

HISTORY AS HYSTERECTOMY
THE WRITING OF WOMEN'S HISTORY IN
THE HANDMAID'S TALE AND *ANA HISTORIC*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

University of Manitoba

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Cheryl Lamoureux

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CHERYL LAMOUREUX

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ABSTRACT

"History as Hysterectomy: The Writing of Women's History in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Ana Historic*" examines the ways in which these two novels represent phallogocentrism as a shaping force in western society, most importantly, in its history and language. As a result, women have been excluded from the pages of history, except as adjuncts and background to the exploits of men. Further, they have been left with the problem of using language, with its patriarchal history, in order to reclaim their experiences from the margins of men's stories.

History as the work of the *histor*, a "learned man," itself depends upon the figure of an objective recorder, whose male Gaze reflects what Luce Irigaray calls a "dominant scopic economy," making it possible for women to be controlled at a "glance." Similarly, this visual bias operates in the construction of history, which allows the observer to objectify the people and events being studied.

The Handmaid's Tale fantasizes a future society, controlled by Eyes and shaped by a metaphysical language of the Word made flesh. *Ana Historic* dramatizes the process of escaping from this look, and of finding a maternal origin for language: the flesh made word, suggesting a possible

answer to feminist theorists' assertion that women must
invent a language of their own.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my sons, Derek and Brian, whose faith, trust, and love have always inspired me.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, those who analyze historical writing have increasingly questioned traditional assumptions and methods. Carl Berger observes how, "As the English historiographer Herbert Butterfield once remarked, there are hidden and unsuspected factors behind any national tradition of historical writing, and these need to be raised as far as possible to the level of consciousness so that they can be neutralized and brought under control" (x). This view of history suggested by Berger is a valuable aid in our understanding of both historiography and historical fiction. Looking at the structures and values behind historical writing allows us to recognize that historiography itself is not an objective science: Canada's "historians described the past at least partially in relation to what they knew of their present and in terms of an image of what the future should be" (Berger 260). Further, Berger notes that the national historical tradition has been criticized for "the failure of historians to analyze class structure, class conflict, and working-class history" (263).

Hayden White also shows how history is written according to choices made by historians who look at history

with a political eye, deciding what to preserve and what to omit. These decisions are based upon present biases and values, and historians also select and arrange data to fit a particular audience. According to White, history is problematic because it contains facts and interpretation together, but it presents itself as a higher order which transcends both. He views historians' choices as culturally determined and not made at the level of the conscious mind. Therefore, although some historians and philosophers have viewed history as an objective discipline which merely describes past events, White has alerted us to the fact that history is always a creative construction.

Similarly, feminist critics of historiography assert that economic and political history have, until recently, reflected only a male world view. As products of a patriarchally-ordered society, historians have, consciously and unconsciously, inscribed their perspectives and assumptions in the histories they created. At the same time, they have ordered sources, methods, and subjects in a hierarchical value system that privileges masculine over feminine, objectivity over subjectivity, and documentation over experience. The feminist approach to historiography is to analyze and uncover assumptions and motivations that underwrite male versions of social and political history.

As Berger notes, more recent social historians have begun to undertake the work of uncovering and recovering lost histories. If we desire an understanding of the processes that have, until recent versions of social history, constructed a political and economic history that has excluded women, then we have to examine those culturally-determined values and assumptions that underlie the perspectives of such historians.

Feminist theorists have also pointed out the extent to which historians are enmeshed within a phallogocentric system that expresses events and experiences with a language that is distorted by its patriarchal history. This language itself functions as a further vehicle by which women's experiences are negated or distorted. Both Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrate the ways in which the meanings of words serve the interests of those who have appropriated language. If language has become a male possession with which to order the world according to a male perspective, then how are women to use this language in order to write themselves into history? Or is it necessary for women, as some French feminists assert, to invent their own language with which to express female experience?

This thesis will examine both these historical fictions by women to investigate the problems of writing women's history in a male language and a male discipline derived from the notion of the *histor* as a "learned man." The very idea of the "learned man" as a neutral observer depends in turn upon the primacy of the male gaze in what Luce Irigaray calls a "dominant scopic economy," making it possible for men to control women through the distancing effect of sight. Such a scopic economy also places women in a passive role with respect to vision--they are the objects of this selective gaze that sees women only in relation to men, thus guaranteeing women's lack of visibility in history.

Further, this thesis explores the linguistic options still open to women (or that women open for themselves) which will enable them to write their own experiences, in order to reclaim not only their lost histories but also their lost bodies. French feminists such as H  l  ne Cixous promote the idea of *l'  criture f  minine* as a form of writing that would allow women to express their own lives by celebrating their difference from men, opening this writing to the charge of essentialism and participation in the logic of oppositions. On the other hand, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their theory of sexual

linguistics, suggest that the answer to the patriarchal language born of the Law of the Father is not the creation of new languages but rather the recognition of a maternal source for language: the *materna lingua*. This view of the mother tongue might allow women to write their bodies without being guilty of either essentialism or a claim to ultimate meaning and authority.

Both Marlatt's *Ana Historic* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* offer new possibilities in considering these problems of history and language for women. Critics have already explored these novels on the basis of what they can reveal about historiography and about language. Arnold E. Davidson, for example, has described Atwood's project as "a metahistory, an analysis of how patriarchal imperatives are encoded within the various intellectual methods we bring to bear on history" (Davidson 120). In his view, the "Historical Notes" at the end of the novel provide evidence that the historians who study Offred's tapes (and provide its structure) do so within the framework of their own biases, particularly the insidious bias of academe: the assumption that historians can distance themselves from what they are studying and turn an objective eye on events and people. He asks whether "we, as scholars, contribute to the dehumanizations of society by

our own critical work" (115). He concludes that "the ways in which scholars (present as well as future) assemble the text of the past confirms the present and thereby helps to predict the future....How we *choose* to construct history partly determines the history we are likely to get" (115).

If *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates that the groundwork for the future is present in our analysis of the past, then David Cowart's assertion that the novel "mirrors the patriarchal times chronicled in the Old Testament and only slightly less obviously, the American past of puritanism and the Pilgrim fathers" (Cowart 106), suggests something about the endurance of the "logocentric" system of "'the Word made flesh'--...the incarnation of a deified masculine rationality" (118). Indeed, his own reading of the Red Riding Hood myth in the novel demonstrates how present biases work to construct meanings, for he sees the reference to the fairy tale as a warning to women, who are --in terms of their liberation--at the adolescent stage of growth. Like the society of Gilead that would prefer to view women as children, Cowart demonstrates that present society has no difficulty in also seeing women as children who do not know what is good for them and who are responsible for learning the rules and being grateful for "the freedoms they have inherited" (Cowart 114). Similarly,

although he recognizes the logocentrism of Gilead, Cowart accepts its basic principles when he argues that "*The Handmaid's Tale* is also the Word, also 'writing'....a powerful *literary* record," thus acknowledging that the novel meets male criteria of acceptability and authority.

Roberta Rubenstein shows how the logocentrism of Gilead allows it to subordinate the body to the mind (bodily experience to written). In her view, the Regime reduces bodies to things, resulting in "multiple inversions and violations of *nature* and *natural*" (Rubenstein 103). But she seems somewhat naive in her faith that Offred's "story is an act of self-generation that opposes the oppressive obligations of procreation" (105). Coral Ann Howells at least concedes the ultimate power of the Regime, but she also feels that Atwood is demonstrating "women's ability to evade these institutions by offering an alternative concept of power" (Howells 63). Howells stresses the subversiveness of the novel and the importance of "forgiveness, love and trust...[as] alternative kinds of power" (68) available to women.

Madonne Miner is more sceptical of Howell's (and others') idea about love as "a force subverting Gilead's power" (Miner 149). She deconstructs the notion of love and points to the connections between the relationships Offred

has with Luke, Nick, and the Commander as evidence of her assertion that Atwood undercuts the notion of love in the novel. Miner recognizes Offred's refusal to make connections between these men (and thus to make a realistic appraisal of love), just as she refuses metaphoric connections between the red of flowers and the blood on a bag over a corpse's head. What Miner sees as a protective gesture on Offred's part that should lead the reader to make these connections, Howells recognizes as Offred's refusal to accept the idea of interchangeability and her insistence on "believing that individuals are significant" (Howells 66).

More obviously, Atwood demonstrates the power of the Regime to make Handmaids literally interchangeable with one another. Lucy M. Friebert may see Atwood's critique of Freud's old assertion of "woman's biology as destiny," and shows how she "exposes the complicity of women in perpetuating that view" (Friebert 280), but Friebert's conclusions about such a grim novel seem almost fatuous in view of the "Historical Notes." The willingness of women like Offred to "take risks and to tell stories" has hardly allowed them to "transcend their conditioning, establish their identity, joyfully reclaim their bodies, find their voices, and reconstruct the social order" (285). Although

the novel hardly confirms such rampant enthusiasm for the power of autobiography, Friebert at least recognizes that Offred's body and voice are significant in the text:

"through responding to her body, [Offred] comes to realize her power with words and develops her voice" (287).

The question of body and voice in language is answered more directly in critical appraisals of *Ana Historic*. Pamela Banting discusses Marlatt's claim that women's experience is "misrepresented...in a 'patriarchally-loaded' mother tongue" (Banting 124). What Banting offers is a (m)other tongue: one that comes into being--is realized--only as a result of the attempt to translate from the native tongue into this other tongue, which cannot exist on its own because feminist translation is not a practice that requires the "masculinist constructions" of "truth, fidelity, imitation, woman" (127). In other words, the language women can use is found between languages, only as a result of the process of translation. But this still leaves women without an authentic language to authorize a women's history.

Like Banting, Glen Lowry sees female meaning arising out of the "dialogical play between [Marlatt's] text and [the] dominant discourse" (Lowry 85). But Lowry's use of Foucauldian analysis of the "archive" suggests that these

versions of female language do not go far enough: "within a normalized society, the individual is defined according to certain differences that are allowed by and useful to the norm" (Lowry 87). If the (m)other tongue propounded by Banting depends in any way upon the norm for its meaning, then it is still encompassed by the logic and standards of the norm, and can not suffice as a language for women to use in writing their history. Lowry also sees writing itself as problematic because observations made from the perspective of an objective gaze are, according to Foucault, "recorded in writing...[and they] become the (f)acts upon which truth is based" (Lowry 86).

According to Lowry, Marlatt can only subvert the domination of this 'male economy of language' by injecting disorder into the dominant discourses. If there is such a thing as a *materna lingua*, Lowry can find it only in a plurality of meaning: "[The reader] is responsible for finding the dormant meanings (not the essential or even original meanings, but the plurality from which the singular meaning has been extracted/abstracted, and over which the one reigns)" (96). But he at least lays the groundwork for the materiality of such a *materna lingua* by pointing to the physicality of the words in the text: "treating language as material--listening to the sounds of

the words, seeing how they appear on the page--allows Marlatt...to create new meanings" (91).

Manina Jones offers a similar view of the effect of Marlatt's "disruptive gesture" of "fragmentation and juxtaposition of public, institutional discourses with unofficial, private testimony" (145). Doing so, claims Jones, allows dislocation of authority and exposure of the ideologies underlying that authority. A female meaning for experience arises out of this process. Jones's view of language, however, falls back upon male notions of the Law of the Father, the Symbolic order of language which is basic to "semiotic" Freudians like Jacques Lacan. For Jones, Marlatt is working with the notion of fixed origins, because all ideas are inherited; therefore Marlatt's project in *Ana Historic* is to look back on, to recontextualize and return the male gaze, and in this process to locate women's place in history.

Such arguments illuminate many areas of my own concern with women's absence in history and the language they can use in order to fill in that absence. The novels dramatize, as the critics have noted, the phallogocentrism that is the foundation for the primacy of the Word over the body. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a literal exposition of this principle: the institution of the Handmaids is based upon a biblical

precedent. Similarly, *Ana Historic* reveals the privileging of the male word over the female body by juxtaposing what Manina Jones has called 'citations' from history books alongside Annie's story of women's absence from history. Both of the novels demonstrate the visual bias that enables men to objectify and thus to negate women and their experience.

In their exposure of the ways in which phallogocentrism is encoded in the 'male economy of language' and is antithetical to the project of a women's history, the critics have laid some of the groundwork for an analysis of the mother tongue. What is needed, they agree, is an "unconditioned language" (Marlatt 75) that would allow women to claim their own place and experience.

Several critics have already demonstrated the limits of *l'écriture féminine* in locating such a language for women. My own reading of these theorists in the light of a genuine *materna lingua* serves not only to situate these theorists within an outmoded logic of difference, but also to suggest other ways of writing the body and materializing language. Such a perspective opens the way for women to express their experiences without falling into the male language that speaks for or claims authority over their own histories. *Ana Historic* and *The Handmaid's Tale* thus reveal

the importance of the maternal body in writing and in speaking, since both novels show how the Flesh was made Word, long before the Word was made Flesh. What these novels do, ultimately, is to illuminate the extent to which phallogocentrism is a state of mind, a misstated story about the real origins of language.

"THE HORROR OF NOTHING TO SEE"

IN A SCOPIC ECONOMY

One historical effect of Western values is that women in a patriarchally structured society are mostly unseen (and their histories are unspoken), except insofar as they occupy allotted roles--daughter, wife, mother, and sexual object. This selected visibility is part of the larger structuring of a society that operates on the basis of a visual bias in apprehending and ordering experience. Luce Irigaray has described this "dominant scopic economy" (351-52), outlining the ways in which such an economy orders experience and structures power: "Woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks. Within this logic, the predominance of the visual, and of the discrimination and individualization of form, is particularly foreign to female eroticism" (351).

For Irigaray, Western culture is grounded in a phallogocentric ideology that, informed by the masculine imagination, locates the subject in a unified and masculine consciousness. The subject defines the world according to what is seen from its central and masculine perspective (in grammatical terms always taking the nominative case while

assigning all that is 'not self' to the objective case). The phallus becomes the index for ordering experience; it is "[t]he one of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning" (Irigaray 352). The self is contained in "the one" that seeks replication in the world. In this economy, then, woman's "sexual organ represents the horror of nothing to see" (352), where male thinkers have historically negated women except as objects which can reflect back on the self. As a result, claims Irigaray, "woman's entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation" (351-52).

For Irigaray, in a world view dominated by the logic of sameness and the endless replication of the one self, "[t]he one of form...supplants, while separating and dividing, that contact of *at least two* (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched" (352). In such a view, self-touching means stating the existence of the self to the world; men touch themselves with language because, "in order to touch himself, man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman's body, language..." (350). Thus, in this philosophy, male thinkers assign value

only to their own meanings for experience, and these meanings are expressed in language. The world is an object to be conquered and named. The proper name itself speaks its relationship to property. And male history turns into a series of proper names, describing the exploits of those men whose actions are assigned validity according to a scopoc economy which defines and privileges action as self-touching.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, Atwood describes a society that is based upon an extension of the principles of visibility and control. In Gilead, the Regime places a great deal of emphasis upon the visual. Because it is a scopoc economy where the "phallus becomes the index for ordering experience" and "woman's sexual organ represents the horror of nothing to see" (Irigaray 352), women cannot be visible unless they are cloaked in a role that is based upon their relationship to men. The women's roles are indicated by the clothing they are required to wear. Thus, a Martha (who is any woman functioning as a housekeeper) wears a dress of "dull green, like a surgeon's gown of the time before...long and concealing" (Atwood 9). Since the role of a Martha is not sexualized, it is one that poses no threat to the purity of thought of the men who look at her. The Handmaids, however, are carefully covered so that they

cannot incite lust in the men who see them. Their scarlet gowns ostensibly represent their fertility, but the subtle connection is to the scarlet of adultery. In fact, their role is viewed with scorn by many of the women in the regime. At the new house, Offred is aware of Martha's reaction: "But the frown isn't personal: it's the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck" (9).

Allotted a role that forces them into adulterous relationships, the Handmaids not only wear the colour that declares their purpose, but they are also tainted by (and made responsible for) the sexuality that is inherent in the role. The scarlet dress, therefore, serves several purposes. It announces the women's function, it ostensibly masks their sexuality, but at the same time, it brands them with it. All of these definitions of the Handmaid are apparent at a glance.

If the male gaze carries such power, then it follows that the women in Gilead who retain sexual power must not be allowed to look out at the world. Unlike the housekeepers--"nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha" (9)--the Handmaids wear hats with wings that shield their faces from the eyes of onlookers and also impair their

ability to see the world with ease. Stripped of any power they might have in their gaze, the Handmaids are controlled by the power of the look that is turned upon them. Not only are they defined by their costumes (which define their sexuality), but they are also constantly under the scrutiny of the Eyes, which act as the political means of control in Gilead. The Eyes are a continual and threatening presence in the Republic. Any action can be taken as a sign of rebellion against the Regime, and to be reported by the Eyes for such an action means death. Since their function is to spy, the Eyes can be anywhere, anyone. The Eyes are merely the explicit representation of the control that the gaze represents in a scopic economy.

Since women in the Regime are defined by their roles, they do not exist as individuals. Their meaning is assigned to them according to their relationship to the Commander. Offred comments on the effect of this male way of structuring society: "I wait, for the household to assemble. *Household*: that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part. The hold of a ship. Hollow" (77). In this society, the Commander is the source of meaning, which he imparts to those around him. Offred depends utterly on being filled by the Commander's

seed in order to have meaning in Gilead. This idea of household as something the Commanders hold is derived from the male ideology of women as empty vessels. Offred recalls the indoctrination at the Red Centre, where the Handmaids were made to pray: "What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies" (182).

What this emptiness also means is that no individual woman has meaning of her own. Any given group of women is defined solely by the roles these women occupy. Offred recognizes the principle of uniformity that is inherent in such a system: "I glide with Ofglen along the sidewalk, the pair of us, and in front of us another pair, and across the street another. We must look good from a distance: picturesque, like Dutch milkmaids on a wallpaper frieze, like a shelf full of period-costume ceramic salt and pepper shakers, like a flotilla of swans or anything that repeats itself with at least minimum grace and without variation. Soothing to the eye, the eyes, the Eyes, for that's who this show is for" (199).

The Eyes are the literal embodiment of the principles behind what Irigaray has described as a scopic economy. Irigaray also claims that this economy requires that female genitalia be defined in relation to the male organ:

"[W]oman's erogenous zones never amount to anything but a clitoris-sex that is not comparable to the noble phallic organ, or a hole-envelope that serves to sheathe and massage the penis in intercourse: a non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself, self-embracing" (Irigaray 350). In a scopic economy, then, with its emphasis upon the visual, woman's "sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see*" (352).

In Gilead, woman's "sexual organ, which is not one organ, is counted as none" (Irigaray 352). During the insemination Ceremony, the Handmaid's organ represents an emptiness, an extension only of the Wife's body. The Wife's body, in turn, is only an emptiness, waiting for male content to give it meaning. The Handmaid provides the vessel for the male content, her bodily "centre" appropriated by the Regime, her womb substituted for that of the Wife. David Williams explains the logic underlying such a system: "poststructuralism has also made it possible for men to 'read' women metonymically (according to the Derridean logic of *supplementarity*) as signifiers in a field of infinite substitutions, as an endless supplanting of one term by another in an infinite regress of the signifier" (Williams 2). *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrates this principle during the insemination Ceremony, in which

the Handmaid is made the recipient of the Commander's semen while positioned between the Wife's outspread legs. Offred recounts the experience: "[m]y arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product" (Atwood 88).

The underlying principle beneath the substitution of one woman for another is the visual bias that operates in Gilead. The male gaze relegates women to the place of the Other. They are objects that can be conquered and controlled through the distancing effect of sight. In the old school gymnasium in which the Handmaids are first indoctrinated in the teachings of Gilead, Offred remembers the past: "I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in mini-skirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair" (3). The girls are not part of the action; they merely watch, and Offred herself remembers them as they would be seen "in pictures": a series of images of girls captured in various stages of the only action that made them visible to men--the adornment of

their bodies. They exist only as a series of fashions, as various statements made by their bodies about their acquiescence to male ownership. But if the camera that captured their images was blind, so were these young women who had eagerly learned to adopt the hunger for fashion without awareness of the invisibility it accorded them as individuals.

There is a difference between these girls and the women Offred remembers from geography films, who are aware that there is a transformation being imposed upon them by the sightless eye of the camera--an eye that sees them "looking squint-eyed or afraid out of the screen at us, knowing something was being done to them by a machine with one glass eye but not knowing what" (111). The Regime relies upon the power of a scopic economy because it can succeed in such a drastic subjugation of women only by first dismantling any fledgling sense of wholeness of the community of women and of the individual. The Commander observes that for women "one and one and one and one don't make four....Just one and one and one and one" (174). Although the Regime would impose the principle of uniformity upon women, the Commander appears to recognize that despite their indoctrination in the Regime's practices

and structures, women do not necessarily define themselves according to the perspective of the male gaze.

Women's place in the history of Gilead is ultimately demonstrated in the "Historical Notes" of the *The Handmaid's Tale*, which describe a "Symposium of Gileadean Studies" (281), held in the year 2195, to examine the historical background of the tapes that comprise Offred's story of life in the Regime. Professor Pieixoto has provided the order and interpretation for Offred's collection of audiotaped recollections. A visual bias is clearly operating in Pieixoto's reconstruction of Offred's story. Pieixoto's emphasis is on the form of Offred's history. What he cannot incorporate into his understanding of any form of history, except finally by renaming it, is the fact that Offred's tale is told orally and recorded on tapes. His initial reference to these tapes is disdainful: "This item--I hesitate to use the word *document*--was unearthed on the site of what was once the city of Bangor, in what, at the time prior to the inception of the Gileadean regime, would have been the State of Maine" (283). The hierarchy which privileges objectivity over subjectivity is implicit in Pieixoto's statement. And the word *unearthed* is telling; it implies the exhuming of an ancient and defunct artifact, so that Pieixoto's language

itself reveals his perspective: nothing about the form that Offred's history takes is useful in Pieixoto's century, except as a visual artifact. Even her language is indefensible; he notes that the tapes were difficult to transcribe because of "accent, obscure referents, and archaisms" (284), indicating that her linguistic sphere--unable to survive time--has been subsumed by his. And this bias towards the printed word, the visual form, is paramount in a further act of appropriation--Pieixoto's reordering and visual transcription of her oral record. Unable to accept Offred's account in her own voice, he finally names its altered shape: "this document--let me call it that for the sake of brevity" (285).

What these imputed weaknesses suggest about Pieixoto and about some practitioners of economic and political history is their deep-seated fear of autobiography as nothing more than a personal history in which the teller constructs the self. For what their vaunted "objectivity" reveals is how their visual bias actually works as an instrument for control and conquest. In a scopic economy, objectivity literally means control-at-a-distance, and it is achieved by the distancing effect of sight. Women, as objects of the male gaze, are controlled by being seen in limited ways. Marshall McLuhan identifies this habit of

separation and control first introduced in writing and then extended in the technology of print culture: "In tribal cultures, experience is arranged by a dominant auditory sense-life that represses visual values. The auditory sense, unlike the cool and neutral eye, is hyper-esthetic and delicate and all-inclusive. Oral cultures act and react at the same time. Phonetic culture endows men with the means of repressing their feelings and emotions when engaged in action. To act without reacting, without involvement, is the peculiar advantage of western literate man" (McLuhan 85-6). For McLuhan, print culture enables the sort of objectivity which feminists would say empowers patriarchy in its "control-at-a-distance."

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Professor Pieixoto's translation of Offred into print, leading ironically to her excision from her own history, is a result of the larger practice of the excision of women from economic and political power in Pieixoto's society. Compared to their status during the Gilead Regime, women in Pieixoto's century seem to have regained positions of power at universities, but their status is, as always, lower than that of men and qualified by the fact of female sexuality, as is attested to by Professor Pieixoto's reference to "enjoying the ...charming Arctic Chair" (Atwood 282).

Pieixoto overtly dismisses Offred's own role as historian: "Our author, then, was one of many, and must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment of history of which she was a part. But what else do we know about her, apart from her age, some physical characteristics that could be anyone's, and her place of residence? Not very much" (287). She cannot speak from a position of any authority if she is merely "one of many" who is indistinguishable from the rest.

Thus, Professor Pieixoto, having dismissed her importance and uniqueness, makes it seem as though he and Professor Wade have had no other choice but to search for the identity of the Commander, by which they can reconstruct the workings of the Regime. Speaking from a place that is ostensibly beyond the centre of authority, Offred then tells a history that is not useful to the academics because it does not illuminate those areas of society by which they judge its value: "She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's private computer!" (292).

Pieixoto's comment illustrates two important aspects of male economic and political history: first, his longing

for a "printout"--a visual document, the word that would validate his vision of history--indicates that a visual bias operates in his society. Second, this bias allows the printed word to be privileged over the bodily voice of Offred. Thus, Pieixoto places himself in the role of historian, transforming Offred's oral history into his document. But Brian Johnson has suggested that Pieixoto is even more "oral" in his use of gossip than Offred herself is--or that, by appropriating Offred's story, Pieixoto is himself indulging in an academic complement to gossip, which allows the story to be ripped from its context. Johnson points to Roland Barthes' interpretation of the function of the third-person voice: telling stories "absents...[and] annuls" the person about whom the story is being told (Johnson 46).

Thus, the conference on Gilead itself becomes a "locus of a kind of academic gossip--a place for speculation on the lives of those radically, as well as grammatologically, absent" (Johnson 49). For Pieixoto takes possession of Offred's experience by displacing her in the role of historian (story teller). In Derridean fashion, "Offred's tale is cut off from its original meaning" (Johnson 50) and can be transplanted to an infinity of contexts, all lacking an authorial center. Pieixoto's historical project is

revealed as a method of constructing himself linguistically at the expense of Offred's physical presence in her own story. In this case, Johnson points to evidence that Pieixoto places himself in the role of Orpheus who "may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but...cannot make her answer" (Atwood 293). Although Johnson demonstrates that Atwood ultimately undercuts this usage of gossip, "Pieixoto...is implicated in the dangers of privileging the linguistic/masculine at the expense of the physical/feminine" (Johnson 51).

Similarly, David Williams claims that post-structuralism has decentered the speaking subject of language by viewing it only as an effect of language. As a result, the "I" can be infinitely decentered. This practice is well illustrated in Pieixoto's construction of *The Handmaid's Tale*: at the Symposium, Offred's tapes are not assigned a central place in the discussion. Professor Pieixoto, the keynote speaker at the symposium, presents his version of Offred's story, one that he has co-edited with Professor Knotly Wade and in which he was "instrumental in its transcription, annotation, and publication" (Atwood 282). Already, Offred's place as an authoritative (and literal) voice in her own history has been supplanted by the word of male historians. Further,

the title of Professor Pieixoto's speech--"Problems of Authentication in Reference to The Handmaid's Tale" (282)--implies that the tapes lack a valid source and authority, unless he and Professor Wade can confer order on them, thus making themselves the source of authenticity in the history of Gilead.

What Pieixoto has made of Offred is a mere research assistant in her own history. And it is a history with which he is dissatisfied because it tells the private (subjective) story of a woman's experience. Similarly, in *Ana Historic*, the narrator Annie must answer the charge that her refusal to be a research assistant is a subjective corruption of the enterprise of history: "--the truth is, you want to tell your own story" (Marlatt 79). She must contend with her husband's preference for what he sees as the objective facts: "i learned that history is the real story the city fathers tell of the only important events in the world. a tale of their exploits hacked out against a silent backdrop of trees, of wooden masses. so many claims to fame. so many ordinary men turned into heroes. (where are the city mothers?)" (28).

But Annie does not want to be a research assistant to her husband, the historian, or even a handmaiden to history: "i have not found the courage yet, the honesty

perhaps, to tell him i've lost interest in what he is doing. that my mind will no longer come to grips with lot numbers and survey maps, will no longer painstakingly piece together the picture he wants" (79). Instead, she prefers to imagine a life for a woman mentioned briefly in the historical notes she is researching. She imagines for Ana Richards a similar refusal to be the "handmaiden" to her father, the English clergyman (55). What Annie wants is what she imagines for Ana: her own voice in her story. Even the word "handmaiden" is not a word forced upon Ana Richards. By choosing the word, and turning it against her father, she is able to throw off his domination and social definition, just as Annie, the narrator, refuses the role of handmaiden to history.

Annie wants to uncover the voices of women in their own experiences, and she begins by imagining a life for Ana and by imagining conversations with her own mother. So Daphne Marlatt poses the question of women's larger place in economic and political history, as well as the place of the speaking subject. Marlatt opens the novel with the question: "Who's There? Who's There? she was whispering. knock knock. in the dark. only it wasn't dark had woken her to her solitude, conscious alone in the night of his snoring more like snuffling dreaming elsewhere, burrowed

into it, under the covers against her in animal sleep. he was dreaming without her in some place she had no access to and she was awake....it was the sound of her own voice had woken her, heard like an echo asking, who's there?" (9).

The novel begins by addressing the question of who really speaks and the difficulties which that question implies for women, whose identities are constructed in a society that privileges a male-centred perspective and therefore allows men to define woman from "some place she [has] no access to." What awakens Annie is the sound of her own voice, but it is a voice "heard like an echo." And it awakens her from a sleep in which she is beside her husband but not with him in the vision of his dreams.

The fact that her voice is heard as an echo suggests that she has been removed from herself, even as this echo literally embodies a reminder of her past. The "echoes from further back" (9) belong to her "fear-defiant child voice carried still in her chest," and this voice, Marlatt later demonstrates, is part of Annie's "Lost Girl" (11). Annie has experienced a rupture within her self sometime during her adolescence, and this rupture is a result of the ways in which the lives of women in a patriarchal society are ordered by the gaze. Annie is confronted with a voice from her Lost Girl, a voice that is disembodied because she has

already learned to see herself as a former subject who is now an object.

The objectifying effects of Irigaray's scopic economy are played out quite extensively in *Ana Historic*. Women in such a society are not only objects in the eyes of men, but they are also objects to themselves. As a young girl, Annie and her sister were unaware of the strictures of a scopic economy: "without history we squatted in needle droppings to pee, flung our bodies through the trees--we would have swung on vines if there had been any....always we imagined we were the first ones there, the first trespassers" (19). Being unseen and "without history," these young females are supposed to be without words and perspectives that belong to others and that limit and define the girls. For words, as Annie notes, are "never one's own. full of deadfalls and hidden claims to a reality others have made" (32).

Socialized by language as she grows into adolescence, Annie soon learns the importance of soliciting the look from male watchers: "Now she was walking her body as if it were different from her, her body with its new look. (o the luck, to be looked at. o the lack, if you weren't. o the look. looking as if it all depended on it)" (50). What Annie has learned is that her value lies in her visual appeal to men; her sense of self-worth and her self-

definition are dependent upon the perspective and approval of the masculine world: "boy-crazy you said, shaking your head as we drove, walked, rode obsessed past street corners, sauntered past certain spots on the beach, our heads full of advertising images, converting all action into the passive: to be seen" (52). While the gaze is active, her own self-display is passive; she makes herself an object to his subject position.

What such a state produces is outlined by Irigaray: "How can this object of transaction claim a right to pleasure without removing her/itself from established commerce? With respect to other merchandise in the marketplace, how could this commodity maintain a relationship other than one of aggressive jealousy? How could material substance enjoy her/itself without provoking the consumer's anxiety over the disappearance of his nurturing ground?" (355). Marlatt illustrates such aggressive jealousy in Annie's relationship with her dead mother, when she reveals the one and only action she can take in her passive "object" position: "yes i tried to efface you, trace myself over you, wanting to be the one looked at, approved by male eyes. 'liked' was the word we used. 'i think he likes you!' the signal of attention in the intricate game of the look..." (Marlatt 51).

Annie and her friends learn to be pleased by male approval. But the "game of the look" involves a measure of judgment. Not only are girls and women passive objects of the gaze, but they are also required to conform to a standard of social acceptability that is not of their making. The extent to which they meet this standard of propriety is assessed in one look and enforced by women's knowledge that they are constantly the objects of this look: "it's there in the way we're trained to solicit the look, and first of all the father's, Our Father's. framed by a phrase that judges (virgin/tramp), sized-up in a glance, objectified" (56). Women must always be aware of the idea of propriety--of their place within the system of roles allotted to them: "virgin/tramp." Ana, subjected to Captain Soule's remark about "Sheba's Paps" (31), wonders "does he speak freely because he sees me wandering of my own free will?....I am not a Proper Lady perhaps" (32). It is Annie, though, who makes explicit the connection between propriety and property: "Proper, she says, Lady capitalized, and it is barely sounded, the relationship between proper and property" (32). What she thus comes to understand is the relationship between the object case and the economic circuit of exchange.

This proprietorial effect of the look is likewise echoed in the numerous references to photographs in the novel, where photography itself functions as a metaphor for history. Since Annie is doing research for her husband, the historian, she has access to photos, newspaper clippings, and books, and she describes their contents: "there are photographs of the buildings, of the docks, of the men. there are maps of the streets, the first few blocks of Granville or Gastown (Gassy Jack's town, the appropriative hidden in the abbreviation). there are histories of properties changing hands and names, of civic developments named for those who pushed them through. amidst all this there are brief references to women: Mrs. John Peabody Patterson....or Mrs. Richard Henry Alexander..." (47).

What the photographs illustrate is the sense of stopped action which the history books impart to the facts they report. The words and photos define the people and events, freeze them into one perspective: "sized-up in a glance, objectified. that's what history offers, that's its allure, its pretence. 'history says of her...' but when you're so framed, caught in the act, the (f)stop of act, fact--what recourse? step inside the picture and open it up" (56). History and words fix people and events into visual facts--they follow the logic of cause and effect--

but just as Pieixoto's appropriation of Offred's story in *The Handmaid's Tale* relies upon the absence of her body so that his words can fix her in place, so economic and political history require disembodied names and photographs. Annie notes that the body is discarded once the words have captured the action: "and the body gone off, into some fleshless realm where it is neither meet (met) nor right" (147).

Primarily, history is to blame, however, not for its substitution of forces for persons, but for its privileging of one gender over another. For the history of the City Fathers has erased the history of women. Annie, in *Ana Historic*, comes to understand "hystery" as the "excision of women" (88). Women can be made invisible in the history books, except where they are seen as the property of men.

Unless women fit into male perspectives, male historians seem to find women's stories unreadable. In the "Historical Notes" of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Professor Pieixoto names what he considers the problem with women's stories: Offred's tale is of little value to him and his colleagues because it does not help them to identify the men in power, or the power structures, around her. Instead, Offred's oral record speaks of her own experience and that of the women around her, something Professor Pieixoto sees

as quite useless. As he puts it, "Voices may reach us from [the past]; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day" (Atwood 293). Similarly, in *Ana Historic*, Annie notes her husband's (the historian's) inability to understand what she is writing about the "historic" Ana: "but this is nothing, i imagine him saying. meaning unreadable. because this nothing is a place he doesn't recognize, cut loose from history and its relentless progress towards some end. this is undefined territory, unaccountable. and so on edge" (Marlatt 81).

What Richard does understand is the "relentless progress," the linear progression of cause and effect, "history the story...of dominance. mastery. the bold line of it" (25). A woman's non-scopic experience has no place in this perspective of events. If the male historian cannot understand it, he must find ways, as Pieixoto has done, to rename it, to explain it in terms of his perspective. But Annie recognizes that there is an inexplicable gulf between his vision and hers: "i find it difficult to explain, Richard, what this scribbling means" (83).

Both Offred and Annie have described a scopic economy with its controlling gaze, but unlike Offred in her

narrative, Annie speaks last in her story, gets the final word after the historian. And aware that her scribbling would be inexplicable to a male historian, Annie looks for new ways to speak her own story from a female point of view, one that is outside of the male perspective, but inside the body of feminine sensation and perception. Having arrived on the island without a history, Ana is free to reinvent herself: "I find myself in a new world, Father, and that has made all the difference" (85).

WRITING THE BODY IN THE
MOTHER TONGUE

In the ways in which they look for new means to inscribe their bodies in the text, the narrators of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Ana Historic* bear out the assertion that women (as visual and sexual objects for men) have "been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves" (A.R. Jones 358). What Ana in *Ana Historic* alludes to in her reference to "a new place" is what French feminists would see as a "(site of difference) from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory, but also in practice" (A.R. Jones 358). If women were to speak from this new vantage point, these feminists argue, they would be expressing their sexuality "in the new languages it calls for" (358).

Yet expressing women's experience, as both these novels suggest, is problematic. Since history is not an unmediated recording of events, but is written according to choices made (consciously and unconsciously) on the part of the historians, then writing itself becomes a problem. Similarly, there is the problem of language as the instrument of mediation--the tool with which we define our

experiences. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point to the fact that "linguistically-minded critics have increasingly called attention to the artificiality and indeterminacy of the terms through which we think we know the world, while psychoanalytic theorists have increasingly emphasized the psychological forces that determine the apparently logical terms in which we think we think" (81). Gilbert and Gubar refer to Julia Kristeva's idea that sexual difference may already have determined our relationship to language:

"Sexual difference--which is at once biological, physiological, and relative to production--is translated by and translates a difference in the relationship of subjects to the symbolic contract which is the social contract: a difference, then, in the relationship to power, language, and meaning" (81-2).

For language has its own relationship to power--is itself power. In this view, the masculine "claim to centrality...has been supported not only by religion and philosophy, but also by language. To speak and especially to write from such a position is to appropriate the world, to dominate it through verbal mastery. Symbolic discourse (language, in various contexts) is another means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else--including

women" (A.R. Jones 358). Luce Irigaray has expressed the idea succinctly in her claim that men "touch themselves" with language. As the source of all meaning, men are reaffirmed in their dominion and authority over everything through their use of language.

The history of male appropriation of power in language is deftly illustrated in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred points to the patriarchal origins of words, the ways in which they have become invested with meaning by the men whose possession of language allows them to define the world: "*Fraternize* means to behave like a brother. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant to *behave like a sister*. *Sororize*, it would have to be, he said. From the Latin" (11). Although the root for a female version of "fraternize" is there, male speakers have not fostered its development, for they have had no need to find a word for women behaving like sisters. Words, then, do not necessarily reflect reality; they reflect the attitudes and beliefs of those who allow themselves to invest language with their own meanings. Moreover, language not only reflects a male perspective, it conditions attitudes so that everyone in the culture learns to accept the male perspective as the only valid one.

Gilbert and Gubar speculate that men have always been territorial about language and particularly about writing: "once the middle-class woman began to write, male defenses against female speech became particularly virulent" (Gilbert and Gubar 82). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is clear that language has always been a male tool, one that allows men to appropriate and define (and therefore control) all that they name. Offred recalls men's use of language in pre-Gilead times: "The difference between *lie* and *lay*. *Lay* is always passive. Even men used to say, I'd like to get laid. Though sometimes they said, I'd like to lay her. All this is pure speculation. I don't really know what men used to say. I had only their words for it" (Atwood 35). But their words, as Offred notes, have still defined reality (and sexuality) for women.

The problem with these male approaches to language, according to Gilbert and Gubar, is that men suffer from a "male linguistic wound" (93). They describe how men once received a classical education which took boys out of the mother tongue and educated them in Latin, the tongue of the Father. But men began to feel that their language, the *patrius sermo* of Greek and Latin, was being encroached upon by women at "the end of the nineteenth century because...of the entrance of women into higher education" (92). Gilbert

and Gubar also point to Harold Bloom's assertion that "nineteenth-century men of letters increasingly experienced themselves as belated in relation to their great male precursors" (92). Gilbert and Gubar take over Walter Ong's view of 'father speech,' as opposed to the mother tongue, and put it to a feminist purpose. According to Ong, "the only 'father speech is a language such as, for example, Latin or Greek,' inherited as land is, an external possession [which] refers to a [legalistic] line of conveyance, not to personal origins" (91). The power in such speech, then, is not inherent in the individual but is assigned by the structures of patriarchy.

Male anxieties about language point to an underlying assumption: language is a possession; those who have this property have power. Therefore, the entrance of women into higher education meant that they were now using a tool that men considered their own possession. And if men had to give up Latin and Greek, then they had to find a way to invest the vernacular with power, in order to mitigate the effects of using a language that was the common language--one used by (and thus degraded by) women and children. Gilbert and Gubar describe this "transformation of the *materna lingua* into a new *patrius sermo*--that is, the occulting of common

language, the transformation of the comment into the charm" (93)..

The 'father speech' of Latin functions in *The Handmaid's Tale* as a "(masculinist) linguistic code" (87), a sample of which Offred uncovers in her methodical search of her room. "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*" is the inscrutable message she finds "scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, in the corner [of the cupboard] where the darkest shadow fell" (Atwood 49). The message pleases Offred, because she knows it was scratched by a Handmaid before her: "It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman. For she is unknown; or if known, she has never been mentioned to me. It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person....Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy" (49-50). The words seem to follow a male line of inheritance, passed on from older schoolboys, as the Commander later explains to Offred: "We used to write all kinds of things like that. I don't know where we got them, from older boys perhaps" (175). But females have both gained access to and have corrupted this male speech, in order to communicate a message to another Handmaid: "Don't let the bastards grind you down" (175). By using their own

words, the schoolboy joke, the Handmaid manages to subvert the authority of this *patrius sermo* and turn it against the men who control the Regime.

This strategy is one of the many responses women have made to the "exclusiveness of a (masculinist) linguistic code [women] both refuse to speak and seek to crack" that Gilbert and Gubar outline. They discuss women's "need for an alternative speech [which] is not of course surprising in light of the different educational opportunities accorded the two sexes until the late nineteenth century....[M]en and boys...had access to a privileged priestly language, what Ong would call a *patrius sermo* which women could only counter with the vocabulary of witchcraft" (Gilbert and Gubar 86). They trace a number of such female linguistic strategies, from Emily Dickinson's "witchcraft" to Christina Stead's "witchlike private language that sounds suspiciously like a parodic mixture of Latin and Greek" (86, 87). They describe the way "Gertrude Stein remakes English itself into a foreign language when she seems to speak in tongues, testifying to the authority of her own experience" (87-88). The common theme in all these languages is either the authority of or the primacy of a female language. All of them reflect, as Gilbert and

Gubar put it, "women's historic efforts to come to terms with the urgent need for female literary authority" (85).

According to French feminists, particularly Hélène Cixous, one option for women to develop their "mother tongue" is to express the female body. Part of the problem, these feminists assert, is that in Western thought there has always been a mind/body separation, and women have typically been reduced to their bodily functions, leaving the field of thought to men. In this binary, the mind is the superior term; the body is inferior, secondary (notwithstanding women's role in childbirth). Charlene Spretnak outlines this sort of history of women's association with the body. In pre-Christian times, the power of women's bodies was worshipped. Religions were based on Goddesses and the fertility, generosity, and renewal implicit in the female body and its functions. It is only with the advent of patriarchal religion that woman's power has had to be renounced: "All of the myriad varieties of patriarchal oppression--co-opting and replacing the Goddess, imposing patrilineal descent and ownership of woman's womb, restricting and mutilating woman's body, denying woman education and legal rights, forbidding her control of her body, and portraying that body as a pornographic toy--*all* of these acts are motivated

by one desperate drive: to prevent woman from experiencing her power" (Spretnak xii). Implicit in this denial of woman's power over her own body is an assumption that woman is only body and that body is necessarily inferior to mind. Thus, even her role in childbirth is inferior to that of the father of the child, who, through marriage and the structures of patrilineal descent, owns her womb and the child within it.

In consequence, say Cixous and Irigaray, women need to celebrate their bodies as the source of mind, as the primary, superior term in the body/mind binary. They promote the idea of *l'écriture féminine*, a way of writing that links woman's language to her physical being and thus erodes some of the division between writing (as a higher, mental activity) and the body (as the base, physical one). Irigaray's idea is that women need to become aware of themselves and their sexuality, and she "offers as the starting point for a female self-consciousness the facts of women's bodies and women's sexual pleasure, precisely because they have been so absent or so misrepresented in male discourse" (A.R. Jones 359).

Such feminists claim that the language of the body would thus be different from the kind of writing valued in Western society. For these feminists, *l'écriture féminine*

would reflect the *jouissance* of woman's sexuality--a return to the innate pleasure in and of the body. This writing would subvert linear thinking (associated with masculine rationality) and would instead be everywhere at once, incorporating a plurality of meaning without being fixed in any one definition. Further, such writing would allow women to engage in new ways of thinking--ways that are not foreign to them, as male thought is. These feminists propose that "the immediacy with which the body, the id, *jouissance*, are supposedly experienced promises a clarity of perception and a vitality that can bring down mountains of phallogocentric delusion" (A.R. Jones 361).

Some critics, however, have suggested that writing from such a perspective merely reinforces the phallogocentric idea of woman as a bodily essence, or even a functional difference from man. As Ann Rosalind Jones says, "Rather than questioning the terms of such a definition (woman is man's opposite) *féminité* as a celebration of women's difference from men maintains them. It reverses the values assigned to each side of the polarity, but it still leaves man as the determining referent, not departing from the opposition male/female, but participating in it.... What we need to do is to move outside that male-centred, binary logic altogether" (363).

But what Gilbert and Gubar suggest is that no new languages are required by women to speak their own experiences, for they envision the problem of language from a different perspective from that of other theorists. For example, a summary of Kristeva's answer to the problem of language for women suggests one side of a linguistic solution: women can subvert the authority of this masculine practice by acquiring a feminist practice which is anything that "is at odds with what already exists" (A.R. Jones 359). If, as Kristeva claims, women are outsiders to language, we should not look for "alternative discourses" but instead should consider the advantages in the marginality of our position with respect to language: we are unlikely to put ourselves in a "fixed, authority-claiming subject/speaker or language" (A.R. Jones 358).

Kristeva, however, accepts the idea that women are outsiders to language because, for her, the moment of the child's accession to language is the same as the moment of the Oedipus complex, as Jacques Lacan had theorized. She thus sees the child's relationship to language and the mother as a "preverbal identification with the mother," in which mother and child engage in what she calls "semiotic discourse" (A.R. Jones 358). For Kristeva, then, the

child's entrance into language, the domain of the Symbolic, is the entrance into the Law of the Father.

Gilbert and Gubar, on the other hand, see the mother/child relationship to language as primary. Describing the strategies which men have applied in order to maintain their ownership of power in language, Gilbert and Gubar observe that "most male writers are either reacting against or appropriating the verbal fertility of the mother, and they are doing so precisely because, as Ong observes, 'there are no father tongues'" (Gilbert and Gubar 95). Contrary to Kristeva, Gilbert and Gubar see more than a "semiotic" language of mother and child. The "Law of the Father" is no more than a male invention, they say, to exclude women from their true role in language acquisition. The Symbolic Order, as described by Jacques Lacan, is simply another way of erasing woman as the source of speech, the originator of the "mother tongue": "we see the culmination of this tradition of male discrediting of female originating in the extraordinary swerve Jacques Lacan has to perform as part of his attempt to make the moment of the child's accession to language coincide with the moment of the Oedipus complex, so that women can be defined 'as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words'" (96).

For Gilbert and Gubar, however, "the power of the father, while obviously representing the law of patriarchy, need not be inextricably bound to the power of language" (96). They suggest instead that the child acquires words from the mother and is incited to use them when the child realizes that he or she is different from the mother, and she is absent. Language is thus acquired when the child needs to cross the distance created by the mother's absence. In this theory, Gilbert and Gubar take very seriously Claude Levi-Strauss's assertion that "a woman is not 'just a sign' but 'a generator of signs'" (96).

Daphne Marlatt demonstrates such a relationship to language between mother and child in *Ana Historic*. As Annie recalls, "i was two perhaps, you told me often enough, hurry up Annie...and then there was silence, the whole house filled with it. Mummy, i cried, Mummy? and you said in a low distant voice i didn't recognize (i did but i knew i wasn't meant to): your Mummy's gone. i burst into tears. don't be silly, darling, i'm here, you see how silly you are--as if *saying* it makes it so. but it does, it did. you had gone in the moment you thought to say it, separating yourself even as you stood there, making what wasn't, what couldn't be, suddenly real" (Marlatt 11).

Even as Annie illustrates that her mother's absence created the need for speech, she also demonstrates what Gilbert and Gubar have described: "If the female does have a crucial linguistic role...isn't it also possible that the primordial self/other couple from whom we learn the couplings, doublings, splittings of 'hierarchy' is the couple called 'mother/child' rather than the one called 'man/woman'?" (Gilbert and Gubar 98). And is it necessary, then, to create a new language, one that depends upon its "other" for meaning, or can we not relocate our source for language in the mother--who provides us with our mother tongue? Gilbert and Gubar point to Erich Neumann's idea that "'the positive femininity of the womb appears as a mouth...and on the basis of this positive symbolic equation the mouth...is the birthplace of the breath and the word, the Logos'" (97).

The birthing scene in *Ana Historic* is presented as such an instance of the birth of the Word from flesh--the flesh made word, rather than the patriarchal story of the Word made flesh. What Marlatt offers is a description that is focused on the body, that exemplifies the flesh before the word, the maternal body as primary, the true source of the word. Annie describes the birth of Jeannie Alexander's baby, during which Ana glimpses the maternal origins for

language: "Ana caught a glimpse of dark almost purple flesh and stood up, shocked. How dark it looked, an angry powerful o...this was Jeannie, this was something else not Jeannie, not anyone, this was a mouth working its own inarticulate urge, opening deep" (Marlatt 125). And what the mouth gives birth to is "a massive syllable of slippery flesh" (126). In this vision of "mouth speaking flesh," Ana looks for another way "to make it tell her present in this other language so difficult to translate" (126).

If language is a *materna lingua*, after all, if the source for words is maternal and all of the "vilifications of the gnosis of the Mother" (Gilbert and Gubar 95) are just the result of male anxiety over female primacy, then how does this maternal language avoid replicating the masculine assumption of centrality and authority? How can women express themselves in their mother tongue without speaking "in place of everything and everyone else?" (A.R. Jones 358). Marlatt and Atwood both suggest that it is possible to avoid the use of language as a tool for domination, depending upon how language is used, and by whom.

Marlatt offers part of the answer when Annie describes how the baby was spoken from Jeannie's body: "to be born in, enter from birth that place...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" (127). If language is given, as birth is, the speaker cannot appropriate either the words or the subjects for language. More than that, if the moment of accession to language involves the child using words to bridge the gap caused by the mother's absence, then connection, and not appropriation, is what underlies the need for language.

Once the birthplace of language is seen to be the country of woman's body, then language cannot be owned or fixed in place, nor can it be used for ownership or for defining a fixed reality. Marlatt's view of this language seems to coincide with that of Irigaray, who sees woman's pleasure in language, like her pleasure in sexuality, as not direct, linear or singular. Similarly, Cixous links women's sexuality to language. She also invokes "other bodily drives....Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive--all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive--just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood" (Jones 361).

Annie begins to write the "dictionary" of a woman's bodily drives, her pleasures and pains in recognizing her body as writing/the body of her writing:

there is still even now the innate pleasure of seeing on a fresh white pad the first marks of red, bright red when the bleeding's at its peak. innate because of a childish astonishment, *i made that!* the mark of myself, my inscription in blood. i'm here. scribbling again.

writing the period that arrives at no full stop. not the hand manipulating the pen, not the language of definition, of epoch and document, language explaining and justifying, but the words that flow out from within, running too quick to catch sometimes, at other times just an agonizingly slow trickle. the words of an interior history doesn't include. (90)

This interior language that is given, as in birth, is the mother tongue. Marlatt demonstrates the association of the mother tongue with the maternal body: "my mother (who)...voice that carries through all rooms, imperative, imperious. don't be silly. soft breast under blue wool

dressing gown, tea breath, warm touch" (10). But this language is excluded from history, inasmuch as the males in *Ana Historic* exclude and negate female experience. When the boys of Annie's childhood claim the woods as their own, they claim for themselves what, like woman, is untamed. Men's response to this untamed "other" is to subsume, control, and make it their own, whether it is in the woods or in written history: "history the story, Carter's and all the others', of dominance. mastery. the bold line of it." History (by which they claim all experience for their own) and axes (with which the men of Ana's time claim the wood for their use) are just the tools used in order to appropriate all that is around them.

There is a part of young Annie's woods, however, that cannot be claimed; it is the part that is maternal, that resists male ownership, and that is associated with blood: "...that part she and her sisters called the Old Wood, moulted and softened with years of needle drift, tea brown, and the cedar stump hollow in the middle where they nestled in a womb, exchanging what if's, digging further with their fingers, sniffing the odour of tree matter become a stain upon their hands like dried blood" (12).

Ana, too, stepping outdoors, associates her body with the stripped wood, and with all that is around her, without

wanting to possess it or put it to her use, but feeling an answering freedom in her own body, a freedom she wants to write: "If only she could write it down, as if the words might make a place she could re-enter when she felt the need, when she forgot--what it was like to feel this complete" (40). For what women are, in the patriarchal world, is not merely incomplete, but absent--absent even from their own bodies: "the monstrous lie of it: the lure of absence. self-effacing." Women are removed from "the swift race of the world" (24). But Annie is able to trace the falsehood of women's "lack," the "uneasy hole" women are supposed to cover up. For the source of absence is the source of language and connection, itself associated with the blood of the maternal body. In *Ana Historic*, it is also associated with waters that are deep in the woods, the place the roots of trees go down into, of "a nameless colour as if stained by the Trees themselves, darker than tea..." (46).

Ultimately, this maternal source becomes an answer to woman's fear of knowing her own power: "she broke through branches, stumbling on a pool, and found two women sitting there in the leafy water. Wisps of steam, warm, she knew it was warm. They beckoned to her. Rain fell warm around them, the brown water pulled at her skirts--it hadn't mattered,

clothes fell away--she was about to change into something magical and sure..." (86). What will change her is the encounter with the maternal body of water, of blood--the source of the mother tongue. This source, as Ana notes, is unnamed: "This secret space between our limbs we keep so hidden--is yet so, what? What words are there? If it could speak!--As indeed it did: it spoke the babe, and then the afterbirth, a bleeding mass of meat" (126). There are no words for this place because this 'mouth' giving birth to the word precedes it. Thus Annie recognizes her desire to return to that place--to be "unspoken and real in the world, running ahead to embrace it" (46).

A return to that source of the mother tongue is a retreat from the world of dominance and mastery, of singular possession, and a return to a language that is, as Irigaray notes, "everywhere at once." Jeannie Alexander's body in labour is that of a "woman a rhythm in touch with her body its tides coming in not first nor last nor lost she circles back on herself repeats her breathing out and in two heartbeats here not winning or losing labouring into the manifest" (125).

But, as Marlatt notes, to be spoken in the patriarchal language is to be defined and confined by a reality others have constructed. As a woman, it means being defined by the

female body and placed on the inferior end of the mind/body division. Similarly, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Regime reduces women to their bodily functions, particularly the Handmaids who are now only "two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 128).

Moreover, the Handmaids' bodies are subordinated to the mind--not only in the larger sense of being inferior to men (who are associated with the intellect), but also in the sense of being something that must be subjugated to the purity of their own minds. With this objective, then, the Handmaids at the Red Centre are taught by Aunt Lydia to pray: "She wanted our heads bowed just right, our toes together and pointed, our elbows at the proper angle. Part of her interest in this was aesthetic....But she knew too the spiritual value of bodily rigidity, of muscle strain: a little pain cleans out the mind, she'd say" (182).

This view of the Handmaids as bodies at the Regime's disposal is part of the larger practice in which the Regime controls interpretation and reduces plurality of meanings by reducing signs to things, the Word made flesh. Thus, a butcher shop is now signified by a picture of meat, and words are no longer available for general (female) interpretation. Offred notes of her room at the Commander's house that it "could be a college guest room...or a room in

a rooming house, of former times, for ladies in reduced circumstances. That is what we are now. The circumstances have been reduced; for those of us who still have circumstances" (Atwood 8). By reducing all possible meanings for the Handmaids except their reproductive function, the Regime succeeds in controlling them. Now they are nothing but chaste vessels for the Commanders' seeds-- "determined...completely" by their bodies (59).

The Regime insists upon this reduction of meaning for the Handmaids, for that is the most effective way to control them. Offred recognizes that to the Regime, she is "a national resource" (61). Or at least her womb is. For the Regime, the "I" of Offred does not exist: "I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will....There were limits but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me. Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping" (69-70). Offred has been transformed from a woman who controlled her body to a woman who is only the reproductive function of her body. This reduction, for the Regime, denies her access to activities of the

intellect--like writing. Thus, women in Gilead are not allowed to read or write. In matters of the printed word, women are trespassers, usurpers of male territory.

Only when the written word has been denied to women does Offred come to recognize its true power for those who define reality. When the Commander allows her to use a pen, she observes, "The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another Centre motto, warning us away from such objects. And they were right, it is envy. Just holding it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen" (174). Similarly, she feels a hunger for the words that she is allowed to read in magazines given her by the Commander: "On these occasions I read quickly, voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation. If it were eating it would be the gluttony of the famished, if it were sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere" (172-73).

Being determined by her body means that Offred is deprived of fullness of interpretation in her sense of touch. Even the Ceremony involves only penetration, and the only touching allowed is that of the Wife, who holds Offred's hands and on whose pelvis Offred's head rests, as

a symbol of the Wife's ownership and control of the "process and thus of the product" (88). Even the touch, then, that Offred feels, is negated as touch on her body. Instead, it is as if her body acts merely as a conduit between the Commander and his wife, and thus the power of the Regime is enforced through her body. By controlling the meaning of touch, the Regime controls all of the possible ways in which Offred's body might interact with the environment. Offred's body is not meant to be touched: Handmaids are not allowed body lotions since they have no need of soft skin any more.

So Offred looks for ways in which she might regain some of the meanings for her sense of touch. She would like to touch bread dough, for instance, claiming, "I would help Rita to make the bread, sinking my hands into that soft resistant warmth which is so much like flesh. I hunger to touch something other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch" (11). This is not simply a question of sensory deprivation. It is a matter of the Regime's using every possible context for meaning as a way of reducing the Handmaids to their function. And the response it engenders in Offred is congruent with the feminist response to the limits of patriarchy--a

celebration of woman's association with the body and a refusal to subordinate the body to the mind.

What Offred does, besides referring to reading and writing as hungers--effects of a physical appetite--is to reclaim not only her physical desires but also her body. When she takes a bath, she describes the insistence of her maternal body that remembers the feel and smell of her child: "I step into the water, lie down, let it hold me. The water is soft as hands. I close my eyes, and she's there with me, suddenly, without warning, it must be the smell of the soap. I put my face against the soft hair at the back of her neck and breathe her in, baby powder and child's washed flesh and shampoo, with an undertone, the faint scent of urine. This is the age she is when I'm in the bath. She comes back to me at different ages" (59). Offred and her daughter exist for Offred in a place that is encompassed by the maternal body. By telling the listener about this place, Offred is inscribing her body in the text. Although she does not want to see her body in the tub, because it determines her "so completely," the physical sensation of the bath subjects her to an immediate and sensory recollection of her daughter and of her body--except that her body is not maternal in Gilead's terms, as a vessel, but in her own and, more importantly, her child's

terms; for her description is a vivid, sensual reconstruction of her daughter.

In the birthing scene of *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, the birth of Janine's baby appears to correspond to the patriarchal ideal: the child is born and given over to the wife of the Commander, while the birth mother fades into the background. Male ownership of female bodies is thus made complete. In this scene the primacy of the maternal body is nonetheless evident. Although no one gives witness to the birth of the word, the primacy of the maternal body and its function in providing connection is recorded in the body of every other Handmaid in the room. While Janine labours, the other Handmaids share in the physical sensations: "It's coming, it's coming, like a bugle, a call to arms, like a wall falling, we can feel it like a heavy stone moving down, pulled down inside us, we think we will burst. We grip each other's hands, we are no longer single" (Atwood 118).

There is another kind of connectedness in the novel that is also a function of the language of the body. Once the Commander begins his secret relationship with Offred, Nick's presence or absence, and the position of his hat become the signs that tell Offred whether or not she is to meet with the Commander that night. As Offred puts it,

"He's only my flag, my semaphore. Body language" (170). But Nick's body itself also becomes a language to which Offred's responds: "He stretches in the sun, I feel the ripple of muscles go along him, like a cat's back arching. He's in his shirt sleeves, bare arms sticking shamelessly out from the rolled cloth. Where does the tan end?" (170). Her growing love affair with Nick becomes a bodily experience for its own sake. Offred is able to express her body--not as something separate from mind, something to be subjugated so that the mind can be purified, but as something to be celebrated--something that is connected to her own sense of self. But without another body to touch and to love, she recognizes her own body as a lack and an absence: "Can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I too am disembodied" (97). The body is dialogized in this novel as much as is the voice and the mind: "I tell, therefore you are" also translates, "My body loves, therefore your body is."

This emphasis upon the primacy of physical experience thus reveals a larger sort of dialogue in this kind of body language: Offred is connected to her child, to the other women, to Nick. And in the orality of her tale, she is also connected to the reader: "Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over, again....But I keep on going with this sad

and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance....By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I'm willing your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (251). Here, Atwood signals a complete reversal of Cartesian epistemology. Descartes' original view of the world in relation to self leaves nothing but an impasse--everything begins and ends with the self. What Offred claims instead is that she does not exist on her own, but only in relation to "you." She and we exist in community.

Likewise, Marlatt in *Ana Historic* demonstrates that we exist in a network of relations, and that part of that community existence is figured in language. At the closing of the novel, when Annie Richards renames herself Annie Torrent, signalling the beginning of her understanding of language, her own torrent of words, Annie indicates to her friend Zoe: "i want you. and me. together" (Marlatt 152). Acknowledging their connection, she demonstrates for us that language is not about authority. Women can write their own experiences and can give voice to other women without speaking for or in place of them. Annie writes about the

way in which writing can supply a connection between writer and subject and can give voice to someone else. As she sits at her typewriter, she acknowledges that 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" (45).

On the final page of *Ana Historic*, Marlatt dramatizes the kind of inter-connectedness inherent in language which also reshapes literary text: "we give place, giving words, giving birth, to each other--she and me. you. hot skin writing skin. fluid edge, wick, wick. she draws me out. you she breathes, is where we meet." In this revised grammar of the reading act, "you" becomes the text where "we" meet, "the reach of your desire, reading us into the page ahead" (153).

If language is about community, and if the origins for language are not paternal, then perhaps it is not necessary for women to search for new languages, to "only excreate, only excreate a no since" (Gilbert and Gubar 88), such as Gertrude Stein has done. It may be possible, in fact, to move away from the idea that language is something to be

possessed, or even something to be guarded. If it is possible for women to give one another a voice with which to speak, it is because this language does not have to be bound within the logic of oppositions and difference.

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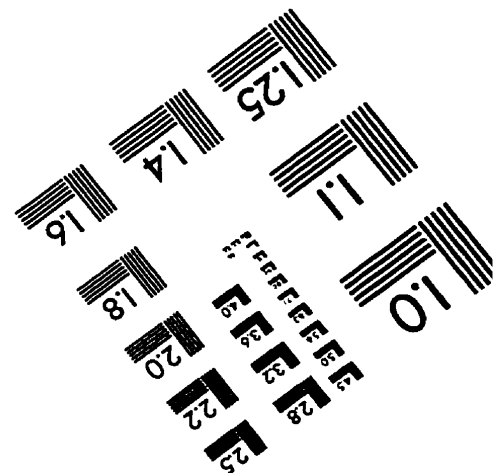
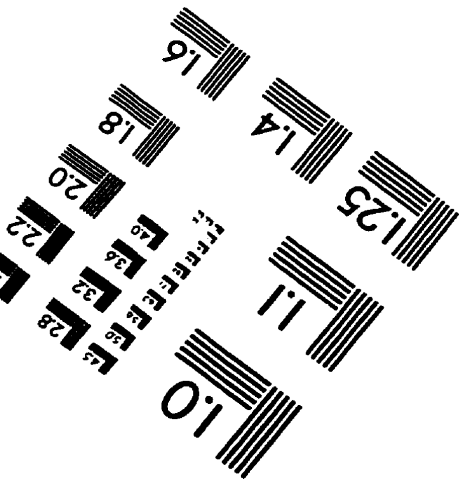
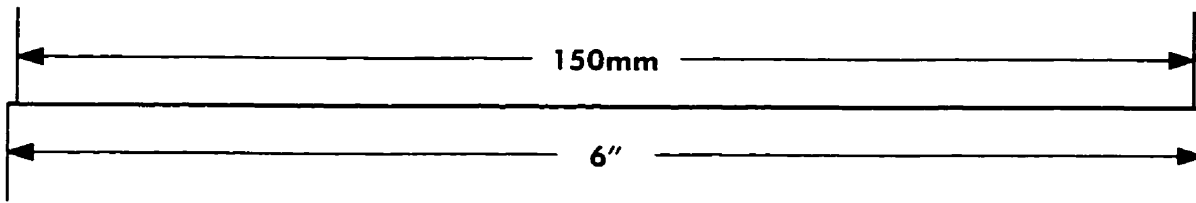
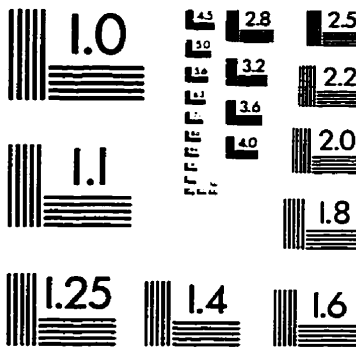
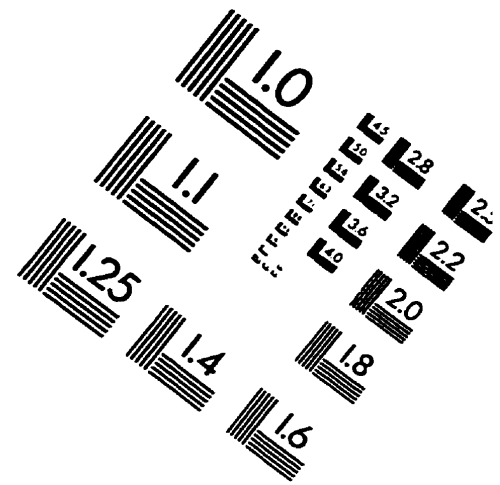
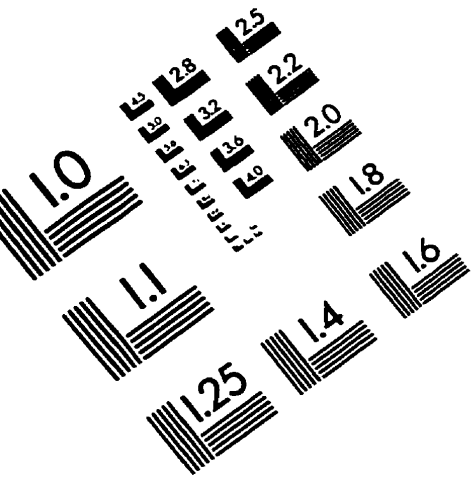
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