

# Tensing the Difference: Daphne Marlatt, Karen Mac Cormack, and Susan Howe

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## Conjuger la différence : Daphne Marlatt, Karen Mac Cormack et Susan Howe

*Pour la critique culturelle contemporaine, différence est un terme extrêmement polyvalent. Son sens varie selon les théories politiques, poétiques et psychanalytiques. Nichols discute la façon dont Marlatt, Mac Cormack et Howe interprètent la différence dans le but d'explorer les différences d'un point de vue politique et textuel. Elle trace un portrait de la façon dont les trois écrivaines utilisent la différence en rapport avec le temps et montre comment la différence est conjuguée au présent, au futur et au passé dans chacun de leur textes. La narration au conditionnel présent de Marlatt dans Taken, la propension de Mac Cormack à utiliser des combinaisons disjonctives orientées vers le futur dans sa poésie centrée sur le langage, et la recherche sur l'irréparabilité du passé dans les narrations historiques de Howe sont analysées dans la structure triadique de l'essai qui les fait converger non pas pour effacer les différences entre les auteurs mais pour les distinguer, pour les mettre en rapport de manière disjonctive. Le présent, le futur et le passé convergent dans « Tensing the Difference » pour suggérer qu'il n'existe pas de stratégie unique pour penser la différence (autant dans le langage politique qu'universel). Nous devons demeurer « polylogique » dans notre pensée et notre imaginaire.*

### 1. Introduction

This reading of Daphne Marlatt, Karen Mac Cormack, and Susan Howe has a beginning in my suspicion that seemingly incompatible strategies and positions in contemporary poetics and theory might be understood better as complementary. Most current critical languages either function according to the subject-predicate logic of discrete entities, even if only strategically, or they employ one or more of the philosophies of deconstruction. This distinction is demonstrable in the various theoretical uses of the term "difference." In sociologically based feminist or postcolonial

identity work, difference is tied to the politics of cultural representation, and the creation of new subject positions. In deconstructive thinking, however, *différance* has come to mean a destabilizing slippage within the symbolic order, which nonetheless, shakily, stands; in Deleuzian philosophy it is a rhizomatic spreading of differentiations; in Irigaray's feminism, it is a philosophy of the fluid; in Levinasian ethics, it is ungraspable, *a priori* alterity. Between these senses of "difference" there is not only the rivalry of competing theoretical camps and different generations of critics and writers, but also impossibility; the mechanics of fluids cannot coexist with that of discrete substances and structured space.

It is obvious, however, that the different "differences" do not operate at the same level of abstraction, nor do I know of any theorist who claims they do. The philosophical study of how being is produced or how it might be refigured differs in abstraction from the study of empirical subjects and intersubjective relations (reality effects, as a deconstructivist might say). The ontic is not the ontological, yet this theoretical commonplace rarely shows up in critical *practice* beyond the introductory disclaimers. In my view, there is an advantage in allowing difference to do its work on various levels at once, and an advantage in constructing critical vocabularies capacious enough to promote polylogical ways of doing criticism. We need languages that help us to understand relations and subject positions within the life-world, and others that question the most fundamental assumptions and unacknowledged biases of that world. Some of our languages have to be "fast" (communicative, pragmatic), so that they can help us tell to ourselves the givens of experience as they are right now; some have to be "slow" (difficult, transformative), so that experience can be analyzed, and opened to the future. And this goes for the literature we write about, as well as the critical languages in which we do it. I cannot make a general claim here, against all counter example, that my metaphors of time and tense can be applied to *every* literary text in furtherance of such a project. Not only does that kind of claim require much more than an essay or a few examples, but it is precisely my contention that one critical rubric cannot well serve in all contexts. What I can do, however, is model a particular kind of reading that aims to preserve and contextualize the different vocabularies and textual strategies of my writers, with an eye to promoting a cultural ecology of the arts rather than a market-like economy of competition and obsolescence.

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Marlatt, Mac Cormack, and Howe figure difference in ways that evoke competing theoretical positions. Marlatt often engages in feminist identity politics, for instance; Mac Cormack's textual strategies suggest a Deleuzean mode of linkage; and Howe's construction of the subject points to Giorgio Agamben or, in the infinitely demanding call of the other, Levinas. However, I want to construct these positions as tensed to the present, future, and past, respectively. Through her staging of perception, Daphne Marlatt re-writes sexual difference as *provisional*, present-tense narrative. Her focus is thus on the work of imagining new feminist identities that have immediate, practical implications. Karen Mac Cormack, on the other hand, refuses the relative stability implied by even dynamic, provisional subjects. Her deterritorialized word flows and non-organic assemblages compose difference in the future tense as the ongoing *potential* for disjunctive combinations and affective linkages. Lastly, Susan Howe's pursuit of historical subjects brings forward a relationship between past and present that displays the *irreparability* of the past. Howe complicates the politics of historical narration with her attention to the complex singularity of historical subjects and events. As she writes it, the alterity of the past mobilizes ethical and emotional demands that move us beyond the judging of what has been done socially or politically to a meditation on the act of judging itself. My categorizing of these writers must, of course, be read as a critical fiction, exaggerated to show a difference in emphasis on present, future, and past rather than an exclusivity that is logically impossible.

## 2. Daphne Marlatt: present, provisional

As a number of her readers have remarked, Daphne Marlatt combines tropes drawn from the most common and pervasive of mainstream meta-narratives – binary paradigms of gender, for instance – with a strenuous attention to sense and signification. Frank Davey has noted the difference between “the syntactic density and opacity of the text and the simplicity and visibility of its structural elements” (41); Douglas Barbour points to a “privileging of ‘enunciation over the enounced’” (212); Lola Lemire Tostevin distinguishes between “the presence of content situated in the past” and “the presence of form, of language, taking place in the moment of writing” (34). In her recent study of Marlatt and Brossard (*Narrative in the Feminine*, 2000), Susan Knutson recalls these commentaries, now more than ten years old, in noting the strategic nature (the “political timing” [7])

of Marlatt's alleged essentialism. Yet as the above comments suggest, Marlatt's interpreters have also noted her proprioceptive strategy – her rigorous attention to the eventfulness of writing as a record of sensual experience in its polysemy. The emphasis of the method does *not* fall on epistemology or the primary production of subjectivity, but rather on the unarticulated, semiotic possibilities of the given cultural script and subject positions that the poet has inherited. The specificity of Marlatt's poetics lies in her willingness to work with, rather than discard, the cultural script she finds herself in as an Anglo-Canadian, middle-class female feminist subject. In a much cited interview with Brenda Carr, Marlatt remarks that “A program for change means valorizing a difference, and as soon as you valorize a difference you're moving out of postmodernist deconstruction into a position of ... belief or trust in a certain meta-narrative” (Carr 106).

Marlatt's push, then – the effort of attention in her work – is to reposition patterns of social relations and linguistic conventions in the present tense, so that they no longer appear to be self-evident or transhistorical, but rather *merely* present. The *discipline* of her method is to hold her own thinking tensed to the present in this way. This means that she does not try to deconstruct perceptual experience or write the future, but rather to subject the terms of the given cultural script to the closest possible investigation. This is not as obvious a task as it might seem. If one is born white and middle-class – if one benefits from an imperial, capitalist tradition – the ethical highroad might seem to be ideology critique or the development of an agenda for emancipation that would involve a repudiation of the past and a re-scripting of the future. But Marlatt's continuing excavation of her cultural position aligns her with writers who argue that change is not simply a matter of will or intention. In the novel *Taken* (1996), the mother of the narrator, hoping for the safe return of her navy husband, “writ[es] her desire against the destiny script, tense with the meshes of circumstance” (20). These phrases, in which “desire” seems to mean something between conscious will and the involuntary desire of psychoanalysis, hold the *plot* of Marlatt's poems and novels: namely the writing of desire against destiny, and the tensing or temporalization of the “meshes of circumstance.” Judith Butler has argued for a shift of critical attention from epistemology to signification that would enable a working on and through existing discursive practices. She suggests that the subject is formed through repetition, and that agency “is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (*GT* 145). What matters is how the given is taken.

Marlatt's many takes on the Same-Other narrative constitute an operation on that narrative. In *Taken*, where Marlatt weaves together stories about a British family in Australia during World War II and a lesbian relationship in 1990s British Columbia at the time of the Gulf War, the titular metaphor is elaborated in the photographs that provide a point of departure for some of the narrative fragments. The "snaps," as the narrator calls them, are "black and white," and she adds that "whole cultures [are] reduced to dirty adjectives under the acrid developer of national will" (3). War is aided by black and white arguments and abetted by snap judgments. As the speaker re-presents these photographs, however, the self-evidentiality of them as visual takes leaks away into foreground and background, the personal and political contexts of the occasion, and the physical senses triggered by the visual fragment. Looking at a photograph of her mother, she says, "i can almost touch her skin, the softness of it" (6).

Like these photographs, the conventional subject positions inscribed in Marlatt's text are repeated as "takes," until they begin to *take on* shades other than black and white. The women of the 1940s narrative are decorative, domestic. They are caught in the woman-nature alignment of a masculinist economy of sexual reproduction. They worry about romantic love, the safety of their men, raising children, going shopping, the "social niceties" (12). The men represent the war machine that roars through the novel. But the mother strains at the restrictions of her gender role, and wants "training" rather than the leisure that is the "mark of her class" (32). At the same time as she is scripted as the other of the male subject, she switches positions in relation to her Asian servants. In turn, the Asian other is mobilized in references to relations between Japan and China, and Japan and Malaya. Marlatt has the grandfather say, "It's more like Asia for the Japs if you ask me. After the atrocities they've committed in China, do you think the Chinese are going to welcome them with open arms?" (33). This constant shifting of the characters between positions unfixes the referents of the black and white script they play out, and complicates the script with the particularities of the players. "What if there were another way?" (34) the mother wonders, and when the aging grandfather calls up his "authoritative self" it is only as "shadow play" (39). The accountant-father, too, seems to glimpse some "inkling of a different way of being" (27).

The other narrative strand in *Taken*, the story of a lesbian relationship that is breaking up, develops this process of de-scripting. Introducing the

relationship, the narrator says that in the entwining of the two bodies, it is “impossible to know where each of us ends” (15). The lesbian revision of the Same as proximity rather than identity recalls the structure of nearness and non-identity as Irigaray has elaborated it in tropes like the two lips, the in-between, or the mucous. But again, Marlatt amends the black and white of a lesbian versus heterosexual dichotomy. The lesbian partnership of *Taken* is not utopian, as it seems to be in the final pages of *Ana Historic*. Where in *Ana Historic* the narrator leaves us with the lover “on [her] lips” and “the reach of ... desire” (152, 153), the speaker in *Taken* says of the relationship, “How put it together with the news we are occupied by, preoccupied, so that this fades” (15). A few lines later, we find the phrase, “The fatal idea of islands cut off from the main” (16). The suggestion is that the two women cannot just discard the “main” they have rejected, whether “main” refers to the mainland as opposed to their island home, to the Gulf War with its economic and racial implications, or to the gender script they seem to be “occupied by.” Their island life is literally fueled by a commodity over which the war is fought – “[r]ooms afloat on a sea of electronic impulses, while fires rage unchecked and oil slick on a different gulf drifts toward a herd of breeding sea cows” (86). Moreover, the narrator’s effort to hang on tightly to the beloved echoes the heterosexist paradigm of possession – of *taking* – rather than the proximity figured in their love-making or “the call and response that birds are full of” (86). In fact, a gulf opens between them and the lover ends up taking evasive action against “the parental tone” of the narrator (125).

Should the repetition of blacks and whites still seem like an apology for the old cultural script, however, *Taken* includes a number of scenes from a prisoner of war camp, that in their graphic horrors, lay out the consequences of the military, industrial, and sexual aggression in which *all* the major characters are complicit. But the novel also implies that this is the script which must be taken up. The word, “taken,” changes radically with its context: one may be taken by or with, and one may take up or take over. One might, for instance, be taken with another, in the sense of being surprised or enamoured, in which case one might fall back and give ground, rather than seek to appropriate. The context dependency of Marlatt’s embodied subjects renders them elusive (indeterminate as types), and suggests a way to queer the script. Tropes of proximity complicate, without erasing, tropes of occupation and displacement in Marlatt’s non-systematic argument with the way in which social identities enable the

regulation of lives. Desire alters destiny through repetition; this is present-tense cultural work that acknowledges the inevitability of beginning from where one finds oneself (or from where one has been put), and insists on the importance of reworking that position at micro political levels.

### 3. Karen Mac Cormack: future, potential

In Karen Mac Cormack's dense language work, destiny is behind the poet. *Quirks and Quillets* (1991) and *Marine Snow* (1995) bring to presence the potential to be otherwise that characterizes languaged beings, and from the perspective opened up in these texts, the oedipal subject positions that haunt Marlatt's work represent symbolic *effects* that enormously reduce the potential for relationship, as if filiative relations represented a square inch cut from a universe of possibilities. Difference in Mac Cormack's poetry is an effect of spacing or rhythm in language, and at this material level, it is not regulated by resemblance (likeness of sound or sense), or by oedipal linkages. In a poem called "One No Trump" from *Marine Snow* Mac Cormack plays a bridge game, in which organic kinship ties represent only one option among others:

Struck with this word implies a relation  
most do, *cousin* being the site and in that  
sadness two more little ones next to the sea. (15)

The syntagmatic structures that usually regulate meaning are loosened here, so that the subject of the verb "implies" might be "this word" or the phrase "struck with this word" or, if the phrase is read referentially, some other, unnamed word that the speaker (where is the speaker?) has been struck by. In any case, there are either too few or too many words in the line. In order to capture a meaning, readers must either add or subtract. For instance, we might write something like, "The fact that I was struck by this word implies a relation" and then, with many additional words, go on to name the striking word and the relation. Or we might eliminate "struck with" and begin the verse with "This word implies a relation" or "'This' is a word that implies a relation." As it is written, however, the line performs what poststructuralists have explicated as the simultaneous lack and excess intrinsic to language; there are never enough signifiers to supplement the originary lack of a foundational arche-term, and always too many to settle the meaning of an utterance. Thus relations wander; there

is always "a relation" rather than "the relation." Kinship ties, as indicated by the word "cousin," represent one kind of socio-linguistic relation among other possibles, not only because "cousin" is a word, but because it signifies a social linkage that falls between those of kinship and alliance. In the second and third lines of this verse, the phrases "that sadness" and "two more little ones," since they have no definite antecedents, present the same ambiguities as "this word." The "two more little ones" evoke the reproductive economy usually regulated by marriage (again, a relation between kinship and alliance), but since "cousin" is the nearest "site" of action, the usual connotation of "little ones" seems uncertain. The fact that there are two *more* of these diminutive somethings when we have not yet been introduced to whatever they are more of, points to the difficulty of getting to the bottom of this (of any) utterance. What the passage does do, however, is multiply the possibilities for narrative and in this sense "little ones" is a reflexive phrase. As the first line of the next verse says, we are at the "Wrong end of a funnel's disappearing act." Instead of funnelling a dispersed something into a grammatical container, the contained is here in the process of dispersal. Or as Gertrude Stein says in *Tender Buttons*, "The difference is spreading" (461).

Missing in the above passage from *Marine Snow*, as in the other poems of that volume, is the presence of an ordering consciousness as a player in the poetic performance. Certainly the writer writes consciously, but perceptual experience is not the organizer in these poems, as it is in Marjorie Perloff's work. In fact, Mac Cormack does not work at the level of global subjects or molar forms. I am borrowing language from Deleuze here because I think it is best suited to describe linkages in Mac Cormack's work that do not fall under the Same-Other paradigm. Deleuze defines "either ... or ... or" relations as disjunctive syntheses, in which "a disjunction ... remains disjunctive, and ... affirms the disjoined terms, ... affirms them throughout their entire distance, *without restricting one by the other or excluding the other from the one*" (76) (emphasis original). In "Flame," from *Marine Snow*, phrases like "block verb light," "creaking perennial" or "knife abrasive sill" are carefully spaced on the page, one line to a phrase, and carefully spaced grammatically, so that it is difficult to close up the distances between words, phrases, and lines. It is always possible, of course, to add or subtract so that we end up with a narrative, but distance seems to be the point. If the last phrase of the poem is read reflexively, these lines are "places of announce" (21): they are molecular sites where global aggre-



gates – subjects, sentences – might, potentially, come together, or not. The phrase “crevice control” (“Flame”) aptly describes this writing practice as an art of junctions, while the absence of metaphorical shading in the phrase (“crevice control” might conceivably serve as a metaphor of sexual difference) underscores the distinction between Marlatt’s strategy and that of Mac Cormack.

The complaint that language poetry like Mac Cormack’s neglects agency misses the *kind* of work accomplished by this writing. First, Mac Cormack carries through as poetic *performance* the common, post-Saussurean assumption that the connections between things, however entrenched, are conventional rather than necessary, and therefore potentially open to transformation. In her work, however, this is not just a claim about the indeterminacy of language, but also about the ability of languaged subjects to behave unpredictably or agrammatically, to initiate action, to *rework* a deterritorialized textual field, and to create linkages that may come to refigure the social. Secondly, the dimension of the potential, by definition, assumes a suspension of action. As soon as I arrange the words or phrases of the poems into a narrative fragment, as soon as I decide that “creaking” in the line “creaking perennial” will be an adjective, for instance, I reduce the potential of the phrase. I begin to eliminate possibilities; I drag the phrase into the actual.

Much has been made about the role of the reader in language writing – about whether or not the reader completes or co-writes the poem, or whether the poem resists participation. In my view, open texts resist closed readings and therefore do not invite the reader to participate in just any way she wants; they do not narrow the reader-writer gap or model democratic empowerment, in other words, because they simply do not yield to particular readings. The resistance of the text to closure does indeed suggest plurality, but only in the abstract. No one of those possible readers, or any number of them for that matter, can step up to such a poem and stake a claim to it because the poem resists the diminishment represented by actualization. It sets up a textual field of which there are always more readings possible than anyone can pronounce, more positions available than anyone can take, so that the results of any readerly participation are likely to seem limited and unconvincing. In this way the poem actively, even aggressively, holds open the future.

Peculiar to this dimension of the potential is that it is as politically indispensable as it is inaccessible to experience. Without a future tense, any

agenda will close and its agents lose the ability to respond to changing contexts. At the experiential level, however, I have to act. To do nothing is an affirmation of the given. And while I may always be in transit, both as a subject-in-process and as a political agent capable of multiple alliances, I cannot be everywhere at once experientially, nor can I completely get rid of my "I" at this level without eliminating consciousness. To go back to Marlatt's vocabulary, it is as utopic to imagine that I can fully overcome destiny with desire – that I can completely pulverize the script that I have been born into – as it is ahistorical to take the script as authoritative. The "social work" that Mac Cormack's poetry performs (should we insist that poetry get a job), is not the delivery of a righteous State, but the continual re-opening of static institutions and static ways of ordering things. This is not so easy, given the pressure on writers of all disciplines to serve present demands for social justice. Alongside a novel like *Taken*, "Flame" seems improbably indefinite – but then both trouble the language of politics. I will return to this point about poetry and politics later. For now, I want to suggest that these different poetic practices speak to each other through their differing temporalities. Marlatt's revision of narrative as the provisional testing of subject positions and qualification of existing socio-political relations addresses the present-tense realm of experience and action, where empirical subjects struggle against social, economic, or cultural determination and attempt to recreate themselves; Mac Cormack's non-narrative poems underscore the fact that the future is no one's property – not even the good guys'. Attempts to make it so, like those of the commercial or bureaucratic worlds, are violent misreadings of the materiality of thought.

#### 4. Susan Howe: past, irreparable

Everything in a commodity culture argues with temporality. The future must be insured against, the present must be extended whatever the cost, and the past must be made to serve the needs of the present. In her *Nomadic Subjects* (1994), Rosi Braidotti discusses the commodification of time in the new bio-medical technologies, namely the trade in body parts, with its racist, sexist possibilities, and the blurring of generational differences through reproductive technology. In quite another context, Michael Lambek, in his "The Past Imperfect: Remembering as Moral Practice" (1996), suggests that the purpose of narrating histories is to be found in such present moral and political aims as the establishment of belonging,

or the elaboration of subject positions (239). History, as Lambek constructs it, is the site of ethical and political contestation.

Susan Howe's forays into the archives of literary history differ from these uses of the past – commodification, ethical judgement, or political action. In a key comment, Howe says that she wants to “tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate” (“[Statement]” 15). Her project, then, *sounds* like that of many feminist and cultural revisionists, but she approaches her subjects not only through narrative (which already, in its exclusions and inclusions, implies judgement), but also through the physical artifacts that have been marked by their passing, and which establish their *absence* in the narrated present. It is the artifact, rather than perception or the dance of signification, that organizes her texts and marks the difference between present knowing and the otherness of historical subjects. It is thus not just the past which is to be measured and judged, but the present as well, and, perhaps the act of judging itself.

Howe's artifacts include the marks, smudges, corrections, archaic spellings or mis-spellings, ambivalent usages and references, marginalia, and unusual tropes in the manuscripts of her subjects, but she also creates artifacts with her typographics: lines that intersect, collide, overtyping, or create odd angles on the page such that they cannot be paraphrased. Howe explicates the significance of these traces and patterns in *The Birth-mark* (1993), when she opens the book with epigraphs from Hawthorne's “The Birth-mark,” Dickinson's “Third Master Letter,” and Melville's *Billy Budd*. The epigraphs are taken from passages presenting Georgiana's birth-mark, Dickinson's monosyllabic volcano (“Pompeii heard it, and hid/forever”), and Billy Budd's stutter. Howe's meaning is clear. As in Hawthorne's tale, the birth-mark holds the singularity of the subject and its elimination is equivalent to erasure or death. Howe pushes this point to suggest that the editorial elimination of textual idiosyncrasies is homologous to the political silencing of dissident voices. In the history of antinomian New England, she says, this form of silencing as “encoded in the story of Anne Hutchinson, is gendered from the beginning” (BM x), and it “continues in the manhandling of the Thomas H. Johnson editions of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Including Variant Readings Critically Compared with All Known Manuscripts* (1951) and *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1958), published by the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press” (BM 2). Howe's specific objections to Johnson's editorializing include his “sover-

eign system for her line endings – *his* preappointed Plan” which “establish[es] the constraints of a strained positivity” (135). Quoting Emerson, Howe suggests that the effect of such editorial improvements is to create “the appearance that one person wrote all the books” (BM 141).

Howe’s attention to the artifact implies an argument for the inherence of singularity in the *way* that entities come to presence in the world, rather than in their structure, attributes, or content. The traces she records bear witness to the passage of subjects that were *this way and no other*. Their mode of being does not paraphrase or translate because it is not reducible to a positive content. In a brief analytic on “the modality of being” (91) that I find helpful in reading Howe, Giorgio Agamben says that the “being-thus” (90) of entities in the languaged world means that they are neither separable from nor reducible to their attributes. Having no essential nature they are better understood as “hows” rather than “whats.” And because they do not exist apart from the mode of their being, they are “Irreparable” (89); there is no positive kernel which could be saved or restored apart from the multitude of symbolic elements and encounters that make up their content. It is precisely this infolding that Howe claims is effaced in most scholarly histories. “I know records are compiled by winners,” she says, “and scholarship is in collusion with Civil Government. I know this and go on searching for some trace of love’s infolding through all the paper in the libraries I come to” (BM 4).

When Howe “lift[s a subject] from the dark side of history,” then, she lifts to presence not an isolate being or delimitable topic, but the whole unpronounceable world that has been inflected by her subject. Hence the relaxation of scholarly rigor that seems to be indicated in the title of her *My Emily Dickinson* is actually a most strenuous act of attention – the conjuring of an immense latent historical content. The “my” is about the *genitive* nature of subject formation. Emily Dickinson is everywhere dispersed in the world she once inflected and can only be approached by the traversing of that world. To borrow a figure from Dickinson, the textual artifacts the poet leaves behind are analogous to the tumbled blossoms that witness the hummingbird’s “Route of Evanescence” (619). But in the pursuit of her quarry, the poet’s own subjectivity is formed through the inflection of a world which now contains Emily Dickinson.

The stakes of this poetics include a distinction between love and justice, and, I would argue, between poetry and politics. Historical narration feeds the present-tense need for political and social action, and as Lambek says,

narration can establish belongings and entitlements. It can bring to light former injustices, and it can create powerful arguments for social justice. It is a crucial task. But already embedded in the form of the revisionary act is the judgement that initiates the gesture. The irreparable, however, opens up a dimension of ethical thought in which judgement is forever forestalled because the particularity of historical subjects and events can't be fully articulated. From this point of view, we can never reach a verdict because we can never get past the enigma of the "who" in "whodunnit." It is thus appropriate that Howe positions her work outside the purview of States, because the State with its juridical apparatus is a device that substitutes for the kind of love that can't be actualized in time – the infinite love that used to be attributed to God. In *The Birth-mark* she writes that "letters, phonemes, syllables, rhymes, shorthand segments, alliteration, assonance, meter, form a ladder to an outside state outside of States. Rungs between escape and enclosure are confusing and compelling" (46). Locating the work of poetic discourse in this "outside state outside of States," Howe aligns poetry with love rather than justice. This is *her* antinomian heresy, that there is a higher court than those which regulate social behaviour. Shakespeare's *Lear*, for one, presides in this court just at that moment in his madness when he has left behind his demand for retribution, along with the imaginary court room of the storm scene. In Howe's "Book of Cordelia" (*The Liberties*, 1980), *Lear* appears, "giggling in a whistling wind/unbonneted" (88); in Shakespeare's play, this is the moment when, decked with flowers, *Lear* declares that all are guilty and none should be punished. The reply Howe offers to the ungrammatical question of her poem, "has his children brought him to this pass?" is both question and exclamation: "Whowe." Already the subject ("children") is distanced, through a subject-verb disagreement, from the predicate of which it stands accused ("has brought him to this pass"). Who, then, has brought the king to this pass? Who [are] we? How [are] we? Or Whoowee! the king is "unbonneted," the case is dismissed. In the conflation of "who" and "how" with her name (a pun noticed by Rachel Blau DuPlessis in her essay titled "'Whowe': An Essay on Work by Susan Howe" 163), and in the consequent deferral of the accusing question, Howe offers the singularity of the subject as a response to the demand for justice. This singular subject, however, in its ungraspable alterity (this is the Levinasian strand in Howe's thinking), has the effect of positing an absent respondent that can only be divine. Only a god could answer to the

demand implied by an infinite singularity: only a god of love might conceivably want to.

The psychoanalytic reading of love may help here to draw out the core of unreason at the heart of Howe's antinomianism. From the perspective of Lacanian analysis, a demand for love implies delusion since it requires that the irreducible lack that constitutes the subject and characterizes the symbolic Other be filled in with a positive content. Slavoj Žižek, one of Lacan's more recent interpreters, argues that Christianity answers the "unbearable enigma of the desire of the Other (God)" by offering up the subject as love object and sacrifice to the Other (116). The more rational response to the "enigma," Žižek suggests, would be Jewish anxiety. It is not delusion which animates Howe's poetry, though, but a poet's rebellion against the conditions of subjectivity – a perfectly futile rebellion from the psychoanalytic perspective since these conditions derive from a constitutive dis-ease in the subject that, if we accept Žižek's arguments, is paralleled at the social level by irresolvable antagonism. Like Melville's *Bartleby*, who shadows her *Melville's Marginalia*, Howe prefers *not* to be a little reasonable, prefers to go to the wall rather than accept the inadequacy of love to complexity and thus the improbability of personal or social redemption.

## 5. Conclusion

Howe's treatment of F.O. Matthiessen in the introduction to *The Birthmark*, provides an illustration of the ethical difference she opens between the present-tense use of historical materials, and the infinite demand of the past. The passage may also serve to illustrate the differences in the kinds of agency suggested by my three writers. Matthiessen banished everyone, except for the Euro-American men he approved of, from his canon-making critical reading of the American renaissance, and indeed that monumental work (*The American Renaissance*) is as memorable for its biases as the prodigious scholarship that made Matthiessen famous. It does not seem very difficult, at this safe remove, to pass judgement on Matthiessen according to standards of cultural inclusivity that we now find acceptable. However, most of the space that Howe gives to this scholar is devoted to biographical details that bring out Matthiessen's own antinomian tendencies, duly repressed in his public life. There was a youthful enchantment with Shelley, for instance, and Matthiessen's homosexuality. In correspondence with his long term lover, Russell Cheney, Matthiessen addresses

Cheney as “Rat”: Cheney writes back to “Devil.” In a letter Howe quotes, Cheney says,

“Deezie, [Devil] on the back of your letter this morning was a shopping list, and with a flood the actual scene of your life—your being alive there—  
sugar was all through me. It sort of took my breath it was so real—as  
cocoa though I'd reached out and  
cereal touched you...”

eggs

bread

salt

Oct 7, 1929

pepper

(BM 14)

How do we read this letter? In the present tense, it might count as evidence of Matthiessen's secret life, and invite ethical judgement: here we have the Harvard professor who promotes a WASPish, masculinist literary agenda while concealing his own difference in relation to that tradition. In the future tense, however, the letter might serve as a metaphor for the potentiality of all languaged experience to break into its “ingredients” and recombine. Reality effects (“as though I'd reached out and touched you”) reverse into the materials that engender them (“sugar/cocoa/cereal...”) to form new “places of announce.” In the past tense, however, the letter – a love letter – bears witness to the irreparable intricacy of a life in the minutiae of its passing. An artifact smudged with absence, it solicits our judgements endlessly and complicates the narratives that support them.

There is no one of these readings that I would choose to omit, and yet they rest on incompatible ways of constructing the subject. If we demand of the subject ethical accountability, we imagine him as a free and discrete agent and strategically ignore his interpellation in a socio-linguistic order. If we attend to that order in its potentiality to be otherwise, and focus on destabilizing the subject, or if we respond to her as sheer affect – the infolding of a world sublime in the infinity of its detail, and combinatory possibilities – we begin to lose the language of action. In the play between the different differences, however, we might look for the flexibility to respond to the givens of the moment with what wisdom is ready to hand, and, as well, re-imagine ourselves, our values, our delights, and our social spaces as they might become.

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