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*Narrative Deconstructions of Gender in Works by Audrey Thomas, Daphne Marlatt, and Louise Erdrich*

By analyzing the works of Thomas, Marlatt, and Erdrich through the lenses of subjectivity, gender studies, and narratology, Caroline Rosenthal brings to light new perspectives on their writings. Although all three authors write metafictions that challenge literary realism and dominant views of gender, the forms of their counter-narratives vary. In her novel *Intertidal Life,* Thomas traces the disintegration of an identity through narrative devices that unearth ruptures and contradictions in stories of gender. In contrast, Marlatt, in *Ana Historic,* challenges the regulatory fiction of heterosexuality. She offers her protagonist a way out into a new order that breaks with the law of the father, creating a "monstrous" text that explores the possibilities of a lesbian identity. In her tetralogy of novels made up of *Love Medicine, Tracks, The Beet Queen,* and *The Bingo Palace,* Erdrich resists definite readings of femininity altogether. By drawing on trickster narratives, she creates an open system of gendered identities that is dynamic and unfinalizable, positing the most fragmented worldview as the most enduring. By applying gender and narrative theory to nuanced analysis of the texts, Rosenthal's study elucidates the correlation between gender identity formation and narrative.

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*Chacun a ses raisons: pour celui-ci, l'art est une fuite; pour celui-là, un moyen de conquérir. Mais on peut fuir dans un ermitage, dans la folie, dans la mort; on peut conquérir par les armes. Pourquoi justement* écrire, *faire* par écrit *ses évasions et ses conquêtes?*

Jean-Paul Sartre

*Writing and storytelling allow us to escape our own predicaments in this physical world and free our minds to go beyond it.*

Alootook Ipellie

# Preface and Acknowledgments

AS SUGGESTED BY my choice of epigraphs, I consider writing and storytelling as chances to imagine concepts, oneself, or life differently. This also applies to the writing of this book which has been an eye-opener in more than an academic sense. While it has been challenging at times, I am grateful for having had the opportunity to "conquer" new spaces and "to go beyond my own predicaments."

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All translations of German quotations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

C. R.
October 2002

# Abbreviations

THE FOLLOWING ABBREVIATIONS are used for frequently quoted novels:

| | |
|---|---|
| AH | *Ana Historic* |
| BP | *The Bingo Palace* |
| BQ | *The Beet Queen* |
| IL | *Intertidal Life* |
| LM | *Love Medicine* |
| TR | *Tracks* |

# Contents

# Introduction

> *Beginnings gather those dilatory moments when you hesitate, evaluate. Beginnings are when you need to locate where you are, with people or places. Introductions, mappings, initiations. Novels and life open cautiously.*
>
> Aritha van Herk, *Places Far from Ellesmere*

OVER THE LAST few decades, the concepts of "gender," "identity," and "narrative" have received growing attention in nearly every field of academic study. Gender has become an important analytical tool in many disciplines because of the insight it gives into the cultural orders underlying representations. Theories of subjectivity have illustrated that identity is not something we achieve and possess but something individuals must consistently reestablish in various social contexts and through a number of symbolic practices. One such symbolic practice is narrative. Through a coherent structure, and by drawing on familiar forms, narrative both constitutes and naturalizes concepts at the same time. The realization that gender and identity are not described by, but are constituted in, signifying practices has engendered a greater awareness for how texts *perform* gender, sex, or sexuality, for instance. As feminist critics and writers have shown, narrative not only consolidates gender but can be a strategic tool in dismantling stereotypical representations of gender.

This book explores the correlation between gender identity formation and narrative. While drawing on feminist as well as cultural studies theories, part of my methodology will be the close reading of key passages in the texts of three women writers who in their narrative style deconstruct the fiction of a factual, a given, gender. They disrupt linguistic and narrative structures not to unearth a *true* female identity hidden within patriarchal structures, but to bring to the surface a multiplicity of unrepresented possibilities of women's identities. The authors distort familiar narrative frames to render the ideological conditions for apparently real or natural representations of female identity, and by adopting a distinctly feminist perspective perform other potential gender identities in their texts. The authors chosen for this study show how

narratives, which are informed by ideology, frame women in specific ways. As gender identity resides within and not outside of representational strategies, the authors forge different tales of gender in their own narratives by challenging the means, manner, and matter of traditional representation. They break smooth narrative surfaces down to show that in suppressing contradictions and ruptures, narrative produces and also naturalizes gender identity. In an attempt to counteract such naturalizing gestures, each of the chosen texts transcends gender codes in its linguistic and narrative techniques. The novels render the conditions for and the mechanisms of the fictional process as well as their ideological standpoint.

I will be looking at texts of two Anglo-Canadian writers, Audrey Thomas's *Intertidal Life* and Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic,* as well as at the tetralogy *Love Medicine, Tracks, The Beet Queen,* and *The Bingo Palace* by Native American writer Louise Erdrich. Thomas and Marlatt are both writers of fiction as well as literary critics. Their work is highly acclaimed in postcolonial, Canadian, and feminist studies as their texts mix genres and as their experimental style questions cultural concepts such as gender or identity. I have chosen their texts as an example for how unruly narratives can destabilize notions of gender because they both deal with hybridity and the in-between of cultural categories, which also is a dominant theme in the work of Louise Erdrich.

Whereas Thomas shifts meaning but stays within a traditional frame of representing femininity, as a lesbian writer Marlatt transcends this frame and explores the "monstrous" possibility of a lesbian identity outside the heterosexual norm. Thomas's and Marlatt's narrative technique can be described as shape shifting.[1] In their texts they deconstruct traditional subject positions for women without offering any definite new ones as their texts resist finite readings. In a similar fashion, Erdrich draws on the trickster figure both in the creation of her female characters and as a narrative device where the trickster becomes a wandering sign in the text that defies unifying and naturalizing gestures. All three authors skew the familiar perspective, the frame in which the meaning of *feminine* is usually constituted, to include what is normally out of view and to question the conditions for realistic or normal frames.

Audrey Thomas is currently living on one of the Gulf Islands off the west coast of Canada. She was born in Binghamton, New York State, in 1935 and emigrated to Canada in 1959. Thomas lived in Ghana for a few years, an experience that, along with a miscarriage, has had a strong influence especially on her early writings such as *Mrs. Blood* (1970) or *Blown Figures* (1974). She is best known for her novels and short stories

that all experiment with language and its relationship to the subconscious. *Intertidal Life,* her novel that will be closely examined here, was published in 1984. Another Anglo-Saxon Canadian writer from the west coast, Daphne Marlatt was born in 1942 in Melbourne and lived in Malaysia and England before coming to Canada in 1951. Because her parents both came from British colonial families, during their life in India and Malaysia they fiercely held on to English tradition and habits. Marlatt grew up with an ambivalent sense of belonging, a fact that early on shaped her poetic sensibility. In an interview Marlatt claims that early on in her life writing becomes a means for bridging conflicting cultural experiences. In her first book *Frames of a Story* (1968), Marlatt mixes prose and poetry, and this shifting of genres will become a characteristic of all of her works. A recurring theme in her work is the mixing of historical accounts and fiction. She first explores this in her highly acclaimed volume on the Japanese fishing village *Steveston* (1974). Marlatt has published various volumes of poetry as well as novels but is also well known as a feminist critic, theorist, and editor, especially of the feminist theory journal *Tessera,* which publishes the experimental and theoretical texts of Quebec and English Canadian feminist writers and critics. In her critical, as well as fictional, writings Marlatt explores the connection between text, subject formation, and ideology. Like Thomas, her style is highly experimental and metafictional. A close reading of her novel *Ana Historic,* published in 1988, reveals that by challenging the heterosexual imperative of our culture, Marlatt questions certain codes of femininity. Louise Erdrich was born in Wahpeton, North Dakota, in 1954 and is of half German-American and of half Chippewa-American descent. Her work deals with the hybridity of cultural identities and rejects clear cut categorization. In contrast to many other Native American writers, Louise Erdrich's work is read and received as Native and as mainstream American literature. Her novel *Love Medicine* (1984) won the National Book Critics Circle Award, and her books have made it to the top of bestseller lists in various countries. Erdrich breaks with the prevalent pattern of the Bildungsroman in Native fiction and instead tells stories from a multiplicity of different perspectives to emphasize cultural heterogeneity rather than unity. As a mother of six children, Erdrich — like Thomas and Marlatt — repeatedly deals with themes of pregnancy, motherhood, and the difficulty of finding artistic expression as a mother and woman.

Chapter 1 delineates the theoretical framework for the ensuing three text analyses. The text analyses in chapters 2, 3, and 4 explore the individual author's approach to destabilizing gender, sex, and sexuality

through unruly narratives. The concluding chapter discusses narrative as a strategy for rewriting gender. Whereas most critical studies focus exclusively on one — ethnic, sexual, or national — group, I have chosen diverse contemporary women writers who in various ways disrupt familiar tales of gender in their narratives. Although approaches that focus exclusively on Native, Canadian, or Lesbian writers are vital to make them visible as a group with distinct literary characteristics, this often enforces rather than dissolves their marginalized position. Marlatt's and Thomas's works have rarely been studied outside a Canadian context. Erdrich's work has been looked at either in the context of ethnic women writers or Native American literature. This book wants to shift the critical framing of Thomas's, Marlatt's, and Erdrich's texts to produce other readings of the novels and to show that categories such as gender or identity are bound to specific cultural discourses. Whereas Erdrich's text reflects an understanding of a personal identity which is closely bound to the community, the Canadian texts put an emphasis on individualism. On the one hand, I draw on the productive differences of these authors and, on the other hand, I emphasize the themes and techniques they share in deconstructing stereotypical representations of female identity. Their differences are not leveled, on the contrary, I explore the plurality and multiplicity of the *narrations of self* offered by the texts, as well as their different strategies in disrupting gender patterns.

In *Intertidal Life,* Thomas uses etymologies to unearth ruptures within seemingly smooth concepts. She also exposes the sexist content in everyday texts, news, children's songs, and fairy tales to raise awareness of how women are taught to read themselves as women. Her text exhibits a lust to trace ironies and to destroy romantic notions. Thomas deconstructs concepts, but she offers no alternatives. Her protagonist, who has been left by her husband after fourteen years of marriage, is caught in opposing discourses and cannot let go of positions such as *wife* and *mother* that she desperately wants to abandon. The text follows these contradictory movements. Whereas Thomas shows that "over" is already contained in "lover" and "other" in "mother," and thus points to their inherent contradictions, she does not leave the frame of reference in which such concepts are situated. Her narrative offers no soothing coherence or new perspectives to the readers who have to bear the chaos and, as the title indicates, the intertidal waves of the text.

Like Thomas, Marlatt disrupts linguistic and narrative structures to distort familiar images and structures. In her playful poetic style, she emphasizes the materiality of language and uses syntax as a rhythm modeled on the female body in order to subvert the symbolic order. Marlatt

also breaks surfaces to get at "what lies beneath words": ideology. She transcends concepts by calling into question the heterosexual matrix that limits the choices of gender positions. In that respect, although her methods are similar to those of Thomas, Marlatt does not only point to the ruptures in concepts but moves beyond them. In *Ana Historic,* the narrator, a contemporary historian, imagines the possibility of a lesbian relationship in nineteenth-century Victorian British Columbia. By exploring this monstrous — because *ab-normal* — possibility, the narrator comes to realize how she herself has been *made into* a heterosexual woman. The protagonist gradually comes to imagine different roles for women in a space different from the patriarchal order. The textual proceedings reflect the plot because the narrative itself is "monstrous" in its disobedience to linguistic and narrative convention.

In her tetralogy, Erdrich resists definite representations of women's identities altogether. She transcends *realistic* frames by creating female trickster figures who step out of restrictive Western gender frames. Erdrich not only evokes the shape-changing trickster figure of Indian mythologies in her characters but the stories themselves are driven by what Gerald Vizenor has termed "trickster discourse." Just like the cunning trickster who is hero and loser, saint and devil, jester and villain, Erdrich's narratives defy fixture in content and form by playing with oppositions. Trickster-like qualities allow characters to escape *the usual story,* but the trickster is also used as a textual device, a "comic trope" (Vizenor 1989) that breaks finite limited patterns. Erdrich's intricate identity webs, woven by the countless different stories individuals tell about each other in the tetralogy, demonstrate that the trickster is a sign for both individual and collective identity.

In my analyses, I show different ways in which the texts deconstruct gender identities. In Thomas's text, I trace the shredding of an identity, in Marlatt's novel the process of externalizing internalized gender patterns and their subsequent transformation. Erdrich's texts serve as an example of how the comic trope of the trickster can defy definite gender classification. Because the texts reflect their underlying agenda in their style, part of my method is to follow the metaphors and playful narrative of the novels. Through a close reading of the novels, I explore how the deconstruction of narrative patterns leads to a reconfiguration of gender. While the narrative deconstruction of gender, sex, and sexuality is an aim the authors share, their techniques and strategies differ; hence different theoretical frames are needed for the understanding of each text. Whereas I am drawing on theories of mapping, intertextuality, and trauma in my analysis of how Thomas brings repressed images and

meanings to the surface in *Intertidal Life*, I look closely at *écriture au féminin* and *fiction theory* in the analysis of how Marlatt resignifies the monstrous as a viable other identity. Erdrich's writings are examined with respect to theories of cultural anthropology, of semiology, and with reference to deconstructive feminism.

## Notes

[1] See Linda Hutcheon's essay: "*Shape Shifters:* Canadian Women Novelists and the Challenge of Tradition," in Neuman/Kamboureli 1986, 219–27.

# 1: Framing Theories

## Identity

> *Identity as a concept is fully as elusive as is everyone's sense of his own personal identity.*
>
> Anselm L. Strauss,
> *Mirrors and Masks: The Search for Identity*

IDENTITY IS AN all-pervasive and fundamental aspect of human life, and yet identity as a concept is one of the most hotly debated — contested and defended — concepts of our time. The term identity has its roots in developmental psychology and has only been the subject of critical debates since modernism. The notion of identity as a psycho-social entity only dates back about 100 years to the psychology of William James who differentiated an outer perspective, the "social self" (me) as the self recognized by others, from an inner perspective, the "continuous, inner self" (I) that denoted the self as experienced by the individual. The term identity gains significance in Erikson's psychoanalytical I-psychology. Erikson defines "psychological identity" as being at once objective and subjective, individual, and social. For Erikson, psychological identity is formed through crises, primarily during adolescence. A person has achieved an identity when s/he has successfully synthesized various identifications during adolescence with the hierarchical roles society offers to the individual. Although Erikson concedes that adults also suffer from crises after losses, or other major changes in their lives, these are minor compared to the crises during adolescence because the individual has already achieved a fair degree of continuity and coherence.[1]

Discussions since have circled around the question whether identity, or more precisely the agency of the subject, is dependent on the parameters of continuity and coherence. Continuity refers to the temporal aspect; we stay the same person over time, while coherence refers to a sameness of character and behavior. Whereas in a legal definition of identity those parameters are imperative, in discussions on identity as a psycho-social phenomenon, they are called into question. We are neither born with an identity nor do we ever finally achieve it. Recent theories

claim that identity is something we *consistently* have to work at, and therefore call into question notions of continuity and coherence. Over the last few decades, the conceptualization of identity has changed from an ontological to a constructed category that is always temporary and fairly fragile. The de-essentialization of identity has given rise to questions of moral agency and responsibility. Since the subject is temporary and since identity is *alterity* rather than *sameness,* some critics argue that measures must be found to hold a subject responsible for its deeds and to make political action possible. Others dismiss the autonomy and stability of the subject as an illusion. In order to retain some kind of stability, critics arguing within the framework of late modernism still perceive the subject as being defined by continuity and coherence. Continuity is no longer seen as given, however, but as self-reflexively achieved by the subject, which interprets itself in terms of her/his memory or biography.[2] Critics arguing within a postmodern frame dismiss the modernist alignment of identity with continuity and coherence. They claim that modernism constructed the individual as an autonomous person, capable of self-reliant agency with its preconditions of continuity and coherence. This autonomy of the individual implies that external, social forces cannot completely determine human beings. Postmodern theories brand this discourse of liberal humanism an illusion and state that the autonomous position of the individual is a *discursive construction* rather than a mirror of reality. Instead of focusing on the autonomy of the subject, more recent discussions of identity put an emphasis on the analysis of systems of power.[3]

Marginalized groups have analyzed systems of power and discourses that propose universal conceptualizations of the subject, which are, however, modeled on white, male, or heterosexual parameters. Discourses on difference like feminism(s), cultural studies, or postcolonialism have challenged supposedly universal notions of identity by showing that since modernism the constitution of subjects has relied on excluding the other. Not only have these new cultural criticisms called for making visible formerly excluded identities, but for rendering the very processes and discourses that constitute subjects in systems of power and signification.[4] However, the notion that (gender) identity is constructed, discursively and socially, does not deny the real effect it has on the lives of human beings. Although notions of homo- and heterosexuality, or of black and white, are constructed in discourses on sexual and ethnic difference, these categories have far-reaching consequences for an individual's actual position in society. Marginalized groups make use, but are also critical, of poststructuralist theories that propagate the end of the