

**“A Bedtime Story for you, Ina”:
Resisting Amnesia of the Maternal in Daphne Marlatt’s
*Ana Historic***

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**“Une histoire pour toi Ina”: la lutte contre l’oubli de la mère dans
Ana Historic de Daphne Marlatt**

Projet: stratégie féministe de résistance, de révision. C’est ce double mouvement dont Ana Historic suit la trace, et dans lequel Annie rejette les scénarios qu’on lui a donnés – à propos de femmes emprisonnées dans la tyrannie du regard – au profit de ses propres projections: mères, filles, amantes. Annie tourne son regard vers la relation difficile entre l’Histoire du Père et l’hystérie de la mère, afin de découvrir ce qui se trouve à l’extérieur de l’image. C’est en retraçant la mère, par le souvenir et la recomposition que la narratrice produit un futur. Ces révisions résistent à l’amnésie maternelle et à l’effacement de la mère dans la mémoire collective et forcent ainsi la lectrice à imaginer un autre héritage.

Daphne Marlatt’s *Ana Historic* participates in the feminist project of writing women’s lives into the “ongoing cinerama” of official history (31). Annie discovers the journal of Mrs. Richards, a nineteenth-century schoolteacher who emigrated from England to Vancouver, while she is researching in the local archives for her husband Richard. As Mrs. Richards’ journal has received no attention from historians, Annie decides to write a novel based on this woman’s life-writing. The discovery of this literary and historical foremother propels the text, leading Annie to christen Mrs. Richards as Ana. Although exploration into the past to uncover a foremother might be considered a return to an essentialized prelinguistic maternal economy¹, I would argue that Annie conceives the maternal as herstory, as that which has been erased from Canada’s colonial history. The naming of Ana foregrounds Annie’s feminist writing project, a project which counters the exclusion of women’s lives/texts from historical documentation. Annie ‘remembers’ this foremother, writing her back into our imaginations and our memories. Annie’s revisionist strategy enables the projection of women’s lives and texts out of the past and into the present. Questioning

history, Annie explodes what she has inherited, projecting beyond and dreaming "of making fresh tracks my own way" (98). Fiction and history thus do not remain contained within their borders but rather are crossed and recrossed, for as Marlatt states in her Acknowledgements, "[t]his is a work of fiction; historical personages have been fictionalized to possible and/or purely imaginary lengths."² It is precisely in the interaction between history and imagination that Annie discovers the potential for women's agency in the revision of the past. *Ana Historic* declares itself to be "a book of interruptions"; as such, the text situates itself in the gap between history and imagination, fact and fiction, the "f" and the "act" of fact (37). Marlatt rewrites hystery into a herstory text, a narrative of Canadi-ana, our history told "back, backward, reversed/again, anew" (43)³.

Ana's journal and Annie's novel both act as strategies of resistance to the dominating "historic voice (voice-over)" (48).

While Ana's journal has been preserved in the archives, the presence of this document points towards the trace of women who lived and died outside of documented history, whose stories were not preserved in the archives. Ana's journal therefore acts as inspiration for Annie to imaginatively recreate an exempla of the corpus of lost female lives/texts; this collision of life with text critiques the politics of historical documentation to form a feminist inquiry into the social conditions supporting this illusive picture-show called history. Rewriting Ana's life/text, Annie refuses to accept the silencing of women's histories as one more casualty of Richard's historical project. Annie's project, in contrast with Richard's "Big Book" (79), appears to correspond with Adrienne Rich's call in "Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life":

I believe that we [feminists] have a right to conjecture, a right to invent; but there is a difference between "inventing" a lost culture, as a kind of extended metaphor for yet unrealized values and visions, and making educated guesses, as every historian of an oppressed group must do. As feminists, we need to be looking above all for the greatness and sanity of ordinary women, and how these women have collectively waged resistance. In searching that territory we find something better than individual heroines: the astonishing continuity of women's imagination of survival, persisting through the great and little deaths of daily life. (148)

Ana thus becomes symbolic of the possibilities suppressed but not completely erased by the official version of history. Accepting the almost blank slate of an ordinary woman's life in nineteenth-century Vancouver, Annie writes a text which is as much about herself, her mother and her daughter as it is about Ana. For as Rich argues, "without our own history we are unable to imagine a future because we are deprived of the precious resource of knowing where we came from" (141). Ana, Ina, Annie and Ange: this continuum of life stories is woven together in *Ana Historic*. Acting in the gap between history and fiction, between the "f" and the "act" of fact, Annie's novel projects the woman writer and her foremothers into a space where there are no clear distinctions between history and imagination, between fact and fiction. And by extension, the reader/daughter of *Ana Historic* also enters that indeterminate space, what Marlatt has elsewhere termed the "blurred distinction between/ corpus & corpse" (*How Hug a Stone*, 181). What results is a narrative encompassing past, present and future, memories and imagination, countering the official documentation which erases and effaces these ordinary stories of love, life and death.

While Annie effects a rebirth for Ana both out of and into history, she is unable to initiate the same process for her own mother. Ina cannot escape history for she is trapped by the tyranny of the male gaze, always confined and defined by the "possibility of being seen, ambushed in the sudden arms of bears or men" (Marlatt, 18). Lola Lemire Tostevin notes that "it is the hysterical, alienated figure of the mother, an oppressed victim of fate, marriage and society, that keeps haunting the novel" (37). For the text and for Annie, it is Ina who represents the narrative of female subordination to the master (gender: male). Annie also plays out this story with Richard, but she is able to break free from the paradigm and remove the negative attached to the female assertion of identity as inscribed in her mother's name "I-na, I-no-longer" (11). Annie is able to move beyond this masculinist projection of the female self and into the 'i' which resists the phallogocentric subject.

Ina remains caught within this male projection of the feminine, frozen in the frame of the hysteric. And unlike Ana, Ina's fate cannot be changed or reborn. She can only return home from electric shock treatment silenced:

mum: mum. wandering around in some lost place, incapable of saying what it was that they'd done to you. under the robe or robe

was no one . . . they erased whole parts of you, shocked them out, overloaded the circuits so you couldn't bear to remember. remember. (148-9)

Ina's amnesiac state is countered by Annie's telling of her mother's story: "perhaps i've been writing this as a bedtime story for you, Ina – surely now it's my turn" (137). Annie speaks into Ina's silence, Ina's life-text is retold through the female gaze of the daughter. The rejection of the male projection becomes the foundation of Annie's project: Annie rewrites and displaces Ina's lost memories with her own memories, her own re-remembering of her mother. While according to Adrienne Rich, "[h]istorical amnesia is starvation of the imagination" (145), in *Ana Historic* it is an individual woman Ina, rather than an entire culture, who goes through this experience: "they took your imagination, your will to create things differently" (149). Annie takes up the creative torch, a true gift, the true inheritance from her mother, to write her novel of Ana Richards.

Annie's bedtime story for Ina thus becomes part of the feminist project of recovering the lost past of female experience. Annie not only retells, remembers and recreates her mother's story, making it part of her own story, she also addresses this narrative to Ina, and by extension to all the colonial women who came before Annie. But does this feminist project address all women who live and have lived in Vancouver? It is clear that Marlatt's novel concentrates upon the Anglo-European foremothers in Vancouver's past, however, it does not turn a blind eye to the effects of the colonial enterprise. The text makes connections between the phallogentric excising of women's history and the colonization of British Columbia. The uneasy relation between Father History and mother hysteria in *Ana Historic* points to an ambivalent power dynamic which parallels that of the colonizer/colonized. The gendered violence represented by the solutions to Ina's 'hysteria' is analogous to the colonial impulses of our Canadian past, tracing a process by which the (m)other is erased, silenced and captured by the cinematic reels of official history. I will conclude my paper by considering the feminist project outlined to this point in conjunction with the post-colonial inquiry offered in the sequence of the novel that is set at Jeannie's house. The pregnancy of Ana's friend Jeannie sets the stage for a critique of the importance placed upon the Town Fathers, in contrast to the insignificant role to which the mothers of the community are relegated.

While Ana and Susan Patterson are visiting Jeannie's home, Jeannie goes into labour. This sequence is juxtaposed with the narrative of a boat race, pointing out the phallogocentrism of historical documentation. The episode does go further than the feminist critique of history, for the presence of Jeannie's servant Harriet implicates Anglo-European women as accessories in Canada's colonial history. The prelude to the scene of Jeannie's labour and the birth of her child is both facilitated and interrupted by the figure of "Harriet, the Indian girl" (114):

Jeannie leaned back in her rocker with a tiny sigh, smiling under half-closed lids: 'What would I do without you [Susan], my dear? Things always seem right when you're here.'

But it's Harriet, Ana thought, who makes them right. (115)

In this scene of sisterly familiarity and support, Harriet is not spoken of or spoken to. Marlatt is careful not to equate white women's struggles against oppression with those of First Nations women; rather the ironic frame of this feminist revisioning of history points to the "historical responsibility" we as white women must take (Rich, 137). I consider Marlatt's dialectic strategy to be particularly challenging in this episode, for I find myself, as a woman of European descent, caught gazing past Harriet through the eyes of Jeannie. Lola Lemire Tostevin delineates the disruption of the boat race by Jeannie's birthing as follows: "Although a boat race, in which the boats all bore the names of women, was deemed important enough to record in the city archives, the first birth in Hasting Mills was not worthy of attention, so Ana Richards imagines it and writes it down" (38). While Tostevin outlines this project of women's history in the making, there is no space made in her analysis for the doubly colonized Harriet. Just as Ana's presence in the text points to the absence of the lives/texts of other colonial women, Harriet's presence attests to the native peoples, born and forgotten, whose histories and lives are dismissed by Alice as "only Indian births" (117).

Another important episode which points to the potential danger for monologism in the white feminist project of historical revisioning is Ana's encounter in the woods with "the Indian crone called the Virgin Mary" (96). In this passage it is again the dynamics of specularities which are explored, for the Siwash woman gives Ana "a look not at her but through, as if she were a bush or fern" (96). While Ana conjectures first that the woman is blind, then that her eyes hold "a large amount of sky" and also mountains, she concludes by thinking "[s]he would like to

know what those eyes saw" (96). It appears that both women elude the other's gaze and grasp, that both are outside the other's visual and perceptual range. In spite of the colonial impulse to trap the colonized subject in the gaze of the colonizer, Ana allows that this woman can gaze back, thereby making the relationship between spectator and exhibit more complex. Although *Ana Historic* could be accused of tokenism, of creating a stereotype similar to that of the "Third World Woman" outlined by Chandra Mohanty⁴, I would argue that endemic to Marlatt's feminist project is the call for the inclusion of a plurality of female voices and perspectives. I believe it would be inconsistent with that project for *Ana Historic* to appropriate the indigenous female subject position. The possibility of seeing through this native woman's eyes, if this is not the perspective of the reader herself, can only be realized beyond the bounds of this text. The Siwash woman and Harriet lead us to the edge of Annie's and Ana's forest and point toward a path which is for me a lesser known part of the woods. *Ana Historic* does not leave the experiences of indigenous women out of the text altogether and thereby perpetuate the silencing of the voices of the oppressed. Rather the text leaves their experiences to be told in their own voices, in the voices of their own daughters and granddaughters.

Harriet's presence at Jeannie's home implicates women as well as men of Anglo-European descent in the colonial settlement of Vancouver. Her presence points towards the limits of Annie's feminist project as a colonial critique of the experiences of white women. Instead of taking the clichéd, white feminist perspective of global sisterhood which refuses to face the historical responsibility of our colonial heritage, Annie's novel acknowledges Ana's privilege in Jeannie's home. This privilege contrasts markedly with Harriet's silence and the ironic denial of her domestic labour in the midst of the celebration of Jeannie's labour. Harriet and the Siwash woman who appears earlier in the text act to "step inside the picture and open it up," forming an internal critique of Annie's project, just as Annie's novel acts to critique Richard's 'Big Book' (56). The revisionist project in *Ana Historic* involves not only deconstructing the official version of history, but also critiquing the potential for monologism in this feminist revision of history. The colonizer's projection of the Other cannot be sustained within a feminist critique of history; this projection is thus revised in *Ana Historic* through the present absences of these indigenous women.

Annie's revisionist project marks a movement towards a female gaze

which rejects the phallogocentric projection of the feminine in favour of recovering that which has been left outside this frame. Ana's story is revised by Annie to fulfill her desire for a foremother; Ana's story becomes for her a symbol of the survival of women's lives/texts. This project is offered to Ina as the possibility for renewal and rebirth denied her by the gender oppression she suffered. Ina's narrative is told again through new eyes and by this process she moves from her identity as I-not to i-ana; re-versed, this transformation becomes ana-i, or Annie. Ina's daughter is the result of the procreative potential and process within Ina, which is then passed on to Annie. For, as Celeste Schenck argues, in her article "All of a Piece: Women's Poetry and Autobiography," "it is continuity with the presence of the **recreated** maternal voice that makes writing at all possible for these daughters who would write" (300). Or, as Zoe tells Annie, "we give birth to each other . . . it's women imagining all that women could be that brings us into the world" (131).

Ana Historic dismantles the androcentric discourse of official history through a re-creation, a re-mem-bering of women's colonial experiences in Vancouver. Parallel to this feminist narrative strategy is a feminist linguistic strategy: questioning phallogocentrism, Marlatt breaks language apart, taking the reader off the path and into the forest of "undefined territory" (81). In an interview with Janice Williamson, Daphne Marlatt outlined her view of the connections between women's history and language:

If history is a construction and language is also a construction – in fact, it actually constructs the reality we live and act in – then we can change it. We're not stuck in some authoritative version of the real, and for women that's extremely important, because until recently we always were – the patriarchal version was always **the** version, and now we know that's not true. When we change language, we change the building blocks by which we construct our reality or even our past 'reality,' history. (188)

The phallogocentric discourse of history is thus disrupted, interrupted by the (m)other tongue⁵, pro-jecting women's bodies onto the page, exploring the "blurred distinction between/ corpus & corpse" (*How Hug a Stone*, 181), or "writing the feminine in" (Banting, 240). The revision of the historical foremother Ana, the result of Ana's project, becomes then for the reader/daughter a means of envisioning strategies of resistance. These strategies pro-ject the possibilities of resistance – against phallo-

gocentrism, against heterosexism, against racism – into the past which then enables the continuing development of such strategies in the present and the future. Remembering a historical foremother becomes a necessary project which enables feminist writing and reading, urging the reader/daughter to take up that which she has inherited, and let speak the "skeletal bones of a suppressed body the story is" (*Ana Historic*, 29).

Notes

- 1 Lola Lemire Tostevin has read Marlatt's use of etymology in terms of a "nostalgia for a source, an origin" (35). Dennis Cooley, too, has written of Marlatt's "Edenic" dreams of the restoration of an "essential self" (80). It is my argument that Ana's re-remembering serves, rather, to enable a project of revisioning history which has repercussions in the present.
- 2 On distinctions between autobiography, fictions, and history, see Marlatt in interview with George Bowering, in *Line* 13.
- 3 See the above mentioned interview for Marlatt's comments on the importance of the name Ana to the text's revisionist strategy. Ana "means upwards and forwards as well as backwards" (102).
- 4 Chandra Mohanty has argued that unitary notions of male dominance in feminist analyses tend to support reproductions of similarly reductive notions of a 'Third World Difference' (335). The 'Third World Woman' is colourized, once again, by the white feminists who work with such reductive paradigms (333).
- 5 See Pamela Banting for a discussion of (m)other tongue as a feminist strategy for disrupting phallogocentric language.

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