

Rishma Dunlop

Archives of Desire

Rewriting Maternal History

in Daphne Marlatt's Ana Historic

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

*

she longed for it.

—Daphne Marlatt, 1988, *Ana Historic*, 127

i learned that history is the real story the city fathers tell of the only
important events in the world. a tale of their exploits hacked out
against a silent backdrop of trees, of wooden masses. so many claims
to fame. so many ordinary men turned into heroes. (where are the city
mothers?)

—Daphne Marlatt, *Ana Historic*, 28

In her opening address at the 1995 Western Literature Association Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, Daphne Marlatt described her interests in how one comes to see place as home, in what constitutes belonging in writing, and in the perception of self in community. Marlatt explores these concerns in her novel *Ana Historic*, which provides us with an example of what Homi Bhaba (1994) calls “a radical revision in the concept of human community.” This revision of community is played out in the setting of the male-dominated world of Hastings Mill, Vancouver circa 1873, and in the world of contemporary Vancouver through the voice of Annie, Marlatt’s narrator. The “radical” elements in this revision are found in Marlatt’s technique of juxtaposing this

history and genealogy against efforts to create new discursive contexts to embody and articulate desires circumscribed by gender and sexuality. In this way, the novel becomes a rewriting of women's history and maternal history.

Ana Historic proposes and exemplifies ways of rewriting or revisioning the possibilities of living in the world, one in which the historical past has considered only male journeys—an imagined fraternity, yet, ironically, one which repeatedly genders nations as female. As Annie, the narrator of *Ana Historic*, states about her historian husband, Richard: “he was dreaming without her in some place she had no access to.”

Marlatt and her narrator Annie explore the disruption and the erasure of maternal history within a paternal genealogy. Together they create new maps, new places in which to live, new ways of writing history. They negotiate access, entry into the world, finding place for the woman writer giving birth to creative work in “a cold country.” In Marlatt's essay “Entering In,” she writes: “Looking back, i think that most of my writing has been a vehicle for entry into what was for me the new place, the new world” (1981: 219).

Similarly, Annie's entry in to a new terrain is through the imagining and recreation of the story of Mrs. Richards, a historical figure with only a few lines recorded in the archival history of Vancouver. Annie's text forms a poetic narrative from bits and pieces of archival material, excerpts from *The Tickler* (the town's newspaper), official and unofficial writing Annie composes about Mrs. Richards; imaginary conversations between Annie and Ina, her mother. Within the patriarchal framework of Annie's/Ina's/Mrs. Richard's life/lives, Annie imagines her historian husband's dismissive response to the disjunctive nature of her written text:

“but what are you doing” I can imagine Richard saying, looking up from the pages with which he must confront his students over their papers: this doesn't go anywhere, you're just circling around the same idea—and all these bits and pieces thrown in—that's not how you use quotations. (Marlatt, 1988: 81)

Women's writing in the revisionist sense of Marlatt's book is embodied in the image of “a woman sitting at her kitchen table writing'... as if her hand holding the pen could embody the very feel of a life (Marlatt, 1988: 45).” L'écriture feminine in *Ana Historic* becomes a flow of red ink, the writing that emerges from the history of the interior life, marked with women's lifeblood and fluids, of menstruation, of labour, of giving birth. As Marlatt writes: “the mark of myself, my inscription in blood. i'm here. scribbling again” (90). This writing of the interior, becomes in Marlatt's text, a response to questions around the silences of women, the absences of women in history. The excision of women from history is aligned metaphorically with images of infertility, barrenness, and with the historical suppression of the childbearing body: “hystery. the excision of women (who do not act but are acted upon).

hysterectomy, the excision of wombs and ovaries by repression” (88). Marlatt’s text attempts to respond to what would happen if women were to write their own stories, in this blood-red ink. *Ana Historic* becomes a response to Ana’s question: “the silence of women/if they could speak/ an unconditioned language/what would they say?” (75).

Ana becomes an acronym for the names of the three women—Annie, narrator, writer, voice; Annie’s mother Ina; and Mrs. Richards (named Ana by Annie). Ana, *ana*—defined in the dictionary as that which can be reversed—a contradiction, a paradox—ana historic. Annie’s research for her husband ends in her own research or a project of her own, a mapping, a creation of female genealogy, recovering and constructing self, rewriting a history in which the symbolic community embodies the cultural inheritances of mother to daughter to mother. Annie reflects:

o the cultural labyrinth of our inheritance, mother to daughter to
mother...
...hours of nothing slipped through their doors. bathrobe
sleeping beauties gone in a trice, a trance, embalmed, waiting for
a kiss
to wake them when their kids, their men would finally come
home.
how peaceful i thought, how i longed for it. a woman’s place. safe.
suspended out of the swift race of the world.

the monstrous lie of it: the lure of absence. self-effacing.
(Marlatt, 1988: 24)

As Foucault states, the genealogist reverses the practice of historians—“their pretension to examine things furthest from themselves.” The genealogist must find sources for historical analysis “in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history” (1977: 139-40).

So the task of the genealogist is to explore silenced or subjugated knowledges. In this way, Annie gives voice to the experience of women, like the city mothers, who are not considered worthy of the books of history. By acknowledging the texts of the body and denying traditional perceptions of women’s felt experience as unworthy or without history, Annie’s project rejects the erasure of women in “history’s voice” (Marlatt, 1988: 48). She must engage in history, but she must read it and write it against the grain:

she is writing her desire to be, in the present tense, retrieved
from silence, each morning she begins with all their names. she
has taught them to say, “present, Mrs. Richards,” and so, each
morning she begins with her name, a name that is not really
hers. each evening she enters her being, nameless, in the book

she is writing against her absence. for nothing that that surrounds
her is absent. far from it. (Marlatt, 1988: 47)

i wasn't dreaming of history, the already
made, but of making fresh tracks my own way...
(Marlatt, 1988: 98)

Marlatt writes against the grain of the conventional novel, “making fresh tracks” her own way, against the conventions of the sentence: all of a sudden, floating on the page, the reader encounters—“a book of interruptions is not a novel” (Marlatt, 1988: 37).

The novel begins with the question “Who’s There?” As the narrative unfolds, Annie answers the question through a recovery of the semiotic, and of embodied experience, pushing against historical “fact,” the “(f)” stop of act,” the frame of perception in history. Annie learns to acknowledge the texts of her body, written and unwritten. Marlatt seems aligned with Julia Kristeva’s (1987) notions of two elements of the signifying process, the semiotic and the symbolic, how we attach meaning to our world. The tensions between the symbolic, as evident in everyday discourse, and the semiotic are found in the underlayers of human experience. This perception seems particularly relevant in Marlatt’s narrative, considering the paradoxical nature of human existence and the social conditioning of the women to suppress expression and articulation of the semiotic. The inherent tensions and the variable relationships between semiotic and symbolic imply the fluidity, changeability, and constant process of human life and the attachment of meaning to that lifeworld.

Annie renames herself Annie Torrent, a reference to the unleashing of female desire: “what does Soul, what does a woman do with her unexpressed preferences, her own desires?” (damned up, a torrent to let loose). This releasing of desire disrupts and pushes against erasure and effacement in a paternal genealogy in which women cannot speak. Annie finally speaks. She finds her answer to “Who’s There?” as she finds a new community in the lesbian romantic resolution of the novel. She finds the “country of her body,” “mouth speaking flesh” that she longs for—to be “at home from the beginning” (Marlatt, 1988: 126-27). Annie names her desire for Zoe in a powerful challenge to traditional texts. Juxtaposed against the constructed history of Ana/Mrs. Richards, the world she enters rejects the male-dominated history of colonization; she rewrites the images of vessels and ships, of women’s bodies emptied and filled with the seeds of patriarchy and the freight of empire. The body is written, spoken, salvaged in linguistic terrain in a map of an alternative historical path. In this genealogy for lost women, for the lost city mothers, Annie departs from “the solid ground of fact”(11):

sized up in a glance, objectified. that’s what history offers,
that’s its allure, its pretence. ‘history says of her...’ but when

you're so framed, caught in the act, the (f) stop of act, fact-
what recourse? step inside the picture and open it up.
(Marlatt, 1988: 56)

As cartographer and cryptographer, Annie discovers a place, a community, in which the frame of vision is opened up to new possibilities of representation for the articulation of women's experiences and desires. This new place in history is found not through appropriation or destruction, not by repeating history, but by creating something new. This new world acknowledges the search for a geography of the soul, a slipping into place that occurs as historical, archival "fact" is opened up to include the "ahistorical" undeniable text of the body, written and unwritten. In the emancipatory process that is writing, the body ceases to be a purely biological entity; it is socially inscribed, historically marked, psychically and interpersonally significant. As Mary Catherine Bateson states:

Of all the texts that must be read to understand the human condition, the body is the most eloquent, for we read in all its stages and transitions a pattern that connects all human communities as well as differences that divide. People in different eras and places have read it differently, or made every effort to deny access to parts of the story, to its alternate readings, or to the wider learning that flows from it so it becomes the justification for mutual suspicion and for alienation from the natural world. (1994: 172)

This suspicion of the female body is reflected in Marlatt's novel as a perception inherited by young girls from their mothers, linked to the education of girls and to ideals about how a feminine body is supposed to be. This suspicion becomes a paradoxical betrayal of biology mirrored in societal norms and perpetuated in linguistic inscriptions that label and constrain the female and maternal body:

The sins of the mothers. hating our bodies as if they had
betrayed us in the very language we learned at school...
... words betraying what the boys
thought of us. wounded or sick—you'll catch girl germs!—
with a wound that bleeds over and over—"on the rag again," "got
the curse," "falling of the roof." catastrophic phrases we used
that equally betrayed us. handed down from friend to friend,
sister to sister, mother to daughter. hand-me-downs, too small
for what I really felt. (Marlatt, 1988: 62)

In Marlatt's novel, women's writing through the body forms new community and new ways of perceiving "mothering." As Zoe tells Annie, "the real

history of women ... is unwritten because it runs through our bodies: we give birth to each other ... it's women imagining all that women could be that brings us into the world" (131). Marlatt's text returns the reader again and again to the question: "where are the city mothers?"

—the truth is, you want to tell your own story.

—and yours. ours. the truth is our stories are hidden from us by fear. your fear i inherited, mother dear.

-the truth is, that's women's lot. it's what you learn to accept, like bleeding and hysterectomies, like intuition and dizzy spells—all the ways we don't fit into a man's world. (Marlatt, 1988: 79)

Marlatt's text reminds me of Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater; The Paradox: Mother or Primary Narcissism." Kristeva's text acknowledges the experience of the mother reflecting the continuing exploration with forms and representations of language in text, exposing new kinds of discourse and possibilities for articulation of the women's experiences. Kristeva writes her text in columns, with personal, associative writing on one side, and more traditional academic discourse on the other, creating an interplay of texts that accepts the paradoxes of the mother's felt experiences:

...formless, unnamable embryo. Epiphanies. Photos of what is not yet visible, and that language necessarily skims over from afar, allusively. Words that are always too distant, too abstract for this underground swarming of seconds, folding in unimaginable spaces. Writing them down is an ordeal of discourse, like love. What is loving for a woman, the same thing as writing. (1987: 234-235)

Similarly, in Marlatt's text, *Ana Historic*:

If only she could write it down, as if the words might make a place she could re-enter when she felt the need, when she forgot—what it was like to feel this complete. (1988: 40)

Ana Historic is a novel that challenges and recreates histories "anew." Marlatt's work acknowledges innovative discursive forms and representations of language in text that opens up new spaces for the embodiment and expression

of women's experiences. In the end, the new places for living in the world are found in the archives of the heart, in the terrain of women's desire, in the new maps created on the skin of the earth. With Marlatt and her narrator, we begin to write/read against historical fact, questioning the "(f)act. the f stop of act. a still photo in the ongoing cinerama." As Annie states about world events: "these are not facts but skeletal bones of a suppressed body the story is (Marlatt, 1988: 29)." Like Annie, the reader is invited to "step inside the picture and open it up." In order to create new geography and a new history for women, a "history. unwritten" (109), Marlatt opens the novel with the epigraph by Susan Griffin that asks us to locate our history in the body, to locate our "assemblage of facts in a tangle of hair."

On the back cover of *Ana Historic*, Canadian writer George Bowering comments on the beauty of Marlatt's text. By challenging our notions of The Novel, tearing The Novel down, Bowering writes: "What she has put up in its place is too beautiful to keep to oneself. Please read it. While you are at it, read it out loud. Make oral history." Indeed, Marlatt's text is a subversive, feminine map of sound, a lyric embodiment of women's histories, and a poetic rewriting and revisioning of the notion of maternity and the suppressed and oppressed stories of maternity. This novel pushes at conventions of genre and text, blurring boundaries to create a fluid text, embodying a form of women's writing that expresses and performs the writing of the body explored in the narrative. Marlatt moves us from the colonial narrative of the mother as "the vessel she is—(full)filling her destiny" (Marlatt, 1988: 118) to a reconceptualization of the maternal body as: "mouth speaking flesh. she touches it to make it tell her present in this other language so difficult to translate. the difference" (126).

So I close with oral history, reading aloud as I write, speaking with the final words of *Ana Historic*, in Marlatt's imaginative, poetic words:

we give place, giving words, giving
birth to each other....it isn't dark
but the luxury of being has woken you,
the reach of your desire, reading us into
the page ahead.

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