

Room of One's Own

Volume 8, Number 4

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Editorial Statement

AS THE CONVERSATION which introduces this special issue reveals, *TESSERA* was begun in order to bring the theoretical and experimental writing of Québécois feminists to the attention of English-Canadian writers, to acquaint Quebec writers with English-Canadian feminist writing, and to encourage English-Canadian feminist literary criticism, which we feel has been largely conventional and uninspired, to become more innovative in its theory and practice. Above all, we wish to offer a forum for dialogue between French and English women writers and among women across Canada interested in feminist literary criticism.

TESSERA will appear once a year as a special issue of an already established magazine; our next issue will appear in Quebec or Ontario. We plan to publish a wide range of genres: essays, letters, interviews or discussions, reflections, écritures, some fiction and poetry—writing, in short, that focuses on writing by women, informed by a theoretical approach to language, form, meaning as it is being developed by women writers breaking with the mainstream. We are not interested in thematic criticism or essays that focus on images of women.

We invite our readers to respond to the texts in this issue by submitting letters, papers, notes, etc. for inclusion in number two. Controversy and debate are encouraged. Not all positions taken by the authors in this issue are necessarily endorsed by every member of the collective: we feel debate is more important than a party line. Submissions will be acknowledged as soon as possible; they are then read and discussed long-distance by all members of the collective

so notification of acceptance or rejection may take several months. Please submit to either Kathy Mezei, English Department, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C. V5A 1S6 or Barbara Godard, English Department, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Downsview, Ontario M3J 1P3.

After compiling this issue, our editorial collective feels there is still much room for growth. We would like to see more texts move further along the route to a criticism “where theory and practice are united in the writing and the reading” (“Why This Book,” *New French Feminisms*).

—Barbara Godard, Daphne Marlatt, Kathy Mezei, Gail Scott.

TESSERA would like to thank Room of One's Own for this special issue, and the English Department at Simon Fraser University for funding and secretarial assistance.

SP/ELLE: Spelling Out the Reasons

TESSERA editorial discussion with Barbara Godard, Daphne Marlatt, Kathy Mezei, and Gail Scott, in Vancouver, July 4, 1983. Transcribed and edited by Daphne Marlatt.

KM: It began with Daphne and I going home in Ann Mandel's car from the Dialogue Conference that Barbara had organized (October 1981, York University). And we were talking about the fact that there isn't much interaction between Quebec writing and English-Canadian writing, that Quebec feminist writing was so much more interesting than what was going on in English-Canadian feminist writing, and it would be nice for it to have some influence on English-Canadian writing.

DM: We said why isn't there a magazine that makes this possible? And there should be one. I don't know if we actually said let's start one, at that point, but the idea. . .

BG: And then you, Kathy, were spending that whole winter in Montreal, so you and Gail were talking in Montreal and Daphne was in and out of Toronto that winter and we were writing back and forth and things evolved from there. We didn't have enough money and we didn't want to spend all our time running around for financing which was exceedingly difficult to mobilize. The *Fireweed* people had an enormous collective out there who spent all their time raising funds for them. We didn't want to get involved in that sort of structure to start off with, because we already had the cross-continental complications, so we thought of trying to find someplace we could work from.

DM: Yes, an already established magazine that would allow us to do a special issue.

KM: And *Room of One's Own* had been wanting to do a feminist literary criticism issue for some time so they were quite happy to do that.

BG: And next issue we'll find another magazine.

GS: The name. . .

BG: We were already into naming on one of Daphne's trips to Toronto. We didn't have time to meet so we talked on the telephone. It was a heavy rainy day and I was sitting at the typewriter and Daphne was in a hotel, someplace in transit, so that we had very much a feeling of floating, we had this little wire between us, the voices, and nothing else and so it was the whole sound effect that we were playing with.

DM: Barbara was throwing out words right and left and we were making acronyms, bilingual puns and everything else.

BG: I can't remember all of the different ones that we came up with but we did have one that would function bilingually and it was SP/ELLE.

GS: Which I liked.

DM: The speaking elle.

BG: Which gave us all sorts of different meanings because we had the feminine ending, the "e" ending which was articulated and announced.

GS: I loved that.

BG: The witch was there. . .

DM: And language and spelling. . .

GS: Is it too late? (laughter)

BG: But this can be our subtitle for what we're doing, casting "spells" of various sorts.

DM: So how did we come upon TESSERA?

KM: I think you thought of it, but how did you think of it?

DM: Oh, there was the conversation with you, Barbara, in the car—you were driving me somewhere, I did see you on one of those trips, and you were talking about the patchwork quilt, what a profound image that had become for you for women's work, putting all the little pieces together. . .

BG: The whole notion of fragmentation, yes.

DM: And then we thought of the mosaic, Kathy, and of tessera as a piece of the mosaic.

KM: It has several different meanings. . .

GS: There's a reference to spinning, isn't there? as in Mary Daly?

KM: Tessera, textera.

BG: If you change the double "s" to an "x", you have the text and the spinning thing, the weaving thing, together. But the tessera was the putting together of the various fragments. It also meant the password, didn't it?

DM: That opened up a whole secret . . .

BG: Meaning. It was also meaning and that is one of the other things we're interested in getting at, the fact that there was a lot that had been buried and was heavily encoded and had to be communicated. Of course it also has had all sorts of resonances in recent theory too because Lacan used it in talking about the relationship between speech and language in psychoanalysis and that was the other thing, that it had resonances in this way through the subconscious.

DM: I remember you xeroxed that up and mailed it off to all of us.

BG: Kathy did. Here's the page where he talks about it: ". . . however empty this discourse may appear, it is only so if taken at its face value: that which justifies the remark of Mallarmé's, in which he compares the common use of Language to the exchange of a coin

whose obverse and reverse no longer bear any but worn effigies, and which people pass from hand to hand 'in silence.' This metaphor is sufficient to remind us that the Word, even when almost completely worn out, retains its value as a *tessera*. Even if it communicates nothing, the discourse represents the existence of communication; even if it denies the obvious it affirms that the Word constitutes the Truth; even if it is destined to deceive, here the discourse circulates on faith in testimony. Moreover, it is the analyst who knows better than anyone else that the question is to understand which 'part' of this speech carries the significative term, and this is exactly how he proceeds in the ideal case. . . " [Jacques Lacan, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, p.13] The question of lapsus is what he's talking about too, which is of course one of the ways in which women's relationship to language has been characterized. The lapsus, the silence. . .

DM: The fragment that leads into silence.

GS: The fragment that leads into and *out of* silence!

BG: And it was from this paradox that our emphasis on the doubleness of language arose.

GS: I'd like to say something here about one of the reasons why the idea of the magazine excited me. I went to the Learned Society Meetings with France [Théoret] in Halifax in 1981, where France and I had a dialogue about how we'd influenced each other both as writers and in our feminist politics as well, because we were coming from different cultures. One of the things that struck me about it was that there were a handful of people in the room, people like Barbara, and I didn't know you then, Kathy. . .

KM: I was there, yes.

GS: Anyway, a handful of people who understood what we were talking about, but there was also a lot of hostility and resistance, I mean really there was hostility about this whatever it was that was coming from Quebec, the language-centered writing, the. . .

BG: Theory. It was the old Anglo-Saxon empirical resistance to theory and it's so entrenched in the Canadian literature field here.

GS: My frustration at the Learned's and again at the Dialogue Conference at York was that just at the end of the conference we suddenly were in a situation where women from different cultures began talking to each other but each time it took the whole conference to build up to it and it was only as we were going home that there was a little break-through that seemed to take place. So when Kathy talked to me about TESSERA, although it wasn't TESSERA then, I thought it was really important. And we haven't completely succeeded because we haven't got a francophone on the editorial board at this point. And we're not translating towards the French in this issue. Once more—although it wasn't our intention—the burden is on francophone women to make the language concession, i.e. to read us in English. I hope we can change that.

KM: We're not translating towards the French because I think we felt the need was to tell English-Canadians what was going on in Quebec. But the thing that's come out of the Women and Words Conference (Vancouver, June-July 1983), and it's the first time I see it happening, is that there's some interest on the francophone side as to what's happening with English-Canadian writers, and it's been a long time coming.

GS: And an excitement too, especially about what's happening on the West Coast. I think it's a *discovery*, really, on the part of some francophone writers.

DM: What's exciting about that is that those of us who are doing language-centered writing in English-Canada, and we haven't had much support and understanding from the feminist movement here, suddenly find among Quebec writers not only an understanding but a tradition and that's really thrilling. It's part of that necessary dialogue that we need to grow on both sides.

BG: So in other words we were thinking that all these oral forms of conferences are wonderful to get ideas going and start breaking down barriers and get conversations growing, but then everybody separates to their own isolated places and how do you keep in contact? how do you do it? You need some form of written word to cross the distances and to solidify some of the things that have been happening, to allow people to go on building from there.

GS: That's the importance of TESSERA and also of having an ongoing structure for Women and Words. So that the development continues.

KM: But we also wanted to have critical writing that talked intelligently about texts and that was not thematic or sociological or very general; we felt there was a need for that and we wanted to try and promote it by the kind of writing we asked for.

DM: And believed that it existed but it seems to be so difficult to find on the English side.

BG: But it's not just that. The thing is there has been censorship in that area. Lorraine Weir is a good example in the number of times she has tried to give papers on these language-centered issues, particularly at ACUTE [Association of Canadian University Teachers of English] meetings, and never had her proposals accepted. She was finally able to give one this year, but there has not been any means for the people who were doing this work to get it out. Louise Forsyth's work is all in oral form and so is my work, which is why people out there have no way of knowing what is going on and why one sensed some of the surprises in the Women and Words Conference, because this material has been circulating in oral form among people who were going to conferences and people who were exchanging letters, but there's nothing in a more permanent form.

KM: The only form of feminist criticism in English Canada so far has been images of women, you know, what kind of heroine in Margaret Laurence's novel. . .

GS: "Why is blood important?" and the images of mirrors. . .

BG: Yes, that *is* the fact. And it's also the fact that it's been very much the American tradition. When we ran that Dialogue Conference there had been nothing done in English that moved in these new directions, more formal-oriented and text-oriented and language-oriented work. We ran the conference in October (1981) and people had been working on those papers a year and a half in advance. And then there was that special issue of *Critical Inquiry* that came out, winter of 1981, where suddenly there were some of the American people who were into theory as opposed to images of women. What

happened was that the break-through came here, people were doing it here, and it happened before there were any visible signs of it coming from the United States or from England.

DM: There's also the problem I was very aware of when I was listening to native women and women of colour talking at *Women and Words*, that for them the first step is still content, that there is still a taboo operating against the content that is made up of their actual daily experience.

GS: And they have to name it.

KM: That's true and it was true for us in the 60s and maybe 70s but we've been talking about it for so long that we really have to get at the theoretical now.

GS: I think that one of the most important things at the *Women and Words* conference was said by Lorraine Weir on one of the panels when somebody again stood up and said, but if we get all concerned with theory and language-centered writing we're not going to be able to talk to all women. Lorraine said that, on the contrary, one of the really big problems with criticism in Canada is that there is no interpretive new view to interpret the work of women who are doing really important research in language that will eventually be useful to all women and that feminist criticism is not very highly developed in English Canada.

KM: Right, she made the point that they hadn't gone beyond talking about realism, that when they look at a woman writer they look at her in terms of writing in the tradition of realism. A lot of women writers do not write in traditions of realism and if they do that's not necessarily what we want to talk about.

GS: Yes, that we have to go further and look at the work of women who are doing other things which we can't do when we don't have any good feminist criticism.

KM: Right, because reviewers and critics don't want to talk about them.

GS: And look at all the feminist publications in Canada, what they choose to review, most of them anyway, in terms of writing.

DM: In English Canada the realization still has not been made that looking at language, looking at *how* you name what you name, is the first revolutionary or subversive act.

GS: Exactly.

BG: We were talking about stages of development and the fact that the native women and the black women are going through this process of naming themselves and self-discovery. They're not ready to face the question of language, but this hasn't been true in Quebec nor has the French feminist criticism gone that way. There are very different intellectual structures operating among the groups and there's this very strong empirical bias coming from Anglo-American philosophy. There's a tradition of the poetry of fact, the poetry of statement, a desire to describe what one is experiencing. And there is language work being done, but the work that's coming out of the American tradition is descriptive linguistics, it's sociolinguistics, it's looking at the conversational structure and describing the power structures that are operative, the means of silencing women by gestures, body-language, the ways of cutting off and redirecting conversations. This is very important in dealing with our everyday lives in a social context but language is not being looked at politically. The whole tradition of continental philosophy has been language-oriented and the developments there in terms of semiotics and contemporary linguistics have been looking at the production of meaning through language. In Quebec the impact of the 60s and the work with the nationalist movement there made people very sensitive to language as a central vehicle for expressing one's experience and a vehicle for conveying new ideas and expressing these through a new vision of society. But the real crisis came about—and it's well-documented in Nicole Brossard's novel *Sold-out*—with the October crisis, when the women went to prison there and they realized that in the various revolutionary cells all along they had been serving coffee and buns as they had been doing everywhere else. But also they became very much aware of the way in which the political slogans were restrictive and manipulative and reduced the possibilities of one's experience. They became aware of power over people through language and they made a very careful analysis which related the situation of women to the situation of the colonized.

KM: That has not happened in English Canada. The most prominent writers in some ways are women, but the women writers have not incorporated theory into their fictional, creative writing like the Quebec women writers have and it's had no effect at all upon the genres of writing and criticism the way it has in Quebec.

DM: Well let's get back to *TESSERA* because we're trying to present a forum for the discussion of the theory, of the criticism, of the poetics or whatever the equivalent is in prose, of the kind of writing being done by women.

KM: One thing in terms of *TESSERA*'s function of speaking intelligently about women's writing is Barbara's point about us as academics or as writers having difficulty finding a voice. In fact, it's probably more of a problem for academics, women writing about women's texts, to find the appropriate voice, to get away from the patriarchal voice, to write in such a way that you illuminate a text rather than oppress it.

DM: Louise Forsyth made that passionate declaration at *Women and Words* of what the critic's role is. She kept returning to the affirmative, that there is a need to affirm a text and to write with the same heat and energy as the original text. That is, the criticism itself becomes a writing in its own right.

BG: And there is the whole question of different modes of criticism. I showed Kathy the drawing that was developed in terms of translation and the relationship of a translated text to the original text from which it comes. The same is actually true of the critical text in its relationship to the original text. There are all sorts of different relationships and different degrees of distance that one can take. One can imitate the text, one can write a text that's inspired by the original text, one can use the language of the text and work out of that same language configuration and write another text. The general mode that's been used in literary criticism is that of quotation which sets up a great distance between the two texts and clearly demarcates the divisions between them.

KM: It depends how quotation is used, though; it doesn't have to be a separation.

BG: But it sets one up because it puts quotation marks around what comes from the original text and the way it's then incorporated into a new text. And most of the academic literary criticism constructs another thing that surrounds and frames this text. The frame usually is very much broader than the elements of the original text which are involved. And the sort of criticism that Louise is arguing for very strongly is a criticism that works within the language of the original text and where the mode is more one of allusion and potentially of plagiarism in the sense that it actually picks up some of the phrasing and the connotations of the text and works them out. It's a strong form of criticism that moves more in the mode of writing than in the form of setting up an alternate discourse.

DM: Actually it's a building—every text that is criticized is seen as something to build from, it's a carrying-forward of the movement of ideas.

BG: A carrying-forward but moving within the direction of the original text, bringing it forward rather than setting up an alternate form, which is what you're doing with quotation. The frame around it can move very strongly *against* your quotations within it.

DM: Well it seems like traditional criticism is a translation *into* the academic patriarchal language, especially when it's a criticism of women's texts that aren't written in that language. And what you're suggesting and what Louise is suggesting is not *that* translation but an origination, a generation of further texts.

BG: That's of course one of the strong metaphors that is used, the whole notion of the matrix out of which the new text is generated, a kernel of verbal meaning which generates new sounds, which generates new ideas. Your connotations rise out of it, and it's the textual matrix which leads to new textual generations. And that all texts in a way are building on texts which already exist, continually going forward.

KM: Several of the texts we have in this issue don't do that. I feel there should be more real discussion of texts and language and syntax, not just generalizations and avoidance and so on.

BG: Kathy and I had an exchange of letters on this issue, because we had talked about it, and what I tried to write back to her was I thought we should be working on two fronts at once, that the exploration of texts, working within the language of them, should be informed by a theoretical perspective, that one couldn't divorce the two. This problem has happened so often, that the new critical texts just isolate the text and look at it in a vacuum, and what we are trying to do is find a new way of looking at things where one has a sense of respect for the text and a working within it, that it is still the centre-point from which one is working, but these broader issues and the whole question of what it means to be a woman and to speak as a woman and to write as a woman will be central to our thinking as we are looking at the text. And it seems to me that this is the sort of thing that the voice we're looking for should be articulating. Not just abstract theory but a theory that's related very much to texts.

DM: Well I think we're all in agreement about that, about avoiding abstract theory. You're saying let's not forget the theory, let's bring the theory along with us as we look at these individual texts.

BG: No, I wasn't.

KM: Okay, there's two ways of doing that. Either the theory is revealed in how you talk, which is what France Théoret and Nicole Brossard do, or, because that's easier for me I suppose, the theory talks precisely about texts, it doesn't work around them either way.

BG: But it's that dualist split that I'm worrying about! I think it's difficult to spell out because the tendency has been for theory to be theoretical and to work in a void and textual criticism to apply itself to specific texts and not to keep general perspectives in mind.

DM: What interests me about the French writing we have in this issue is that almost invariably it takes off on the language, it starts generating thought through new uses of language, and it doesn't just fall back into the ordinary transparent language to talk *about* that, it actually *does* it.

GS: Oh, this is interesting because this is one of the things I've run up against, I think, trying to write in English and being in that Que-

bec context. In English we've got to find our own way and I don't think it's the same way. I mean what Kathy says about how it's easier for her to do it a different way from Brossard and Théoret has to do with the fact that the abstract quality of French in the beginning makes it a lot easier to take off on language and include the theory, whereas somehow in English you have to make almost a theoretical leap and when you do, you leave the concrete behind. I don't know if you've experienced this. . .

DM: I don't agree you can't do it in English.

GS: No, I'm not saying you can't do it in English, but the process is much more difficult because it's not coded in the language in the same way. I think you did it in your text in this issue, but I think it's a break-through when it's done because it's *not* coded in the language.

KM: Because that writing takes you into the process of what you're talking about doing.

DM: That's why Mary Daly's book is such an important text for anyone wanting to work with the English language.

BG: It really is. The beginning of *Gyn/Ecology* really does this.

GS: But I think that anglophones writing for TESSERA, writing and developing feminist theory, will have to be very conscious that we have to find our own way. I don't think we should leave the impression that what we want to do is transpose what's happening in French into English, because it *is* a whole different language and process.

KM: You know, what we should perhaps think of as well is helping. Some texts are difficult for people to read because they don't understand where those texts are coming from and instead of making it more difficult for the reader to read it, we should be in some way helping as well, illuminating or whatever.

BG: This is really difficult and this is where I find my problem, when I say I haven't got a voice. I'm very much aware of contradictions, of where the audience is out there and where their knowledge is and the complexities of the texts that are coming forward. Just

how does one manage to work between them and define the words that are carrying the weight of the original but will have resonance out there?

DM: As soon as you start to explain you risk dilution, and from my own experience as a young reader when I was just beginning to read new American poetry, I only began to understand what people were doing after I'd been reading it for a while. It was like a foreign language. And I think that is everybody's experience when they start reading something new. I don't think you can help them because if you dilute that experience it's not the same, they're still not getting it, they're only getting a summarized, a synopsized, version of it.

KM: You probably can help them depending on how your criticism works. I mean your criticism could take you either further away from it or closer to it.

DM: But I still think it has to be done in the language of the text, or in the use of language that the text embraces.

KM: But it should be a process of helping the reader get into that text.

GS: That's a very difficult one. If we're consistent in what we say about creating our own language of criticism and writing, it's of necessity going to be difficult to read in the beginning because it's a new language and people have to learn a new language. So as soon as we start helping, does that mean we go back again into a more discursive writing, the kind of thing we're trying to get away from?

KM: (laughing) I don't know, I haven't written it yet. But I don't think Daphne's "Musing with Mothertongue" would be inaccessible to someone who is just beginning that kind of experience.

BG: Not listening to it orally, but reading it—it's dense, there are all sorts of allusions, quotations, echoes that are working through it. And the whole thing opens out when you recognize where those echoes are coming from. That's why it's so impossible, so difficult, to translate, because the whole intellectual tradition which some of these reflections in French are coming from isn't available in English, people can't have read it, so that the work when it comes out doesn't

have that echo effect.

KM: But even just saying that echoing, repetition, quotation, plagiarism, intertextuality are “okay” will help a reader.

GS: The other thing we have to remember is that what we’re trying to do represents *our* realities as women. It’s important what I said about Daphne’s text being, for the uninitiated, probably easier to listen to than it is to read: it’s true for a lot of women’s texts.

DM: I heard the same response to your stories when you read at Octopus Books, you know.

GS: I know. When they hear them read, suddenly they’re not difficult.

KM: Why is that?

GS: People aren’t used to *hearing* a voice on the page.

DM: And because it is a more oral form. . .

GS: And because we’re trained to read differently. . .

DM: There’s so much rhythmic and melodic play happening that anyone who is not used to hearing language, and most readers aren’t, won’t pick it up.

KM: Well maybe we should tell our readers to read these texts aloud.

BG: Doesn’t everybody do that automatically?

GS: That’s why women are so alienated when they are confronted with the written word, I think, because in fact most of women’s discourse is conversation, it’s oral, you know, it happens on the back porch.

KM: Well what’s wrong with saying that?

GS: Yes, we have to say that.

KM: I mean why make it more difficult?

BG: I think there’s something we’re trying to get at here, and that is there’s a difference between the two things happening, that in the

anglophone tradition what one is doing is transcribing reality, translating a reality which is total and exists out there and one can mirror it in language. That whole self-reflexive tradition you're talking about hasn't touched the general critical, the general reading, public in the anglophone reality. It's been a much longer tradition in the French literary world and there people are doing something quite different, they are inscribing reality in words, the reality of their sensations, their experience. Literature does not come from life, literature comes from other texts, it comes from language and the body writes things down. The literary tradition is transmitted through the individual physical body writing.

