

Introduction

Julie Murray

This issue of *Tessera* carries with it the previous issue's emphasis on a sustained feminist critique of ethical norms. We received so many outstanding submissions in response to our call for work on feminist ethics and the law, we decided to produce two volumes on the topic. Like the previous volume, the texts in this issue take up – in various registers and to different ends – a critique of what Luce Irigaray calls the “ethics of the one.”

Colette Whiten's powerful cover image, entitled *Haitians Watch*, is a fitting frame and bespeaks this issue's orientation toward feminist inflections of justice, ethics and law. The image, in which onlookers solemnly observe an event that is unavailable to the viewer, recalls scenes of sacrifice. The image frustrates the viewer's desire to bear witness *to something*, to have an unmediated relationship to the event itself. Instead, we witness a scene of witness. The mediation of our access to the scene is foregrounded, literally, by the elaborate beading that constitutes the image, and that contributes to the ritualistic element of the scene. The quiet ceremony of the beadwork unsettles our efforts to attribute something random or singular to this particular gathering of spectators, and instead underscores what is customary, even habitual, about such “events.” This idea of customary violence, the ritualistic violence of sacrifice, is crucial to Sandra Vida's *Kitchen Freedom*, in which representations of 1950's era domesticity – a kind of customary femininity – are married to scenes from ancient Celtic culture. The presence of the latter (witness skull on plate, and sword in hand) provides a subtle critique of the violence of the former, in that it reinvests this scene of putative comfort and familiarity with the jarring, the unfamiliar. The strategic collision of these two forms of custom allows for a perspicacious commentary on the violence that traverses the domestic, and brings with it a much broader conception of domesticity than our more “customary” understanding of domestic violence generally allows. Vida's domestic is one site of the sacrificial logic that grounds other aspects of culture, though in an important reversal, here, it is women who

are invested with the power to perform such rituals, rather than being subject to them.

Mariana Valverde and Dawn Moore's *Party Girls and Predators* exposes the gendered stakes of the "moral panic" that anchors the discourse about date rape drugs and "club" drugs. Placing into historical context recent date rape drug awareness campaigns directed at female undergraduates, Valverde and Moore argue that "the maidens-in-distress of the campus scene cannot rely on anyone to save them: like good neoliberal subjects, they can only save themselves through constant risk-monitoring and risk reduction." In time-honoured fashion, women are encouraged to monitor and regulate themselves and each other by forming "safety networks," in order to protect themselves from, not men per se, but the risk of being drugged. This focus on the drug and not the person administering it constitutes, suggest Valverde and Moore, a displacement of male violence. Moreover, such "moral panic" divests women of political agency at the very moment it invests them with the righteousness of moral authority. Rosemary Nixon's short story picks up this concern with governance, this time in the context of a hospital, in which a mother, Allegra, and her sick infant are subject to the institutional regimes that govern this "separate country. With its own time zones and weather. Well-behaved parents are allowed inside its borders after passport inspection, the ritual washing." In the relentless mechanistic of the neonatal nursery – "Panels of wall plugs. Blinking, flashing, beeping monitors" – Allegra wonders what the nurses would do if she and the other mothers, whose "job here in Foothills Neonatal is to stand around in yellow gowns like a hospital choir," "broke into song." Sandra Semchuk's *shallow breath*, produced in collaboration with James Nicholas, considers the painful legacy of residential schools. Semchuk writes of the "ancient graveyard" in front of the apartment that she shares with Nicholas, and of the "difference of opinion" about to whom its dead belong, a remark that invokes the question of the residential schools, and the ancient debts still outstanding to those who endured them.

Catherine Mavrikakis' essay takes up the institutional stakes of particular speech acts in order to consider the politics of secret-keeping and silence-breaking. Suggesting that we need to attend to the specificity of the situation in which a confession is produced, Mavrikakis interrogates the effects of confessions in several institutional, cultural and political contexts. In Nadia Ghalem's poem, "Amours et colères," the act of silence-

breaking is tied to questions of voice, and the naming of violence, especially as this relates to political violence in the Algerian context. Similarly, the drive to document violence – in this case sexual abuse – is what motivates Carol Itter's photographs in this issue. The eerie juxtaposition of a child's quilt, upon which is inscribed the familiar nursery-rhyme lyric, "Hush little baby don't say a word," with excerpts from clinical literature that elaborate the relationship between child sexual abuse and adult depression, is further punctuated by the inclusion of official records and documents: an archive of awards, educational degrees, and other accomplishments of a life cut short by suicidal depression. The history of Chinese indentured servitude is the subject of Sharyn Yuen's *John Chinaman*, in which strategically-lit white coats form the canvas upon which are inscribed representations of Chinese-Canadian experience. The naming of violence and the violence of naming converge in MR.'s *Caged*. The realistically rendered "portraits" of wingless birds offer a meditation on the dialectic of freedom and captivity, though the more striking detail is not the studied naturalism of the images, but the fact that the names of the birds correspond to names of both kings and serial killers. The connection between kings and killers, in addition to the notoriety of both kinds of figures – recognizable by their first names only – is underscored, again, much like in Colette Whiten's and Sandra Vida's images, by the careful, practiced rituals associated with both forms of power.

Irene Oore's essay on Marie-Claire Blais' *Soifs* poses the question of ethics in a more literary context, and considers the possibilities, available in literary language, for different relations of difference, ones which Oore identifies in Blais' writing, and which constitute what Oore calls "ethical thinking," or an "ethics of love." Traces of the possibility of such an ethics can be discerned in Ailsa Kay's *Why Can't I Be You*, a story in which two characters' inability to communicate beyond customary gender expectations leads to an act of violence reminiscent of 1980's suburban gothic: a dead rabbit. The rabbit is a token of William's affection for Alexandra that she scorns, in favour of fantasies about how "love would be in his hands, strong hands, the way he pushed her back into the wall, in clattering dishes, the jut of cupboard handle against her spine, in ripped seams, bruised nipples. That's how it worked, she'd thought." Trish Salah's "Law's Echo Lies In" reads like a kind of fable, an allegory of Law, who has a "capacity for abundant gratitude," and Echo, who's "got her own word for shame, her portal to the future." Echo is Law's trace, vestige, she "takes

recourse in her whispers," "in her quicksand," and provides the hole, the place where "Law takes her leave." In a slightly different inflection of the relationship between ethics and the literary, Christl Verduyn argues that the question of ethics is inextricable from the question of ethnicity, especially in the context of contemporary Quebec writing. She reads Régine Robin's *La Québécoise* as an instantiation of this practice of "l'éth(n)ique." Also concerned with the "blindness to race" in histories of women in colonial Canada, Terry Provost's essay revisits what she calls "the problem of Whiteness plaguing the political and epistemological models of Canadian feminism."

Together, the contributions to these two volumes of *Tessera* offer a wide-ranging and provocative consideration of feminism's negotiations and deployments of the law.