

**Encountering Maternal Silence:
Writing Strategies for Negotiating Margins of Mother/ing in
Contemporary Canadian Prairie Women's Poetry**

by

Luann E. Hiebert

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**Department of English, Film, and Theatre
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg**

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Canadian prairie women poets write about the mother figure to counter maternal suppression and the homogenization of maternal representations in literature. Critics, like Marianne Hirsch and Andrea O'Reilly, insist that mothers tell their own stories, yet many mothers are unable to. Daughter and mother stories, Jo Malin argues, overlap. The mother "becomes a subject, or rather an 'intersubject'" in the text (2). Literary depictions of daughter-mother or mother-child intersubjectivities, however, are not confined to auto/biographical or fictional narratives. As a genre and potential site for representing maternal subjectivities, poetry continues to reside on the margins of motherhood studies and literary criticism.

In the following chapters, I examine the writing strategies of selected poets and their representations of mothers specific to three transformative occasions: mourning mother-loss, becoming a mother, and reclaiming a maternal lineage. Several daughter-poets adapt the elegy to remember their deceased mothers and to maintain a connection with them. In accord with Tanis MacDonald and Priscila Uppal, these poets resist closure and interrogate the past. Moreover, they counter maternal absence and preserve her subjectivity in their texts. Similarly, a number of mother-poets begin constructing their mother-child (self-other) relationship prior to childbirth. Drawing on Lisa Guenther's notions of "birth as a gift of the feminine other" and welcoming the stranger (49), as well as Emily Jeremiah's link between "'maternal' mutuality" and writing and reading practices ("Trouble" 13), I investigate poetic strategies for negotiating and engaging with the "other," the unborn/newborn and the reader. Other poets explore and interweave bits of stories, memories, dreams and inklings into their own motherlines, an identification with their matrilineage. Poetic discourse(s) reveal the limits of language, but also attest to the benefits of extra-linguistic qualities that poetry provides. The poets I study here make room for the interplay

of language and what lies beyond language, engaging the reader and augmenting perceptions of the maternal subject. They offer new ways of signifying maternal subjectivities and relationships, and therefore contribute to the ongoing research into the ever-changing relations among maternal praxes and cultural ideologies, mothering and feminisms, and regional women's literatures.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Writing Poetry Counters Maternal Silence

How do contemporary Canadian prairie women poets write about mother/ing, and what are they telling us? My dissertation is an analysis of the writing strategies a select group of poets utilize to negotiate mother/ing¹ specific to three occasions: mourning mother-loss, becoming a mother, and reclaiming a maternal inheritance. These transformative occasions have prompted these poets to remember, reconceive, and re-inscribe the maternal subject into their texts. Writing about mothers and becoming a mother entails countering a history of socio-cultural and literary suppression. While the scope of my analysis is limited by the concerns and perspectives of these select women and their texts—they speak primarily as biological daughters and/or mothers from single, lesbian, heterosexual, indigenous, ethnic, and/or white middle-class perspectives—they do represent a range of experiences with the maternal. This study therefore contributes to the ongoing research in the dynamic relations among maternal experiences and cultural ideologies, mothering and feminisms, and regional women's literatures. My research deals with several crucial questions: How does the act of writing subjective maternal experiences counter socio-cultural expectations, patriarchal repression, domestic violence, and literary misrepresentations? How do poets contribute to the larger theoretical, literary, and social discussions concerning mother/ing? What writing strategies do these poets use to mourn the death of their mother, or represent maternity, or reconstruct a matrilineal heritage? Additionally, I apply a number of queries to the selected texts: What questions and literary techniques do the selected poets employ? How do notions of the maternal affect their choice of language(s) and figures of speech,

¹ My use of the term mother/ing encompasses mothers as subjects and writing subjects, and mothering as cultural praxes. Mothering practices are performative and relational, engaging the physical, emotional and intellectual (Sara Ruddick "Maternal Thinking" 97). Being a mother is not restricted to biology or gender, and includes foster, adoptive, surrogate and social mothers, to name a few. I prefer the term maternal because, as Marianne Hirsch states, "it signals that there is no transparent meaning of the concept" ("Unspeakable Plots" 248). I view the maternal subject as the person or representation of the mother figure being discussed. Maternity involves bearing and birthing a child; that is, pregnancy and childbirth.

their aesthetics and poetics? More specifically, how does poetry, as opposed to other genres, affect representations of mother/ing? I argue that the double image and perspective of maternity offers a new and empowering maternal aesthetic and poetics that is dialogical and hospitable, open to *both/and* realities and wary of *either/or* dichotomies.

Upon the first reading of Di Brandt's² book *questions I asked my mother*, I heard echoes of my heart in her words. Brandt's title poem offers a series of questions about life and death, faith and culture, questions I could not ask my mother. She queries notions about life after death. Brandt asks her mother whether "grampa" is in heaven with God or "in the ground" until

[...] the trumpet call or what i got to
know mom what do you think my mother is sewing she's
incredibly nimble with her fingers [...]
i can see my question is too
much for her Dad she calls into the other room come here a
minute & listen to what this girl is asking i have to repeat the
whole thing my voice rising desperately

(5; ellipses mine)

Brandt, like me, longed to know what her mother thought, but as was typical in our experience, inquiries were deferred to the father. These deferrals not only hindered female relationships, but also reinforced maternal silence. In the above excerpt, pronouns shift from the relational "you" and "i" to the dissociated third persons "she" and "girl." The enjambment of line upon line, interrupted only by sporadic gaps in the text, as though the daughter is catching her breath, further underscores her desperation. Determined to be heard, the daughter-poet re-inscribes her self as "i." The lower case "i," however, suggests a gendered devaluation. Moreover, her mother's thoughts remain unspoken. In response to encounters with maternal silence, poets like Brandt speak to the ongoing need for mothers and daughters to (re)connect. At the heart of my research is the question: "what i got to/ know mom what do you think"?

² Di Brandt has used lower case letters for her name in the past. However, her name in more recent books appears in the standard capitalization form I have used here and throughout this dissertation.

Poets chosen for this project reconceive maternal subjectivities and mother/ing realities in rich and distinct ways. The selection process was based on my interest and position as a mother and poet living on the Canadian prairies. In my academic studies, I found a dearth of concerted research and literary analysis at this junction. Thus, in choosing these poets, I have made some effort to include women with diverse perspectives and culturally varied histories from each of the prairie provinces, including Indigenous and first generation Canadians. I have also included both established and relatively unknown poets who span just over two decades. Still, the selection process inevitably includes omissions. Of note is the absence of Di Brandt's excellent collection *mother, not mother* (1992). There does exist a growing body of critical work on her poetic and scholarly works. In shaping this discussion, I have chosen poets whose works have been written since 2000 or who have received limited attention: Claire Harris' *Drawing down a daughter* (1992), Sarah Klassen's *Borderwatch* (1993) and *A Curious Beautitude* (2006), Charlene Diehl-Jones' *lamentations* (1997), Sally Ito's *Season of Mercy* (1999) and *Alert to Glory* (2011), Méira Cook's *Slovenly Love* (2003), Rita Bouvier's *papÿâhtak* (2004), Louise Bernice Halfe's *Blue Marrow* (2004), Jennifer Still's *Saltations* (2005), Su Croll's *Blood Mother* (2008), Lisa Martin-DeMoor's *one crow sorrow* (2008), Ariel Gordon's *Hump* (2010), Barbara Langhorst's *restless white fields* (2012), Erin Moure's *The Unmemntioable* (2012), and Melanie Dennis Unrau's *Happiness Threads: The Unborn Poems* (2013).³ Close readings of these texts will illuminate writing strategies that resist, reclaim, reconstruct, or recontextualize maternal identities in present Canadian society. This research contributes to the ongoing scholarship on the shifting relations among maternal ideologies, praxes, and women's literatures.

³ Six of these collections, namely those written by Diehl-Jones, Still, Martin-DeMoor, Gordon, Langhorst, and Unrau are first publications, indicative of the impulse to write transformative occasions and to break the silence of subjects that until recently have been taboo.

While the poets selected for this dissertation have a connection to the prairies, I found in my study that strong prairie characteristics did not surface as clearly as I had anticipated. Their writing strategies resist stereotypes and narrow definitions. These poets include rural and urban images; English, Cree, and other languages; Indigenous, Métis, and immigrant histories; varied ethnic and personal viewpoints. Although a definition of prairie literature is not the main focus of this study, several perspectives of note influence my conceptual framework of this region. In their introduction to *History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies* (2005), Alison Calder and Robert Wardhaugh state, “Until very recently, literary critics have privileged the prairie environment in their identification of the forces that shape writings from the prairies” (5). Indeed, the prairies encompass more than acres of grain, small farms, and rural communities. As Jason Wiens points out, the dynamics of a “cosmopolitan space” accounts for the prairies’ predominant “urban character and increasingly diversified economic base, and the social and cultural transformations [the prairies] continue to undergo as national and global migration [and immigration] patterns shift” (“The Prairies as Cosmopolitan Space” 153 – 54). However, in disregarding “local difference,” he cautions, we acquiesce to “a homogenizing global culture” (152). Deborah Keahey, in *Making it Home*, shows how “the Prairies have neither a single shared landscape nor a single shared culture” and argues that “all attempts to define such are necessarily exclusionary or reductive” (159). “Making” the Canadian prairies a “home” for people from many cultural histories—indigenous and immigrant—entails creating “social, psychological, and cultural relationships” in this ever-changing place (7). Places, people and literary expressions are always in a state of flux.

Critic and poet Dennis Cooley has written extensively about prairie literature, including various anthologies and a collection of essays in *The Vernacular Muse* (1987). In his more recent

essay, “The Critical Reception of Prairie Literature” (2008), Cooley covers a seventy-five-year period of prairie writing and makes several important statements: “until recently there has been little criticism meant to define or to develop an overview of prairie writing in its manifold creations, ...that what there is has been written overwhelmingly by men,” that increasingly from the 1970s through the 80s “those who have written about the literature have been drawn to linguistically-inspired readings, ...that in that same period... poetry got some attention,” and lastly he asks, “where now are the new statements?” (47). One reason for the paucity of “new statements” may stem from the disputed definition of prairie literature. As Calder and Wardhaugh point out, some recognize the prairies as an ever-changing region whereas others seek to “reinforce regional boundaries” (10); or, as Sue Sorensen puts it, those who “desire to deconstruct, de-centre and break down conventional assumptions of prairie, and a countering reactionary drive to construct and reinforce traditional boundaries and definitions...driven by market forces” (*West of Eden* 10; ellipsis mine). She goes on to say that “the more one reads, the more it looks rather like we have barely begun to articulate what the region’s literature is” (10). Therefore, I intend to draw attention to prairie poetry, an underrepresented genre, and the “new statements” these poets make about mother/ing. To use Warren Cariou’s words, their poetic “re-inventions” not only “provide a venue for continued re-evaluation” of prairie and its’ literatures (“Occasions for Feathers” 30), but also for re-evaluating the maternal subject in the context of this place and time. Maternal, regional, and literary conceptions “need to be reinvented, continually,” to reflect “a vibrant, living and changing reality” (30).

Alongside these changing realities, prairie poets’ texts intersect with contemporary theories, practices, and literary models of maternity, and inform our cultural views of mother/ing and maternity. It is significant to consider the evolution of these models as they have taken shape

in western Canada. The maternal subject—in theory and practice—has been a topic of scholarship for decades. Motherhood studies emerged as a branch of feminist scholarship with the publication of Adrienne Rich’s formative feminist work *Of Woman Born* (1986). Rich exposes the way patriarchal ideology has shaped and defined notions of “motherhood as an institution or as an idea” that continue to concern feminist scholarship (9). She calls for “women-as-mothers” to theorize and write from their subjective perspectives and embodied experiences to counter what she terms “patrochialism” (9). Rich’s legitimation of maternal subjectivities initiated motherhood studies in a broad range of academic fields, such as anthropology, psychology, women’s studies, and literary criticism. For several decades, feminists like Nancy Chodorow (“Early Psychological Development”), Mary O’Brien (*The Dialectics of Reproduction*), and Sara Ruddick (“Maternal Thinking”), have extended those early inquiries to reform traditional constructions of gender, reproduction, childbirth, and motherhood in terms of psychology, biology, philosophy, and epistemology. They have strongly opposed the reduction of motherhood to a “natural” biological function, and elevated maternal ways of knowing; that is, the knowledge women accrue in the dialogic relations of mind, body, and experience with their infants. The fifty key texts collected in Andrea O’Reilly’s anthology *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings* (2007) substantiate the thirty-plus years of concerted inquiry into motherhood, mothers, and mothering. Such examinations of the maternal body and mind have helped develop feminist perspectives and analytic methods that continue to influence present scholarship.

In her introduction to *Maternal Theory*, O’Reilly notes that motherhood studies have shifted focus from the “nature and meaning of motherhood” (1) to the experiences, praxes, and representations of maternal subjectivities. This move is motivated by at least three key concerns: 1) women writing from diverse socio-cultural contexts provide correctives to predominantly

white middle-class approaches to feminist and maternal theories; 2) women writing as mothers enable the reformation of literary models for parenting praxes and mother-daughter relationships previously (in)formed by patriarchy and masculinist myths; and 3) women writing maternal subjectivities possess the potential to remodel mother/ing and redefine maternal relationships. These concerns have a bearing on literary and social histories of the Canadian West and beg for detailed analyses of that world.

Although white middle-class voices have dominated feminist praxis in Western Canada and elsewhere, divergent views of femininity and maternal roles provide a starting point for interaction across cultures. Patricia Hill Collins, Patrice DiQuinzio, and Kim Anderson have responded to the relatively homogenous and often myopic conceptions of white bourgeois motherhood. They draw particular attention to the influences of race, class, ethnicity, and other social contexts in theorizing and practicing motherhood. Patricia Hill Collins, in “Shifting the Centre,” argues that such awareness is crucial since “decontextualization... distorts, and omits huge categories of human experiences,” and that “all motherwork” is informed by memberships in particular ethnic and social groups (326). Likewise, DiQuinzio notes that adequate theorizing of the maternal subject must attend to the “specificity of women’s situations and experiences” (“Mothering and Feminism” 548). Mothering is “profoundly shaped” by “[r]acial domination and economic exploitation... not only for racial ethnic women ...but for all women” (Collins 311). Still, the default figuration of the middle-class mother, Kim Anderson contends, is the “angel of the home,” an image that has governed “North American ideologies of motherhood for the last two hundred years” (762). Problematic is the fact that “few working-class mothers could afford to devote themselves exclusively to mothering” (762), past or present, and that the angelic-mother image presents an impossible reality. These critics, among others, call for the

recontextualization of maternal experiences and practises that have been marginalized if not muted in research and in writing.

In addition, though racial, economic, and gendered attitudes shape and delineate maternal feminisms, it is important to emphasize that women's identities are not static. Kerry Fast and Rachel Epp Buller, in their introduction to *Mothering Mennonite*, affirm that cultural attitudes “evolve in specific contexts and in articulation with the cultures in which they are located”; as “re-creators—even creators—of religion and culture,” mothers continually redefine ideologies in relation to the dominant culture (1). Similarly, Anderson argues that despite the domination of western patriarchal ideologies, Indigenous women have “maintained and revived their own distinct ideologies of motherhood.... [namely] collectivist, spiritual, and sovereign elements” (761). Indigenous women continue to construct counter narratives “as strategies of resistance, reclamation and recovery” (762). The poets I will discuss also use their own devices to deconstruct patriarchal assumptions and encounter divergent views of the maternal subject. They voice some of the maternal silences embedded in prairie histories and cultural customs, and re-envision possibilities within and against the present multicultural milieu.

A second stream in motherhood scholarship concerns the effects of patriarchal myths on literary and social approaches to mothering and mother-daughter relationships. Theorizing maternal practices potentially enables positive relationships and reforms socially-constructed parenting models. Confronted with what Marianne Hirsch identifies as “Unspeakable Plots,” women contend with masculinist myths like the Oedipus story (244).⁴ The silent voice of Oedipus' mother Jocasta, she argues, is indicative of the absent mother in classic male plots and in daughter stories alike (238, 240, 245). Although feminists began “inscribing the female into

⁴ Hirsch examines how the classic narrative of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (c. 429 BC) has dominated narrative and familial structures for centuries. For further study, see Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother/ Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1989).

the male plot,” Hirsch observes, they continued “silencing one aspect of women’s experience and identity—the maternal” (239). Crucially, stories from the mother’s perspective differ from those written from a daughter’s point of view. Brandt’s poetry, for example, is decidedly daughter-centric. An emphasis on the maternal, Hirsch argues, will reveal “the multiple differences within the maternal, the differences among women, . . . and the difference of maternal plots and stories from conventional romance plots” (248; ellipsis mine). Attending to these differences, mother-writers continue to reform conventional plots and re-envision the maternal perspective to such an extent that, as Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O’Reilly point out in their introduction to *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts* (2010), recent writers have explored “maternal themes, identities, and experiences to a perhaps unprecedented degree” (5). Motherhood studies, which were only recently established as an academic discipline in the 1990s (5), have not only altered conceptions of mother/ing, they have reconceived mother-daughter relationships. In *Mothers and Daughters* (2000), Andrea O’Reilly and Sharon Abbey contend that telling maternal stories breaks “codes of silence and submissiveness” and enables the “reciprocal mother-daughter dyad” (15, 9). Mother (and daughter) poets, then, participate in textual dialogue, construct new myths, and empower others as they make visible their rich perspectives.

Stressing differences among mothers invites evaluative comparisons but it also can propagate “Good Mother” and “Bad Mother” myths. Representations of mothering in literature, as Podnieks and O’Reilly remind, are often influenced by the “age-old dichotomies to position the mother who is seen to be selfless, sacrificial, and domestic as angel/Madonna (‘good’), the mother who is judged to be selfish for seeing autonomy beyond her children as whore/Magdalene (‘bad’)” (4). In Nathalie Foy’s words, “mothers are either sanctified or demonized” (111). Paula J. Caplan contends that despite the gains of feminism, good vs. bad mother myths

persist, so much so that they set mothers up as scapegoats of patriarchal power: either mothers “naturally...know all that there is to know about mothering” or they “cannot raise emotionally healthy children without the advice of lots of experts” (594). The “good” mother faces impossible expectations because she is not always nurturing, and the “bad” mother fails almost immediately to meet expectations (594). Despite this impossible dilemma, dichotomous and/or mother-blaming myths continue to influence social and artistic conceptions of the maternal, parenting roles, and mother-child relationships. Valerie Walkerdine, Sharon Hays,⁵ Susan Douglas, and Meredith Michaels, among others, have made a point of critiquing the persistent “ideology of intensive mothering” (Douglas and Michaels 617). They found this parenting style competitive and class-based, a social construct reinforced by celebrity moms in the media—an obsession that has made “new momism” unavoidable (621).⁶ Momism not only “redefines all women, first and foremost, through their relationships to children” but also “insinuates that... the enlightened mother chooses to stay home with the kids” (633 – 34). Thus, career-oriented mothers and those in the labour force are often seen as second rate. Sadly, as these critics reveal, the “new momism” is a thinly veiled version of the old good versus bad mother myth.

In response, Andrea O’Reilly proposes “feminist mothering” as an alternate model. Her “oppositional discourse ...[or] counter narrative of motherhood... seeks to interrupt the master narrative of motherhood to imagine and implement a view of mothering that is *empowering to women*” (“Feminist Mothering” 796; emphasis in text, ellipses mine). Similarly, Fiona Joy Green insists that forming a “feminist motherline” has the potential to “carry the voices, wisdom,

⁵ Sharon Hays, in “Why Can’t a Mother Be More like a Businessman?” (408 – 30), summarizes the evolving social construction of mothering and child-rearing ideologies in Canada. She points to capitalism as the source of what she terms the “ideology of intensive mothering” and the “self-interested utilitarian attempts to retain or achieve middle-class status for their children and themselves” (422).

⁶ The term “new momism” was coined by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels in *The Mommy Myth* (2004). This “cult of the new momism,” or style of “intensive mothering,” is further scrutinized in O’Reilly’s “The Motherhood Memoir and the ‘New Momism’” (203-13), D. Lynn O’Brien Hallstein’s “Conceiving Intensive Mothering” in *Mothering and Feminism* (96-108), and elsewhere.

and wit of feminist mothers” and to “assist women in re/claiming their feminist mothering authority” (7). Writing not only bears these maternal “voices, wisdom, and wit” in textual forms, but enriches our understanding of mother/ing and reclaims the value of maternal knowledge. I also concur with Green’s notion that women need to keep “sharing and recording feminist motherline stories to ensure that the difficult, yet rewarding work of feminist mothering remains a communal and political endeavour” (18). These “counter narratives” rewrite oppressive mythologies and offer new models that extend to future generations.

The third issue in Motherhood studies, and the focus of this project, concerns the interplay of literature, mother/ing, and writing. In their introduction to *Narrating Mothers*, Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy pick up Hirsch’s argument that maternal narratives should “begin with the mother in her own right, from her own perspective” (2; emphasis in text). Historically, Daly and Reddy claim, most “literary and theoretical texts about mothers, mothering, and motherhood” have emerged from the daughter’s perspective even when “written by feminists who are mothers” (1). At issue here is that “daughter-centric” narratives teach us more about being mothered than mothering (2). A mother should have a real voice in her own story, but with what possible effects? Mother-writers, Ann Snitow argues, have had to break two “narrative taboos” (291): “speaking the life of the mother” and representing “mothering as one element in life, not its defining core” (297-98). Thus, writing from a matrifocal perspective opens the possibility of inventing new “ways of constructing motherhood and to other-than-patriarchal ways of thinking that could have a transformative effect on literary, political, and social conditions” (3).⁷ That kind of writing simultaneously reveals the pros and cons of mothering, and

⁷ Daly and Reddy coined the term “daughter-centricity” (2). Informed by Miriam Johnson’s discussion on matrifocality in *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives* (1988), Podnieks and O’Reilly identify matrifocal narratives as stories “in which a mother plays a role of cultural and social significance, and in which motherhood is thematically elaborated and valued, and structurally central to the plot” (3).

the manifold interests mothers possess beyond her role. Maternal writing strategies, such as O'Reilly's "oppositional discourse" and Green's "motherline stories," can help to redefine mother/ing, restore subjective voices, and reform maternal language. Mother-poets, then, reconstruct "what I got to/ know" (Brandt) in matrifocal verse. By (re)inscribing the mother into poetry, they redefine mother/ing and contribute to the ongoing revision of the western male-centered literary canon (Podnieks and O'Reilly 5).

Women have not always felt at liberty to share their birth giving stories openly. Katherine Martens and Heidi Harms, in their collection of interviews *In Her Own Voice: Childbirth Stories from Mennonite Women* (1997), represent the individual particularities of twenty-six women and cultural birthing practices from the 1920s to 1980. Martens explains that the goal was to "find women who would tell their stories," and to let their distinct stories take "centre stage" (xvi – xviii) in the transcription process. Peggy Regehr, for instance, explains that her "mother never talked about childbirth or anything about the sexual aspects of becoming pregnant" (156). In the community, childbirth "was something that was expected of you," but kept "hidden"; yet, if "you were not visibly pregnant" after a year of marriage, "questions began to be asked of you" (157). Tess Cosslett asserts that women need to tell their own childbirth stories. In her book *Women writing childbirth: Modern discourses of motherhood* (1994), Cosslett stresses that this "life-changing event for many women...needs to be made visible, written about, from a woman's perspective. Too often, the story has been taken away from women by the 'audience perspective' accounts of fathers, or, more influentially, doctors" (2). Regardless of genre, writing "the consciousness of a birthing woman... involves a process of *negotiation* with prevailing ideologies" (3). Although "subjectivities have been culturally constructed," writing provides control over stories and experiences to work within and against culture (2 – 3). A key hope for

Cosslett, Martens, Harms, and others is for mothers to regain subjectivity. More specifically, Cosslett analyzes the discourses (medical and literary) that affect women's birthing stories. She shows how official stories iron out the "perplexities and complexities" of "individuality and identity" that women raise when telling and writing birth stories from their own perspectives (7). Mother-writers, especially those from "different classes and races," alter, subvert and fracture the "unifying 'woman'" promoted by official discourses (7). Along similar lines, Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb and Julia Tharp examine the interplay of mothering and writing as they explore the evolution of American maternity literature in their introduction to *This Giving Birth: Pregnancy and Childbirth in American Women's Writing* (2000).⁸ MacCallum-Whitcomb and Tharp refer to Sharon Olds' poem "The Language of the Brag" as a point of departure in writing maternity. She represents "the corporeal reality of pregnancy and childbirth, shying away from no bodily function ... in a way that was unsentimental, unembarrassed, and, most importantly, wholly unapologetic" (1; ellipsis mine). Olds expresses the ways "childbirth has shaped both a woman's identity and her imagination" (1), and her poetry legitimizes maternity as a subject for literary production (2). Consequently, poets, like those in this study, continue to explore alternative discourses, techniques, and (re)formations of maternity in literature.

There have certainly been a few gatherings of relevant texts. Various anthologies and feminist analyses of maternal literatures investigate the interrelationship between mothering and writing, often in terms of genre. For example, in *Double Lives: Writing and Motherhood* (2008) and *The M Word: Conversations about Motherhood* (2014) mother-writers contend with this knotty relationship in autobiographies and memoirs. Fictional matrifocal narratives are analyzed

⁸ For a detailed list of motherhood anthologies and critical works published during the 1990s, see Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb and Julie Tharp's *This Giving Birth*, p 3 – 4. Maternal literatures and discourses finally found success; birthing became a focus in their writing. One of the first anthologies of women writing about pregnancy and birth was edited by Laura Chester and published in 1989.

in *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities* (1991) and *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts* (2010). Scholarly journals, including *Essays on Canadian Writing*, *Canadian Poetry*, and *JMIRCI*, have published a host of essays on Canadian literature in recent decades. Still, whatever the state of feminist scholarship elsewhere, Canadian maternity poetry resides on the verges of scholarship and conversation. MacCallum-Whitcomb's "Bitches with Broomsticks," for instance, is the only essay in *Mothers and Daughters* that speaks to poetry. She analyzes the provocative "witch" figure in American maternity poetry (87). The image of the "witch"—an amalgam of "good" and "bad"—confronts and transforms the traditional "good" vs. "bad" dichotomy to an embodiment of a both/and reality, a reality similarly expressed by the poets in this study. Two writers in *Textual Mothers* also analyze the works of American poets. Elizabeth Beaulieu investigates the ambivalence of mothering in Rita Dove's poetry, and Rita Jones examines the fusion of supposedly good and bad mothering in Sharon Olds' poetry (251).⁹ Mother-poets apparently alter classic mother figures, portraying the mother as a composite rather than an either/or identity. However, poetic analyses focus on mothering rather than on becoming a mother. So where are the book-length inquiries of contemporary Canadian maternity poetry?

In her essay "And the Motherhood of Poetics," Susan Griffin points to birth giving as "titanic" in nature, to pregnancy as a bodily "sphere of contradictions"—an indivisible couple—, and to the words without sense "stitched into" the unborn's existence (*the grand permission* 83, 84-85, 86)—the child hears mother's voice "in utero" (DeCasper and Spence 134). Poetry makes room to explore the extremes of pregnancy and childbirth, as well as potential engagement with the unborn in ways that would be difficult to represent in auto/biographies or narrative fictions.

⁹ Elizabeth Beaulieu analyses Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah* (1987) and *Mother Love* (1995) poetry collections and concludes, "Dove's poetry ... celebrates the privilege and the responsibility, affirming motherhood in all its terrible beauty" (153). Rita Jones, in "But she's a Mom!," examines Olds' portrayal of female identity as multiplicitous; the woman "finds pleasure in her roles as both mother and lover" (251).

Poets need not follow a plot line, nor stick to personal history. Poetry houses lived and imagined experiences and feelings and dreams. Poetry frees words and thoughts to entwine, fragment, flow or interrupt. In his essay “breaking & entering,” Cooley admits that “formal departure disturbs readers” and “generates uncertainties,” but when “we move off & away from metre, we’re in a position to rethink the line” (102). Lines, spaces, and patterns that break away from convention cause the reader to pause, to consider new possibilities of interpretation. Line breaks and spaces, Stephen Dobyns states, create a “visual effect” as well as “rhythm and meaning” (90). Moreover, surprises potentially “heighten and expand our sense of the entire poem” (92), and devices such as enjambment encourage readers to ponder the poet’s intentions (110). Poems clearly work on multiple levels and create diverse effects. In terms of feelings and emotions, Peter Barry posits, they “seem to hover somewhere ‘between’ the lines”; they reside in a dimension that “can only be implied” (86, 96). When writing about loss and disaster, Maurice Blanchot claims there is a cry that “tends to exceed all language” (51), a desire to “suspend time and circumstance” (Barry 143). Emma Radley, in her essay “Baraitser-Plus-Lacan: The Maternal Encounter, Interruption, and Language” (2012), analyzes Baraitser’s approach to subjectivity. Radley claims, “The maternal encounter-as-interruption is a radical disturbance at the level of the signifier...an interruption in the temporal logic of interpretation and meaning” (102; ellipsis mine). It is “in the blank spots, the silences, the affect, the shock...that new spaces of signification emerge”; the “pause and the gap themselves...resist interpretative reification” (104; ellipsis mine). Poetry opens windows for what exists beyond language. Extra-linguistic qualities of poetry, in terms of form, sound patterns, white spaces, tone, emotional resonance, imaginative engagement, and the like, contribute to meaning and also resist meaning when language fails or is interrupted.

The mother-writer relation, Marni Jackson argues, enacts “a fruitful dialogue between Self and Other that mimics—even as it interrupts—the imaginative journey of writing” (xiv). Still, writing about mother/ing faces its hurdles. In her essay “Troublesome Practices,” Emily Jeremiah explains three strategies feminist critics have espoused in response to the mother-writer dynamic. The first strategy focused on a revision of “pre-existing images of maternity,” or a critique of the “Images of Mothers” in literature (8). This examination exposed the “inadequacy and negativity of many depictions of women... [and] it highlighted the inevitably partial nature of any cultural product” (8; ellipsis mine). Problematic, however, was the assumption “that ‘woman’ was a “fixed and graspable category,” whereas most critics now view identity “as shifting and contingent” (8). My analysis will reveal a range of contextualized maternal images that contest conventional depictions. A second feminist course of action seeks the recovery of “a matrilineal literary tradition” (8), based on Virginia Woolf’s oft quoted statement from *A Room of One’s Own*: “we think back through our mothers if we are women” (2474). This approach, Jeremiah posits, “opens the way towards a theory of narrative which, in contrast to traditional masculinist models, allows for the articulation of female subjectivities,” and potentially fosters communities (“Troublesome” 8 – 9). Crucial to my project is the representation of “female subjectivities” as a counter to objectifying women. The notion of a matrilineage is important in chapter four as I discuss poets who unearth, reconstruct, or upset maternal heritages. Developing a “matrilineal literary tradition” is not insignificant, but it has its limitations. Mother-writers are largely absent in canonical literary history. This brings us to the third and particularly pertinent strategy, the “exploration of the mother as writing subject” in response to a history of relative silence (9). Reasons for this absence, Jeremiah observes, may be practical or financial, but they are “also ideological” (9). Critics such as Hirsch have accused literary theorists for marginalizing

and silencing women, whereas others have developed “new narratological models” to contest the assumption that “*Mothers don’t write, they are written*” (Susan R. Suleiman qtd in Jeremiah 9).¹⁰

While there are those who work with theories of writing the maternal body, such as French feminist Julia Kristeva and others, my work is with an Anglo-American school of motherhood studies that does not engage francophone theories of maternal discourse. Anglo-American feminists, Sylvie A. Gambaudo notes, seek “a woman-centred perspective” in the construction of female identities that, in their view, “have been denied” (96 – 97). My analysis assumes mothers do write, and focuses on women using poetic language to reconstruct maternal identities.

Writing strategies for negotiating mother/ing evidently emerge from a complex social matrix, and, according to Jeremiah, should not be based on a natural state:

A poststructuralist conception of literature helps us theorize maternal writing in ways that free such discourse from confinement to the babbling or silent semiotic and allow its troublesome possibilities to emerge. It suggests that writing by mothers is not ‘before’ culture, but rather that it takes place in, and may even shape, particular cultural contexts. Poststructuralism also offers us ways of conceiving maternal writing as not only potentially subversive, but also as ethical. (11)

Jeremiah’s point is crucial. If maternal discourses are confined to pre-linguistic “babbling,” or the “silent semiotic” of the maternal body, then mothers are essentially excluded from cultural production. I would add, however, that some experiences lie beyond language. Even so, writing grounded in a particular historical context gives the maternal subject a public voice, and troubles traditional perceptions of mothering. Interdependent activities, such as writing and mothering, counter “traditional western ideals of rationality and individuality” (7). Since culture informs meaning and meaning informs cultural production, mother-writers may well transform cultural and literary representations of the maternal subject. Mother-poets, in fact, make visible lived realities, social structures, and literary conventions that constrain or empower mothering; they

¹⁰Jeremiah offers a detailed look at feminist responses to mothering and writing in “Troublesome Practices” (7-16).

break the silences of ignorance, abuse, and domestic violence even as they adopt silences for their own purposes; they offer creative ways to mother even in difficult contexts. What is especially germane is Jeremiah's belief that mother-writer relationships are "compatible with art" as well as "conducive to it" (11). Maternal writing blurs "public/private, mind/body distinctions" and potentially subverts dominant discourse (11). In *Drawing down a daughter* Claire Harris writes, "Baby we journey down dreamlines/ .../ all for this your birthgift Child who/ opens me" (8; ellipsis mine). Notions of relationality and interdependence create a dialogic and subversive "maternal aesthetic" and liberate maternal discourses from monologic language.

Poetic discourses embrace the dialogic experiences of mothering and writing. For Brandt, empowered poetry arises from the interrelationship of language and bodily rhythms: "Poetry is revolutionary. It puts the power of language back where it belongs, inside each living human body. It makes us pay attention to the sounds and images and rhythms of our own bodies... It gives us back the sounds of our own women's voices... makes us angry... throws us into action" (*Dancing Naked* 45; ellipsis mine). Poetry may find its potency when the words and rhythms represent or attune to women's bodily rhythms, sensory encounters, and emotional sensibilities. Even so, Brandt's position on feminist discourse bears an essentialist strain. Women's intellect, skills, beliefs, and opinions also influence the (in)effectiveness of poetry. Ruddick seems to agree when she claims that mothering is both a practice and a way of thinking. She defines the "discipline" of maternal cognition as "the intellectual capacities she develops, the judgments she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, [and] the values she affirms" (96). Ruddick goes on to explain how conceptions about mother/ing inform and alter perspectives:

The agents of maternal practice, acting in response to the demands of their children, acquire a conceptual scheme—a vocabulary and logic of connections—through which they order and express the facts and values of their practice. In judgments and self-reflection, they refine and concretize this scheme. Intellectual activities are

distinguishable but not separable from disciplines of feeling. There is a unity of reflection, judgment, and emotion. (97)

In this understanding, mother/ing, like writing, entails a blend of “reflection, judgment, and emotion” (97). Mother/ing and writing constitute both a practice and a response that involves bodily rhythms and intellectual processes. Notably, Ruddick’s phrase “agents of maternal practice” makes room for those whose mothering practices do not involve birthing an infant. Many women (and men) care for children outside of traditional biological relations, such as step-parenting, adopting, fostering, or grand-parenting to name a few.

In her article “Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond” Jeremiah contends that discussions about mothering “highlight the active nature of maternity” and posits “a performative and ethical maternal aesthetics. Aesthetic practice involves relationality since it constitutes participation in a particular culture. The experiences of writing and reading also promote non-hierarchical, fluid sets of identification” (21 – 22, 29). I am sure that the efficacy of a maternal aesthetic lies in the performative and relational activities of maternity, mothering and artistic expression. They have the potential to recreate maternal identities and transform cultural misconceptions of mother/ing, particularly in a multicultural context. Reading and writing maternal texts engage in dialogic and empathetic acts that have the potential to undermine masculinist notions of “authorial autonomy and authority,” female passivity, rationality, and “knowledge production” (29 – 30). Maternal writing may also be traditional and /or repressive, but insofar as literature participates in culture, reading and writing, like mothering, will be performative. Creative expression by its very nature shifts maternal thinking and maternal knowledge from internal or private domestic places into public discourses, actively and dialogically engaging within and against culture.

Croll celebrates the significance of maternal knowledge. In her poem “we need to have our deaths written,” Croll underscores the import of mothers writing poetry:

we need to have our lives remembered
 touched first with a fingertip then cupped trembling
 for half a breath in the palm of a hand then written
 with ink that won't run (61)

Maternity writing counters silences elicited by a new life or a death. Human experiences matter.

The poem continues, “we need death examined as body after body is washed/ and laid into the ground we need to remember children/...the blood/ of our mothers...what all this life means”

(61 – 62; ellipses mine). To remember and write “what all this life means” from the first

“fingertip” feel of a newborn to the final touch of a lifeless body is of some consequence. Croll tellingly repeats the pronoun “we,” inviting readers to join in a meditation of our human origins:

our lives, our bodies, our mortality, our mothers. Births and deaths trigger retrospection and examination of our existence. Since life and death coexist “inside the blood/ of our mothers,”

Croll urges us to manifest the whole of our experiences in ink. Eight times she insists, “we need.” Like Brandt, Croll expresses a desire to know and make known. The insistent repetition stresses a deficit of writing about mothers and their children. Similarly, Joan Thomas in her

foreword to *In Her Own Voice* states “that there is enough meaning in every birth, as in every death, to warrant the telling” (ix). With this in mind, in the following chapters I will analyze the

writing strategies used by contemporary Canadian prairie women poets to re-inscribe the maternal subject, praxes, and experiences into language. In particular, they tell us what they

know about mourning mother-loss, welcoming an infant stranger, reconstructing a maternal inheritance, and contending with language in their telling.

In the next chapter, I examine the strategies poets use to (re)form the poetic elegy in mourning the loss of a mother. I look at how they honour their mothers to counter the silence of their deaths, and how they use textual recollection to counter forgetfulness and identify various forms of maternal suppression. I consider the work of three poets: Lisa Martin-DeMoor's *one*

crow sorrow, Barbara Langhorst's *restless white fields*, and Erin Moure's *The Unmemntioable*. Each woman negotiates the uncertainties and upheavals that her mother's death triggers. What these poets do with the elegiac mode is striking. Historically, giving homage in the elegy was a public expression using elevated language and an identifiable set of conventions to praise and honour someone of influence, a formal lament or tribute usually to another male. Two poetic forms—the Ode and the Elegy—have traditionally expressed this type of celebration, praise, and veneration for the living and the dead. For centuries, poetic genres have been moulded into male images, ideals and ideologies. In her generative book *The Daughter's Way: Canadian Women's Paternal Elegies* (2012), Tanis MacDonald assesses the male elegiac tradition. The elegy moved from “a declaration of personal grief to angry political statement to philosophic/spiritual declaration, relying heavily upon the truths discovered through melancholic profundity to complete the elegiac discovery of the self through the media of art and philosophy” (8 – 9). Writing grief was viewed as a journey toward self-discovery and solace. Karen E. Smythe defines the elegy as “a verbal presentation or staging of emotion, wherein the detached speaker engages the audience with the intent of achieving some form of cathartic consolation” (*Figuring Grief* 3). MacDonald claims that Canadian women have transformed the traditional male elegy into a site for inquiry. Unlike their earlier male counterparts, she posits, “feminist and proto-feminist elegies are less concerned with identity and consolation than they are with subjectivity and inquiry. . . .the female-written elegy tends to refuse resolution rather than invite it” (15; ellipsis mine). Although MacDonald focuses on mourning fathers' deaths, I will investigate whether her claims of subjectivity and inquiry are also operative in mourning mothers' deaths.

Canadian elegists, according to Priscila Uppal, not only diverge from male elegiac conventions, but also deviate from American and British approaches to writing grief (*We Are*

What We Mourn 2009). Uppal's claim that Canadian elegists "refuse to accept separation from the dead" (13) holds for the poets selected for this chapter. They mourn and write loss "not only to remember the past, and memorialize it, but also to recover the past and use it to create a future. The dead are sought out by the living to interact once again with their communities" (13). Rather than creating emotional and poetic distance, Canadian elegists write to converse with the dead. Mourning is not a "private activity" invested in speaking to one's self. Writing grief enables the subjective "I" (daughter-poet) to engage with the deceased mother as a maternal subject rather than the object of her grief. By reconfiguring daughter-mother intersubjectivity via the elegy, poets reject the traditional subject/object dichotomy. Elegies open space for reconnecting with the dead—a communal and dialogic work of mourning. Thus, writing grief counters the silence of absence and death, the isolation of mourning, and the fear of forgetting personal and cultural experiences. I will explore the ways poets remember their deceased mothers and how they integrate their voices and stories into their texts. Their relational poetics not only pays homage to their mothers, but transforms the elegy from a monologic reflection of personal grief into a dialogic expression that engages the dead with the living. Grief reconnects these poets with the past and often draws to the surface other kinds of loss. As a metaphoric site for reunion, the elegy, then, becomes a form (forum) that welcomes dialogue and contends with socio-cultural and literary suppression. This strategy maintains a connection between the living and the dead, and opens the possibility to recuperate losses and to reconceive a better future.

The third chapter shifts from texts that remember deceased mothers to poetry about becoming a mother. I will focus on the poets' representations of their mother-child relationship during pregnancy, childbirth, welcoming a newborn, and burying an infant, and will analyze their strategies for negotiating these occasions in terms of hospitality. I examine Harris' *Drawing*

down a daughter, Diehl-Jones' *lamentations*, Cook's *Slovenly Love*, Croll's *Blood Mother*, Gordon's *Hump*, and Unrau's *Happiness Threads: The Unborn Poems*. These poets construct their mother-child bond amid the daily joys, tasks, demands, risks, surprises, and losses. I will investigate the ways they affirm or confront traditional models of maternity. Harris' book, published prior to the others listed here, offers innovative representations of the mother-unborn and mother-daughter interrelationships have modelled new ways of portraying maternity. In the face of deeply ingrained myths and social expectations, women have often masked their encounters with maternity. Susan Maushart, in "Faking Motherhood," explains that "the mask of motherhood is in fact an assemblage of fronts ... that we use to disguise the chaos and complexity of our lived experiences" (460; ellipsis mine). However, the articulation of these pressures and polarizing experiences in literature exposes "the fault lines in how we construct motherhood" (Foy 111). The poets I am reading reconstruct their relationship with the unborn/newborn and unmask some of the expectations and losses, pleasures and terrors of becoming a mother. Their poetry counters traditional "good" mother images and represents divergent views of maternity.

As a theoretical framework for this chapter, I draw on Mary O'Brien's valuation of female reproduction and labour in "The Dialectics of Reproduction" (1981). I am also indebted to Lisa Guenther's notions of "birth as a gift of the feminine other" and welcoming the stranger in *The Gift of the Other: Levinas & the Politics of Reproduction* (2006). Like Guenther, I wish "to rethink the significance of birth to an Other" (57), to underscore the complexities of mother/ing, and the mother-work of bonding with the unseen other. O'Brien draws attention to historical tendencies that perceive "reproduction as 'pure' biological process," a view that implies "reproduction is all body and without a mind; irrational or at least prerational" (50). In contrast, she argues that the "experienced process and human consciousness of process" are

inseparable and “central to the theory of the dialectics of reproduction” (50 – 51). Like Ruddick, she opposes the view that childbearing is simply a biological process distinct from female intellect. The reproductive process during labour may be involuntary, but O’Brien asserts that “it is also integrative. It is a mediation between mother and nature and mother and child” (79). However, when this integration is “labeled as ‘passivity’ by male-stream thought,” it demeans the value of female reproductive labour (79). Many poets confirm O’Brien’s claim that women are engaged physically, mentally, and emotionally through pregnancy, labour, and delivery. They also express a growing consciousness and relationship with their unborn/newborn infant.

It is clear in the growing body of feminist writing that pregnancy and childbirth are fraught with paradoxes. Poets represent various attitudes as they develop a relationship with the unseen stranger. Alicia Ostriker was one of the first poets to write of the conflicted relationship as a “double attitude to maternity” (Cosslett 121). In her essay “Alicia Ostriker’s Propaganda for Motherhood,” Laura Major explores Ostriker’s series of poems “Propaganda Poem: Maybe for Some Young Mamas,” “Postscript to Propaganda,” and “What Actually,” and like Cosslett, features the paradoxical imagery in Ostriker’s poetry. The mother-child relationship during pregnancy, for example, is depicted as “one animal” (Cosslett 120; Major 193). Motherhood is represented as a life “peeling away” and “[a]n iron doorway” children “kick open” (Cosslett 120; Major 196). Her metaphors trouble notions of harmony, and as Cosslett notes, the presumed “reciprocal relationship is undone” (120). In “What Actually,” Major points out, Ostriker writes “we paint ourselves wrong,” and thus, presents a more realistic look at mother/ing (Major 197-98). Like Ostriker, the poets I am considering speak to the negative and positive sides of maternity. Their poems depict divergent attitudes and approaches from one woman to the next, and at times from one poem to the next. The poets might accede to Maushart’s argument that

“mothering is the most powerful of all biological capacities, and among the most disempowering of all social experiences” (472), and that “the price of parenthood is almost incalculably high” (476) when compared with autonomy. They likely would also agree that “there is the gift of growth and discovery that comes from breaking those old boundaries of selfhood” (476). The paradoxical mother-child relationship flexes, always in a state of flux. For Maushart, the “price” of parenting is offset by the “gift” of personal growth and the benefit of self-discovery.

The notion of childbirth as a “gift” is perhaps perplexing. Gifts are generally understood as positive and beneficial, willingly given and willingly received. However, neither female reproduction nor childbirth are always freely given or welcomed. As host and hostage to the unborn, the female body and mind become potential sites of hospitality and hostility. Guenther’s conception of “birth as the gift of the feminine other” (re)constructs the troubled mother-child relationship in terms of hospitality. Her theoretical model has influenced my reading of mother/ing and interest in the poets’ responses to this “gift” of birth. Writing the nascent relationship and welcoming the newborn stranger—including the unknown reader—opens relational acts of hospitality and intertwines the mixed experiences and expressions of maternity. Nonetheless, terms such as gift and hospitality are contentious, and even more so the context of poverty, infertility, unwanted pregnancies, abandonment, rape, incest, and so on. How then do we understand birth as a “gift”?

Jack Reynolds, like Guenther, explicates Jacques Derrida’s notions of a “gift.” For Derrida, “a genuine gift requires an anonymity of the giver” who gives without expectation of reciprocity, and that “unconditional hospitality ...requires non-mastery, and the abandoning of all claims to property, or ownership” for the sake of the guest (Reynolds). Derrida’s definitions of gift and hospitality, Reynolds explains, have been termed “possible-impossible aporias...or

paradoxes” (Reynolds; ellipsis mine). Irina Aristarkhova, in “Hospitality and the Maternal,” notes that Derrida’s examples of hospitality, that is “giving while owning,” are drawn from a time when women did not own anything (171). Concerned with the absence of the maternal in philosophical discourse, she stresses that it is precisely the maternal relation that undergirds hospitality, including “notions of gift and generosity” (163). Guenther, in her reading of Derrida, states that a gift is only possible “when someone ‘gives what [she] does not have’” (Derrida qtd. in *The Gift* 50), which is to say, for women, the gift of time (52). Guenther adapts Derrida’s idea of the gift of time to the ambiguous process of giving birth:

A woman gives birth to a child, but only by receiving this child into the world. The child makes the woman a mother through the gift of its own appearance; but this gift is also a demand—for warmth, for love, for a full belly and a clean diaper....the ambiguity between giving and receiving as a mother or a child suggests that the circle is not closed, that the end does not always return to the beginning. (49)

Reproduction, Guenther contends, is not simply the constant biological “circulation of individuals through the species,” which, in her view, theorists Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, and others have supposed it to be, and neither is it “a debt of familial obligation incurred by the credit of birth” (50). Rather, “the process of reproduction exceeds circularity to emerge as the gift of the Other. Quite literally, birth ‘gives’ what no one—neither the mother nor the child—‘has’ in the sense of possessing something; it brings forth the time of the Other” (52). This giving and receiving between mother and child is “an open circuit of generosity that gives more than it could possibly possess” (50). Each newborn receives the gift of time—existence—because of the (sometimes begrudging) generosity of the woman giving birth. This generosity, however, does not guarantee a response to the infant as a gift, nor the demands for care. In caring for the other, Guenther recognizes that “maternal bearing yields an account of responsibility that neither exalts nor excludes the possibility of a painful and difficult generosity for Others” (97).

Notions of generosity and hospitality are closely linked to the gift of time and the Other. Reconceiving the perplexing relationship between maternity and hospitality, Aristarkhova posits that Derrida's writings "could be renovated as a profound and transformational concept in our understanding of self and other ...if it turns to reckon with the concept of the maternal... as, problematically, the 'first home'" (164; ellipses mine). Recent studies in hospitality follow two streams: personal or communal (163). The personal welcome, Aristarkhova explains, relates to "the privacy of one's home... or into one's being," and the communal relates to the welcome of "strangers, immigrants, and refugees into one's country" (164). Hospitality during pregnancy and birth giving depends largely on personal responses. Aristarkhova describes Emmanuel Levinas' conception of hospitality as "a primary dimension of being ... always open toward others," a welcome that is intimate, intentional, focused on the guest, linked to feelings "of being at home with oneself...that first hospitality," and associated with the feminine in terms of the "field of intimacy, interiority of the home, presence as absence in the house" (164 – 65; ellipses mine). Although aspects such as intimacy, intentionality, and focus on the other are manifest in the maternity poetry studied in this chapter, some poets express ambiguities or feel they are held hostage by the unborn. Aristarkhova's reading of Levinas and Derrida's notion of hospitality "as a universal concept" (164) seems to be a misinterpretation. Derrida argues that hospitality is "a right, a duty, an obligation, the greeting of the foreign other...as a friend," but it is also conditional, based on "the one who receives" the other as host and "remains the patron, the master of the household" (4). It is a conscious choice: "Hospitality can only take place beyond hospitality, in deciding to let it come" unexpectedly; "hospitality awaits ...its chance" (14; ellipsis mine). For Levinas, the host becomes "the hostage" when "I am and must be the hostage of the other, delivered passively to the other before being delivered to myself" (Levinas qtd. in

Derrida 9). Perhaps Levinas and Derrida overlook individual perceptions, choices, and contexts in which hospitality and hostility are at play. It is surprising, as Aristarkhova suggests, that they “seem to be systematically unaware and unable ...to discuss the maternal as a foundation for their thinking on hospitality, even when their language and the logic of their arguments tend toward it” (172; ellipsis mine). This absence illustrates how maternity and the mother as subject have been excluded from public discourses and theoretical formulations of relationality.

Several poets in this study view the maternal body as a home for the unseen other, comparable to Guenther’s articulation of “the feminine Other who both *gives* me a home and allows me to *make a gift* of my home to the stranger” (*The Gift* 57 – 58; emphasis in text). Ideally, we learn to welcome strangers because others have been hospitable to us, but the opposite is also possible. The demands of the stranger, Guenther continues, direct us “if only silently—to remember the gift of the feminine Other: not by returning it to the source, but by passing it on to another” (58), similar to the Golden Rule. Aristarkhova adds, “It is the *possibility* of hospitality that the mother delivers,” and it is the maternal body that becomes “a site and a model for conceptualizing any type of social relation: be it hostile or hospitable, welcoming or tolerating” (176; my emphasis). The maternal gift of hospitality is an intentional (and sometimes involuntary) effort to provide space for the other in her body and in her home. Hospitality, then, is one response to those who have made room for us (Guenther 60). In looking at several poets, I explore the ways they make room for the newcomer, whether reluctantly or expectantly. Writing maternity poetry, like the maternal body, makes room for the stranger. It is a site to formulate mother-child relationships in terms of hospitality during pregnancy, childbirth, and/or becoming a mother. Moreover, Derrida’s notion that “translation [is] ...an enigmatic phenomenon or

experience of hospitality” (6; ellipsis mine) suggests that the translation of the maternal subject—physically and literarily—is an experience of hospitality.

Occasions for remembering deceased mothers or becoming mothers themselves have prompted some poets to remember their foremothers, that is, their matrilineage and cultural heritage. Chapter four explores the writing strategies they employ to reclaim their maternal inheritance and extend or agitate their motherline. Reclamation implies something has been lost or is absent. I analyze four areas these poets negotiate: reconstructing the past, re-inscribing the self, recontextualizing culture(s), and re-envisioning the future. The poetic works I investigate are Harris’ *Drawing down a daughter*, Ito’s *Alert to Glory*, Bouvier’s *papîyâhtak*, Halfe’s *Blue Marrow*, Still’s *Saltations*, and Moure’s *The Unmenmntioable*. Writing from diverse cultural contexts, these six poets uncover maternal legacies and genealogies—biological, cultural, and literary—buried beneath “official” histories and canons in the Canadian west. Negotiating their matrilineage, they confront misrepresentations and encounter erasures. In their writing, they reform cultural practices and transmit values from one generation and one context to the next. Di Brandt upholds the poet’s potential as “a keeper and passer on of maternal wisdom, and knowledge, and skills, a mentor to the next generations” (“My Breasts Had Become Eyes” 59). The strategies these poets use to keep or convey maternal wisdom need further study as they represent their particular insights in a form largely absent from motherhood studies and literary analysis. I will consider how they rebuild their histories, recontextualize their cultural heritages, deliver maternal knowledges, and recover maternal subjectivities silenced and forgotten.

Numerous obstacles prevent or limit the recovery of maternal stories and lineages. Jodi Vandenberg-Daves, in “Finding Maternal Histories,” points out two of them: “history’s emphasis on men and public institutions, and ...broad cultural devaluation of maternal work in patriarchal

societies” (9). Feminist historians have had to be creative in their search for original sources for how mothers actually lived. Certainly, poetry plays a role in representing maternal realities and perspectives within the present historical context. Reconstructing maternal histories into poetry, as these women demonstrate, necessitates a careful process to free artifacts, select images, and nudge memories into new associations. I will examine the ways poets piece together bits of stories, memories, experiences, knowledges, and conjectures alongside heirlooms and documents to construct their matrilineages. Fragmented representations, though they seem limiting, enable these poets to expose the constructed nature of histories and memories, identities and literatures.

Reconstructing a matrilineage provides poets an occasion to re-inscribe the self into what Gina Wong-Wylie calls a “motherline” drawn by telling stories, affirming, altering, and making cultural matrilineage visible. She defines “matroreform” as the process of “outlining issues in mothering, racial tensions, bi-cultural identity, and belonging ... a feminist act of voicing up and out of invisibility and silence”(“Images and Echoes in Matroreform” 136; ellipsis mine). This chapter elucidates the ways some prairie poets aspire to make their culture(s) visible and audible, and the strategies they use to (re)draw racial and socio-cultural tensions that are often obscured or marginalized. Naomi Lowinsky asserts that “The Motherline is not a straight line” because it is about “bodies being born out of bodies,” and it is about “body knowledge and birth story and family story and myth” (“Mother of Mothers” 231, 230).¹¹ She also claims that “to be her full, female self,” a woman must “know the stories of her Motherline” (231). Jennifer Brant, in like mind, honours her “indigenous maternal histories” and the legacy left by her grandmothers: “Our cultural continuity is testament to the gifts they nurtured and held sacred so that we could learn them...providing us with ‘story medicine’ that awakens our sacred birthing ceremonies” (35, 50

¹¹ Lowinsky capitalizes the term “Motherline” whereas others like Green and Wong-Wylie do not. Therefore, unless I am speaking specifically about Lowinsky’s conceptualization, I will use the lower-case version.

-51; ellipsis mine). Cultural continuity, Brant asserts, persists through “a strong line of blood memory” and “story medicine” (51). Brant’s “line of blood memory” echoes Lowinsky’s Motherline, an inheritance and a convergence. Lowinsky in turn pictures the Motherline “as a cord, a thread, as the yarn emerging from the fingers of a woman . . . cords of connection tied over generations. Like weaving or knitting, each thread is tied to others to create a complex, richly textured cloth connecting the past to the future” (231; ellipsis mine). The image of “textured cloth” aptly portrays the interconnectedness of motherlines, yet recognizes individuality and creativity much like the poets’ innovative lines.

Reclaiming maternal traces through writing frees the potential to heal cultural wounds and to alter the future. However, maternal histories for some poets have been largely obliterated, and require alternative strategies to reconstruct or deconstruct their motherlines. In the face of her “lost identity,” Ruth Skilbeck posits one option: the “healing power of personal storytelling as communicative action in the public sphere” (63). She examines “the significance of the absent mother, women’s art and writing, and transitional objects, in women’s cultural history of empowerment” (63). In this chapter I look at the ways these poets recover and reconstruct traces of their maternal inheritance to find healing and empowerment. The art of writing, as Skilbeck maintains, makes it possible to address various forms of prejudice, such as racism and sexism, as well as cultural and domestic violence. That potency, Green and O’Reilly propose, gives mothers agency as “cultural bearers of feminism,” and contests oppressive “patriarchal discourse[s]” (Green 19, O’Reilly “Feminist Mothering” 818). In “Telling Our Stories,” Christina Baker expands this claim to the struggles of all people: “feminism informs and strengthens the mother-daughter bond as we—mothers and daughters together—continue to expand our vision of social justice and deepen our self-knowledge. Therein lies the healing of ourselves, each other, and the

world” (210). As a feminist act, reconstructing a matrilineage and reclaiming selfhood can effect personal and social healing, as well as strengthen mother-daughter relations across generations and cultures. Conversely, Erin Moure challenges patriarchal and heteronormative suppositions associated with a matrilineage. Dianne Chisholm, in “The City of Collective Memory,” suggests that lesbians who live “*without* the traditional means of social reproduction afforded by family, ethnicity, nationality, and religion” counter social norms and potentially write “genealogies of their own telling” (195; emphasis in text). Whether poets rebuild or dispute their motherlines, writing poetry offers a reconceiving of the past and a reimagining of the future.

In chapter five I investigate the strategies a number of poets use to manipulate words, language(s), and space(s). I will re-examine their poetry to elucidate their maternal aesthetics and poetics. Collectively and individually, these poets interrupt, subvert, reconstruct, and expose the limitations of the English language in expressing maternal experiences, perspectives, and possibilities. As Daly and Reddy assert, women writers “not only reformulate the boundaries of self and world, [but] they also transform linguistic and social practices” (15). In the making of poetry they participate in the making of culture. Negotiating the margins of mother/ing, I argue that these poets redraw borderlines and reconstruct “linguistic and social practices” to re-inscribe maternal subjectivities within language. I concentrate on three approaches that gesture toward a maternal aesthetics and poetics: 1) encountering the English language; 2) negotiating mother tongues; and 3) sounding the silences.

Re-inscribing the maternal subject into language resists the typical subject/object binary. Literary production by its very nature is relational, but in Jeremiah’s view, “To posit reciprocity as an ideal” model for writing and reading “is to challenge the notion of the rational, autonomous subject dominant in modern capitalist societies—a fiction which fosters the marginalization of

those who do not make the grade” (“Troublesome” 12). Her approach to a “maternal aesthetic” is based on a mode of thinking and relating to others through writing and reading, whether they are mothers or not. She conceives the reader-writer relation as

a site at which the boundaries between self and other are negotiated, challenged, drawn and redrawn in ways that could be instructive to theorists of maternity in such disciplines as psychology, philosophy and literary criticism... [and in] the development of models of relationality which allow for conflict and anger as well as for care and support. Such new understandings of intimacy will, I contend, further our shared knowledge about shared knowing. (14; ellipsis mine)

I will examine how these poets use strategies that elicit readers to actively engage with their texts and participate in the process of sharing knowledge and conceiving “new understandings” of the maternal. Their hospitable texts are “models of relationality” in that they construct a dialogic poetics, representing other perspectives, creating sites for contemplation, and exemplifying ways of learning to love the unseen other. A mother-writer, in Mielle Chandler’s terms, travels “between an individuated and separated subjectivity which allows me to write, and an actively in-relation subjectivity...born of mothering” (530; ellipsis mine). This “in-relation subjectivity” parallels Jeremiah’s concept of “‘maternal’ mutuality” (“Troublesome” 13). Writing opens an “elsewhere” where readers participate in creating meaning(s), and potentially empathize with the unseen other (writer) who perceives the world differently. Jeremiah describes the act of reading as an “imaginative engagement with other ways of seeing and acting” (13). Nonetheless, I argue that poetry inflects the experience of reading unlike any other literary genre. The linguistic and extra-linguistic qualities of poetry dramatically augment “new understandings” of maternal subjectivities and relationships. In writing and reading about mother/ing, the poetic text supplies a site where readers constantly engage with “other ways of seeing and acting” the maternal. Poetry, as these women demonstrate, is a particularly suitable and flexible form for interweaving texts, and engendering a dynamic dialogic relationship with the reader.

Some of the poets that appear in this chapter contest the English language, especially in what Daphne Marlatt sees as a “patriarchally-loaded” grammar (“musing” 1021). They employ a number of strategies to integrate the maternal into language, such as multiple languages and discourses. Some deconstruct and subvert English to disrupt and trouble the reader. All of them open dialogic spaces where readers potentially discover different interpretations of the mother tongue. Language may be an issue in their poetry, but there can be no avoiding it. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, coincidentally has written that “Languages throw light on each other: one language can, after all, see itself only in the light of another language” (12). The interillumination of languages, Bakhtin argues, stimulates a “creative consciousness” (12). This “creative consciousness” becomes particularly evident when poets, like several in this study, construct multi-vocal texts. Tamara Palmer Seiler, in her essay “Multi-Vocality and National Literature,” seems to agree with Bakhtin when she suggests that the tension between cultures in “multi-vocal” texts, or a “multicultural aesthetic,” could be “potentially productive tensions in a heterogeneous nation” (148) such as Canada. Discourses that cross cultures (and generations) can be generative in forming new ways to understand and welcome others instead of othering them. In this chapter, I illustrate the ways in which the poets trouble and negotiate language(s), interpolate multiple viewpoints, and re-form poetic genres to reinstate mother-tongue(s).

The mother-tongue here means more than a person’s first language. Marlatt’s poetic essay *musing with mothertongue* defines language as “a body of sound” we are born into (1019), and that language “carries us along with it. it bears us, it births us, insofar as we bear with it. if we are poets we spend our lives discovering not just what we have to say but what language is saying as it carries us with it” (1020 – 21). Language is physical and associative. In her analysis of Marlatt, Pamela Banting writes, “Language works by evocation, not invocation. Thought

works by association. The physical bodies of words provoke each other into utterance by attraction along an associative, metonymic chain” (199). Writing the maternal subject into poetry implies a mother-language, a maternal inflection, a mother’s voice embodied (embedded) in the poet’s own language and evoked in her texts. Each poet creates her own forms and phrases, shapes words and sounds and spaces from her own sensibilities, and offers room for her readers to imaginatively participate in making new associations and meaning(s). Poets do so because, as I argue, their aesthetics and poetics prove remarkably relational and dialogical, and for many, multi-vocal, and intercultural. In these ways, maternal poetics counter patriarchal discourses and monologic literary traditions.

Significant to my project is the ongoing marginalization of maternity poetry in motherhood studies and literary analysis. Podnieks and O’Reilly suggest that poetry both “makes possible and yet problematizes women’s creative potential: a poem can be written in fits and starts” (6). More precisely, mother-poets must juggle the disruptions rising from complications associated with pregnancy, employment, economic state, childcare, various responsibilities, and the like. MacCallum-Whitcomb’s examination of American maternity poetry, in “Claiming Our Birth-Write,” identifies issues that “jeopardize the literary production of mothers,” such as “occupation and interruption” (40), and the reproach “of their peers, male and female alike” (46). Traditionally, “women were forced to make a choice. ...forgo child-bearing to dedicate themselves to their art... or ...have children, settle into a domestic routine, and give up their poetic aspirations” (45), but now models of poetry are grounded in maternal experiences which see mothering as an “asset rather than an artistic liability” (45; *ellipsis mine*). For Brandt, “poetry and mothering seemed inextricably linked...my own creative writing career began to take off after my children were born... Early childhood was a perpetual state of intense creative chaos, an

environment in which I and my poetic instincts thrived” (“My Breasts” 55; ellipsis mine). The prairie poets I am reading confirm that poetic forms of literary production and the “fits and starts” of chaotic lives are conceivably complementary activities. In response to Baraitser’s *Maternal Encounters*, Radley raises the import of maternal disruptions: “maternal experience is mediated through interruption and disturbance and...presents a radical challenge to traditional systems of communication, interpretation, discourse, and meaning” (103). This disruptive approach creates new spaces “where the [maternal] subject-of-interruption emerges,” spaces that exist “at the limits of language and interpretation” and form “a kind of doubled interruption, a ...space beyond interpretation” (104; ellipsis mine). Even disruptions need not be a liability. Poetic forms allow for spaces to interrupt the text, to open up to the “beyond” of articulation.

In the following chapters, I intend to demonstrate how contemporary Canadian prairie women poets work the margins of literature and scholarship. These poets welcome readers to engage with them as they encounter occasions of mourning mother-loss, becoming a mother, and reclaiming a maternal inheritance. Their aesthetics and poetics model the dialogic mother-child and writer-reader relationships, the both/and (good/bad) of maternal encounters. Their hospitable texts open space for unseen other(s) to (re)imagine maternal subjectivities in new ways.

**Chapter 2: Mourning Mother-Loss:
Reconfiguring Daughter-Mother Intersubjectivity via the Elegy**

i no longer believe that silence is death
[...]
i write not against the silence
but into it (Langhorst 89; ellipsis mine)

Barbara Langhorst, in her poem “December 31,” simultaneously celebrates her mother’s birthday and mourns her absence. In this excerpt, Langhorst indicates a change in perspective during the process of mourning and writing about her mother’s death. In another part of this poem, she juxtaposes a time “when i knew i would go mad/ in a wordless world,” with the present time of “ease.” Her oppositional language has become affable, and silence has become a choice rather than a threat. The notion of writing “into” the silence suggests movement and relationality rather than the complete separation we associate with death. Analysis of elegiac poetry written by contemporary Canadian prairie women poets has the potential to say something new about the maternal subject as well as writing grief. In this chapter, I will examine the works of Barbara Langhorst (*Restless White Fields*), Lisa Martin-DeMoor (*one crow sorrow*), and Erin Moure (*The Unmemntioable*). It is worth noting the context in which each of these women mourns the loss of her mother. Langhorst’s father murdered her mother then killed himself. Martin-DeMoor’s mother died after a battle with cancer leaving her without parents. Moure’s mother also died of cancer. In addition, Moure mourns the loss of her maternal lineage; many of her foremothers died during the genocide in Ukraine. Through close readings, I will examine their writing strategies and ascertain how they utilize and reform the elegy for their purposes. Central to this discussion is the particular responses these women make in mourning death and loss. What inquiries are initiated by the mother’s death? What aspects of the maternal identity and practices are challenged or accepted, critiqued or praised? Smythe, as the title of her book

Figuring Grief suggests, poses the question “How do writers ‘figure grief?’” (3). She says that “the traditional elegy has undergone a great deal of change in terms of form...[and] has become increasingly marked by blurred boundaries, containing as it does an intricate mixture of other genres, sub-genres, and modes” (3 – 4). I also ask, “How do these female poets negotiate mother-loss and reconfigure their relationship with their deceased mother?” Writing poetry, I argue, allows these women to speak about grief and loss in a form that brings into play both the linguistic and the extra-linguistic. For these poets, elegiac writing counters maternal silence and extends the mother-daughter relationship beyond death, thus resisting consolation and closure.

Juliana Schiesari, among other feminists, interrogates the poor reception of female elegists and lack of literary analysis. In her book *The Gendering of Melancholia*, Schiesari contrasts women’s laments with those of their male counterparts. She asks, “Why does a woman’s plaint [lament],... come across as mere chatter and thus less dignified ... And why aren’t there more women speaking out this ‘truth’ then, and why is that when a melancholic woman speaks, her loosened tongue is not granted the same extraordinary virtue and wisdom as a man’s?” (55). Though Schiesari’s work concentrates on Renaissance literature, her question persists: why are women’s forms of mourning negated in culture and literature? Have male conventions and criticisms set the parameters for the genre and tied up the “loosened tongue” of female elegists? This gender-specific approach to negotiating loss, MacDonald asserts, is a major factor in the dearth of literary scholarship of female elegists (8). She investigates female elegies in the context of a male elegiac tradition largely focused on the self; they dramatized grief, made statements based on “truths” of self-discovery, and used the rhetoric of mourning as a remedy for sorrow (8). In response to Abbie Findlay Potts’ study *The Elegiac Mode*, MacDonald agrees that the “elegy ‘makes and unmakes’ ways of reading and regarding death” even as it “rearranges”

and “disturbs” socio-cultural expectations of mourning (9). Women have altered and agitated elegiac conventions, which may, at least in part, account for the negation of female forms of mourning (Schiesari). MacDonald uses Schiesari’s question to underscore her argument “that virtue and wisdom can be granted to the female elegist who speaks through productive melancholia” (11). According to Melissa F. Zeiger, in *Beyond Consolation*, productive elegiac occasions abound and “many cultural norms of sexuality, gendered identity, cultural inheritance, and permissible response[s] to death have been at once challenged and actively renegotiated by feminists among others. Because of its privileged poetic status, [the] elegy has been a primary site of critical renegotiation” (1). Elegists in this study critique cultural norms, “refigure the roles and voices of women,” and “enable new social subjects” (Schiesari 32)—the maternal subject.

Mourning practices and responses to death continue to change. Priscila Uppal, in *We Are What We Mourn*, claims that “ways of responding to death are both period- and culture-specific. . . . The diversity and flexibility of the elegy over time have enabled it to survive as an important and compelling poetic genre” (3). Over the past few decades, according to Uppal, a number of “book-length studies on the elegy”¹² have been published, yet “the Canadian elegy remains unmentioned” (4). MacDonald also draws attention to Uppal’s critical work as an important contribution to Canadian literary studies. Prior to its publication “little critical work had been produced concerning the place of elegy in Canadian literature. A greater emphasis on fiction than poetry was evident in Canadian elegiac studies, as well as a marked interest in casting elegiac fiction as a literary version of Freud’s ‘work of mourning’” (14). MacDonald also notes Jean

¹² Uppal lists a series of book-length studies, the most recent being Melissa F. Zeiger’s *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (1997) and Jeffery A. Hammond’s *The American Puritan Elegy: A Literary and Cultural Study* (2000), as well as several noteworthy articles, such as Sara Jamieson’s “‘Now That I am Dead’: P.K. Page and the Self-Elegy” (2000), and “Mourning in the Burned House: Margaret Atwood and the Modern Elegy” (2001), and Karen E. Smythe’s discussion of the “modernist fiction-elegy” in *Figuring Grief: Gallant, Munro, and the Poetics of Elegy* (1992). According to Uppal, studies of contemporary Canadian elegies are usually limited to articles on individual poets. Seldom is the elegiac form “a primary element” of scholarly inquiry (4 – 5).

Baird and George Bowering's essay anthology *The Heart Does Break: Canadian Writers on Grief and Mourning* (2009) as "another indication that literary works on grief and mourning have become culturally and critically central in recent years" (14). In response to Schiesari's concern for the inclusion of female elegiac forms (55), and Zeiger's claim that the elegy is a site for renegotiating socio-cultural norms (1), Uppal and MacDonald's scholarly texts attest to the significance and evolution of elegiac poetry. This project is a response to their call for further examination of Canadian elegies, not only "to correct its critical omission" from Canadian poetic and literary studies, but also "to supplement existing studies" and link Canadian contributions to the larger English elegiac tradition (Uppal 5). English-Canadian elegists, Uppal argues, differ from their American and British counterparts in their strategies for writing loss: "They wish not only to remember the past, and memorialize it, but also to recover the past and use it to create a future" (13). In the context of cultural diversity, Canadian poets contribute to the evolution of the elegy. Uppal states that "poets from various cultural and national backgrounds revise poetic conventions and traditions to reflect their own needs as poets and as national citizens, and carve spaces for those voices that have previously been marginalized or forced into silence" (5). It is worth noting that six out of nineteen elegists in Uppal's study and four out of eight in MacDonald's analysis have ties to the prairies. This would suggest that the region is particularly conducive to elegiac production, a place open to recollection and remembrance. Langhorst, Martin-DeMoor, and Moure augment these studies and exemplify how the elegiac form continues to evolve as they counter the silencing effects of disease, domestic violence, and cultural genocide associated with experiences of mother-loss. The socio-political import of their elegiac texts, as further analysis will verify, extends from personal grief to local, national and global injustices.

Challenging male models for mourning necessarily involves grappling with the classic Orpheus and Eurydice myth. Zeiger explicates the impact of this myth and challenges the masculinist traditions of the elegy:

The story has served as a template—a structural paradigm, even an ominous, self-fulfilling prophecy—for elegiac production. . . . elegy has retained a certain narrative focus on the key plot sequence of Eurydice’s death, Orpheus’s descent to the underworld, and the fatal turn that restores Eurydice to death while Orpheus lives on as the exemplary poet-mourner. . . . An identificatory fixation on Orpheus and his poetic success is all too compatible with a repressive, death-denying, and self-canonizing masculinist compulsion in elegy *and* in its reception, which now calls for critical re-evaluation. (2 – 3)

Zeiger argues that some interpretations of Eurydice’s damnation to eternal death, critic Roland Barthes for example, see Orpheus’ “fatal turn” as a strategy rather than an accident. If Orpheus symbolizes the “exemplary poet-mourner,” then Eurydice’s sentence to death effectively silences the female voice. Zeiger turns the elegiac focus from Orpheus to Eurydice, or, as Uppal puts it, she highlights “the dead (Eurydice) rather than the living (Orpheus)” (8). Uppal concurs with Zeiger and her “feminist consciousness” in re-examining the myth, “its traditional interpretation and appropriation by male elegists,” as well as her “revisionist approach to the practice of elegy and its criticism” (8). In revising the classic elegy, Canadian elegists, according to Uppal, “attempt to achieve what the mythic Orpheus initially set out to do: recover his dead wife and live with her again” (12-13). In writing grief, poets represent the dead not only to mourn their absence but also to maintain a connection or relationship with their loved one. Uppal argues,

the living refuse to accept separation from the dead. The work of mourning is, instead, performed with the goal of recovering the dead, a ritual enacted to continue dialogue and engagement with the dead loved one. The elegy, as a site for the work of mourning, plays a crucial role in this process. . . . these English-Canadian elegies seek multiple voices, including the voices of the dead, and do not aim to supplant them. (13)

Canadian elegists avoid railing against meaningless suffering and death, fixating on the dying self, or striving for closure, and largely resist “elegiac monody” (36). Instead of creating poetic

distance, the dead subject is welcomed into a dialogue with the mourner and other voices. This strategy of writing grief resists the notion that death permanently severs relationships.

Christian Riegel, in the introduction to his essay anthology *Response to Death*, states that “the act of writing itself often performs a psychic function and becomes the work that is required to mourn loss, and for the receptors of the text, the work provides instructive models for coping or has the specific function of public memorializing ... an inherently complex and necessary activity that has the aim of providing consolation in the face of pain” (xviii – xix; ellipsis mine). Writing loss, as literary history demonstrates, attempts to give language to pain and has the potential to manage the difficult work of mourning, provide healing, and offer “instructive models” for readers. In *Writing Grief*, Riegel examines the traditional Freudian view of mourning as a process that has an end; that is, the aim is not a recovery of the past but a recovery from mourning. Riegel notes psychoanalyst Kathleen Woodward’s observations: “in psychoanalysis ... the emotions are something to be eliminated, to be unearthed and discharged, to be gotten rid of, not something to be cultivated... For Freud the most important aspect of this work of mourning is that it must come to an end” (qtd. in Riegel 142). There is a correlation between Freud’s model of mourning and the conventional English elegy. Uppal, like MacDonald, outlines the traditional movement of textual mourning:

The traditional English elegy moves from the individual death being mourned into a meditation on the current state of the world and one’s place within it and, eventually, towards a form of consolation that accepts the earthly separation of the dead loved one from the living realm. The transformation is such that the mourner ends the period of mourning, and the cycle of life and death in the natural world resumes, with the living effectively replacing the dead. (10 – 11)

This structure of mourning drives the elegist from the one he mourns back into his present context. Associating with the living helps the elegist to separate himself from the dead loved one.

Mourning ends when he accepts the new situation and resumes his daily routines. Other relationships take the place of the lost loved one, and soon the deceased is more or less forgotten.

Traditional models continue to be transformed by female elegists (and others) in the work of mourning loss and recovering maternal subjectivities. Riegel, among others, identifies elegiac writing as “a labour of mourning...an opening to emotion and to loss” in the process of “grief-work” (*Response to Death* xxii; ellipsis mine). This “opening to emotion,” I would add, is also available to readers. As a “product for public reception,” Riegel claims the elegy “provides instructive models for coping” and /or functions as a memorial (xviii). Evidently there are diverse views of what “grief-work” can do in theory and practice, from Lacan’s account of processing grief, which in Alessia Ricciardi’s words adopts an “interminable, monotonous tempo ... a rhythm that flattens the singularity of the object and renders its historical circumstances irrelevant,” to Freud’s notion that processing grief aims at moving through loss and leaving it behind (Ricciardi qtd in Riegel xxii; ellipsis mine). Contemporary prairie elegists, I argue, neither aim to move through grief to find consolation and forget the pain of loss, nor remain caught in a “monotonous tempo” that distances the object of mourning from the realities of the past or present contexts. Rather, textual mourning becomes a space where the poet seeks to represent voices of the dead as subjects rather than objects, to engage with them in the present context, and to compose an ongoing dialogue between the living and the dead.

Zeiger and Uppal perceive this type of elegy that refuses consolation as a feminist response to death and mourning. MacDonald concurs with Zeiger that resisting consolation and preserving “affectionate relations with the dead” creates a “strategic dialogue” and contends with monologic masculinist traditions of the elegy (Zeiger 24 – 25; MacDonald 11). In accord with Zeiger, Uppal, and MacDonald, the poets discussed in this chapter, namely Barbara Langhorst,

Lisa Martin-DeMoor, and Erin Moure, represent feminist perspectives in that they seek to maintain a dialogic relationship with their deceased mother. They have “negotiated within and beyond the parameters of the male elegiac tradition” (MacDonald 7), and transformed the work of mourning into a communal space for reconnecting with the dead. As the subsequent analysis will attest, these prairie women poets reconstruct the elegy to conform to their own needs, concerns, and contexts. Like their male counterparts, female elegists transpose grief from a “private activity” into a public text, but from alternative points of view. In addition to sharing in the work of mourning and honouring the dead, these prairie poets participate in the feminist projects of reforming cultural expressions of mourning and the literary canon. Uppal asserts:

contemporary English-Canadian elegies ... memorialize and revitalize those sources of identity that have been shunned, ignored, or even suppressed... [they] isolate moments of convergence and communality between the living and the dead, and between the past, present, and future. The dialogue or polyphony that they represent sustains the living and the dead while it also sustains a process of continual discovery ... mourning actively changes us. (264, 265)

Through textual mourning, contemporary elegists resist consolation and closure by opening poetic space where times past present and future intermingle. This dialogic interaction across time allows these poets to engage with the dead and the living personally and communally.

Louise J. Kaplan, in her book *No Voice is Ever Wholly Lost*, claims that “the compulsion to repeat” stories of difficult experiences or traumatic events “originates in ... the elemental human dialogue that binds each of us to other human beings and to human society itself,” and “ties us to the past” (32; ellipsis mine). Rather than severing ties and silencing the dead, elegists now follow a new model for mourning that fosters a “strategic dialogue” (Zeiger) between the living and the dead, a textual space for “mourning and reunion” (Uppal). If we are to understand the “complex consciousness” of the maternal subject, Daly and Reddy remind us, we must “follow the way of mothers, dislodging mothers from their place in our psychic and cultural past

in order to relocate the voices of mothers in our collective future” (12). Elegiac responses to the “way of mothers” add a new dimension to the complex maternal subject that has been largely absent in literary criticism. Poetic language provides a “connective medium” that not only brings together the past, present, and future (Uppal 15), but also daughters and their mothers.

Literary critics evidently examine contemporary elegiac texts with a particular focus in mind. MacDonald, for example, focuses on gender and the daughter’s elegy for her father as a site of inquiry. She claims that “feminist and proto-feminist elegies are less concerned with identity and consolation than they are with subjectivity and inquiry” and that “the female-written elegy tends to refuse resolution rather than invite it” (15). Female elegists find their subjectivity by refusing resolution, “challenging and even flouting elegiac convention,” and “inquiring into the terms of melancholia and inheritance” (29 – 30). After reading more than a thousand elegies, Uppal ascertained three predominant thematic categories of English-Canadian elegies since 1967: “elegies for parents, elegies for place, and elegies for cultural losses and displacements” (Uppal 5, 25 – 26). Pertinent to my research is her discovery of the paucity of elegies for mothers written by contemporary English-Canadian poets. She states, “Elegies for mothers have been slower in coming, perhaps because of the complexity of gender dynamics in poetic expression, especially in the elegy form itself, as has been suggested by critics such as Zeiger” (27). This revelation makes my study of the elegy as a writing strategy for mourning mother-loss all the more urgent. My analysis in this chapter is limited by gender and region, and concentrates on the daughter’s elegy for her mother as a site of homage, inquiry, subjectivity, and dialogue. The intention of this chapter is to work alongside Uppal and MacDonald’s work on the Canadian elegy, and to supplement ongoing scholarship in motherhood studies. Like many of their literary foremothers, such as Daphne Marlatt in *How Hug a Stone* (1983) and Di Brandt in *mother, not*

mother (1992) to name a few, these poets have adapted the elegiac form to negotiate the complexities of grief and mother-loss to suit their particular needs.

In light of the elegiac alterations mentioned above, such as the reformulation of the traditional elegy and the reconceptualization and recontextualization of writing grief, the term “homage” must also be revised. The term homage, in the context of textual expressions of grief, involves mourning the deceased (absent) mother as well as recognizing the intersubjectivity of the daughter-mother relationship. Writing strategies that create “convergence and communality” as well as “dialogue and polyphony” (Uppal) enable the subjective “I” (daughter-poet) to honour and engage with the deceased mother as a subject rather than the object of her grief. However, as MacDonald reminds readers (critics), we cannot presume the elegy is an autobiographical confession or a “record... [of] an individual death, but rather...a radical shift in the poet’s faith, philosophy, or politics” initiated by that death (29; ellipsis mine). These poets use various writing strategies to represent these shifts in response to mother-loss. I have organized my analysis of these poets into three sections. In part one I focus on textual mourning as a form of homage to the maternal subject and a countermeasure to the silence of mother’s absence. Part two is concerned with textual recollection as a means to create a better future and to counter the silence of closure. In the final section, I concentrate on textual preservation as a countermeasure to maternal marginalization and other forms of socio-cultural and literary silence.

1. Homage: Textual Mourning & the Maternal Subject

Textual mourning is a form of homage to the maternal subject and a countermeasure to the silence of mother’s absence. Maternal elegies, MacDonald claims, “underscore various ways in which cultural elision can masquerade as family dynamics, and the ways that elision becomes lauded as literary tradition” (21). Paying homage to the mother through textual mourning is a

strategy of inclusion. These poets honour their mothers and reconnect her to the cultural and literary public. Uppal identifies elegiac texts “as active sites for reconnection with the dead...[a form] revitalized as a ritual structure that performs the work of mourning, becoming a medium through which interaction between the living and the dead can occur” (13; ellipsis mine). The dialogic relation between the “elegist and the elegized, represents a complete reversal of conventional goals” (14). Rather than the traditional aim for the elegist to acknowledge death and accept separation from the loved one (the elegized), prairie women poets, like their contemporaries, have adapted the elegy as a site for imaginatively reuniting with the dead.

Erín Moure’s book *The Unmemntioable* gives honour to her mother as she encounters and counters maternal silences. Prompted by her mother’s dying wish, Moure returns her mother’s ashes to Ukraine, to the land where many of her foremothers were eradicated. Intentionally difficult to articulate, the book title exemplifies the challenge to represent her grief and experiences. Additionally, the title evokes the word mnemonic, a device to aid the memory. But how do you remember and/or write of unspeakable violence—the erasure of memories—let alone a mother’s death? Moure’s textual mourning is expressed in poetic and prosaic fragments. Typographically, she incorporates multiple languages and symbols, textual gaps and white spaces, as well as a wide range of punctuation and graphic elements. Her deviant writing strategies in this text are similar to the strategies MacDonald sees elsewhere in Moure’s work. Moure resists patriarchal linguistic forms that “devalue the structures of women’s memories” and opposes male models of mourning; she “reinfuses elegy with the force of female memory” (MacDonald 210). The epigraph, written by Paul Celan, introduces the first section and sets the tone for the rest of the book: “The land of your mother wanders / everywhere, like language” (1). While in her mother’s homeland, Moure writes to counter the silences of her mother’s absence:

I woke up from that sleep then
Honoured her

And only wept now, eight months later (92)

The brevity of the poem and the gap between lines two and three not only emphasize the silence initiated by her mother's death, but also that mourning is a process. Wandering the landscape of Ukraine, Moure's memories are activated: "at the icons of the brain, i stood and wept// in veneration" (94). Remembering and writing open doors to negotiate emotions and express grief; they gesture toward what cannot be articulated. As the book concludes, Moure pays homage to her mother: "in honour of my mother M.I.M., Марія Грендиш, to whose 'inner forum' I owe this book" (117). Returning her mother's ashes to Ukraine and writing this poetry collection not only honour her mother, but also preserve a connection between the dead and the living.

In the following excerpt, Moure makes this drive to reconnect with her mother and to preserve her mother's voice evident:

If only I could go backward, undo time. The trees out of narrow
woods, and snows Madre, matka, matyi, mama.

Yet to these shaking things that are my mysteries
my mother's answer still holds:
"we must press forward to the schools."

She sits up in bed and I embrace her. Later we are awake all night
together one last time, me in the chair beside her ... (52; ellipsis mine)

Her desire to "undo time" indicates a longing to understand the mysteries of her inherited past; her mother's family history lost in the "woods, and snows" of Ukraine. Moure repeats the word for mother in four languages, thereby drawing attention to the significance of the maternal subject. She honours her mother's conviction that the most beneficial response to the "shaking things" of the past is to "press forward." Using quotation marks, Moure preserves her mother's voice in ink. The record of their embrace and their last night together express the strength of their

daughter-mother relationship, a bond that extends beyond death. Textual mourning becomes a form of embrace. Moure honours her mother's life and preserves their connection as past and present times and voices intermingle on the page.

Barbara Langhorst, like Moure, uses the elegy as an "active site" (Uppal) to reconnect with her deceased mother, but their approaches differ. She introduces her poetry collection with the poem "care of the neck":

my mother is essence
 such stalled mitochondrial chill of regret

each sleep I share her cooling body
 no wool no flannel no linen can warm us
 through watershed moments motion sickness
 or hubris you're never so close

such a bullet of fears love's anaesthetist cried
 by her ear as she slept all hope lost

the one clear way to raise the dead
 may be to absolve the living (9)

From the very beginning, the narrator frames her poems of mourning with the assertion: "my mother is essence," permanently present in the present tense. Arranged in couplets, the structure of the poem makes visible the intimate and intertwined mother-daughter relationship. Couplets also represent the mitochondrial DNA, a maternally-inherited extranuclear double-stranded DNA (Merriam-Webster). The image of the mitochondria honours the maternal life—what MacDonald calls the "maternal force" (21)—embedded in the daughter's DNA. Biologically interconnected, her maternal inheritance of energy is present in every living cell. Maternal memories also animate the lines of the daughter's elegiac poetry. Langhorst's image of the interlinking "double-stranded DNA" resonates with Jeremiah's notions of relationality, interdependence, and the embodiment of the maternal subject through writing ("Troublesome" 11 – 12). Even in the

“stalled mitochondrial chill of regret” brought on by her mother’s death, the narrator shares “her cooling body.” Death may have stalled the maternal life-energy, but writing reconstructs the maternal subject, thereby recognizing her existence. The interdependence of their relationship is further exemplified in the final couplet of the poem. In the process of mourning, the mourner moves beyond biology to their emotional and spiritual relationship. This shift beyond biological ties is important in terms of a revisionist feminist approach as it challenges patriarchal ideologies and traditional elegies. Patriarchal and paternal ideologies are reinforced by associating biological relations and inheritance (O’Brien 51, 59). Similarly, traditional English elegies, such as John Milton’s “Lycidas” (1638) and Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “In Memoriam” (1850), were designed to express grief in order to claim an inheritance; “honouring the dead through verse” male elegists would become “the rightful heir of poetic tradition” (Uppal 7). In contrast, Langhorst rejects separation, the limits of biology, and the tradition of self-advancement. Instead, her narrator seeks absolution, a sacrament of reconciliation that will release her from guilt and regret. Regeneration is made possible through the physical, emotional and spiritual interrelationships between the living and the dead, and the dynamic mother-daughter intersubjectivity is represented through textual mourning.

Mourning the maternal subject, for Langhorst, is a sustained practice of communing with the dead. Recalling an incident at her mother’s wake, she echoes her mother’s voice: “my mother would have said *if you don’t laugh you’ll go crazy*” (15). Resistant to traditional elegiac forms, she re-shapes the elegy for her own purposes and effect. Her poem sequence “Climate Change,” exemplifies the elasticity of the elegy in expressing grief and honouring the maternal subject. In the following excerpt, it is impossible to miss the concrete shape of this poem in relation to the narrator’s question, “what is it to move in the deceptions of a world without a mother?”:

...uncanny i pray for the return

<p style="text-align: center;">every moon milky fragile a tenuous life back to ourselves in slow blooming distance space</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>the dead have always written to us with their invisible ink. then they deliver us seasons what is it to move in the deceptions of a time world without a mother to go on teaching of the great ocean beneath all that is said? (31)</i></p>
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Langhorst constructs the poem in a circular form on the page and challenges the act of reading these lines. Form informs the content and provides the answer to her question. A world without a mother is emptied of substance and leaves a huge hole. Without a mother, all else is peripheral.

Langhorst's poem also evokes the cyclical nature of mourning, and the recurring seasons remind us of the "ocean" of silence that persists. She proclaims, "*the dead have always written to us.*" Langhorst suggests that the "invisible ink" of every "fragile" and "tenuous" life "delivers us/ back to ourselves." Not unlike the notion of DNA, those who have died continue to reach into the future, a kind of mirror in which we see ourselves. A world without a mother is deceptive, deprived of maternal knowledge. The poem suggests that "to go on teaching of /time" is meaningless without the one who gifts time, the mother who gives life to her children. In other poems we learn that Langhorst's mother was murdered by her own husband (14). In this light, the "ocean" of the unsaid suggests an accumulation of tears from all the mothers and daughters who have been forcibly silenced. Textual mourning reconstructs and re-inscribes the life and

death of the maternal subject back into public discourse. Elegiac writing breaks the silence and opens space for recomposing the voices of the dead.

Frequently Langhorst interposes quotations and allusions from other poets into her poems. The italicized words in the excerpt above belong to one of her Canadian contemporaries, Sue Goyette. Langhorst interweaves lines from Goyette's poems "Homage" and "Issa" into her own.¹³ This intertextual engagement suggests another kind of intersubjectivity. Recognizing contemporary female poets in this way differs significantly from traditional male elegists. Rather than self-advancement, Langhorst's poems exemplify a connection with her deceased mother as well as with other poets who speak to various forms of loss. These are the future foremothers who will "*deliver us/ back to ourselves.*" The "*slow blooming*" suggests the gradual recovery of maternal voices transplanting them into literary texts where they can flourish. In the work of mourning "a /world without a mother," Langhorst engages other female poets, creating a dialogic and polyphonic text in which past, present and future interact. Rejecting isolation, the elegy becomes a site where a community can gather to mourn. Uppal posits that writing "strategies for reunion with the dead and dialogue with the past" have created a new model for mourning "where the elegiac monody is replaced with the elegist's welcoming of multiple voices. A subject, the poets argue, must interact with other subjects to remain alive" (36). For feminist elegists like Langhorst, this is particularly significant as an ocean of *invisible ink* remains untapped. Textual homage not only honours one mother but also other maternal subjectivities.

Intertextuality is also evident in Lisa Martin-DeMoor's sequence of poems, entitled "Echoes from a room with no sound" (45 – 50). In this sequence, she takes an excerpt of prose

¹³ Sue Goyette's poetry book *Undone* (Brick Books 2004) explores grief and loss after a marriage breakup, but also pays homage to other artists.

from Jacques Derrida's book *The Work of Mourning* (2001) and breaks it apart. Martin-DeMoor's particular line breaks suggest a feminist revision of grief:

though we are only ever ourselves
 from that place within us
 where
 the other,
 the mortal other,
 resonates (45)

In the work of mourning, Martin-DeMoor dismantles the philosopher's prose piece and re-envisions each word or phrase in the context of her own subjective experiences of mother-loss. She refashions each of these lines into six elegiac poems, and each poem follows the same structural pattern as the first:

"though we are only ever ourselves"

She and I look more alike than ever.
 My face in the mirror—
 her afterimage
 her way of remaining physical.

Remnance: that which cannot be erased.

The trace, physical, a ghost of remainders.
 Her half-image
 the mirror of her face
 more than she ever conceded. (45)

In contrast to Derrida's line, Martin-DeMoor's poem suggests we are more than ourselves. She reconstructs her mother from the image she sees in the mirror. A variant of Langhorst's DNA image, Martin-DeMoor's "afterimage" suggests that her mother is evident in the "half-image" that returns her gaze. The mirror acknowledges her mother's physical presence even in her absence. Their intimate connection is made visible by the "afterimage" of the mother which acts as a watermark onto which the daughter's face is superimposed. In this way, the daughter realizes her selfhood in the light of her mother.

The elegy also leaves an “afterimage” of her mother, not only in the words, but also in the form. Although the concept of a mirror image is not uncommon, the way Martin-DeMoor reconstructs the image in her poem is unusual. Her arrangement of the lines and stanzas visually suggests a mirror image. The “*Remnance*” line shifts to the left margin and intervenes like a plane between the two stanzas, yet the line or threshold between life and death, mother and daughter, “cannot be erased.” Martin-DeMoor draws a connection from each line in the first stanza to the corresponding lines in the second stanza. In the second lines, for instance, “My face in the mirror—” reflects “Her half-image,” and “her afterimage” in the third line corresponds with “the mirror of her face.” This pattern creates a doubling or echoing effect signaled in the title. Thus, she makes visible the intertwining of the past in the present, the presence of absence, the living and the dead. The mirror image, like a double-stranded DNA, depicts the intimacy and intersubjectivity of the daughter-mother relationship. Martin-DeMoor’s doubling mirror ironically follows Derrida’s gaze inward where the “other,/ resonates,” and finds the mirror makes visible both the self and the “other.” The narrator’s recognition of the mother’s physical presence expresses her refusal to be separated. The process of writing and connecting with the deceased mother is the work of mourning. Furthermore, Martin-DeMoor’s innovative term “*Remnance*” evokes the terms remnant, trace, and resonance. The mother’s “afterimage” is the “*remnance*” —a vestige, an imprint, a remnant that survives beyond death. The manifestation of the trace is both physical and ethereal. Daughter and text embody the half-image of the maternal; the marks of her mother “cannot be erased.” Textual mourning, like looking in the mirror, substantiates the maternal subject whose voice re-sounds through text and time. Rather than severing the mother-daughter bond, the *remnance* mediates the gap between the absent and present, the invisible and the visible.

Contemporary English-Canadian elegies, in Uppal's view, represent a "new work of mourning model" and employ two main conceits "as active sites for reconnecting with the dead": "language and landscape" (13). In her sequence of poems "Stone's throw," Martin-DeMoor integrates both language and the prairie landscape as sites for textual mourning. Across this eight-page sequence, grief spills in phrases and words with little semblance of symmetry. The visual effect of these irregularities corresponds with the erratic experiences of mourning. Even the most structured poem in the series is allied with the narrator's connection with her deceased mother:

*3 AM. Awake listening to the mist-
that-will-not-rain
shuffle its feet through the soft belly
of cloud. Thunder here, but the moisture falls
somewhere else, in someone else's fields.*

I can still hear her voice.
Drought, and days until rain.
Somewhere that house remains
where I first touched death,
where death touched back. (82)

These two stanzas are printed in two different fonts, and evoke two different times and places. The first stanza represents the now, at "3 AM," whereas the second stanza is a recollected time. In the first stanza, the narrator is "here" and listens to the *mist-that-will-not-rain*. The irregular prairie weather patterns suggest the unpredictability of grief and the ongoing work of mourning. The second stanza, like the first, begins with the narrator listening, but the mist and thunder have modulated into her mother's voice. Textual mourning allows Martin-DeMoor to construct another time and place, "that house" where she "first touched death,/ where death touched back." She personifies death, an entity that is physical even as it is psychological and spiritual. The elegiac landscape opens space for Martin-DeMoor to return again and again to that precise place and time where she and her mother touched death, but from opposite sides of the threshold.

Martin-DeMoor's poem "Variant for the breath" expresses a kind of mourning that occurs prior to her mother's death. MacDonald states that "emphasizing the act of mourning the still-living body ... puts pressure on ... the rights of mourning and the rituals of elegy" (26; ellipses mine). Martin-DeMoor bends the conventions of mourning and elegiac form to involve the reader in the process of mourning, in observing her dying mother (as opposed to after she has passed away). The narrator begins the exchange with bits of news: the "squirrel's small corpse. / The winter trees," and then the sudden statement: "we're all /going under." Readers are confronted with the realities of human mortality and the brevity of existence. Martin-DeMoor (and the reader) finds herself in the space between life and death, in the (un)certainly of her mother's death. Death and dying elicits inquiry:

And how did this begin? With a birth
inside a stone. A ripple's difference
on the face of waves. A sliver more light.
A mirror held to the depths
of the ocean's own
existence—the first écle.

We are made of very old molecules.
We are made of the first moment
of breath, the electric flick
that wakened matter—life
broke the old bonds. And how
is this going to end?
You should see her now. A shroud
of cells, still knit together, but dying.
She is dying, skin like yellowed linen,
and to sit beside her, you'd know
the silence is—everything
I've ever doubted.

Now we are moments of shared breath,
im-mediate. Time itself is intimate
in her body, a winding down clock
that can unmake the universe
reset the rhythm of the world's turning—
because I honour her.

Because love is a space we inhabit—
 a door held open by two or more bodies,
 and time is an increment of love.
 We are all mortal as that first moment.
 That is what we are, witnesses to this—
 accident of breath. (40 – 41)

Martin-DeMoor asks two of the most common yet significant questions regarding existence: “how did this begin?”; “how is this going to end?” In just a few stanzas, she draws together all times past into the present moment. The elegy, MacDonald suggests, “performs the function of questioning the ineffable” (12). She also claims, “The elegist invokes the divine in order to address earthly taboos, writes of the achingly absent as painfully present, finds consolation in inconsolability, and questions the meaning of existence by searching the parameters of non-existence” (12). In this poem, Martin-DeMoor brings into question human origins and existence. In the first stanza, she constructs a creation story that encompasses the first “birth/ inside a stone” to human “existence—the first miracle,” a time when “life/ broke the old bonds.” She reminds readers that everyone comes from the same “old molecules” and that “first moment of breath.” The repetition of the pronoun “we” further underscores human interconnectedness, our common beginning and end. Blanchot writes, “It is the dying which, though unsharable, [we] have in common with all” (23). Hence, we all can empathize with the elegist.

Nevertheless, Martin-DeMoor also differentiates each individual as a “variant,” an “accident of breath.” In the third stanza, she shifts the reader’s attention to her dying mother’s bedside: “You should see her now. A shroud/ of cells.” The maternal body bears witness to the intimacy of time and death, the “winding down clock” inside each of us. She employs a mix of caesuras, enjambment, and long dashes to engender feelings of uncertainty and represent her fluctuating emotions. These devices “reset the rhythm” of the poem. Long dashes carry emotions

of grief that cannot be articulated. Lingering in these silent spaces is where narrator and reader find “everything / I’ve ever doubted,” places to ponder questions about life and death. What difference does one ripple make in an ocean of waves? What difference does one poem make in an ocean of elegies? Why honour one life when countless generations have lived and died? Why do birth and death matter, and why should they be written? Writing and existing both have a beginning and an end. Or do they? The title of the poem, “Variant for the breath,” suggests that writing poetry provides a kind of “breath” so that Martin-DeMoor can keep her mother alive metaphorically in the elegiac text. This notion reminds readers of Langhorst’s line, “*the dead have always written to us*” (31). In the fourth stanza, Martin-DeMoor innovatively alters the pronoun “we,” changing the meaning from inclusive to personal: “Now we are moments of shared breath,/im-mediate.” Daughter and mother share the last moments of breath. The work of mourning is “im-mediate,” always in the present tense. The daughter-elegist is the “im” (I am), the immediate relation, next in maternal and poetic lines, the mediator between generations. The poet breathes life for the dying mother and transposes her voice into a communal space.

Elegiac writing is a strategy that gives witness to the mother and to the daughter’s work of mourning. This double perspective doubles again in Martin-DeMoor’s response to the miracle / accident of breath she has received from her mother. Time and text are expressions of the “increment[s] of love” the narrator has for her mother, who has the potential to “unmake the universe” and “reset” the seasons. Why? The daughter’s response is “because I honour her” and “[b]ecause love is a space we inhabit.” This is why one ripple differs from another—this is her mother, the “variant” from all other mothers. Likewise, each elegiac response to mother-loss is a “variant” from all others. Mothers have the power in life and in death to alter both place (the universe) and time (the seasons). Elegiac texts are places where “a door [is] held open” and

“bodies” meet—a site of reunion. Martin-DeMoor’s invitation for her readers to witness her mother’s dying body indicates mourning as both an individual and collective experience. The shifting pronouns, “we,” “you,” “her,” and so on, suggest that there are at least three bodies that keep the door ajar between the living, the dying, and the dead. From one perspective, the three bodies could be the daughter, the mother, and the reader. Alternatively, the elegiac text invites the reader and writer (bodies) to encounter one another, a reunion with multiple voices involved in the collective work of mourning mother-loss and maternal silence.

For Moure, Langhorst, and Martin-DeMoor, mourning is an ongoing process of detecting the *remnance* of their mother’s voice, stories, memories, familial relations, and the afterimage (aftermath) of her leaving. Elegiac writing, as these poets demonstrate, has the potential to pay homage to the maternal subject when she is dying or years after she has passed away. In the processes of mourning and writing, both daughter and mother are simultaneously re-inscribed as individual subjects in the text. Textual mourning opens the door to return to the mother in the pages of poetry, and engage with her as a presence rather than absence.

2. Homage: Textual Recollection & Reformation

Textual recollection counters forgetting and the silence of closure, and therefore, has the potential to challenge socio-cultural norms and create a better future for women. Nancy Berns, in her book *Closure: The Rush to End Grief*, claims that until recently very little critical analysis had been done on the consequences of this drive towards an end. Berns lists multiple meanings associated with the idea of closure: remembering, forgetting, getting even, knowing, confessing, or forgiving (24 – 27). She also notes that “[w]e have the capacity to carry grief and joy together. We do not have to ‘close’ the pain before we start to heal” (161). In the complex context of grief, Berns remarks that there are several socio-cultural expectations to consider. These notions

imply that closure exists and carry the assumptions that closure is (1) possible, (2) good, (3) desired, and (4) necessary. Closure encourages the idea that grief is bad and therefore something that needs to end. These assumptions, and the larger narratives that carry them, build feeling rules for how we are supposed to respond when bad things happen. (28)

Social norms influence mourning practices, and “feeling rules” for mourning differ from culture to culture. Contrary to the Freudian view that mourning is a means to recover from grief and forget the past, Uppal posits that mourning, like archaeology, is a means to recover the past, an “act of digging” into all that has been left behind (14). In the absence of the maternal subject, the elegist recollects memories and stories as a counter to the silence of forgetting. Susan Sontag claims, “All writing is a species of remembering” (*Where the Stress Falls* 54). Jan Zwicky, in her essay “Lyric, Narrative, Memory,” echoes this notion in the form of a question: “Is there any gesture humans make that is not a species of remembering?” (93). If all human gestures and forms of writing are born out of memory, then there is no story or poem or life that is not shaped by recollection. In the ongoing cycle of recovery, the elegist not only re-remembers her own memories of her mother, but may also recollect her mother’s stories, memories, and maternal knowledge. According to Uppal, memory in contemporary elegies

is revealed through kinetic incarnation within the Canadian landscape as a geological and metaphysical entity capable of protecting and uncovering private and public histories and genealogies and, within language, as a linguistic landscape or form, like the elegy itself, that can both evoke remembrance and participate in the future. (14)

The process of remembering is dynamic and archeological, physical and metaphysical. In the work of recovery, memories and voices of the past are unearthed and actualized on a “linguistic landscape” (14). As Uppal shows, the linguistic landscape of the elegy encompasses more than words on the page: future evocation of memories and elicitation of emotions. Writing memories conveys individual and collective remnants buried in time, and solicits further remembrance from readers. It makes public both private and communal histories and maternal genealogies.

The elegiac strategy of mourning loss not only involves remembering the past to memorialize it, but also to engage in an ongoing dialogue with the past to “create a future” (13). Consequently, the work of mourning and recovery is also a work of translation from thought to text and into the present context. In her poem “Things to remember,” Martin-DeMoor writes about her mother’s belief in prayer: “she was a passenger in a near-fatal crash./ She tells me how she, being a believer, had uttered/ a prayer after dessert, for travelling mercies./ Remember, she insists, .../ Remember: You must pray without ceasing” (69; ellipsis mine). Translating mother’s memories into linguistic form makes it possible to reassess her past, consider her mother’s view, and reimagine her own future in response to those particulars. In “readingwritinglistening,” Robert Finley examines the way an artist paints his response onto a visual/digital artifact directly, adding his own colour (or interpretation) to the object. This strategy creates a “double meaning, the present and the past, the present to the past” (*A Ragged Pen* 18). Similarly, these poets re-remember the past and reconstruct (colour) their own and their mother’s memories, further doubling perspectives. The absent mother remains a subject “beneath the present tense [and the first person singular] of the artist’s interventions”; that is, the elegist’s renderings “mark, by their presence, an absence, a loss which cannot be recovered” (18). Elegiac writing “marks” the absence of the deceased mother by leaving traces of her in the text. Translating memories into linguistic form, these elegists leave traces—a tangible silence—of their mother’s presence/absence alongside their own traces. Certainly when the maternal subject dies her memories die with her. Still, traces of the past, including bits of conversations, remain present as reminders (remainders) of what has been lost.

Martin-DeMoor’s poem “*resonates*” (italics in original) concludes the “Echoes” sequence and validates this persistent remainder/reminder of her absent mother:

You, in this same room, can you hear these echoes too?
 They're the same grey strain.
 At night, sleeping, do you remember her body, as I do?
 The site of these memories, porous and oblique.

Love has made caverns out of the rock.

So I carry on the mortality of the body,
 though the weight I bear in sleep is partly hers.
 She's like an infant, curled against me,
 a half-heard echo, an inner ear. (50)

Martin-DeMoor pays homage to her mother by inviting “You” the reader to mourn with her and imagine the intimacy she had with her mother. She asks, “Can you hear? Do you remember?” The mother remains alive in the audible echoes and memories articulated in this poem, as well as in the maternal genetics and mortality she, the daughter, carries in her body. These connections suggest that the boundaries between mother and daughter, life and death, are porous. Martin-DeMoor hears traces of her mother’s voice and translates them into text for her readers to “hear.” In acts of translation, however, words, ideas, and lived realities, are inevitably lost. This notion of incomplete translation is formulated in descriptors such as the “grey strain” of the echoes and the “porous and oblique” memories she carries. Language and memories may have gaps and limits, but it is in these “caverns” that love has carved, these poetic lines that Martin-DeMoor has written, that we hear echoes of her mother. Love motivates her to take on a shared maternal responsibility —“the weight I bear ... is partly hers.” In this newly born alliance, she represents her mother as “an infant, curled against me.” The image of the infant, curled against her body, contends with Derrida’s concept of carrying the dead within, which in MacDonald’s terms, is like bearing “the interiorized dead as a kind of fetus” (47). I concur with MacDonald that this is a problematic image: “The fetus of memory, ambiguously ‘unborn,’ functions as a representative of both future and past, and the refusal of this fetal burden casts the mourner as a rejecting or

annihilating mother” (47). Martin-DeMoor rejects Derrida’s image of the dead as a “fetus of memory” and claims the mother is “curled against” her not *inside* of her (my emphasis). Thus, the daughter becomes a kind of care-taker/care-giver of her mother’s subjectivity and memory, a relationship animated through acts of recollection and writing motivated by love. The “half-heard echo” of the mother resonates through a language of love, an intimacy that has created caverns where the echo can be perceived and translated as textual homage. The dialogue may not be clear, but it continues to be heard from “an inner ear”—a shared space where daughter and mother reconnect and memories resonate through her poetry.

Memories also resonate in Martin-DeMoor’s poem sequence “Stone’s throw.” She illustrates a process of textual mourning and recollection that draws on images suggestive of the prairie landscape:

So I sit down with faith,
 call it by name: name it with river-stones,
 syllables, the sticks the tree “language”
 leaves behind in the grass
 that tree dug up for reasons of heaviness
 and the threat of summer storms,
 for being too old, too close to the house. (79)

Martin-DeMoor gathers “river-stones” and “the sticks of the tree” as images representing the *remnance* left behind in the prairie grass. These images allude to the old saying “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me,” yet they do. Translating her loss into language is a painful process. The image of digging up the old tree, like her family tree, suggests the archeological work of mourning, of recollecting and writing loss. Martin-DeMoor’s images, like the tree and summer storms, embody the metaphysical realities of grief. The “force” of the elegy, MacDonald claims, “is driven by the multiple ways the ineffable lurks in the experience of

loss” and the ways the genre examines the “uncommon” of a common experience (11 – 12), the distinctiveness of a regular occurrence. In this case, having lost both parents, Martin-DeMoor recalls the *remnance* left behind from both sides of the family. The old family tree and mourner have both been uprooted. She uses familial syllables and cultural markers of her past to assuage the loss of her family history. The shifting lines in the poem contribute to a sense of uprootedness and uncertainty. Martin-DeMoor admits it takes faith to express her ineffable loss and to select the right “river-stones” and “sticks,” or memories, to represent the *remnance* of her own parents. Reconstructing memories into poetry provides a sense of rootedness.

All of the poems in this sequence are brief, leaving large portions of white space on each page, and although the series of poems has a title, individual poems are unnamed. The strategy of naming and unnameable accentuates the absence that death initiates:

What does it matter if I call it grief
or memory? Her death or his?
There is only ever one death.

So many names for the unnameable. (84)

Martin-DeMoor blurs the boundaries of mourning and memory, suggesting that death, grief, and memory are all interwoven. Paradoxically, death is singular, common yet unshared (Blanchot). In the first poem in this sequence, the unnameable is called “faith,” whereas this poem indicates there are “many names for the unnameable.” This too suggests a paradox. Martin-DeMoor’s juxtaposition of “one death” and “many names” implies that while names identify an individual, all experience death. This notion is explored in the poem that follows: “I can only tell you what I know:/ one death, respooled./ Each time...it acquires a different name;/ to bear this requires forgetting” (85; ellipsis mine). Naming specifies an individual life unravelling, like the writing of her poem sequence. Meanings are made by associations from poem to poem, but the names of all

who have died cannot possibly be remembered in these poems. Leaving her mother and father unnamed, Martin-DeMoor gives space for readers to remember the loss of their own loved ones. Although we cannot bear to remember the countless individuals who have died, elegiac writing names death and evokes remembrance of the one and the many, the familiar and the stranger.

Martin-DeMoor's eight-poem sequence "Stone's Throw" begins and ends with the image of a door:

But for now, death will not open its door—
that great embrace. (79)

[...] —we wait, grief-hungry, complicit

stalled, arbitrary curve of a stone's throw

or pebble in the hand of a child
who is learning how to aim
toward that open door: Love

spoke once in history, said I must lose my life. (86; ellipsis mine)

She represents death as a door through which all must go. Rather than focusing on the negative, the poet depicts death as "the great embrace," a door that opens to "Love." Both Martin-DeMoor and Langhorst believe life and death are more than physical. To "sit down with faith" (79) and write means to "see" beyond what is visible. The line "I must lose my life" refers to Matthew 16:25, "whoever loses their life for me will find it" (*New International Version*), and alludes to a belief in life after death. For Martin-DeMoor, it is faith in "Love" (Jesus) and hope that in losing life she will find it again, whether in this life or the next. Elegiac writing is also an act of faith, a door that opens emotions and evokes remembrance through a process of naming and unnamings experiences. Textual recollection, like naming, counters the silence of closure. However, the door is also an exit, a reminder that all things in life and in literature come to an end. Both the title of this poem sequence and the final poem remind readers that the names of those who have

died are quickly forgotten and that death is just a “stone’s throw” away. But then again, the dead write back to us (Langhorst), prevent us from forgetting about them and the certainty of death.

Moure offers an alternate view of “*resonance*,” a notion of existence on the edge of memory. The silenced, those “whose very names have/ vanished,” are still resonant on the “verge” where each name “still casts its sound on all who sleep there” (45). It is this recognition of forgotten names that prompts Moure to recollect her mother’s final breath:

I remember the last sound my own mother called out in the city of my birth, in Calgary. A sigh, an interpellation that refused to articulate its word. I turned to her and spoke, as I was meant to. (45)

Pertinent here is the “sigh” that refuses “to articulate its/ word.” The “last sound” of her mother’s voice is indecipherable. A sigh is impossible to decode, yet the reader senses its importance. Moure underscores this significance in her response to her mother’s call: she speaks to her mother, recalls the sound, and writes of her experience. The daughter speaks as she “was meant to”— without force, pretense, or expectation. Recollection of her mother’s sigh also prompts her memory of Calgary, “the city of my birth,” and motivates her to put into words what resists articulation. Still, Moure questions the potential of language to communicate: “Language *here?* Blind figuration? . . . My mother sitting up in bed and me beside her. The intensity of her blind gaze. How can I talk about the face here?” (45; italics in original; ellipsis mine). She implies that there is still so much that exists outside of language; so many thoughts and emotions are difficult to express. For Moure, it is the mother who resonates from the verge, and whose name still sounds: “*A mother is the unmemntioable boundary/ that can never come fully clear*” (45; italics in original). Mother and daughter are separated by an *unmemntioable boundary* death activates.

Dominic Williams and Milena Marinkova, in “Affective Trans-scapes,” argue that “Moure’s strategies of mobilizing the affective charge of bodies, objects, and words to translate

physical and emotional landscapes beyond direct knowledge” is an ethical method of translating memory and history (73). Recollection reimagines a world that has already taken place, and transmission of experiences that exist beyond the borders of language. Writing grief necessarily mediates between body and mind, between sensory and emotional experiences:

[...] —*one of the last things I can do that my living mother wanted: to return her to the soil in Ukraine where she was born.*
 Testifying to the endurance of desire beyond any possibility of experience. The transfer of desire between bodies. Is this the beyond of experience? The beyond of borders?

Experience of ‘she’? A breach or symptom?

If experience requires entry into language, then we cannot experience death, for language ceases. There is no remnant.

Or there is. By taking her notebook, I make myself responsible. I myself become the restitution she is searching for. But I desert her. I left her a new notebook, and I’ll fill hers on my own. (57; italics in text; ellipsis mine)

Moure queries the “(e)xperience of ‘she’” and concludes that desire extends beyond life and language. Fulfilling her mother’s desire “to return to the soil” of her motherland, E.M. also pursues her desire to trace their shared history in Ukraine and in a notebook. In line with Uppal, Moure’s strategies involve “language and landscape,” two “dynamic sites” that underpin the “reconnective project of mourning” (15). Elegiac writing is a form of restitution, a recreation of the remnant(s) left behind after her mother’s death. Williams and Marinkova state:

While E.M. struggles with the task of writing about her grief for her mother and a distant landscape traumatized by ethnic and political strife, E.S. is unable to conceptualize experience that transcends and precedes language, experience exceeded by the “endurance of desire” [Moure] (57). These impossible poetic acts are conducted, if not completed, via a series of random encounters and deliberate interruptions, which while destabilizing familiar landscapes, enact their multiple relations. (76)

Moure’s disruptive poetics represent the tensions between experiences, desires, and transmission. Transmission “of desire between bodies” and the “[e]xperience of ‘she’” imply an intersubjective

female relationship that exists outside of language. In this excerpt, the pronoun *she* refers to E.M. However, the quotation marks around “she” suggest encounters with a female other, and not limited to a mother-daughter relationship. These “impossible poetic acts” (Williams and Marinkova) problematize the translation of what cannot be said, the “beyond of borders.” Is elegiac writing a symptom of a malady or a disorder? What language expresses encounters with death? Moure’s queries destabilize conventions of writing and negotiating the unmentionable, the taboo, the experiences of desire, and the memories of violence that remain beyond words.

Nevertheless, Moure’s poetic recollections exemplify her desire to break the silence and represent the unmemntioable boundaries of intersubjective female relationships, such as mother-daughter and lesbian encounters, as well as genocide. In the context of memory, violence, and silence, Patrick Friesen raises some important questions: “What does the body remember? Are memories stored in the cells of the body itself? ...I believe the body holds memory” (36; ellipsis mine). Certainly, memories are neither perfect nor chronological, but as Friesen points out, “We need memory to live even if that memory is partially false, totally false, or momentarily true” (36). Mind and body hold memories that may or may not be factual, but the body, including all the senses, also informs personal desires, experiences, and memories. Elegiac texts become the “fictional sites through which women can continue to meet and redress the silence between them” (Uppal 100). Similarly, the notebook holds representations of physical and emotional memories, a dialogue with the past. Taking responsibility for the recovery of memories, Moure herself becomes the “restitution” her mother longed for—the physical return of her mother’s ashes to Ukraine. Grief lingers at the borders of comprehension and language, at the verge of lived and uttered experiences, at the periphery of remembering and forgetting, at the breach between the living and the dead. Moure’s textual remembrance of her mother’s and her own

experiences intermingle in the notebook and poetry collection. Language exposes its own limits, and like the “unmemntioable boundary” of mother, “*can never come fully clear*” (45; italics in original). Moure’s recollection of “random encounters” (Williams and Marinkova) and frequent interruptions test the borders of language, transmission, and literary conventions. Her poetics represent the subjective experiences of death and loss, the presence of her absent mother, and the trauma of genocide.

In the work of recovery, reconnecting with the dead mother means returning to grief—an ongoing reminder of her absence. Longing to remain connected with the past also indicates a desire to make sense of painful loss. Moure, like many elegists, suggests that the body remembers and desires recovery of the maternal subject. The female elegist bears the weight of listening and transcribing the relationality and interdependence of the mother-daughter bond:

...Beside me is the cancer hat. For a long time after she died, it carried the soft perfume of her head—the smell of a baby. As if my mother’s thoughts were still in it—not brain-tumour thoughts but the thoughts that worked despite the brain tumour, trying to straighten out the world that the tumour ruined. How many trees are out there? She’d ask me. My ever-mathematical mother. Numbers order the outside world but were also a kind of intimacy with it. (109)

In the work of mourning, the disruption of death and ensuing grief find some semblance of order in the recollection and transcription of memories. The longer prosaic lines of this excerpt suggest the lengthy and ongoing process of mourning, and the mourner’s desire (like her mother’s) to “straighten out the world that the tumour ruined.” Textual homage is like the cancer hat, a kind of muse that carries the perfume and thoughts of the dead mother.

Perfume is a particularly effective image. Scent lingers, permeates, elicits emotion, and triggers memories of the narrator’s mother. Perfume also evokes the notion of essence, the term Langhorst uses for mother: “My mother is essence” (9). In the context of sitting at a “café table

by the window” and “drinking coffee” (*Unmemntioable* 109), Moure associates her mother’s scent with “the smell of a baby.” This suggests a quiet fresh start, a pleasurable and perhaps an addictive scent. But the cancer hat is also associated with feelings of “the body’s demises” (109). The infant and the maternal are united in the image of the cancer hat. Akin to Martin-DeMoor’s image of mother curled against her, the cancer hat rests beside Moure and carries “grief and joy together” (Berns 161). Recollection is a sensual ritual. Mother’s and daughter’s thoughts mingle like perfume. Recovery of memories gives voice to the maternal subject: “How many trees are out there? She’d ask me” (*Unmemntioable* 109). On the landscape of elegiac poetry, the mother lingers on the verge as a subject embodied in language. Textual recollection creates a context of intimacy and a space for dialogue where memories and voices mingle, mourn, and celebrate.

Writing in remembrance of a mother draws together internal and external realities, and produces a sense of longing that lies beyond memories themselves. Friesen points out that one of the purposes for writing poetry is to transcribe this longing. In his essay, “Memory River,” Friesen explains, “poetry is to be a song of longing for what is not there, nor ever was. Not longing for the memory itself, but for something outside of memory, the absence which is the context of memory; the state of longing in and of itself. We long for what can’t be named; the unremembered” (33). Elegiac writing is infused with this longing. Writing in remembrance involves a search for the “tree” language that names what cannot be named (Martin-DeMoor), and permeates the boundaries of the “unmemntioable” (Moure). In her poem “Summer after” (77 – 78), Martin-DeMoor depicts the entangled relationship between absence and presence, memory and reality, silence and representation. While in her garden, she is reminded of her mother:

[...] Sweet peas crowding the steel knots of the fence

with their tangle of blank pods. Mom never made it here to visit,
to see this garden I’ve made on my own. What I remember of her

is a damp chamomile—and is more certain
 than this earth, stuck to the trowel in the garden she never saw

where each bruised bloom is a proof:
 the weight of a breath is more

than the hum of its distance
 after dark, as it falls away from the source. (77; ellipsis mine)

Martin-DeMoor draws attention to the irregularities of grief and remembrance by her use of enjambment and varied line lengths. This two-page poem is written in a series of couplets, indicative of the entwined and knotted relationship she and her mother share despite the “fence” or boundary death creates. Her mother’s absence is like the “blank pod,” yet the memories of her mother are “more certain” than the visible substance “stuck to the trowel.” Like the sigh of Moure’s mother, Martin-DeMoor represents her mother’s voice and absence in the “breath” and “hum” that cannot be deciphered. She asks, “Remember? I used to hear her/ only through the sound of her own voice” (78). Martin-DeMoor claims she keeps hearing her mother’s “own voice,” only now she hears the voice through her own voice as she remembers and writes.

In another part of the poem Martin-DeMoor represents her grieving self: “Like a wing-torn bumblebee—each week, I find a new-bloomed/ wound.” The long dash between the “wing-torn bumblebee” and “each week” is suggestive of the separation she feels from her mother, the pain each week brings, and the protraction of time she faces in looking to a future without a mother (and father). The repetition of the word “bruise,” associated with the flowers and her heart, further emphasizes the ache that discolours her days. Her “wing-torn bumblebee” metaphor signifies the debilitating work of mourning, moving from day to day like a bee moves from flower to flower. In the end, it is the internal bruise that takes advantage of her sensibilities: “of the fluttering, year-old moths/ that are falling out in tears// through the soft funnel of my hands” (78). The gap between the word tears and the final line suggest the movement of “falling”

down, an emotional break down. Representing the hands as a “soft funnel” implies that grief is difficult to grasp, let alone express in words. Just as the dirt is stuck to garden tools, her mother-memories are “stuck” in her mind, resistant to linguistic formulation. The final line of the poem is singular, uncoupled like Martin-DeMoor’s physical separation from her mother. Even so, the “proof” of her mother’s existence is manifested in the bruised blooms and pages of her poems.

These prairie elegists suggest that seeking closure is a denial of personal feelings, a devaluation of maternal influences, and a negation of the maternal presence that lingers in their lives. Textual recollection of the deceased mother acknowledges the ongoing sway of the maternal subject. The “linguistic landscape” (Uppal) of the elegy enables these writers to evoke emotions as they negotiate grief and loss. Langhorst’s line “*here one is given the music through the gesture*” (30) suggests that poetic responses to mother-loss are like musical compositions — they gesture toward a broad range of emotions. Words, like notes, carry the sounds of human experiences and the relational resonance among the living and the dead. For Martin-DeMoor, the elegy is a “place love goes to, to remember its name” (76). Love motivates recollection and reconnection with the dead. Writing poetry in remembrance honours the mother and resists social pressures toward closure and silence. Genuine responses to grief are gestures that generate alternate “feeling rules” (Berns) for mourning in society and in literature.

Giving homage to the mother through textual remembrance gives testimony to the human desire to commune with those who have gone before us. The elegiac language of remembrance can offer a form of healing through reconnection. Zwicky restates Friesen’s notion that poetry is “written by losers... [that is] we are constantly losers of the world, of that communion with the world for which, as creatures of language, we will always long” (98). Though the world is always already in the past, recollection and communion with the dead in textual form vivifies the

past through language, gaps, and associations. Poetry invites others to negotiate emotions of grief, to mourn, and commune as a collective. In accord with Uppal, Zeiger, and MacDonald's analyses, these elegists seek communion with the dead rather than consolation or a cure for their grief. This is the case even when suffering and loss has been the result of violence. In recalling the devastation of the Holocaust, Anne Michaels writes, "Language is how ghosts enter the world...Language remembers" (*Miners' Pond* 59). Language opens doors for writers and readers to negotiate memories of atrocity, to dialogue with the ghosts of those whose lives were violently destroyed—erased—and remember those who have been forcibly silenced. In writing the pain of violence, according to Uppal, elegists may evoke "the past deliberately as a reminder to her audience of a rich heritage," or avoid the terrors of the past to forget, yet for others, the choice to forget is to concede to the oppressor (254). The conundrum survivors must face is whether to remember or to forget past atrocities. This brings to mind the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission publication *The Survivors Speak* (2015), a sad reminder (remainder) of colonialism—the breakdown of Indigenous cultures and family ties, and the maternal violence involved in residential schooling.¹⁴ In *Blue Marrow* Louise Halfe writes, "ê-pêcimakik./ With my sorrow,/ I call you./ Haunt us/ with your cries" (73). As MacDonald points out, the elegy is devoted to remember and to forget, a genre built on a "double paradox that defines elegy as a practice of memory that presages forgetting and as a practice of forgetting that requires remembrance" (45).

The tension between remembering and forgetting is particularly poignant for poets such as Langhorst and Moure. These women substantiate in their poetics the invisible scars caused by murderous deeds. Mourning is a return to the past even when memories are associated with pain and hostility. In opposition to Freud, Riegel states, the "work of mourning may be circular or

¹⁴ The full report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is available on their website www.trc.ca.

cyclical, rather than final. ... [it] is an acknowledgment that psychic trauma such as grief is not easily—or perhaps ever—put aside” (*Writing Grief* 147). Riegel’s analysis supports Uppal and MacDonald’s notion that mourning is cyclical, yet domestic and ethnic violence complicate the cyclical nature of mourning. In addition, writing demands a deliberate connection with a painful past and a refusal to forget the terror. It requires a resolve to revisit and transcribe experiences of abuse and cruelty, to break the silences inflicted in cycles of oppression. Like Moure’s notion of the “verge,” Blanchot argues that silence is a form of speaking: “the language of awaiting — perhaps it is silent, but it does not separate speaking and silence; it makes of silence already a kind of speaking; already it says in silence and speaking that silence is. For mortal silence does not keep still” (59). Elegiac poetry opens spaces where language “awaits,” and where silence speaks. The attentive recognize that a language exists and resonates beyond sound:

the cry tends to exceed all language, even if it lends itself to recuperation as language effect. It is both sudden and patient; it has the suddenness of the interminable torment which is always over already.... The patience of the cry: it does not simply come to a halt, reduced to nonsense, yet it does remain outside of sense—a meaning infinitely suspended, decried, decipherable-indecipherable. //In the work of mourning, it is not grief that works: grief keeps watch. (Blanchot 51)

Elegists like Moure and Langhorst not only write in remembrance of their mothers but of the inexplicable cruelty of domestic violence and genocide—the enduring cries of the slain. Elegiac writing holds up a mirror to the self and acknowledges the effects of traumatic experiences, whether they are physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual. Even so, the literary techniques available to elegists, such as allusions, line lengths, enjambment, caesuras, punctuation, white spaces, and images, make room for the “decipherable-indecipherable” sighs or cries that “exceed all language.” Although language has the potential for healing, grief extends beyond language and time, just as longing goes beyond the memories themselves. Violence may be inconceivable, but grief remains alert to sighs and silent cries; anguish and loss colour perspectives.

In her poem sequence “Menstrual Cup” (13 – 20), Langhorst associates the cyclical nature of mourning with the female body and menstrual cycle: “my daughter’s menstrual cup/scarlet wounds of cyclic release” (18). Recurring periods of anguish are compared with the monthly interruptions of menstruation. These physical and emotional intrusions into a woman’s life are heightened visually in the body of the poem. As a punctuation mark, the period indicates the end of a sentence, a full stop. In this 6-page poem sequence, periods are scattered among the words, fragmented lines, and white spaces on the page:

the mathematics of fatigue
the colours of grief and release
.

for thirteen years i can’t forgive

. . . .

to understand agony is violence itself
a good man a good mind holds an energy too dangerous to know
. (13)

Langhorst uses this strategy to overturn the notion of an end stop or closure to mourning. As the periods dispersed among the lines indicate, this ongoing work does not follow a specific pattern. Feelings fluctuate and memories may be elicited at any given moment. Shifting lines between right and left margins further illustrate the “cyclic release” and the “colours” or effects of “grief and release.” Langhorst explores the “colours” of grief and representation, reforming the elegy as she navigates the white landscape of the page. In content and form, her poetic sequence portrays the periods of silence and speech, of personal reflection and response in writing the inexplicable.

Langhorst, like Moure, destabilizes the reader, but she uses different poetic devices. She uses periods, line breaks, caesuras, and intertextuality to interrupt the flow of the text and represent the disrupted thoughts and emotions actuated by grief and loss:

no, the whole universe is a thought/ ruptured/ just short of
completion . . .

mother-loss. She destabilizes language and signification—they have “*no fixed value.*” In Langhorst’s case, the cycle of life and death are cut short for both parents and her life is ruptured by their absence. Her work of mourning and writing require a return to her mother’s murder.

Elegiac writing is not strictly a reiteration of historical incidents, neither is it simply a biographical sketch of the deceased maternal subject or the surviving daughter. Poetic responses are “attempts to listen—to remember—without constructing, without imposing a logical or temporal order on experience. *This, it says. This. And this. And this....* Lyric address to the past stands as an implied critique of the shapeliness of history” (Zwicky 98; ellipsis mine). These poets include historical, autobiographical, and lyrical elements, and are less concerned with tracing a narrative line, a chronological series of events, or a linear progression of experiences, and more interested in generating associations. Negotiating grief through elegiac writing allows for what Zwicky calls “the astonished treatment of memory” (98). Memories are neither sequential nor complete; they are processes rather than incidents. In “Eve Resisting” (82 – 84), Langhorst portrays the arbitrariness of recollections and the interconnectedness of relationships:

a woman was not born to tend a garden
 the garden happens and—gravitas—some
 draw to it
 elegiac dirt verminating
 rhizomatic quackgrass
 calling come to me
 compose me (82)

The image of the rhizome suggests movement and entanglement as memories and emotions intermingle beneath the surface. Langhorst represents the tumult and unpredictability of grief through the varied line-lengths, shifts, and gaps across the elegiac landscape.

These “rhizomatic” forces verminate beneath the surface and carve paths in the garden. Langhorst’s word choice “verminating” is unusual, a reference to an infestation of rodents or other repulsive creatures that are difficult to control. Grief and sorrow infest the elegiac dirt, or poem. Moreover, the botanical images suggest that memories and emotions are constantly active and periodically break through to the surface unrestrained like the weed “quackgrass.” Re-remembering tragedies and loss unearths “rhizomatic” interrelationships extant between mother and daughter, the living and the dead. Similarly, the elegiac landscape opens spaces for buried voices to break the silence and speak into the present. Langhorst hears her mother’s cries rising from the “elegiac dirt” and calling out “come...compose me.” Listening to her voice, the poet feels compelled to write the gravitas of her mother’s death and right the wrongs of “sinspilled hearts” (83). Writing draws attention to the persistent issue of violence against women. Poets like Langhorst, Moure, and Martin-DeMoor, carve out gaps for voices buried under the weight of the past so they can rise to the surface. The strategy of textual remembrance potentially transplants tragic recollections into fertile “elegiac dirt,” addresses problems of domestic violence in society, and recovers the voices of maternal subjects.

Writing can be a catalyst toward action and change as well as an antidote for further destruction of the self or of others in the future. In her poem sequence “Climate change”

Langhorst writes,

I crave to give I carve to crave
 I crave to hold the knife and carve myself

 every three seconds how I have missed her
 beyond marrow or shelter

contemplation a countermeasure to violence (29)

Writing allows her to carve out a space for herself with a pen rather than carve herself with a knife. Reminded of her mother's absence "every three seconds," Langhorst also carves out a space for her mother. Though twenty years have passed since her death, time scarcely matters. Repetition of the words "carve" and "crave" emphasize the ways physical, emotional, and psychological responses are intertwined. The sharp phrase "to hold the knife and carve myself" may be read in several ways: the mourner desires to cut away painful memories, to carve a new self, to literally cut herself, and/or to commit suicide. The excerpt "rage/suicidalityachi/ngdesp/air" (18) is one of several references to suicide. Additionally, the nearly identical words "crave" and "carve" (a switch of two letters) suggest a strong connection and tension between desire and artistic expression. Langhorst contemplates, carves, and crafts an alternate pattern of mourning to accommodate another perspective calling "come to me // compose me." She listens, then (re)composes her mother's voice in an elegiac model that embraces dialogic interaction with the past rather than a separation from the past. Langhorst gives recognition to the "rhizomatic" ties with her mother, and the gravity of "contemplation [as] a countermeasure to violence" (29).

Langhorst, Moure, and Martin-DeMoor fit into Uppal's model of elegiac writing insofar as their work of mourning is less about recovering from painful loss than it is about recovering a connection with their deceased mother through recollection and writing. They challenge the notion that grief and sorrow should be dealt with and forgotten. These poets bring back the dead "to interact once again with their communities" (Uppal 13). According to Berns, social expectations create a "closure frame" in which mourners can "navigate and contain grief" (166). Langhorst's rhizome metaphor exemplifies a proliferation of private grief that frequently exists under a pretense of calm. Beneath this appearance of closure lies what Berns calls "private disclosure"; that is, "to reveal information that was previously kept hidden. . . . people are more

likely to express their actual feelings about grief in a private circle rather than in public” (166). In representing the deceased to their reading public, these poets disclose the persistence of loss. Writing grief, a personal and communal ritual, is a corrective to violence and an antidote to “the fear of forgetting. Or the fear that others will forget” (Berns 141). The elegiac landscape visibly opens space for disclosure, diverse expressions of mourning, and dialogic engagement among voices of the dead and the living through intertextuality, recollection, and representation.

3. Homage: Textual Preservation & Re-Imaging the Maternal Subject

Textual preservation is a countermeasure to maternal marginalization in life and in literature. Conventions for mourning practices in public spaces vary among communities and change through time. For example, as Berns points out, there is a growing resistance towards visible memorials and public expressions of grief. One of the contributing factors is the current social drive towards closure:

Victims’ rights advocates argue that memorials are important for healing and that the government should not regulate grief....Sometimes people who use the argument of closure through remembrance run up against those who argue for closure through forgetting. (149; ellipsis mine)

Uppal suggests that the elegy “acts as a site for ritualized mourning and reunion... as a possible public site of mourning when other public spaces might be unavailable, either due to the removal of traditional mourning practices from the public sphere or due to marginalization of those practices” (15; ellipsis mine). Berns, Uppal, and others note the changing attitudes in society towards mourning and the pressure to conceal death from the public eye.

Elegiac writing not only resists the silence death initiates, but represents alternate forms of mourning mother-loss, and reimagines the maternal subject. Smythe claims,

The genre of elegy transforms other performative literary genres (such as auto-biography, praise, and the classical genres of lament and consolation) into tropological forms. An autobiographical segment of an elegy, for example, functions as a trope in that it signifies

something other than the speaker's 'life'—namely, a state of the elegist's textual 'work' of mourning, wherein grief is figured and survival is 'voiced.' (8)

Textual mourning for these prairie poets is a "work" of (re)figuring the mother and the daughter as subjects. For instance, Langhorst recalls her mother saying about her husband that "*he's a good man*" (14), giving her mother a voice and attesting to her mother and father's existence. In the first lines of the first poem, Langhorst refers to her father's painting and her own "peace/ in his excellence" (9) prior to her father's mental illness (15). Knowing that this "*good man*" eventually takes her mother's life, as well as his own, intensifies the grief. The text itself is the object which holds these memories, and gives voice to the mother as well as the poet-survivor.

MacDonald posits,

If we consider the elegy...as a designed artifact of mourning that is created primarily to testify to the presence of a passed entity and the memory of a living entity, then ... any study of the contemporary elegy must have one foot in the past and the other in the future—a ... position ... that speaks to the present with a good deal of political urgency. (12; ellipses mine)

As "designed artifacts of mourning," elegies are memorials to deceased and/or marginalized maternal subjects. They represent maternal voices, living entities of the past who speak into the present. Smythe argues that "the prosopopoetic 'voice' is a double voice in elegy: the voice of the absent as well as the voice of the survivor is figured in the performed and performative text" (8). Elegiac texts are sites where the reader can engage with both voices. These textual artifacts preserve individual maternal voices and memories within the larger community—present and future—and potentially counter gendered social norms and mourning practices.

Elegists craft dynamic artifacts, aesthetic texts that archive memories, sketch encounters with grief, and render relationships with the dead in new ways. Langhorst, in the eleventh poem of her "Spring Romance" sequence, exemplifies the potency of artistic expressions in relating with the dead:

beneath my bed i keep my mother's perfect crewel work the last thing
 my father saw before he shot her i write at their table in my dining room
 listening to the geese in the fields around me i keep his painting of the rich blues
 and greens and browns of a spring lake facing me as i look into
 the living room

where i can keep my eye on it (72)

Textual recollection allows the poet to review the past through her parents' works of art. Using the pronoun "i" Langhorst creates a dialogue with her self, her past, her deceased parents, and her reader. By referencing the "spring lake" in her father's painting, Langhorst triggers the reader's memory of an earlier poem about the lake: "forty years ago/ summer at the lake/ bright blue waves crashing," her mother spoke of her father as "*a good man*" (14; italics in text). Ironically, Langhorst keeps an eye on her father's painting, but hides her mother's embroidery beneath the bed, protecting a valuable artifact—"the last thing"—from destruction. Also, she uses the word "crewel" to evoke the homonym "cruel." These writing strategies reveal how the father's cruel work overshadows the mother's "perfect crewel work." Artistic expressions from her dead parents remain as visual evidence of their presence despite their absence, as well as objects that evoke remembrance. They are reminders of Langhorst's familial and artistic inheritances. Through her own artistic expression, she revives or regenerates the creative productivity of her parents. Rather than trying to forget the devastating past or seek closure, she faces the perpetrator, negotiates troubled familial relationships, and represents her grief literarily.

This work of remembrance, however, is not an easy one. Langhorst exposes the difficult process of recollection and translation of grief into words. The second last poem in the sequence "Menstrual Cup" exemplifies her sense of brokenness. Langhorst breaks words apart, leaving them right justified. These strategies, as in many of her poems, represent the cyclical process of mourning. She recognizes that a "ten / yea / r / trans / for / ma / tion" (19) has taken place. This

disruptive writing strategy reflects a series of incremental changes and a gradual shift in her perspective. The title of her poem sequence “Climate Change” also suggests this painstaking transformation. Langhorst feels compelled to respond to her mother’s death. For her, elegiac writing is “not/ a cur/ e/ but/ a / cal/ ling” (19). She is not driven by the Freudian notion of recovery from mourning, nor is she interested in catharsis or therapy. Rather, textual remembrance is her mission, her response to her mother’s tragic death. In honour of her mother, she enlists the reader and larger community to confront social issues of domestic violence against women. On facing pages Langhorst brings into sharp contrast the “*good man*” of “forty years ago” (14) with the man who “twenty years ago” had a stroke (15), the summer at the lake (14) and the sudden destruction of her family: “we find them three days later”—dead (15). She represents the upheaval that death initiates by breaking up the text and leaving large white spaces among shifting short lines. She also interweaves reoccurring fragments and interpolates multiple time periods. Particularly potent is the three-day gap between the actual time of her parents’ violent deaths and the discovery of their bodies. Langhorst repeats this three-day gap again in her poem sequence “Climate Change”: “three days the bodies lay” (29). These references allude to the biblical narrative of Jesus’ death and resurrection after three days. Reviving memories and family ghosts is no small task, especially when death and loss are born in the context of cruelty and violence. Langhorst draws attention to these silences, the gaps between ignorance and knowledge, and the awareness and the volition to respond to devastating experiences. These poems suggest that textual mourning resurrects the past, breaks the silence, and potentially stems cycles of violence.

Textual homage for Langhorst is not limited to the recollection or recovery of silenced maternal voices. Elegiac writing involves a new way of seeing, a new point of view. This

revisionist approach (re)writes and reimagines the subjective maternal body and voice rather than replacing the dead voice with the living. In the first poem of the sequence “Below the Wire,” Langhorst suggests that resurrecting the dead on a “linguistic landscape” (Uppal) not only involves mourning mother-loss, but it also applies to all living creatures on this planet:

to gather the dead resurrect a flattened hawk i don't know when it started
 a puff of down a beak an eye marking my path i have been for forty years a
 prophet on the highway each car flicks to life some long thick umber wing flaps
 and resettles for i am not revolted but afraid rueful wanting

to approach the place of holiness (48)

The “flattened hawk” on the highway signifies a “place of holiness,” like a roadside memorial, a reminder of the sacredness of life. Like a prophet, the poet feels a calling to resurrect the dead. For Langhorst, death triggers inquiry into the displacement, violence, and loss of all forms of life. She represents the vulnerable, those “flattened” and displaced, and “flicks [them back] to life” in her writing. Drawing the past into the present, her in/sights shed light in two directions simultaneously: back through history and forward into the future.

Moure also offers two points of view, but she employs two personae: E.S. and E.M. This double perspective is manifested in her poem “Remedia Amoris”:

Her eyes'
 indigence a ballad frenzy to the core

look back optic
 human will

to see and objects rise from
 their own properties

nowhere
 memoria amoris et gloriae voluptas

E.S.
 Bucaresti

Yet we know that what the tip of the white cane touches is processed in the visual area of the brain. Touch and sight merge. The brain doesn't care what body or prosthesis act as conduit for sight. The skin too.

[Take me in your arms] a way of seeing then.[There is nothing natural.] A sense organ (15; italics and brackets in original)

In this poem, E.S. critiques E.M. for looking back with impoverished eyes “to see” what doesn’t exist. The construction of couplets and enjambment create ambiguity. For example, the third couplet indicates that objects are visible and distinctive. However, the hinge word “nowhere” implies that these objects hold no “memoria” or memories. Moure’s mother said, “*I come from nowhere*” (4; italics in original). Here, the word “nowhere” also suggests that there is no love, glory or pleasure in recollection (a rough translation of the Latin phrase). E.M. offers another more prosaic perspective in the italicized lines. She claims the entire body is a “sense organ” that apprehends subjective experiences. All of the senses, including the skin, are conduits for sight—they merge in the mind. In/sight requires “human will/ to see” the past. This is particularly poignant in light of the systematic destruction of Moure’s Ukrainian ancestors, as well as other acts of violence. This approach to mourning and recovery involves all the senses in seeing the unseen and perceiving the thing itself, regardless of how unpleasant. Furthermore, this model reverses the violent erasure of female subjectivity. Like walking with a white cane, Moure traces the past and reimagines the maternal subject—body, mind, and voice—into poetic texts. Her construction of two voices—E.S. and E.M.—doubles the already doubled voice of the elegy; that is, the two personae augment “the prosopopoetic ‘voice’” of the absent mother and the voice of the survivor daughter (Smyth 8). Thus, Moure troubles ideas of authorship and subjectivity as well as exposes the constructedness of identities. In *my beloved wager*, she queries the notion of personhood: “What are the limits of individual consciousness? What are the borders of memory,

of the construction of the present, of the past and future?” (104). For Moure, the idea of “selfness comes from contextualization with or through the other, from this play between autonomy and other” (105). Elegiac writing is an exploration into experiences in relation to the other, whether with/through her personae E.S. and E.M., or her deceased mother. Moure blurs the border between recollection and construction; she refigures grief as a multi-vocal and intersubjective practice that “contextualizes” the self-other relation across time and space.

Love and the desire to reconnect with the deceased mother compel Moure and Langhorst to write despite experiences of unspeakable pain. This compulsion to resurrect and reconnect with the dead, Kaplan claims, arises from “Eros” and the desire to dialogue with others like us: “Any dialogue, even one that entails fear, threat, suffering, and self-punishment, is better than absence of dialogue” (32). Eros is not solely the god of erotic love in Greek mythology, but is also defined as “the sum of life-preserving instincts that are manifested as impulses to gratify basic needs, as sublimated impulses, and as impulses to protect and preserve the body and mind” (Merriam-Webster). It is “the principle of personal relatedness in human activities, associated with the anima” (mind or soul) in Jungian psychology (Oxford Dictionary). Kaplan, Uppal, and others, identify Eros as the drive to preserve life in opposition to the Freudian death drive or “life instinct” (Oxford). Elegiac writing, then, attends to the impulse to return and recover what has been lost. As I have already shown, these elegies arise out of love for the poet’s mother and a desire to preserve or protect the maternal and the self (survivor), the sensual experiences and the memories. According to Zwicky, the eros of poetry differs from the eros of narrative and sequential order (93); poetry is more about emotional responses and human (re)connections than about story. Langhorst portrays the force of desire—the fusion of anger and love, anguish and passion—and the preservation of mind and body, voice and experience in her poem “Eros”:

eros i have eros in every single socket my x-rated disease is just a highrise of
 bright cocktails my specialist distills with pride and light accomplishment you
 never see my secret pain a stiff epistemology a department of biology will never
 button up my frame my world i cannot bend it i will never be as i once planned
 it time ensures that i am guilty of dead mice and many rats but alive between
 those hidden faulted points i feel quick ruptures of my sanity my radiant
 disease gives my wild life to the plan that i am eros i am eros i am (52)

Eros energizes a powerful life-preserving response, apart from the mice and rats. Langhorst's block poem, with its lack of punctuation and enjambment of long lines, generates a drive to read from the beginning to the end without pause. Her "secret pain" has infected her entire being, an "x-rated disease" that remains unmentionable. The "stiff epistemology" connotes a restrained knowledge of her mother's death that "cannot bend." A "stiff" is also slang for a dead body. Her unnamed "secret pain" suggests the anguish she must negotiate due to her mother's murder and father's suicide. Langhorst exposes the blindness of her "specialist" and the "department of biology," implying that they are ignorant of her body, her desires, emotions, and experiences. The poem moves from "i *have* eros in every single socket" to "i *am* eros," negotiating the "ruptures of [her] sanity" (my emphasis). She refuses to let scientific deduction, or literary convention, control her frame or "button up" her sense of self and the turmoil she feels. The repetition "i am eros i am eros i am" also emphasizes the passion involved in returning to pain and writing her mother into existence. Eros insists on preserving mind *and* body. Reinterpreting maternal subjectivities resists traditional elegiac models and allows her to reveal and conceal her "secret pain" in a form flexible enough to bear her "wild life."

Disruptive elegiac designs and imagery trespass traditional male elegiac patterns and resist the syntactic order of story (Zwicky 98). Langhorst evidently disturbs traditional elegiac patterns. Like "Eros," her poem "Five-Way Distraction" further exemplifies her resistance to literary conventions:

i keep
 my back to the scenery
 i know (that chaos is poetry) deception of
 blowing elm leaves slender blue beardtongue crowding
 masses of sweet clover alfalfa (quickened) quackgrass
 invasion bed preening swallows (85)

Langhorst turns her “back to the scenery,” the pastoral poetic tradition in which nature is presented as idyllic, and represents plant and animal life as deceptive and invasive. Caesuras infiltrate the text and parentheses interrupt the lines. Langhorst’s disruptive poetics embodies the chaotic life of mother-loss and eruptions of grief. She uses imagery from the prairie landscape to represent her philosophy of elegiac writing: “chaos is poetry.” The “invasion” of “(quickened) quackgrass” represents the wild energy of eros that infiltrates her poems. Moreover, the terms “deception” and “invasion” allude to the circumstances that surrounded her mother’s murder, notions that also point to a regional history of colonization. Langhorst supplants idyllic prairie imagery and conventional consolatory models with poetic images and forms that signify the inner turmoil initiated by violence, death, and loss.

Martin-DeMoor employs the image of the moon, commonly associated with women, as well as the notion of communion to represent her mother’s presence in her absence:

Picture the moon’s communion, the pale of
 wafer, substantial even in daylight
 where it skims the grey perimeter of
 sky like a ghostly emissary, its
 body weighted dense as a loaf of bread.
 Tuck it under your tongue at once. Midnight,
 when no one will notice the eclipsed
 binary scar, immaterial as
 God or a war fought for reasons you don’t
 understand. A distortion, sea of blood.

Communion, the pale daylight, grey sky like
 a ghost, its body dense as bread under
 your tongue. No one will notice the scar

for reasons you don't understand: sea of
blood. God of distortion. Picture the moon. (51)

The title of her poem, “Ellipses,” indicates an omission or absence. Martin-DeMoor invites her readers to associate the “moon’s communion” with the mother-daughter relationship—though her mother is hidden from view for now, she remains “substantial.” Martin-DeMoor revises the Christian ritual of communion, the partaking of bread and wine in remembrance of the death of Christ, and transforms the tradition into an elegiac act of maternal remembrance. Through a series of repetitions, she creates an echo, a textual reverberation from one stanza to the next. The first stanza is double the length of the second stanza, which suggests that the first illuminates the second, or the second is a translation and condensation of the first. Either way, the repetition and doubling emphasize recollection and relationship. The reference to a “binary scar” brought on by her parents’ deaths, implies a doubly painful twofold mark of remembrance signified in the poem and her body. Her poem(s) is a “ghostly emissary” and a “pale wafer”—images that bear witness to her parents’ existence. She imagines her deceased mother as the moon, always present though not always visible, and represents the ongoing communion between the living and the dead.

In her poem “Remission,” Martin-DeMoor adapts the image of a shipwreck to represent her deceased mother’s body. Aware of a crack in “the skull of sky,” she admits that her vision is “fractional.” She listens for her mother’s voice:

I heard her voice, a shipwreck
somewhere out on the ocean—
though on the shore we could do nothing
beyond witnessing (61)

The long dash indicates an end stop, but it also suggests an extension beyond the text. Martin-DeMoor hears her mother’s voice as though from a great distance, a maternal presence that speaks across a vast ocean of absence. The enjambed lines also add to the effect of reaching

“beyond” sight. The living and the dead have not been completely separated. Though Martin-DeMoor feels helpless, “we could do nothing” to prevent her death, she identifies her position as a witness. Elegiac writing gives witness to mother-loss, yet upholds the mother-daughter relationship into the future. Later in the poem she develops the shipwreck imagery further:

Leaning into the air’s new velocity,
I imagine myself now at the helm
a boat blasted by waves, and wind as strong as an arm. (61 – 62)

She takes the “helm” of her own boat, bears witness to the past, and leans into the wind of the future. Martin-DeMoor moves forward with a new velocity—something like Langhorst energized by eros—ears attuned to mother’s voice, and sensitive to her guiding “arm.” In *Give Sorrow Words*, John H. Harvey suggests that the death of a parent “may shake up the person’s life in a way such that the person feels that he or she no longer has an anchor” (55). Although Martin-DeMoor feels herself “blasted by waves,” she is buoyed by her mother’s voice and body. Her image of the “shipwreck” suggests their relationship has been damaged, but not destroyed—an effective re-imaging of the maternal subject. Negotiating her mother’s death through poetry, Martin-DeMoor takes responsibility for her mother’s memories, and preserves them alongside her own through textual remembrance.

The image of the moon is used in a number of Martin-DeMoor’s poems as she watches for traces of her mother. A “strand of white hair” moves “across the moon” during a storm:

I’m watching the moon through thunder,
blank as one-way mirror.
I’m thinking *she could be out there, watching back
from the other side of all this*

emptiness where she told us
we were children, we would find heaven. (62; italics in text)

Though the moon seems as “blank as one-way mirror,” through self-reflection Martin-DeMoor reimagines her mother on a “linguistic landscape” (Uppal). Elegiac writing allows her to imagine possibilities: “*she could be out there,*” and later in the poem “maybe she is still fighting, with us, this earth.” The italicized lines suggest an internal conversation and an invitation to the reader to imagine with her. The presence of the maternal is experienced in memory, reflection, and in the physical world. In the final stanza of “Remission” she writes:

Maybe those cold convex bones
of light are hers, and remain, if only
to caliper the darkness. (62)

The image of the caliper as a metaphor is significant here. It suggests that maternal light measures the distance and/or depth of darkness. Unexpectedly, the light comes from the dead, and darkness dwells with the living. The maternal is also the measure from which the daughter perceives her world. In addition, the caliper can be used as a noun or a verb. As a noun, this two-legged measuring device is suggestive of her mother’s body (legs, arms) and the interrelationship between mother and daughter. Martin-DeMoor becomes the instrument through which the past is written into the present, and preserved for the future. Notably, the caliper is not a fixed instrument but is able to move, adjust, and extend its reach, just as maternal light can expose alternate ways of seeing. Martin-DeMoor listens, watches, and imagines her mother’s presence in a physical as well as a spiritual sense. Despite the reality of human mortality, textual mourning extends maternal life beyond death. Her white hair and cold convex bones merge with the light of the moon, an embodiment of maternal presence. Like Langhorst and Moure, Martin-DeMoor adapts and transforms conventional images to represent and preserve maternal perspectives as a means to evaluate the past and to gain in/sights for the future.

Poets discussed in this chapter not only negotiate their mother's death, but also construct living memorials to their mothers through elegiac writing. Moure, according to Lori Emerson,

understand[s] a text as that which must be read as an artifact of the author's act of writing and as that which bears meaning on countless different levels (from the paper on which it was written, the way in which it was written, in addition to the many vectors of meaning carried by each word, each combination of words); further, meaning here is also inevitably created as much by the author as by the text itself and the reader. ("Materiality" 55)

I concur with this idea of the text as an artifact, and that it "bears meaning on countless different levels" (55). I would also argue that textual homage is a living artifact, a site where the living and the dead commune and engage in mourning and meaning making. Elegiac writing arises, according to Martin-DeMoor,

from that place within us

Night terrors. The clenched fist of my heart
also a microphone
and picks up old conversations,
the memory of her memories—

Though I am alone here, and only here, and now

Memorializing her. Memorizing
those forced conversations. I listen
for micro-memory, phonic,
the wisp of the heart in the cleaving rock. (46)

These contemporary Canadian prairie poets and their texts pay homage to the maternal subject through mourning, memorizing, remembering, and preserving their mothers. Motivated by eros, the work of mourning is a continual return to reunite with the maternal subject. It is a drive to recollect memories, hear her voice, converse with her, and recover "the wisp" of what she has left behind. Marginalized by social and literary conventions, the maternal subject returns from the dead to speak to the living. Moure also makes this evident as she interweaves lines such as "[when I am gone, will you recall me, dearest trout?]" (66). Conventionally, square brackets

enclose words added to the original writer's text. This line suggests that Moure is adding her mother's words into her poetic text, especially in connection with the girl who "crossed the migration rout of the /Dane-zaa, [and] later the Dawson Creek-Edmonton road" (66). Moure not only makes her mother's voice visible, but also reveals a desire to be remembered. Textual preservation of the maternal subject differs from museums or other memorials. She writes,

Corn and basil laid on the face of the god, to give thanks for the
visible. The Museum, storehouse of the visible, I creep alongside" (36).

Museums preserve visible objects whereas textual mourning preserves the invisible subject and her encounters. Langhorst, Martin-DeMoor, and Moure "creep alongside" the visible to recover the invisible and honour their mothers' lives and voices. The elegiac landscape makes visible the experiences, memories, emotions, and images that exist unseen in "*that place within us*" (Martin-DeMoor 46). As Jonathan Goldberg states, "Speaking of and to the dead, and in the intensity of a desire that does not stop with death, is to find the voice of elegy" (514).

Chapter 3: Welcoming the Stranger: Representing the Mother-Child Relationship in Terms of Hospitality

Hospitality is not usually the first notion that comes to mind in relation to pregnancy and childbirth. However, the intersubjectivity of a daughter-mother relationship, as discussed in the previous chapter, emerges from the maternal body. Katheryn Bevis, in “Better than Metaphors?,” examines Levinas’ notion of the “Woman” as metaphor, and the intimacy of the maternal body as a dwelling place, or in Levinas’ terms, the “primary hospitable welcome” (321). Bevis states that “[t]he prenatal maternal body acts as both a host and, paradoxically, a hostage to the Other” (323), yet it is through the maternal body “that the human person can encounter that which lies beyond herself” (317). Similarly, Aristarkhova argues that “a relation of hospitality means acknowledging that the mother receives [her infant-guest], and [that] she is also hosted in other ways, when she is ‘at home with herself’ in her maternal relation” (176). The dialogic and intersubjective relationship of maternity, the embodiment of this “twoness” (Jackson) from pregnancy to childbirth and beyond, both affirms and troubles the notion of hospitality. How, then, do women write about this paradoxical and transformative experience of maternity?

Wendy J. Robbins, in “Breasting Body,” surveys the evolution of maternity poetry written by Canadian women: “until the middle of the twentieth century some of women’s most profound and central realities remained almost entirely taboo” (canadianpoetry.ca). Similarly, Cosslett states that “[a]s a central, life-changing event for many women, childbirth needs to be made visible, written about, from a woman’s perspective. Too often, the story has been taken away from women by the ‘audience perspective’ accounts of fathers, or, more influentially, doctors” (2). Pregnancy and childbirth have remained taboo in society and literature for much too long. Critics like Robbins and Cosslett call for “the recovery of maternal subjectivity in the birth-story” (Cosslett 1, 2). In response, I will explore representations of maternity from the

woman's perspective. More specifically, I will investigate the writing strategies Cook, Croll, Gordon, Harris, Diehl-Jones, and Unrau use to counter silences associated with maternity, to construct mother-child relationships, as well as to negotiate and represent the metamorphic experiences of becoming a mother. Although there are diverse ways of becoming a mother—adoption, step-parenting, fostering, and social mothering to name a few—these poets write about becoming a biological mother in the context of a heterosexual relationship. In analyzing their poetry, I will consider how each woman “gives” space to the unseen “other” in her body, and receives the infant stranger at the moment of birth.

Recovering maternal subjectivities, Cosslett posits, begins by negotiating and (re)writing the dominant ideologies of childbearing and childbirthing. Firstly, the “official” versions of childbirth in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are based on “medical discourse” (Cosslett 2). O'Reilly reiterates, “[T]he medical definition of birth is codified as the official and only meaning of childbirth” (“Labour Signs” 217). Cosslett and O'Reilly, among others, rightly claim that medical ideologies of childbirth “reduce women to objects,” and make their efforts of labour “automated procedure[s]” of production (Cosslett 2; O'Reilly 219). O'Reilly adds that “scientific and mechanical metaphors”—the uterus is a machine with “efficient or inefficient contractions” and “normal” rates of progression—“result in the discursive erasure of the birthing woman as an active subject and facilitate her objectification” (219). Furthermore, as Diane Speier claims in her article “Becoming a Mother,” pregnant women in the twenty-first century must face a plethora of choices, and despite all of the medical knowledge of maternity, “the medicalization of childbirth does little to alleviate the fears that women have—fear of pain, fear of the power, and fear of the unknown” (16). A second ideology that has become influential in stories of maternity is “natural childbirth,” which includes “home births, birth centres, and more power for

midwives” (Cosslett 4; O’Reilly 218). Unfortunately, this stance excludes those who desire or require medical aid—in my case, an epidural and a caesarian delivery. This so-called “liberating counter discourse,” O’Reilly argues, “constructs an impasse between the discursive ideal and the ‘real’ circumstances of birth” (221), but “[w]ith equal access to social technologies, feminists may be able to codify and signify their own discourse of childbirth” (222). Neither medical metaphors nor “natural” discourses of childbirth appear adequate. Women’s bodies are not baby machines, yet technologies potentially save lives. Cosslett identifies “a third, marginalised, unofficial popular discourse” missing from the discussion, “the ‘old wives’ tale’—the oral tradition of women telling each other about childbirth” (4). Dismissed by medical and natural supporters, these unstructured “old wives’ tales” “challenge the simple, optimistic structures of our modern myths of birth” (4). Moreover, cultural birth stories inflected by race and class are also absent from “official” discourses, yet, as Cosslett points out, they “leave their mark when women write the experience from their point of view” (4 – 5). Ideologies and experiences of pregnancy and parturition are often in opposition and can exclude some women’s stories.

Women’s stories have been either idealized or medicalized and these discourses are widely broadcasted in western popular culture. By writing personal stories of childbirth, women gain “power to take over the story... control the experience; ...to protest, or celebrate, lack of control” (Cosslett 3). Also, writing about becoming a mother counters the marginalization of individual particularities. I propose that poetic discourses liberate women to innovatively represent their experiences in bearing and birthing an infant. This chapter seeks to answer a similar question posed by Laurie Kruk in her article “More than One, Less than Two”: “What happens when Canadian poets become mothers?” (172). Like her, I see the potential of a “vast territory” of poetry yet to be explored (173). Therefore, I will consider the ways these

contemporary poets represent “a relation of hospitality” with their unborn/ newborn, and if they are or are not “at home” with their maternal selves and their unseen “other” as they bear, birth, receive, or bury their infant-stranger.

1. Bearing the Stranger: an Embodied & Ambiguous Welcome

According to Cosslett, the lines between fiction and autobiography are blurred: “so-called ‘real life’ accounts of childbirth are also constructed in negotiation with other discourses, and even with literary patterns” (5). Moreover, during pregnancy, as Ruth F. Lax explains, women turn their attention inward to the formation of and interrelationship with their “fantasy child,” and develop an “expanding dual self-representation” (3). These embodied experiences of pregnancy emerge from what Guenther calls “an Other *in the midst of the same*” (*The Gift* 55), and thus affect the construction and representation of the self and the “fantasy child” (Lax) or “familiar stranger” (Guenther). The poetic texts *Drawing down a daughter*, *Blood Mother*, and *Hump*, represent the embryonic mother-other (mother-unborn) relationship and the metamorphic gestation period from conception to parturition. As Canadian prairie poets, Harris, Gordon, and Croll incorporate images and metaphors that reflect where they live as well as depict their bodies as a temporary “residence” or home for the unborn. Writing the body for Harris is tied to the “white” city of Calgary, a “drowned city,” and her Caribbean heritage, an ambivalent bond similar to that of the mother and unborn. Her protagonist observes the inhospitable city through her window like an exile. She longs to call it home, a place for her and her daughter to belong. Croll views the pregnant body as “this western city the country/ of my own body,” and the “residence of my daughter/ my heart” (35). Her body is apparently a hospitable space, a dwelling place for the unseen stranger. As a resident of Winnipeg, Gordon sets several poems in the Assiniboine Forest. She associates the unborn with a squatter, a colonizer and consumer of her

body. As the following analysis demonstrates, writing poetry opens space for these women to find their own lines to represent the mother-unborn interrelationship.

In her essay “Bringing Forth Life from Body to Text,” Michele Lise Tarter proclaims “Breaking the silence, breaking the taboo, women are now taking part in the transgressive and subversive activity of writing the female body” (31). Claire Harris breaks several taboos with her innovative book *Drawing down a daughter*, writing the pregnant female body and mother-unborn relationship from a non-white point of view. Her book title bears a double meaning: her daughter is both portrayed in language, and drawn from her body at birth. Harris blurs the borders between poetry and prose, exploring pregnancy through culturally inflected stories, dreams, journal entries, poems, songs, and letters. Weaving together these genres, her collection embodies the mother-child intersubjectivity, as well as the interrelationship between pregnancy, writing, and the writer-reader relationship. Near the centre of the collection Harris writes:

Daughter to live is to dream the self
 to make a fiction
 this telling i begin
 you stranded in landscape of your time
 will redefine shedding my tales
 to grow your own
 as i have lost our ancestors your
 daughters will lose me
 remembering only a gesture a few words (43)

In this excerpt, Harris’ pregnant speaker reveals the significance of dreams and storytelling in defining herself for the sake of her unborn daughter. From the perspective of being a mother and a daughter, Harris’ speaker recognizes each daughter must grow her own tales. This idea that living is “to make a fiction” suggests that self-identity emerges from circumstances and the imagination. Harris also points to the interconnectedness of living and writing. Dannabang Kuwabong posits that in this excerpt “[t]he woman refers to herself as daughterhood expert

because she took lessons from her mother on the quality of dreams and reality. She now transmits that knowledge to her unborn daughter in the form of the text” (“The Mother as Archetype” 118). However, the unborn daughter must eventually take this knowledge and “redefine” her identity in terms of her own particular landscape of time. Moreover, her location in time and place will shape the fiction she makes of her selfhood. In using the word “stranded,” Harris also implies that dreams and fictions are limited, bounded by a historical landscape.

Harris constructs a textual landscape that conveys the knowledge of “daughterhood” from several points of view. Mother-poets like Harris, Kruk asserts, recognize the “psychological and cultural multiplicity of identifications” (173). Harris’ book embodies the complexities of identity compounded by maternity. The opening poem sequence, entitled “The Gathering,” implies a meeting place, a compilation, and a process of collecting, an apt image for Harris’ writing strategies. According to Kruk, Harris’ “polyphonous exploration of the threshold state of the pregnant woman” allows her to reconceive maternity through “her protagonist Patricia” (173). This “polyphonous” strategy frees Harris to interpolate and engage with a number of voices and perspectives. The following excerpt exemplifies the dialogic interplay between the pregnant woman and her unborn daughter in the context of Harris’ own historical “landscape” (43):

I wake hunted curled around a small doubt the air as
after a thrumming of wings I reach for your note book
stroke the soft belly: Baby we journey down dreamlines
alone while your father searches islands ‘a safe place for
this daughter!’ my mother’s terrible love does not alarm
him . . . at least Girl you’ll be born here . . . (8; ellipses in the text)

The use of gaps, ellipses, line breaks, dialogue, and disparate thoughts make visible the erratic, interrupted, relational processes of maternity and writing. Pronouns throughout the collection shift between she, her, i, and you, often blurring the boundaries between self and other, infant and mother, as well as mother and grandmother. In this case, the quotation marks indicate it is

the father who differentiates “this daughter” (the unborn) from her pregnant mother. Harris emphasizes “dreamlines” as an image of maternity rather than bloodlines. The notion “to live is to dream the self” applies to the mother-child relationship as they “journey down dreamlines” together. The “we” of maternity is significant here as they are also taking this journey “alone,” in the absence of the father. In contrast to the “terrible love” of her mother, Patricia intends to be a different kind of mother to her Girl in this new place. She constructs their entwined journey in a note book, a gathering of “dreamlines” that represent their particular intersubjective condition from pregnancy to the threshold of their (re)birth.

Writing the “bodily predicament” (Cosslett) of pregnancy requires the imagination as fetal development remains unseen. Hence, the image of “dreamlines” is apropos both to the process of writing as well as the representation of the mother-unborn interrelationship. Harris constructs the “fantasy child” (Lax) in light of her socio-cultural context:

now as in a dream
 your face drifts too just out of sight
 though we are roped to each other
 i picture your hair sprung black brushing my chin (112)

The unborn face lies “just out of sight,” on the verge or “threshold” (Kruk) of knowing. Writing draws into existence the pregnant woman’s unseen infant, a textual vision open to any number of possibilities. The image “we are roped to each other” signifies the interconnectedness of mother and fetus. They share their blood, their journey. Still, the “we” of maternity troubles the alleged mother-fetus “unity.” They may be “roped to each other,” but as Teresa Zackodnik points out, the protagonist recognizes a “bodily split and divided subjectivity” (176). Harris writes: “are you awake Girl she strokes her belly/ Daughter we are bare foot and pregnant / in the kitchen” (28). In this way, Harris draws “attention to the division her mother-speaker senses through her maternal body” (Zackodnik 176). The separation of “Girl” and “we” within the lines also makes

visible their intersubjectivity—together yet divided—as “we” move about the kitchen.

Maternity—self and other—engages the senses and the imagination.

The fetus makes itself known both in the growing awareness of independent movement and in reshaping the woman’s body. Their entwined bodies are concretized in the following text:

She hears her name again calling
As she were lost

for
her
self
for
the
child
roped
in
her
womb
she
refuses

remembering another making small in a tin tub trying
not to splash (15 – 16)

Harris creates a profile of the pregnant body with words on the page. The poem depicts the mother-child relationship as language intertwines the self and the other: two subjectivities, one history. In this way, Harris makes visible the interconnectedness of the pregnant woman’s child-self, expectant self, and the not-yet-visible daughter that she bears. Referencing the “lost” child-self also hints at a loss initiated by pregnancy. The presence of the unborn alters the woman’s shape and her identity.

As the two previous excerpts suggest, being roped together is both an amiable and an antagonistic relationship. Zackodnik claims that the mother-poet feels ambivalence “toward both her unborn child and her role as nurturer,” and characterizes “her pregnancy as both a ‘gift’ and enslavement of her body” (176). These contrary perspectives are interspersed in the poetic texts.

For example, the pregnant protagonist sees the note book as a “birthgift” for the “Child who opens me” (8). Later on she reconceives their relationship as “a contract of gift/ renewable from moment to moment” (109). Conversely, she writes:

restless
 the child slides into kicks out again again! again!
 oh!

a wish to be free shape that is not shape wisp in
 the corner an eye (10)

In each caesura the reader can imagine the woman feeling the infant kick against the wall of her uterus. The construction of this excerpt makes the subject ambiguous, or intersubjective. The words “restless” and “a wish to be free” could refer to either mother or the unborn or both. Regardless, the fetus makes herself known in utero. Still, Patricia is neither passive nor silent: “Girl i ain’t no lily pad!” (11); “Girl i hope when you’re finished using my body, i can/ still go to concerts in the park . . .” (34; ellipsis in text). She confesses in third person, in “truth she is terrified” (10), and later, “how okay can/ you be carrying thirty pounds about the middle/ thirty kicking pounds” (109). Just as the “Girl” makes herself known within her body, the mother-writer makes herself known in writing. Harris, like Gordon and Croll, represents the ambiguities and fears that accompany maternity. Writing maternity for these poets is a strategy that potentially embodies their multidimensional experiences and their “slide” and “kick” encounters with the Other.

Bearing a child brings expectations of preparation and promise to welcome (tolerate) the stranger, to provide a home and care for the newborn. Guenther argues,

To be responsible is not only to welcome the stranger into one’s home, but to bear her in the flesh, despite the pain that this bearing might bring. The maternal body is not only a host but already a hostage for the Other, unable to extricate herself from a responsibility that she did not undertake but to which she was already assigned by the Other. (*The Gift* 6)

Maternity invokes and coerces responses of hospitality and responsibility. To find “a safe place” is already demanded by the Other before she is born. Guenther argues that the relationship of the unborn-pregnant woman and the newborn-new mother implies a responsibility that is open-ended “in spite of the pain.” Furthermore, her exploration of Levinas’ phrase “like a maternal body,” suggests an inclusive and ethical conception of hospitality—we are always already responsible to welcome the stranger (*The Gift* 57).¹⁵ In the poem sequence “She rises,” Harris represents this maternal sense of responsibility for the future of her daughter:

She rises

going
 out to
 day that existed
 in/ and
 before
her body
her body
 day’s
 memory
 of it illusive
 imprint
 waiting for
her nakedness

inside her the child thrashing
daughter she needs
dreads
for who would bring a child
skin shimmering black
[...]
who would choose to cradle such tropic
grace on the Bow’s frozen banks

(Harris 17, 18; ellipsis mine)

¹⁵ Levinas, as Guenther explains, associates the maternal body with the ethical responsibility to bear the Other, “to substitute oneself for the Other...in spite of the pain that this might bring” (“Like a Maternal Body” 119). Guenther adapts this notion for her “feminist ethics of maternity...to destabilize any strict correlation between women and mothers, or...motherhood and responsibility....I can become ‘like’ a maternal body whether or not I physically give birth...[and] bear responsibility for another...even the stranger” (120).

Central to the poem is the doubling of the words “her body” and the two-in-one capacity of the female body. This doubled yet connected image of “her body” is further emphasized by the shaping of the lines to create a double movement. The words “existed” and “illusive” extend to the right side of the poem and create a comparison, a double with a difference: she exists, the unborn is illusive. However, the association between “illusive” and “imprint” implies that the unborn has left her mark(s) on her mother’s body as well as in her writing. The child’s face may be “just out of sight,” but her presence is obvious. Being “roped together,” the “child thrashing” inside her is not only dependent on her in utero but in “her nakedness” at birth.

Of greatest concern for Harris’ protagonist is the birth and well-being of her black child born into such an inhospitable place. The “frozen banks” of the Bow River are certainly uninviting, but what terrifies her most is birthing her “tropical/grace” into this racist country. Harris uses particularly racialized language here to reveal the challenges women of colour continue to experience in Canada. Kruk claims, “[t]he expectant mother is caught between an irresistible maternal vision of newness, and the hard-won knowledge of life as a black woman in a still racist society” (173). Preparation and promise are in conflict for this woman, torn between her husband’s desire to move back to Trinidad, and her desire to birth her child in Canada. Harris represents a situation where pregnancy exemplifies a radical responsibility for the Other that goes so far as to “substitute” her “maternal self” for the sake of the Other; that is, to identify with and care for the infant who cannot care for herself in such an inhospitable environment:

O Sunchild sleep be safe
learn your self (34)

Writing about pregnancy, for poets like Harris, is also a safe place to “learn your self,” to grow a fiction that represents the racial dilemmas many marginalized women face. Poetic texts provide a liminal space where “[t]his cultural/linguistic ‘betwixt and between-ness’” (Kruk 174) can be

characterized and confronted. Furthermore, in *Drawing down a daughter*, Harris' dialogic writing strategies engage readers with political issues, such as racism as well as sexism:

Girlchild i wish you something to be passionate
about someone to be passionate with a father for instance
natural opponent of any right thinking girl

and where the hell is yours

i'm telling you Girl you have to watch men
you leave the islands to come to Canada
you meet the man in Canada
he's born in Canada his grandfather's born in Canada
you marry him in Canada
now he wants to live in the islands! (23)

Girl you might as
well face it they don't let us play football (109)

The repetition of “Girl” and “you” not only constructs a dialogic relationship with the unborn, but also with the reader. When the woman-poet writes “i’m telling you,” “any right thinking girl,” and “face it,” she confronts the reader with the complex pressures of gender, culture, and class involved in maternal interrelationships. For Patricia, the birth of her Girl is a chance to start fresh. This is evident as Harris challenges socio-cultural and gendered norms along with literary conventions. She presents what Cosslett calls an “unofficial” cultural birth story in which ethnicity illuminates other maternity discourses (4). Just as her protagonist Patricia writes this “birthgift” to her unborn daughter, I would argue that Harris writes her poetic text as a “birthgift” to all daughters. She writes from a maternal consciousness and expresses her concerns for the Othered living on the Canadian prairies.

Ariel Gordon's maternal consciousness is evident in the three-part construction of her book, a representation of her experiences before, during, and after pregnancy. The double entendre of the title *Hump*—a round protrusion (noun) and copulation (verb)—sets up the

context for Gordon to explore alternate interpretations of reproduction. From the opening poem in the first section, “Spring in Assiniboine Forest,” she evokes ardent images of fertility and procreation. The exuberant language of springtime is laced with wit and innuendo as poet and partner witness “the balloon-rub chorus/ of bullfrogs from puddles & ditches” spawned by “the heady amphibian lust of last year” (9). This is the season when “frogs hump spring’s wet/ backside in the ultimate catch-and-release slip-slide” and the “blades of grass unsheathed/ in the work of switching seasons/ are undercut by the spring-loaded sounds/ of deer pounding turf” (10). Gordon’s wordplays entwine human desire and foreplay with the reproductive processes of local flora and fauna. In addition, hyphenated words signify the coupling of creatures during mating season, and suggest the natural, biological and/ or sensual aspects of sexual attraction that “colour our days” (9). However, as the final poem in this section implies, these procreant images only tell half-truths. In the third stanza, Gordon refers to her husband and his dream:

He comes to my elbow like a thorn
 in his side, murmurs that our daughter
 unborn unconceived has been running into traffic
 again how the cars narrowly missed her
 & turns towards me with a snore
 so soft all my curves
 go flat. (“Pre-conception” 38)

Her use of enjambment draws attention to the end words, and to the movement from the longest line of “traffic” towards the brevity of final line. The hinge word “thorn” not only links her “elbow” with “his side,” but the “thorn” is surprisingly associated with a potential “daughter.” Shifting lines and bad dreams, like the thorn, disrupt the couple’s pleasures and create a sense of uncertainty about the future. Gordon’s series of poems in this section shift from the jubilation of coupling to the deflation of his “snore” (38). Again, the title “Pre-conception” simultaneously rouses anticipation and challenges assumptions. For Gordon, and the other poets, the challenge is

finding ways to write past the preconceptions of pregnancy and narrative conventions associated with mother/ing.

The second section of *Hump* represents the dramatic changes that occur during pregnancy, physically and otherwise. In her poem “Two months: moving day” (41), Gordon provides clues for the reader to detect that a conception has occurred. For example, the title suggests she is two months pregnant. In the third stanza, readers are informed of a “secret”:

Today, you are only another secret I’ve kept
from my mother. Today, minus my little yellow pill
filling sinuses trump a filling uterus & anyways
mum’s drunk with the spirit of moving on (41)

Gordon keeps this secret from her mother as they pack up the things Oma left behind.

Unexpectedly, she draws her readers into a moment of intimacy. We “overhear” her address the “you” that is “filling” her uterus, the secret that her mother does not yet know. Writing allows Gordon to be suggestive as she imagines the “you,” the potential other that has begun to grow within. Moreover, she juxtaposes the seasonal poems in the first section with the new season of maternity. It is also the season of allergies. The image of seasonal patterns is further developed in her poem “Three months: morning sickness” (43). Gordon begins each of the three stanzas with a reference to her own experiences with morning sickness: “The season regurgitates what it can’t absorb”; “Where the season has gone light-headed”; “The season burps tastes bile” (43). These opening lines repeat the word “season” and stress that her condition is temporary. Moreover, the specific images engage the senses and modify the reader’s imagination. Likewise, pregnancy alters Gordon’s perception and inflects her poetics. Later in the poem she concludes, “there are patterns/ there are repercussions” (43), indicative of the transformation and consequences she faces.

In the evolutionary process of gestation, Gordon grows more cognizant of the fetal presence within her. Gordon expresses an “inwardness” (Lax) in her poem “Six months: in the bath” (46 – 47):

I am a submerged island
 a barnacled beast with an exposed flank
 [...] *the scuttlebutt of you*
sculling between my hips
 You are a trim swimmer
 [...]
 making me a metre-spinner instead of a fisher
 a grease-trail woman who could yank you out
 [...] Sea-immersion
 would make for a different creature
 but you are our cunning candlefish our very own
 spinning hooligan.

You grow into an oily fish
 a fatty cargo of lanugo & vernix
 a spawning run of one circling my fleshy pool
 kicking off from the lip of my cervix with each lap
 making me the murky tank to your shy finny-flit (46; ellipses mine)

Gordon reimagines the unseen other in relation to her own morphing body. Although the image of fetus as fish is not that unusual, Gordon revises the image; she accumulates nautical imagery to explore the fetus-female body interrelationship. At six months, she can feel the “scuttlebutt,” “swimmer,” “candlefish,” “spinning hooligan,” “oily fish,” “fatty cargo” as it actively sculls, swims, dives, circles, and kicks inside the submerged female island, her body a “barnacled beast,” “a grease-trail woman” and a “murky tank.” Gordon’s imagery represents the movements she feels but cannot see, and how she feels about what she can see. The “repercussions” of childbearing not only alter her body but change how she reconceives her own image. Her body bump is an island in the tub, but the image also suggests isolation. As a “barnacled beast,” her body is like a rock, increasing in size and weighed down in the bathwater. Moreover, she is also a “beast” hampered by the tenacious being that clings within. The

accretion of images aids readers in imagining what can and cannot be seen as she negotiates sensual, psychological, and relational alterations.

Gordon also explores the “grease-trail”¹⁶ image to represent the entwined relationship between the unseen other and her body. She pictures the nutritive link between the fetus and the female body as a trade route for candlefish. In the context of pregnancy, the “grease-trail woman” carries the oily “candlefish” spawned in her “fleshy pool.” Gordon’s images of the barnacle or freeloader, and the “grease-trail” or trade route, would suggest that the relationship is one-sided, always giving to the other. As a trade route, her body transports nourishing provisions to the interior much like a host serves a stranger. Thus, the poem positively frames this relationship, so that it is possible to think of the siphoning fetus as a stranger rather than a parasite. Gordon’s reference to a “murky tank” might also suggest that her maternal body receives “the rejected waste from the guest” (Aristarkhova 176). Gordon, like others, questions the function of the female body and bond with the fetus. Is she a host or held hostage or both?

Anne Simpson portrays the pregnant female body as host:

When I was pregnant, host to a life that was not my own, there were times when I thought I had nothing to do with the squirrel-like quickenings, the *making* that was going on in my body. Nor did I have much to do with the delivering of a new life. It was out of my control, and all I could do was give myself over to it. It was body doing what body does so well—generating life. (157)

For Simpson, the female body is a “host to life,” but is also held hostage, governed by biological processes. Her statements of passivity tend towards a natural discourse around pregnancy and parturition. There are times when the female body seems detached—“body doing what body does”—and disengaged from the mind. Pregnant women may feel “squirrel-like quickenings” going on inside their body, but they may also feel detached from the fetal stranger. Interestingly,

¹⁶ Mirjam Hirsch, in her paper “Trading across time and space,” examines the “grease trails” used for trading oil fish from the B.C. coast to the interior, and the importance of Oolichan (candlefish) to the Northwest Native tribes.

both Simpson and Gordon use images from nature and link fetal movements with animal behaviour: the “squirrel-like quickenings” and the “shy finny-flit” of a fish. Their imagery suggests the uncanny, mysterious inklings of a life, evident and felt, yet unobservable.

However, the host versus hostage debate goes beyond biology. In the final stanza, Gordon uses a different set of metaphors and perspective to reimagine her entwined relationship:

Tonight you are quiet
 only a buttered lump a morsel that escaped my mouth
 but the moral & bite of this story
 is if I am only another plump-rumped Aphrodite
 rising from the dying foam of these waters
 he is the one with the empty stomach
 who will reach out
 to somehow steady us both. (47)

Gordon suggests there is more than one way to imagine the “spinning hooligan” and “barnacled beast.” The “fatty cargo” is also a “buttered lump,” a source of satisfaction, “a morsel” or portion of the story she is telling. Gordon reimagine the fetus as a delicious morsel, thereby reversing the fetus-as-parasite motif. She also envisions herself as the “plump-rumped” goddess of love and beauty rising from the sea. If the mother is positioned “as a hospitable space,” Aristarkhova reminds, then the “gifts of that relationship, their sources and their possibilities” must be reconsidered (176). For Gordon, the “hospitable space” goes beyond her body and biology. The linked words “metre-spinner” represents her doubled (doubling) self, a poet and a pregnant woman, a “two in one” subjectivity (Cosslett 117). Also, the words “metre” and “spinner” bear generative cargo. Spinning words and blood feed the poem and the fetus. The “moral & bite of this story,” not only involves her relationship with the internal other, but also with the external other(s). The “he,” mentioned earlier in the poem, refers to “the pool attendant,” the father. He plays an integral role in keeping her afloat literally and figuratively. Gordon integrates the father, and the reader, into the relational matrix. Similarly, in her poem “Seven months: ultrasound

introductions” (50), Gordon includes the father, a “big eye,” as he anxiously observes “the wet magnification” of the image, a grainy “fin & bony ripple” on the screen. What was unseen is now observed as a pixelated image. Each image is one more representation of what is actually growing within her. However, the pun in the final line, “I’m the only one likely to go belly up,” which colloquially means she is the one likely to die, suggests she feels the “bony” presence more intensely than the other onlookers. The pun also implies a dread with the impending birth as well as the “death” of her non-maternal self. Writing poetry allows Gordon to reimagine pregnancy in multiple ways and illustrate the physical and emotional changes in the process. Each poem offers glimpses into her multifaceted and paradoxical experiences of maternity.

Bearing the stranger also involves bearing with and confronting (un)written socio-cultural expectations and assumptions. Gordon’s poem “Eight months: what to expect/ when you’re expecting” exposes the kind of scrutiny and advice others impose on pregnant women:

*Is it...a good thing?
Do you know if it's a boy or a girl?
[...]
When are you due?
What name do you have picked out?*

*Really?
Was it...planned?
[...]
You ARE going to breastfeed, aren't you?
So, are you all ready? No?*

*Careful! (Don't fff—)
Your life will never be the same, you know.*

*You have no idea.
When's the next one coming? (55; ellipses in brackets mine)*

Gordon constructs her list so that these intrusions become more pointed as the gestation period progresses. Her poem exemplifies the ways maternal bodies are objectified and subjected to the

judicious gaze of strangers. Gordon's interpolation of advice manual-style inquiries and naturalized social scripts exposes the dominant ideologies that pervade maternity. These coupled lines create friction and grow in intensity toward the final lines of the poem. In addition, the poem is written in the second person, mirroring the questions back to the reader for re-examination. Gordon demonstrates how these prevalent queries propagate "official" stories and muzzle women's own childbearing stories.

One of the issues with representing pregnancy, Cosslett claims, is that "[o]ur culture has no way of formulating the intersubjectivity between mother and foetus/baby without reducing one to the object of the other" (8). Sue Croll, like Harris and Gordon, counters "official" stories and conventional depictions of maternity and reimagines the mother-unborn inter-relationship. She introduces her collection with the poem "projection"—another title with multiple meanings. Similar to Gordon's *Hump*, projection suggests a protrusion, a thrusting action, like projecting emotions onto others, or predicting the future. Recalling Harris' profile of a pregnant body, here Croll sees a projection of her pregnant mother on film:

a wavering colour
 projection of my pregnant
 mother wringing the last light
 of memory from this fragile vein
 of 48-year-old film stock
 where I steal a fleeting image
 of myself

unborn (11)

Croll sets up her collection with a moving image of her unborn self and her mother. The filmic image "remembers" the brief yet visible sign of the unseen and unknown stranger, an indication of her coming into existence. Her mother's pregnant body is a projection of a maternal welcome Croll ultimately provides for her own children. Writing maternity for Croll is not only a dual

projection of the mother-unborn/ newborn, but also a double vision looking back and ahead, envisioning her own children seeing representations of their “unborn” selves in her poetry. Croll grapples with how to represent the dynamic interrelation of bloodlines that pregnancy signifies. The biological ties are evident in *Blood Mother*, but it is Croll’s personality, particular choices, lived experiences, and images of maternity that add “colour” to her poems, and draw her mother and her children together. The “wavering” lines, like film, create a sense of movement, capture “fleeting” images of her unborn, and counter rigid ideological conventions and maternal images.

The *Blood Mother* collection, as the title suggests, stresses the connectedness of blood and bodies and family lines. Like Gordon, Croll’s poem “desire made flesh” expresses the power of desire, hope for the future, and patterns of procreation:

threads have knotted have braided themselves
into ropes between us through the years

strands have thickened our flesh
connection solidifying to bone and muscle
and heart the sudden web of the heart strung along

beating blood pathways a tapestry of entwined flesh
forced into the lush uterine bed to weave
40 burgeoning weeks into our bodies’ desire (15)

Croll uses the tapestry metaphor to illustrate the intricate patterns of bloodlines knotted and braided together. Likewise, she interweaves caesuras into her poetic lines to signify the beating rhythms along “blood pathways.” Cosslett affirms that “the body itself, the physical condition of maternity, challenges all our cultural scripts, and resists a unifying definition” (5). The beauty of “desire made flesh,” as Croll’s images illustrate, is that each time the pregnant body weaves an infant, it is unlike any other. Blood and familial connections, like poetry, do not follow straight lines but generate web-like relations. The beauty of writing maternity is that every poet creates

something new, each with her own rich experiences and word-patterns braided into poetic lines—genetics and poetics are intertwined.

The relationship between pregnancy and writing poetry is also developed in Croll’s poem “alphabet” (16). She uses the book as a metaphor for the gestating female body:

the image all by itself
 lying across the horizon
 of the line the lip
 of the next riding up
 to compress the picture
 this is how we house pregnancy
 and how pregnancy houses us
 as each word each key
 stroke each flick and pull
 of the page makes letters
 and their meanings inhabit the book
 of the body each printing brands
 this sudden kick
 start as life the beginning
 of life gets its hooks into us
 the body becomes narrative
 unfolding a steady accruing of detail
 [...]
 until the alphabet is complete” (16; ellipsis mine)

Croll intertwines writing and maternity, imprinting her body (and the fetal body within her) on the page—body as text becomes a textual body. The two lines “how we house pregnancy/ and how pregnancy houses us” further suggest the kind of mother-fetus intersubjectivity that Cosslett was calling for. Croll overturns typical “medical” and “natural” discourses. She is gestating language and birthing a text as the fetus, “smaller than the letter/ ‘a’ on this page,” begins its own story. Details accumulate until the alphabet, the story, the unborn, grow to full term. Croll’s poem illustrates how words bear more than the image of the letter, and that the maternal body houses a story in living letters.

With ultrasonic technology, images of the fetus make visible what previously remained a secret. The image produced by an ultrasound is a “projection” of the future infant. Croll responds to the ultrasonic image in her poem “annunciation”:

in light on this dark december morning
a child is suggested

no st lucia's day reaches beyond
suggestion ultra sound is simple
truth an illuminated manuscript
the story of this life inscribes itself

inside my body where a second heart blooms
and I see flashing like lightning
what will be a baby a curled near-nothing
through the magnifying gold
fish bowl of my bladder so many clear
glasses of water inflating me into a phantom

of pregnancy as it will not be seen
till spring and there is this water lily
this fish of a child my child
floating on a soft curve of spine
and it is the heart that is first visible
on this day suddenly sacred to sight (17)

Gordon and Croll respond to the ultrasound experience very differently. Gordon compares the “wet magnification” and grainy image with her bodily sensations, whereas Croll expresses her encounter in religious terms. Like the filmic image of her pregnant mother, the ultrasonic image is an “illuminated manuscript” that suggests a child, but it also reveals the “truth” of “this life.” The sacred secret within her body begins to “inscribe itself”—a new story. Similar to her poem “alphabet,” Croll envisions her maternal body as a book in which the unborn writes itself. Here she represents the “illuminated” image of the fetus as a fish. However, in this sudden “sacred to sight” moment, she experiences a deeper bond with the unborn: “this fish of a child” is “my child.” This “water lily,” whose “heart blooms,” is no longer a “phantom// of pregnancy.” Croll

draws on cinematic and ultrasonic images, as well as her own body, to announce and inscribe the transforming presence of an other in her texts.

Croll's collection illustrates how her two pregnancies were so dissimilar. Cosslett claims that "the same bodily predicament can have quite opposite effects on different women's sense of self: a mother can feel in harmony with the foetus inside her, or she can feel it is a hostile antagonist" (117). Even the same woman will experience days of harmony and days of hostility, as seen in Harris and Gordon's poetry. Croll expresses this tension with her unborn in the poem "sweet rock" (72). Her second pregnancy was a very different experience from the first one:

my son is a press of bones under my ribs
 a rounded rock of sugar seeping into my blood
 I am bones grating flesh and fat beneath skin
 straining round me like an elastic coat I am a tightening
 knot of knees and elbows and a jagged hunch
 of shoulder blades as I steep into full term
 immobility barely loosening in the steam of 3 am baths
 I bathe in darkness to ease migraines and the thin
 hot wire of insomnia night
 after night (72)

Line upon line Croll builds pressure in the poem to represent her experience. The accumulation of verbs in the present tense, such as grating, straining, tightening, and the sharp nouns and adjectives, such as knot of knees, jagged hunch, and hot wire, add to the intensity and misery of her predicament. Croll's writing strategies also create a sense of immediacy as the reader is confronted with the dark side of pregnancy. Croll and Gordon describe taking a bath and feeling encumbered, but for Croll, 3 am baths to "ease migraines" and insomnia further complicate the situation. Later in the poem, Croll reveals she must take insulin six times a day, she feels the "heavy undertow of pre-labour," and she wanders "the thin/ darkness of these expectant rooms/ huddled tight inside november" (72). These experiences are not part of the "official" stories of maternity, nor are they what we might expect when expecting (Gordon). Still, the intersubjective

mother-fetus relationship is manifest as the unbalanced sugar levels in the blood affect them both. Rather than the “fish of a child” from her first pregnancy, Croll uses the image of a “ripening rock candy” for the second unborn child.

Writing maternity poetry also opens space for Croll to express other concerns associated with pregnancy. For example, in “pressed flowers,” she fears isolation once the infant is born. As she prepares for the baby, she wonders:

if the sleepers and socks and soft
cotton undershirts themselves
will soon shut me off
from the world as I ready myself
for the wringer a compression
within walls I am thinking
of a victorian flower press though all
images are thrown
off kilter the walls are biological
the press is the process
where I will find myself
between the suddenly close
walls of a secret room I have
never known (19)

Croll uses the laundry metaphor not only to emphasize the frequent task of washing baby clothes, but also the ways caring for an infant will “shut” her “off from the world.” The double meaning of “wringer” is significant as she does laundry. Not only is she anxious about the difficult experiences ahead, but she fears being squeezed like wet clothes through a wringer. This squeeze is amplified by the feeling of “compression/within [biological] walls,” and being pressed like a flower into a “secret room.” Her stacked lines add weight to her fears.

Croll is certainly not alone in feeling stuck in the confines of motherhood. O’Brien notes:

Traditional wisdom says: Women are naturally trapped in the childbearing function. Women therefore cannot participate in social life on equal terms with men. In a place of this, a new syllogism is coined: Women are naturally trapped in the childbearing function. Therefore the liberation of women depends on their being freed from this trap. (49)

O'Brien agrees with the conclusion but not the premise (50). I agree that women are not "naturally trapped" in the biological functions of childbearing, and that "liberation" depends on being able to decide whether to mother or not. O'Brien affirms that "contraceptive technology" has given some women more freedom "to choose parenthood" (51). Indeed, many women are unable to make that choice. Croll, however, articulates her decision to become a mother in her poem "Choice" (28). By saying "yes" to the "unformed self," she embraces mother/ing:

now it is a choice
 lying here in my arms
 how I chose to carry
 myself through
 the world with this other
 within me and now
 I embrace
 what we have sown
 embrace this small
 new light (28)

Writing poetry reveals the attitude that Croll, like Gordon and others, negotiates as she seeks to represent herself as a pregnant woman and the "small/ new light" that she bears. Comparing this poem with the previous one, "pressed flower," Croll demonstrates a shift in perspective. She has turned from the fear of being shut out from the world toward a confidence in living in the "world with this other." In the final poem, "biology," Croll relates her personal and ironic journey through two pregnancies. For years she had been fighting against the notion "*biology is destiny.*" Now she has embraced motherhood. In the end, she writes:

but here I am succumbing
 inside the walls of my house with the earth beneath it
 and the air above it all mine I'm not sure
 what I have become what I have betrayed
 in wanting this house and this husband to make me
 a wife and these children to make me a mother (94)

Croll resists dominant ideologies, and in particular, biological determinism. Moreover, she affirms the right to choose to become a mother. The caesuras suggest there is a give and take, a process of becoming, of betraying, of choosing, of “finding herself” (19). Croll writes to represent the web of physical, emotional, intellectual, and psychological processes involved in the multidimensional experiences of pregnancy. Furthermore, her tapestry of poems portrays and articulates a mother-unborn intersubjectivity (Cosslett).

Gordon’s four “nine month” poems represent the maternal body in the final stage of pregnancy. Like her medley of fetal images, Gordon utilizes a number of images to represent the maternal body nearing full term. Her poem “swelling & swollen” (56) is divided into two stanzas. In the first 12-line stanza, she juxtaposes the birds’ “spring-fling song” and “shreds of shell & exultation” with the “wail of the first train” and her “inflated... ankles/ waiting for ...summer” (56). As the title suggests, her expectation and trepidation swells, and her body is swollen. In the first stanza, she reveals her uncertainty: “remind me again: this is on schedule.” Each stanza repeats the words “remind me again” and concludes with “another day,” indicative of fatigue as she “resume[s] this bloated ride” of the final days of pregnancy. Gordon’s writing strategies emphasize the doubling state of maternity as the second stanza increases in size from 12 to 15 lines, her body becomes a “solid cast of poured plaster,” and each day matures to a “soon-to-split ripeness.” Gordon explores the notion of ripeness again in “grocery list” (57). While the mangoes are “just this side of soft,” the nectarines are “unripe... fruit unyielding/ coming away hard/ from the stone.” Although “half” of an avocado had already spoiled, the tomatoes are “round/ & perfect.” Each of the four stanzas represents a biological stage of the gestation process and the physical changes her body undergoes. Gordon counters medical discourses that define the “normal” progression of pregnancy. The terms “*due*” and “*overdue*” in

the fourth stanza illustrate the disparity between testing for ripeness in fruit, and assessing the maternal body for readiness in giving birth.

In her third and fourth “nine month” poems, Gordon uses images of evolution and habitation to represent the metamorphoses that has occurred during pregnancy. In the poem “sweet nothings” (59), Gordon describes the female body as a host, similar to a city that hosts locals and aliens. Her body provides a dwelling place for the unknown. Nearing the end of the gestation period, Gordon compares the unborn to a storm that blew in, “squatting over all the corners/ & corridors” of her city. Here the double meaning of “squatting” suggests the fetus is crouching down and occupying the place without permission, like an illegal alien in the city. The presence of the other threatens to blow her “balloon” body away. Gordon also associates the mother with the “slow moan of the balloon” and the unborn as “the consumptive heave of the storm.” She reverses the expected relation from nurturance to consumption. While the poem “grocery list” reveals her cravings for fruit, this poem portrays the fetus consuming her body. Gordon also draws attention to divergent maternal and paternal perspectives. In “grocery list,” the husband goes to the store to buy fruit “sweet enough/ to bring home,” and in “sweet nothings” he “blows bewildered endearment,” as if the fetus is “a seedpod dispersed with the least breeze.” Gordon also alludes to the fairy tale of the three pigs, where the “huff-puff” of her wheezes and sneezes “could kill off any wolf,” and causes her to double over, punning on the word “double.” Conscious of every movement within her, “that lilt the tilt of the head,” Gordon contrasts the fetus as “faintest orb” with the fetus as a storm that inhabits the “corridors of my city,” thereby illustrating the discrepancy between father’s imagination and her experience. He sees the round belly, whereas she experiences a complete transformation of her being. Gordon resists idealist and sentimental representations of pregnancy. Rather, she acknowledges the

intersubjectivity of mother and child: the “knot” that will be tested when her daughter is born. The mother-poet is the balloon tied to the stranger, but “the string that connects your father is this line/ all the words sighs songs ever exhaled between us.” Poetry is the line that strings together “words sighs songs,” gestures that generate associations regarding her entwined host-hostage relationship with the unseen other. Writing poetry allows Gordon to use diverse metaphors to represent the many facets of the gestation period, to augment meanings, and to convey her shifting thoughts and emotions. Maternity poetry opens windows for fathers and readers to catch glimpses into the sensual and emotional complexities of pregnancy.

In the poem “what you may be concerned about” (58), Gordon addresses the unborn as “you,” but also speaks indirectly to her readers (including the father). Each of the three stanzas ends with a shorter line, drawing the reader’s eyes downward, similar to the unborn dropping into position for birth. In the first line, “I hafta admit, Baby, this is a stretch,” Gordon puns on the word “stretch.” She stresses the physical expansion of her maternal body, the period of gestation, as well as the emotional and psychological “scars” that accompany pregnancy. The notion also connotes ideas of implausibility, that which lies beyond the imagination. The unimagined “sawteeth of pain” that blooms on her “potholed potbelly” are the effects of this “unseen wriggling” fetus (58). Gordon resists what Maushart calls “[t]he mask of motherhood,” a mask that “keeps women from speaking clearly what they know, and from hearing truths too threatening to face....for every woman who ‘blooms’ in pregnancy there’s another who develops root rot” (463). In the second stanza, Gordon admits: “You’ve made me over./ I’m now a creature neither of water/ nor land.” Clearly, both the mother and the unborn have undergone a transformation. By the third stanza, the poet feels “[c]olonized” as the unborn child has taken possession of her body:

Colonized, I'm a teeming type
 that flushes infection flushes all day all night long
 as you junk & wreck me into another jurisdiction
 turning me into a displaced person
 even as you find finger & footholds
 in my cargo hold climb the ropy lumps of my organs
 the slave's collar of my cervix
 now the only thing between you
 & the light. (58)

The irregular line lengths of this stanza suggest the active infant kicking in utero. The stranger has taken over her interior, as though her body is a territory (jurisdiction) to be possessed. The jellyfish-turned-whale threatens “to beach them both.” Gordon’s imagery is similar to Harris’ poem discussed earlier (10), in which the infant kicks again and again. Mother and unborn both desire to be freed from their bond. Similar in some ways to Harris, Gordon feels enslaved by the kicking infant. Her cargo hold is now inhabited by an unseen slave driver. Moreover, depicting the “slave’s collar” as a metaphor for the cervix implies that pregnancy is an enslavement of the female body (Zackodnik). The unborn kicking in utero indicates a desire for freedom for the infant and mother alike. For Gordon, it is a desire for the storm to pass through, and to repossess her own body. The last line of the poem expresses the major concern for both mother and stranger; that is, to be free from the bondage of the other, and see the light that signals birth.

The intertwined, and at times, oppressive relationship with the unborn is particularly evident in the final lines of Harris’ poetry collection. Like Gordon, Harris stops short of the actually birthing experiences, but the final two pages include the onset of labour. Gordon signifies the umbilical cord as a “knot,” Croll uses thread imagery (15), and Harris suggests the mother and unborn are “roped to each other” (112). In the context of a familial and cultural history of slavery, however, Harris’ usage of enslavement and freedom bears a much deeper significance. She represents the struggle between freedom and slavery in the final scene of the

book. At a moment when her protagonist Patricia is singing and laughing with her husband, a sudden pain rips through her, leaving her breathless. Like Gordon, Harris includes the father's point of view: "don't fight it/ go with it/ breathe come on girl breathe// she lies limp" (111). His expressions are reminiscent of my experience; in prenatal classes we were taught breathing patterns in preparation for labour and delivery.¹⁷ His line "don't fight it" suggests a passive rather than active response to labour pains. In the context of the song, "*get a taste for it babeeee/ it ain't never gonna be enough/ this here is down an dirty/ you just gotta call its bluuuff/ [...] /you wanna survive/ git down an jiiiiiiive*" (111; ellipsis mine), the word "lies" implies she does need to "fight it" and find her own response to the situation. O'Brien claims that "reproductive labour is a synthesizing and mediating act. ... Labour is inseparable from reproductive process in its biological involuntariness, but it is also integrative" (79). The mind, not just the body, is engaged in the process of labour. When she catches her breath, Patricia "goes to the glass wall looks out over Calgary/ finds her line seizes the morning" (111). Looking over the city, she envisions her daughter's face "just out of sight" (112); she sees beyond the moment (Simpson), to the light (Gordon). Actively engaged, Patricia finds her line of sight and her lines of poetry, writing her "birthgift" to the daughter as yet unseen.

Prior to her birth event, Patricia's goal was to create a "safe place" in Canada, on the "bank of the Bow" river in Calgary, where she would raise her daughter:

Here on this bank of the Bow white sky
 arching over us white snow below
 i write this tale for you Daughter this account
 as a *Matter of Fact*
 enter it
 as we enter
 pure space of being

¹⁷ See Tess Cosslett's second chapter "Institutions, machines and 'male' medicine" in *Women Writing Childbirth* (47 – 76) for a detailed discussion on medical discourses, institutions, and technologies, often presented as masculine and oppressive, and how some women have found ways to subvert these discourses (7).

moving to what is
radiant black
 where we can be truly (48; italics in text)

Harris writes a tale about Patricia writing a tale to her daughter, a tale that is considered “a *Matter of Fact*.” Her references to the “white sky” and “white snow” emphasize the fact that the mother and daughter are “radiant and black” surrounded by whiteness. Typographically, the phrases shift toward the right, “moving to what is/radiant black,” almost like a dance, into a “pure space of being”—a sense of freedom to be and belong regardless of ethnicity. However, the fact of the matter is, the unseen stranger will be born into a white world of “love/ or hate/ helpless” (8). Harris discusses her main socio-cultural concerns as a Caribbean-Canadian writer in her essay “Why Do I write?”:

first, my work had to take part in the reinscription of Africa on the Western consciousness; secondly, ...to examine what it means to be human in the context of the social and economic, the historical and environmental fractures we have constructed over the last five hundred years. Thirdly, since women remain doubly subjected, I would try to reveal what happens when a woman must deal with the realities of racial as well as gender subjugation....my characters would have to fight back. (27)

Writing *Drawing down a daughter*, Harris uses her protagonist Patricia to fight against racial and gendered suppression, using a doubled voice to speak for the “doubly subjected.” At one point in the book, Patricia tells her own birth story in a conversation with her fetus:

Aunt Clem she put
 my navel string in a bottle, carried it to the family barracks
 at Lopinot to bury i wonder what the doctor would say if i
 asked him for yours what would your father say so thorough
 a Canadian **he doesn't really know anything about us . . .**
 we're going to have to teach him, you and i (80; emphasis and ellipsis in text)

The bold line in this section clearly stresses the position of the pregnant woman—both she and her unborn infant are wedged between cultures. Kruk suggests the protagonist Patricia inhabits a liminal space, a state of “betwixt and between-ness” (174), a no man’s land caught between

Trinidad and Canada. In response to this “between-ness,” she resolves “to teach him, you and i”—the “us” and “we” are the mothers and daughters who need to speak out. Her story exemplifies the ways women have countered the oppression of doctors, fathers, and others during maternity. Writing poetry offers another avenue for women to “fight back” and tell their own stories in their own way. In this case, Harris draws attention to the added complexities of maternity in the context of racism, sexism, and other forms of suppression.¹⁸ Moreover, the reader is confronted with these matters of fact that persist in Canada.

In the final lines of the book, Harris entwines the beauty and severity of both the wintery Calgary landscape and labour pains:

as if all my striving to order existence with your birth
 were less even than this view: grey pink clouds/trees/
 river/thin frill of ice/ the drowned city
 small of all i hold for you
 the sun gathers wings draws back his blade
 morning bleeds into the river
 inside you thrash out i hug my belly in the helpless dawn
 for a moment i am
 as the stunned slave under the whip (112; backslashes in the text)

Harris juxtaposes the desire to create some order in life like the cycles of seasons (Gordon); so much lies outside of her control, like the dawn and their future existence. The only punctuation in this section is a colon and a series of slashes. With the colon, Harris draws attention to “this view,” a subjective perspective that blends her present context with her past, and interweaves the beauty and the extremes of existence. The backslashes embody the harsh interruptions of labour pains, the sun slashing the morning with “his blade,” and the startling whip of a slave driver. These sudden intrusions into the text disturb the mind and the poetic rhythms. Harris’ collection of images—“drowned city,” bleeding morning, “helpless dawn,” and “stunned slave”—suggest

¹⁸I will discuss in greater detail some of the issues related to ethnicity, racism, and the maternal in the following chapter on reclaiming a matrilineal heritage.

the woman's feeling of powerlessness as her vision for the future is in question. Compared to the hope of "all i hold for you," the "drowned city" is small. Still, Harris leaves the ending ambiguous. "Harris resists ...resolving what is problematic and contradictory," Zackodnik notes, including the contraries of the maternal body as gift and slave to the "child's needs" (176). Her portrayal of the gendered sun's violence to the morning, along with the final image of the "whip" used against the "stunned slave," illustrates Harris' concerns with racialized identities, colonized histories, and female subjugation. There is a potential for socio-political reform with the birth of Patricia's daughter (Kruk). Kuwabong posits, "It is through mother-daughter bonding that Afro-Caribbean women develop a collaborative feminist consciousness of struggle against multiple oppressions" ("The Mother as Archetype" 105). However, Harris leaves the ending open to possibilities. The note book provides a hospitable place for her to "find her line," and claim both her daughter and her own existence as she negotiates her "between-ness" on the threshold of childbirth and in the uncertainties of the future. Readers are challenged to consider their reception of others, of oppression based on race, culture, gender, or class.

Harris, Gordon, and Croll attest to the curious interconnection and intersubjectivity between the pregnant woman and the fetus, the book and the poem, the self and the Other. They represent the unborn as a living text, both a part of and apart from their maternal bodies. Writing maternity poetry bears the marks of the stranger they carry, counters the silencing of gestating women, and offers alternate discourses as correctives to social ignorance and communal responsibility. These poets give evidence that each experience of maternity is not like another.

2. Birthing the Stranger: an Entwined Welcome

Writing the birthing process itself is less common than writing about pregnancy. There are a number of reasons why the experiences of labour and delivery are more difficult to express

than being a mother. One of the difficulties in representing “the actual event of parturition,” Katharina Walter suggests, stems from the convention of using “female gestation” as an analogy for the creative writing process (102). This fusion of “maternity with creativity,” Jeremiah argues, has the potential to “reinstate the traditional conflation of femininity with maternity, and the denial to women of creativity” (“Troublesome” 10). Secondly, some women want to forget the intensity of labour—pains, processes, procedures, emotions, conditions, and so forth. Another issue, Cosslett posits, is identifying the split-self and the mother-child relationship pre and post birth (118). A fourth reason, Cosslett argues, is related to the birthing body itself:

The maternal body, though always culturally mediated, creates its own particular problems for the male-centred discourses of our culture...this is not a single or simple “point.” It is only “audience” point of view narratives that are able to give single and simple accounts of childbirth: experienced from the centre, that “centre” becomes diffuse multiple, fractured. (118; ellipsis mine)

Writing about labour and delivery is complicated by women’s personal experiences, limited vocabulary, and social and ideological constraints. As I have discussed thus far, Harris ends her book with Patricia at the onset of labour. Gordon leaves a gap between the “nine month” poems and the “kneading fingers” of the newly born stranger (63). Méira Cook begins her collection in response to her newborn daughter, whereas Charlene Diehl-Jones responds to the death of her daughter. Melanie Dennis Unrau includes the birthing process of a stillbirth and “another birth story” associated with giving birth to a new self (42). Among these poets, Croll is the only poet in this study who writes about her experiences of labour and delivery. Kerry Clare suggests that unfamiliarity accounts for the difficulty in writing about becoming a mother:

To become a mother by any means is to cross a threshold; it is to shatter one’s universe and then have it put back together as a wholly other place. It is difficult to put into words exactly what this transformation feels like... it began to occur to me that in our most earnest and essential conversations about motherhood, many of us had been missing huge parts of the story. (10-11)

For Clare, the transition from pregnancy into motherhood is a re-location into a “wholly other place” (10). Giving birth is a kind of conversion experience, a change from one state of being to another, a question of identities (Cosslett). Even though Clare affirms the alteration that takes place in birthing a child, she does not say anything about the process of birth giving. Labour and delivery of a newborn are still “missing...parts of the story.”

Perhaps the stories of the actual birth event are absent because women forget the labour pains. Or do they? Croll explores the notion of forgetting in her poem “what I forget” (21 – 22):

I forget my first labour and all its fury
 they say we forget what the body must
 how fury slides spent
 from slick skin but not from muscle-memory
 of pain buried beneath skin and embedded in bone
 to be held until the end they say we forget
 pain and the beginning of pain

[...]
 the labouring muscle we become
 the whole 12 or 24 or 36 hours it takes
 for labour to rumble through and consume

but that’s wrong pain is not born
 inside the earth it’s all mine my own
 offspring gestating inside this closed
 grenade of a womb until the barrage begins (21; ellipsis mine)

In the first line Croll claims she has forgotten her first labour. Ironically, she offers many details of what she has (not) forgotten, such as the repetition of words like “fury” and “pain.” Moreover, she sets up an oppositional relation between “I/we”—those who remember—and “they”—those who say “I/we” forget. The debate shifts back and forth throughout the poem as Croll juxtaposes what she is “taught” with what she experiences. She is taught “not to call on the pain/ inside pain is old”; she is taught “it is *pain with a purpose*”; she is “told/ to visualise some serene ocean”; she is “given a focal object.” Croll states outright: “that’s wrong.” Conventional stories, professional instructors, and medical discourses teach that women will forget their labour pains.

These discourses, I would argue, also separate labour and delivery processes from the individual woman. Croll clearly has not forgotten her labour and claims the pain as her own. Thus, it is the social conscience (and literary history) that has forgotten (or denied) the labour of mothers.

Guenther argues that to forget the “givenness” of our birth is to claim “self-production” or “self-generation” (*The Gift* 23). Poets who write about parturition potentially create alternative discourses and change social perceptions of birth giving.

Croll, for instance, imagines the womb as a grenade during the labour process, a violent image somewhat like Harris’ image of the “whip.” This explosive device stands in sharp contrast to a hospitable dwelling place for her offspring. The term in Middle French means pomegranate, a reddish pulpy fruit thick with seeds. In Latin, the feminine word *granatus* means seedy, and *granum* refers to grain. The womb, then, bears an explosion of seeds, possibilities of children. However, a grenade is also “a small missile that contains an explosive or a chemical agent” (Merriam-Webster). Though women are “taught not to call on the pain” but “learn the breathing” techniques (as Patricia was urged to do) to withstand “the coming tide,” Croll rejects traditional prenatal education and medical discourses. She takes ownership of her fury and pain: “my body calls pain to itself/ in a voice I cannot recognize as my own” (22). As labour “pain blossoms purple and red,” she becomes a “shipwreck” as the intensity increases. Lines begin to fracture in the poem, like her “broken breath,” and at “every/ spiked contraction,” pain spirals on the surface of her body and on the page. Although “a man is counting every throbbing/ breath,” the numbers “have no meaning/ at the centre of pain.” Croll, like Harris’ protagonist, offers a very different perspective than those in her “audience” (Cosslett). Neither “the nurse,” “my husband,” nor “a man” can fully comprehend how pain seizes her entire being. In childbirth, everything is trivial except the fury of her labour:

at the centre of pain I forget
 I forget I'm inside the body's fury
 my body
 my fury
 I forget the child relinquishing
 her amniotic inland sea and I float
 free of the sutured surface
 and all pain
 all fury is forgotten (22)

The two lines, “my body” and “my fury,” are accentuated in the labour process as they work in tandem. Croll repeats the word “my” throughout the poem, indicating a personal claim to her experience outside of the “official” discourses. Poetic lines represent her body and her pain as they expand and contract, splinter and spread. If the image of the grenade denotes the womb, and the shipwreck signifies the labouring woman, then these comparable metaphors represent the torturous threshold where the two in one become two (Cosslett). The line “my body calls pain to itself/ in a voice I cannot recognize,” suggests that the body has its own voice that summons the pain. Childbirth, O’Brien insists, involves the involuntary (biological) as well as the integrative (cognitive).¹⁹ Croll’s dual images—grenade and shipwreck—depict a dialectic and even chaotic approach where mind and body, mother and child work together as well as collide against each other. The nautical imagery is apropos as the female body, like a ship, carries the infant in her cargo hold, and transports her in an amniotic sea only to crash-land at birth, like a shipwreck. When the fury has run its course, the labouring woman floats “free.” Croll “forgets” her pain and fury, but she also forgets that the child has “relinquished her amniotic inland sea.” Freed from each other, both mother and child are displaced and transformed.

¹⁹ In “The Dialectics of Reproduction,” Mary O’Brien interrogates masculine and feminine perceptions of reproduction and argues that these processes are not strictly biological. She claims that women are not passive but actively engaged physically as well as mentally during labour and childbirth.

Giving birth is not all “oranges and asters,” Croll points out. Being stretched and opened, even cut open for the sake of the Other, is neither easy nor pretty. Her poem, entitled “lungs forced open,” suggests that the violent effort involved in giving birth affects both mother and child. Similar to her poem “what I forget,” Croll repeats “I don’t know” to a series of things. As the poem progresses, her focus narrows in anticipation of the birth of her second child:

locked doors I don’t
know how the barricades

can endure I only know
my stubborn stretched skin

barricading the body and life
forcing itself on flesh

coloured wind of shrill
oxygen into my daughter’s open

mouth the moment she was pulled
blue from my slit

open
abdomen that slim red

scalpel line marking me
in that second before life begins

with breathing
I don’t know anything

but the body the body
of this western city the country

of my own body residence of my daughter
my heart (34-35)

In a series of couplets, Croll draws attention to the doubling of her body and the dialectical relationships between mind and body, woman and child. The line breaks and enjambment stress the difficulty of crossing the barricade and build in intensity toward the threshold of giving birth.

Words either spill onto the next line or cross over a gap from one couplet to the next. Like Harris' use of backslashes, Croll breaks up the lines with caesuras to suggest the violence done to her body. The word "open" is on a line of its own, emphasizing the sudden change from "locked doors," "barricades," and "stubborn stretched skin" to being cut open and exposed. She is conscious of her body being cut open, of her daughter born blue, of her heart allied with the infant being forced into the world. By creating uneven rhythms, the poem emulates the labour and upheaval as the newborn is pulled from "the country" (and home) of her body. Croll is transported into a "wholly other place" between "that second before life begins" and after "she was pulled/ blue from my slit." Simultaneously, the unborn becomes newborn, and the woman becomes mother, a birth and a rebirth that occur beyond biological functions.

Croll not only negotiates her own birthing experiences, but also gives witness to some scary maternal experiences that tend to be silenced. In her poem "trading birth war stories" (49), Croll writes these frightening stories into a running block of text:

inductions taking agonizing days or babies coming too fast and two said they ripped badly despite episiotomy and one said after she'd delivered they took the epidural tube out and the doctor sewed her back together without anaesthetic for fifty minutes while she screamed and one said she was pushing and had such pain she thought she had delivered but the nurse said it was only a contraction and stuck her hand up during the next one *everyone who walked by had their fingers in me* she said *bring on the plumber and let him have a go as well* and another said her husband was eating a banana *take that fucking banana out of your mouth it's making me sick* she said she threw up the whole six hours she pushed her son out and one said she birthed her daughter with only her doctor and boyfriend who held and comforted and rubbed her hard all through the back labour and another said her nurse sat in the corner knitting and looking at the monitor saying *there's no way you are ready why are you even in bed?* and the baby coming all in an unexpected rush and one said she had such a fear of the pain because it was the second time and she knew what to expect but she was also afraid of morphine demerol epidural and even a planned c section she was just so afraid but there was nothing to be done because the baby was in there and had to come somehow (49; italics in text)

These twenty enjambed lines run without punctuation marks, save one question mark, and a few italicized phrases. Snippets of stories run together and maternal subjectivities are anonymous. It is up to the reader to distinguish one from the other. Croll's block construction and enjambment expose a myriad of childbirth stories excluded from official discourses. These variants stop mid-way on the final line, which suggests there are more tales (birthing experiences) left untold.

These so-called "old wives' tales," Cosslett points out, are not "ghoulish horror stories" (4) women tell each other, but rather accounts that "articulate the unacceptable side of childbirth in our culture" (7). Again, Croll subverts official discourses by representing a series of "unwritten" tales from women's perspectives. These poetic story bits manifest the difficulties, suffering, cruelty, and objectification some women have faced in medical institutions, and expose divergent responses from the viewpoints of birthing women as opposed to their audiences.

Poets like Croll, Gordon, and Harris are taking up O'Brien's call to develop a "feminist perspective and a method of inquiry" that challenge conventional ideologies of reproduction and childbirth through poetic discourses. Writing the fears and pains of childbirth helps women to negotiate the pain in light of the release, the visible presence of the newborn, and the hope for a renewed future. The moment of birth is a welcomed relief, not only from the pain, but also in finally seeing the "fantasy child" (Lax) or the face just beyond sight (Harris).

3. Receiving the Stranger: an Embraced/Endured Welcome

Birth, Cosslett argues, "disrupts our categories as an 'individual' literally 'divides' into two" (180). In Guenther's terms, the transformation from bearing the "Other *in the midst of the same*" (*The Gift* 55) to becoming "other-*from*-the-same" (105) challenges notions of individuality (Cosslett) and alters a woman's "sense of self" (Speier 13). Representations of the mother-infant relationship, Cosslett states, may reflect "an absolute division" pre- and post-

delivery, whereas “others see a continuum” (119) from pregnancy through childbirth and beyond. Aristarkhova argues, “the maternal relation . . . needs to be understood as requiring ‘work’ as a way of letting the other be, become, breathe” (175; ellipsis mine). Still, receiving a fetus-become-newborn is neither passive, nor is a hospitable reception a given. Not all women choose to mother their child and some have their child taken from them. The sudden presence of an infant, not surprisingly, engenders varied responses, as is the case for Croll, Gordon, and Cook. Writing about this new relation involves the work of representing a little stranger from a new viewpoint. As a new mother-writer, according to Cosslett, childbirth may be “figured as a death or a heroic rebirth” but it is “always a turning-point, a narrative crisis that destroys, confirms or creates a woman’s sense of identity” (154). Croll, Gordon, and Cook give “shape, voice, [and] representation” (154) to that moment of reception.

Croll’s poetry collection, including poems like “alphabet” and “annunciation,” implies a literary response to her newborn. Writing potentially welcomes the new stranger, values the gift of a distinct personality, and reminds us of our own welcome into the world. In her brief poem “receiving,” Croll approaches the stranger as a shared experience of wonder:

a reservoir of the world
 wide as this room where the palm
 of a parent is shaping
 a cup of air as it nears
 the back of an infant’s head
 richest moment of our lives
 her head heaviest
 part of the body our hearts
 now fully open
 covering of soft new bone
 cradled in our wondering hands (25)

Transformed from two-in-one to two, the mother (and father) embraces the stranger who has also changed from dream to reality, from awareness to a visible being. Croll’s body was opened by

the child, and with its appearance—a revelation—both mother and father’s hearts are “now fully open,” Croll shifts her metaphors from the “amniotic inland sea” to the “reservoir of the world,” suggestive of a move from confinement to freedom and possibility. Two of the lines are interrupted with a caesura. In so doing, Croll individuates “her head” and “our hearts,” yet emphasizes their relationship. Her brief poem leaves a large area of white space on the page, suggestive of openness. This openness is further illustrated by words such as “reservoir” and “world,” “wide” and “room,” “wondering,” and the notion of possibilities that this infant represents. Croll’s poem implies a “space of welcome within the home” (Guenther 6). To receive the child is to make room for her, to accept the gift of being called a mother, and being radically responsible for the Other (6). Similar to Harris’ narrator who writes a birthgift for the “Child who opens me” (8), Croll indicates that it is the infant who opens her physically and emotionally. As readers, we are also reminded that becoming a mother entails what Joanne Arnott calls the “reformation of being” (202). Croll’s portrayal of this “reformation of being” may seem idealistic, yet it is her poetic response to this shared moment of reception.

In her poem “gift” Croll writes about her encounter with her new self as mother. She expresses the curious intersubjective gift exchange between her mother-self and her newborn:

as if she were a gift as yet unopened
 and I could look but not touch not have
 as if I needed to ask permission
 to have her in my room alone
 all night as if I did not have a right
 to her as if she were not mine
 but she was my own child
 so barely in the world she seemed not real
 not really here a swaddled stranger I needed
 to ring for the nurse to give me my child
 as if she were an unopened gift though it was me
 opened and this gift this daughter
 so recently cut and plucked out of me
 I thought I needed to ask to have the child

my sudden child placed in my arms
 when only hours before
 she had been sharing my blood
 sheltered in me the same as me
 only hours before she was me
 not yet in my arms and I was not yet a mother
 and as a mother so newly a mother
 I didn't know I didn't have to ask (26)

Croll draws attention to the newness of becoming a mother, the suddenness of “this daughter/ so recently cut and plucked out” of her body. The transformation from two in one “the same as me” to two separate individuals (Cosslett), daughter and mother, is disorienting. Enjambment of the lines and the fragmentation of thoughts also disorient the reader. Like the contractions that pushed Croll into motherhood, the repetition of “as if” “as if” pushes readers through the poem. Moreover, these abrupt shifts add to the perplexities in adjusting to the presence of this unreal “swaddled stranger” and the speed at which the transformation from “not yet a mother” to “so newly a mother” has occurred.

Croll emphasizes the difficulty in adapting to the reality of this newborn through the reoccurring notion of opened and unopened gifts. She recognizes her body was opened, like unwrapping a gift, in giving birth to her daughter. Twice she compares her daughter to an unopened gift. These repetitions make visible the mental effort needed to comprehend this mysterious gift exchange. Croll's poem “enfleshment” also attests to the surreal presence of a child that was so recently concealed. She describes her newborn daughter in sacred terms: “I feast/ on the vision of my daughter's face/... I know the mouth/ the latch of her mouth as a sacrament/ ... I will give you/ this milk I will give you this// blood this bone and flesh” (30; ellipses mine). Croll's innovative term “enfleshment” alludes to the biblical image “word made flesh”—the divine/human figure of Jesus Christ. She feasts on the revelation of her daughter's face, while her daughter feasts on the milk from her body. Croll portrays a give and take relation

in which both find satisfaction in the other. Though they are distinct (independent) beings, mother and child remain intertwined (interdependent) as they share blood, bone, flesh, and milk. Breastfeeding, for Croll, represents a kind of communion, a physical and spiritual intimacy between mother and child.

Gordon focuses more on the physicality of the new mother-child relationship. The title of her poem, “Over spilt milk” (63), suggests the adage “no use crying over spilt milk”—what’s done is done. She portrays their interrelationship as “stuck to the other with a mortar/ of sweat & sweet milk.” Expectations and reality are conflicted. Gordon writes, “I have had enough of the cut & jab/ of your kneading finger” (63). The double image of kneading/need, and the “letdown/ of hours in the same soft pose” suggest a disappointment or resignation to her new identity as mother. Gordon’s word “letdown” is also a pun. She may feel an emotional letdown, or she may feel the physical letdown of milk in breastfeeding, or both. Gordon, like Croll, also nudges the act of breastfeeding into the spiritual realm. She says, “I might as well try/ scrying the spilt milk.” Scrying elicits the notion of crying but it also means seeing into the future through something like a crystal ball. Gordon suggests a desire to know the future of their mother-child relationship, of her own responsibilities, as well as the possibilities of “[s]eeing into things” (Simpson 157). Gordon repeats the word “whimsy” three times, which implies the reception of her newborn inspires her imagination despite the drawbacks of “spilt milk.” Writing poetry allows Gordon to follow her whimsies, express her disappointments, and imagine their future.

Méira Cook’s poetry collection, *Slovenly Love*, probes and celebrates the birth of an infant and the curiosities of being a new mother:

Little bird you flutter-flutter in my arms, tick
 thick milk and blood, cheeks
 flying red flags where the unsheathed teeth
 live. Outside geese scatter across sky,

iron filings thickening at the magnetic line
of horizon. This moment won't recur,
a sky rubbed thin
beneath the barefoot feet

of last summer's children. The window
is a frame stretching that paper-thin sky
along the bias of geese prejudiced
by weather. Little bird your unfinished head

crooks my arm, keeps my heart
coniferous. Even the horizon
exerts no pull. Instead a need
to bear witness. Like the man

on a bridge who sees the first
of the summer raptors, who calls
to the woman pushing her stroller below,
look up, *up!* Tilts her head, observes

their windpocked feathers, his mouth
spread in the shape of the word *eagle*
swooping towards her on the wind.

As for me,

little bird, I am no longer hollow
boned, audacious. Gravity
keeps me buoyant, bright
anklet of teeth about the bone. (11 – 12)

Cook introduces the reader to her newborn as “Little bird,” a metaphor she uses for her daughter throughout the first section “A Year of Birds.” It is interesting that these poets use creatures to reimagine the unborn/newborn. Cook reconfigures the “fetus-as-fish imagery (Gordon and Croll) into the infant-as-bird image suggestive of freedom and flight. She negotiates her new life as a mother by writing the “tick” and “flutter-flutter” of the breastfeeding infant’s heartbeat. She compares her little bird with the natural migratory geese and the predatorial *eagle*. The significance of this comparison becomes clearer through the poem. Geese scatter and follow the “prejudiced” patterns of seasons, the magnetic pull of migration. A man points up to the flying

“summer raptors” and mouths the word *eagle*. Juxtaposing these birds with her little bird is significant. Unlike geese in the natural world, this little bird does not follow the patterns of migration, nor the coming and going of seasons. Rather, she depends upon the generosity of her coniferous-hearted mother. The adjective “coniferous” refers to evergreen trees. The word suggests life and endurance, and evokes an image of a familial tree. Also, her little baby flutters in her arms like a bird in a tree. Notably, this little bird is not a “summer raptor.” The eagle is a superior predator that swoops down to prey on smaller birds and creatures. Both the man on the bridge and the eagle look down from a distance to observe the woman and child. He mouths the word *eagle*, and expects the mother to listen, to look up, and to mimic his language. Cook rejects both the “natural” and the “male” avian metaphors. Instead of the lofty masculine or omniscient viewpoint, the poet represents a subjective relational and maternal perspective.

This poem, like many in Cook’s collection, points to the problem of language and the challenge of writing the mother-view. This little bird has an “unfinished head” and depends on the mother’s care, yet the “red flags” of the infant’s “unsheathed teeth” signal pain. In the newborn maternal experience, “milk and blood” (nurturance and discomfort) comingle. Men may make observations from above, but they cannot respond to the specificity of the situation and intersubjective relationship of the poet-mother-newborn. Placing “As for me” on its own line, Cook sets herself apart as a mother with her own point of view. She claims, “I am no longer hollow/ boned, audacious.” She has been altered physically and psychologically. Speaking directly to the infant—“As for me,/ little bird”—the poet concludes with an unusual image of the child: “bright / anklet of teeth.” Just as a newly hatched bird opens her beak to receive food from her mother, this newly born infant opens her mouth to receive nourishment from Cook. Holding her child in her arms, the poet sees the ring of teeth of her baby’s mouth, an image that suggests

both beauty and duty. The infant keeps her “coniferous” or invigorated in two ways. First, the “gravity” or demands of responsibility keep the mother “buoyant” and active in care-giving. Secondly, writing keeps the mother-child relationship and lived experiences alive beyond the moment. Unlike the repetitious migration of geese, the poet reminds us that “[t]his moment won’t recur.” This “little bird” is born at this time and place, and this particular mother-child relationship will never be repeated. Negotiating her new maternal responsibilities, Cook bears witness to this strange little bird.

Even as the poet responds directly to her newborn, she also engages dialogically with the reader-stranger through her poetry. Cook writes in the present tense:

Don’t cry
little bird, honey-girl, sweet-and-bright.
Listen you,

I will work the stars loose
from their clasps, I will
douse that good-night moon
dares blah-blah in your too-big

but-you’ll-grow-into-them ears. Here’s
the thing: I am not so young nor so prone
to metamorphoses as once I was. Joints
need oil something dreadful, skin too tight

stuffed sausage-full with unrequited
sleep. (An elegant Greek epigram
escapes me, lees
of wine staining the wineskin

would do for my breasts
if I could remember.) Compose
yourself baby, I say, but you turn
bird, flap the corners of the room

to panic and tussle, pinfeathers
whirling. In the morning,
thin drifts of word, the letter
V for good-bye in the sky. (13 – 14)

Cook's approach to writing poetry is to speak directly to the infant. However, the pronoun "you" invites the reader, like the infant, to "listen" to the voice of maternal subject. Adjusting to a crying child is no easy task: "I am not so young nor so prone/ to metamorphoses as once I was." The twenty-four-hour demands of the newborn takes its toll. The little "honey-girl" expects her poet-mother to translate the meaning of those cries. Similarly, Cook looks for strategies to transpose her new maternal experiences into a suitable language. Prying out the tired image of "stars" and dousing the famous "good-night moon" phrase,²⁰ Cook surprises her readers with the "blah-blah" and "you'll-grow-into-them ears" reality. Cook's poems reflect the interrupted rhythms of night and day and resist the clichéd and idealistic representations of mother-child relationships. The newborn stranger has her own pace, her own language, her own needs; neither mother nor infant understand the "blah-blah" of the other. Conventional poetry, such as the forgotten Greek epigraph or the wineskins of the Old Testament, has left the "skin too tight." In the metamorphoses process, Cook's perspective has changed. She lets her poetry take flight as she cares for her little bird.

Similar to Gordon's line "Baby, this is a stretch," Cook suggests mothering stretches the skin to near breaking point. She uses the image of new and old wine skins: old wine skins break if new wine is poured into them, but new skins filled with new wine expand. Cook uses the image of wine to suggest a new maternal mode of living. Not only is she transformed into a mother, but her infant requires responses specific to her needs. Cook seems to suggest that this new mode of being requires a new kind of poetry. Her new maternal perspective involves the Other in the process. She says, "Compose yourself baby," but the little bird flaps and tussles and refuses to settle in the room or onto the page. Language and life are not the same, just as the

²⁰ Margaret Wise Brown's popular children's book *Goodnight Moon* was first published in 1947.

mother and the other-from-mother are not the same. However, as the poet-mother becomes familiar with this new mode of being, “thin drifts of word” begin to form—a gathering of letters. For this particular morning in the poem, “the letter/ V for good-bye in the sky,” depicts the formation of geese in flight, a pattern of movement. Writing about mother is also a process of formation and movement, translating her new experiences into a language of love. Giving birth may mean “good-bye” to an entwined relationship, but it also means a welcome embrace to the new mother-self and infant stranger. Cook’s writing strategies reform poetry to represent her own version and vision of the mother-child relationship.

Inventiveness is linked to both mothering and writing. Cook gathers “drifts of word” to formulate the “hello” of her new role as mother. For poets like Cook, Croll, Gordon, and Harris, composition of a natal language involves observing the infant’s face, hearing the child’s cries, imagining her perspective, and dreaming possibilities for the future. Acquainting herself with the stranger, Croll watches her “daughter’s eight day-old dreams/ enacted upon her sleeping face/... her face rehearses /all faces she will ever need/ all possibility hovering over her// a future an imagined future animating/ her unknowing face” (30). Croll watches her daughter’s animated faces and imagines her dreams. The infant’s face unwittingly expresses the potential of “all possibility hovering over her” as she sleeps. Guenther points out that mothering, or any type of parenting, is “a response to the future of the child: a future that is not my own, and does not necessarily include me, but for which I am nevertheless bound to respond” (*The Gift* 4). Just as these poets imagined a future of possibilities for their unborn, becoming a mother has altered the mother-child relationship. Her dreams for the child are now separated from the infant; the newborn begins to develop her own dreams for the future. Poetry provides a space for the mother

to respond to the possibilities of the future and to imagine the child's dreams even though the future may or may not include her.

Similarly, the newborn smile prods the imagination and provokes inquiry for Cook. She asks the child, "What can you be smiling at in your sleep?" (15). Cook reconceives a newborn world from the perspective of the infant. She writes the "la-la-la/ tongue" of the pre-lingual child, a "new/song" in which the child's lips slip "between the uncut pages your mother/ thumbs her way out of, losing/ her place in the night's inflection" (15 – 16). To write a "new/ song," as Cook suggests, is to include the other alongside the subjective perspective. The poet echoes Guenther's claim that the mother is bound to respond to the future of the child, but Cook loses "her place in the night's inflect." It is the child's demands that interrupt her nights and inflect her poetry. To write the newborn mind is like the "night// slipping its stitches, unravelling/ the soft knitted toy in her head./ How she hovers above the parenthesis/ of your smile, casting off" (16). Despite the disruptions at night, Cook gives voice to the "inflections" of her newborn. She writes the raw materials of life beginnings, the "uncut pages" are shapeless reminders of the difficulty in representing childbirth. Like the other poets in this discussion, Cook recognizes the insufficiency of language to articulate maternal experiences: the "metaphor/ no substitute for what it replaces" (16). However, she slowly unravels the infant's personality through writing. Cook finds herself smiling as she gets to know this demanding stranger. The newborn's smile is her impetus for inquiry and the raw material for creativity. She casts off words and unravels the knitted toy of a newborn mind to reconceive this budding relationship and let the infant compose "new/song[s]" for her poetry.

For some women, writing the infant stranger is a celebrative and inventive act. Maternal poetry transposes context and lived experience into a suitable language. Gradually biological

processes, (pre)conceptions of mothering, and poetic conventions are reconstructed to suit the maternal subject. Therefore, in negotiating mothering, poets like Cook, Croll, and Gordon, explore the transitions between pregnancy and mothering in their particular contexts. They engage with the stranger/ reader, generating new poetic language and images to embrace the hospitality and responsibility gifted to them as new mothers. Negotiating mothering through writing opens new ways of seeing the world—from maternity to mothering, from the maternal subject to the unknown Other. Drawing these perspectives together allows for engagement to counter the silence often associated with motherhood. Furthermore, newborns can initiate new possibilities for the future, including innovative maternal responses in poetry. Consequently, these poets reconceive mothering, welcome the Other, and broaden socio-cultural and literary preconceptions of mother-child intersubjective relationships and the implications of embracing hospitality and responsibility in the larger community.

4. Burying the Stranger: an Eclipsed Welcome

In a series of poems entitled “Blue Lines,” Cook writes in the context of mourning. She recognizes the significance of writing poetry in response to death:

There are places you can only get to by dying
or writing. There are places that cannot be paraphrased.
The sky curved behind windshield glass,
muffled pines, the scared pelt of a mountain range,
reason in all its convex forms. In the place of words,
a trackless blue hum. Her life
tilting into misdemeanour, into memory. (34)

Cook leaves large empty spaces on the page to express all that “cannot be paraphrased.” They suggest “a trackless blue hum,” but it is up to the reader to listen for them. Like Cook, Croll recognizes the need to write about deaths as well as births:

we need someone to write out death because death
is leaking into every cup we raise to our mouths

[...]
 we need death examined as body after body is washed
 and laid into the ground we need to remember children
 crying babies [...] we need
 someone to look without fear into the faces of the newly born
 only now emerging from that soft covering of darkness
 and write what all this life means (61 – 62; ellipses mine)

Croll’s poem “we need to have our deaths written,” as discussed in the introduction, voices a lack of literatures about unborn/newborn infant deaths. These are the stories that have been hidden and are “only now emerging” as poets like Croll, Unrau, and Diehl-Jones draw them into the light. How do women respond to the loss of an infant, when the anticipated welcome of birth is eclipsed by death, and the “gift of the other” is grief? Roxanne Harde, in her essay “What I Hold and What I Give Away,” argues that society has developed a clinical attitude toward pregnancy and childbirth. Recovery should be quick. However, she asserts that mourning a miscarriage matters to others and not just to her own mothering:

I hold that life inside me still, as a memory, a secret, a life that was invisible and intangible to the world but alive to me. I hold that child encrypted inside me; my womb was the site of both his life and death. Like the deaths, the memories, of everyone I have lost, his is a death that inhabits me. Never really present in the world, he continues to be present to me. He is a closed cipher, but I continue to hold the experience of him inside me. (59)

For many women, mourning and writing about a miscarriage gives recognition to the invisible life that had begun in their womb, a taboo that persists in elegiac studies. Harde uses linguistic terms to represent her unborn, a “cipher” who has been “encrypted” in her womb. The uterine walls “remember” his life and death. For Harde, the absent child “continues to be present” in her memories, and “inhabit” her mind, body, and text. Writing child deaths breaks the silence for those women who “hold that child encrypted inside” like a secret that cannot be paraphrased.

Unrau’s poem “enceinte” (12), as the title implies, portrays the linguistic difficulties in writing the painful experience of being “with child” and then without. She addresses herself as

“you” throughout the poem: “you were so careful”; “you cradled your belly”; “you dreamt hot bath”; “maybe you couldn’t help it”; “you wanted” (12). The pronoun “you” is used both as a subject and an object, and creates a kind of mirroring effect. In this way, Unrau not only critiques herself, but the reader is also forced to walk in her shoes and imagine the devastation, guilt, and scrutiny that follows loss. Unrau echoes a common social response: “people will say it just wasn’t meant to be,” but she reminds, “they don’t know how you dreamt” (12). How will the reader respond? Each stanza increases in line-length and intensifies the uneasiness as the reader realizes this “sweet yolk” will not grow to fruition:

maybe you couldn’t help it
 but when you’re splayed here
 at the bottom of consciousness
 what you wanted and didn’t want
 saw coming and didn’t
 what you felt and when you stopped feeling

well, you just can’t tell anymore (12)

Similar to Croll, Unrau feels the need to tell someone but, as the last line emphasizes, she is unable to tell her story. The final line, the pronoun “you,” and the title “enceinte” all stress the problem of telling. Writing poetry provides opportunity for Unrau to present the anxieties and ambiguities of her experience. The line break and gap between “feeling” and “well” suggest two interpretations. First is the movement from feeling to not feeling—a response to fear and death—then taking a pause before interjecting “well” to continue the thought. More likely, the difficulty here is in speaking of illness, when you stop feeling well during pregnancy. Unrau’s writing strategies underscore the barriers in expressing child-loss.

The intersubjective relationship of mother and child, as discussed in the section on pregnancy, begins prior to birth when a woman becomes aware of the “other” stirring within her body. Diehl-Jones begins her poetry collection *lamentations* with a dedication: “for chloe, in

celebration.” The first series of poems in the collection is entitled “the body” and expresses the two-in-oneness of the poet and her unborn:

like a child’s toy a body
 nests inside another
 the world a swaying
 preposition to reorient
 the spine
 gravely comic we bodied
 forth cherished the heavy belly
 conjugated ourselves
 in the plural
 hoping to elude the stiff
 sentence

oh daughter i
 mark the loss of you
 both of us ciphers now
 hiding in a language we cannot
 speak each day
 i reinvent
 a world without (3)

Diehl-Jones, like Harde, uses “cipher” as a metaphor. However, she includes both the absent daughter as well as herself as ciphers “hiding in a language we cannot/speak.” Writing the inexpressible is like decoding a “closed cipher” or inventing a new language in response to the newborn’s death. She shifts the pronouns from “i” to “we” back to “i.” The woman-gestating-child relation is represented in conjugal terms. Diehl-Jones alludes to the image of marriage, when “two become one” in sexual union, and when the sperm and egg unite. She represents the two in one, “we bodied/forth,” and moves from a lifeless “child’s toy” metaphor to a brief embodiment of their gestating intersubjectivity, and finally to her daughter’s death.

Writing poetry as a strategy for dealing with death echoes the double meaning of “stiff/sentence.” Stiff, slang for corpse, and sentence, meaning judgement, represent the prognosis of the unborn’s death. Diehl-Jones also suggests that there is no language to represent her loss—

language is lost to itself. Poetry, then, avoids strict linguistic structures (sentences), and poetic language signifies an analogical relationship. Thus, the two ciphers continue to body forth in the “reinvented” world of her poem. Though death has dis-embodied the child and emptied the poet, they hide in a language they “cannot /speak.” The “we” may return to an “i,” but the “i” remains plural because she still bears the other within her memories and poems. Their interrelationship may be silenced by death and social expectations, but Diehl-Jones’ poetry collection “marks” the loss of her daughter. Writing marks the presence of loss, the existence of a child now absent. The poet still holds the mental and physical remainders as reminders of her experience with the unborn. Writing re-remembers and re-inscribes the m/other in a celebration of “us.”

The poet transforms her experience of loss into “ciphers” on a page in a language that reveals and conceals grief. Furthermore, the book as an object embodies Diehl-Jones’ grief and her absent daughter. One of the subtleties in the design of her book is the presence of the word “lamentations” watermarked in different fonts on the pages that mark each section. Other watermarked words are scattered in all directions as a backdrop to the three-line poems in the section entitled “storms”—a visual representation of her psychological state as her baby was dying. Diehl-Jones writes “O daughter i/ mark the loss of you.” Her poetry collection is marked with faint words, ciphers, impressions of her presence in her absence. The visual shifts of texts and whitespaces draw the reader through empty spaces filled with a language that cannot be written. The form communicates as much or more than the words themselves. The “us” remains as the watermarks (and tears) of *lamentations*.

Following their own call to write infant loss, poets like Unrau, Croll, Cook and Diehl-Jones are prompted to “reinvent” language and forms to express their heartbreak. Diehl-Jones re-imagines her maternal body after child-loss:

motherbody curls around
the absent infant
invents fragile compartments to hold
the stuttering moment
a nautilus shell geometry
of a divine proportion spiralling
to contain the reach
of you
somewhere
outside my loss
measuring the space
between stars (4)

This conception of the “motherbody” echoes Croll’s notion of the maternal body as a house for the unborn: “this is how we house pregnancy/ and how pregnancy houses us” (Croll 16). These poems house her responses to the lived experiences of the “motherbody.” The poem and the female body remember the “absent infant” and create “compartments to hold the stuttering moment” like stanzas. Stacking fragmented and short lines, as well as the word images “geometry” “spiralling” “reach” “measuring the space/ between stars,” all contribute to this sense of stuttering. Inadequate language and immense loss impede speech. The physical and textual bodies of women like Diehl-Jones and Unrau, house the memories of the dead; their poems and books of poetry embody the presence of the deceased other.

Giving voice to experiences of expectancy and mourning requires a language that bears witness to the child that was lost and to the woman who gave her body and mind for the Other — a gift of hospitality in the task of reproduction. Poets like Diehl-Jones and Unrau push back against the silence, determined to alter socialized responses to child-loss. Unrau’s prologue, “my children are not my poetry” draws attention to the relation between maternal experience and poetic response:

my children are not my poetry
so beautiful
they make their own

[...] i lost my poems
 this one is not a child

wrap myself in blankets that still
 smell of breastmilk wish for it back then
 cry for my losses
 who am i now

[...] laundry the dishes i
 go unwashed and unwritten

a mother's job is to know
 what matters and keep it alive

a poet's job is to feel
 for a pulse

so long as i'm living
 it is (9; ellipses mine)

Unrau indicates from the outset, a poem is not the same as a child; writing does not replace what has been lost. She probes her ambiguous identity: “who am i now,” a mother or not a mother or an emptied poet? Her fragmented sense of self is reflected in the fragmentation of her poem. The entire poem includes single lines, broken lines, gaps, single words, and various line- and stanza-lengths. As a poet, she feels the weight of social and personal expectations to “keep it alive” and “feel/ for a pulse.” Whatever people may think, for Unrau the lost infant “is” not a poem but a reality she will never forget; “it” exists in her life and in her poetry.

Unrau's poem asks an important question. If her unborn child dies, does she still receive the gift of motherhood? Is she a mother or a not-mother? Some argue that the event of birth is the moment of rebirth for a woman to become a mother. Does that include a miscarriage or stillbirth? For Croll, the term “mother” is gifted to the woman who gives birth to a child. Prior to birth, the unborn was “the same as me/ only hours before she was me/ not yet in my arms and I was not yet a mother” (26). For Unrau and Diehl-Jones, a miscarriage or stillbirth is still a loss of

“it” or “her”—born (alive or dead) of a woman. Unrau depicts the grim and unspeakable loss of a stillborn child:

his body was brown & empty
 skin clung to our fingers
 when we tried to pull away
 the nurse took him from us I cried
 as if this parting & not some
 silent trauma
 were the moment of his death

you can't take the unborn home
 your breasts may leak
 but he is not hungry

he is a polaroid guesses about eyes
 a useless name a strange smell
 that lingers the sound of the doppler machine searching

he is the silence
 between my heartbeats (19)

Unrau does not shy away from the shocking moments of holding a dead newborn. Both the polaroid and the poem represent his body. Not only are some of the details discomforting, but the pronouns also shift from “our” and “we” as parents, to the “I” and “you” of the poet. This writing strategy expresses the difficulty in dealing with the “silent trauma” of the unborn in utero, the stillbirth event, the moments holding his empty body, and finally their second parting in the hospital. The painful reality “you can’t take the unborn home” is exacerbated by the breasts that “may leak.” The “motherbody” and psyche remember the expected infant and his existence. The reader joins with the poet in recollecting him. As lines spill on the page, we must pass through the silent spaces between lines.

However, women who have miscarried or experienced stillbirths, like Diehl-Jones and Unrau, maintain that they do “take the unborn home.” The breasts leak but he is not hungry, his eyes are missing in the photo, his name is “useless,” and he leaves “a strange smell that lingers.”

The nameless “useless” child is the “he” represented in this poem. For Unrau, “he is the silence/ between my heartbeats” (19). For Diehl-Jones, chloe is “the space/ between stars.” The dead child resides in her internal/maternal body “as a memory, a secret, a life that was invisible and intangible to the world but alive to me” (Harde 59). Like Croll’s pregnancy-house image, Diehl-Jones’ motherbody houses the unborn and bears the memories of an invisible life. Thus, the body, mind, and poem are hospitable places for the infant to dwell. Even after death and separation, for these poets the mother-child relationship remains entwined. The presence of the absent stranger dwells in the silences between heartbeats and the poetic lines.

Negotiating and writing maternity, Gordon, Croll, Harris, Diehl-Jones, and Unrau bear witness to the particularities and paradoxes of pregnancy and parturition. In life and in death, the rhythms of their poems accentuate the desire to tell of this nascent intersubjective relationship. In her poem “first night” (27), Croll stresses the importance of telling:

on the first night I told my daughter
 I was her mother I told
 my daughter as I tried to learn to hold her
 [...]
 she already had my voice
 imprinted on her from five months’ gestation
 [...]
 I taught my infant daughter the order
 of the world I told her I was hers
 I told her I was
 her mother and that I would be her mother
 forever I would be her mother
 after my death (27; ellipses mine)

Four times Croll repeats “I told,” signifying the importance of telling and writing birth-stories. She is “already tangled up/ with the rhythms of her [daughter’s] still foreign body” (27). At “five months’ gestation,” the infant has heard her voice, yet she is just learning the baby’s “vocabulary of need” (27). Each prairie poet in this chapter represents the mother-child bond in her own way.

As hosts and sometimes hostages to the unborn/newborn, they negotiate and write the dynamics of a hospitable and sometimes hostile relation. Writing out of their subjective experiences, they contend with dominant discourses and construct alternative maternal relations. O'Reilly suggests that to "displace the official definition/dominant ideology of birth," women need to lobby for "equal access to the social technologies" so that "feminists may be able to codify and signify their own discourse of childbirth" (222). As I have tried to show in this chapter, each of these poets re-codify and re-signify maternity in particular ways through their poetics. Poetry allows these women to write the rhythms of their intersubjective bodies, to imagine and represent the unseen other, to generate dialogue with the unborn and the reader, and to leave spaces where the unsaid resonates. These women not only "see into things" (Simpson) from doubled perspectives before, during, and after childbirth, but they also respond from individual points of view. Readers are invited to "see" the transformative experiences of maternity and the multidimensionality of maternal subjects. There is more to bearing and birthing babies than what meets the eye and what conventional discourses can bear.

**Chapter 4: Reclaiming a Maternal Inheritance:
Drawing a Motherline by Reconstructing & Transmitting Cultural Memories**

Writing strategies for negotiating mother/ing emerge from a complex socio-cultural matrix of relationships and are constructed within and against socio-cultural and literary structures. As previous chapters indicate, poetry is potentially a hospitable space where women negotiate maternal experiences—mother-loss, pregnancy, childbirth, child-loss—and counter maternal silences through writing. Reclaiming a maternal inheritance, like mothering and writing, is clearly a relational practice and contradicts conventional ideals of individuality and independence (Jeremiah, “Troublesome” 7). Moreover, this occasion for writing is an act of restoration as well as identification with a specific maternal line. Naomi Lowinsky, in “Mother of Mothers, Daughter of Daughters” defines the motherline as “body knowledge and birth story and family story and myth....The Motherline is not a straight line...it is about bodies being born out of bodies” (230 – 31). Her view of the “Motherline” stresses the biological and familial interconnection between mothers and daughters. In the context of generational and cross-cultural relations, Sharon Abbey and Charlotte Harris, together with their daughters, use Lowinsky’s concept to reconstruct their own “Motherlines.” They observe that “each foremother introduced changes to the Motherline,” recontextualizing praxes and principles according to the individual foremother’s circumstances (“Motherline Connections” 264). The “motherline,” for Fiona Joy Green, concerns the storylines, “voices, wisdom, and wit of feminist mothers” (7). Gina Wong-Wylie, in her essay “Images and Echoes in Matroreform,” revises the notion of a “motherline” once again. The “motherline” is drawn by telling stories, reaffirming, altering, and making cultural matrilineage visible (136). In addition, she defines “matroreform” as a process of “outlining issues in mothering, racial tensions, bi-cultural identity, and belonging ...a feminist act of voicing up and out of invisibility and silence” (136). Wong-Wylie’s articulation of the

terms motherline and matroreform takes into account all of the formulations mentioned above. No two women are identical and neither do they all write. However, those who do convey their particular maternal histories offer glimpses into the complexities and tensions involved in mother/ing within a particular context. In this chapter, I will focus on contemporary poets whose writing strategies reconstruct a matrilineal past, (re)inscribe the self along a motherline, recontextualize and transmit cultural memories, and/or reconceive and reform the maternal.

The poets I discuss in this chapter consciously seek to make “cultural matrilineage visible,” reconstructing their maternal histories and transmitting their cultural memories through their poetry. My investigation will include Rita Bouvier’s *papîyâhtak*, Louise Bernice Halfe’s *Blue Marrow*, Jennifer Still’s *Saltations*, and Erín Moure’s *The Unmemntioable*. These poets write to recover maternal genealogies, legacies, and customs—biological, cultural, and literary—buried beneath “official” Canadian histories and canons. Their particular views of matrilineage and identity formation are shaped by relationality, ethnicity, and history. At the time of writing, Bouvier and Halfe are mothers, Still is a new mother, and Moure is not a mother. Ethnic and cultural contexts also inform their individual perceptions: Bouvier is a Métis poet, Halfe writes out of a Cree heritage, and Still has Métis in her motherline. Moure problematizes the notion of a motherline; her Ukrainian matrilineage was largely destroyed via genocide. Writing a (multi) cultural matrilineage makes visible the ways ideas of race, culture, identity, and community are intertwined. Andrea O’Reilly and Silvia Caporale Bizzini, in their introduction to *From the Personal to Political*, suggest that contemporary scholars and writers acknowledge the challenge to speak “that which has been censored, distorted, and silenced, [and] struggle to make the maternal story narratable in both literature and theory” (27). This struggle is multiplied when writing poetry about maternal histories and genealogies across cultures. Jennifer Andrews

laments the paucity of critical investigation into Native women's poetry. Focusing on "eight contemporary Native women poets from Canada and the United States," including Louise Halfe, she stresses the import of humour and irony, two discursive strategies prevalent in their poetry (5). Andrews suggests "it is through the double-voiced discourse of irony and the textual surprises of humour that these women writers repeatedly challenge hegemonic renderings of themselves and their cultures" (7). In *Re(Dis)covering Our Foremothers*, Lorraine McMullen draws a similar conclusion: women writers "express a different vision of Canada and the Canadian experience than is conventionally held" (2). She focuses on the recovery of women's literatures in order to re-inscribe women into "Canadian literary history" (2)—a literary motherline. I have found that the poets in this chapter not only give voice to the "censored, distorted, and silenced," but they also conceive of new ways to rewrite their maternal histories.

Podnieks and O'Reilly argue that life writing genres, such as diaries, memoirs, and auto/biographies, allow mother-writers to

inscribe an 'I', or series of 'I's' in the authoring of their maternal selves, accounting for and expressing awareness of factors such as the body, sexuality, gender, race, class, and nationhood.... [to] tell their own stories through matrifocal speech, seeking agency as they shape and control both their lived realities and textual representation of those realities. (7)

I would argue that poetry also gives women agency in representing "their maternal selves."

Writing matrilineal poetry encompasses the relationality of their "lived realities" and employs "daughter-centric" and/or "matrifocal speech" to engage with other discourses. Jo Malin argues that daughter-mother stories in auto/biographies overlap. The mother "becomes a subject, or rather an 'intersubject,' in her daughter's autobiography. These texts become conversations or dialogues between a mother and a daughter" thereby creating "an alternate literary form" that resists the "single authoritative or monologic voice" (2). These poets "explore silenced or

subjugated knowledges” (Dunlop, “Archive” 67) by interweaving daughter-mother-grandmother intersubjectivities into a matrilineage that emulates Malin’s “model of a hybrid, conversational practice” (4). They sift through official and unofficial writings that span multiple times and “I’s,” imagined or real, to piece together their shared lives.

Maternal histories, ethnicities, and cultural experiences are intertwined and always in flux: “A woman’s identity as mother is always intersecting with other cultural and historical factors in which the woman is situated” (Fast and Buller 3). Writing makes culture visible and exposes racial and cultural tensions often marginalized in society and in scholarship. Andrews points out that to recollect the past is to revise “the perpetuation of select master narratives” (128). Further, reconstructing a motherline in poetry recreates history in form and content even as it re-inscribes the poet-self into the tapestry of history. The poets discussed here work to re(dis)cover their own matrilineal heritage(s) and lost maternal voices (and texts) as they re-envision western Canadian experiences of mother/ing. Redrawing motherlines challenges the persistent “disparity between what women’s voices say and what has been accepted” (McMullen 2) as socio-cultural and literary norms.

For a number of poets, maternal heritages cross cultures and claim mixed identities. In her essay “Hyphens, Hybridities and Mixed-Race Identities,” Isabel Carrera Suarez stresses the “*relational* nature of identities, by means of their dialogic structure. This relational aspect of self-perception is a key point in discussions of hybridity and mixed race, as it is in contemporary theoretical discussions” (26; emphasis in text). Negotiating mixed identities in life and literature unsettles notions of fixed identities and histories. In *Writing Ethnicity*, Winfried Siemerling argues that ethnicity stems from “the construction of cross-cultural identification” and denotes “an act of ‘ethnogenesis,’” or “communal identification,” that is marked “precisely as different

from the previous, seemingly unmitigated cultural identity to which it refers”; that is, “marked by hybridity and invention” (2). Certainly poets discussed in this chapter identify with their maternal or cultural inheritances in varying degrees, but the dialogic nature of hybridity, which implies an other, is applicable to ethnicity, maternity, mothering and writing. The doubled or “self-effracting” identity of maternity (*The Gift* 54), and the “double vision” (Russel xi) of a bi- or multi-ethnic self, emphasize the relational, dialogical, dynamic, and multi-dimensional nature of identities. Reclaiming a maternal inheritance, as the following investigation clarifies, has the potential to counter silencing effects of patriarchy and racism, fixed histories and identities, colonization and social conformity, as well as masculinist and monologic literatures.

1. Matrilineage: Reconstructing the Past

Virginia Woolf’s oft quoted statement “we think back through our mothers if we are women” (*A room of one’s own*) continues to resonate in the twenty-first century. Jodi Vandenberg-Daves argues that in the recovery of maternal “experiences, voices, and even their bodies, in history and in contemporary political and cultural discourses” (11), maternal historians have had to scour “institutional records and sermons... women’s private writings... oral histories and memoir... family photographs, visual art, and family memories ... literature and poetry, and from the documents women created in activist projects” (13). She goes on to claim that maternal histories remain “a vast too-little explored dimension of the human experience” largely due to a “cultural bias” that privileges “the public world, not coincidentally the world assigned to men” over “the private one” associated with women (10, 11, 18). These daughter-poets look back through their mothers as they reconstruct their matrilineage. Similar to maternal historians, these poets sift through memories, stories, and heirlooms, and explore dreams and possibilities as they piece together lived and imagined motherlines, lineages always “in-the-making” (Bakhtin 7).

Halfe reconstructs a maternal inheritance that troubles categorization of literary genres. Her book is a family history, a photo album, an autobiography, a fiction, a collage, a hybrid of prose and poetry. On the front cover of the 2004 edition of *Blue Marrow*, photographs of Halfe's four grandmothers shimmer among the northern lights.²¹ Writing back through her grandmothers, the narrator discovers moments of light, insights into her maternal histories. These portraits are redrawn into four poetic prose paragraphs several pages into the book. Halfe re-collects her "crumbs of memory" and re-creates intimate portraits for her four grandmothers (8, 9). Adeline is her "father's mother. Huge, forbearing medicine woman"; Emma "must've been married to a white man...she was/ our minstrel woman, travelling poet of her time"; Bella is "the one who loved to laugh...a/ hen with babies beneath her wings" (8); Sarah "was a midwife, ...she always had that wonderful rabbit, hot and perking,/ bannock melting in your mouth" (9). Although the photos of Halfe's grandmothers are unnamed, the significance of relationality and interdependence are not difficult to discern. Halfe makes room for her grandmothers, in image and word, even as they make "room for [her] ...at the altar" (8).

For Halfe, the cultural community, both past and present, plays an important role in terms of her sense of identity. She introduces herself as "Voice Dancer *pawâkan*, the Guardian of Dreams and Visions" (1),²² as well as "The Keeper of the Stories – *âcimowinis*" (20, 21) and "The Keeper of Sacred Legends – *nôhkom*" (23). Her synesthetic name "Voice Dancer" represents her dynamic and dialogic poetics. Using the plural form of voice and an uppercase "V," Halfe emphasizes the importance of listening to her maternal ancestors. Each voice is plural

²¹ Unless otherwise mentioned, my analysis focuses on Halfe's 2004 rather than her 1998 edition. The changes in the second edition, such as a new cover, in-text glosses, and the inclusion of a Cree Glossary, make her work more accessible, and provide a deeper understanding not only of the Cree language but also the Cree culture.

²² Louise Bernice Halfe's Cree name is Sky Dancer. Voice Dancer is a dream spirit (see Cree Glossary). The first page begins with "Voice Dancer *pawâkan*, the Guardian of Dreams and Visions,/ prayer, brings to you this gift" (1).

and embodies generations of great-grandmothers. Their Voices continue to multiply as Halfe lists dozens of Indigenous names. By naming her foremothers, many who were effectively silenced by colonization and cultural violence, Halfe opens a dialogue with her past in which the reader participates. In her essay “Bone Memory,” Méira Cook says these “collective stories” create “a fascinating dialogue between history, taletelling, and memory, ... [which] initiates an intriguing correspondence between the written text and its oral equivalent” (85). Halfe’s dialogic construction appears as a transcription of her grandmothers, thereby allowing her grandmothers to be the subjects of their own stories: “*We will guide your feather,/ dipped in ink*” (27). The tales of Halfe’s foremothers empower her writing.

Maternal histories do not occur in isolation. Halfe reconstructs her matrilineage in terms of gender and ethnicity, and in relation to European colonizers and immigrants. Note how Halfe elevates her subjugated maternal forebears in the following excerpt:

My Grandmothers were country wives—
 battered, traded, stolen, bought and sold
 sometimes loved by
 Frenchmen – *mistikôsiwak*
 Englishmen – *âkayâsiwak*
 Ukrainians – *opîtatowêwak*
 Norwegians
 Irishmen
 Scotsmen (61)

Halfe situates this poem at the top of the page, and introduces her Grandmothers at the beginning of the stanza before listing a series of ethnicities. One of Halfe’s writing strategies is creating lists. Here, the list moves along the left margin in a systematic way like a tally of transactions. Not only does she reimagine a vast number of Indigenous women, but Halfe also lists other cultures that have entered her maternal history. Naming her foremothers signifies their subjectivity. In contrast, men are associated with settler ethnicities and are divested of

subjectivity. Several ethnic groups have no Cree names. As a whole, these men are noted for the ways they treated their Indigenous wives. Halfe takes control of her story, overturns patriarchal and Euro-centric constructs of gender and race, and honours her Grandmothers, placing them above these unnamed male colonizers.

The multilingual and multi-vocal text of *Blue Marrow* gives witness to the influx and integration of immigrants that settled the Canadian prairies and altered Halfe's Cree maternal and cultural heritages. Intercultural relationships were both chosen and forced. One of her foremothers "stutters her story" and identifies various ethnicities in her family line:

*My mudder and fudder were liddle bid Irish
an French. My grandfudder, dough, he dick
dough white skin speak grandmudder's Cree.
She, grandmudder, was a pure. I 'member dere
stories. (61)*

Halfe represents this stuttered story as a recorded conversation. The Cree "grandmudder" is associated with the term "pure." Her stories, and those of the "white skin" grandfather, are the ones recollected because they both spoke the Cree language. Language is crucial in transmitting cultural memories. This phonetic text not only represents a transcription from oral story-telling into print, but it also undermines the standard pronunciation of English. The vernacular speech exemplifies the contamination or influence of Cree on the dominant language. Halfe's range of registers, as Cook states, "bears witness to the discourse of colonization, in which to speak is to straddle the narrow border between learning to 'ride English' (5), and 'Cree-ing loud' into the night (14)" (91; quoted from Halfe's 1998 edition). Furthermore, the "representations of women of 'mixed' blood—or First Nations women married to white men—occupy a significant position in a text concerned with hybridity as a privileged site of survival and creativity" (102). Halfe's mix of Cree and English not only acknowledges the hybridity of her matrilineage, but more

importantly, empowers her to re-inscribe the “Voices” and histories of her Cree foremothers into Cree-English poetry, and to counter traditional versions of Canadian history.

Incorporating multiple voices is a productive writing strategy for poets like Halfe who must negotiate the racial and cultural conflicts that tarnish Canadian history. Seiler examines debates “over cultural voice and cultural ownership” and suggests that “ethnic heterogeneity” in literature has had a “profound but paradoxical impact . . . on Canadian culture” (148). In her analysis of ethnic and indigenous Canadian writers, such as Tomson Highway and Joy Kogawa, Seiler points to the ways their writing “both decentres and centres, fragments and synthesizes Canadian national culture” (148). These paradoxical tensions are evident in Halfe’s poetry. Firstly, the text is a collection of fragmented stories or songs, lived and imagined, past and present:

My relatives wake.
Fingers and toes winged,
cord strung in our
infant moccasins.
We’ve gathered
splintered bones,
weave, mend
the blue marrow. (46)

The poet weaves together the “marrow” of her matrilineage, reconstructs the bones splintered by her violent history, and restrings the moccasins of her Cree heritage. The “splintered bones” are like the “crumbs of memory,” or what Cook calls “bone memory,” gathered along the lines of Halfe’s poems. Secondly, Halfe focuses on marginalized maternal voices drawn out of the “invisibility and silence” (Wong-Wylie): “When the Voices roar, I write./ Sometimes they sing,/ are silent. [...] *ê-pêcimakik*. / I haunt them./ My wailing stories” (Halfe 53; ellipsis mine). She resists the conventional singular unifying voice by incorporating a myriad of Voices and a hybrid of ethnicities and genres in her work. She “haunts” these stories even as she is haunted by them.

Halfe critiques the homogeneity and violence of colonization, as well as the destruction of matrilineal and cultural histories. Moreover, encounters with the Cree Voices of Halfe's matrilineage and her own "wailing stories" have the potential to haunt her readers, to engage them in a dialogue across cultures and histories.

Halfe demonstrates the significance of poetry as a site for expressing cultural appropriation and racial tensions. Seiler claims that "conflicts between traditionalism and eclecticism which are given concrete expression in the debate over appropriation, are both inevitable and potentially productive tensions in a heterogeneous nation" (148). Halfe's eclectic poetic reconstruction of her inheritances represents the potential of literary production and the reclamation of her Indigenous voice. Her poetry opens space for dialogue across generations and cultures that have been silenced far too long:

êy êy êy nôsisim
 kika-pîcicînânaw
your fingers
stitch this cloth
mend these moccasins
light my ospwâkan
 êy êy êy nôsisim
so long we've sat
 êy êy êy nôsisim
we've waited for so long. (64)

Sky Dancer, the grandchild-poet, dances imaginatively with her grandmothers and her readers through poetry. Her fingers "stitch" together the fragments of her matrilineal fabric—Cree and English—like a poetic quilt. Halfe not only reclaims her maternal heritage, but also her native tongue by italicizing English as the "foreign" language. Halfe also counters traditional documentation of histories, by repeatedly claiming that she, the grandchild-poet, is "The Keeper of the Stories—*âcimowinis*" (20, 21, 23). She must keep or preserve her grandmothers' stories because they lie "tongueless in the earth," because she carries their "Bundles" inside, and

because she “cannot/hold” them in any longer (9). Little stories and songs, such as “*In those days/ we lay heavy/ loaded with children, grub./ The men added to our/ burden, whipped us/ as if we were dogs*” (27), bear witness to a history of cultural violence and racial tensions that continue to reverberate in the present context.

In her poetry collection, Halfe begins in dialogue with the Voices of her grandmothers and moves towards the stories and memories of her own parents, thereby linking the past with the present. Contrary to the long lists of names earlier in the book, Halfe withholds her parents’ names. It is her “Nameless *pâpâ*” who “calls upon his daughter to join him/ in his memory” (81), and “His eyes” that are “a tiny light” (88) into her history. Twice she writes, “I cannot name him./ Will not name him. My poor father,/ He is many fathers” (80, 81). He represents all the impoverished fathers who struggled with and were silenced by priests (religious fathers), “sister superior, the pope,/ ...Indian Affairs” (84). Likewise, Halfe’s mother symbolizes all mothers:

She sheds buckskin. Hightops.
Loosen braids. The Ages
become my mother. Arms
raised. She sings.

I will not name her
Cannot name her
She becomes everyone’s
mother. (86)

The uppercase in the word “Ages” points to an immeasurable past, a maternal history. Halfe’s mother (and father) embodies the remembered and forgotten memories across generations.

Though the lines of these stanzas are brief, they bear the burden of a shattered and silenced history. Halfe uses the verb “become” in each stanza, indicative of movement and change. In refusing to name her mother, like the nameless photos (2004 edition), Halfe resists closure.

Symbolic of “The Ages,” her mother ties Halfe to her maternal history. As “everyone’s/ mother,”

she is the link to future generations. Drawing all mothers together does not eliminate their subjectivities but creates a solidarity that exemplifies relationality and interdependence.

Moreover, readers are invited to join her mother's song:

waniskâ
Arise

pê-wâpan ôma
dawn has come

âsay piyêsîsak
already the birds

nikamowak
sing

miyohtâkwan.
the beautiful song

kitaskînaw
our land. (87)

Pairing the Cree and English lines like couplets may suggest cultural acceptance, but the structure reminds us that Cree came before English. Similarly, the final line “our land” troubles the notion of ownership and alludes to centuries of government control over First Nations’ land. However, the line “dawn has come” implies a new start and hope for a better future.

Reconstructing a matrilineage through poetry not only has the potential to challenge official histories, but also makes new connections with the past. Jennifer Still’s poetry collection *Saltations* (2005) explores the “bewilderment” (14) of becoming a mother and the mysteries of her own maternal heritage. At first glance, the title evokes an image of salt, a seasoning and preservative, or the notion of exaltation, a state of elation or an act of praise and honour for someone, as well as salutation, a greeting—apropos notions for reclaiming a maternal inheritance. According to Wiktionary, saltation can also be defined as 1) a leap, jump or dance;

2) beating or palpitation; 3) a sudden change (mutation) from one generation to the next; 4) any abrupt transition; 5) transport of loose particles by a wind or water. Still draws on this rich term to emphasize life, movement, and change, pivotal in reconceiving a motherline. The idea of a sudden change or mutation between generations disturbs assumptions that the “line” is smooth and uninterrupted. There are moments when Still points to “the hole in the snow// where I interrupted/ your death” (21), or “where the blood,/ each fine-brushed/ stroke, *closer closer*, arrives/ a new entry” (78; emphasis in text). Each “new entry” into the motherline can alter its trajectory just as each new word on the page can turn and twist the line. In a series of birthing poems in the opening section, “A Hinged Air,” Still concretizes the “vertebra to vertebra stringed /bone light of stepping// stone, passage” (12) of biological and genealogical development. Each poem is a vertebra or stepping stone that unites a growing history of bones and associations. Each life hinges on the previous generation in “the ever-expansive// arc of reaching” (13). Like the umbilical “cord/ winding through fingers, a staircase/ for angels, the lightfeet of anything/ returning to wings” (8), Still links birth poems with poems of her grandmother’s death to construct a motherline between her infant and her foremothers.

Becoming a mother and losing a grandmother are abrupt alterations (saltations) in life from which “there is no hiding.” This transitional shift is especially poignant in Still’s poem “Variations on a Blue Sky” dedicated to her Grandma R.:

9-1-1 vibrato the space between
voice
and hearing, body-silent, full of wind. A flag
on the other side of glass, rippling. A fluid-armed circling,
mouth miming
mother mother
[...]
a child’s fingers, pinning
room to room, the bleat of white

sheepbody, knitted
 spines of cloud, a hinged air
 that reminds you
 there is no hiding
 from wings— (17-18; ellipsis mine)

The enjambment and varied line-lengths create sudden shifts that “mime” movements from the critical call to silence, and from one body to the next. Gaps between and among the lines open spaces where the “hinged air” pulses—a visual representation of the rhythms of life and death. The final long dash, like the flat line of a heart monitor, alters Still’s point of view. A voice morphs into a “body-silent” leaving behind the “sheepbodies,” the offspring that follow the family line. On the opposite page, the poem “Snow Angel,” begins “If this is the end, let it be, little dove,/ a string in the wind like sand// from a palm” (19). Still captures the fleeting reality of human existence through the images of a snow angel, an ephemeral human impression left behind, and a dove, a symbol of hope. As a granddaughter-poet, Still holds the string and sand, like the continuation of time and her family tree, in her hands. Looking back at the “hole in the snow,” she recognizes how quickly the past is “glossed over.” The “flailing wing could have been any/ message, lifting” (19). These striking images and movement on the page represent the sudden changes that birth and death activate. Writing allows Still to navigate these significant experiences and search for “any/message” her grandmother may have left behind.

Composing maternal histories through maternal eyes is a way of making sense of the world. Sara Ruddick claims that mothering is both a practice and a way of thinking. Ruddick’s conception of “maternal thinking” includes “the intellectual capacities she develops, the judgments she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, [and] the values she affirms” (96). These thought processes inform her choices and responses, and shape a “conceptual scheme—a vocabulary and logic of connections ... a unity of reflection, judgment, and emotion” (97). The

mental and emotional work of shaping a “conceptual scheme” not only applies to mothering but also to writing. Still makes this process visible in her poem “What Makes Sense To the Hand” (22). In her search for an approach, or conceptual scheme, to reconstruct her matrilineage, Still offers a series of possibilities. Six times in the poem she repeats the words “might be,” then proceeds to analyze potential ways of making a path into the past. For example, traces of her grandmothers might be found in the “small habits,” instincts, or cards of “chance and luck,” or the “water shifting in a bucket, compensation/ of shoulder, memory of spine” (22). It might be the saltations, the “loose particles”—genes, artifacts, gestures, memories—that flow from one generation to the next. Ultimately, “what makes sense to the hands” for Still are the things that lie “close to the heart” and the “small histories: seed packets, a nail file,/ clipped pictures of your mother, the prick/ of a stray pin” (22). Through a process of “reflection, judgment, and emotion” (Ruddick), Still (re)collects sundry items and thoughts and reforms them into poetry, “a vocabulary and logic of connections” (Ruddick) that make sense to her personally and literarily. Like vertebrae, the construction of the line of the spine, the poem, and the motherline are sequential, relational, and interconnected, a gathering of what Still holds dear.

Still, like Halfe, gathers together “small histories” and creates lists. However, Halfe transcribes her grandmothers’ oral stories, whereas Still looks for traces of the past through the objects left behind and makes lists of possible interpretations as strategies to negotiate gaps in knowledge. Still’s poems are the rooms in which artifacts, such as “the seeds, nail file, photos, and stray pin,” and memories are held. These collected items offer clues, little windows into her maternal history. According to Ninh T. Nguyen, “one can view [the past] as a repository that allows and even requires ordering and sorting of information and experiences” (179 – 80). In her analysis of Joy Kogawa’s novel *Obasan*, Nguyen underscores the associative qualities of images

and the reconstructive “process of sorting and weaving together the past out of fragments to create a ‘whole’ picture” (180). I would argue that the associative qualities of images and words are especially germane in poetic language. Poetic reconstruction of maternal histories necessitates a selection process that frees artifacts, images, and memories to generate associations. Still exemplifies this “process of sorting and weaving” in her poem “Berry Picking”:

It’s all about pathways, blood,
the calyx-lit compass

of wander. Patch to patch
this is refinement of the hand, a family

clustered every August in the plinkity-plink slow
task of gathering. It’s all about love

measured in buckets, pies, the familiar round dance
of birdsong, season. Or small returns, [...] (23; ellipsis mine)

In this series of couplets, Still portrays writing as a relational journey motivated by love and family connections. Her inventive image of “calyx-lit compass” is salient here. Still unites “lit” or literature with the calyx—the sepals that form a protective layer around a budding flower. She associates writing with a compass, an instrument for navigation and orientation. The compass is also “lit” by the calyx, a light for the journey. As a strategy for negotiating her maternal inheritance, Still’s poetics demonstrate qualities of refinement. Word choices, line breaks and spaces, metaphors and associations are crucial in poetry—much is required from a few words. Unlike a narrative or autobiography, poetry moves from “patch to patch” picking words like berries, and gathering “small stories” like budding flowers; “*This is the way*, you say, to grandma’s deep-dish pies” (23; italics in text). Poetic lines follow the “familiar round dance” (saltation) of family bloodlines as they change with the seasons.

Still draws new connections among the things left behind as she makes the journey along maternal bloodlines. The salt doll, received from her “great-great grandmother Flora Bell Tapper” (94), is a salient artifact that embodies the rhythms and tears of her maternal inheritance. Still strategically situates a section of poems, entitled “A History of Blood,” near the centre of the book. In the poem with the same title, she reveals the constructedness of writing maternal histories and the centrality of the salt doll:

I have looked for a rhythm, a thread
 passing through one heartbeat
 and out another, a motion
 weaving pages, stories
 binding stories

—the journey of my blood.

Birth dates, death dates,
 a hyphen resting in-between
 (a drawn eyelid), a crease
 in history

*(The salt doll is 100 years of tears
 evaporated, preserver of secrets
 she travels with blood,
 mother to daughter gathering
 ages, prayers, flower petals
 press them gently—*

Turning pages, I was sifting soil
 not for the sake of earth
 but to find some treasure hidden
 in those black lines, pressed
 onto paper, letters
 bent into words, whispering
 a face, a name (58)

Central on the page is the stanza that holds the salt doll. She bears the memories and preserves the secrets of the past, and like the poet, travels the maternal bloodline. The centrality of the salt doll is further emphasized by italics. Notably, the parenthesis that begins this stanza does not

find its partner until the following page. This insertion disrupts the movement of the text, suspends the reader, and defers closure. Furthermore, the long dashes suggest a continuum—a motherline, a storyline, a thread—that represents the journey of blood. These long dashes also segregate the lines between them, as though the salt doll is related to the interrupted flow of the poem. The long dash does not represent a flat line signifying death, but rather a life-line that connects the salt doll with the journey of blood. Her demarcations make visible the peculiarity of this maternal artifact, the matrilineal pathway, and the malleability of history.

Still not only resists traditional forms of writing histories but queries the transparency of record keeping. The salt doll prompts further research in constructing her matrilineage. Sifting through documents, Still finds “some treasure hidden” in the “repository” (Nguyen) of history. She unearths a “small story” buried among the papers:

The history of blood reveals in halves:
 half-breed, half-blood, half-truth, I was left
 with only half story
 the unnamed, unspoken:
A Cree Woman

*She is nine generations steeped
 into one small apparition, distilled
 mothersalt, the sharp edge of brine.* (59; italics in text)

Lost in “a crease/ in history” the “hyphen” is revealed—an unexpected seam in the bloodline.

The “unnamed” secret, like the “prick/ of a stray pin,” draws blood from the past to the surface.

A holograph of a Cree mother’s signature is reproduced in the text from an official document.

Half of the story is resurrected from the past: “*I, Margaret Matilda Hourie, am a half-breed, head of a family*” (59). Still notes that the signature “is a reproduction of my 4th generation great-grandmother’s signature as it appears on a Métis scrip application from April 7, 1850 (courtesy of the Manitoba Métis Federation through Public Archives Canada)” (94). The scrip not only

identifies the woman as Métis and “head of a family,” but also indicates an entitlement to money or land from the federal government. Still gives the reader no clear indication of what happened to Margaret Matilda Hourie’s application or entitlement.²³ Line breaks, like “your name so neatly/ executed,” and “the page/ is bleeding x’s, *sign here* intersections points/ of inevitable crossings” suggest the possibility of violence. Still includes Hourie’s personal handwriting in the construct of her poem as a mark of her foremother’s existence in her motherline.

Still uses punctuation and typography to explore silences that form in the gaps of time and the ways bits of knowledge can speak into those silences. For example, the opening parenthesis in the line “(*The salt doll is 100 years of tears*” occurs near the half-way point on page 58, while its partner appears on the following page. The closing parenthesis at the end of the excerpt above sits on “the sharp edge of brine.)” (59). This “sharp edge” rests on the verge of knowing. This new bit of information prompts questions, such as what happened to Hourie, and how women like her took care of their families. Was her application honoured or rejected or confiscated? If rejected or confiscated, she and her family would have faced poverty and oppression. Hourie’s affidavit is a “half story” that leaves a remainder. In “Half-Bred Poetics,” Fred Wah posits that “names and naming not only encounter a blood residue but also indicate the camouflage possibilities of the name (both visible and invisible, both dash and cypher)” (79). It is the “hyphen resting in-between” (Still 58) that reveals her “blood residue” (Wah) in Still’s matrilineal inheritance. Bloodlines carry lost or forgotten histories. The question remains: Why was this othered mother kept a secret for nine generations? Roy Miki, in “A Poetics of the Hyphen,” suggests that this “‘silent dash’ operates as a sign that embodies subjects who have been produced as the outsiders in the interstices of the nation” (145 – 46). As a “half-breed,”

²³ This prompted some research of my own. According to the Manitoba Métis Federation, as many as three quarters of the claimants did not receive their rewards due to coercion or fraudulent practices (Library and Archives Canada website). This is an appalling statistic.

Hourie was “the outsider.” Still uses a series of hyphenated words —“half-breed, half-blood, half-truth”— to foreground cultural histories and identities as socially constructed and silenced. In addition, the repetition of the word “half” suggests these constructions leave gaps in which the “unnamed, unspoken” exist but remain silent. Nine generations are condensed into one “*small apparition*” (59). Still’s matrilineage is distilled into one Cree woman’s signature which verifies Hourie’s existence. By gradually adding new bits of information, often accentuated in italics, Still prompts readers to look back and re-examine their understanding of the “past” italicized passages. Italics suggest separation, foreignness, and otherness. They also clarify the connection between the salt doll and “mothersalt”—both represent the presence and preservation of Still’s maternal inheritance.

Still frames several of her poems with an epigraph, a strategy that also shapes the reading of the poem and potentially generates new associations and insights. Epigraphs provide a context and make connections to other literary works or other writings. The introduction to “Country Wife” is a disturbing reference to Still’s 9th generation great-grandfather, made by Samuel Hearne in his travel journal republished in 1958:

Isaac Batt, willing to be as great a brute as his Indian companions,
absolutely forced one of his wives, who had recently lost her infant,
to suckle a young Bear. (62)

This new knowledge is shocking. Still exposes the brutality of her forefather and the perversion of maternity, enforcing his grieving wife to suckle a bear as though she were an animal. What is more, Hearne’s reference indicates Batt and his Indigenous companions were of the same mind. This racist depiction evokes what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies as a significant colonial trope: “white men saving brown women from brown men” (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 93). Hearne’s less than sympathetic response—the maltreated nameless brown woman remains a

side-note in his travel journal—suggests the white man is in control. Still re-inscribes a name for her foremother and builds an emotional relationship with her. Unlike Halfe’s catalogue of names, Still creates the sequence “*StoneMaidenCreeMaidenIndianMaidenMother*” (62). Her string of names increases in intensity as each word collides into the next. The hybrid name embodies her grave stone, Cree culture, and Indigenous origin, as well as her status as a young, unmarried mother. This chain of references suggests a persistent “blood residue” (Wah) not only carried in her bloodline but also in the traces of violence in her family history. Still’s juxtaposition of this motherline with “Country Wife” also implicates generations of cultural and anti-maternal biases. The force generated by the two conjoined words that follow the line of mother names, “Bloodlock. Wedlock,” heightens the violence of European contact and cross-cultural interrelations. The double accents of the spondee add weight to the tragic maternal and cultural oppression, colonization, and patriarchal cruelty. Still’s use of the epigraph and the conjoined matrilineal names not only provides context and relational connectedness, but also emphasizes gendered ways of knowing and writing, of dominance and violence against mothers silenced and perverted in paternal histories.

Still interrogates the ways artifacts and traces of mothers’ lives are interpreted. She uses her experiences as a new mother to shape her Cree foremother’s encounter with infant loss. Still reimagines the woman’s suffering and traces the sorrow that encircles the “moss-swaddled / grave” like “an eagle’s ghost-/path of smoke” (62). These poetic lines represent the infant buried beneath the “[n]ight” and dirt of time:

is dirt
 over dirt, fistfuls
 of piling stars, the flickering vernix
 of your body *your tiny body* dusted

in earth. Shards of creamware,
bone. A tinkling cone
at my hip, pupa wind
of your hair. (62)

Still constructs the poem by piling lines, like “dirt/ over dirt,” over the infant’s body, which is central to the fourth line of the first stanza. She also repeats “your body,” but with a difference. The addition of the word “tiny” suggests a fragile treasure. Still unearths the bones like an archeologist excavates for broken pottery—with great care. The “creamware” shards are not simply a reference to artifacts of history. They implicate British colonizers and their fraught relationships with Indigenous peoples. Still associates the infant’s body with the “cone/at my hip”; she draws a relationship between her matrilineage and her own reproductive capacity. The image of the pupa, like a woman’s body or poem, suggests a potential site for transformation. Writing from a maternal perspective, Still overturns Samuel Hearne’s historical account into personal genealogical relations. She simultaneously validates maternity and exposes paternal subjugation and cruelty. In spite of efforts to bury the past beneath time, papers, moss, dirt, or by men like Batt, the Cree mother and her infant survive in Still’s bloodline and in her exposé.

Negotiating her mixed inheritance, Still’s writing brings into question claims to accurate interpretation of the traces and artifacts of the past. In the final section of the “Country Wife” poem, she begins with the italicized Latin term “*in situ*”—in place. In contrast to Hearne, who names the “brute” Isaac Batt and mentions the incident with “one of his wives” in his travel journals, Still re-envision the original occasion by looking back through a culturally inflected maternal viewpoint: “little curled roots/ of the ear, alula feather, bone” (63). She invites readers to re-examine the “shards” and “bones” of history through an alternate lens:

does what is left have anything to do
with what is found, the charcoal horizon

where her eyes never saw light, a humus
wet with womb

does what is left have anything to do
with flint, the small depressions
to the East, kaolin pipebowls, honey-coloured
chert,

just tell me
does it have marrow
ferruginous root
evidence of burning? (63)

Still queries the assumptions and prejudices of traditional historians and archeologists. Do their interpretations fit the clues left behind? Her questions force the reader to reimagine the world through “her eyes”—the maternal “marrow” and “root” from which she comes. She confronts the objectification of Indigenous mothers, treated like artifacts of “flint” and “kaolin pipebowls.” Images of white (porcelain pipebowls) and red (ferruginous) clay represent European contact and Aboriginal peoples, colonization and the economy of trade—a system that viewed women as commodities. Still weaves together bits of story, shards of bone, and remnants from two cultures. Her double vision or hyphenated perspective—in terms of maternity and cultural hybridity—generates both “creative and critical work” (Miki 175). Still challenges readers to follow the “ghost-/path of smoke” and grief, and to recognize the maternal apparitions erased from traditional histories.

Poets like Halfe and Still reconstruct their maternal inheritance by examining what is left behind. Their poetry embodies maternal and cultural heritages erased by time and/ or violence. Moure, however, troubles the idea of a motherline even as she reconstructs some of her mother’s Ukrainian history; she acknowledges the mysteries, absences, and gaps in knowledge. The title and the cover image of Moure’s collection create a perplexing context for her readers. Entitled “*Singing Jars*, the image is a detail from *Preserves* (2010), an installation /performance by Vida

Simon in the At Home Gallery, Šamorín, Slovakia.²⁴ Two small transparent jars with metal lids stand on the cover. One jar is empty and the other contains a ball of yarn. A portion of the blue yarn has been pulled through the punctured lid and drapes across a nondescript surface. The jar with the blue yarn not only represents the knit cancer hat of Moure's mother, but also suggests the unraveling of time and storytelling. The empty jar evokes notions of silence and/or the absence of her mother. Perhaps the title is ironic, but the "singing" jars are also mnemonic images; that is, they represent what can and cannot be remembered or said. They resonate with Moure's emphasis on absence and the large gaps of white space that interpolate her poetry. At the top of page six, for example, is the line "Down to the river behind the school we walked" (6). The next four lines are situated at the bottom of the page leaving a large white space in between, a lengthy silence. Silence and absence are also underscored by the scarcity of titles for Moure's poems, and the grey printed passages symbolic of the traces that remain despite the violent erasure of her mother's forebears and community: "they burned those Polish houses, and drove them away" (5). Moure uses mnemonic objects to thread together memories and small story bits out of what seems a vanished past even as they help the reader follow poetic traces left behind.

Moure discovers points of contact with her matrilineal history as she explores her mother's homeland:

Home: the barbaric language.
 I wade through the streams of grasses.
 My mother's sweater clings to their seeds
 I bow down to soil and streaming grasses
 Light's hedge and memory

I see her wading in those grasses
 outside memory, inside soil
 her frail membrane
 touches, what it touches <hillside> <touches>
 disappears (4)

²⁴ Photo by Vida Simon.

Moure reaches back “outside memory” to reconstruct the “frail membrane” of her mother and her mother’s memories of childhood. She blurs the lines of lived, remembered, and imagined maternal realities. Moure indicates that the “soil and streaming grasses,” the land of Ukraine, are sites for exploring the “hedge and memory,” the hidden and recalled pieces of the past. Her heritage lies buried “inside soil” and in the lines of these poems; much of her history has been lost to memory. Central to these five-lined stanzas are the sites where her mother “touches” the surface. The line “My mother’s sweater clings to their seeds” is particularly evocative as Moure reverses the path and natural conduct of the seeds and sweater. The sweater clings to the seeds instead of seeds clinging to her mother’s sweater. This image symbolically reunites the present with past generations, an analogy for, and (re)constructed memory of, her mother- and culture-lines destroyed by war and time. Moure also pairs the membrane with the hillside, accentuating a maternal connection with the motherland. Her repetition of the word “touches” and the graphic symbols in the line “touches <hillside> <touches>” are visually suggestive of the soft touch of her mother who once walked on this land. Moure imagines her mother “wading in those grasses” even as she herself wades through the grass. She searches for points of connection with her maternal past and investigates “silenced or subjugated knowledges” (Dunlop, “Archives” 67). Moreover, Moure returns “Home” to investigate the traces and sites where the membrane of her mother’s reality touches the surface, and to knit a poetic path for her maternal history.

In concluding the excerpt above, Moure adds an alternate lineage in faded lines:

(E.M., daughter of M. Grędyusz,
Daughter of А Хамуляк) (4)

In opposition to the construction of traditional patriarchal lineages, Moure links her persona E.M. with a muted female lineage, depicts the frailty of motherlines, and reconstructs a matriarchal

lineage. In her essay “Poetry, Memory and the Polis,” Moure argues that poetry “is the *structuration* (the action or condition of structuring, the rendering visible, audible) of *memory*,” and that “[m]emories are not things, but process” (202, 204). Moure’s poetics make visible the “*structuration*” of maternal memories. Near the centre of her collection, she inserts a copy of the “handsewn book” entitled “The R&se Letters” by Grandmother Pound-Cake Rose (77 – 84) — likely her foremother. The construction of this addendum is illustrated by the title page. It includes additional information, such as a “handwritten” comment “I woke up with blood in my mouth from reading,” a reference to the “smirched” condition of the artifact, and the strikeout marks across supposed authors’ names ~~Elisa Sampedrin~~ and ~~Grandmother Rose~~ (77), “rendering visible” the structuration of “The R&se Letters.” Although E.S. sends these “absent letters” to E.M. (75), she worries “*if their reading is bearable*”. Sampedrin’s name on the front page problematizes single authorship and destabilizes the motherline. E.S. represents “the irreducible presence of an inexpressive Outer Edge” (33), such as unknown others (foremothers) or selves (as daughters), who have or will exist yet remain unnamed. The visible signs of presence and absence in these letters illustrate the ways texts and histories are malleable. Like palimpsests, they leave evidence of erasure, re-composition, and interpretation. Moreover, Moure “renders visible” the processes of recollection in the context of a female community. For Moure, community embraces “[a] sense of the elemental non-congruity of things, and the beauty of that. *The sense of ‘with’-ness, ‘joint’-ness that conveys no hierarchy-of-terms*” (“Poetry, Memory and the Polis” 203; italics in text). Her conception of “*joint’-ness*” is manifested in the ampersand sign inserted at the center of the name “R&se.” The inscriptions on the artifact, such as the ampersand and the crossed-out names, suggest that these letters (texts) involve a community of women’s voices rather than the patriarchal monologic authorial voice.

The crossed-out names not only convey a rejection of hierarchy, but also point to the larger tragedy of matrilineal and cultural genocide. Note the following “R&se” letter:

EM moja droga,

The rest weep from we, who emerge in ways not Zmarł.
 For <after> ten days of diseases Zmarł.
 It asked, if <or> in wagon already <somebody> zmarł.
 When it murder and it smoke <concealment> weary <tire>
 It weep and extreme desperation has covered it outlawed from
 the verge Ukrayina-Polska.
 One people <people> weeped, others sang tender favourite homeland
 farewell muzyka <voice>.
 There were cries, screech <squeaks>, it weep.
 The rest weep from we, who emerge.
 There was one wall of weeping. And we have parted with <from> you

z.m.,

our verges grandmother <pound cake> Rose (78; emphasis in text)

Although the text appears to conform to the conventions of the letter, bracketed words disrupt the text. In Williams and Marinkova’s terms, Moure’s “interruptive trans-scapes” coincide with her “poetics of displacement,” the “displacement of her own self and writing practice” (83). They also note that these letters, “mainly written in Polish, ...have been machine-translated, most likely at poltran.com, leaving some words in the original language(s) (including some in Ukrainian), and preserving in parentheses the linguistic options offered by the software” (89). The word “*babka*” (Polish), for instance, is translated as “grandmother (pound-cake)” using poltran.com (89). Words like “*zmarł*,” which means “(he) died,” suggest “the inassimilable intrusion of something beyond language and death...into the text” (89). The grammatical structure of these lines, the inclusion of multi-lingual and untranslatable words (a polyglot text), and the <bracketed>²⁵ alternate translations inserted into the text, not only trouble the reader but also signal the problems with translating and representing memories and unspeakable atrocities.

²⁵ Williams and Marinkova note that the angled brackets are “an authorial/translatorial reaction to poltran’s round brackets” (90). This detail is one more example of Moure’s revisionary writing practices.

Moure uses parentheses to disrupt the text and represent those who were “lost” during the war years. No one remained to support the community or record their histories, activities borne of love for the other. In processing memories of her maternal and cultural heritages, Moure constructs an alternate lineage that offers both revelations and secrets. These “R&se” letters end with the recognition: “We are the heirs of these traces, oh my brothers. In us they are the sign of the whole.// [dearest trout]” (86). While Moure may be addressing her biological brothers, she also seems to imply a broader gendered blindness to the “we and “us” as sisters. Often absented from histories, women bear the traces of the past in “letters” and bodies, symbolic of the “whole” of their lineage. Moure’s “*structuration*” of memories not only inscribes matrilineal traces in her poetic texts, but also complicates those traces.

2. Motherline: Re-inscribing the Self

Strategies of matrilineal reconstruction reconnect the past with the present and recover memory traces, as well as create occasions for self-discovery, and for re-inscribing the self along a motherline or with a female community. Self-knowledge and knowledge of mother stories, for Lowinsky, are inseparable because “Motherline stories weave pregnancy, births, miscarriages, abortions, deaths, and psychological development into one fabric, not separating body and psyche” (232 – 33). The body and psyche are intertwined, but the approaches to birth and death and the maternal, I would argue, differ among women and change with each generation. Abbey and Harris make this evident in their investigation of motherlines. Despite a focus on cultural differences, they found that “there is more diversity between generations of women in our Motherlines than there is between our cultures” (263). While they placed less value on “self-sacrifice and inequitable divisions of labor” than their foremothers, their daughters are in no “hurry to marry, have children, or settle into careers,” and gender and race are less of an issue

(263 – 64). Daughters develop a sense of self in the shifting contexts of socio-cultural and maternal praxes, a give-and-take process of assimilation and distinction across generations. Inscribing the self along maternal and ethnic lines, according to Fast and Buller, can result in a “dilemma of identity” (1). They argue that Mennonite mothers and their daughters “do not leave behind, and have not left behind distinctness in exchange for assimilation, but establish their identity in tandem with both.... continually redefined in opposition to surrounding culture if it is to be maintained” (1), or adapted to the larger community. Tensions between acculturation and difference intensify for those of mixed heritages. Writing from a mixed-race position, Bouvier, Halfe, Moure, and Still process and problematize their identities even as they re-inscribe them.

Bouvier identifies herself in at least four ways according to the poem titles “I say I am” (10) and “I am created” (13), as well as the lines “I am Métis” (22), and “I am the Other” (66). Her poem “I say I am” is a part of a larger sequence of poems entitled “the portrait.” Bouvier draws a word portrait for her readers and establishes her selfhood in relation to, but apart from, what her relatives say:

my grandfather says
I am an angel
sent by St Peter
to guide him
when he loses his way.

my grandmother says
I am ‘*î kîmôtât sit*’—
the one who lives under
hiding secrets.

my aunt says
I am a daughter
a daughter for all.

I say, I am. I say
I am all these things
and much, much more. (10)

Bouvier not only introduces herself to the reader, but stresses the significance of relationship in identity development. The repetition of “I am,” along with an emphasis on “I say” in the title and in the line “I say, I am. I say,” declares her existence and a desire to tell her own story. Five times Bouvier repeats “I am,” each time glossing the views of others. K. Anthony Appiah claims that it is “in dialogue with other people’s understandings of who I am that I develop a conception of my own identity” (154). Bouvier recognizes those who have influenced her sense of self. Furthermore, she speaks for herself. In repeating “I say,” she asserts her own subjectivity and agency in defining her multi-dimensional self.

In her poem “I am created,” Bouvier explores the politics of identity in biological and ethnic terms:

I am created by a natural bond
 between a man and a woman,
 but this one, is forever two.
 one is white, the other, red.
 a polarity of being, absorbed
 as one. I am nature with clarity.

against my body, white rejects red
 and red rejects white. instinctively,
 I have learned to love—I have learned to live
 though the politics of polarity
 is never far away. still, I am
 waiting, waiting (13)

Bouvier constructs her bi-cultural identity in two stanzas, blending both cultures in each stanza. In biological terms, she speaks of her existence as the result of a “natural” union, and yet she is “forever two.” Ethnically speaking, she emphasizes a “polarity of being” both white and red in each stanza. She presents her body and poems as paradoxical sites of clarity and conflict, where white and red are “absorbed/ as one” yet reject each other. Bouvier stresses this oppositional tension by interspersing numerous caesuras throughout the poem, a strategy that compels the

reader to pause and consider her “dilemma of identity” (Fast and Buller). The long dash in the second stanza unites notions of love and life, two phrases on a single line, which echoes the notion of sexual union in the first stanza. In this way, Bouvier transforms the red/white tension into a love/live celebration of her Métis heritage. Nevertheless, she represents herself as being caught between two races in her poem “moccasins in two worlds”:

I am soft, sure footed, flower fragrant
I am the Other, in a confined space
separate, imagined two worlds in one (66)

Bouvier’s sensual self—soft, sure, fragrant—is contrasted with the static self—Other, confined, separate. The repetition of “I am” suggests a discrepancy between how others see her and her own sense of identity. Although she has one moccasin in each world, a “politics of polarity,” Bouvier envisions the potential reality of a two-in-one world (analogous to maternity).

Kate Osborne, in “Deconstructing History,” shows how “the concept of self-identification as a Métis is incredibly important to Métis culture” and that the ambiguity of “what it means to be a Métis” is similar to the ambiguities of what it means to be a Canadian citizen (1). In “dark like me” (22), Bouvier makes visible what she sees as the bi-cultural ambiguities of her Métis identity. A student from Afghanistan observes “you are dark like me.” When she declares “I am Métis,” he claims “he knows the story. As if/ Batoche held the only story” (22). Charles Taylor argues, “that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and can suffer real damage, real distortion” (25; emphasis in text). As Bouvier mentions in other poems, there is “much, much more” (10) to her identity than a single historical event. Not only does she embody a “polarity of being,” (13) but she is also a daughter, lover, and mother (18). She is a poet whose “schooled eye can see/ that what was once ordinary” (57), and a “reluctant speaker” addressing issues of violence and silence: “words are one thing /I

can hold them in my hand/ later embroider them” but “dead silence/ that’s another matter/ there is nothing to hold on to” (60). Writing poetry allows Bouvier to represent herself as a specific individual, to break the silence of violence (words, actions) against the Métis people, and, as I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, to reconstruct her cultural history.

Although Bouvier, Halfe, and Moure identify themselves as individuals within a larger cultural community, Moure inscribes her selfhood in terms of the other; that is, through the dual personae E.M. and E.S., as well as her mother: “though my mother is gone, her face still claims me” (106). Moure uses “face” as a synecdoche or metonymy for her mother, the one who holds her attention psychologically and physically: “In the morning I/ write wearing her cancer hat. I wear her Western belt to Whitehorse” (106). Devoid of historical records, Moure must explore alternate constructions of identities. She muses, “There is a phantasmal poetry and a poetry of the seeing self” (53). Writing poetry, Moure suggests, allows for dreams, the imagination, and sensory perceptions to re-see and redraw the self. She engages in philosophical queries to ascertain the interrelationships among experience, thought, and identity. She asks: “Without experience, is there an ‘I?’”(37). In her poem “Somnium” (24), Moure argues that “experience already refers to the *I think*”; her female experience of “I am,” which already assumes “I think,” implies a “*modality of the unmemntioable taking on meaning*” (24; italics in original). She forms a sense of self through remembering, questioning, and writing the enigmas of death and love:

In her spires of ink: “The impossibility of leaving the other alone with the mystery of death. This way of laying claim to me, of calling me into question, this responsibility for the death of my (m)other, is a significance so irreducible that it is from it that the meaning of death may be understood. (29)

E.S. critiques E.M.’s “spires of ink,” the compulsion to keep writing, and uses quotation marks to suggest she is quoting from E.M.’s work. Moure’s double perspective allows her to analyze

significant as it implies that something is given and received. It also suggests the potential for self-knowledge through the process of writing. Knowing “*what I am*,” such as her origins and physical features, differs from who I am—a complex individual personality. This knowledge triggers a change, a “turning” point, a realization. Since the word “turning” is not italicized, the word relates to the word wave and suggests she belongs to this generation. The words “*what I am* /turning” may also indicate what she is becoming or what she is changing. Having discovered her hybrid motherline, Still positions herself as an agent of change. She is part of the generational turn in life and literature. As she says in another poem, “I am learning the equation/ of mixed blood” (60). Identities are always in progress.

Inscribing the self along motherlines has its surprises and its ghosts (Lowinsky 234). Still constructs a dialogue with one such ghost in her poem “Nestichio” (64 – 65).²⁶ An epigraph from her family archives provides the context:

A child was born and at the age of 6 was stolen by the Indians.
When A. Spence came to the country several years afterwards, he
saw this white child among the Indians. He adopted her and later,
at the age of 12, took her for his wife. –family archives (64)

The pragmatic language of this block text introduces a disturbing account of the life of Nestichio, presented from the perspective of the child. Three stanzas are from the girl’s point of view and the two stanzas on the opposite page are Still’s response to the girl’s story (her foremother). The unnamed girl identifies herself through her paternal heritage:

I am daughter of your father’s son of father son
of father. Six-years-old, salt-skinned and in feathers
when I am found and rescued, found
and fathered, found and stolen and lost and
married, 12-years-old who stole
who? (64)

²⁶ Margaret Nestichio Batt, according to online genealogical sources, such as redriverancestry.ca, wikitree.com, and others, was the daughter of Isaac Batt and an unnamed Cree woman. She was married to James Andrew Spence.

In asserting “I am daughter,” the girl identifies herself in relation to and apart from her patrilineage. At the age of 6, she describes herself as “salt-skinned and in feathers,” a double identity recreated in the context of her new cultural community. Her life follows a pattern of female subjugation and cultural ownership: stolen, found, rescued, fathered, stolen, lost, married, buried, and now remembered. Four times Still repeats the word “father.” She reveals how the girl’s body is objectified, a possession passed along from father to father. Placing the word “who?” on its own, she compels the reader to consider the question of stolen (female) identities.

The dialogic construction of this poem opens space for the young girl to speak to her absent mother. In the second stanza, she says “I am waiting/ [...] in the seven stars/ of your hair, one for each/ child lost, I am” (64; ellipsis mine). The girl identifies herself as one of the seven children her mother has lost. Still’s line break between each and child is significant here as the line reads “child lost, I am.” The girl may be lost but she still exists. Similarly, in the third stanza, the girl declares “They say you are dead, but either way/ these hills grieve you” (64). Where there is a lost daughter, there is also an absent mother. The last two stanzas are Still’s response: “I can feel it in the leaves, 200 years/ of decay ... I can feel it in the white-/tailed corners of the eye... I can feel it, buckling... heaving/ your unsettled grave” (65). Three times Still repeats “I can feel it” as she sifts through unearthed fragments: a knife, flint, twisted pine. Furthermore, she speaks directly to her foremother: “In flint, the steadiness of bone, mother,/ ... I can feel it ... heaving/ *your* unsettled grave” (65; ellipses and emphasis mine). The structure of the poem suggests the woman who is buried in the “unsettled grave” is the girl’s mother. Writing poetry allows Still to simultaneously tell the girl’s story alongside her own, and to respond to it. Thus she creates an intercultural and intergenerational dialogue. Moreover, the repetition “I can feel it” stresses the emotional repercussions and uncertainties conveyed along motherlines.

Still's poem series "Saltations" underscores the interconnection between listening, feeling, and writing:

2. *Listening with palms*
This line, a skin we share.

Grandmother, I wear you
a crease, thumb to wrist.

Everything I have seen
pleated in my palm, the rim of your skirt, a lifeline,
full as a bell.

where we have grown: silver thread,
stretching (61; italics in text)

The palm image in this excerpt is especially salient. In palm reading, the life line denotes vitality and longevity. Here, the poet is "*listening*" with her palms and writing "[e]verything" she sees. Still reads the visible to discern the invisible. Her "pleated" palm embodies the lifeline of her Grandmother, but because of the skin they share, their connection is also a feeling. Still situates herself on "the rim" or extension of her Grandmother's bloodline like the pleat of a skirt. The longest poetic line portrays the "lifeline" of the palm and the maternal "stretch" into subsequent generations. In fact, the line spills onto the third line, into the third generation, in her blood and life lines. Poetic lines, like pleats, reconstruct and re-envision her Grandmother's experiences. By listening and feeling and writing, Still acknowledges her Grandmother's existence, and re-inscribes herself along her motherline. Whether the image is the ear or palm listening for voices, like Halfe and Still, or the skin seeing in new ways, like Still and Moure, or the self-embodying motherline, like Bouvier and Moure, identity is neither fixed nor definitive but an ongoing relational process of reconstruction. Akin to Miriam Kyselo's "enactive" view of identity, they integrate the "embodied self," a desire "to distinguish self from others," and the "social self," a need "for connection with, and being affected by, others" ("The body social" 14).

3. Recontextualization: Cultural Transmission along Motherlines

Maternal traditions are entwined with ethnic and religious distinctions, and are shaped by a particular milieu that is in constant flux. Traditionally, mothers have borne the weight of cultural contextualization and transmission. Jennifer Brandt, in “From Historical Memories to Contemporary Visions,” contends that although colonial forces altered Indigenous “story medicine,” maternal histories and memories remain “deeply rooted” (37). As “cultural carriers,” grandmothers have sometimes silently but “creatively passed on” cultural values and maternal practices to subsequent generations (37). Navigating cultural and ideological shifts, mothers contribute to or resist “cultural messages” through their own maternal praxes and poetic representations. Rachel Rose, in “Letters to a Young Mother Who Writes,” argues that “mothers have never, as a group, been silenced. Women have written diaries and penned letters as they crossed the prairies in pioneer wagons. They have created poems and lullabies, resonant rhymes and quilts that told stories.... and those who never learned to read have still passed down songs and poems” (231). Certainly, “as a group” mothers and grandmothers have found ways to express their experiences throughout history. However, as this dissertation illustrates, many individual women have been silenced due to ignorance, socio-cultural oppression, discrimination and the like. Some stories and experiences are privileged over others. White middle-class women tend to be privileged over women of colour, European histories over Indigenous (Halfe), medicalized or naturalized childbirth stories (Cosslett) over “birth war stories” (Croll 49) and child-death experiences (Diehl-Jones, Unrau). Moreover, historical and cultural contexts delimit private and public expressions, as well as privilege some forms of cultural production over others. There are mothers and grandmothers, like the poets in this study, who have found ways to transmit their stories, beliefs, and ethnic distinctions more openly.

Some mother-writers see cultural transmission and preservation as their mission. Others see literary production as a site for re-evaluating, reconstructing, or recontextualizing cultural customs and maternal praxes. Often these foci overlap. Abbey and Harris, for instance, identify themselves, “as divorced mothers of young adult daughters and as motherless daughters.... as the family matriarchs ... [and] the keepers of our collective maternal stories, charged with the responsibility of selecting what will be passed along to our daughters” (247). Fast and Buller identify mothers “as transmitters of culture and religion... [as well] as re-creators—even creators—of religion and culture” (1). They recognize “the dilemma ethnic groups face of maintaining distinctness ... and assimilating” (1) in our multicultural nation. “To be the bearer of history,” Fast and Buller argue, “can make impossible demands on mothers, and yet position them as the vehicle through which culture and religion is transmitted to the next generation” (7). Di Brandt sees a mother-poet as “a keeper and passer on of maternal wisdom, and knowledge, and skills, a mentor to the next generations,” especially as she has entered “the age of grandmotherhood” (“My Breasts” 59). For Brandt, “mothering and creativity and writing...mean[s] ...very much the same thing ...they are intricately woven together” (60; ellipses mine). One of the reasons for passing on maternal wisdom, she claims, is that the “feminist revolution” is not over; “changing cultural scripts is a ...serious matter and cannot be done in a single generation or by an act of will by an individual or a handful of people” (58). Cultural and maternal knowledges and praxes inevitably enter or inform mother-writers’ texts. Thus, poetry embodies even as it reconstructs and recontextualizes cultural scripts. Negotiating and writing about mothering involves the transmission of cultural norms and beliefs into a specific place and time.

Like Brandt and others, Halfe feels compelled to write, to transmit cultural and maternal wisdom, especially from her grandmothers:

Grandmothers hold me.
 I must pass all that I possess,
 every morsel to my children.
 These small gifts. (7)

Halfe uses the imperative here: “I must” pass on “all” that she possesses. She takes charge of this mission to transmit “every morsel” like “small gifts” for the next generation. Every scrap of memory and story of her maternal ancestors—invented and lived—including her own are significant. Although, like Brandt, Halfe desires to alter cultural scripts, it is the present English social script that Halfe intends to transform. At a family gathering on her husband’s side, Halfe hears the stories of immigration to Canada, driving her to re-inscribe her matrilineage and rewrite her history for the sake of her children:

My lips are tight from stretching when my
 small family is introduced alongside the
 large extended family. Later,
 driving home, I weave a story for my children—
 how their great-grandma rode sidesaddle,
 waving her .22 in the air trying to scare
 those relatives away. I tell them
 how my relatives lived around the fort,
 starving and freezing,
 waiting for diluted spirits
 and handouts from my husband’s family.
 I tell them
 how their little children died wrapped in
 smallpox blankets. (69 – 70)

Halfe offers her children a brief history lesson to provide a connection between her husband’s family and her own. In the poem, she places her “small family” on the line above the “large extended family,” suggesting that her family lived in this country before their father’s family. Note the word “stretching” (gerund form) of her lips not only suggests pain and effort, but also suppression. Many of the verbs in the excerpt above, such as “driving” “waving” and “trying,” suggest the present and ongoing negotiations across cultures. In addition, the repetition of the

pronoun “my” implies ownership or custody. This is her family, her children, her relatives, her husband, and these are their stories. Unlike those at the family gathering, each with their own history book, Halfe recreates a tapestry of her own as she tells, writes, and represents stories of subjugation and tragedy into poetic history. In addition, she interweaves her absented story and viewpoint into her husband’s family history for the sake of her children as well as her readers.

Bouvier, like Halfe, constructs a literary bridge from cultural clashes of the past to her present familial and socio-cultural contexts. Brant explains that “[w]hile Indigenous women’s poetry serves as a form of resistance by drawing attention to the diminishment of Indigenous women’s voice[s], it also exists as a valuable teaching tool that reclaims Aboriginal women’s voice[s] by sharing stories and traditions” (49). Bouvier both informs and resists socio-cultural domination of Indigenous women’s voices and histories. Her dedication—“for the children”—underscores a desire to pass on her cultural heritage to the next generation. Bouvier frames her collection with a poetic transcription and English translation of the term *papîyâhtak*:

to act in a thoughtful way,
a respectful way,
a joyful way,
a balanced way (8)

Bouvier draws attention to an inheritance of wisdom encapsulated in a single Cree word. This series of adjectives indicates her aspirations and implies her readers should follow suit. For Bouvier, the bridge is an important image and metaphor for cross-cultural relations and for reconstructing the past. Her “Gabriel Dumont” poems arise out of Métis history and memorials, such as the Dumont Bridge, which crosses the South Saskatchewan River east of Rosthern, and the statue of Dumont on horseback, which stands next to the river between Broadway and Victoria Bridges in Saskatoon. Bouvier’s poems lead readers across socio-cultural bridges as she recontextualizes her history and legacy of cultural resistance into the present world.

Bouvier's poetry collection is organized around three dialogic encounters with Gabriel Dumont, a Métis leader during the North-West Rebellion (1885). The "Gabriel Dumont Overture" occurs in three movements (9, 33, 54). Bouvier's poems simultaneously present and contest dual histories, languages, and perspectives. In the first movement, she observes:

*I am rounding the bend
when along comes Gabriel
riding frozen along the bank*

he beckons âstam ôta come over here
*tears like raindrops welling
as I move closer and closer*

*the hand that cast the statue
in memory of him
could not have had a heart
why is he laden in steel?
I caress his aching back
afraid he might turn.* (9; italics and translation in the text)

Bouvier's imaginative encounter with the statue unites sight, dream, and memory. Written in the present tense, Bouvier bridges time, place, culture, and gender relations. The male statue, "riding frozen," motions for her to "come over here." At the same time, Bouvier invites readers to take a closer look at the Gabriel Dumont monument. She interrogates this artistic representation: "why is he laden in steel?" She criticizes the artist for placing such a burden on him, as if Dumont is fixed in time. Paradoxically, Gabriel is "riding frozen," moving in the present tense, yet stuck in the past. Bouvier's overture proposes an alternate image in contrast to the heartless sculptor's hand. She offers a mother-poet's hand—"I caress his aching back"; her poetry recasts Dumont's calcified image into a dialogic relationship between the living and the dead. She re-remembers him, recontextualizes their shared history, and engages her readers in an unusual encounter with the past. Further, her poetry personifies the statue and creates another kind of cultural monument in the form of poetry.

Communicating across cultures, from Métis to non-Métis, is complicated as two languages and viewpoints converge in this text. Much like Halfe, Bouvier alters the typeface to further differentiate the Cree and English. Cook states that italicized “words and phrases from a language other than the one used in the body of a text typically exoticizes the ‘other’ language as foreign, alien, and in need of explanation” (“Bone Memory” 94). Notably, Bouvier uses italics for the *papîyâhtak* and “*Gabriel Dumont Overture*” poems as well as the Cree words that interpolate other poems. However, in the excerpt above, Gabriel Dumont’s Cree words are not italicized, which reverses the concepts of “foreign” and “normal.” Here, the English language appears as foreign or alien. This strategy of reversal challenges the colonizers’ perspectives, repositioning Cree and Métis figures and histories as the standard. Just as Bouvier interrogates the “frozen” representation of Dumont, she also examines the disputes around Louis Riel in her poem “Riel is dead, and I am alive” (28). She contests the “sterile talk” of academics and “cultural imperialists” who debate an irreconcilable past: was Riel a hero or mad? Neither the colonizing “gatling gun” of academic discourse nor the gendered monopoly on “truth” respects alternate points of view. Contrary to these exclusionary discourses, Bouvier offers a more inclusive and relational representation:

this much I know
when I remember—I remember

my mother—her hands tender, to touch
my grandmother—her eyes, blue, the sky
my great grandmother—a story, a star gazer
who could read plants, animals and the sky. (28)

In opposition to monologic “imperialistic” perspectives, Bouvier reconstructs a dialogic and genealogic viewpoint. As a form of resistance, she reviews the past through a matrilineal lens. The four-line stanza steps back in time, line by line, remembering the past through her

matrilineage. Her alternate approach stresses the value of family connections and invites her reader to look back and see Riel (a dead man) through her living eyes. Somewhat like Halfe, Bouvier repeats the pronoun “my” to underscore the strong ties she has with her forebears. She emphasizes an alternate perception of the world which includes touch, sight, and story—relational forms of communication.

Teresa Gomez Reus, in “Weaving/ Framing/ Crossing Difference,” articulates the tensions involved in reclaiming or reinforcing ethnic and gendered identities of difference. She acknowledges “how wholly contaminated our experiences are, how problematical it is to reproduce organic concepts of identity, and how, in a culture of diversity, the question of identity is always a matter of constantly crossing and (re)drawing boundaries” (52, 99). In her second meeting with Gabriel Dumont, Bouvier draws attention to the “problematical” reduction of an “organic” identity. Contending with a “*sadness laden in steel*,” due to the “*fixed-time identity*” imposed on her and other Métis, she tells of a dream in which she holds “*the key*” but is unable to “*find the right door/ among many*” (33). She searches for the right key that will open the “*steel door*,” yet “*not one of the keys*” in her hand fits. Bouvier carries a similar burden as the statue; their identities have been frozen in time. Alongside Dumont, she re-inscribes her identity: “*I am fixed-time identity/ searching, where passion might/ meet compassion down the line*” (33).

Poetry, she seems to suggest, may be the key to open the door to find understanding and break gender and culture stereotypes. In her poem “even Metis women get the blues” (37), Bouvier describes herself as “a grey sky” and “an abandoned home/ on the roadside” after an occasion of “connecting the lines/ of our sacred lives” with other “women with children” (37). Poetry opens space for multiple accounts of Métis history in two languages. Alongside her own experiences, Bouvier includes stories from other women and children. By representing her self-identity and

cultural history as living and “organic” (Reus), Bouvier disrupts fixed-time identities and histories. Poetic lines are where passion and compassion meet, and where she conveys to her readers the potential for change “down the line”—in the future.

Inherited or recovered artifacts may also transmit cultural memories and maternal wisdom. In “Testimonial Objects,” Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer argue:

material remnants can serve as testimonial objects that carry memory traces from the past and embody the process of its transmission. Inspired by Roland Barthes’s notion of the *punctum*, ... such testimonial objects [are read] as points of memory—points of intersection between past and present, memory and postmemory, personal and cultural recollection. (353; emphasis in text)

Remnants left behind not only serve as personal connections with the past, like Jennifer Still’s salt doll and kaolin pipebowl, but also serve as culture-bearers, testaments, and memory triggers.

Halfe recontextualizes her cultural memories using a broken bone as her “testimonial object”:

Possession took me last night.
I slept with a bone.
The jawbone of elk lined with pearly teeth.
I bathed her in sweet grass. Laid her under my pillow.
Winds swept through me. This path has chosen me,
this chosen walk is a blizzard whiteout.
My Cree-ing alone in the heavy arm of snow.

I hang onto this bone
dressed in satin. Wade into redberry lakes.
I am married
to her garden of carrots and sweet corn heads.
I lay her skull, broken jaws,
face them to the East. (15)

Prior to this excerpt, Halfe refers to Columbus, whose bones were moved four times, and how colonization dislocated her foremothers’ bones by those “men of god” (13). Halfe bears the wounds of her ancestors. In another poem she asks, “How many of my relatives were cattled/ onto the reservation during their settlement? / How much of my people’s blood was spilled/ for this migration?” (69). Here, in opposition to Columbus, Halfe welcomes another form of

(re)possession—the cultural, psychological, and literary habitation of her grandmothers’ voices. The broken “jawbone of elk lined with pearly teeth” is a germane object that gives witness to her silenced foremothers obliterated by the “whiteouts” of fur traders and colonizers. Cook reminds that “although bones provide the charmed touchstone for a communal recognition of memory ... and a guide to writing ... they are also weapons” (“Bone Memory” 88 – 89). Halfe states her “hunt is without a rifle,” but her bones are “filled with the fists of women/ of the fur trade” (14). Writing poetry allows their bones to “stand and sing” (2) against colonization, cultural violence, and genocide. The elk bone, as the pronoun “her” indicates, embodies the memories and voices of her motherline. Facing the elk bone to the East toward the sunrise, suggests a hopeful future. Although she is “Cree-ing alone,” suggestive of crying in Cree (Cook “Bone Memory” 89), she looks to a time when whiteouts will be gone (Halfe 16). As a material object, the jawbone prods Halfe to testify and transmit the memories of her grandmothers in writing. She repossesses their voices from colonial oppression and restores their subjectivity so they can tell their own stories. Thus Halfe resurrects their bones so they can “stand and sing” on the pages of her book.

Along similar lines as Halfe and Still, Moure employs testimonial objects as goals for writing. For instance, memory traces are embodied in the shirt that hangs in a museum exhibit:

I look in. An incongruity: near the back of the church on the wall or vertical field, a white rough shirt hangs on a hanger, arms fallen.

(nearby, on a tiny plaque, translated slowly)

“We have enriched the church with a shirt.”

Incongruity-enrichment. Anachronism, “un síntoma en el saber.”
Corn and basil.

“I wanted you to be born” <a voice>

“*thanks, mom*” (36; italics and quotation marks in the text)

This series of lines move from the testimonial object on the wall to human voices mediated by several interpretations: 1) the plaque, 2) a translation of the plaque, 3) the response in two languages, 4) a (maternal) voice, and 5) a response to “*mom.*” In this progression, Moure exposes the shirt in the church as an anachronism and the sign as a grievous incongruity. The shirt, with its “arms fallen,” bears witness to those who fled Ukraine or fell during WWII. It is a “*punctum* ... [a point] of memory” (Hirsch and Spitzer 353; emphasis in text). The Spanish line, roughly translated “a symptom in the know” (Google Translate), implies there are those who know and those who misapprehend the significance of testimonial objects. In this “storehouse of the visible” (Moure, 36), the shirt acts as a synecdoche for the absent body and a representation of those who died during the genocide. However, the museum “storehouse” does not make “visible” the individuals and communities that witnessed these atrocities. In another poem, Moure identifies the shirt as a “record of the body, an infinite outcry, an ethical subject/ , a way of life” (41). Also, “The R&se Letters” reveal someone’s experiences and memories: “they have hung on gate with nails young boy, // And they have deadened him, within his shirt” (83). Thus Moure reveals the impropriety of the plaque in relation to the “deaden” boy “hung on a gate” and the “voice” of a “*mom.*” Her structural choices problematize the process of transmission through time and attest to the discrepancies between personal/cultural memories and artifacts in museums. For Moure, the object is a generative site of recall that is at once personal, maternal, cultural, and political. Moreover, she illustrates the import of writing as a strategy to re-evaluate the past. It is in the writing and reading processes that memories are transmitted, associations are discovered, and incongruences are exposed.

Artifacts and poetic texts evoke associations that interconnect history with the present.

Hirsch and Spitzer argue that artifacts, like the shirt, “prick and wound and grab and puncture...

unsettling assumptions, exposing the unexpected, [and] suggesting what Barthes calls ‘a subtle beyond’ or the ‘blind field’ outside the frame” (359). The existence of the emptied shirt punctures the mind and returns again and again as a point of memory. Seeing the shirt in the museum, Moure recalls her ailing mother’s shirt: “We wept our gifts for you, dear mother, our treasures. Waking up in/ the night and wringing out the shirt. Even then, the tumour was/growing in the blood” (62; quotation marks in the text). Like Still and Halfe, Moure draws attention to the ways cultural artifacts “store” traces of the past and have the potential to transmit and recontextualize histories. Objects are the “vestiges of the past that come down to us in the present” (Hirsch and Spitzer 358), the “gifts” and “treasures” as well as the “tumour[s]” and “blood” that shape our maternal inheritances.

4. Matroreform: Reimagining the Future

In *Looking Back*, S. Leigh Matthews argues that the role of the reader is crucial in identifying the “narrative tactics used to ‘revise’ predominant myths. To ‘revise,’ to ‘re-vision,’ is to actively engage with or interrogate —indeed, to adhere/conform to or to undermine/ refuse —those historical narratives and cultural images which have predominated in public representations” (27). In reconstructing a matrilineage and recontextualizing cultural memories, these poets largely reconnect with their motherlines and extend them into the present, but they also interrogate cultural representations and engage readers in reimagining a better future. The feminist act of matroreform draws attention to “issues in mothering, racial tensions, bi-cultural identity, and belonging” thereby “voicing up” the things that have been hidden and silenced (Wong-Wylie 136). Brant states that Indigenous women writers have been instrumental in “the resurgence of maternal teachings. The revivification of the old ways within contemporary literature ensures that these teachings are accessible to our future generations” (50). Similarly,

Delores V. Mullings points out that writing “[c]ounter-stories creates space for marginalized people to document and counteract the falsehood and social injustice perpetuated against and about them, while also allowing for the expression of injury to mind, body, and spirit... re-storying the dominant discourse” (“Black Mothers” 108). Re-envisioning a future begins by opening literary and social space for expressing maternal and cultural injuries to affect change.

Writing poetry empowers these poets to “re-story” lost or distorted maternal subjects and cultural histories, and re-envision a future where mothers and others are no longer marginalized. Kuwabong, in “Mother as Transformer,” affirms that “a re-visionary reading of history” enables women writers to “unravel” previously held beliefs, to reassess literatures, and to recodify and reclaim maternal and ethnic histories (89 – 90). Baker claims that feminist mothers and daughters are “world changers; they believe in justice” (203). After many interviews, Baker concludes that “feminism informs and strengthens the mother-daughter bond as we—mothers and daughters together—continue to expand our vision of social justice and deepen our self-knowledge. Therein lies the healing of ourselves, each other, and the world” (210). Matroreform is a feminist response to maternal and cultural injustices. As “cultural bearers of feminism,” mother-writers also develop feminist motherlines in life and literature, thereby empowering others in the future (Green 19). The revisionary writing strategies of these poets work to transform maternal, cultural, and literary constructs of identity and forms of expression.

Ethnicity and identity shape attitudes towards the maternal and ultimately affect the potential for matroreform. According to Danielle Schaub, problems arise when there is a “lack space for themselves culturally, politically and even metaphysically” in the Canadian world of multiculturalism (xi). On the journey toward change, Bouvier places Cree and English side by side in “wordsongs of a warrior” as though in conversation:

<i>naḱamowin'sa</i> —wordsongs, I say	wordsongs
<i>kahkiyaw ay'sînôwak kici</i>	for all human beings
<i>ta sohkihtama kipimâsonaw</i>	to give strength on this journey
<i>kitahtawî ayis êkwa</i>	one of these days, for sure now
<i>kam'skâtonanaw</i>	we will find each other (68)

This dialogic structure represents Bouvier's desire to make a space for "all human beings." She identifies herself as a warrior and her weapon as "wordsongs," similar to Halfe's imagery of bones singing in poetry. Bouvier repeats "wordsongs" three times in English and once in Cree. The long dash connects the languages, but the insertion of English into the Cree also suggests an invasion. Poetry, then, is a site for battle, a place to encounter words and ideas, a space where Cree and English potentially "find each other" and make *papîyâhtak* a reality.

Bouvier, like Halfe, constructs dramatic monologues and poetic dialogues to represent the past from multiple perspectives. She focuses on reconstructing and transmitting her cultural heritage and rewriting her history from a maternal point of view. In her poem "mama, did God create me?" (43), she imagines a dialogue between a mother and daughter. The epigraph provides a historical basis for the poem: "(in memory of Marcile Gratton, ten years old—a casualty [sic] of the Battle of Batoche.)" We "hear" the daughter's voice three times: at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the poem. Marcile queries: "*mama*, did God create me?" and "*mama*, why are we hiding?/ I want to go home/ I'm scared, *mama*, I'm scared" (43; emphasis in text). The mother responds by telling stories of hope: "everything in creation is good" and "everything will be all right." Bouvier ends the poem with Marcile's voice: "*mama*, I can touch the stars." The abrupt end leaves the reader with silent white space below the "stars" on the page. This poignant poem juxtaposes the mother's hopeful responses with the reader's (fore)knowledge that Marcile dies needlessly. Bouvier reinforces the girl's "dead silence" with a parallel poem, "space is an emptiness," written from her viewpoint: "the light/ shifts. the soft

shuffle of feet announcing/ your presence, your voice is this morning's song./ *mama*, you call, *mama are you there?*" (49). She stresses the import of dialogic interaction among generations of Métis mothers and daughters. The "empty" spaces of unrecorded time echo through the pages of her poems, voices silenced by "*les Canadiens*" (41), or distorted by "cultural imperialists" (28).

Reclamation of a maternal inheritance is a personal act of identification with maternal ancestors and a communal act of recognition. At the close of her book Halfe asks:

Did our Grandmothers know we would be scarred
by the fists and boots of men?
Our songs taxed,
silenced by tongues that speak damnation and burning?
Did they know we would turn woman against woman?
Did they know some of us would follow,
take mates of colour and how the boarding of our worlds
would pulse breathing exiles connected to their womb?
[...] Did they know our memory, our
talk would walk on paper, legends told sparingly? (98, ellipsis mine)

The repetition of the plural pronouns "we" and "us" emphasize Halfe's relationship with past and present generations—the collective "we." In a series of inquiries, she examines the interconnections between her cultural inheritance and the ongoing effects of maternal traditions, experiences, and praxes. Her repetition of "Did they know" suggests the difficulty in envisioning the future. Still, if women's histories, legends, memories and visions "walk on paper," their concerns enter public consciousness and conversations. Halfe calls on Grandmothers (and poetry) to bring healing through powerful story medicines:

pê-nîhtaciwêk, nôhkomak.
Climb down, my Grandmothers.

pê-nânapâcihinân.
Come heal us.

ê-sôhkêpayik. kimaskihkîm.
Your medicine so powerful. (17)

**Chapter 5: Probing Maternal Aesthetics & Poetics:
Relationality, Dialogism & Sounds of Silence in Maternal Discourses**

if we are women poets, writers, speakers, we also take issue with the given, hearing the discrepancy between what our patriarchally-loaded language bears (can bear) of our experience and the difference from it our experience bears out—how it misrepresents, even miscarries, and so leaves unsaid what we actually experience.... where are the poems that celebrate the soft letting-go the flow of menstrual blood is as it leaves her body? how can the standard sentence structure of English with its linear authority, subject through verb to object, convey the wisdom of endlessly repeating and not exactly repeated cycles her body knows? or the mutuality her body shares embracing other bodies, children, friends, animals, all those she customarily holds and is held by? how can the separate nouns mother and child convey the fusion, bleeding womb-infant mouth, she experiences in those first days of feeding? (Marlatt “musing” 1021)

In “musing with mothertongue,” Daphne Marlatt interrogates the English language and exposes the ways patriarchy has “miscarried” women’s experiences. She undermines the gendered hierarchies of English by superimposing (imposing?) a maternal perspective onto the language. Notably, “English” is the only word capitalized in this text, symbolic of the patriarchal dominance and “linear authority” that have standardized the language. Marlatt juxtaposes the dominant linear approach with the “not exactly repeated cycles” of women’s experiences. She bewails the dearth of language that represents the mutuality of women’s bodies and the fusion of mother-child bodies, mothers as subjects rather than objects. Contending with the English language is exacerbated for indigenous and immigrant writers wedged in the liminal space between two (or more) cultures and languages. Nevertheless, these writers have the potential to expose gaps in the language and reform social and literary perceptions of the maternal. The poets I have selected for this chapter trouble and negotiate language(s), interpolate multiple viewpoints, and re-form poetic genres to reinstate mother-tongue(s) in their texts and into the Canadian multicultural context. In opposition to patriarchal and monologic poetic traditions in English, their maternal aesthetics and poetics are surprisingly relational, dialogical, and for some, multi-lingual, and intercultural.

Rita Wong, in “Jumping on hyphens,” notes that some women of colour are not comfortable “with the implications of english dominance” and choose to “experiment with other languages to disrupt the english” (140). By not capitalizing the word “english,” Wong similarly challenges the dominance of the English language. She also states that in employing “tongue[s] as] a strategy,” a writer may use “translation and language-contamination ... [as] a space of possibility, particularly if one is trying to construct a genealogy of mothers and foremothers, a community and a grounding context from which to grow” (140 – 41). The subversion of Standard English with an “english” variant pervades post-colonial literatures, a practice from which writers like Rita Wong, Sally Ito, and others draw. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft et al affirm that english literature “constructs difference, separation, and absence from the metropolitan norm” (44). Writing strategies include glosses, untranslated words, fused linguistic structures and syntax, code-switching, vernacular words and dialects (61 – 72). Adopting these techniques shift colonial power and centrality, creating a discourse that seizes and embraces “the marginality imposed on it and make hybridity and syncreticity the source of literary and cultural redefinition” (78). Manipulation of the English language transfers control to the writer, draws attention to “difference,” and validates marginality in all its variations.

All writers indeed encounter linguistic and representational limitations in the process of expressing their realities or translating dreams into textual form. Nevertheless, poets are “voicing up” matrilineal and cultural heritages, literal or symbolic, “out of invisibility and silence” (Wong-Wylie 136), and out of their own ingenuity and socio-cultural contexts. These writers are conscious of the generative intersections where language(s) and spaces, sounds and silences meet. In this chapter, I will analyze contemporary prairie women poets whose self-reflexive writing strategies counter, encounter, and address gendered discrepancies embedded in English,

and interleave the mother into language. I will examine representative poems from the following poets to elucidate their maternal aesthetics and poetics: Claire Harris, Sarah Klassen, Charlene Diehl-Jones, Méira Cook, Louise Bernice Halfe, Su Croll, Sally Ito, Erin Moure, Barbara Langhorst, and Melanie Dennis Unrau. These poets interrupt, subvert, reconstruct, and/or expose the limitations of the English language in expressing maternal experiences, perspectives, and possibilities. As Daly and Reddy assert, women writers “not only reformulate the boundaries of self and world, [but] they also transform linguistic and social practices” (15). I will concentrate on three strategies or markers that represent their relational, dialogical, and at times transformative maternal aesthetics and poetics: 1) encountering English, 2) negotiating mother-tongues, and 3) sounding silences.

1. Encountering English

In “Illegitimate Positions/Women & Language,” Erin Moure asks the question, “How [do] we speak/ discuss without assuming patriarchal positions wherein we empower ourselves and our point of view over others?” (13). She offers an approach to voicing opposing views without alienating or silencing other women:

One way is to let women articulate their own relation to language so that all of us can examine *the points of contiguity*, to move into a place where discourses don’t blind each other. Not rejecting theory, but *making* it as we speak. Uncovering the lack or absence in our own speech; in all discourse there is something covered over; the problem with patriarchal discourse is that the place that is covered over is generally the place where women are speaking... (13; emphasis in text)

Moure identifies the benefits of multiple discourses to foster a feminist poetics. The problem lies in finding “*the points of contiguity*”; that is, being willing to find linguistic connections and to recognize there is an inevitable “lack” in all discourses. Multiple discourses, in speech and in texts, have the potential to enlighten rather than blind one another. This capacity for illumination is fundamental in Bakhtin’s understanding of language. He claims, “Languages throw light on

each other: one language can, after all, see itself only in the light of another language” (12). When women engage with other discourses they can shed light on their “relation to language” and expose the inevitable gaps. Indeed, this potential for illumination applies to poetic discourses about the maternal subject. Poets work to find languages (and forms) that recover what patriarchal discourses have covered up.

The mother-child and writer-reader relationships share “*points of contiguity.*” Mothering modifies writing strategies and discourses. Jeremiah claims that writing subjects are “engaged in a relationship with other writers and with readers” (“Troublesome” 12). Similarly, Chandler posits “we are not individuals but in-relation with” others, and suggests that a mother-writer is “an actively in-relation subjectivity” (529, 530). She challenges the dominant idea of autonomy and identifies “in-relation” discourses in “ecological theories, economic theories, theories of socialization and consciousness, and linguistic theories” (530). In negotiating and writing about mother/ing, I argue that these poets use “in-relation” discourses to simultaneously represent their relation to mother/ing, to language, and to their readers. DiQuinzio claims that an individualistic theory of subjectivity negates “the effectivity of difference in subjectivity and construes subjectivity in terms consistent with traditional Western conceptions of masculinity” (546). In accord with Chandler and DiQuinzio, Jeremiah argues that “a relational mode of subjectivity” not only “help[s] challenge and overcome Western capitalist models of individualism” but also promotes a “desire to create a genuine fit between self and other, to ‘resonate’ with and through that other” (“Troublesome” 12 – 13). This desire to “resonate” with the “other” is evident in mother-child and writer-reader relationships and discourses. Mothering benefits artistic expression and empowers writers (11; Daly and Reddy 8). Sally Ito’s experience suggests that artistic expression also benefits mothering. In her essay “Mother to Vision,” Ito observes, “[I]f I

was not writing, I was not engaging with the immediate world of my family. For some reason, the complete immersion in another world composed entirely of words helped me reap more fully the wonders of my present sensual universe....I am a better mother when I'm writing" (186 – 87). In Ito's experience as a mother-writer—an "in-relation subjectivity"—writing benefits and empowers her mothering. The poets in this study demonstrate that writing modifies mothering even as maternal experiences modify their poetic discourses.

Mothering and writing poetry in English for Croll is fraught with obstacles. A number of her poems underscore the discrepancies and deficiencies in the English language. In her poem "writing mother" (42 – 43), Croll repeats the word "language" at least eight times, emphasizing her frustration: "I only know language/ has been leached of what I want/ to say." Croll's desire "to write" her "own/ state of motherhood" is impeded because "the word has slipped/ so far from the truth" (42) of her reality. She laments:

there is no language
 for what I want to say no language
 for mother and child that hasn't been
 washed and rinsed and spun
 to dry so many times that what is left
 has paled and this bleached version is all I have
 to work with the words
 left to me are not muscular
 enough for what I want
 to say (42)

Croll incorporates caesuras in the lines, breaks that embody the silences created by the insufficiency of language. The caesuras also represent the gap between Croll's desire to write and her inability to say what she wants to say. It seems traditional mother-child representations have "bleached" out the specificities of her own maternal experiences. In fact, she says "pictures of young pink/ mothers and their young/ pink children is all/ our language allows" (42). Words have been "worn," "spent," and devalued "through ... years of being fumbled/ and fingered" until

they have become “pretty and flimsy” (43). Centuries of “fumbled” words brings to mind Marlatt’s statement that “patriarchally-loaded language ... misrepresents, even miscarries” women’s experiences (1021). Still, Croll remarks “I want to say” and “I want to write” seven times, even though she says there is “no language” or “expression” left for her. She counters the “candy floss” words and homogeneous imagery with domestic discourse: “washed and rinsed and spun to dry” (42). The 64 stacked lines of her poem ironically give “muscle” to her words and add “weight” to her representations. By critiquing clichés, Croll knocks over the barriers of language, and rebuilds the words to her advantage. Poetry allows Croll to put her own “slant/ of light” on all that is “true” for her, “but without language” (43). The poem itself embodies the “us” of mother-daughter and draws together the “us” of writer-reader to reform perceptions of maternity.

Writing about becoming a mother is a process of translating the transformation that an infant stranger activates. Clare, like many others, affirms the significance of writing this life-changing experience: “it was by talking about motherhood and reading about motherhood that I was able to make sense of my new life and of this whole other world into which the baby and I had landed” (9). In her poem “translation” (47 – 48), Croll translates her “new life” and the process of learning “about women/ being mothers” (47). Using her background in teaching English as a second language, Croll searches for a suitable “mother language”:

I don’t want to play
with language which is a masculine noun
though its utterance its flow
over the tongue is
feminine in our country’s other
mother language though each word
we weave through our children’s
first memory of language is forever
masculine I only want
to point out the women

sitting beside the open feminine wall
 of windows in the weekly café
 where we watch each other
 learn how to mother I want to look
 I want to step outside memory
 I want to freeze us within
 the poem's frame and really
see us (47; emphasis in text)

The point of contention for Croll and other mother-writers is finding a “mother language” that adequately represents the complexities of becoming a mother. She juxtaposes the utterance of a mother's tongue with English, “our country's other/ mother language,” which is “forever/ masculine.” Croll's poem illustrates the interrelationship of grammatical gender systems in language, gendered social norms, and maternal misrepresentations in literary history. She wants to “step outside memory,” beyond conventional portrayals of mothers, to “really/ *see*” “women/ being mothers” embodied in her poems, as though they are windows. Croll's poems, such as “writing mother” and “translation,” suggest an alternate mother language, words that translate her transformation from being a woman to also being a mother. Her poetry confirms Susan Crean's claim, “now we are making them [words] over to suit our bodies and sensibilities; now we are writing in our own image” (90). Croll's repetition of “I want” in these poems stresses a persistent “lack” of words, and implies an ongoing need to renovate language, to reformulate maternal bodies and mother-child images through writing.

Méira Cook's poems also shed light on the inadequacies of language in articulating her newborn experiences of mothering. Her poems in the first section of her book, “A Year of Birds,” are formed in four-line stanzas, un-named and largely unrhymed. Cook's poetic strategies, like Croll's, reflect the difficulty of articulating the newness of becoming a mother. She creates a dialogic relationship with the newborn, but also engages with the “we,” that is, other mothers, writers, and readers:

We are all
 fish swimming in circles
 darting at words shining
 like scale in water. Little

you, little v rhymes with me,
 little w, double you, that's two of us
 or we. Little x for kisses on your
 little wise zed (that's head). Hmmm- (23)

Cook recognizes the discrepancy between shiny words and the reality of the “you” that is the newborn infant. In this poem, her linguistic play is with the alphabet. Five times she repeats the word “little”; the letters of the alphabet are little signs that relate to what is. The “you” (u) and “v” (me) as well as the “w, double you” underscore the new mother-child relationship that has just taken flight (like the birds in a previous poem, 14). The “double you” also expresses the plurality of maternity; what was once the two-in-one “you” during pregnancy is now doubled—you and me, or “we.” Since the English language does not distinguish between the singular “you” with the plural “you,” notions pertinent in the maternal experience, the poet-mother breaks down the language into its smallest parts. Just as the alphabet accommodates 26 letters, poetry accommodates the multiplicity of “you.” Cook makes visible both the “we”—mother-child and writer-reader—as well as the singular “you” (y) that exists between the “x for kisses” and the “zed” for head—an emotional and intellectual relationship. At the end of the excerpt, Cook represents a non-linguistic sound, a hum that carries over to the next page. These letters, like “darting at words,” represent a lack of language to represent the newborn, but also suggest the pre-lingual “Hmmm-” in the infant’s mind.

In the final stanza of the poem, Cook (re)draws the interrelationship (what Moure calls intersubjectivity) of mother and infant:

sufficient as a rhyming couplet,
 You, my lovely always, on which I thread

each drawn breath, each yawn
a bead, dear one, an eye. (24)

The English language may be inadequate, but Cook suggests the “rhyming couplet” is sufficient. Cook counters the conventions of the English poetic form by transposing the meaning of “a rhyming couplet” into a living and intimate relationship, an image of mother and child. Cook uses the language of poetic form to represent the give-and-take rhythms of mother/ing. Her use of internal rhymes, “little v rhymes with me” and “we,” and near rhymes, “each” and “bead” or “dear,” give sound to their coupled relationship. Cook interweaves every breath and yawn into poetic lines, and uses enjambment to reflect the flow or movement of their shared reality. Letters and words are strung on lines like beads on a thread. Each word is “an eye” that catches a glimpse of the “dear one” as Cook constructs and “bear[s] witness” (11) to the mother-child relationship. The newborn participates in Cook’s couplet experiences of mothering and writing.

Cook’s use of the “couplet” metaphor simultaneously counters patriarchal language, literary conventions, and maternal expectations. One of her self-reflexive poems begins: “La Madonna parts her hair” (27 – 28). Her reference to Madonna prompts conventional images of the Virgin Mary, a centuries-old model of maternal perfection, and Croll’s reference to pretty pink skin-tones of mothers and children. However, Cook drastically alters this idyllic “rhyming couplet” with the following lines: “root and cuticle, claws/ the bird with shocked eyes.” This startling revelation of “claws” and “shocked eyes” digs at the “root” of maternal fictions. Her reference to “claws” evokes the notion of survival of the fittest, the realities of a sleep-deprived new mother.

Cook questions the ability of language and literary structures to hold her experiences: “Will this turn out to be the long// narrative poem about the mother,/ dead but insomniac/ by habit?” (27). In her preface to “On the Edge of Genre,” Smaro Kamboureli states that the

contemporary Canadian long poem is defined by “its discontinuities, its absences, and its deferrals [and] by foregrounding both its writing process and our reading act” (xiv). Although ambiguous, Cook’s reference to the “long // narrative poem” suggests an unease, particularly with the convention of deferral. In fact, later in the poem she says it would be easier “to sleep curled like a comma/ between heroic couplets” than to invent a new form. Which modes of expression support the realities of her maternal experiences?

The pain
 is back, the hairline crack, fish
 hook through the gills reeling

that mackerel tongue. Hard, darling,
 to come to this place, the years
 crossed like wings over wet
 language flaring in the throat,

a draught of poison to agitate
 the follicles. And memory
 forced like embalming fluid
 through the body’s cooling cavities. (27 – 28)

Cook’s deft use of enjambment draws attention to the end words, “[t]he pain” and “the years” of silence that linger between each line. These line-breaks imitate the interruptions of her life even as they disturb the reader. Cook not only parts Madonna’s hair, but also finds a “hairline crack” in traditional maternal representations. The mother-mackerel-tongue is hooked, mother-language is poisoned, the Madonna image is embalmed, and real mother-memories are flushed away. In search of language and form, Cook plays with the image of the “rhyming couplet” and confronts patriarchal models of “dead” mothers. Her images are more severe than Croll’s version of a “washed” “rinsed” and “bleached” masculinist language. However, Cook and Croll use writing strategies that challenge linguistic and poetic forms. Their poetics bring life to maternal realities traditionally silenced (deadened) by mythical, fictional, or sentimental literatures.

Poets who negotiate “conflicting messages, or contradictions, from the culture” and transgress boundaries in “linguistic play,” according to Daly and Reddy, may in fact be “silenced by readers” (11). For example, in a series of short poems, Unrau articulates the death and birth of her infants as well as her own process of becoming a new self. She contends with the “forbidden language” to “*write the womb*” and counters traditional representations of birth with maternal body language: “tongue parts/ my lips speaks/ to all there is/ *down here*” (44, 45; emphasis in the text). Unrau’s unusual line break, “parts/my” rather than “parts my lips/ speaks to all,” emphasizes the difficulty in speaking about the forbidden “parts” of the maternal body. The brevity of the poems and line-lengths of this sequence exemplify the constraints in voicing what others may not want to hear/read. In one poem she asks herself, “can she bear it/ the pain it takes/ to deliver herself?” (48). Unrau increases the potency of this question when set against the poem on the opposite page. Using italics to indicate another voice, she writes: “*to turn to our bodies/ looking for our power/ it’s just not right the professor/ hisses we’re not talking/ about real body parts*” (49). Unrau’s emerging maternal identity and body language challenge the mind/body and theory/reality dichotomies. She confronts the issue of language further in the subsequent poem:

splash of blood
 in the bowl
 all that red
 language
 flushed away
 before she has
 a chance to read it (50)

In this sequence of poems, Unrau engages the reader in the process of theoretical gestation, touching on and rejecting Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalytic theories of the self. She returns to the “red/language” of the womb to give birth to her new self in writing, despite opposition. These poems are sites of struggle to “*find your centre and push off*” (51). Unrau discovers in the

process that “she knows she is fierce/ not only for her children” (52). She encounters “conflicting messages” of the maternal self, counters socio-cultural and theoretical perspectives, and reconceives her new-mother self as physically and psychologically stronger.

The fourth section of Unrau’s book, entitled “happiness threads” (54 – 80), composes another kind of birth story. She reconstructs a series of blog posts, conversations from an online lounge where mothers from diverse backgrounds and ideologies write about their experiences, concerns, and views of mothering. The first thread, entitled “welcome,” includes four poems. The first post/poem, “forum,” introduces the “online voices” that “teem + split” as they reveal “the sameness + difference of our typed selves” (56). Their “typed selves” suggest a double meaning: they type on their computers, but they are also typed or sorted into groups. The topic of children does come up. However, blogging is a writing strategy that provides a hospitable space to “flex our languid identities/ make ourselves not the weary mother hanging/ laundry but the bright flags waving on the line/[...] the lumps of play dough we take from our children +/- shape/ ourselves” (56; ellipsis mine). Unrau illustrates the ways online forums construct and shape the self in relation to others. Moreover, Unrau demonstrates the ways language can be (re)shaped into poetry, transposing online terms and symbols “on the line[s]” of her poems. She includes abbreviations and emoticons, “bright flags” that wave in these poems. In her poem “IRL” (in real life), Unrau deftly substitutes happy faces for letters in some of the words:

i have n☺ RL
 my ch☺ldr☺n are ☺ll
 it’s what makes m☺ such a
 ha☺☺y ☺bj☺ct

i m☺ther anyone who n☺☺ds
 to kn☺w there are some things
 you can alw☺ys c☺unt ☺n (57)

In this excerpt, the insertion of happy-face emoticons emphasizes ironies in the text. She challenges socially gendered codes and exposes cultural performative expectations that mothers are always self-giving. Unrau exemplifies the ways mothers are often treated as objects and verbs rather than subjects in life and in literature: “i m😊ther anyone who n😊😊ds,” always happy, always available. Her use of emoticons and abbreviations not only defamiliarizes the social script, but also creates new ways of meaning. The absence of letters suggests more than one way of reading the words. For example, “c😊unt” might read as count or cunt, and 😊ll might be all or ill. Unrau demonstrates the potential of recodifying maternal discourse (O’Reilly), adding vocabulary and alternate platforms to “liberate” the language and change maternal (mis)representations.

Birthing a mother language, or maternal discourses, through poetry creates “*points of contiguity*” with other women writers seeking words that fit their “bodies and sensibilities” (Crean). Croll, Cook, and Unrau’s maternal poetry contributes to the ongoing creation of “space where theory and poetry are confluent and not turned into an opposition,” and where concerns with “the issue of language” are addressed, concerns that Moure raised in “Illegitimate Positions” (15). These poets wrestle with English and poetic language to create maternal discourses that fit their own subjective experiences. It is precisely the poststructuralist conception of literature as relational and interdependent (Jeremiah) that frees maternal subjectivities from “illegitimate positions” (Moure). They are empowered to push against socio-cultural norms and resist erasure from public discourse, and in so doing, they empower others.

2. Negotiating Mother Tongues across Cultures & Generations

Negotiating “between generations, languages, and cultures,” according to Pilar Cuder-Domínguez et al, is a “personal and communal struggle”; it may be a painful process, but they

believe it is “a positive one” (xiv). Writing in English, for Janice Kulyk Keefer, is “a source and means of empowerment rather than entrapment,” even though her “wounds” growing up were the result of being “born into two languages” (164, 165). For Sally Ito, however, the English language is a “wound.” Her poem “Mother Tongue” (1999) expresses a painful sense of loss associated with Canadian history:

. . . the world before
 the wound of english

 the birth words

 sounds now foreign

 and oh, the labour of effort
 to return to that soft curve in the tongue

 where mother’s milk lay. (57; ellipsis in text)

Opening the poem with an ellipsis, Ito positions the poem in *medias res*. There is a larger story in which this poem is situated, a silent history, a time when there were “birth words”—now there is English. Like Wong, Ito does not capitalize English. Linked to the word “wound,” Ito stresses the injuries associated with “english” dominance. The phrases “birth words” and “sounds now foreign” are separated vertically and horizontally; they make visible a double wound. Prior to English was the language of “mother’s milk”—the intimate and interdependent relationship between mother and infant. There was also mother’s language—Japanese. This brief but potent poem triggers memories of WWII and the incarceration of Japanese-Canadians. The expressive word “oh” stresses the “labour of effort” required for healing wounds of ethnic alienation and for recovering the language in which she was born. Ito builds a sense of loss and longing in the white spaces and in phrases such as the sensual “soft curve in the tongue.” It is in this “soft

curve” that the mother’s language is transferred from one generation to the next, and reformed into poetry.

Claire Harris was born into Trinidadian English. Wedged in the liminal space between two cultures, Harris unveils the “wounds” of gendered hierarchies buried within the language. She constructs a dialogic text in which she articulates and (re)negotiates her cultural and maternal positions linguistically:

Daughter there is no language
 i can offer you no corner that is
 yours unsullied
 you inherit the intransitive
 case Anglo-Saxon noun (24)

Harris’ declaration “there is no language” echoes Croll’s frustration, but with additional cultural tensions. Without another “tongue to exchange” (25), Harris alters the syntax to reform the language. She employs upper and lower case letters to signify the dominant/ subordinate hierarchy of Anglo-Saxon. The “i” and “you” (the daughter) are subjects and the “Anglo-Saxon” in this case is an object. Harris gifts her daughter with the “intransitive” verb—a complete action without an accompanying direct object. In this way, Harris places her daughter in an active rather than a passive position. She changes the grammatical gendered language to empower her unborn daughter. In another part of the poem, Harris criticizes English as masculinist: “his/ harsh imperatives” and “quick curd consonants” (25). Like Ito, she longs for a softer, more hospitable tongue, a relational language.

Relationality and interdependence should be givens in a multicultural context. However, Harris’ writing strategies expose a gap between official multiculturalism and lived realities:

Child all i have to give
 is English which hates/fears your
 black skin
 make it

d
 a c
 n e
 s
 i g (25)

Harris addresses the racial “hate/fear” associated with English. Various sections of her poetry collection speak to English colonization and her cultural history of slavery. However, in this excerpt, Harris both forewarns and empowers her daughter to celebrate her “black skin.” The poem typographically and figuratively dances on the page. Harris makes the words and letters sing her poetic song and the reader’s eyes join her in the dance. She invites her unborn daughter not only to make her black skin dance, but to make English sing and dance. It is interesting to note that the words “dance” and “sing” share the letter “n.” The linking “n” may be an abbreviation for “and,” a nod toward reciprocity, or an affirmation of physical and artistic cultural expressions. Nonetheless, Harris’ dialogic poetics and linguistic play make visible the interrelationships among mother-with-child, writer-reader, and culture-within-cultures.

Harris also interweaves histories and dreams and various forms of poetry and prose, blurring generic boundaries and creating new connections. In “Why Do I Write?,” she elucidates the motivation behind her writing strategies: “this refusal to accept boundaries, even the boundaries of genre or of the page.... [and] the varieties of English I exploit in a text,” is motivated by the desire “to provide a ground for community on which we all can stand” (31 – 32). Harris’ hybrid text opens space where multiple discourses negotiate the intersection of cultures, discourses, and generations. For example, through a dialogue between the mother-to-be (“I”) and her husband (“the man”), Harris articulates a number of conflicts some cultural groups face in Canada. The reader learns that “the man” is a “third generation Canadian” who wants “something better” for his child (69). She says “baby is going to be a Canadian citizen, but one

with the gut knowledge of her own worth” (70). He wants to retreat from the “Western legacy” of racism, and return to the “ethnocentric” Caribbean islands; but she says “there is racism there too” (71). These interactions force readers to engage in this precarious Canadian multicultural dance. Poetry enables creative movement of diverse rhythms and new patterns on the page.

Poets like Ito and Harris illustrate the ways socio-cultural ideals and gendered viewpoints are embedded in language(s) and have the potential to wound or heal relations, and to divide or bridge generations. Several of Sarah Klassen’s poems depict the prickly juncture where English and other mother tongues cross generations. In her poem “Letter,” Klassen reveals the deep significance of mother tongues for immigrants, specifically her mother:

Mid-morning in my mother’s building women and men bend over
metal canes and walkers, sort themselves according to the
languages they speak. Their tongues touch everything already
mentioned yesterday. [...] Childhood’s other country.
The long bleak silence of a sleepless night.

They wait for the mailman who brings them bills, glossy travel
brochures, offers of discount carpet cleaning, notice of elections.
Of death. If they’re lucky a letter. Today my mother opens one
from Russia [...] (1993, 82; ellipses mine)

Klassen’s paragraph stanzas read like a letter to an implied reader. She draws a parallel between the ways people organize themselves around mother tongues and the ways texts are sorted: bills, brochures, flyers, notices, letters, and poems. Klassen shows how a personal letter trumps other forms of communication, especially for the aging and the immigrant. They long for news from “Childhood’s other country”—her mother’s homeland, Russia. Letters provide a link across time and space, and communicate in words that connect with specific readers.

Historically, oral transmission was the way in which stories and news were passed along. When Klassen’s mother receives the letter, she is considered the “lucky” one. A representation of the letter is printed in italics and placed at the centre of the page:

*Our daughter has come home
from Moscow. She is healed
and has found God. For these gifts
we are grateful. (82)*

Though the reader does not know if this is an actual translation or an imagined text, it offers another “voice” or perspective in Klassen’s poem. In fact, the line breaks and formation suggest a poem within a poem. Klassen plays with our expectations as readers. The source is unknown, and this letter from Russia has been invisibly translated into English so readers can understand it. For Klassen’s mother, the letter is central in her mind as she “rereads it,” folds and refolds it. Not only is the letter a link to her childhood country, but it is a maternal connection, a portrayal of a broken and restored mother-daughter relationship. This text within a text is a site for empathy and remembrance as Klassen preserves the gist of the letter, but reforms her mother’s language into a poetic “letter” in English. Like the mother, readers can also read the text repeatedly. However, something gets lost in translation. This poetic translation does not name the mother and daughter, nor does it specify from what the daughter was healed. Unlike other readers, Klassen’s mother is clearly aware of what lies behind these words. Cultural and personal associations and wounds are encoded in language and do not necessarily translate.

Klassen interweaves oral and written forms of cultural knowledge in her poem sequence “German Lessons in the Interlake” (2006). The first poem, “My Mother Taught Me Gothic,” demonstrates the ways gendered scripts are imparted through language and practice, and are tested across generations:

My diligent mother at the kitchen table
washed sticky porridge bowls while I
bent mesmerized to the plain brown book she’d sent for

from Germany. Father hewed oak and poplar down,
wrestled with sinister underbrush,
slapped querulous mosquitoes from his face.

[...]

My tight-gripped pencil
practised slant lines. Sharp points of lower case,
looped flourishes of upper. Skin on my child knuckles

stretched taut and white as I repeated
at the kitchen table: *Mutter Vater Kind*
and also *Hund*,

while on our isolated road an alien wheel
snarling its fatal script
put full and final stop to Rover.

Tod,
my sombre mother taught me. A short,
uncomplicated word to end the lesson. (78; ellipsis mine)

In this poem, Klassen troubles appearances of stability in content and form. The “diligent mother” does double duty. She washes dishes and teaches her daughter to read and write her mother tongue. Enthralled by the “the plain brown book [...] from Germany,” the daughter learns to write the script. The “sharp points” and “looped flourishes” not only suggest a pain-and-joy pattern in life, but particular ways of learning and writing. Klassen depicts how we learn socio-cultural scripts for familial and gender norms through observation, recitation and inscription: mother, father, child, and dog.

The scripted order is also defined by space in life and poetic form. Klassen constructs eight three-line stanzas. Each stanza “houses” a mini-lesson and registers a specific perspective: 1. establishes the setting, 2. mother washes at the kitchen table, 3. father wrestles with the underbrush, 4. Rover and the land struggle against obstacles, 5. child practices her writing skills, 6. familial order is recited, 7. alien arrives with a fatal script, and 8. death stands out on its own line. Klassen disturbs the familiar familial structure and spatial boundaries. The child’s “tight-gripped” determination to write the Germanic script is cut short by the interference of an “alien

wheel” (English). The name Rover is worth noting. It is an English name that means to wander, one who does not settle. This naming is significant because the wanderer is associated with the English rather than the immigrant. The “fatal script” (English) ends the dog’s life, the German lesson, and the supposed security of isolation from foreign influences. Here is the site of Klassen’s “Gothic” lesson. The last word for the day, *Tod* (death), not only suggests Rover’s violent death, but also the erosion of cultural boundaries. The “alien,” or mysterious other, permanently alters their family script.

Contextual considerations are important, as Klassen’s poem illustrates. They influence communication and interpretation of cultural, familial, and gendered scripts. Michael Holquist points out in his introduction to Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination* that there are two basic elements of communication:

a mode of transcription... a more or less fixed system... [and] the particular context in which the utterance is made; this context can refract, add to, or, in some cases, even subtract from the amount and kind of meaning the utterance may be said to have when it is conceived only as a systematic manifestation independent of context” (xix – xx).

Transcribing the “slant lines” of the Germanic language, the child learns the “fixed system” of letters. However, words “mean” differently depending on the socio-cultural and historical contexts, and individual interpretations. For example, in English the word *Tod* may be a name, or it could mean a unit of weight, a load, or a bushy mass (Dictionary.com). Similarly, literary forms and poetic strategies “can refract, add to,” and “subtract” from the meaning of words. Klassen makes a sharp point by placing the word *Tod* (death) on its own line. The reader is confronted with the abruptness of death. It is singular and permanent in its experience and effect. There are no further negotiations—or are there? The intrusion of the “fatal script” (English) has thrown light onto the old script (German), but the reverse is also the case. In her poem “Alphabet” (84), Klassen constructs a dialogue that reveals the precarious negotiations of

acculturation. The “tiny arthritic grandmother in her Mennonite shawl,” not knowing “one word of English,” sends bilingual wooden blocks from Winnipeg to the family in the Interlake. She inadvertently complicates the parents’ mission to preserve the German language. Children recite “*Apfel Affe Abendbrot*” and “*Bett Brot Butter*” but secretly mouth the English words “‘apple’ and ‘ape’// ‘bread’ and ‘butter’” as though they were speaking a forbidden language. Curious by nature, the children seek out the “foreign” tongue. The bilingual blocks “whisper ‘mittens’ to the giggling children,/ scream out ‘more’ and ‘mine.’” These English words suggest accumulation and individualism, ownership and autonomy. They seem to whisper freedom and offer an alternate perception of the world. However, as we’ve already seen, English carries its own burdens and barriers.

Each generation and ethnic group must wrestle with maintaining cultural distinctions and/or accepting dominant social norms (Fast and Buller 1). Remembering her childhood, Klassen bears witness to this struggle in her poems. In her “Alphabet” poem, children test their cultural beliefs and query gender roles. Take for example the children reciting “b” words:

Bett Brot Butter
Biene buzzing like crazy in July alfalfa fields.
Babi? The mother shakes her head and says
 there can not be another. (84)

Klassen constructs several associative lists in this extract. The first three words “*Bett*” (bed), “*Brot*” (bread), and “*Butter*” (butter) suggest the basic needs for life. Bread and butter also denote a means of support often connected with the father as “bread winner.” The first word of the first three lines also sets up an associative progression: “*Bett*” (bed), “*Biene*” (bees) and “*Babi*” (baby). In response to the child’s “*Babi*” question, the mother says “there can not be another.” Her answer could be interpreted in several ways. She may not be able to perform the child-bearing function, she may not want any more children, or she may want to give the child a

simplified answer. Regardless, this question subtly suggests a socio-cultural expectation that the mother's role is to have babies. Her domestic responsibilities in the context of these poems are reproduction, childcare, and cultural transmission. The father joins the family for mealtime after working the land. Children chant: "*Mama Mimi Milch*" (84)—he does not see them mouth the English words. His duties and concerns are expressed in "*Mittagschlaf*" (midday nap): "a sea of prairie wheat,/the acres free of obstinate oak roots,/ unruly children, grasshoppers, / drought, mortgages, unwieldy stones" (79). Father's role is to weed out problems, create order, and provide for the family. Klassen juxtaposes German and English words, constructing a dialogue at the juncture of culture, gender, and generation. Her poetic sequence "German Lessons" makes visible the ways belief systems are tested and ethnic distinctions are negotiated. Connie T. Braun affirms that "poetry serves as an ethical act that requires a finely nuanced poetic aesthetic in negotiating the silences within the lives of those who experienced displacement and loss of language, and who did not or could not narrate their own experiences" (87). Klassen's transcription of "lessons" and "letters" gives utterance to her parents' mother tongue, their experiences of dislocation, and their struggle to adjust in an unfamiliar milieu.

Klassen, Harris, and Ito contribute to a growing matrilineal literary tradition of "dialogue between children (especially daughter-centric) and mothers (matrifocal)" where "Mothers find *themselves* as mothers, ... engaging in dialogue with multiple facets of their own identities" (Podnieks and O'Reilly 20; emphasis in text). I would add that daughters also find themselves as daughters in these dialogical and reciprocal texts. As Rishma Dunlop and Priscila Uppal affirm in their introduction to *Red Silk*, the approaches women choose to "remember their mothers says a great deal about how they envision the world and their own place in it" (5). In writing the various "facets" of identity and maternal praxes, these poets demonstrate the fluidity of selfhood

and accommodations needed to navigate gendered expectations across generations. Identities and living languages are always “in-the-making” (Bakhtin 7), just as literary genres are ever evolving. These women poets bend and break conventional boundaries as they examine and engage with “alien” discourses. Contemporary poetry is open to a multiplicity of identities, viewpoints, and discourses (as opposed to a single authorial or authoritative voice). Dunlop and Uppal argue that “poetry is a source that can and does speak powerfully across differences; poetry is a language of many tongues” (8). The cross-cultural and intergenerational poetics of recent women writers, as discussed here, verify the flexibility and dialogic potential of contemporary poetic genres.

Erín Moure, like Sarah Klassen, intersperses other languages throughout her poetry collection. However, as the title *The Unmemntioable* indicates, Moure also problematizes language itself and destabilizes communication. For Moure, writing poetry “create[s] a space and duration in the marks that are words where differences are possible, [and] multifaceted articulation is possible” in a “structure [that] is motion” (*my beloved wager* 17 – 18). Poetic texts and forms permit multifarious strategies for voicing “differences” and possibilities. One of the functions of poetry, she argues, “is to disrupt at the edges of what we claim to know” (75). Her interrogation of language and cultural identity, and her use of multiple languages and genres, unsettles her readers, especially those who only speak English. In his essay “A Field of Potentialities,” Jamie Dopp attributes Moure’s “‘discomforting’ poetic” to her resistance to authority: “the authority of received codes of language, of the poet with the one voice, of the critic with the mastering discourse” (261 – 62). He goes on to suggest that Moure’s poetic “teaches the importance of being as receptive as possible to discomfort, to its productive possibilities, as well as the importance of turning discomfort itself into a focus of critical

inquiry” (262). Dopp’s evaluation is helpful in analyzing Moure’s work. Moure’s new term *Unmemntioable* is difficult to pronounce, yet it evokes a number of associations besides the word unmentionable. This word also suggests notions of memory, metonymy, and mnemonic writing strategies. The question is, how do you recollect memories erased by the unspeakable violence of cultural eradication?

insert a map of culture here. []
Je suis moi-même une machine à écrire.

“...Ukrainian,” said my mother.
 “Polish,” said my uncle, older.
 “But Mom is Ukrainian,” she insisted.
 “Polish was what they taught in school!”
 “Austrian,” said my grandfather, gazing out at the soldiers’ road.

“In secret on the mountain I tried to read the letters, for my parents worried awake at night at what they told.”
 “One alphabet I could not read, they did not teach it in Canadian school.” (51; brackets, ellipsis and emphasis in the text)

Moure problematizes the notion of mapping culture. The empty space between the square brackets opens space for multiple perceptions and possible readings of the phrase “a map of culture.” Family members across several generations each identify with a different cultural label, each person has their own “map of culture.” As Moure traces her mother’s expunged cultural history, readers are challenged to question why some histories and alphabets are absent “in Canadian/school.” Moure’s inclusion of the French statement, roughly translated “I am myself a typewriter” (Google Translate), suggests that as a writer, Moure constructs her own culture through linguistic systems, placing several alphabets alongside the dominant discourse. Her use of languages and quotation marks also create a sense of dialogue across generations and cultures, yet she offers no names and gives no credit to these phrases. Her “‘discomforting’ poetic” (Dopp) resists monologic voices as well as cultural borders.

Moure invents two personae to grapple with issues of identity—personal, cultural, and literary selves. E.M., or Erín Moure, is not the same as the author herself, and E.S., or Elisa Sampedin, embodies E.M. as critic.

If anything, it's the fault of reading. When Chus Pato's poetry appeared on my desk, I decided to give up writing poems. I moved to Bucuresti to see if I could free myself from this crisis of experience, this excision of language. Then I saw Erín Moure in the park at a café table, looking at me. Why did she come here?

What does she know about experience? Her mother tongues resist all attempts at a technical language.

Is it that she has no mother tongue?

Today, I refuse to be pinned down to an identity. Right away, I want to betray it. (19)

In my first reading, I assumed that the “I” in this poem was Moure, yet in the fourth line the speaker mentions Erín Moure. It is E.M.’s critic E.S. who says “it’s the fault of reading,” which in turn, was a critique of the reader: me. In her series of questions, the critic (E.S.) draws attention to the problem of interpretation as well as representation. Some experiences and relationships “resist all attempts at a technical language.” In her refusal “to be pinned down,” E.S. questions identity and authorship as stable signifiers: “Infamy’s gesture: author of this” (19). At the bottom of the page Moure writes in italics: “*E.S. looks out at the church [...] She sets down the pen and puts her fingers into her hair to hold her head still. Why did I write this, she thinks*” (ellipsis mine). Rather than identifying the source of the statements, Moure uses the footnote to add another perspective. How does the persona E.M. know what E.S. is thinking?

Marie Carriere, in her essay “Erin Moure and the Spirit of Intersubjectivity,” defines intersubjectivity as “a relational theory [that] corresponds to the philosophical conditions of ethical human conduct” (64). She argues that for Moure, and other feminists, “both the poetic and the theoretical articulation of the female other (mother, daughter, lover, friend, even

transcendental Other) is paramount to the inscription of the female subject in language” (64). In articulating E.S.’s “crisis of experience” and “excision of language,” and E.M.’s excised “mother tongue,” Moure questions the ability for language to represent “the “wreckage of being” (*my beloved wager* 99). She maintains that “our being is socially and culturally constructed, and constructed in and through technology(ies) that flatten and twist notions of space/time, making any conventional notion of presence, self-presence, or corporeality virtually untenable” (99). Culture and language recreate selves and ways of being in relationship with others. As a writing strategy, using two personae unsettles ideas of identity. Artistic expression and language, Moure argues, opens readers “to joy, to human possibility, to febrility and astonishment, which are there, in spite of the wreckage” (102). The notion of two personae applies to the intersubjectivity of a female self, but also to self and other, daughter and mother, writer and reader relations.

The fusion of multiple languages and the doubled perspective (intersubjectivity) suggest there is always an unnameable presence on the margins of texts. Later in the book Moure writes:

“Where is Elisa Sampedrin? Certainly not in the laconic notes that register her presence in the archive of infamy. Nor is she outside the archive, in a biographical reality which we can claim to know. She stands on the threshold of the text in which she is put into play, or, rather, her absence, her infinite turning away, is marked on the outer edge, a gesture that both renders her possible and exceeds and nullifies her intention.”

[...]

“The author’s gesture (E.M.) guarantees the life of the work (40.1c) only through the irreducible presence of an inexpressive Outer Edge (E.S.).” (33; ellipsis mine, quotation marks in text)

Moure constructs a kind of dialogic intersubjectivity that allows her freedom to move in and out of the text, to enact (Kyselo) and examine the self in relation to the other, to recognize a presence on the margins. Carriere describes this presence as a “separate, irreducible other—who will not be assimilated to the subject’s self-projections, desires, or what philosophy calls the self-same”

(64). Moure's doubling technique exposes and conceals the self as a fusion of selves always in-the-making (Bakhtin), but the self (as individual and/or author) is also always in relation with an other who is also in-the-making. Furthermore, cultures, literatures, and languages continue to change. Transcribing experiences and theories into language are mere glimpses into the realities and identities of the subject. Twice Moure uses the term "outer edge" and places it on the right edge of the page. The first time, the two words are split through enjambment. Each word lies on opposite margins. The second iteration is placed precisely at the bottom right edge of the poem. Moure associates the adjective "inexpressive" and the capitalized words the "Outer Edge" with E.S. Her absence, present on the periphery of the text, may be characterized as blank and emotionless, but Moure indicates that there would be no life in the work without her. E.S or the Outer Edge, names what lies outside beyond language, a gesture towards what remains present yet unnameable (Radley) or unremembered. The poetic text is a site where the absence of the "other"—this could include her mother, foremothers, or readers—exists on the "inexpressive Outer Edge" of language. Moure's doubled self, then, not only destabilizes notions of identity and rejects the authoritative voice, but also leaves room for the "irreducible" other, the intersubjectivity of selves, of daughter and (absent) mother, of writer and (absent) reader.

Moure's doublings of selves and self/other dynamics are complex. In the context of ethnicity, Siemerling suggests "double consciousness, irony, [and] dialogism" have the potential to create fresh "literary categories" and "discursive subjectivities" (18). Poetry written by women who identify themselves as bi-cultural, hybrid, or of mixed-race, such as Moure and Halfe, reflects this "double consciousness." These labels have been a source of pain for some and a source of empowerment for others. Elizabeth Russell suggests in her introduction to *Caught Between Cultures* that "hybridity, multiculturalism, diasporic consciousness, nomadism, and

cross-culturalism have become a cause for celebration in theoretical writing on identity, especially because it [hybridity] is a site of transgression” (xi). Although Russell refers to theoretical writing, Moure’s poems mingle theory with reality and exemplify “site[s] of transgression.” In her exploration of identity, she blends multiple languages, cultures, and genres to challenge dominant conventions. Moreover, she queries the reader-writer relation, “Does the skin still demarcate the borders of identity when we work with a computer, when we no longer see our interlocutors?” and suggests that the text “acts like a skin,” a place where bodies touch and communicate (*my beloved wayer* 104). Moure’s poetics aim to create dynamic spaces where “multiple refractions, questions, and reverberatory echoes are possible” (111).

Halfe, like Klassen and Moure, represents her mother tongue alongside the dominant language to reify the voices of her Cree foremothers. Andrea Thompson and Edebe DeRango-Adem, in their “Mixed Manifesto,” suggest that communicating in two or more languages is an aesthetic choice that affirms cultural distinctiveness and validates the “personal and collective dimensions of identity” (6). These “collective dimensions of identity” are particularly prominent in Halfe’s poetics. Shelley Stigter claims that “code-switching” between languages may “carry political and social meanings such as indicating cultural solidarity or distinguishing between formal and colloquial speech situations. ... Halfe’s use of code-switching, however, promotes bicultural awareness and participation” (50). Halfe informs her readers of the cultural dynamics of living in “two worlds.” Moreover, she includes a glossary of Cree words in her second edition (2004) to further encourage her readers to participate with her text. She constructs a myriad of voices to acquaint her readers with other points of view and linguistic rhythms. According to Stigter, Halfe’s word choices use the “possessive kinship terms from the Cree language ... [that is,] the replacement of the beginning ‘k’ with ‘n’ ... [or] the prefix ‘ni’ ... ‘Nôhkom,’ ‘nimosôm,’

and ‘nôhkomak’ are words that denote the possessive forms of grandparents” (54; ellipses mine). For example, the words “nôhkom,” “nimosôm,” and “nôhkomak” mean my grandmother, my grandfather, and my grandmothers consecutively (glossary 106, 107). Halfe repeats the term “my” to signify and emphasize her personal connection within the larger community of her Cree ancestors. From the first page, Halfe establishes her cultural and maternal ties: “My mother strung my umbilical cord in my moccasins” (1). As a mother and poet, Halfe becomes a conduit through which her ancestors make themselves known.

Halfe’s construction of multiple discourses is somewhat like Moure’s in that she uses various personae to speak for the mother tongues literally and figuratively silenced in history. However, Halfe incorporates multiple voices and stories to represent her Cree foremothers and to open “a dialogue between the hegemonic and Canadian Aboriginal cultures” (Stigter 49). She assumes the role of a scribe and grants her grandmothers subjectivity in their own stories:

*We will guide your feather,
dipped in ink.
We will flow.
We will flow. (27)*

Halfe, as listener and writer, welcomes the guidance of her grandmothers and creates a kind of intersubjectivity between herself and the other voices. The repetition of “We will flow” suggests the ink, the blood, and cultural stories are intertwined, but there is also a sense of determination that they *will* tell their stories (my emphasis). In an effort to convey her foremothers’ narratives, Halfe blends together ink and marrow. The title *Blue Marrow*, Andrews states, refers to “the Cree’s traditional practice of using buffalo bone marrow to create a highly nutritious and portable powder base for pemmican, which consisted of marrow, buffalo tallow, and berries” (214). Halfe’s narrator chews on bones as she writes: “this long bone I hold/ leaves me calloused and cold./.../I press these words hard/ with charcoal/ over and over/ so I can write” (13; ellipsis

mine). Bone marrow becomes the source and fuel for a dialogic writing process. Halfe negotiates maternal discourses and mother tongues across generations and counters homogeneity as she interweaves her own voice with those of her forebears into textual form. Thus, Halfe's poetry "ensures that their lives and their impact on subsequent generations are acknowledged and celebrated even through the recognition of their exploitation and suffering" (Andrews 214). Although languages make it possible for Halfe to represent multiple maternal and cultural voices "in ink," their stories remain incomplete.

3. Sounding Silence: Dialogic Spaces

How does silence sound? Much of this project has been devoted to questions like the one Di Brandt asks in "letting the silence speak": "how do you write yourself out of silence?" (55). Many mothers and daughters like Brandt have written poetry as a strategy to break the silences of their experiences. In her essay "Contradiction: A Wide Open Space" Lola Lemire Tostevin claims that "between silence and the dominant discourse there is a space within which each woman, each subject-in-process, can regenerate her language in order to generate new possibilities with an endless signifying chain" (23). Contemporary women poets have found these (re)generative spaces for maternal and cultural explorations and dialogue. However, there is another side to the coin. Spaces also embrace silences. Barbara Langhorst declares: "i no longer believe that silence is death/ the german word *schweigen*/ means to hold your peace to be quiet by choice" (89). Langhorst comes to recognize another side of silence: "i write not against the silence/ but into it" (89). There is a time to write against silence, a time to write into silence, and a time to choose silence.

Poetic genres, I would argue, are the most hospitable to the interplay of words and spaces, dialogue and silence. Adrienne Rich explores the relation between poetry and silence and posits that poetry is

an instrument for embodied experiences ... it comes out of a silence seeking connection with unseen others.... it's not just the words, but polyrhythmic sounds, speech in its first endeavours (every poem breaks a silence that had to be overcome), prismatic meanings lit by each other's light, stained by each other's shadows" ("What is Found" 1058 – 59).

Like Rich, I envision stanzas and spaces in poetry as rooms where connections are made “with unseen others,” but also with the self. Spaces invite rhythmic movement and pause for breath, and create places for pondering “prismatic meanings” and memories. Every poet is conscious of the gaps between language and lived experiences, but also of spaces on the page, between words, lines and stanzas, or along the margins. Even so, Melanie Dennis Unrau, Charlene Diehl-Jones, Barbara Langhorst, and Erin Moure are particularly adept at using these spaces as an effective and affective strategy in their writing.

In her poetic sequence “the womb is” (25 – 30), Unrau situates her three-line poems at the centre left of each page. Large white spaces envelope the small poems, as though they are suspended in an amniotic sac. Readers may be surprised at the potency of such little poems:

heaven where god
sits carefully
knitting socks (25)

Unrau gives the womb a spiritual quality. It is a mysterious space where the potential of a life is knit together—a comforting and domestic image. White space becomes a source of energy, bright with possibilities. Turning the page, the three lines are quite unexpected:

hung with cords like clotheslines
my first child
died tangled in its hair (26)

Suddenly, the blank space becomes suffocating, a place of death. This too is a mystery. Words hang on the lines, but the wide open space echoes with questions unspoken, unanswered. White space holds all that is unknown and uncertain about life and death. Juxtaposing these two tercets illustrates the two sides of pregnancy: promise and despair. The reader shifts from expectation to

disappointment as Unrau knits line to line, poem to poem. Each poem expands the reader's knowledge of the womb's capacity. Unrau imagines the womb as "an ocean the child paddles," "never quiet," and "a nightmare" (27, 28, 29). The reader is discomforted as Unrau constructs suspense from one poem to the next. Will the unborn infant live, or die like the first child?

warm the child could stay
 forever breathing liquid
 dreaming air (30)

These mostly empty pages make room for readers to catch a glimpse of the tenuous experiences of gestation. Together, the reader and poet speculate, anticipate, hesitate and dream as they wait for the unborn stranger to arrive. The future, as Unrau represents it, is (im)pending.

Like Unrau's "womb" poems, Charlene Diehl-Jones uses large white spaces to hold her short poems. Her beautiful book *Lamentations* is an unusual size: 29 x 20 cm. In addition, the typography of her poems varies in point size and font, and very few poems extend from the top to the bottom of the page. Her little poems appear suspended in large white spaces, emphasizing the infant's premature death and intensifying feelings of loss. Just as the "motherbody curls around/ the absent infant" (4), the white space curls around the text like the presence of an absence. Readers get a sense of the poet's grief in the interplay of words and space. As poet-mother-not mother, Diehl-Jones' strategy for writing loss is "like the lone killdeer/ practicing his new choreography" (11). She choreographs a new kind of composition, interlacing dark words onto blank pages. Her poems figure a barren landscape, a vacated body:

i can't help noticing
 the dream is
 white
 from milky to lustrous
 white surfaces rub
 against one another
 texture & absolute
 edge

to specify perspective
 in a monochromatic landscape
 how on earth to write a white
 dream I am thinking
 how to remove color from
 a page which cannot register
 it in the first
 (13) place

Diehl-Jones' opening line "i can't help noticing," and the poem's conspicuous placement on the extreme right margin, draw the reader's attention to the large white space. Pressed against the right margin, the poem manifests the extremity of Diehl-Jones's sense of loss, alienation, and marginalization. The words "white," "edge," and "place," each on a line of its own, imply a liminal space where the white page "cannot register" the presence of a "white dream," a reality that cannot be articulated. This notion evokes Moure's *unmemntioable* and her formulation of "an inexpressive Outer Edge" (33). Page after page the reader is faced with visible absence; mnemonic blank spaces remind us of her loss. The frequent white spaces register sorrow and sadness, sounds of silent cries readers may hear between the lines. In this way, Diehl-Jones creates spaces for readers to mourn with her, to share in a personal and communal lament, and to recall and/or mourn their own losses.

In chapter two I examined Barbara Langhorst's poem sequence "Climate Change." She constructs a poem that reinforces her "*world without a mother*" (31; italics in text).²⁷ Langhorst creates a blank "hole" or hollow in the centre of the page, increasing and decreasing the gap by shifting words and changing line lengths. The white circular field in the centre implies a growing restlessness in the absence of her mother. Violent disruptions, cavities, and fissures in her poems, especially in "Climate Change" and "Menstrual Cup," embody the cruel death of her mother. Lines stretch and collide, as unstable as her emotional upheaval in the mayhem of murder:

²⁷ See an excerpt of this poem on page 51.

i am afraid to hold a knife
 i cultivate tibetan blue poppies and choose paint chips
 approximationsthingsstandingin
 for

i am an escape artist

i can't even tell you
 how i came to this conclusion

.
 there are no kind words for this
 my father put a bullet in her brain and a shotgun to his chest
 . (14)

Words are simply gestures, “approximations” that give voice to the previously unspeakable. The fragmentation and disruption of the lines and gaps repeatedly disturb and remind readers of cruelty to mothers and all the emotions and experiences associated with it. These apertures elicit the reader’s imagination in the silent spaces. Langhorst constantly shifts and moves the poetic texts in ways that form rounded shapes and spaces or wide gashes across the pages. She aptly interjects periods (dots) intermittently throughout the “Menstrual Cup” sequence, and square bullet points in her poem “Vigils.” Her ruptured and disjointed poems, interposed with symbolic marks, effectively disrupt the process of reading as well as disconcert her readers. However, they also have the potential to instigate social change. Langhorst’s poetics opens spaces to consider the consequences of domestic violence. Moreover, awareness can lead to activism and break cycles of oppression. Phyllis Webb, in “On The Line,” suggests that the poem is a “listening room” (1081). The white spaces are caverns where the readers listen to the “escape artist” (Langhorst 14), where the thoughts of poet and reader resound.

Unlike the majority of other poets, Moure makes blank spaces, or “listening rooms,” take on different forms. For example, she incorporates underlined blanks, ellipses, long dashes, brackets, or blacked out words within the text to augment silent spaces. Even though her

mother's childhood village was destroyed, there was evidence that "[t]he Polish houses were here." Moure uses the present tense, "the village exists" (46), to indicate a new village has been constructed, but she also suggests that traces of the old village remain. Her guide points to the empty grove where a church once stood: "She calls this grove not _____ but _____. (I don't catch the words)" (46). On the following page, Moure writes: "What the villagers call that empty space of weeds, that grove or knoll/ where my mother was baptized. Not _____, but _____." (47). This repetition with a difference suggests the ways memories are transmitted across time and space. The empty grove still speaks into the silence. Moure invites readers to fill in the blanks, or to recognize there are always gaps in language, in reading, in hearing, and in understanding. Later in the poem, she crosses out part of a line, creating another form of silencing: "(I are my ~~own memory~~)" (47). Moure draws attention to the ways memories are erased or altered, yet a trace is left behind. In the following excerpt, Moure uses the stanza break to suggest an immeasurable distance across time:

There are persons who can speak no more, whose very names have vanished. Yet a name excised from the verge where it once lived still casts its sound on all who sleep there and enters their throats. "We are called *Grandyshyi*, for once there were *Grandyshi* here..."

I remember the last sound my own mother called out in the city of my birth, in Calgary. A sigh, an interpellation that refused to articulate its word. I turned to her and spoke, as I was meant to. (45; ellipsis in text)

Moure's poem suggests that the names of the dead still "sound on all who sleep" on the verge, they speak from the "Outer Edge." She gestures towards the vanished *Grandyshyi* people as well as her mother's dying "sigh." Spaces bear the traces of their voices and experiences, as well as open space for making emotional connections. The emotional impact of white space is especially poignant on page 42. A single faintly printed line moves across the top of the page: "And the child's rib in the birches of Oles'ko, a finger seeking כרויט" (42). The bodily remnants barely

cling to the glaring white surface. Like the words on the page, the finger points, reaches, seeks remembrance. Large blank spaces signify what “refuses to articulate its/ word,” such as the horrors of genocide or a mother’s last breath. Paradoxically, Moure is compelled to speak, “as I was meant to.” Writing evokes memories and memories evoke writing. Her typographical landscape challenges the reader to acknowledge we won’t always “catch the words” (47) but the silences still resonate.

Unrau, Diehl-Jones, Langhorst and Moure’s poetics involve the interplay of texts and spaces as a strategy for dealing with uncertainty, tragedy, grief and loss. Spaces leave room for emotional and psychological experiences that lie beyond language. Silences interpolate the words and lines even as language gestures towards lived experiences. But silences also suggest sound in the very absence of words. Not unlike Moure’s view of the “Outer Edge,” Maurice Blanchot points out that the paradox of silence, as a word and a state of being, is that “we feel that [silence] is linked to the cry, the voiceless cry, which breaks with all utterances [...] Like writing [...] the cry tends to exceed all language, even if it lends itself to recuperation as language effect” (51; ellipses mine). Silence, as Blanchot explains, is “already a kind of speaking; already it says in silence and speaking that silence is. For mortal silence does not keep still” (59). Kaplan agrees with Blanchot that human cries reverberate through silence. She attributes the sounds of silence to the human desire for dialogic relationships. She argues that “[d]ialogue is the heartbeat of a human existence” (20) and that “*reciprocal dialogue*” is vital “in learning to love” (21; emphasis in text). That is why she suggests “no voice is ever wholly lost *that is the voice of humanity*” (241). Poetic texts and spaces, as these poets have portrayed, are sites where silenced cries reverberate and where experiences that evade language find meaning.

Poets who write about their mothers/foremothers or unborn/ newborns imaginatively engage with the “other.” Malin, in accord with Bakhtin, argues that “texts are often modeled on inner dialogues. Each [daughter] writer not only ‘thinks’ her mother’s story as an inner dialogue with herself before putting it on the page, but her voice and her mother’s voice are dialogic in her inner thoughts” (11). As I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter, these contemporary women poets represent maternal subjectivities in their dialogic texts even as they re-inscribe themselves. Their writing strategies bring into play linguistic and non-linguistic elements, as well as mother-tongues and relational echoes from the margins and beyond. They welcome the stranger and the deceased even as they invite the reader. Their maternal aesthetics and innovative poetics make room for encounters with intersubjective relationships, thereby creating maternal discourses and reforming literary and social representations of the maternal.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

The aim of my dissertation has been to examine the writing strategies of contemporary Canadian prairie women poets to ascertain how they use poetry to negotiate and respond to mother/ing in the context of four specific and often marginalized occasions. The introductory chapter provided a context for this project and laid the theoretical groundwork for subsequent chapters. In chapter two, I explored the elegy as a strategy to mourn a mother's death, express homage to her, and counter the silence of her absence. In chapter three, I investigated maternity poetry as a site to express the mother-child relationship in terms of hospitality during pregnancy, childbirth, and becoming a mother. In the fourth chapter, I considered the reconstruction of a matrilineage as a strategy to reclaim a maternal heritage, re-inscribe the self, convey cultural memories, and construct motherlines. In chapter five, I analyzed poetic discourse(s) as a strategy to expose the limits of language, reinstate the mother in English/english, and engage with others across cultures and generations.

In the process of research, I faced several challenges, the first of which was to remain focused on the poets' writing strategies. Much of the writing in motherhood and literary studies invites comparisons of what mothers should or shouldn't be, and which mothering practices or parenting styles produce the model child. Conversely, I concentrated on **how** these poets wrote about grief, pregnancy, or their motherlines, rather than how to grieve, how to prepare for the newborn, or how to reconnect with foremothers. Another challenge was to develop a definition of mothering that was broad enough to include diverse perspectives, yet provided some limitations. I admit my own experiences colour my view of mothering. Nevertheless, I used the term mother/ing to encompass mothers as subjects and mothering as cultural practices. The term maternal was also useful because, as Marianne Hirsch argues, "there is no transparent meaning

of the concept” (“Unspeakable Plots” 248). Ultimately, through close readings, I examined how these poets wrestled with language and form to articulate their encounters with the maternal.

I have also made a number of discoveries related to each chapter. Choosing elegiac writing as a strategy, for example, not only mourns and honours the dying or deceased mother, but also (re)connects daughter-poets with their mothers, extends her mother’s voice into the present, and addresses other forms of loss. In the process of mourning, Barbara Langhorst identifies with her mother’s “cooling body,” finds comfort in their shared DNA (9), and relates her own transformation initiated by her mother’s violent death. Her irregular and sometimes chaotic lines traverse the pages, illustrative of the volatility of grief. Lisa Martin-DeMoor writes “Sonnets for the silence” (30 – 55), and listens for her mother’s guiding voice. She re-forms lines from Jacques Derrida’s *The Work of Mourning* to represent her own work of mourning in her sequence “*Echoes from the room with no sound*” (45 – 50). Mourning prompts her to ponder the “betrayal” of mortality, from her own existence to the brevity of a fledgling’s life (64). Erin Moure represents her mother as an artist who writes grief through the lens of her daughter. Her unsettling strategies to articulate loss and evaluate grief include multiple languages and fonts, caesuras, white spaces, and dialogue between two personae (E.M. and E.S.). Thus, these poets “raise the dead” (Langhorst 9) and preserve maternal subjectivities in their texts. In very distinct ways they affirm Priscila Uppal and Tanis MacDonald’s assessment that contemporary Canadian elegists reject traditional moves towards separation, consolation, and closure (Uppal 13). In the past decade, MacDonald notes, female elegists often “assert a variety of feminist positions” and engage in socio-political inquiry and interrogation (7, 29). Moure and Langhorst ardently denounce domestic and cultural cruelty, and expose gender politics in society and literature. Langhorst queries (un)acceptable forms for mourning, and discrepancies in honouring deceased

men versus deceased women. Moure draws attention to intersubjective female relationships—mother-daughter and lesbian—as well as the forgotten cries on the verge of memory. These elegists create room for communing with the dead, articulating losses, and inquiring into gender politics, identity concerns, socio-cultural customs, familial relations, and violence.

In exploring the mother-child relationship in contemporary maternity poetry (pregnancy through childbirth), I found that academic maternal theories largely concentrate on maternal myths and mothering practices from various cultural and ideological perspectives. There is a paucity of theoretical work related to pregnancy and the childbirth event, and a tendency to homogenize maternity. Moreover, pregnancy and childbirth are politically and emotionally fraught, entangled in competing ideologies and discourses. Guenther proposes “a feminist critique of birth and reproduction” in *The Gift of the Other*, an ethical response to the “maternal gift of time and existence,” or what she calls “the gift of the feminine other,” as well as the generosity and responsibility of welcoming a stranger (2, 49). Her concept of maternity as a relational mode of caring for others is a fascinating one, in my view, because it could apply to anyone, not just biological mothers. Even so, mother/ing is far more complex and individuated than simply functioning as a caregiver. Guenther’s concern with Levinas’ use “of maternity as a metaphor for ethics” is legitimate as it may diminish “women’s very particular, historical, and embodied experience as mothers” (6). She seeks a middle ground between a metaphoric reading and the biological moment of birth. Maternity, in her view, “constitutes an ongoing ethical and political practice that includes a long history and even prehistory in which women have often been compelled to ‘give’ birth against their will, without a choice in the matter” (8). I found the notions “the gift of the feminine” and hospitality to a stranger relevant not only in maternal theory and practice, but also in maternal writing.

Maternal praxes, experiences, and writing, like the mother-child relationship, are interconnected in virtually all of the poets and scholars I have read. For instance, Ariel Gordon divides her book into three sections—before, during, and after pregnancy. Thus, she elicits anticipation in her readers as she draws them from the fecundity of spring to the final poem in the first section: “Pre-conception” (38). Likewise, in the middle section she depicts the metamorphosis of her body from a “filling uterus” (41) to a “radial tire” (49) to a balloon, and “the string that connects” the father (and reader) is the line of “words sighs songs” (59). Gordon’s images of the unborn also reveal her growing awareness and apprehension of the unseen other as it increases in detail and presence. The “secret” (41) becomes a “candlefish” (46), and at nine months, “Baby” (58) is “the storm that blew in humid & stayed” (59). Claire Harris’ amalgam of lyrical, prosaic, episodic, fragmented, and concrete poetry embodies the racial and cultural tensions that agitate expectations of giving birth. In this way, Harris troubles literary conventions and confronts her readers with the lack of hospitality in Canada: “who would bring a child/ skin shimmering black .../who would choose to cradle such tropic /grace on the Bow’s frozen banks” (17 – 18; ellipsis mine). Su Croll’s poems vary in length and form. The stacked lines and enjambment not only amplify the “erratic” (36) experiences of maternity, but also reflect her frustration in representing these experiences to her readers. Maternal images, she says, are “worn/ away to a light/ translucent scrap of nothing,” or lost in “the soft sponge of hopeless/ cliché” (42 – 43). She laments, “everyday I plan to write but can’t/ focus on her face and fall into autobiography,” the days too fluid to be “fixed onto paper” (33). Even so, Croll observes the “swaddled stranger” and “irregularity” in her arms, then follows “the rhythms of her still foreign body” to create a “clothesline narrative” (26, 36, 27, 46). Méira Cook also focuses on her newborn. Her motivation stems from a “need/ to bear witness” to her experiences (11).

Cook speaks to the “[l]ittle bird” and invites her readers to witness mothering through her eyes. “Compose/ yourself baby,” she says, “but you turn/ bird, flap the corners of the room” (14).

Prairie poets, as I discovered, offer fresh images to counter tired clichés and represent the expectations and transformations they experience. They counter “official” versions of childbirth based on “medical discourse” (Cosslett 2) or mechanical metaphors (O’Reilly 219) that reduce women to objects. Also, these poets avoid “natural childbirth” stories (Cosslett 4; O’Reilly 218), and express their particular encounters from a subjective perspective, not unlike the marginalized “old wives’ tale” discourse—“an oral tradition of women telling each other about childbirth” (Cosslett 4). Croll, for instance, retells “unofficial” childbirth stories in her poem “trading birth war stories” (49). These varied approaches in constructing the mother-child relationship reflect the disruptions bearing and birthing a child initiate. The poets in this chapter invite readers to enter their texts and observe maternity from their point of view, to share in the pleasures, paradoxes, particularities, and problems associated with becoming a mother, and to recognize the complexities of mother/ing and alternative ways of receiving the new stranger.

In studying maternity poetry, I was also interested in the work of poets who wrote about miscarriages or stillbirths. Many women, including my mother, have felt invisible and alone in dealing with these events. Without a babe in arms there are no visible signifiers. As mothers/not mothers, poets like Charlene Diehl-Jones and Melanie Dennis Unrau remain on the margins of literature and motherhood studies. They resist persistent silencing taboos and make visible their unseen realities. Unrau rejects the direct correlation between a child and a poem: “my children are not my poetry” and though “i lost my poems/ this one is not a child” (9). Writing poetry, she explains, is feeling “for a pulse” and knowing “it is” (9). Reading poetry helps others feel the pulse and recognize that “the silence/ between my heartbeats” (19) signifies the absent child. As

Diehl-Jones puts it, the poem and the “motherbody” remember “the reach” of the “absent infant” and create “compartments to hold the stuttering moment” (4). Unrau laments “you can’t take the unborn home” (19); yet, as Harde writes, the unborn resides “as a memory, a secret, a life that was invisible and intangible to the world but alive to me” (59). Writing makes “it” known to readers on an emotional level. Women who have faced a miscarriage, stillbirth, or infertility often feel alienated and invisible. At times, Kerry Clare argues, they feel even worse: “[m]others ... continue to be maligned... even as they’re being sanctified in theory by our mother-obsessed society...creating a sense of apartness that leaves so many other women feeling their experiences are outside of the ordinary and, for some, that they are, perhaps impossibly, alone” (Clare 11; ellipses mine). More research into women’s writing and motherhood studies is needed to empower those whose ties with maternity and the maternal remain absent or obscured.

In my research, I found that some poets reconstruct a matrilineage as a strategy to trace bloodlines, memory lines, or cultural storylines and (re)connect with their foremothers, as well as to (re)create lost histories and identities. Harris fabricates a protagonist with the aim of weaving her childhood memories, cultural stories and dreams, alongside her concerns with gendered and racial discrimination in Canada. As daughter and expectant mother, Harris writes her maternal heritage as a “birthgift” for the “Child who/ opens me” (8). Her unborn daughter will inherit this matrilineal “note book” about their shared “journey down dreamlines” (8). Bouvier builds bridges across generations and cultures for the sake of her children and the larger socio-political context. Her poetry works to alter attitudes and reform misrepresentations of Gabriel Dumont, Louis Riel and the North-West Rebellion. Bouvier recasts the Dumont statue “laden in steel” (9) and recontextualizes her cultural history into a literary monument. Moreover, she includes maternal stories from the battle at Batoche, and an unusual reconstruction of her matrilineage:

my mother—her hands tender, to touch
 my grandmother—her eyes, blue, the sky
 my great grandmother—a story, a star gazer
 who could read plants, animals and the sky. (28)

The repetition of the possessive first-person pronoun “my” stresses Bouvier’s identification with her matrilineage. She constructs her family tree in stacked lines reading back in time. Instead of a list of names, she represents their maternal ways of reading the world: touch, sight, and story.

Unlike Bouvier, Halfe introduces her four grandmothers like *dramatis personae*: Adeline the medicine woman, Emma the travelling poet, Bella the one who loved to laugh, and Sarah the midwife (8 – 9). She positions herself as the “keeper of stories,” one who transcribes oral histories and cultural legends. Although Halfe’s maternal histories are largely lost to colonization and violence, she reconstructs them ironically via the voices of her grandmothers who lie “tongueless in the earth” (9). Thus she reclaims her Cree heritage and grants the “tongueless” voices in her poetry. Jennifer Still is also interested in maternal histories. However, she finds “small histories” (22) in the traces they have left behind, such as the genes, artifacts, gestures, and memories that flow from one generation to the next. She selects “loose particles” (22), like berry picking (23), and discovers associations as she places each word and line into sequential, relational, and interconnected “blacklines, pressed/ onto paper” (58). Alternatively, Moure troubles the notion of a motherline. She transcribes a conversation with her mother: “*Everyone comes from somewhere, Mom,/ No ... not everyone. Some people come from nowhere // ... // When there was no one left, it became nowhere. There were no more letters after the w*” (76; ellipsis mine). There is no here, only now. Traveling to Ukraine, Moure reaches back “outside memory” to reconnect with her past. Her mother’s “frail membrane” touches places where memories of her forebears have been erased (4). Moure, Still, Halfe, Bouvier, Harris, and Klassen reclaim their own identities even as they reconstruct their matrilineal and cultural

inheritances. Their poetic motherlines offer innovative approaches to reconceive the past, reshape genealogies, and reimagine the future.

Writing poetry from the margins of mother/ing is a strategy that is both freeing and limiting. Cosslett laments, “There is . . . no adequate language for the physical process of giving birth, as an ‘individual’ splits to produce another individual, and the subsequent formation of two new identities” (8; ellipsis mine). She illuminates two issues that, in my view, are intertwined. First is the problem of language, and I would add genre, to express experiences of “giving birth.” Second is the knotty double image of maternity, the two-in-one-becomes-two, which represents the mother-child intersubjective relationship. It is not surprising to discover, as I have, that contemporary women poets have developed writing strategies that embody or suggest the doublings of maternity. They represent the both/and—favourable, undesirable, ambiguous—experiences of maternal subjectivities; that is, the positive, negative, and ambivalent aspects of mother/ing. For mother-writers, perspectives typically double, as the essay collection *Double Lives* highlights. Doublings also appear in self/other or mother/lover constructions, hyphenated identities, such as bi-cultural or multi-ethnic selves, as well as the interpolation of multiple languages or genres. These doublings, however, differ from the simple dichotomies of good/bad mother myths, theorized by Caplan, Douglas & Michaels and others, or other dualistic modes of thinking examined by feminists such as O’Brien, Ruddick, and O’Reilly. In fashioning various forms of doubling, these poets resist monologic ideologies and subvert either/or dichotomies.

In the fifth chapter, I re-examined poetic devices and multiple languages to elucidate the problems some poets have with the dominance of English, as well as the maternal aesthetics and poetics specific to 10 poets: Harris, Klassen, Diehl-Jones, Cook, Halfe, Croll, Ito, Moure, Unrau, and Langhorst. I found this chapter especially edifying as I examined poetic discourse(s), the

potential of words assembled on the page, and the possibility of discovering new ways of seeing. Language has its limits, but poetry offers the reader extra-linguistic qualities. Poetry makes room for the interplay of language and what lies beyond language; what cannot be articulated resonates in the spaces and caesuras on the page. The doubling relations of daughter-mother, mother-child, mother-poet, and writer-reader produce dialogic modes of writing (and reading), which support Jeremiah's notion that "'maternal' mutuality" engenders a maternal aesthetic ("Troublesome" 13, 14). Indeed, the integration of multiple languages, cultural perspectives, and poetic forms promote dialogue and "interillumination" (Bakhtin) within texts and with readers. Unrau uses internet slang, blog posts, emoticons and abbreviations in her poetry, whereas Harris interweaves various genres. Harris, Cook, and Gordon converse imaginatively with their unborn/newborn and represent subjective points of view. Poets like Halfe, Harris, Ito, Cook, Klassen, Bouvier, and Moure also write from various socio-cultural perspectives. Sarah Klassen, for example, (re)tells her mother's cultural stories and songs (*Borderwatch*), and recalls the German lessons she learned in childhood (*Beatitudes*). She brings to light her mother's survival stories fleeing from war and immigrating to Canada, and constructs a dialogue at the juncture of culture, gender, and generation. In her poem "Mother Tongue" (1999), Sally Ito grieves "the wound of english" (57), injuries the Canadian government inflicted on Japanese people during WWII. She uses the lower case "e" in english to express the damaging consequences of colonization and the excision of her mother-tongue. Bouvier and Halfe subvert English control by inserting Cree into their texts, often using italics to indicate English as the foreign language. Interweaving multiple languages throughout her collection, Moure problematizes language itself and destabilizes the reader. The aesthetics and poetics of these women prove remarkably relational and dialogical, and for many, multi-vocal and intercultural. Each poet moulds language for her purposes and particular

encounters with the maternal subject. Each woman creates her own forms and phrases, shapes words and sounds and spaces from her own sensibilities, and offers room for readers to imaginatively engage with her and make their own associations.

These strategies indicate an awareness of an Other: an infant, a stranger, or a reader. Through various and effective means, poets engage their readers in exploring various interpretive possibilities. Either implicitly or explicitly, these women reinstate specific maternal subjectivities and encounters into poetic discourse(s). Their poetics demonstrate alternative strategies for representing and reconceiving mother/ing. Still, many maternal encounters and perspectives remain unspoken or scarcely acknowledged in literature. Marni Jackson reasonably claims that “the conflict between career and family has...become more pressing for young women,” especially those “who have forged independent lives and careers” (xiii; ellipsis mine). This makes writing the maternal a real challenge. While these conditions seem scarcely mentioned in poetry, the work of being a poet is an important aspect for a number of women writers. Clare finds that motherhood discussions continue to miss “huge parts of the story,” including “miscarriages, ... infertility, ... single-parenthood, adoption, step-parenting, and IVF costs,” as well as “ambivalent” views of mothering (11; ellipsis mine). Yet writing from the margins, according to Podnieks and O’Reilly, “produces some of the most provocative matrifocal narratives ...creating matrilineal thinking and writing that extends across generations” (10 – 11; ellipsis mine). Similarly, Di Brandt contends that some of the most exciting developments in maternal literatures are produced by those who have “escaped colonization, and thus write on the very margins of western discourse” (*Wild* 18), such as “mothering as a lesbian, an immigrant, or a member of Indigenous or religious communities” (Podnieks and O’Reilly 11). Maternal perspectives continue to reside on the “margins of western discourse” and clearly need to be

studied more adequately. As conceptions and representations of mother/ing continue to change, alternative perspectives and unfamiliar experiences will not only contribute to our understanding of maternal subjectivities, but also provoke change in socio-cultural attitudes.

This dissertation affirms that western Canadian maternal poetry is “grounded” in experiences of the maternal subject. These poets are not limited to using traditional images of mother/ing as “providers or protectors” nor do they focus on their capacity to reproduce (children or poetry). Rather, they counter maternal silences, social taboos, and oppressive ideologies. They reform maternal (mis)conceptions, monologic traditions, and masculinist literatures and offer a range of socio-cultural views. They shape their kaleidoscopic encounters into texts that embody the interruptions, contentions, and complexities of mother/ing. Their writing strategies include compelling images and open spaces for others to imagine the maternal in fresh ways. Their rich and varied poetry contends with a history of “censored, distorted, and silenced” voices, and contributes to the ongoing dialogue among maternal literatures, engaging “with one another across regions, generations, and academic disciplines” (O’Reilly “Stories to Live By” 371 – 72). The maternal aesthetic and poetics of contemporary prairie poets also welcome others into their texts to find mutual support and envision a better future. Their acts of translation —physically and literarily—are also experiences of hospitality. Clearly, this study opens avenues for further exploration and dialogue among such fields as maternal feminisms, women’s histories, maternal literatures (regional & national), and genre studies. It is time for maternal poetry to move from the margins of maternal literatures and to figure more dramatically in motherhood studies. If scholarship is going to be informed by how and what women are writing about mother/ing, it needs to engage with poets and their innovative representations of maternal subjectivities. We need to hear contemporary poetic voices to (re)discover the maternal subject and all her variants.

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