

**CANADIAN FEMALE GOTHIC LITERATURE**

**CANADIAN FEMALE GOTHIC LITERATURE:  
SUSAN MUSGRAVE'S THE CHARCOAL BURNERS  
AND DAPHNE MARLATT'S ANA HISTORIC**

**By**

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and Daphne Marlatt's Ana Historic

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## ABSTRACT

Although the novels seem rather disparate at first glance, both Susan Musgrave's The Charcoal Burners and Daphne Marlatt's Ana Historic share a gothic tendency. Gothicism textures these novels, and I would argue, textures many other works of Canadian fiction. Gothicism remains, however, an unstudied angle of Canadian literature, as it remains a critical blind spot in the studies of Musgrave's and Marlatt's novels. By exploring the gothicism of The Charcoal Burners and Ana Historic, I simultaneously recenter the gothic genre in both the texts at hand and indirectly in Canadian literature.

This study focuses on what we can call female gothic. Female gothic refers to gothic literature written by women, with women-centered agendas. Female gothic is based on the experiences of women who suffocate under the culture's patriarchal construction of gender and sexuality. Women writers have long used the gothic form to explore issues specific to women's lives, issues that are currently being politicized and are circulating in feminist theoretical debates. In many female gothics, writers show how "woman," as a being who is sexually constructed, is defined and limited specifically by her reproductive capacity: her "nativity" is a source of horror. The trope of "nativity" operates in Musgrave and Marlatt through women's reproduction and sexuality, but also, in a strange, perhaps specifically Canadian gothic twist, through the figure of the indigene, who is also constructed with "nativity."

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## Introduction

Ever since Major Richardson's Wacousta, Canadian fiction has persistently crossed into the unknown, the liminal dark spaces of the landscape and the imagination that simultaneously fascinate and terrify. Despite the pedantic assertions of some critics who profess that ours is a literature of gritty social realism, of fiercely honest daylight, there lurks, even in the Mrs. Bentleys and Neils Lindstedts, the insistence of the dark, silent territory of "the gothic." It is no coincidence that in the U.S. and Canada, the "fathers of fiction" (Charles Brockden Brown and Major John Richardson) found the gothic prototype an ideal medium for expressing their ambivalence towards the "New World." Gothic literature traditionally enacts the drama of fear and desire projected onto an "other," a projection causing ambivalence that threatens to dissolve individual identity. For the early colonial writers, the encounter with the "other"--as projected onto the dark forest and the inscrutable "savage"--was a reenactment of this "Old World" drama but in a new setting which rendered old, familiar rules and patterns of the gothic tradition problematic or obsolete. Far from being resolved, the gothic drama continues in Canadian fiction as our contemporary writers continue to reenact the encounter with the "other" on multiple levels: these include the social, political, sexual, psychological, and theoretical.

American gothic by writers such as Poe, Hawthorne, O'Connor, and Faulkner--to name only a few-- has been the subject of serious and extensive scholarship, and so it has

long been considered a literature in its own right. Despite the existence of a parallel gothic tradition in Canadian literature, there has not been sufficient scholarship on the Canadian gothic. The strength and congruity of the parallel traditions are noteworthy since the “New World” gothic, encompassing both American and Canadian gothic literature, is conceivable as “frontier gothic.” Like its American counterpart, Canadian gothic literature deals not only with geographical boundaries but also with psychological, social, political “frontiers,” as David Mogen explains:

As is suggested by the title of Margot Northey’s The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction, the symbols and themes of frontier gothic are not exclusively American property. Clearly the similar circumstances of two nations whose histories are so intertwined are expressed in their national mythologies. As Northey points out, many of Fiedler’s distinctions between European and American Gothicism apply to Canadian fiction as well, particularly the displacement of the aristocratic order of the past by the wilderness as the source of gothic imagery. Like the American wilderness, nature in Canadian fiction is depicted ‘with fascination and horror,’ as a ‘source of exciting vigour and also ominous danger and doom.’ This ambivalent wilderness imagery is paralleled in European literature by the metaphor of the ‘heart of darkness,’ a similarly ambivalent symbol with a broad range of meanings derived from the colonization experience. (“Millennium” 105)

Canadian gothic is as rich and extensive as American gothic, but it needs more illumination. Mogen makes many key connections between the Canadian tradition and its American and European counterparts, but for my purposes the most salient feature of his comparison is the existence of a colonial discourse which is expressed through the gothic form. To use Mogen’s metaphor, Canadian gothic fiction, virtually an unknown and unstudied territory, is itself a frontier that invites further exploration.

Apart from Northey’s definitive text, there have been no major studies of



Canadian gothic, although the gothic is often hinted at, alluded to, conjectured in Canadian literary criticism. In The Canadian Imagination, Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood make a case for the significance of ghosts and monsters in Canadian poetry and fiction, as do others in critical studies and essays; however, because these studies are so few and isolated, it almost seems as if we have to force ourselves to notice the presence of the gothic. Even when it seems clear that a critical text is dealing with the gothic genre, gothic remains a negative, or a discourse signified by its absence. Atwood's seminal text on Canadian literature, Survival, documents the definitive theme of victimhood in Canadian literature. Since the text analyses theme rather than form, she never mentions gothicism; however, one would expect that if not, at least her text would have prompted future studies of the gothic parameters of Canadian literature or more encompassing studies that could accommodate the gothic.

The problem is a continual recentering of realist fiction over other genres and styles of Canadian writing. For example, in her illuminating text The Canadian Postmodern, after devoting an entire book to the exploration of the postmodern tendencies in recent Canadian fiction, Linda Hutcheon states: "The strength of the realist tradition could always be seen here" (207). Perhaps the problem is not so much a lack of gothicism in Canadian literature as a lack of gothic criticism. There is a tendency to "overplay the realistic side of Canadian fiction" (Northey 3). Northey's study of the gothic and grotesque in Canadian literature can be understood as a pioneering text because it opens this fictional territory for study; her study is self-reflexive in that to enter

this literature of the liminal, she has to take a critical stance which is equally marginal. It is perhaps not so strange that in the same vein, critics have understood the impetus for gothic writing partly as a reaction to the glorification of a “daylight” sensibility: “[Varma] sees the Gothic writers as restoring the sense of the numinous to a literature cramped by rationalism and bleached by exposure to unvarying daylight. He sees them renewing its contact with the fertile depths of mystery and primitive emotion” (Tompkins xv).

Before I continue, I must digress. To understand what gothic means for Canadian literature, we must review the key elements that have been imported from the European gothic tradition, well known as they might be. Gothic literature in English became a recognizable genre when English author Horace Walpole first published The Castle of Otranto in 1764. In Walpole’s Preface to the first edition, he used the word “gothic” to describe his narrative. From this tale and others like it the most notable features of the gothic became the conventions of the genre. Yet even before Otranto, and before acquiring its literary connotations, the term “Gothic” referred to the Goths, a tribe of northern European barbarians, noted for their dark, gloomy architecture; it was considered a pejorative term meaning “archaic, uncouth, ugly, barbarous” (Varma 11). For the purposes of my study, I would also like to point out the similarities between the European conception of “the frost-cramped strength, the shaggy covering, and the dusky plumage of [these] northern [Gothic] tribes” (Varma 10) and the European perceptions of North America’s native tribes. It is understandable, then, that Major Richardson would have projected this European conception of Gothicism upon the figure of the indigene.

Historically, the gothic came to define those novels which derived their themes and material from the works of writers such as Anne Radcliffe. One of the most influential gothic novelists in the tradition, Radcliffe wrote classics such as The Mysteries of Udolpho and The Italian. Gothic novels took their shape partly from patterns which appear in her texts: the stories were usually set in the dark ages, in gloomy castles and monasteries saturated with a supernatural atmosphere, and were peopled with terrified, fleeing maidens, cruel tyrants, and virtuous heroes. These novels dealt with fear, desire, mystery, and identity, using the quest pattern as narrative structure. Too often, gothic novels were (and still are) simplified as escapist fantasies. In actuality, they contained the seeds of revolution, for they were textualizations of the authors' political and religious tendencies, written during times of social and political upheaval. It is no coincidence that the common motifs of gothic literature included ruined castles, isolated monasteries, usurpers, and corrupt clergy; these motifs represented the revolt against feudalism, the Catholic church, and the monarchy--all systems of absolute power. Frequently, social revolt was dramatized on the microcosmic level of family dynamics, with the shadows of the larger institutions lurking in the background (Day 32).

Gothic literature is, arguably, rooted in revolutionary tendencies, and as such, contains the potential for textualizing subversion. This opinion, however, runs contrary to the ideas of literary critics who claim the gothic novel reinforces dominant hegemony because it neutralizes subversive impulses. Allon White questions the transgressive potential of gothic literature; he sees it as divorced from the public sphere. In his

understanding, gothic is the manifestation of carnivalesque which has been “driven underground ... and transformed from a public carnival of the day into a private ‘carnival of the night’” (54). The gothic, he argues, “lodged in bourgeois fictions rather than in social action, [has been] privatized, cut off from social protest and pleasure and assimilated to the subjective unconscious” (55).

His criticism is relevant when we consider how Freud’s advances in psychology revolutionized literary criticism of the gothic: psychoanalytic literary interpretation interiorized the conventions of the genre, reducing all to a drama of the unconscious. Psychoanalytic interpretation also reduced the understanding of the gothic to sex: here, “woman” is the ultimate enigma, the unknown “other,” the site of the uncanny. Similar to the European legacy of gothic savagery which coloured the perception of the indigene, the associations made between women, psychoanalytic criticism, and the gothic are important to note. We can take the representations of the indigene and woman further by suggesting that the categories of “native” and “woman” are in themselves both fictions. That is, “woman” and “native” are constructs, and as such, they share a similar, sometimes overlapping place as “other” in Canadian gothic fiction, a point which I will explore.

To return to Allon White, he is suspicious of any claims to subversion through literature, because of what he perceives as “a false essentializing of transgression” (60). While this may be arguable for gothic literature in the European tradition, I would argue that it does not necessarily hold for “New World” or “frontier” gothic, which reinvests gothic with political, subversive potential. As I have suggested with reference to

Northey's seminal text on Canadian gothicism, the gothic is conceivable not only as a literary "genre." The gothic can also be a way of understanding, a critical stance, a perspective, a reading strategy that operates outside of the purely literary; thus it can be self-consciously politicized: "In a complex genre like this one, so closely attuned to the anxieties circulating in the culture, microcosmic ... and macrocosmic representations of fear ... commingle, for if the Gothic is as much a mode of perception as it is a mode of representation, then everything in life is capable of being incorporated within its vision" (Gross 92).

My goal is to re-assess the political aspects of gothic in two contemporary Canadian novels: Susan Musgrave's The Charcoal Burners (1980), and Daphne Marlatt's Ana Historic (1988). As a term that defies its own boundaries of genre and continually pushes towards the unknown, gothic can be understood as a movement towards "knowing" and expressing that which is liminal, hence potentially dangerous and subversive. This may explain why women as an oppressed group have been great producers and readers of gothic texts, and why women like Musgrave and Marlatt have found the gothic useful as a medium to express their visions of women's experiences in a "gothisized" world. The Charcoal Burners is a narrative that makes connections between the nightmarish existence of women and natives in a gothic world. Ana Historic is also a complex story; the novel explores gothicism through the shifting perspectives of women in "pre-feminist," feminist, colonial and post-colonial worlds. As Louis Gross points out, historically, most gothic texts have been the products of women, gay and colonial writers:

“These ‘marginal’ figures in the dominant culture are responsible for the majority of Gothic classics... [T]he overwhelming presence of these groups in the creation of [this] fiction enables one to perceive the genre as an alternative expression of social, sexual, and political projections to the Great Tradition view of English fiction” (2).

The “female gothic” has its own tradition; although it shares many of the conventions of gothic literature, it subverts them, or charges them with meanings specific to women. The two texts I will study show how female gothic intersects with a variety of different discourses within feminisms as well as across other discourses. It is necessary for critical readers to recognize not only the political dimensions of gothic, but also the ways gothic acts as a ground of shifting discourses. What we must remember is that gothic literature often manifests itself in popular forms (the costume gothic, horror, and fantasy are a few gothic literary modes, and there are countless other gothic mediums, such as film and television), which is one of the reasons it has suffered neglect. Insofar as gothicism has cultural currency, I want to show its flexibility and transference, thus its value in scholarship and its potential critical currency. Gothic narratives can remind us, like feminism, that “the personal and political dimensions of the self are one” (Gross 68). Thus the politically conscious gothic writer can use the gothic to subvert unchallenged but oppressive power structures: “Rather than insisting on the barriers between the world and the haunted castle, these works insinuate a reality in the Gothic world that reflects normality stripped of the engines of ideology” (Gross 72). Gothic literature is always the expression of terror from within the confines of a limited system, and dramatizes the

horrors of, struggles against, and sometimes even escapes from oppression. In the case of female gothic texts, it is patriarchal oppression that is textualized.

In terms of Canadian gothic narratives, such as The Charcoal Burners and Ana Historic, the female gothic functions as an interrogation of culture, although on the surface the texts may appear to simply represent meaningless terror and entrapment, or else the gothicism may not be apparent to readers who are unfamiliar with its conventions. In Chapter One, I will examine Musgrave's The Charcoal Burners. Apart from a few reviews, it has been virtually ignored by literary critics since its publication. Reviewers could not come to an adequate understanding of the distressing or disturbing aspects of the novel because they did not read the text as a female gothic. In Chapter Two, I will focus on Marlatt's Ana Historic. While it has been the focus of numerous feminist post-structuralist studies, it is rarely noted as gothic. Its gothic context has been explored by Stan Dragland, but most critics ignore the gothic and the implications it could have for the feminist, post-structuralist critical angles. For instance, Marlatt's conscious use of gaps and absences force the reader to create meaning in the text. By deconstructing authority and textuality, Marlatt shows the ideological processes at work behind her own and other texts. Similarly, the gothic invites the reader's participation in the text whether it be to solve a mystery or to experience first hand terror through the physical responses it often produces in the reader's body, while simultaneously alienating the reader through horror. The gothic can be used to create the critical distance necessary for the reader to recognize the power relations that underlie the horror.

Using an understanding of the gothic as both a form of literature and a critical tool, I will examine these two Canadian texts. Through the gothic, each shows how the darkness and horror are symptoms of stifling power relations, of political, social, sexual, economic, and spiritual injustices that affect the dispossessed. Gothic has always been a literature that has existed on the margins, and so uses as its subject the marginal, the liminal, the unknown, frontiers, transgressions, and the figure of the “other.” Not surprisingly, these concerns are shared by feminist theorists: “‘identity,’ otherness, gender, oppression, the binary divisions of male and female ...[are] all central and driving preoccupations of feminist thought” (Grosz 162). As such, the gothic has been particularly important to women writers and readers, as is reflected in the concepts central to the “female gothic”: the body (which is always feminized if not explicitly female), exploring the liminal or marginal, alterity, abjection, transgression, and subversion.

Musgrave’s The Charcoal Burners and Marlatt’s Ana Historic, though seemingly dissimilar, have many parallels as female gothic texts. There is an underlying gothic darkness that both feel compelled to write through. Although they use the gothic with a twentieth-century consciousness, there remains something of the original gothic in their narratives. Leslie Fiedler, in Love and Death in the American Novel, defines the classic gothic plot as follows: in a markedly foreign backdrop that operates on the level of a dream scape, the young maiden “flees in terror and alone amid crumbling castles, antique dungeons, and ghosts who are never really ghosts” (127). Through the course of the narrative the heroine is constantly on the verge of escape from “her terrible persecutors,”



creating a pattern of ensnarement and escape, a pattern which ends only when she escapes into the arms of the long-suffering “virtuous lover” (127). The supernatural elements that terrorize the heroine often, though not always, prove to be merely devices engineered by the persecutors. Perhaps the fear and horror that lingers disquietingly, even after the source of terror is removed, is not unfounded. Certainly the immediate causes of terror are explained away, and yet there remains something frightening, a residue of uncanniness that persists and disrupts the harmony of closed endings. It is this unease that female gothic texts return to again and again. The Charcoal Burners and Ana Historic both employ the traditional plot structure of the gothic novel, but with a canny self-consciousness that, ironically enough, reveals something uncanny about this plot. In AH, the conventional gothic “happy ending,” signified by the marriage of the heroine and hero, is really the beginning of a new downward spiral into terror and horror, where escape from the domestic gothic proves to be just as frightening as the traditional plot for the women characters. In CB, the traditional gothic plot is subverted as well, for it tells the story of a passive gothic heroine who, even when she escapes the gothic domestic, cannot escape the gothic plot that has enscribed her body as a trap, a body which appears inescapable. In both cases, the traditional gothic plot is subverted from within, exposing an unspeakable darkness that needs articulation. Most notably, female gothic novels involve the struggles of female protagonists who are alienated from their bodies and their lives. With reference to the traditional gothic plot, Heller describes what may be one of the characteristics of gothic literature that female gothic literature has seized upon: “[T]he character’s isolation

increases, he or she comes to feel that the world that was once a *home* has become an alien mystery, finds his or her reason threatened, and either is victorious over opposing forces or is defeated and perhaps destroyed” (48; italics mine). It is this concept of “home” which is central in the female gothic, as is the concept of “nativity” which is operational in both novels.

Juliann Fleenor’s definition of the structure of the specifically female gothic narrative is the most relevant when examining Musgrave’s and Marlatt’s texts:

It is essentially formless, except as a quest; it uses the traditional spatial symbolism of the ruined castle or an enclosed room to symbolize both the culture and the heroine; as a psychological form, it provokes various feelings of terror, anger, awe, and sometimes self-fear and self-disgust directed toward the female role, female sexuality, female physiology, and procreation; and it frequently uses a narrative form which questions the validity of the narration itself. It reflects a patriarchal paradigm that women are motherless yet fathered and that women are defective because they are not males.

... The Female Gothic is not a transcendent form as the Romantic novel has been described. Transcendence is not possible. The Female Gothic is historically defined by the culture in which it has existed and continues to exist. The thread of continuity established in all Gothics is that they all represent an androcentric culture. Women have been subordinate to men and have existed in the private world of the family while men have existed in the public world. Women have gained their identities through whom they marry, not what they do. The dichotomies of male/female, bad woman/good woman create the tensions and contradictions within the Female Gothic. They also suggest concretely how the moral ambiguities of the Gothic novel have come about. Good and evil are located within the female self, and identity is both fixed and shifting as the heroine attempts to establish her identity. (15-16)

From this definition we can trace how **CB** and **AH** both follow and subvert these patterns.

Female gothic is useful as it shows how women as a marginalized group can use it for their own specific purposes, including subverting definitions of female gothic that are no

longer applicable or viable for contemporary women. Between the two novels, it is not surprising that CB is the more “conventional” of the two, since not many options are open to the protagonist, Matty. She conforms to the convention of the hyper-passive gothic heroine, as defined by Day: “[T]he strongest resistance any feminine character can muster is refusal; they are incapable of initiating action or of active rebellion, at least as individuals. ... Whether they accede to male authority or passively resist it, they still acknowledge its control of the realm of action and its power to imprison those who refuse to obey” (104). The difference in AH is that Annie actively resists her gothic entrapment in her domestic situation, and her freedom is gained through writing.

The heroine’s relation to her mother is central in the female gothic. This relation is problematic because it involves the conflict between a daughter who is trying to resist the gothic nightmare and the mother who has been imprisoned by a gothic world. Thus, mother is a devouring figure, a monster, a threat, complicitous with the patriarchal system that oppresses her: “Beneath the haunted castle lies the dungeon keep: the womb from whose darkness the ego first emerged, the tomb to which it knows it must return at last. Beneath the crumbling shell of paternal authority, lies the maternal blackness, imagined by the gothic writer as a prison, a torture chamber--from which the cries of the kidnapped *anima* cannot even be heard” (Fiedler 132).

Fleenor insists that the female gothic is rife with “the dread of female physiology and female sexuality” (14). Her understanding of the female gothic is, however, limited. She believes that it “does not establish any new definitions of female sexuality, though

they are sadly needed...[because redefinition] is beyond its scope; it does however, challenge assumptions about the nature of the Gothic by revealing that the central conflict is with the mother and not with the husband/lover/father” (15). Fleenor’s definition reflects the horror, for women, of a female sexuality which is patriarchally defined; that is, by the reproductive capacity. The emphasis is on the vagina, womb and childbirth, which explains the ambivalence women express towards their bodies and sexuality, as well as the use of the trope of enclosed spaces which are invested with horror. Musgrave’s text fits into this paradigm of the female gothic, for it is preoccupied with the figure of the mother, with maternity, and an ambivalence towards both expressed in an emphasis on the grotesque and abject aspects of femininity.

Fleenor leans toward the potential for female empowerment in assessing the centrality of women in the female gothic, yet she divests the female gothic of agency. I will challenge this assumption in my examination of Marlatt’s novel, which uses the gothic self-reflexively in order to provide a means of escape from it. Marlatt’s agenda also includes a reinscription of the female body, and of alternative expressions of female sexuality, namely lesbianism. She questions the patriarchal inscription of womanhood that ignores the power of *jouissance*, pleasures, and flows unique to women’s experiences of their bodies. Although only Marlatt’s novel charts an escape from the gothic prison of traditional femininity, both Marlatt and Musgrave complicate this “all-powerful, devouring” mother figure (Fleenor 16). Marlatt does so by “salvaging” and re-assessing the gothic mother who is, in the end, not the monster at the heart of the text. She also

explores the possibility of reclaiming the female body from the gothic prison by reinscribing or “writing” the body. Musgrave makes this mother figure ambiguous, but it is hard to tell where the mother figure stands in her gothic vision; however, by the novel’s end, bleak as it is, she seems to move towards the recognition that it is not the mother who is devouring, but literally, the cannibalistic charcoal burners, who act out their fantasies of revolution upon those who are just as dispossessed as they. In this sense, she questions subversion that is not politically effective.

To dilate the scope of the female gothic to the socio-political level, we should return to a consideration of the impetus for gothic literature in North America: the native. What I will consider in Chapter Three is the image or fiction of the indigene, which has operated from the start as a projection of the fears and desires of the European. As Stedman puts it, “Historically, the Indian himself became a mirror. The Indian image was the reflection of the particular white neurosis of that age” (x). Briefly, I will review the major aspects of the gothic that are shared by the image of the indigene. As I mentioned much earlier, the term “Gothic” originally encompassed the idea of barbaric savagery, antiquity, and the supernatural. Similarly, but perhaps not uncannily, the figure of the native has been traditionally defined in a limited set of similar terms, classified by Terry Goldie in Fear and Temptation as “standard commodities.” The native has been linked from the beginning with savagery, the prehistoric or timelessness, and mysticism or supernaturalism. What I want to explore is the extent to which the image of the native overlaps with the image of woman, as both are projections of the “other” in female gothic

literature, as well as the effects this overlapping of images produces.

The image of the native is linked to the image of woman on several levels. Both share the position of the colonized, although they are not necessarily equal. As constructs of the “other” in western culture’s patriarchy, women and natives are relegated to the realm of the body, to sex, to naturalness, and to the irrational or unconscious. This area of overlap becomes most pronounced and “gothic” when we consider how the images of the indigene and woman share the realm of the “uncanny.” It is this overlap, an interstice which operates in both Musgrave’s and Marlatt’s texts, which will be the focus of Chapter Three.

Freud has been useful in psychoanalytic interpretations of the uncanny. Briefly, his theory states that the uncanny is the repressed of a psyche, or a culture, which returns and causes discomfort and fear. “It is undoubtedly related to what is frightening--to what arouses dread and horror ...” (Freud 339). He elaborates: “[T]he uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (340). It is “nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (363-4). Freud ends his study of the uncanny by discussing the “mother” of all uncanniness, the female genitals (pun intended): “It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning” (368). The uncanny,

according to Freud, is both familiar and unfamiliar. In German, “uncanny” is *unheimlich*, which translates as “unhomelike.” This aspect of the word must be emphasized, for it is not immediately connoted from the English word “uncanny,” which means seemingly supernatural or mysterious.

In Chapter Three, the idea of “home” will play an important part in my study, for it is the question of “home” and the related concept of “nativity” that the Canadian female gothic circles. Through the patriarchal inscription of the female body which focuses on its reproductive aspects--thus always defined in relation to men--women’s bodies are made alien to themselves, uncanny, strange. Even Freud’s description of women’s genitals makes them uncanny to women, for he links them not to the pleasure they are capable of producing, but to reproduction. They are reduced to the threshold or portal of the weird, the uncanny. Female gothic, as it concerns a woman’s renegotiation of herself and her double, the mother, tackles the uncanny.

The native is similarly “displaced” from his or her home: as the terms native, indigene and aboriginal imply, the native is the first here, at home here because born and belonging to this place. The colonizer enters and tries to displace the native by taking away his or her “nativity,” and by declaring the native uncanny; a strategy which is similar to calling the female body, the first home, “uncanny.” On a literal level, the colonizer defamiliarizes the native from the place by populating it with his own children. Women, through their “nativity,” are the agents of native displacement. On a figurative level, women and natives in Canadian literature share an uneasy relationship to the “home” and

to the “homeland,” which is manifest through the gothic form.



## CHAPTER ONE

### **Susan Musgrave's The Charcoal Burners: The Gothic Mother and "Nativity"**

The Charcoal Burners is a dense, richly textured novel that seems to operate on the level of Musgrave's poetry. It is daunting to try to unpack its cryptic, enigmatic imagery and the gothicism that is suggested in its darkness, considering that no one has attempted to adequately analyse this particular text in her oeuvre. Briefly, the narrative moves in a downward spiral, tracing the descent of the female protagonist, Matty, into a nightmare world. Married to a native, she is exposed to the grotesque, though often humorous, cultural "otherness" of indigenous life. She grows weary of her husband's drunken, destructive behaviour (indicative of much of native life that Musgrave portrays), so she escapes her futile marriage by going on a canoe trip into the wilderness with an old university friend, Christian. The narrative takes a surreal spin during the second half when Matty and Christian become prisoners in a strange commune of mystical women, and later, in a camp of cannibalistic men called the charcoal burners. Both communities are connected by a sinister cult mania: they are convinced that they are the chosen people who will produce the second Messiah.

What this menacing narrative seems to suggest is that there is no chance of reconnecting oneself to the fiction of identity once it has been undermined, a narrative pattern that constitutes the gothic ur-plot. Ambiguity expressed towards womanhood and motherhood seems utterly irresolvable. As such, it is a specifically female gothic text.

Musgrave's text, however, has a particular resonance with the image of the indigene which cannot be separated from the aspects which I call female gothic; the text uses the conventions of the female gothic and grotesque as they relate to Matty's shamanic quest narrative, to the ambiguous nature of maternity/nativity throughout the text, and to the status of women's bodies. "Nativity" becomes a double signifier, meaning both "nativeness" as status to a place, and birth (especially as an inherently female event).

As we have seen, the female gothic textualizes not the struggle between men and women, as much of the novel might seem to suggest, but rather "the conflict with the all-powerful, devouring mother" (Fleenor 16). It is the figure of the mother, the mother's body, and failed motherhood/nativity that plagues the protagonist; by the end, the "devouring" becomes literal, although it is not the mother who "devours" (as the Fleenor quote above suggests). The devouring mother is that which appears enigmatically, for it is only by realizing that she is a patriarchally constructed figure that we can distance ourselves from the horror that maternity/nativity seems to embody. Both senses of nativity, as in the degree of "nativeness" and the act of birth, are yoked to the horrific, perhaps to show that "nativity," as a fictional identity, is horrifying. Anything one is "born" with or any "essence" to which one is inherently yoked is rendered suspect.

Does the text work on any other level, as a gothic, except to remind us of the horror of individual women's experiences as female-sexed, biologically essential bodies? Yes, it seems to suggest as well issues on a larger cultural scale; because of its nightmarish atmosphere, its focus on the fringes of society, on natives, and on women's destruction

from the margins rather than the centre, horror on a larger cultural level is the frightening core of this narrative. In terms of the textualization of political agency, CB exposes the weaknesses of resistance that does not challenge the centre. Matty's gothic passivity, a type of passivity regarded by some as a uniquely female strategy against gothic oppression (Massé 250), is such a cliché in CB that the reader cannot fail to see it satirically. Michelle Massé reminds us that the masochism of female characters in gothic texts, as we see in the character Matty, is a prevalent motif that is difficult to resolve in female gothic plots: "To be only a victim is to have no self and to cede the absolute power to the victimizer; to overcome domination entirely suggests that one can entirely escape the constraints of a given culture and upbringing without becoming a dominator in turn; *to subvert can run the risk of idealizing the margins while the centre remains unchanged*" (5; italics mine).

Thus, the dark heart of the forest and other liminal places are not necessarily spaces of refuge nor of empowerment in Musgrave's novel. Musgrave seems to imply that women as a fringe group who are socially marginalized will always be disempowered, if the cult at Ephratah is any indication of her cynical distrust of female utopias (read dystopias). We are reminded that, "... utopian alterity is plagued by radical misgivings within the Gothic" (Massé 273).

Before engaging primarily with the novel, I will outline some theoretical parameters within which CB seems to operate. Abjection appears to be one of the defining principles of this text, but whether the text reifies abjection or not is the question I ask. Kristeva, in The Powers of Horror, delineates abjection in terms that appear similar

to abjection in the text. She describes an abjection which does not refer specifically to Musgrave's novel, but which is operational in contemporary texts dealing with the limits of culture. Abjection operates in CB through the signification of shamanism and appropriated nativity, as they are both strategies for indigenisation in the text: "Abjection then wavers between the *fading away* of all meaning and all humanity, burnt as by the flames of a conflagration, and the *ecstasy* of an ego that, having lost its Other and objects, reaches at the precise moment of this suicide, the height of harmony with the promised land" (18). Between the flames of the charcoal burners and the ecstasy of the shaman as the place where all meaning dissolves, does the text offer a principle of regeneration through abjection, of a "promised land"? Or are we doubtful that Musgrave would advocate the marginality (especially of women) that Kristeva embraces? It seems that Musgrave's conception of abjection is different from Kristeva's because while Kristeva sees potential power from the liminal spaces, Musgrave's text seems to tell the opposite story. It remains my task to trace Musgrave's use of abjection, within the female gothic, as a description of powerlessness rather than an inscription of power.

One way we can understand Musgrave's position is to ask, how far is the novel a politically subversive gothic? In Kristeva's conception, the abject derives its power from its position outside of categorization. Thus categories and identities become limiting, even disempowering. Kristeva defines the abject as that which is neither subject nor object (1). She elaborates: "what is *abject*, ... the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (2). This meaninglessness describes the

horror that is perpetuated throughout the text, a horror that culminates in Matty's slaughter. At her death, the abjection of meaningless is evoked: "It didn't matter. Nothing mattered" (233). There is a pun on "matter/mater" which conflates mother with all the meanings of "matter": according to The Concise Oxford Dictionary, matter is defined as physical substance (as opposed to spirit, mind); that which is amiss (what is the matter?); material for thought or expression; any substance in or discharged from the body; to be of importance or have significance; and as a verb, to secrete or discharge pus. From all these disparate meanings we get a sense of the abject and the bodily, the realm of the mother in western culture. Does the text show how mother "matters," to perpetuate the pigeonholing of this figure, or does the text liberate the mother through the subversive link to abjection?

Kristeva defines the abject as the borders or boundaries of meaning and culture:

[The Other] ... jettisons the object into an abominable real, inaccessible except through jouissance. It follows that jouissance alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it ... Violently and painfully. A passion. And, as in jouissance where the object of desire, known as object *a* [in Lacan's terminology], bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other, there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject. It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become an *alter ego*, drops so that "I" does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant. One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims--if not its submissive and willing ones.

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. (9)

This excerpt touches on several key points I would like to emphasize. One is that the

subject is a frontier or boundary that constitutes the border of one's identity. Hence, it is the surface or interstices between surfaces that define identity rather than any "core" or essence. Such an understanding of identity shifts the focus from core, unchanging essences to shifting surfaces, where the boundaries are constantly sliding, colliding, merging and separating. Women represent culture's boundary, because they are aligned with abjection:

If, as Cixous and Irigaray have shown, femininity is defined as lack, negativity, absence of meaning, irrationality, chaos, darkness--in short, as non-Being--Kristeva's emphasis on marginality allows us to view this repression of the feminine in terms of *positionality* rather than of essences. What is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies. ...[I]f patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, then it can construe them as the *limit* or borderline of that order. ... Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will ... share in the disconcerting properties of *all* frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known or unknown. It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, ... and sometimes to elevate them as the representatives of a higher and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God. In the first instance the borderline is seen as part of the chaotic wilderness outside, and in the second it is seen as an inherent part of the inside: the part that protects and shields the symbolic order from the imaginary chaos. (Moi 166-167)

Woman as border is not anchored to the negative definitions and values in which her body has been imbued. Kristeva's position here is one which advocates the marginality of women, a position Musgrave seems to resist. For the time being, we should note that these concepts, which constitute an aspect of the gothicism of CB, are central to current feminist, post-colonial, and other post-structuralist theoretical debates about identity politics and the status of the body.

Also key in Kristeva's definition of the abject is the idea of *jouissance*, a term French feminists use to refer to a "female economy of pleasure" (Dallery 54), especially the mother's body in some discourses (i.e. Cixous, Kristeva). The mother's *jouissance* is one of the "feminine structures of erotic embodiment where self and other are contiguous, in pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing" (Dallery 54). In relation to the novel, however, it is the mother's *jouissance* which is the abject, and which disgusts Matty.

As the mother is located in the realm of the body, she is linked to abjection. The body itself is almost exclusively associated with its boundaries. In terms of the bodily, abjection is what we consider waste objects, such as dung, filth, and the ultimate waste, the corpse, all of which signify the border between life and death (Kristeva 4). In the text, Musgrave gluts the reader with grotesque or abject images. Filth, dead meat and grotesque, liminal people are the staple images, but the cannibalism and torture at the novel's end are perhaps the culmination of that horror. The corpses, however, suggest a kind of perverse regeneration: "Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance" (Kristeva 15). About the corpse, she writes: "Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (4). The ultimate projection of uncanniness upon the mother's womb manifests itself in the image of the devouring mother. However, abjection differs from uncanniness in that it is totally unfamiliar; it does not recognize its "kin" (5). Musgrave's novel deflates the myth of a form of female empowerment that operates by valorizing women's bodies and experiences, a valorization

based solely on their reproductive capacities. She problematizes this myth by making the role of the mother in a patriarchally defined society ambiguous.

Grannie Gull Glut is the matriarchal head of the clan at Old Mystic, yet she is undermined as a devouring figure. She is linked to Matty's mother who wanted to be reincarnated as a sea gull. The mother in reincarnated form is recognized by Dan while he and Matty discard the calf's offal: "An old grey gull, torn and battle weary, flapped along the water carrying the remains of the calf's neck. ... The gull was being mobbed by her relatives but the neck was too thick for her to swallow. ... 'She'll die before she lets go of it,' said Dan" (28). The "gull-mother's" ravenous appetite is sinister, because it is suggestive of the "devouring mother" figure. Matty is linked to the dead calf the gull-mother eats, because Matty herself dies like this calf. Sinister, too, is the verbal echo between Matty's involvement in the calf's slaughter (26) and the phrasing used to describe her own slaughter (233). The links made between engulfment and motherhood are gruesome. The gull signifies this gruesome suffocation and engulfment throughout the text. In "Evolutionary Obsequies," a poem written by Matty at thirteen, the link between mother and gull, home and prison, is reinforced: "*Pink blossom/And a seagull/We must be getting/close to/prison ... (home)*" (91). Matty herself cannot swallow without chewing, "Grannie Gull-like" (169), an inability which is further emphasized by Matty's overall horror of ingesting food. Her anorexic tendencies can be linked to her fear of pregnancy and the mother's body: "... the [anorexic] subject cannot swallow, ingest, or expel food; her self-starvation not only inscribes the oral but the anal tract with the



meaning of the reproductive system, whose function she has indirectly altered. ... The mouth and the anus acquire the significance of the womb that she wishes to protect from impregnation” (Grosz 139). In the novel, the link between abjection as waste or supreme otherness, similar to the example of the anorexic, is a displaced fear of the pregnant body.

Everyone nags Matty about her eating habits. She develops an aversion to meat because she herself is considered meat. She dreams of being filleted when she is pregnant, her body producing endless white meat but no baby (73). After waking up from this dream, Matty overhears a conversation between two native men, about “eating” women. Here, even in non-reproductive sexual relations, women are made into meat, a dead, consumable object. The comparison is intensified when the conversation turns to Matty’s skinniness, which is compared to the skinniness of the doe that is being butchered for dinner. By the novel’s end, all metaphoric connections between women and meat are concretized, as Matty literally becomes meat as food for the charcoal burners.

Cannibalism has been attributed to the “native,” but I suggest that CB shows how anthropophagia is really a fear whites have of themselves, a fear projected onto the image of the native. Cannibalism is fearful partly because it is so fascinating; this fascination suggests a hunger for human flesh that has not quite been mastered, and which is symbolically displaced into communion, the ritual consumption of the body and blood of Christ in Christian theology (Fiedler 42). It operates, too, as a sign of appropriation; cannibalism is a metaphorical representation of western culture’s literal consumption of what is indigenous (Goldie 96-7). Both significations are apt in a text where the cannibals

are members of a Second Coming cult and where cannibalism is a grotesque perversion of communion. Cannibalism in CB is an abject literalization of the incorporation or appropriation of native culture.

The cannibalism, enacted by men, is the real threat; the devouring mother is the imagined threat in the novel. She is constructed as such by a patriarchal society and its symbolic system. Grannie Gull Glut and the mother, as we have seen, are signified by the gull, which is a bird noted for its greedy, voracious appetite. Matty's dreams often involve being buried alive, consumed, or returning to the suffocating womb. It is being a part of a core, an incorporation, that horrifies her. Theories of surface, such as the inscription of flesh as basis for identity, have importance in the novel (but more so in Marlatt's novel); however, in CB *incorporation* of flesh is fetishized. The trope of incorporation, or internalization, rather than shifting surfaces, is the basis of Matty's horror, so it is perhaps the problem in the text. Incidentally, it is within the context of shamanic discourse that incorporation operates in the text. In his study of shamanic cannibalism, Eves outlines the dimensions of corporeality that emphasize the body's inside and outside and the vulnerability of the liminal regions of the body. Food is "the foremost cultural medium of sociality and functions as a means of communicating custom, wealth, political power and status" (Eves 213). Incorporation, as it involves taking in what is "other or alterior to the body," is dangerous (214). Not only conceivable as a "text" or an inscriptive surface, the body is an eating body: "Such [surface] metaphors fail to recognize that acts of power go far beyond being written on the body but cut to its very core and constitute it. In short,

acts of power are not simply surface orientated but are corporeally ingrained, something which the body as text metaphor elides” (214). With the Lelet shamans he is studying, it is the “active process of embodiment ... which occurs through actions that impinge on the body’s outer-most surface or through actions that involve incorporating things that are external to the body” which produces cultural meaning (215).

Since CB is so centrally concerned with the figure of the native and with native signifiers, I will discuss the shamanic aspects of Matty’s narrative quest here. As I base many of my assumptions on the belief that Matty is a shamanic initiate, I will outline what this constitutes. The shaman is the master of the technique of ecstasy, which involves the separation of the soul from the body through “magical flight” and “mastery over fire” (Eliade 5). Shamans are spiritual and somatic healers, a role which is significant in terms of my study: the shaman works with body and soul in tandem, and so transcends the western mind/body dualism. This could have been a significant step for Matty’s empowerment (as all women are relegated to the position of pure body). The shaman acts as healer of body and soul, and is the community’s artist and poet because she or he preserves the oral literary tradition (Eliade 30). A shamanic initiate learns the secrets of the profession in dreams: “[initiation rituals] constitute the essence of shamanic initiation that sometimes takes place in seemingly morbid dreams and trances” (Eliade 17). There are, in accounts of various initiation ceremonies, common motifs. Many of these motifs echo across Musgrave’s text: the initiate undergoes solitary confinement, dismemberment, and fasting to learn how to control the soul’s departures from the body (Eliade 36).

The shaman is the figure who acts as medium between the community and the spirit world, in order to cure illnesses and maintain equilibrium. In this sense, a shaman is a gothic type of figure who has access to the numinous realm of experience denied to the non-initiated. Shamans are also able to transgress that ultimate boundary, between life and death. The initiate goes through a ritual death, dismemberment and rebirth or resurrection to gain strength and powers necessary to perform shamanic cures (Eliade 33). This death and rebirth pattern is evident in the novel on the operational level of the shamanic, but it also functions as a link to gothic convention whereby the gothic is subversive as a purgative for cultural ills and as a literature of abjection that dwells on the border of life and death. Further, this pattern is also linked to female gothic convention whereby the gothic dramatizes the ambiguous relationship a woman has to her mother and her own reproductive capacities. What the shaman's unconscious hooks up to is larger consciousness, but for specific socio-cultural purposes; she or he must keep equilibrium in society, and so the shaman is not divorced from the body of the people or from larger social concerns.

There are several disruptions in Matty's cognition, as noted by the narrator. Examples of the break in consciousness occur when Matty's thoughts, narrated by the third-person limited omniscient voice, break out into the "spoken" of the story (see 106, 129, 218). These disquieting interruptions seem to point to the thinness between the narrator's limited omniscient third-person position and Matty's consciousness. From the thinness between the narrative voice and Matty's voice, I have surmised that the narrative

voice may be Matty's disembodied voice from beyond the grave. As one who is seeking indigeneity through shamanism, Matty is trying to save a dying culture. Because she is killed, does she signify the failure of any search for nativity? As a shaman, she should be able to transcend the flesh and the material world in her reborn shamanic state. But what if we consider how the female gothic is essentially a non-transcendent narrative, exposing the fiction of transcendence (Fleenor 16)? What makes Fleenor's claim more plausible than the idea that Matty could transcend her femaleness is Matty's horror of birth and that much of the imagery of the shamanic journey is figuratively labyrinthine. Not coincidentally, the shamanic journey often resonates with birth and womb imagery.

Since prehistory, religious sacrifice all over the world has drawn human, animal, plant and imaginative blood. ... [S]hamans go through a lot of shuddering psychic and physical sufferings ... They have to--to go down to the underworld is one thing, to get the things we need back here is a greater thing, and finally to bring them back up in some form we can use is perhaps most crucial of all. What the shaman has is no easy thing to put into the world. If it were we would find it here already. ... To talk stones, bones and skin is not really easy. ... There are powers they do not want to give away in words or in signs. They do not want them dispersed, but kept in one piece: one circle, one stone, inside. ... It lowers us into the belly of the earth, and if we are going there, we want to be sure of getting back. Those are the crossings that are given over to shamans: their other ears and what songs they found and sang, leading the way, in the dark. (Kalavinka 133)

The shamanic journey, as we see in the images that are used to describe it, also lends itself to the gothic concern with the mother's body.

Shaman's bones are thought of as the "seeds" from which he or she will be magically reborn after his or her "mortal" body is burned away (Furst 16). Bones are the symbol of life, not of death as in western culture (Furst 17). Birth, in CB, is paradoxically

a sign of death for women whose bodies are inscribed by a patriarchal culture. Thus birth is ambiguous, not life affirming. We must also consider this inversion in a novel where killer white men play at savagery and use burned bones as symbols not of rebirth, as in a native belief system, nor of revolution as they claim (the bones are burned to make gunpowder), but of death, stagnancy, and stalemate. For Matty, the potential transformation into shaman seems to fail to materialize. As an alternative to being a mother, shamanism is presented in the text as her only other cultural choice for transformation (and so for indigenisation or “nativity”); but its failure echoes back to motherhood, where “entrapment in the female body means neither power, nor glory, but only mutilation and death” (Kahane 251).

That the shaman uses the technique of ecstasy would suggest something about leaving the self, altered states of consciousness, sexual ecstasy, and transformed identity; all of these denote power. If we could believe that Matty has become the powerful shaman who triumphs over death through death and rebirth, why are we upset at her demise? Can she not be reborn? Considering how Musgrave problematizes birth and rebirth, the possibility of rebirth for the heroine into this power is unlikely. Also, if Matty has gained the shamanic power to cure (Eliade 299), one would assume that she can restore the dead soul of her community (of women especially): “[S]oul loss’ is always the business of shamans” (Eliade 300). As a shaman, she would gain the power, perhaps as narrator, to tell the story of her initiation and new birth through blood and fire. Has she returned as the narrator to bear witness to Dotty, Doreen, Dorette, Harriet, Bette, aunt

Dot, Violet, all the used “squaws,” Tansy, Grannie Gull Glut, to mother? She seems to possess few of the powers of the shaman, even though she has gone through the initiatory stages. Rather than forgetting her past life, as a shaman is supposed to do (Eliade 64), Matty retells it in this narrative; even more so, she relives it over and over, as is suggested at her death:

[S]hamans are believed capable not only of bringing back the strayed souls of the sick but also of restoring the dead to life; and they who are thus restored, on their return from the underworld, tell the living what they have seen--exactly like those who have gone down to the land of the dead ‘in spirit,’ those who have visited the nether worlds and paradise in ecstasy, and have nourished the multimillenary visionary literature of the entire world. (Eliade 313)

Does Matty have the powers of the shaman as psychopomp and storyteller? In a novel refuting birth and rebirth, is her spiritual rebirth possible? Can I believe that Matty, if she is indeed the narrator, is merely a disembodied voice, or a text? Is being a text powerful or powerless? If we understand shamanic ecstasy to be a source of poetic language creation (Eliade 510), then perhaps Matty is reborn into language: “In short, one unfailingly orients [the borderline patient] toward the other: another object, perhaps another sex, and why not, another discourse--a text, a life to relive” (Kristeva 50). To understand whether or not Matty escapes the gothic world of the text, and in conjunction with these questions I have raised, I must now turn to the female gothic obsession that runs through Musgrave’s text, which is a fear (and desire?) for the mother’s body.

Abjection, which we have examined, works to produce the horror or the gothicism in the text. Musgrave’s text is undeniably gothic, but, as a female gothic, it also modifies

or subverts certain gothic conventions. Perhaps the most definitive feature of gothic texts is the “awareness of death” (Northey 108), often textualized by overt references to tombs, burial, and necrophilia (Bayer-Berenbaum 41). In The Charcoal Burners, this obsession with death is coupled with a dis-ease with birth, which seems to be a specifically female gothic strategy. From the first page we see this juxtaposition of birth and death:

Every week Matty scanned the Obituaries which immediately followed Births and Marriages in the classified section of the *Onanuga Oracle*. ... [I]nevitably the dead were people she didn't know. Still, she anticipated the column with a curious foreboding, half expecting to find her own name prematurely listed. ... The Birth notices were depressing; everybody had babies. She scorned that column announcing offshoots of futile couplings, ignored the subsequent marriages. (9)

There is a tension between Matty's morbid curiosity about death (especially the possibility of her own death) and her contempt for birth (and for marriage, motherhood, and the female trap of domesticity these things imply), which becomes more pronounced when the first death she recognizes is her mother's: “And one day, at last, a message for her: ‘Martha Seeweed. Call home. Your mother is gone. Regretfully, Dad’” (9). The phrasing used here--“at last, a message for her”-- indicates that Matty has finally seen, in the uncanniness of the recognition, her own name, insofar as the mother's identity is tangled up in Matty's. It is an ambivalent, often grotesque identity, which reveals itself more fully in her dream visions concerning the abject mother. “The grotesque instills fear of life rather than fear of death” (Kayser 185).

The maternal aspect in its abjection is important to consider in female gothic works. Kristeva explains the maternal as such:



But devotees of the abject, ... do not cease looking, within what flows from the other's "innermost being," for the desirable and the terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body. For, in the misfire of identification with the mother as well as with the father, how else are they to be maintained in the Other? How, if not by incorporating a devouring mother, for want of having been able to introject her and joy in what manifests her; for want of being able to signify her: urine, blood, sperm, excrement. Harebrained staging of an abortion, of a self-giving birth ever miscarried, endlessly to be renewed, the *hope for rebirth* is short-circuited by the very splitting: the advent of one's own identity demands a law that mutilates, whereas jouissance demands an abjection from which *identity becomes absent*. (54; italics mine)

The italicized sections suggest the potentially subversive and thus freeing aspects of the abject. In CB, however, the fictional world is closer to the real world than to Kristeva's theoretical world: motherhood is not freeing because "identitilessness" is meaninglessness, a position that is implicated with Matty's death, perhaps the ultimate disempowerment..

As I mentioned, Matty's narrative is one of attraction towards death and extinction. She is married to Dan, a native man, whom she "meets" when his car crashes in front of her while she works on a road crew. The imagery used to describe the wreck is almost apocalyptic. She goes out with him soon after, and what arouses her most is his link to prehistory, to the ghosts of his past:

His eyes never left her as he moved her across the floor. Matty could hear the pounding of bare feet, the incantations of song repeated over and over. She could see the smoke fires when she looked into his eyes, could see the ghosts of his ancestors celebrating the stranding of a dead whale on the beach, chanting and dancing wildly around the bloated carcass and gorging on rotten blubber. When she looked at him she could imagine the mask, Wild Man of the Woods ... She could even ignore his dentures, glowing as they did under the black lights. Their bodies were united in the rhythm of the dance, in the spirits of the elements. (13-14)

He appeals to the white anthropologist in her that sees his people heading towards

extinction, while they are presently the cultural abject, or the boundary between living and dead. Later in the novel, we will see how this mask signifies Dan's death, during the marriage break up (82), in Matty's dream vision soon afterwards (88), and when she sees the mask at the women's commune (126). Matty's love for the dead, extinct people, their corpse culture, signified by the graveyard and the dead village, is abject in this sense: she does not reject this death, this border of life, but perversely embraces it: "Matty cared more about the ghosts. But even the ghosts in Old Mystic had died: nobody believed in them" (57).

It is not surprising that she is attracted to death, as we have seen how she is drawn to the possibility of her own death: "The next time she went anywhere for a funeral it would be her own" (55). The irony of this passage is clear. What is not so clear is her interest in a culture "alien" to her own, which may be explained by the following: "Novel after novel ... depict the indigene as a corpse or becoming corpse. Dan ... serves ... the role [of the Indian base for white Canadian culture], but his death at the hands of unnatural white forces is a precursor of the heroine's murder, both examples of Cohen's 'beautiful losers.' These individual deaths have the same feeling of inevitability about them as the deaths of the tribes or of the races" (Goldie 160).

Matty's horror is paradoxically of life, birth, and the maternal body. There is an ambivalence towards both life and death that makes Matty a likely candidate for the gothic quest/shamanic journey. The gothic quest is one that moves towards death; the shamanic journey moves towards life. Ambiguity arises because, for Matty, the two journeys are

conflated into the same movement. Above all, abjection is ambiguity. At her mother's funeral, she builds a bridge between the grave mound, that liminal death space of the tomb (so womblike) and the grass: "She stood alone, watching the water that trickled in tiny rivulets to the base of the mound forming a shallow moat, then knelt to build a muddy bridge connecting the grave-island to the mainland cemetery" (16). Matty has built a bridge for her mother to cross between life and death, so that the bridge is like an umbilical cord between the two states of being; however, Matty seems only to deal in death, not life. She can lead her mother's soul to the dead, but she is powerless to bring the meat in the freezer, once her pets, back to life (30). Her dreams reflect this ambiguous relationship to death and life, too, for alternately she wishes things dead (for instance Rasputin [208]) or alive, but can enact neither wish.

Bridges are a shamanic motif that signify the passage between the worlds of the living and the spirits, which are impassable except to shamans. "Shamans, like the dead, must cross a bridge in the course of their journey to the underworld" (Eliade 482). This bridge motif implies "the need to transcend opposites, to abolish the polarity typical of the human condition, in order to attain the ultimate reality" (Eliade 486). Of course, the one who can do this must be able to "[transcend] the human condition; ... this ... can only be accomplished by one who is 'spirit'" (Eliade 486). It is a need to bring life to that which is dead, like Matty's dead pets in the freezer, which pulls against her horror of the mother's life-giving function. It seems as though Matty is more eager to bring things to life by her imaginative creative powers that can bridge the gaps between life and death, than by her

reproductive powers. She, however, seems to fail in the shamanic capacity as life giver, as much as she fails to form the biological umbilical link to a baby within.

As a failed shaman, she is also a failed artist figure because she cannot harness her imaginative ability to make sense of (and thus escape) her gothic world. For instance, she considers her poetry a waste of time: "Matty had kept all her old poems, thinking they might mean something one day, but now they seemed embarrassingly clear and she put them aside to be burned" (91). Although she is not considered a postmodern writer, Musgrave shares certain poetic sensibilities with Marlatt. Musgrave's text forces the reader to come halfway, to be an active reader. As Matty is a poet figure and a non-mother (a negativity that is the focus of much of the narrative) we can make links between Matty's gothic descent into a hellish, surreal world and her failed artistry. The novel is about a failed artist figure, who has failed because she sees herself as an "empty vessel" that must be filled, or at least is constructed as such. We as readers must fill in her flat passive character with our projections. Shamanism is her vocation, but even here we are not sure if Matty succeeds in "birthing" herself into this role.

The horror Matty feels towards childbirth is connected to the stifling roles women play in patriarchally defined culture, and the novel provides many instances of the dead ends in which women are trapped. Harriet, the discontented wife of a cheap husband, is found drowned in the ocean, wearing the pink housecoat which is the sign of her imprisonment (24). As a gruesome finale, her head has been eaten by crabs; the signifier of headlessness seems particularly linked to women throughout the text, perhaps an

indication of the way women are reduced to mere bodies, to meat. This “headlessness” is sometimes signified by the lack of intellectual capacity most of the women seem to suffer, or the lack of opportunity they have to exercise it.

Women’s lives are simply reduced to “trailer park” size, which Matty finally cannot handle. Perhaps this is why she is initially attracted to the women’s commune, as it provides a regimented, seemingly conscious way of living, before she realizes the amount of personal identity and intelligence which must be sacrificed. Musgrave paints an ugly portrait of women’s social lives. The banality and ridiculousness of women’s lives is condensed into the post-funeral tea episode:

Doreen was discussing the colour of Baby’s faeces with Mary Joseph. Mary had had an operation to stop her from getting pregnant; she looked pregnant again anyway and was telling Vina Adams how her tubes had come untied in the middle of sexual intercourse with two construction workers. ... Esther Brown was describing her niece’s marriage to a candy bar salesman--how they’d fought the first night and the niece flushed her diamond down the toilet.

.....  
Matty felt sick. (63-4)

Although Matty has renounced her poetry it still contains insights about the female’s relationship to the home, and to their lives: “*We must be getting/ close to/ prison...(home)*” (91).

At Ephratah, it is suggested that Matty’s “destiny” is to be a “homebody,” no matter how hard she tries to escape the gothic home. She and Christian see a black goat, who has tangled herself up in her tether. She is considered a “pet” by the vegetarian women at Ephratah, but the goat strongly signifies a scapegoat, a sacrifice, which Matty

soon becomes. Her imminent victimhood is intensified when we see that the scarecrow effigy of Matty replaces the headless Christ at the alter of the commune. Matty, a Capricorn (the sign of the goat), has her fortune read at the commune:

Betony summed up the two types of Capricornians by describing the two types of goats: the giddy mountain goat, stepping neatly from crag to crag, always moving on to nibble the greener grass further up the mountain; and the domestic goat restricted to the small patch of grass within the circle allowed by her post and chain. "You want to break free," she said, "but the mountain overwhelms you. Your chain means security. You lack confidence, you're too conventional." (141).

In one particular section, Musgrave neatly condenses Matty's ambivalence towards women's roles. She relates the details of Matty's grotesque honeymoon. Abjection is encoded in the flowers her father sends, which she discovers a week later, dead. This image is conflated in the next paragraph where Matty notices the faint traces of the wallpaper's pattern behind the paint, "little clusters of yellow roses shaped like the skulls of babies" (50). Following this connecting section comes the disclosure of Matty's tubal ligation, which means she is infertile. This fact alone makes problematic Matty's fear of maternity, since there is no chance she can have children. Matty has made the conscious choice to give herself no chance. I would argue that it is a displaced fear, related to maternity; that is the fear of nativity (which I will explore more fully in Chapter Three).

The use of the oneiric (dreams, nightmares, hallucinations, visions) is another gothic and shamanic convention that pervades the text as both motif and form. Matty's mystical visions, prophetic dreams, and drug induced hallucinations appear regularly throughout the text: a surrealistic texture complementing a surrealistic form. The

narrative itself moves through a reality that is more recognizable as a dream scape--the people are bizarre, the humour is grotesque, and the logic is dream logic. Movement is in a downward spiral, and the narrative has a form that suggests the repetitive, obsessional quality of dreams. The story often doubles back upon itself by suggesting strange connections and parallels, most notably from the resonances between Matty's experiences in *East Oyster* and *Old Mystic* and to her experiences in the wilderness in the latter half of the novel. One of the repeated images occurs first when Dan slaughters the calf (26), an image which is verbally echoed during the nightmarish scene of Matty's death (233). This image of the calf is also a bridge between the dream-like "reality" and the nightmarish visionary world (28).

Day outlines some of the characteristics of the dream model of gothic narrative: "Such modes [the dream, nightmare, etc] have as part of their essential quality a pervading strangeness and fragmentation, a sense of the familiar rendered bizarre" (43). He elaborates: "We search in its narrative form for the rules by which the Gothic dream world brings these fragments together, only to discover that the real rule is the parody and subversion of the forms enlisted in the creation of a sense of formlessness" (43). This gothic narrative technique has a specific resonance for the female gothic, because women are associated with the unconscious, with its irrationality, and its unauthorized forms of knowing. Especially important are the terms "strangeness," "fragmentation," and "formlessness." Women have been made alien or uncanny from themselves. This formlessness is a horror felt towards the constantly threatened identity. By the patriarchal

discourses that inscribe women as leaking bodies, as lack, or as “other,” women’s tentative identities are constantly threatening to fall apart. Pregnancy is horrifying because it is linked to a draining or splintering of the body into self and alien other within.

Women’s flows threaten disintegration. If she is constructed as such in a masculinist world which defines the ideal as a whole, totally self-enclosed individual, she perceives herself as vulnerable and unstable. The images of headless bodies in the text ultimately revolve around women, signifying them as self-divided, self-alienated.

The narrative takes on the characteristics of a dream, and it turns into a quest narrative, which is typical of dreams; however, in *CB*, the quest pattern that shapes the latter half of the novel is of a decidedly female gothic nature. “[T]he Gothic journey offers a darkened world where fear, oppression, and madness are the ways to knowledge and the uncontrolled transformation of one’s character the quest’s epiphany” (Gross 1). The gothic quest ends not in “the regeneration of a dying world and integration of the hero into society, [but rather] in the shattering of the protagonists’ image of his/her social/sexual roles and a legacy of, at best, numbing unease, or at worst, emotional paralysis and death” (Gross 1-2). Certainly, Matty’s journey into the heart of the wilderness, intended to be an escape from the gothic trap of her marriage and life in the trailer camp, turns into a type of vision quest that ultimately fails: “For the heroine in ... [the female] Gothic, too, is on a religious quest. But hers is a false ideal created by a patriarchal society. In the patriarchal literary paradigm the woman is motherless, defective, and defined by a male God” (Fleenor 11). As the scarecrow effigy which replaces Christ, Matty is offered up as the



sacrifice like the Lamb of God, which is the pattern of a patriarchal, monotheistic religion. The ultimate irony is that she is led into sacrifice by the lie/promise of being made into the great Virgin Mother, the “Real Mother” (181). Again it is the figure of the mother or motherhood which betrays Matty. No longer a silly perversion as it was in *Old Mystic* (43), “Nativity” becomes the perversion of life, as embodied in the Second Coming cult at Ephratah and the charcoal burners’ camp.

The castle, once the “focal point” of the gothic (Varma 18), is subsumed in the female gothic by the function of the mother’s body and all it represents of cloying motherhood and domesticity; as the heroine is a woman and a potential mother, the maternal body and the home becomes the place from which she tries to escape. Varma’s description of the gothic castle is helpful, for its elements can be transposed onto the figure of the patriarchally-inscribed mother: “The element of terror is inseparably associated with the Gothic castle, which is an image of power, dark, isolated and impenetrable. No light penetrating its impermeable wall, high and strengthened by bastions, it stands silent, lonely and sublime, frowning defiance on all who dare to invade its solitary reign” (18). It is the fear of the mother’s womb that is displaced onto fear of enclosed spaces: “[The female gothic] uses the traditional spatial symbolism of the ruined castle or an enclosed room to symbolize both the culture and the heroine” (Fleenor 15).

While there is a dearth of castles in the novel, there are ruins, relics, decaying houses and people. These images of decay, usually linked to the gothic castle, are related to the natives. The gothic castle, as shown, is linked to the female body, but here, we also

have the gothic ruin as trope for native culture and peoples, so that the image of the ruin is a signifier they share. In fact, the gothic elements are bound up with the indigenous elements throughout, which are simultaneously linked to the image of the maternal woman. In *Old Mystic*, the traditional houses and their supports have collapsed, signifying the collapse of the old cultural home, the old familiar place that has become strange: “*As in all sacred architecture, the construction of the building represents the creation of the universe itself. Destruction of the sacred structures signifies the destruction of the spiritual life of society. When the roof no longer exists, the sky has also fallen*” (57).

Although Bayer-Berenbaum suggests that images of crumbling ruins show “the limitless power of nature over human creation” (26), in this gothic text, where the images of women and natives overlap, we can read this destruction as a sign of the fallibility of human constructions, including the construction of women and natives who have been consistently relegated to the realm of the natural, to the body. Thus, the culturally encoded “natural” body is no longer a trap or predestined role, but that which can be altered or overthrown. The question is whether this agency is realized in the text.

Gothic texts, especially in the female gothic, not only depict the body but they appeal viscerally to the reader (Gross 75). The gothic is primarily concerned with depicting and eliciting fear gauged not necessarily in the intellect, but in the body: “Not... to reach down into the depths of the soul and purge it with pity and terror ..., but to get to the body itself, its glands, muscles, epidermis, and circulatory system, quickly arousing and quickly allaying the physiological reactions to fear” (Moers 90). Musgrave exploits the

grotesque to achieve these ends. To begin, the grotesque mode is apt for the gothic writer because through it she can present vivid images of freakishness and deformity that function as metonyms for the patriarchal construction of female physiology as freakish, monstrous. The grotesque-gothic, with its appeal to the body of the reader, is one way the writer can collapse the boundary between the text and the reader, thus making our reaction to the textual material more physically frightening.

It is this collapse which makes the reading experience akin to the suffocating, vivid experience of Matty's own dreams and hallucinations of being in the womb and of having a malignant being devouring her womb (165). "[T]he grotesque mode in particular [is] related to cultural death and disintegration" (Northey 110). A creature in the womb becomes a metaphor for the larger cultural and social issues that surround the term "nativity." The female gothic is specific to the experience of a female body that has been inscribed with a monstrousness and otherness, deformed and distorted to meet male needs and reflecting male fears: "What is seen ... are images of self-hatred, embodied in freaks of all kinds, which leads to a grotesque tradition in the Female Gothic, an emphasis on *visual* images of deformity" (Kahane 244).

Matty is an anti-mother because she has been sterilized and because of the psychic horror she manifests regarding reproduction and children: she steals a roast from the Food Giant, which feels "cold against her belly; she felt pregnant, sticky, weighed down by fat and fear" (21). Pregnancy is merely carrying more meat to her, as her dream of being filleted while pregnant also signifies (73). In her dreams, failed pregnancy and

motherhood dominate. Matty often envisions herself as sacrificed, mutilated, like so much meat. In the first textualized dream, following her mother's funeral and the butchering of the calf, she envisions her sister's death. Jessie and Matty pretend to be birds. As the mother bird, Matty orders Jessie to fly over a well, but Jessie falls in and drowns. She also dreams that the dead calf's head licks at her foot until there is only a stump left. These types of images which recur in her dreams and visions show the threat of motherhood: the well is a long, vaginal passageway that causes death. These images, like that of the calf, represent the dismemberment and death of the self that motherhood threatens. "[T]he grotesque-Gothic emphasizes the limits of female identity ... [Through her mother's body], the Female Gothic heroine is locked into images of self which reflect deformity, fragmentation, and annihilation" (Kahane 255).

Motherhood comes across as the height of grotesque at Ephratah, the dystopia of a women's commune. One need only consider the bizarre Pregnancy Wishes Ritual, which is the only socially sanctioned place for female sexuality, that is, within the confines of heterosexual reproductive necessity. Of course, because this is a Second Coming cult, and one of the women is supposedly chosen to bear the Messiah, female sexuality is mysticised as it is linked to religious necessity. In this cult, "Nativity" takes on a whole new meaning. Here, women's abjection is magnified because of the nature of its social organization: "Abjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution in the paganism that accompanies societies with a dominant or surviving matrilinear character. It takes on the form of the *exclusion* of a substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality), the execution of which coincides

with the sacred since it sets it up” (Kristeva 17). Tansy’s Shame Ritual, the Pregnancy Wishes Ritual, and the strict dietary laws that define the commune constitute “the various means of purifying the abject--the various catharses ...” (Kristeva 17). Kristeva adds that these means of purifying evolve from religion into “that catharsis par excellence called art,” which functions in the same way as religion. Art, however requires independent thought and imagination, which are both suppressed at Ephratah, as is represented by the headless effigy of Christ. “Imagination, Briony had told [Matty], was a tool of Satan. ‘The devil pollutes the minds of independent thinkers. The Chela will do your thinking for you’” (174). Matty will never fit into this commune, because of her biological infertility, but also because of her imaginative fecundity. Her imagination is considered in excess (141), and like *jouissance*, it is uncontained. As it is Matty’s shamanic link to the otherworldly, her imagination is also a potential power source. As such, it is a threat to patriarchal culture.

Horror associated with birth is the continual thread of a narrative that winds through many different surreal twists. Childbirth is repeatedly textualized as a liminal activity, linked closely to a sense of abjection: “[G]rotesque images of mutilation and dismemberment [are] contextually associated with childbirth” (Kahane 246). As one of the definitive American gothicists, Flannery O’Connor has also set the stage for contemporary female gothicism. We can see how Musgrave’s construction of Matty’s narrative deals with the same types of issues as in O’Connor’s fiction: “O’Connor’s subsequent stories conjoin the idea of penetration and impregnation with vulnerability and

death, leading various female protagonists to engage in a continual repudiation of their womanhood. But their flight invariably proves to be circular, nightmarishly bringing them face to face with their female fears; face to face with the body of the mother” (Kahane 247). As the forest shares many of the attributes of the womb--both are primordial, primal sources of life, are wild, dark, generative, and are considered outside of language and culture--it seems ironic that Matty dies here, until we consider that the womb and the forest are strongly tied to death, too. The womb/tomb and the forest are places where one’s identity is fragmented or lost. It is no coincidence that Matty dies in a natural setting, because it is “nature,” or the acultural, ahistorical, asocial construction of woman as “natural,” which has been her death.

The novel, like the body, resists closure; the text refuses to be resolved in any way, and the reader is left in the end with a distinctly queasy, open-ended, violated sense. Great discomfort and unease are the residue left, ashes as it were, when the story ends and nothing is resolved. Anti-closure entraps the implied reader in the textual engagement (Heller 124-5). Often the fantastic is used in horror texts to resist closure (Heller 94). The novel ends not with Matty’s implied death, but after the reader gets a glimpse into the great beyond, which has been represented all along in Matty’s dream visions and hallucinations.

Gothic is a cultural measure used to gauge what is missing and attempts to supply what is missing (Heller 200). The charcoal burners, who fancy themselves revolutionaries, say they hate law and order (190), yet never act directly against the established order.

Revolution remains talk only (204). They are literally circus freaks, the circus being the last vestige of the carnivalesque in modern culture (Danow 55). Their symbol is fire: "... the all-consuming presence of fire--designed to swallow the old in preparing the way for the new" (Danow 30). Since they only prey upon those equally or even more disempowered than they, the charcoal burners do not represent the potential for revolution of a significant sort. They will only perpetuate the existing power structures that have disinherited those like themselves, an assertion that Allon White has as the basis of his suspicion of wholesale acceptance of the subversive (67). We cannot accept this kind of subversion that has no inherent political application.

Matty and Christian forge ahead in the gothic wilderness across frontiers; another search for a home across the boundary of the known and into the unknown. As Mogen asserts: "Frontier mythology is still the vehicle which expresses an ambivalent sense of destiny, projected into dreadful apprehensions of personal or cosmic apocalypse, into visions depicting new forms of consciousness emerging from horror ("Millennium" 102). Mogen emphasizes that rather than the frontier wilderness itself, it is the drama enacted there which is key: "the implicit theme of metamorphosis ... , the visionary energy that often climaxes with the hero's departure into the sunset, seeking new horizons, rather than with his or her return" (105)--much like Matty's mother who signals a crossing, "waving out and over the blue horizon" (234).

In the forest scene, where Matty is witness to the rape of the dead doe, Matty, by incorporating it into a vision, strongly identifies herself with the slain deer, as she has

identified herself with the calf at its slaughter. It is as a natural figure that she is made a victim, commodified, especially in her death. When Dan, a native, takes the deer, she feels “wrenched and defenceless” (38). The narrative returns to this scene, through the repeated image of the shared heartbeat: “Dan’s body rose and fell in rhythm with her heartbeat. When he breathed his breath passed over her lips and down into the pit of her stomach” (38). This heartbeat is echoed at Ephratah when Matty sees the white mask of death that she has already dreamed is Dan’s face, here “an unknown force that filled the room like a heartbeat and seemed to suck her breath away” (125). Again it is repeated when Matty is at Tansy’s Shame ritual, when Tansy is masturbating as part of the ritual to exorcise her of shame: “The rhythm of her fingers became the rhythm of Matty’s heartbeat. Her breath echoed that beat; she felt a tremor from the earth’s core rattling her skull” (147). In all of these passages, Matty is identified with the doomed victims. Matty identifies with the deer as a victim, when her body “betrays her” (38). That this scene echoes her destruction later at the charcoal burner’s camp becomes clearer if we think back to the slaughter of the calf. What Matty seems to be suffering is a guilt, forcing her to identify with the victims, as she feels she deserves some kind of punishment. It is telling that the doe is pregnant, considering Matty’s aversion to motherhood as a state of either victimizing (devouring mother) or victimhood. The doe’s head bumping against the roof of the camper awakens Matty, and it is this ominous sign or warning that takes the narrative into imminent horror.

Even Spaghetti Chops’ dreams, like Matty’s, are visionary, and focus on the



mother: "He dreamed that the road he walked was leading him back to his mother's belly. He never arrived; after seven miles he was hungry again and had to stop for something to eat" (46). Matty's dreams revolve around the native, nativity or motherhood, and her own relation to the mother. One particular dream is highly resonant and distinct because of its content and form. It is italicized, as if it were of a voice somehow outside the narrative. Called Raven's voice, it becomes the voice of a child, "older than [Matty's] own" (59). Raven is a bird who figures prominently in the myth and religion of West Coast natives, and, in particular, he is a shamanic bird, as well as a cannibal bird in some legends. The story that unfolds through this italicized dream is highly lyrical, reminding us of a shamanic song. It swings between the language of myth and the language of memory. It is part memory, part prophecy. There are obvious parallels between this song and what Matty goes through, such as meeting the Ephratah "wildflowers" and the omens of death, owls, the voices of Raven and crows, who plot to dispose of her body, the sacrifice in the fire, the journey into the afterlife. It is the mother who betrays her in this dream, who tells her she must "*laugh ... or at least smile as if you are enjoying yourself. ... But I am being lowered into the fire. ... Mother tells me everything will be peaceful. Rest now, she says, you will be sleepy later*" (59). It is also a dream that is linked to her fertility, which is associated with tears and perhaps futility: "*the wind blew a flower into my hair. Its seeds exploded down the tracks of my face*" (58). She is buried alive in the end, a motif central to the hallucinations induced during the Pregnancy Wishes Ritual.

Perhaps the strangest part of the novel is this ritual, which incorporates death,

fertility, Matty's shamanic death and rebirth, and so both maternity and nativity. The raven, charcoal, and blood signify both meanings of "nativity." Matty hallucinates a mythic genesis of the universe and the apocalypse. On the level of human regeneration, she feels someone eating her from the inside out. It is this disintegration, like a self-cannibalism, that is reversed by the hallucinations of being deep inside the womb herself.

The fear of the devouring mother has been the work of men who have constructed this image and construct, with help from complicitous women. It is not woman who is devouring, but men who see women, others, as consumable, as objects. They have projected this fear of the reproductive powers onto women, especially as women are potential mothers who can create, and whose pleasure is not tied to procreation, as is men's. The charcoal burners' Chela, the patriarchal god whom the women worship, is constructed as a virile being who is truly "omnipotent," yet he cannot produce a son (130). Matty makes this image of great sky god ridiculous by imagining giant penis in the sky ejaculating rain (142). "Men were obsolete, anyway, according to a magazine she'd read, because of the nature of the female orgasm" (15). Although the statement seems to be made in jest, it is the fear men have of women, what they must control and repress, and what the work of women writers and feminists has been through writing the body, particularly its *jouissance*.

Mothers are feared and hated by Matty because of their complicity with the patriarchally-inscribed body that is shameful, accepting of their prescribed role. Matty cannot resist being a passive vessel. When she is offered a place at the men's camp, she

believes it is useless to fight what has been scripted, has already been decided (181). The Chela says “Martha” is a seaworthy name to emphasize that she is merely a vessel (180).

Matty’s ambiguous relationship with the mother is partly based on mother’s repression of sexuality. She cries “Sexual intercourse!” in disgust when Matty announces that she is living with a native man. Women’s menstruation and women’s flows are not considered a power but a shame that is passed from woman to woman. Angie, in the same breath, reminds Matty to take “Tampax and bum wipe” on her trip. Matty reacts to the conflation of menstruation and defecation with nausea (96). Her menstruation, vaguely perceived as a power she owns, is stripped of its power by the Chela, who also reacts to her menstruation with embarrassment (177-9). Only the blood of prey is valued, which is blood spilled from the transgression of killing (157).

Women are not freed from these culturally repressive norms at the women’s commune, either. Pleasures of the body, including the sexual and sensual (eating, imaginative creativity), are not to be enjoyed at Ephratah. Tansy’s Shame Ritual attests to the consequences of sexual intercourse for pleasure. Briony does not think women should indulge in pleasures of the flesh (150), think for themselves (144 and 174), and so Briony figuratively decapitates/clitorectomizes the followers. Some, like Tansy cannot fit into these rigid paradigms, and seem to transgress the commune’s rules constantly, sometimes with real intent (it seems she implicated in the collapse of the headless crucifix [169]). That the figure of the mother laughs at the end, quoting Tansy’s Tantric scripture from the Shame Ritual, seems to clinch her position as irredeemably gothic and oppressive.

Subsequently, Matty's "pleasure" is always, seemingly, masochistic. She has been alienated from her body because she has concentrated on its (in)fertility, the reproductive aspect and its failings. At the end she follows mother's dream advice by smiling at her persecutors, but this advice does not save her. In the end, "Nothing matters":

Perhaps those that the path of analysis, or scription, or of a painful or ecstatic ordeal has led to tear the veil of the communitarian mystery, on which love of self and others is set up, only to catch a glimpse of the abyss of abjection with which they are underlaid--they perhaps might be able to read [The Powers of Horror] as something other than an intellectual exercise. For abjection ... is the other facet of the religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and breathing spells of societies. Such codes are abjection's purification and repression. But the return of their repressed make up our "apocalypse," and that is why we cannot escape the dramatic convulsions of religious crises.

... [S]he is preparing to go through the first demystification of Power (religious moral, political, and verbal) that mankind has ever witnessed; and it is necessarily taking place within that fulfilment of religion as sacred horror, which is Judeo-Christian monotheism. (Kristeva 209-10)

Perhaps this is the gothic vision Musgrave's text manifests: there is no space yet for subversion if women cannot move out of the patriarchally-inscribed roles they play. Musgrave's novel does not provide any models for women to escape the patriarchal trap of their lives as women. The dire tone in her novel is indicative of most female gothics, as most of them textualize horror rather than escape from it. In analysing and rejecting the masochistic trend found in most female gothics, Massé identifies three possibilities for resisting the gothic. The first is aggression against the oppressor(s), which often leads to severe reprisals against the resisting female character(s) (240). The second involves a "self-conscious subversion that mimes cultural expectations of femininity to achieve the

protagonists freedom,” a strategy that uses passivity, for instance, to escape violence (240). The third is “utopian alterity, always briefly hinted at, that refuses to accept the binary options of subordinated/oppressed and laughs heartily at the very idea” (240). It is this last category which seems to best describe Marlatt’s Ana Historic.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Daphne Marlatt's Ana Historic: Re-assessing the Uncanny Gothic Mother

Much of the work done on Daphne Marlatt's experimental novel, Ana Historic, focuses on her postmodern use of language, narrative, and the feminist poetics of "writing the body." Although these aspects of the text, insofar as they have intellectual currency in contemporary scholarship, are provocative and innovative, there remains a problem of interpretation; it is easy for the novel's gothicism to slip through the cracks of post-structuralist interpretations, which are almost exclusively attuned to progressive, post-structuralist concepts. Many gothic critics and writers are showing, however, that the gothic form is conducive to post-structuralist readings and interpretation. Marlatt is one of these writers. She has written a novel which self-reflexively uses feminist postmodernist techniques and concepts in the gothic mode. Self-consciously manipulating language and convention, she turns the gothic into a discourse that is threaded through other discourses such as those of (sexual) identity, the (female) body, the "other," history, and writing. From multiple, fragmented discourses comes Ana Historic, a narrative that self-reflexively (or consciously) uses the gothic trappings but ultimately avoids the gothic trap. The trap is conforming to patriarchal values which imprison women's bodies and lives.

The novel's plot has not often been described as gothic; however, the elements are clear if one looks for them. There are three main characters, Ana, Ina and Annie, whose

whose fictional boundaries blur and overlap. Ana, or Mrs. Richards, is a fictional creation of Annie's; she has discovered this name in the archives, and she builds a story around this nineteenth-century woman. Ana's story is of the colonial woman who sees the new world as "other," and yet, as a woman, she, too, is seen as an "other." Ina is Annie's dead mother. Ina's story is closest to the female gothic paradigm because her story is one of domestic horror. Ina believes in patriarchal values which have been instilled into her, but instead of being rewarded with the safety that the domestic world promises, she loses her self to this world, and as a result, goes mad. Annie's narrative is the central thread in this weave of narratives. The novel comes across as Annie's attempt to write through the lives of Ana and Ina to understand the trap of her own domestic situation. She realizes that being married with children is not her true identity, but one which has been socially prescribed for her. By the novel's end, she comes to see that her identity cannot be contained in any one category, and her fluid identity as a newly realized lesbian enables her to break out of her own patriarchal trap.

Marlatt understands the construction of the gothic, its ideological potential and limitations, so she is able to both use it and subvert it to create specific effects for her purposes. For instance, Marlatt's narrative conforms to the gothic paradigm in that it textualizes discontinuity, fragmentation, and thus questions "the capacity of narrative form to comment on and represent reality" (Day 44). This is evident in her critique of masculinist history: "what is fact? (f)act. the f stop of act. a still photo in the ongoing cinerama" (AH 31). She works against the gothic novel's tendency to portray action as

meaningless, since her agenda includes positing agency through the act of writing. She subverts through a self-consciously gothic technique, however, which both affirms and critiques gothic. Take Day's analysis of action in gothic narratives:

Meaningful action, action that moves from point *a* to point *b* [linear action], either physically or psychically, is impossible. ... The Gothic world, like a black hole in space, allows no energy to escape, but traps it in a closed system. Action can never be progressive, only circular; whatever the protagonist tries to do, his actions might result in his own disintegration. (44)

As the dissolution of the category of identity (defined as total, enclosed, and unchanging) is Marlatt's goal, she both uses and subverts the gothic. While the traditional gothic character sees this dissolution as frightening and fatal, Marlatt exposes the stability of identity as a construct, and posits the fluid self, or self as process rather than fixed form in the central protagonist, Annie: "Becoming-woman means going beyond identity and subjectivity, fragmenting and freeing up lines of flight, 'liberating' multiplicities, corporeal and otherwise, that identity subsumes under the one" (Grosz 178).

She takes apart the gothic logic as it were, shows up its weaknesses, and then politically reinvests or charges the useful elements. For those who have traditionally found their voices through gothic literature, such as women, homosexual, and colonial writers (Gross 2), the gothic mode has been effective only so far as it expresses their experiences and strategies of survival as the "other," but it mainly dramatizes the alienation. Marlatt's approach, however, makes the gothic effective as an empowering tool because its ideology is made explicit, thus negotiable. Heller shows how the fact that the gothic exposes the fictionality of "I" suggests that it can be changed (183). By



shrinking the aesthetic distance between the reader and the text, the gothic mode allows the reader to consciously choose and then give up the unified “self” of the implied reader, a construct that is similar to an identity. In being forced to reconsider taking on a fixed identity, the gothic novel forces the “real” reader to interrogate categories of identity, “thus bringing that self in its relations to ideology before the reader’s own consciousness” (Heller 186). Such a literary technique can be understood as empowering, for it allows the reader to participate fully in the creation of the text’s meaning, but it also gives the reader the chance to throw off the fiction of a unified identity. There are some who claim that the gothic mode is essentially one that dramatizes the lack of power an individual holds: “The genre cannot make positive statements or create an empowering mythology” (Day 61). Day’s statement may be true of gothic literature that is unconscious of its ideology, but Marlatt’s post-structuralist approach proves to be the exception which harnesses the potentially subversive power of gothic.

The gothic form she works with is particularly suited to her purposes in the text, which is to show how women can free themselves from the gothic trap of domesticity through writing. Annie interrogates the unquestioned values and assumptions of patriarchal society, which are espoused by her mother, Ina. Ina acts as the text’s ghost, who, because of her self-defeating adherence to the rules of a patriarchally-inscribed society, Annie must “exorcise.” Marlatt self-consciously draws upon the gothic tradition in this novel by linking its terms with the patriarchally-inscribed role women play as housewives and mothers, or simply as “women.” The category of woman is gothicized;

that is, womanhood is conflated with a fictional construct (the gothic form) to show how womanhood is also a fiction. Along these lines, she subverts the gothic, and thereby shows how fictions can be perpetuated, or alternately changed. Her self-conscious choice of the gothic is appropriate. As we have seen, it has always been a genre popular with women, particularly because it is a genre that they have used to articulate their horrifying perspectives on domestic life. This horror manifests itself in female gothics through the confinement the female characters feel in occupying “a woman’s lot” in society, the perception of the female body as a prison in a patriarchal society, and the uncanniness experienced from being alienated in these spaces that are supposed to be safe and homelike. This uncanniness is conflated into the image of the mother’s body, as we see in the figure of Ina “wandering around the empty house of your body, sleeping pills in hand” (132).

The gothic has also been a vehicle for homosexual writing, so it is a form particularly suited to Marlatt’s political agenda as a lesbian writer. Lesbianism is a major subtext for much of the novel. Like an underground river that trickles out of weaker places in the ground, the lesbian subtext shows through in the gaps, silences, and ellipses, until it bursts out at the end in a powerful, liberating surge. What we might deduce from the novel is that by strategically placing herself outside of patriarchy, as a radical lesbian, that a woman can escape the gothic trap. In contrast, consider Fleenor’s assessment: “[T]he Female Gothic does not establish any new definitions of female sexuality, though they are sadly needed. That is beyond its scope; it does, however, challenge assumptions

about the nature of the gothic by revealing that the central conflict is with the mother and not with the husband/lover/father” (15). Fleenor recognizes that the female gothic recenters women, but her definition does not allow for the transcendence of the patriarchal control of female sexuality. It is surprising that Fleenor does not mention the possibilities of lesbianism in the gothic novel, although another essay in the collection demonstrates how the female gothic has been used to explore the formerly unspeakable, “monstrous” aspects of women’s lives (Stein 126). The absence of discourse on lesbian gothicism is a serious omission, since a classic lesbian text, Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, is a gothic, although it is not quite a lesbian affirming novel. Still, since Marlatt writes of Annie’s successful escape from the gothic-patriarchal trap through lesbian self-awareness, lesbianism must be seriously considered in *AH*.

One of the few critics who addresses the numinous in *AH* is Stan Dragland, who puts his finger on the gothic pulse of the novel. As one of the most definitive and significant threads of the narrative, the gothicism of patriarchally-inscribed experience intertwines the lives of Annie, Ana, and Ina as they all grapple with the unknown spaces within themselves. These spaces are created by the inconsistencies in the patriarchal plot that promises them a place, a home, but does not deliver. Their identities are fictions which act as boxes, as sealed houses; locked up in the darkness that is ignorance and inarticulacy are other identities and possibilities which signify freedom and power.

The shape of Marlatt’s text is undeniably gothic, and she uses the form not to perpetuate the gothic prisons, but to show, in a fiction, how the gothic lives women lead

are fictions. Consider this excerpt, which, although it refers to the gothic elements in Hogg's The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner, parallels the way events unfold in Marlatt's novel:

Rather than a unified, coherent whole, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, it is a series of fragments ... The juxtaposition of the three sections emphasises their incompleteness and the impossibility of a narrative that could represent reality or even be a complete story. [The narrative] leaves us with a sense of indefiniteness. ... The realization that the story is over, but without any sense of closure, confirms the dreamlike atmosphere of the Gothic fantasy, whose experiences end similarly, at the arbitrary moment when we awaken or are shaken out of our hallucination by some event in the real world. Because the Gothic fantasy is made up of a set of narratives, rather than a representation of action, it becomes a hall of mirrors, a series of stories doubling and reflecting each other. ... The more the text becomes a series of enfolded and enveloped narratives, the more conventional narrative structure disintegrates (Day 49).

There is a difference between Day's interpretation of the gothic and Marlatt's: while Day assumes that we "need to halt this tendency toward absolute instability" (50), Marlatt embraces it. Women, as they are trapped in gothic circles that restrict their lives, cannot fully know themselves until they break out of the constricting gothic ring. Figuratively, the gothic circle for women is a wedding band, which leads to other connotations, such as the womb that is a prison and a body that is a shame, the home that is treacherous, the cultural expectance of marriage and heterosexuality placed on women, the language that they are caught up in, which can either trap or liberate. "What is this closed and constricting circle in the novel? It's the interior of Ina's house ..., the confining limits of social convention ..., a line of narrative, the script of marriage with a subordinate role already written out for women, or of history which erases these female lives of

servitude ..." (Dragland 173).

Women's bodies and lives are horrifying and uncanny to themselves, and it is only 3  
through writing, or re-inscription of their bodies and lives, that they can break out of  
patriarchal imprisonment. It is a recognition of the body as an inscriptive surface where  
discourses are traced rather than inherently imbued with meaning, which is critical in the  
novel's overtly feminist discourse: "The 'body' is ... to be thought of as the point of  
intersection, as the interface between the biological and the social, that is to say between  
the sociopolitical field of the microphysics of power and the subjective dimension"  
(Braidotti 97). Through a re-inscription of the body that is traced over the patriarchally-  
inscribed woman's body, a re-inscription which includes a reevaluation of women as a  
positive, as flows, pleasures and excesses, rather than as lack, Annie is able to write herself  
out of the gothic gloom and into a new lesbian-identified life, where the possibility of  
leaving the closet is imminent.

Dragland helps to bring these issues to conscious articulation by examining the  
ways Marlatt uses the gothic in her text. His assessment of Ina's story as "gothic" in a  
traditional sense is accurate; however, he does not show how the rest of the novel is  
consciously engaged with the gothic in a highly conscious, self-reflexive manner, except to  
say this: "But it doesn't do to think of the stories as separate. Each of them infiltrates the  
other, as each is highlighted in various ways by the documentary voices woven through  
the novel; each story is an exploration for a different generation of the power of that  
gothic narrative" (Dragland 179). In any case, Ina's story, as it is gothic, is not at all self

contained. Its gothicism inevitably leaks into the other narrative streams as well as into the texture of the entire novel; the background for each woman's story is a backdrop of trees, which represent the unknown, the liminal place of wildness and potential, and the incessant rain, which is a sadness, but also water, movement, torrents. The water images converge in Annie's act of lesbian self-naming. As Annie Torrent she can finally take the first step into the unknown, which, contrary to most gothic conceptions, is less fearful than promising.

The storyline that least deviates from the gothic pattern of imprisonment is Ina's. As a woman who gives in to the culturally perpetuated fictions constructed for women (those fictions of heterosexual marriage, domesticity, motherhood, and self-sacrifice), Ina's life is boxed into the gothic pattern of stagnation and isolation. The home, women's only culturally recognized space, is characterized by its imprisoning walls: "for it was the walls that closed in on you, picture windows that never opened, doors that stayed shut against the cold" (136). In the gothic, the home is not a place of refuge, but "a place of danger and imprisonment" (Ellis x). Here, women are cut off from others and from themselves, thus from any possibilities outside of their prescribed roles. Although Ina tries to paint over the walls, she does not solve the problem of the stifling home. In fact, in trying to make a "home" of her prison, she only reinforces her entrapment. She does not deal with the problem; rather she tries to "paint over the cracks in the whole setup"(26). Annie would rather point out the cracks and inconsistencies, by criticising the entire social system: "holes. there were holes in the story you had inherited. holes in the image" (26).

Annie as a character is not simply set in opposition with Ina or the culture she sees as fault-ridden; Marlatt constructs this character as one who asks questions and gradually formulates her own truths. At first, Annie is seduced by the lure of tranquillity, of implied safety and peace, that the home promises:

... I wondered what you did in the empty house alone, one in a row of houses settled in the sunlight, dreaming. all the housewives absent, their curlerheads, their mops still on their knees in the aftermath of storm. endless morning stretched before them, tendrils of quiet crept in their windows, hours of nothing slipped through their doors. bathrobe sleeping beauties gone in a trice, a trance, embalmed, waiting for a kiss to wake them when their kids, their men would finally come home. how peaceful I thought, how I longed for it. a woman's place. safe. suspended out of the swift race of the world.

the monstrous lie of it: the lure of self-absence. self-effacing. (24)

Later, after she has lived the life of a housewife and mother, she knows differently: "it is the world outside my door which looks at times exceedingly dangerous. it is my own inability that is so dangerous. the worst is that we (that we again) have made it so" (78). Here Annie indicts the complicity of mothers who perpetuate the gothic trap by passing it, like a grim heirloom, to their daughters.

Ina's impotent rage manifests itself in "hysteria," a mix of rage, fear and insanity. Hysteria is the supreme gothic emotion attributed specifically to women. Her staunch acceptance of the gothic legacy, an inheritance of self-hatred for her woman's body and social place, is complicitous with the ideology of her gothic imprisonment. Annie recognizes the impetus behind the gothic imprisonment of women as male fear of the "other," while internalized by women, becomes fear of the self: "your fear I inherited,

mother dear' (79). Annie realizes that this inheritance is not in the blood, but is rather an heirloom or a family name that can be rejected, exchanged, or put away. This understanding enables her to write herself anew, through the act of rewriting her body. Women like Ina, who understand their bodies to have inherent biological meanings or predetermined, unchangeable significance cannot see the body as inscriptive surface. They do not know how or what to write or reinscribe "on the body" that is merely unspeakable to them.

Ina cannot face the unspeakable, the uncontrollable wildness that, once embraced, would free her. To break out of the gothic prison she must imagine and act on this creativity through writing. This act can only be realized through the will to leap into the great unknown of the unconscious. To do so is to let go of the patriarchally-assigned gothic script of womanhood which, although it is a prison, is the only reality Ina can imagine: "impasse: impossible to exit. dead end. when the walls close down. the public/private wall. defined the world you lived inside, the world you brought with you, transposed, onto a Salish mountainside, and never questioned its terms. ... never questioned its values. English gentility in a rain forest?" (24-5). Here, we have the vaguest hint of what it is that Ina never questioned; her own (homo?) sexuality. The rainforest is the site for questioning, for exploring that which is out of bounds, taboo. The monster running through the text is not the mother, not the female body, nor is it (homo) sexuality. It is none of the "unknowns": it is fear. The fear expressed is of losing the only identity one knows as a woman, hence choosing life in the enclosed eternal nighttime of



the gothic home and body. This resigned acceptance of “the way things are” offers no opportunity for escape. As an alternative, Ana and Annie try venturing into the woods, the sign of liminality, to transgress boundaries, and to say the unspeakable. For Annie, the unspeakable is lesbianism. In the novel, the unspeakable is always that which we desire, and what we desire is what we fear most. Ina never learned to speak her desire, only to exhibit her fear, and so she became entombed inside her life: “(the small space life gets boxed into). ... the small space desire gets boxed into. boxed. off” (59). As a subtext, lesbianism runs through most of the text and works to undermine the patriarchal gothicism even on behalf of women such as Ina.

Just as Ana Richards is Annie’s fictional self, so is Ina, in that Annie rewrites Ina’s story to make sense of it, to come to terms with the gothic maternal legacy, and ultimately to free herself from its madness and limitations. Ana is a fictional identity Annie can try on in writing. Through this writing she unearths a buried self, a truer identity that had to be sublimated in her own gothic world (as Annie is a housewife who has sublimated her own life and desires in order to stay “true” to the gothic domestic script). Ana functions as another role, another skin to explore that which is unknown in herself. There is a wonderful scene where the self-reflexivity of language is gothicized. Marlatt collapses the distance between Annie writing Ana, and also between her own writing and Annie’s. The fictionality of fiction-making through writing is exposed: “Knocking, tapping, tapping, looking, looking ... reading: these are metonyms for writing. ‘Also reading’ is a compact way of describing the way Daphne Marlatt’s writing functions for her, as a reading of the

world where she meets it in the body of language, where she meets others also reading” (Dragland 180). The image of the tapping and knocking is related both to writing and to the occult, which runs through the text as a gothic motif. The communication with the great unknown, the beyond, is particularly convoluted in the text where Annie is reaching beyond the grave, in a sense, when she converses with the “ghost” of Ina. This “tapping” runs through the text in small details: the Ouija games that Ina’s colonial parents played afternoons in the tropics (98) or that Ina taught to her daughters (145). The act of tapping is also notable at the birth scene, where Ana taps on the window (121). The tapping comes to a peak in the end where Annie finally breaks through the walls, the patriarchal language that has kept her separated from other women (“stuck in the unspoken, unenacted--half born” [132]) and has prevented her from giving birth to women like Ina through language (132). Most explicit, then, is the act of tapping as writing.

To return to the self-reflexive act of writing in the text, the scene where Ana “knocks” on the paper and Annie knocks back is highly charged with the central discourses of the text: writing, gothicism, lesbianism. The passage is significant because Marlatt herself surfaces in this moment, and so collapses the construct of “objective distance” between reader and writer. “One has a pleasant, only mildly vertiginous feeling, imagining Marlatt writing Annie writing Ana writing ....” (Dragland 179). The vertiginous feeling spins out to include the reader who is reading, thus writing by virtue of her contribution to the creation of meaning. The vertiginous effect is heightened for me as I

tap on the computer keyboard and as you the reader tap this paper for my meaning. This act of conflation is a gothic effect, one which has often been identified in critical interpretations of the text as a purely postmodern.

In this passage, Annie is writing, tapping for someone else, a rapping that echoes from the first scene of the book--“Who’s There? she was whispering. knock knock. in the dark” (9)--and which is much echoed throughout the text:

she was knocking on paper, not wood, tapping like someone blind along the wall of her solitude. ...

but here was the page, her tapping there, looking for a way out of the blank that faced her--blankety-blank--and not that tug either, the elliptical tug of memory which erases this other. she was looking for the company of another who was also reading--out through the words, through the wall that separated her, an arm, a hand--

and so she began, ‘a woman sitting at her kitchen table writing,’ as if her hand holding the pen could embody the very feel of a life. as if she could reach out and touch her, those lashes cast down over blue (brown?) eyes, the long line of nose, the lips doubting or pleased, that curve of a shoulder, upper arm, wrist at another table in a different kind of light ... no, it’s this small and present thing in her arm, her hand holding the pen between which fingers of which hand: lefthanded and upright or right and oblique in the proper fashion? ... does she stare at the wall? as if the right, the only word might suddenly appear? not brown ... but darker than tea ...

‘I try again--it seems no foot, or none other than mine, disturbs ... the roots of enormous Trees going down into--its ~~brackish~~ waters evade the eye--’Tis a nameless colour as if stained by the Trees themselves, darker than tea ...’

what is she editing out and for whom? besides herself? it is herself there though she writes ‘the’ eye and not ‘my.’ objective: out there and real (possibly) to others. she is thinking about those possible others leaning over her shoulder as she writes. or does she strive only to capture in words a real she feels beyond her? those enormous Trees with their capital letter. a colour no word can convey. I lean over her shoulder as she tries, as she doubts: why write at all? why not leave

the place as wordless as she finds it? because there is 'into--' what? frightening preposition. into the unspoken urge of a body insisting itself in the words.

who's there? (knock, knock). ... it isn't Frankenstein you're looking for but some elusive sense of who you might be: she, unspoken and real in the world, running ahead to embrace it. (45-6)

The image presented is of a woman, Annie, seeking someone else (and herself) through the act of writing. In this dense passage, Marlatt combines the self-reflexivity of writing with her own voice coming through as a woman writing another woman who is writing, and the search, the tapping for the lesbian identity, which is the text's gap: it is the "elliptical tug of memory which erased this other," "unspoken urge," "she, unspoken and real."

*writing*

Marlatt is also asking us to see how she herself is writing the fiction, thinking through her writing. She alienates the reader, and so makes sure the reader sees the processes of fiction, as well as those of identity. The conflation of the reader and writer, or the collapsing of aesthetic distance, is often an uncanny moment in the reading experience that makes us see the gothic aspect of self-reflexive writing. She consciously collapses the aesthetic distance time and again, by shifting quickly between pronouns that are applicable to many characters at once and to the implied reader and writer. These instances where she emphasizes the fiction is a technique of gothic literature. Terry Heller, by using the example of Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," emphasizes the technique Whitman uses for collapsing or transcending the time and distance between the persona of the poem and the implied reader. This collapse often creates an uncanny or

haunting effect. Heller explains how Whitman destroys the aesthetic distance:

“... Whitman transforms the dead physical Whitman and the real reader into roles rather than the actors ... Whitman provides one pole of the continuum in his deliberate attempt to violate the antinomy of aesthetic distance ... [T]his [violation] is a constant risk of the tale of terror ...” (9). Heller does not make it clear that what Whitman is doing, is in effect, exposing (deconstructing) the construction and machinery of the aesthetic distance, a process which inevitably collapses it. Such a collapse, as he mentions, seems to be device that works for gothic literature in particular, because of the transgressive aims of many gothic writers.

This aesthetic distance, or objectivity, is what Marlatt's text seeks to deflate as a fiction. It is this “objectivity” which has denigrated women's experience, so that they are a ghostly absence in history. The ghostly hand of the long passage quoted above is eerie as it comes out of the text towards Annie, but it is also sexualized. Attached to it is a catalogue of eroticised parts of a woman's body which is the “unspoken urge of a body insisting itself in the words.” Here the act of writing and communicating is conflated with lesbianism, suggesting that the author sees lesbian language as a skin that both touches and is touched simultaneously. Though it appears eerie because of its immediacy, the hand, a signifier for writing and communication, is not threatening. Marlatt conveys her political and social agenda by using the gothic as an alternative medium. She thus invites the destruction of fictional positions which imprison women in a patriarchal economy of language.

The gothic has been largely understood, since the birth of Freudian psychoanalysis, in terms of the psychological; gothic becomes the expression of the symbolic workings of the human unconscious/psyche, which replaces the great unknown of the supernatural. Through a feminist awareness or consciousness, Marlatt sees the unconscious not as a closet to hide the repressed “others” of one’s selves, but as a potential source of creative empowerment. The power of the unconscious can be “tapped” by cutting through the aspects of psychoanalysis and gothicism that oppress women, as Marlatt does in her text. It is the unconscious that may yield truths, for it contains the hidden, repressed selves that haunt the mind. In *AH*, the unconscious which yields the true selves is accessed through the act of writing (the body): “Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth” (Cixous 338).

The text is explicitly concerned with the problems and powers of writing in and through women. Marlatt, through Annie, articulates the problems of women’s language. In reference to the passage quoted from Simone de Beauvoir, Annie says: “... that explains why our writing, which we also live inside of, is different from men’s, and not a tool, not a ‘pure instrument for getting a grip on the world.’ ‘it contains menaces,’ traps, pitfalls--I stop at the word ‘our’ and think of yours, how it hurts to think of your ‘scribblings’ under the bed (the bed!) in a language which was not yours” (133). It is re-inscription of the body through women’s language which becomes Annie’s project, a project which has gothic dimensions. Insofar as *l’écriture féminine* is a movement to

reclaim women's bodies from the obscurity of patriarchally inscribed lack, negativity, and imprisonment in reproductive capacities, it is also a movement that seeks to exorcise the uncanniness from women's bodies.

Some definition of "writing the body" is necessary: "... *l'écriture féminine* ... posits the feminine as that which is repressed, misrepresented in the discourses of western culture and thought. The preconditions for the production of western knowledge, its standards of objectivity, rationality, and universality, require the exclusion of the feminine, the bodily, the unconscious" (Dallery 53). In this sense, gothic, especially as it is written by women, is a direct challenge to the western patriarchal forms of knowing and knowledge production. Through writing the woman's body and bringing the unconscious to light, female writers subvert patriarchal hegemony through the gothic form. "As such, [writing the body] poses an enormous threat to the philosophical tradition of gender-free humanism and to the treasured ideal of androgyny, itself based on fear of otherness" (Dallery 65). Grosz devotes an entire book to exploring the relation of the mind to the body, a relation that has been severed. Western patriarchal thought has disconnected the mind from the body by feminizing the body and masculinizing the mind, thus setting the mind and body in opposition, and in a hierarchical relation. It is by reconnecting the mind and body that we can better understand how women can reinscribe themselves:

What psychoanalytic theory makes clear is that the body is literally written on, inscribed, by desire and signification, at the anatomical, physiological, and neurological levels. The body is in no sense naturally or innately psychical, sexual, or sexed. It is indeterminate and indeterminable outside its social constitution as a body of a particular type. This implies that the body which it presumes and helps

to explain is an open-ended, pliable set of significations capable of being rewritten, reconstituted, in quite other terms than those which mark it, and consequently capable of reinscribing the forms of sexed identity and psychological subjectivity at work today. This project of rewriting the female body as a positivity rather than as a lack entails two related concerns: reorganizing and reframing the terms by which the body has been socially represented ... and challenging the discourses which claim to analyze and explain the body and subject scientifically ... to develop different perspectives that may better represent women's interests. (60-1)

Part of the reinscription involves a decentring of patriarchal values which are inscribed onto women's bodies by ascribing them to women's biology. Here, certain derogatory values are taken as innate in women; thus this patriarchal system of values denigrates women and empowers men. Rather than accepting these values, it is necessary to question and deconstruct them to see what the agenda behind the inscription is, so that it can be altered. One of the values which has been written onto women's bodies and which has been naturalized is the discourse of maternity, or the maternal instinct, an "instinct" which has been a justification for keeping women in the home. Writers can reinscribe the primacy of the sexual woman's body, a body which is a source of power that the maternal discourse has overshadowed: "it is not the womb but the vulva that is central: the women must rescue not reproduction, but non-reproductive sexuality from mystification" (Crowder 120).

As we have seen, the female gothic is centrally concerned with the mother, the mother's body, and the daughter's relationship to it, a tangle which stews in ambiguity without providing any means of getting beyond this gothic "impasse." In *AH*, there is the fear of the mother who becomes mad from her sense of imprisonment, an imprisonment



that is most pronounced in terms of her body image, and of how the doctors, those agents of patriarchal oppression, blame her body for her madness. Ina cannot find freedom because her conception of language stifles her. There are no words to write herself, only the “proper terms” that conform to the rules and thus impede her freedom: “true: exactly conforming to a rule, standard or pattern ... but whose standard or rule? and what do you do when the true you feel inside sounds different from the standard?” (18). Ina flounders in the proper syntax that she tries to advocate (17). She cannot explore through written language like Ana/Annie because of her inability to consciously articulate that which may be subversive or to let go of the rules of patriarchal language: “you would never write like that. ... because of the grade-school scribbler you hid under your bed and which you showed me once, family stories for *The Reader’s Digest*, ‘Laughter is the Best Medicine,’ stories that lost their humour in description, faded away in proper sentences. ‘tell me the truth: they’re terrible, aren’t they?’ you who could outtalk, outname, outargue me anytime” (20). Her strength is arguing, oral language, but then she loses control because her language cannot convey the truths she wants to express. She lacks the consciousness, the paradigms to analyze her situation and change it: “it was nothing so controlled as a dive, more like smashing into black waters where there were no limits to what could be said, no up nor down, no boundaries to respect, no real. always that seed of half-truth from which grew vast kelp beds of accusation” (88). While her raging words are strong, they cannot argue effectively against what she sees as oppression. She lacks the language because she denies her language: the language of her own body.

The doctors blame her faulty (because female) physiology for her illness. Ina is “... infected by [her] body ...” (88). Even the rhetoric of the scientific world reinforces the burden of the hysteric’s problem with her body rather than larger social problems which may be the cause: “*The patient is identified as the “sick” member of the family and the family is reassured they don’t need to feel guilty or in any way responsible*” (145). The real source of hysteria is hidden by a patriarchal discourse that displaces social and cultural ills upon individual women. The problem, then, lies “... in the psychiatric diagnoses of hysteria made by men who fail to trace this vicious circle back to its social origins, leaping instead at a tangent of women’s bodies, to a shocking fantasy of absence ...” (Dragland 189). The recognition is that woman’s imprisonment is cultural and social rather than individual and purely psychological. Women’s imprisonment can be ascribed to the patriarchal social structure, rather than to individual women and their faulty physiology/psychology based on lack (as Freud would have us believe). “It is not clear why hysterectomy does not carry with it the kind of phantom effects that even the removal of other internal organs, organs not usually perceived, such as the appendix, have as scar tissue. Is this because the vagina, cervix, clitoris, and other female sexual organs are already codified paradoxically as ‘missing’ organs [lack]?” (Grosz 71).

There is always a sense of unease or uncanniness of the home which really “comes home” for Ina after the electroshock therapy she undergoes: “when Harald brought you back from the hospital, he brought back a stranger, a small round person collapsed in on herself, who drifted in her blue dressing-gown in a fog from table to window to bed as if

nothing looked familiar, as if home were a motel they had stuck you in with some people you vaguely knew” (145). After her hysterectomy and electroshock “therapy,” Ina is left without even her madness as a defence or a tool: “they took your imagination, your will to create things differently” (149). “By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display--the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions” (Cixous 337-8). Annie makes it her cause to write not only herself into being, but also to birth her mother into language: “but you are not reading this as I write and Ina is--in my imagination, Ina I would give birth to, enter her into the world” (132).

Ina, as we have seen, is the gothic mother. She is the chief perpetuator of the gothic prison because she passes on the legacy of shame towards the female body: “on the inside--shame. the taste of it in my mouth, musty as dirty linen and just as familial” (61). When Ina gives a pubescent Annie some old bras, it is not with pride in her womanhood, but with shame and furtiveness that translates to Annie: “(these things that smelled of mother flesh, the used body, sagged on my spare frame like empty hammocks with a nipple fold embarrassing under sweaters.)” (61). Annie continues:

the sins of the mothers. hating our bodies as if they had betrayed us. but the words for our bodies betrayed us in the very language we learned at school: ‘cunt,’ ‘slit,’ ‘boob,’ words betraying what the boys thought of us. wounded or sick ... with a wound that bleeds over and over--‘on the rag again,’ ‘got the curse,’ ... catastrophic phrases we used that equally betrayed us. handed down from ... mother to daughter. hand-me-downs, too small for what I really felt. (62)

Later, Annie sees that Ina knew that there was a contradiction between what she felt and what she knew she ought to feel, which came out in her “voice, ... lucid and critical,” (135) and later in her more desperate outbursts. The problem was, “you still didn’t know what to do with the fear that found you alone on the far side of where you were ‘supposed’ to be. ... guilty of ‘going too far.’ (in the woods alone.)” (135).

According to Marlatt’s text, women must find a home again in their bodies, an act which is possible by reinscribing their oppressed bodies and repressed selves. “Repression implies knowledge that one has but chooses not to remember because it is too threatening to the ego. Oppression is state in which one is prevented by others from acquiring or acting upon knowledge one needs and wants. ... Women are not repressed but oppressed” (Crowder 125). Such a stance cuts through to the ideological assumptions behind the “uncanniness” of women; it relieves women of the burden of biological determinism and exposes the political discourses and uneven power structures that are responsible for this oppression (imposed by others) masked as repression (imposed by the self, self-policing). “Women’s oppression results not from repression of the personal unconscious, but from very conscious political mechanisms which have alienated women from themselves and each other, and which have silenced women’s discourse” (Crowder 125).

Writing the body becomes a strategy for breaking out of gothic confinement, as it is enforced by a patriarchal society: “... [AH] is the act of an escape artist” (Dragland 173). For one thing, as a text that explodes the category of genre, Marlatt’s text clearly subverts the patriarchal impulse to rigidly categorize, and to fix identity. It breaks the

boundaries of poetry, fiction and theory, produces what may seem monstrous by rigid patriarchally defined scholarship (fictionalized in Richard's response to Annie's eclectic style and form of writing [81]). Marlatt challenges even the rigid definitions of gothic that claim it is a literature which shows how breaking boundaries, especially of identity, is fearful and fatal, by her assertion that it is the struggle to maintain these boundaries, as the plot of most gothics demonstrates, which is disastrous, fatal, futile.

Annie's writing of the body is uncanny in two senses: woman is the repressed, and her body is the site of that repression, so that a woman's body is made uncanny to her until she reinscribes it; writing itself, however, is also an uncanny act, which we can call metafiction, as we have seen in the example Heller makes of Whitman's poem. These two aspects of the uncanny are described as such: "the generation of the uncanny in fiction is often at the point when the writing bends back upon itself, to observe its own processes, or to dislocate the narrative by the inclusion of another writing within it. ... [T]he uncanny in *American* fiction is predominantly generated through the suppressions and repressions involved in sexual interaction" (Lloyd-Smith ix). Marlatt's text becomes doubly uncanny when we consider not only her subject matter of the uncanny gothic mother/body, but also her style: she writes as if her characters are just discovering their thoughts, so the writing seems more spontaneous. She also collapses the distance between the writer and reader, as we have noted at the scene where Annie "taps" for Ana. Marlatt is a writer who advocates explorations of the unconscious, but she seems to advocate writing as a subjective process of self-conscious fiction making rather than focusing on the "finished"

text.

In the female gothic of Marlatt's text, a central problem is that women have been made uncanny to themselves, and it is only through writing or reinscribing them that they can repossess their bodies. Even when she is describing the lack that masculinist language ascribes to femininity, Marlatt reminds us of the possibilities of *jouissance* in the female body: "it sounded so royal, regina, vagina, so foreign a word for something that was simply there, warm to touch, nice to rub, parting a little in the warmth of the bathtub. secretly looking it up in French I was astonished to discover it was masculine. le vagin. ... a word for sheath, the cover of a sword. it wasn't a sword I was promised" (62-3).

Pleasure is in the non-reproductive parts, and the writing of the body through *jouissance*: "promise: the budding of some secret future in me, little knowing all the eggs were already there, lined up and waiting. ... not a vessel waiting for someone to fill, but a small storm, a slow flood subsiding on its own" (62). Regardless that her mother has passed on a legacy of shame, Annie finds she can reinscribe pleasure onto her body: "... I remember, despite all this, my secret pleasure, feeling the sudden flow, a sudden rush of blood slide out between my lips and onto the pad ... there is still even now the innate pleasure of seeing on a fresh white pad the first marks of red, bright red ... innate because of a childish astonishment, *I made that!* the mark of myself, my inscription in blood. i'm here scribbling again" (90). By reinscribing the body in the terms of pleasure, Annie erases the "cursedness" of her body. She validates its status as continually changing, as a process rather than the fiction of solidity, wholeness, or fixed identity.

The textual process Marlatt takes us through in *AH* is not a naive activity: the author does not believe that by reinscribing womanhood, she is going to lose all of the baggage it has accumulated, nor does she mean to redefine all women everywhere. The focus of the text is on white middle class women in British Columbia, in different times in history. Indeed, one of the signifiers I will examine in Chapter Three is the image of the native in the text, an image which I believe Marlatt has used deliberately for certain literary and political effects. With reference to the body, we can see how Marlatt recognizes the body as always already inscribed by its place in the discourses that intersect across its surface: “The body is regarded as the political, social, and cultural object par excellence, not a product of a raw, passive nature that is civilized, overlaid, polished by culture. The body is a cultural interweaving and production of nature” (Grosz 18). The birth of Mrs. Alexander’s child, as it is interspersed with passages describing imperial economics and newspaper clippings contemporary to Ana’s time, shows that the body is always already culturally inscribed: “Far from being an inert, passive, non-cultural and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles” (Grosz 119).

Marlatt reinscribes the body, but she also shows the body’s already inscribed meanings when she writes the birth of Jeannie Alexander’s child. This scene is deliberately broken into fragments, between which Marlatt has inserted the economics of nineteenth-century English imperialism which politicizes the birth. I disagree with Dragland’s reading of the birth scene, because he makes it seem as if Marlatt wants to represent birth, and so

the functions of women's bodies, as timeless, or eternal, thus fixed: "It's appropriate that Mrs. Richards witnesses this birthing scene, and narrates part of it, with Annie shadowing her closely (as earlier Annie watches at Mrs. Richards' shoulder while she writes), because this *natural instinctive process* of great power is analogous to her own struggle with writing. An *ancient metaphor--literary creation as child-bearing--* is given explicit physicality.." (Dragland 188; italics mine). For one thing, though it is an ancient metaphor, the birth-literary creation metaphor has changed with every social, historical context in which it has been used. Most importantly, women have not been recognized as writers through most of history. In fact, often they were denied writing because they were expected to be slaves to their own real birthing bodies. When they use the metaphor, there must be some irony. Annie rarely talks about her own children in the novel, and she never mentions her own pregnancies. She alludes to her pregnancy once to say that it ended her graduate career (16) and once in the context of the ways a woman's body "betrays" her, by "bleeding, leaking, growing lumps, getting pregnant, having abortions and miscarriages" (89). One would not be far off the mark to suggest that part of the pleasure of the period is that it signifies non-pregnancy! If writing is to be understood as a purely self-conscious process in this text, why would birthing as a metaphor for writing be praised as an instinctual process, unless it is the birth of the unconscious, which is prompted through writing as self-conscious exploration.

Writing the body entails a journey into the self, an exploration of the darkness. As it involves opening doors and illuminating that which is unknown, the process is



transgressive. **AH** is the site of multiple transgressions which liberate by successfully challenging the standards and “truths” of a society premised on the privileging of the heterosexual, middle-class, patriarchal, Anglo-Saxon nuclear family. The only way to escape the gothic is to trespass the boundaries it has set up; in fact, the gothic invites the subversion of its own rules because it has always been a form that inspired transgression (hence its longevity and popular appeal?). Annie begins the narrative by showing her capacity for transgression: “Trespassing across an old boundary, exposing my fear before it could paralyse me” (Marlatt 12). Annie repeatedly paints herself as a child who sided with the transgressors, the trespassers (13). By the end, she realizes that her freedom lies in transgression, the ultimate for a woman being repudiation of her traditional socially defined roles and sexuality: “terror has to do with the trembling that takes you out of yourself” (152).

Curiously, perhaps even appropriately, Ina gets a taste of transgression, through the gothic novels she takes out at the library.

when I go [to the campus] I see library, see centuries of hidden knowledge, wealth, see romance--like you in this, Ina, how you used to enter the North Van library as if entering a medieval cloister, sssh, you warned, as if trespassing, pulling me into the smell of dust, ... heading immediately for the shelf of historical novels, family history with its lurid stretches shaping the destiny of a nation. consoled by this, that the familial, the mundane, could actually have historical proportions? kings and queens in bed with you of an afternoon. rain, rain. (16)

Ina seems to introduce Annie to an interest in history, which she uses to make Ina’s secret wish come true, that, it is the everyday which is women’s history. “the real history of women, Zoe says, is unwritten because it runs through our bodies: we give birth to each

other” (131).

Although much work is being done through feminist discourses to rectify women’s position, Grosz reminds us that the inscription of the female body is a cultural phenomenon, so that no matter how hard an individual tries to reinscribe women, there will be no change except on the social level of body meanings (82). A novel, or any literary act, is always public when published so that Annie’s fictionalized reinscription has potential meaning for the larger social sphere. As well, we should notice that in the novel’s end, Annie is participating in the world outside her home by stamping (political) pamphlets with Zoe, Norah and Eunice. It is through women’s community that Annie seems to find the courage to “come out.” Nina Auerbach touches upon the female gothic and women’s communities, saying that the “potency” of these communities derives from “a womblike ‘inner space’” and that these communities are “‘born of a communal self-creation and the integrity of adherence’” (qtd. in Fleenor 27).

Annie’s choice to pursue a lesbian lifestyle is in itself political, since it is a choice which entails the rejection of all the values that a patriarchal culture is based on. Still, there are problems with the radical feminist lifestyle which is so far removed from the mainstream that it does not effect political change. (Musgrave’s text seems to critique this radical feminist lifestyle.) Writing the body helps women escape the gothic trap by avoiding the gothic’s tendency to recenter women’s patriarchal inscription and the obsessive pursuit of a unified identity (which is a fiction). Rather, Annie has found a valuable way of understanding her self not as a whole, but through multiple narratives,

which are multiple aspects of herself. The gaps and ruptures of the text by the last, unnumbered page are understood not as lack, but as the spaces in which to write one's multiple selves. "In place of plenitude, being, fullness or self-identity is not lack, absence rupture, but rather becoming" (Grosz 165). It is the process that counts: "reading us into the page ahead."

What is unknown and unspeakable is what is feared and desired, and is projected onto the landscape around the characters--the trees and woods, the rain and torrents. In negotiating these liminal realms or spaces as potential sites of discourse, women can discover their voices and language in the unspeakable, and articulate this power to reclaim themselves. "... it was the fascination of desire for what lay out of bounds. not Frankenstein, ... it was knowing where the real began, under the words that pretended something else" (77). For instance, Annie only breaks out of the gothic trap of marriage and convention when she has realized her lesbian self : "She herself is learning and changing until the last page of the novel. She finds out how to analyse the gothic circle of patriarchy (replacing her mother's pain of obliviousness with her own pain of consciousness) long before she discovers she has a choice: in or out. Before she finds her lesbian identity" (Dragland 175). It is not simply enough to know that she is trapped, she needs a way out, namely, lesbianism.

The gothic backdrop for the entire novel is the atmosphere Marlatt evokes through the repeated use of the signifiers of trees and rain or torrents. These elements act as signifiers of multiple meanings. The trees are commodities, roots, the forks and branches,

and very much related to women, to their stories, as well as to the place, the landscape. Trees and the forest represent the liminal spaces that Annie wants to break into, to discover herself and ultimately the wildness she equates with her lesbian identity. Water is fluidity, leakage, streams, and also the flowing that Annie inscribes onto the body and words. Water is also linked to Annie's renamed self as a lesbian: Annie Torrent. As trees and rain form the dense background of the entire novel, they are noteworthy as multiple signifiers; the forests and trees create a seemingly gloomy gothic landscape, and yet they are also linked to the liberation of women through their bodies and language.

As she writes her "unspeakable" self through her exploration of character, Mrs. Richards, Annie links her, too, to the water, the trees. "She would walk to her spot in the woods where she could write in the midst of all this plenty undisturbed. ... Still, if she wrote outdoors the words might gather in the page with this thick being she could feel between things, undisturbed" (41). In the unspeaking woods, in anonymity, she thinks she can find a truth, a reality unavailable in the patriarchally-inscribed world. Like Annie, Ana finds the water and the woods highly charged with eroticism, rather than with the fear she initially feels there (41) or the warnings she is given as to the supposed danger that lies there (31). Her erotic dream of the women in the forest pool is significant because it is a moment when Ana feels that she "[is] about to change into something magical and sure" (85-6).

Annie's first encounter with overt lesbianism comes when she is walking in the woods with her friend Donna, who is Annie's first crush. The encounter with the women

in the car is a culmination of the images of trees and water as signifiers of lesbianism:

we came to a fork and saw one trail blocked with a blue car. how did it get there? at first we thought it was abandoned but the window had steamed up and then we saw two shapes on the back seat pulling apart. ... I was intrigued, they were two women. perverts, you replied, I feel sorry for them. we walked for some time in silence. I thought about that leafy tunnel they'd chosen, the silence of the dripping woods and, under glass as under water, two mouths meeting each other.

.....

a fork in the road implies a choice, the will to chose. (107)

Then we must also consider Ina's association with that signifier "torrent," as one of her possible but unpursued identities. It is a word that Annie uses to characterize Ina's rages. Perhaps she is drawing on her mother's heritage by ascribing the name to her rather than suggesting her mother was a repressed lesbian.

Lesbianism is a strong subtext for much of the novel, a possibility that struggles for emergence from the repressed of Annie's consciousness, through the strategic placement of the signifiers of trees and water, but also in her particular form of writing. From the start, we have the key images and phrases that resound throughout the text. The knocking, which we have seen is Annie's form of self discovery through writing, is heard on the first page "knock knock. in the dark. only it wasn't dark had woken her to solitude, ... it was the sound of her own voice had woken her, heard like an echo, asking, who's there?" (9). Annie remembers her childhood, when she was afraid at night, and would creep downstairs to check the wardrobes for monsters. The closets are the source of fear: "she stood in front of the darkest of the six-foot wardrobes, teak, ... big enough to hide Frankenstein, stood feeling her fear, her desperate being up against it, that other

breathing on the other side of the door she could almost hear ..." (100). These monsters in the closet soon take on a different meaning, that is of the entrapped, hidden homosexual, in the night world of secrecy, or the lack of self-knowledge. The closet is the monster in this text, however; not the lesbian trapped inside.

By the end of the novel, Annie has brought her true lesbian identity to consciousness: "I want to knock: can you hear? I want to answer her who's there? not Ana or Ina, those transparent covers. Ana Richards Richard's Ana. ... Annie/Ana--arose by any other name, whole wardrobes of names guarding the limitations--we rise above them" (152). On the unnumbered page, which is inscribed with a poem, Marlatt writes what echoes the first awakening, although this awakening is charged with self-consciousness; she is the awakened lesbian who is ready to come out, into the daylight: "trees/ out there, streets you might walk down, will,/ soon. it isn't dark but the luxury of being/ has woken you, the reach of your desire, reading/ us into the page ahead."

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**The Charcoal Burners and Ana Historic:**  
**Exploring “Nativity” as a Female Gothic Convention**

The image of the indigene is an image, a fiction, which serves the needs of non-natives, including writers. This figure has been used to perpetuate and valorize non-native discourses, a fictionalizing process that seems to serve only a non-native audience. Although the *figure* of the native--an entirely fictional construct--has been described by its defining characteristics in many studies of native representation, it is the native as gothic figure, also a fiction, which concerns me most. While Goldie, for instance, analyses the “standard commodities” the native is portrayed through, I also consider how these commodities work as gothic motifs. The most gothic element of the image of the indigene is its connection to a dead or dying culture: “Twentieth-century writers, faced with the survival of the Indian despite the dire predictions of their predecessors, continue to find in Indian culture images of disintegration, assimilation, and death” (Monkman 65). The indigene even before this figure was a figure of death, was a gothic figure because it was associated with the past. The gothic, as we have noted in the introduction, grew out of an interest in antiquity, medievalism, and the past. The native is also associated with the unknown, nature, the demonic, and the supernatural. In a sentence, however, we can say with Francis that: “Indians are used to represent not a place that is modern and familiar, but rather a place that exists outside of time in another reality” (188). By invoking the image of the indigene, the “non-indigenous” writer tries to make the un-homelike space, be it physical or imaginative space, more homelike, or familiar. “By

appropriating elements of Native culture, non-Natives have tried to establish a relationship with the country that pre-dates their arrival and validates their occupation of the land” (Francis 190).

As a category, the native is a fiction, as is the category of woman. What specifically ties women and natives is “nativity,” a concept that is used in the female gothic. This concept involves the (privileged) status that one has by virtue of the accident of birth in a certain place. Birth in the female gothic is, however, always problematic or at least problematised. In CB, we see how birth is forever problematised, delayed, aborted, and miscarried. This novel exposes the fiction of identity, especially of the identity we are “born” with (sex, or nationality), yet offers no chance of indigeneity because to feel at home would be a fiction. In AH, birth is embraced in the end as a metaphor for literary and political regeneration of a conscious sort, but birth is still made problematic by the figure of the indigene. Wholesale acceptance of indigeneity is also deconstructed in this novel, a novel which we have seen is concerned with destroying the fiction of a stable identity, or subjectivity.

The central preoccupation in both novels seems to be a search for a sense of home, and also a non-recognition of that home or the permanence of any “home.” Non-recognition of home, or looking at the unknown, is the gothic aspect of both novels. The specifically female gothic dimension in both texts seems to be the uncanniness or horror that accompanies non-recognition. Both texts dramatizes the struggle to find recognition, or identity, in or through the sense of place. The native, as a figure associated with place,



becomes a measure to gauge indigeneity for both the characters and writers: "... the question of where one is 'at home,' and the metaphorical exploration of this problem, often falls into the predictable, if disturbing, discovery that one does not have a single home at all, but rather two [or more?] homes, mutually incompatible in their values" (Folsom 36). In the gothic, we often find that: "... it is not the characters who change in a landscape which remains constant, but the reverse: the landscape changes, to the bewilderment of those who had expected it to remain the same. In this statement, the common, 'homey' atmosphere one expects metamorphoses into something unanticipated and therefore terrible" (Folsom 36). Gothic texts show us that every home is potentially un-homelike, but not because the home is inherently dangerous. The home operates more as a metaphor, as does indigeneity. Both terms come under question in the gothic because all rigid boundaries and categories are interrogated insofar as any one fixed position is impossible and also dangerous to try to maintain.

One strategy for feeling at home is indigenisation, which Goldie describes:

The white Canadian looks at the Indian. The Indian is Other and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. So the Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada? ...

The importance of the alien within cannot be overstated. In their need to become "native," to belong here, whites in Canada ... have adopted a process which I have termed "indigenisation." A peculiar word, it suggests the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous. For many writers, the only chance for indigenisation seemed to be through writing about the humans who are truly indigenous, the Indians ...

... [T]he first felt need for indigenisation came when a person moved to a new place and recognized an Other as having greater roots in that place. (13-14)

What seems to be happening in female gothic texts that use the figure of the indigene is

that the authors recognize the fictionality of the category of woman and the damage that has been done trying to keep women in that fixed, minuscule space of identity. The indigene, insofar as this figure runs parallel to woman, is not the ideal figure that represents home, or what the protagonist strives for and gains. Instead, if the protagonist strives for indigeneity, she loses, as Matty does, whereas a character like Annie seeks only to construct her own category of indigeneity in her own flesh, by constantly changing positions.

Musgrave's text is rife with images not only of death, but of birth or nativity as a failure. All of the textualizations of motherhood show this role as a failure. Children offer no redemption: the commune's first child, a monster, is born, but dies the day after, on Christmas day. This is a strongly suggestive death, as it signifies the death of any hope for a Saviour-child. Yarrow is the *enfant terrible*, a telling product of the commune's reproduction. Baby, the child of a French Canadian father and native mother, is a nameless child who is perhaps one in a long line of anonymous half-native children. The dream of integration, wholeness, and unity of assimilation fails. The white-native marriage of Dan and Matty does not work, and there is no offspring, so no synthesis or assimilation. There is also the "subplot" of Matty's shamanic initiation, which is supposed to lead to a rebirth or strengthening which borrows from native culture, but which fails. This is why I would suggest that while Musgrave uses the fiction of the indigene, she uses it with a consciousness of the fictionality. The clichés are played up, most obviously when Musgrave puts them in quotation marks (32). Matty's white guilt is not assuaged by

marrying Dan and sacrificing herself for him. Nor does the wilderness journey to discovery lead to an indigenisation she can live within, for in essence it says that to belong here you must not be born here; but rather, you must die here.

Throughout the novel, whenever she starts to feel at home Matty becomes alienated. She feels uncanniness at these points, especially at the pivotal necrophilic doe incident. Prior to discovering Bud and Dan in the forest, Matty has a communion with nature that is almost complete to the point where she becomes at one with the forest. It is as if she is so intrinsic to the landscape, so obvious, that she feels invisible. This feeling of at-homeness is shattered once she sees Bud and Dan rape the doe's carcass. The uncanniness arises from her problematic relationship to Dan as native, because he dominates her. Part of the problem is their relationship, which is "miscegenous" and so transgressive, yet it remains ambiguous because there are no clear cut power definitions. Matty as a white woman is not equal to Dan as a native man.

Even though Dan recognizes Matty's gift for turning invisible (36, 217) it is not equivalent to finding home, not in her body, nor in her social and cultural roles, and least of all in her sense of place. In one of her dreams Dan tries to warn her about the dangers to come; perhaps one of the dangers is the search for roots by appropriation, because he ties her hands together with roots (89). This appropriation is manifest in the most insidiously by the figures of the charcoal burners.

When Matty is caught trying to escape the charcoal burners' camp, she tries to tell Rasputin that she is going home, but home is an uncertain term (218). When she has left

Dan and the trailer they shared together, their “home,” she stays at the Terminal Hotel. Here, she sees an ad reminding people to “Call Home Tonight,” but, at first, Matty imagines the ad is for Suicides Anonymous (93-4). This misreading is a sign that Matty’s conception of home is as a place of death.

Then there is the sea, the primal womb of all and the tomb of many, especially in West Coast native belief systems. As a central signifier, the sea is invoked during the Shame Ritual, the Pregnancy Wishes Ritual, at the doe scene, before Matty’s death, and when her mother comes after Matty’s death. The sea is a place to become indigenous, because it is a return to roots, or to the beginning, yet to return to the beginning is to die. As the novel ends with Matty flying across the waters with her mother, the concept of the first home, the womb, is made uncanny by its link to death, the final home.

The pursuit of “nativity” by the charcoal burners and the women’s commune is just as suspect as other avenues to nativity. By a double process of living “naturally”--or like the perceived native--as well as actively working towards the nativity of the second Christ, the two camps of communards pervert the movement towards nativity and thus suggest the futility of this movement. The perversion of nativity, ironically enough, has its roots earlier in the novel, where Hogben and two other natives drunkenly mock the Christmas mass and so the Nativity of white Christianity (43).

The ancient village homes of Old Mystic have fallen to ruin, and reflecting upon this ruin leads Matty to dream of the conflation of nativity and nativeness (56-60). This dream looks ahead to Matty’s death, but does not necessarily suggest a rebirth on the

horizon. Although Matty, along with Christian, tries to pursue indigenisation by becoming acquainted with the land, this journey of discovery ends in death. They seek Uncle Archie's cabin as a base camp, but it has been appropriated by the women's commune. It has turned into the Manger, the place to which the impregnated women retreat after the Pregnancy Wishes Ritual, a ritual through which the women attempt to conceive the new Messiah. The association with the manger of the Christmas nativity scene is clear. The Manger is also the place where skinned beaver pelts are stored before being sold. In the signifier of the Manger, then, we have multiple layers of meaning, which are heavily ironic because the Manger in the text signifies a perverted, inverted movement towards nativity.

While at Ephratah, Matty is fed drugs and potions that disorient her and sap her strength. The administration of these drugs is rationalized as necessary to prepare her body in order to act as host or home for the Messiah. This treatment only displaces Matty's sense of self, of at-homeness in her body: "Nothing felt stranger to Matty than her own body" (143). The goal of the commune women seems to be to force Matty to surrender her body and will. The only thing she has, as a woman, is her body. When Christian returns, having escaped from the charcoal burners, Matty notes two things: that her body is seized by a nightmare of awareness and that, when she and Christian embrace, his body feels totally familiar to her and she wants to stand that way until their bodies become moss covered (154). This passage reminds us of the abandoned native houses and totems in Old Mystic, which are no longer home-like to the native population. These links between the different meanings of nativity signify the unrelenting uncanniness that cannot

be bridged or neutralized, so that women remain alienated from themselves and so powerless in the novel. There is no possibility for rebirth when birth and nativity signify nothing but horror.

Horror seems to be allayed in *AH*, where rebirth and nativity are constructed as positive and the search for roots is not futile: it is possible to be positive when the protagonist is able to discover the meaninglessness of false constructs of womanhood and so she can create herself as fluid, shifting boundary. Marlatt as a poet is obsessed with word etymology, that is, with finding or tracing the roots of words as far back as possible to discover previous meanings and so to change or recharge the present meanings. In the novel, she continues this search for word roots (such as “scribble” [81]), but also for place roots, as she focuses her story on two immigrants: Ina and Mrs. Richards. This search for roots reveals itself quite overtly when Ana writes repeatedly of the great roots of the massive trees (46). The link between Ana and young Annie is in the signifier of the roots of great trees, for through them the two identify with their own bodies and with the wild spaces, thus dispelling any sense of uncanniness traditionally ascribed to womanhood. As a child playing in the small space of forest behind her house, Annie feels she is native (18), and also feels in the woods a sense of her body, its future power through blood (menstruation), and as a safe place to give birth to different identities, thus it is also a metaphoric womb (12). Annie expresses the wish that she could have been here first, and as she does she also links this “aboriginality” with an at-homeness in her skin (19).

There is a sense of dislocation, or a jarring, when alien values are imported into the

place, somehow ruining its potential as place to find a sense of home. These jarring moments are explicitly linked to the displacement of the “native-ness” of the place, or to the fact that the place has already been inscribed with native values, native names. Ina lives in an entrapping set of values instead of in the possibilities of the place: “the public/private wall. defined the world you lived inside, the world you brought with you, transposed, onto a Salish mountainside. ... and never questioned its values. English gentility in a rain forest?” (23-4). The women bring dowry items from homeland to the “New World” to try to make this place home, but these heirlooms and traditions do not seem adequate. The terms in which the afternoon tea is described suggest that the traditions are stifling and the culture has stagnated (116). Perhaps Marlatt suggests we borrow what is here to make our home.

It is no accident that all natives in the text are a part of the “historical” story, and that all are silent figures. Their silence is a carefully constructed absence from the present-day time of the novel, but in the historical story, their silence seems to give them presence by emphasizing the presence only. Ruth, a Siwash woman who helps to clean the schoolhouse, traces the letters on the chalkboard with her fingers, “... as if,” Ana writes, “the letters marked thereon might leap into her very skin” (69). Here “writing the body” is literalised. The native seems to embody pure presence, which westerners can only grasp by writing: “And yet it [our magic, writing] cannot capture them--the quiet with which each seems wrapt ... the Grace of direct perception, surely, untroubled by letters, by mirrors, by some foolish notion of themselves such as we suffer from. I cannot find the

words for this the others would dismiss as Pagan--perhaps our words cannot speak it” (69). It is inaccurate to believe the natives have some direct perception of the “Truth” as Ana would like to believe, and yet these figures seem to operate as the non-native’s “ticket” to indigeneity.

In AH, the narrative moves towards a re-birth of the self and other women through the language of the female body. There is a sense of “uncanniness” in relation to the mother’s body and to one’s own which is also a (potential) mother’s body, an uncanniness that Marlatt, through Annie, overcomes by writing. Mrs. Richards sees herself as “ab-original” in the new world (30). The word “aboriginal” is separated, the prefix from the root word, to emphasize its meaning, as “from the beginning” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary), but also to emphasize that she is beginning. To believe she has always been here would be presumptuous. Like Matty in Musgrave’s novel, Ana feels at home in her own body, for once until she comes across two Siwash men in the woods (40). She is frightened of them, though they look at her only as if she is a bush or a fern (41). They seem to grant her a nativity that she does not seek, an invisibility with which she is uncomfortable.

The native, too, has a part to play in this exploration of home, nativity. One of the key scenes in the novel has to do with birth, nativity and indigeneity. Nativity is another means for colonizing space, and, as I mentioned earlier, the emphasis on the imports/exports during the birth drives this fact home. Harriet’s presence at the birth is loaded (123), especially in the context of the following pages where the colonial discourse



of the white birth as noteworthy leads to the desire for the “nativity”:

to be born in, enter from birth that place (that shoreline place of scarlet maples, since cut down) with no known name--see it, risen in waves, these scarlet leaves, lips all bleeding into the air, given (birth), given in greeting, the given surrounds him now. surrounds her, her country she has come into, the country of her body.

to be there from the first. indigene. *ingenuus* (born in), native, natural, free(born)--at home from the beginning.

she longed for it. (127)

In this passage, there is a conflation of the (white) birth, “womanness,” the place as colony, and desire to be native in both place and in body. Both are impossibilities, fictions which must be overcome. Once these fictions are realized as such, and imprisonment rather than safety defines “identity,” a significant understanding of the potential freedom in identityless is possible.

What seems to be operative in AH and, to a lesser degree, in CB is that the gothic sense of uncanniness arises when the words do not fit the place: “The ‘first necessity for the colonial writer’, Lee notes, ... is for the ‘imagination’ to ‘come home.’ But this is not possible for the colonial, because the ‘words of home are silent’...” (Ashcroft 142). Or, to phrase this another way: “Gothicism may define the experience of any culture when the stories it tells itself do not ring true to the experience to be had by simply walking about in the landscape” (Mogen 17).

It is important to note that perhaps the most valuable aspect of the gothic is that it is about the failure of identity: “The Gothic fantasy is a fable of identity fragmented and destroyed beyond repair, a fable of the impossibility of identity” (Day 6). “[H]orror cuts

through all of our comforts, from the obvious to the sublime, and unveils our *rootlessness*. At the same time, it suggests a way to *handle* this rootlessness” (Schneider 2). Hence, the gothic is an appropriate form of literature to fictionalize the ultimate failure of identity politics or of fixed categories and perhaps to forward the collapse of identity as we know it:

Things, material or psychical, can no longer be seen in terms of rigid boundaries, clear demarcations; nor, on an opposite track, can they be seen in as inherently united, singular or holistic. Subject and object are series of flows, energies, movements, strata, segments, organs, intensities--fragments capable of being linked together or severed in potentially infinite ways other than those which congeal them into identities. Production consists of those processes which create linkages between fragments, fragments of bodies and fragments of objects.

There is no hierarchy of being, no preordained order to the collection and conjunction of these various fragments, no central organization or plan to which they must conform. Their “law” is rather the imperative of endless experimentation, metamorphosis, or transmutation, alignment and realignment. (Grosz 167)

Grosz goes on to add that this understanding would not flatten the world, but would rather be a way of understanding hierarchies as “not the result of substances and their nature and value but of modes of organization of disparate substances” (167). Also, she reminds us that: “... feminism, or indeed any political struggle must not content itself with a final goal, a resting point, a point of stability or identity. Political struggles are by their nature endless and ever-changing” (178). Because of this call to embrace *identitylessness*, it seems pointless to try to say why exactly this is Canadian gothic, when there are so many factors involved, and so many discourses intersecting that create these two particular texts. In this regard, gothic as a genre is a limited way of understanding “gothic”

texts, when there are multiple shifting grounds which constitute texts, and which defy all boundaries of category. Suffice to say we can arrest the novels for a moment to see what sorts of reading dynamics and interstices we see them on at this particular time.

So, if we can posit the failure of identity as a starting point that these gothic novels give us, then Musgrave's novel is not wholly a narrative of "failure" as most have seen it, or it seems to suggest itself through limited categories of reading. We can take into account Godard's assessment in her review of the text:

Ultimately, Musgrave's readers may well be sickened by the uncompromising nature of her vision. None of the familiar literary illusions are allowed to remain: there is no redeeming joy in narration as in Hodgins or Atwood where the act of story telling becomes its own salvation, nor are we allowed, as Engel would have us, to see in children the redemption of our species. Musgrave plays the role of psychic iconoclast, pulling the categories of existence apart and presenting a broken, confused reality that her readers must put back in order for themselves (94).

Here we see that Musgrave's text interrogates areas that we may want to safeguard.

Nothing can be kept inviolable. Home is not possible, nor is it desirable.

The image of nativity conflates many ideas that I have been exploring, as well as many of the ideas central to gothicism. In turn, we see how gothicism can incorporate or act as a vehicle for issues of a post-colonial, feminist, post-structuralist nature, not simply as a genre of literature that is cut off from political agency. As it invites chaos, revolution, and interrogation, gothic literature remains politically operative.

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