

School of Communication and Cultural Studies

Women and Biographical Speech: Subjectivity and Authority

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ABSTRACT

Women and Biographical Speech: Subjectivity and Authority

The thesis is concerned with the construction of women's authority as it is manifested in biographical speech; that is, in written or oral narratives, or sub-narratives, about others. The emphasis is on women's biography but certain other genres (notably gossip and the biographical research interview) are also examined.

The central premise is that women as patriarchal subordinates are significantly disadvantaged in the cultural processes that construct (public) authority; also, that speaking about (defining) both ourselves and others is a significant means by which we construct knowledges — an important basis for authority. Women's collusion with patriarchal structures and processes, whether this be conscious or unconscious, creates problems with the construction of their authority on numerous levels in public and private domains. Moreover, even when women intend to operate subversively from sites of resistance, and when they succeed in doing so to some extent, the workings of power through discourse often render the overall effect of subversion to be consistent with, and ultimately supportive of, dominant ideology.

The thesis examines a variety of aspects of these complex dynamics as they apply to women in the context of contemporary western societies. To this end, the first and last chapters consider women's relations to formal biography with the aim of identifying their (historic) engagement with lifestorying. Two chapters discuss the psychological/ideological aspects of biographical authority with relation to western women's subjectivities. And two chapters analyse the political and ethical implications of postmodernist/postcolonial theory on women's biographical speech. The study concludes that women's authority manifested in biographical speech is undoubtedly problematic but that feminist-inspired initiatives continue to be productive.

Introduction

This thesis sets out to explore the question of what might constitute women's emergent public authority in the context of their representations of others. It analyses the potential for, and limitation of, agency by focusing on the infrastructure of subordination in which women's subjectivities operate, regardless of other status-ridden structures in their lives, and it considers how these gendered subjectivities are manifested in biographical forms. As John Fiske expresses it, theories of subjectivity attempt to explain the workings of the forces of domination, and theories of agency focus on how people cope with these forces (21).

The exploration of this relationship ponders questions of collusion and resistance, interpellation and agency, commonality and difference, universal sisterhood and post-feminist alliance, and similar polarities of the new millennium. The thesis is concerned with the construction of women's authority as shown in biographical forms, specifically because post-feminist politics have a substantially inhibiting effect on the process of representing women other than oneself in written and spoken media. Such ethical restraints are not surprising. Feminist politics of voice and representation are born from oppressive representation, and male dominance/ domination has not ceased to exist because (some) women have gained increased public power. Contradictions, restraints and, indeed, oppressions still operate

particularly, this thesis argues, at the level of subjectivity, this focus being when linked to instances of public/official power.

For this reason, public power, as deployed through official authority, is only one aspect of power/knowledge.¹ We might call this first side the “outward” or overt manifestation of authority, which is socially constructed. The ‘inward’ or covert aspect of a socially inscribed authority is frequently discussed in terms of emotions and relationships and is usually presented as self-constructed—hence the plethora of personal growth books, which purport to change the life of an individual by influencing their personal attitudes. The “solution” for each is respectively couched as, firstly, changing the way others see you and, secondly, changing the way you see yourself.

From a cultural studies perspective, the two aspects need to be addressed together since they are both social constructs that are culturally specific and, most significantly, discursive phenomena. Theories of subjectivity in the latter part of this century attempt to explain the way individuals are socially and materially constructed. Concepts of leadership and authority are grounded in authoritative practices and *vice versa*. For women, this process has grown from and through an emancipatory struggle sited in a history of subordination. Thus, this thesis

¹ The term power/knowledge was coined by Michel Foucault in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969.

emphasises the gendered nature of authority and its connection to a social history. An analysis of the effects of subordination by gender demonstrates that women's personal and public lives are inscribed by patriarchal ideologies at all levels of experience. As the tenets of second-wave feminism would have it, the question of women's authority is at once personal and political, private and public, individual and social.

So the focus of this thesis is an analysis of how women cope with, or adapt to, the forces of gendered subordination when they write or speak of other women—even with other women of their own cultural group(s). For the majority of feminists, acquiring public authority now means changing the constitution of official authority from a vertical to a (relatively) horizontal mode, or at least to a more reciprocal/egalitarian style of leadership. Some believe that these changes will occur automatically, as a result of more authoritative roles being taken by women. However, whilst this vision has its merits, what we may cautiously identify as female traits have been learned within contexts of subordination—something that we are at pains to shed. This circular logic is inevitable. We know ourselves through our histories of the self, which, although more imagined than objectively real, have the force of social structure behind them. Michel Foucault tells us that resistances are never anterior to the dynamics of power, so that the collusive works simultaneously with the transgressive. Indeed, to take a Habermassian perspective, the Foucaultian

subject has become nothing but an effect of power. For Foucault, the subject is eliminated as a conscious, autonomous individual in favor of a docile body created by the normalizing force of the disciplinary regime. This question of agency in the enactment of power is at the heart of the Habermas versus Foucault debate on power and justice (Mumby 94). The chief grounds on which feminists necessarily take some issue with Foucault are those of a post-structuralist agency which, this thesis argues, must be envisaged as problematised by the disunified subject but not severed from its roots in ethical activism². Since most women, including feminists, enact behaviours that are counter-productive to social empowerment, we need to understand more about the conditions of our gendered subjectivities as sites of struggle.

This research draws on material from an earlier project—work towards a biography of a woman activist³. The examples drawn from this project grounds the academic discussion in an experience of researching a feminist biography, and serves only to illustrate some specific instances of women’s biographical utterances in practice. It is not utilised in the sense of proving anything through a single example of qualitative research, and certainly not to suggest that my own experience “proves”

² There is now a substantial body of feminist work addressing Foucault’s theories of power, discourse and the subject, for example the collection of writings edited by Caroline Ramazanoglu (1993) in this bibliography.

³ The subject of this earlier research has given consent to its use in this thesis although she has not been named. This written consent complies with the University’s code of ethics as it applies to research on human subjects, and also covers issues relating to the legal action of breach of confidence.

the hypothesis of this thesis. Yet neither are these instances unusual or remarkable. Close analysis has the effect of making an object of scrutiny appear more marked or emphatic than may have been the case at the time—a phenomenon of representation that serves the art of writing in positive and negative ways. In effect, the biographical utterances discussed in this thesis are chosen for their “everydayness,” a quality that tends to belie the low-level power play that takes place in our representational speech modes which, I argue, are significantly gendered and which clearly affect constructs of subjectivity and authority. Whilst there is no claim that these behaviours are “typical of women,” they are common in a “western” context and are discussed in an array of feminist writings on which I have drawn extensively.

Reflection on this earlier project created a research hypothesis that women’s emergent authorities are both constructed and hampered through the overall context of their gender. To construct narratives about others (even those of another individual within one’s own cultural group) is an authoritative act. Indeed, this thesis argues that *because* biography and biographical speech (telling the story of an other) is authoritative and resistant, it tends to throw up many ambivalences for women that render it uncomfortable and raise ethical questions. Moreover, the politics of difference, originally hailed by feminists as a solution to their subordination by essentialist gender theory, now work to produce a different kind of anxiety about women’s representations. Such an anxiety, I argue, extends beyond

presumptions of universal authorities that disregard differences, but also problematises representations of any other individual or group on the same premise—an effect resulting from a developed awareness that to represent an Other in any form is, to some degree, to oppress them. This research investigates these micro-politics of subordination and interrogates an underlying question: can post-colonial feminists achieve relative non-violence in their representations of others?

The discussion of subordination and domination in this thesis owes a considerable debt to Gramsci's theory of hegemony that has drawn attention to the complex ways in which subordinated subjects collude with their own oppression through ideological practices. The work of Louis Althusser then emphasised the institutional nature of ideological forces. In a postmodernist context, revisionists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe ultimately found the Marxist project to be unworkable, based as it is on a reductive binary of power held in social class (Mouffe 168-204)—in effect, in two social classes that no longer co-exist in simple opposition. Multi-dimensional models of power (*qua* Foucault) have problematised the idea of one class or group dominating another. Gramsci himself was critical of the principles of class reductionism and Mouffe comments that whilst the conceptual tools used by Gramsci in his theory of hegemony have now been superseded, his insights into the functions of ideology remain of crucial importance (199). This research interrogates instances of ideological subordination (otherwise explained as the effect of power in the

micro-management of bodies) that is manifested by women's biographical speech modes at the level of subjectivity. It frames the concepts of domination and subordination in pluralist and multi-layered concepts of power. The concept of oppression is somewhat less coherent (although, unfortunately, no less prevalent) in post-colonial societies but, arguably, even more difficult to theorise. It seems that instruments for measuring collusive and transgressive moments in speech utterances are still confined to subjective observation easily dismissible as intuition or mere opinion. The illustrative case comes from a personal (and professional) experience that inspired my theoretical analysis, and that falls within a journalistic methodology rather than sociological.

To claim that women remain disadvantaged by their gender is strangely difficult to justify. Feminism has instigated and inspired much insight into the oppressive nature of power, yet "post-feminists" are more disparate and conflicted than is explainable by cultural difference alone. The notion of patriarchy has gone the way of naive Marxism and can be seen as reductive and simplistic. Identity politics are prone to accusations of naivety, and alliance politics are, by definition, contingent and therefore partial and fragmentary. Any pretensions to a global movement are easily dismissed as 'essentialist' at best and harmfully reactionary at worst. But whilst the insights of Foucault, Fiske, James C. Scott and other interdisciplinary male theorists of power are invaluable, few seem to address, or even to acknowledge, the

continuing dominance of male power in this post-feminist era. This, in itself, reveals certain aspects of socio-political power. Power may be, as Foucault tells us, creative and productive except, of course, when we have a smaller share in it than we would like. Then we experience the side effects of someone else's creativity and productivity. Paradoxically, subordinated subjects also tend to see power as intrinsically bad and oppressive, adopting the view that relative powerlessness remains the only position from which goodness and truth can prevail. This latter view (significantly, one which can be held in tandem with the desire for increased power) obviously creates inhibitions and conflicts in the feminist trajectory. Feminists see their "rise" into public authority as being fraught with dangers of women leaders producing both old and new forms of oppression, and they are keen to change the system they begin to access. This raises the issue of whether it is possible to get outside of the system to effect change, even supposing those seeking change are clear about the changes they want to effect.

If the fact of subordination by gender is agreed by feminists⁴, we then need to recognise the micro-politics of privilege and domination that often provide some advantages to subordination by gender. Women can be reluctant to relinquish such advantages. Subordination and domination (or collusion, resistance and coercion) in

⁴ Feminist may, or may not, agree on the fact of women's subordination by virtue of their gender, but the discourse of difference substantially problematises the reasons for this and, indeed, the "source" of oppression which has this century moved from "men" to "patriarchy" to culture-specific social factors.

their various shades and manifestations are enacted at every point of political and ideological struggle. To put this another way, a person acting from a subordinated structural position—even a victim—may misuse power. In addition, weaker or more junior members of privileged groups are subjected to some very brutal patriarchal sanctions that subordinates escape. This is not exactly because they pose a lesser threat but because they are being trained to administer the system of domination “from above,” or at least from within a system that constructs them as advantaged. It is therefore common for subordinates to fear admission to a more privileged group because their acceptance is provisional, yet they stand to lose the protection their subordinate status gives them. This, too, is a factor for women aspiring to “leadership,” in which they hope to add to their options without losing, or giving up, those familiar aspects of gendered oppression on which they depend for a sense of well-being and, indeed, for identity.

Then, of course, many of us belong to subordinated and elevated groups at the same time, as in the case of gay men and powerful white heterosexual women. In such cases, the conflicting behavioural codes that must be observed and applied result in considerable ambivalence and confusion for all concerned. Thus, Foucault’s now-famous assertion that power comes from everywhere (and, especially, from “below”) is a useful tool for a feminist analysis of emergent authority, although it fails to elucidate the ways in which dominant power manifests differently from subordinate

power. Any consideration of women's authority in actual or imagined forms must take into account that, as they begin to transform the subordinate status of their gender group, women also begin to transform not only their professional and social roles but their gendered identity. This makes women's social advancement as confronting to many women as it is to many men.

Subjectivity, and change in subjectivity, is manifested in "voice." One of the most significant ways in which women have both demonstrated and asserted the authorities of voice is in speaking about others. In this treatise on women's authority the umbrella term "biographical speech" is used to mean any kind of spoken or written non-fictional representation of (an) other self or selves. Biographical speech is therefore multi-generic and theoretically includes stories about, or descriptions of, others in any linguistic form from biography to journalism, from oral histories to everyday speech. The primary focus is on biography as a formal written genre because this presents the most promise and the most formidable problematic for a feminist authority. Women's stories about each other both maintain and challenge social norms. These emergent models also show up the ways in which women's gender codes clash with the codes of established formal practices which exemplify and perpetuate male dominance. However, in order to examine some of the ways in which women's collective subordination manifests itself in their complex relation to public authority, this thesis also discusses the informal biographical speech genre of

gossip and its trait of secrecy. This discussion is framed in the contention that such informal speech is a gendered “way of working” that may or may not be deemed desirable or effective, but nevertheless exists as common practice in the context of subordination⁵.

To speak of such matters is difficult and carries its own weight of feminist⁶ problematics. Claudia Card has said that the kind of moral damage women have suffered as a result of a history of oppression is an aspect of the “moral luck” that defines many of their behaviours and practices. For Card, the notion of luck refers to the fortune that ensues from a group’s history. In this context (women’s history of oppression through gender), she observes that “feminist thinkers are understandably reluctant to address publicly women’s reputation for lying, cunning, deceit, and manipulation” (*On Feminist* 94). Yet it is vital that we do address all aspects of subordination as honestly as we can, especially if we are to see that history is not perpetuated. Clearly, experience has a profound impact on identity as well as behaviours, and the two are inextricably linked in social subjectivity. As Card says:

⁵ The acknowledgement that unofficial forms exist in a frequently unacknowledged (non-legitimised) practice is not to place any judgement on whether these forms are desirable.

⁶ To critique post-colonial politics of representation also carries the risk of appearing reactionary, which is not my intent. This thesis critiques new (that is, post-colonial) oppressions of women and women’s writings. It does so from the perspective that respect for difference is essential. However, it also contends that women’s subjectivities are constructed in the overall context of subordination by gender, and are hence vulnerable to any disapproval – a factor that encourages women to eschew authoritative speech.

Social practices have made such aspects of our identities the bearers of fortune. Nor is all the fortune bad. Terms like “gender-related” enable us to call attention to these facts in order to clarify the myths and truths surrounding the moral luck of individuals. (94)

Gender-related subordination is not over, and even socially advantaged women have more yet to lose in the form of approval and rewards withheld by those still valued as protectors (“where our identities are at stake, oppression is hard to face”) (Card 80).

Two areas related to representational politics have not been pursued and this should be explained. I have not explored women’s historiography as such, despite its implications for biography with regard to the work of (for example) Carolyn Steedman. Steedman herself observes that “in narrative terms [biography and autobiography] must always remain in conflict with the writing of history, which does indeed come to conclusions and reach ends, but which actually moves forward through the understanding that things are not over, that the story isn’t finished, can’t ever be completed, because some new piece of evidence may alter the account” (*Women’s Biography* 99). In the writing of Margaret McMillan’s biography, Steedman experienced this conflict between the narrative forms of the life-story and history (99). She notes that the historical biography “elevates the political and social setting to the life above its narration” (100) and it is my view that this altered focus substantially changes the discursive authority brought to the writing. It is, of course,

true that “life (hi)story writing” (as discussed by Margaret Somerville) (29) also has much in common with biography. Yet there remains a fundamental difference, that being one of positioning (of writer and subject) so that the power relations are different and call for a different set of feminist ethics. In telling a “life history,” the writer acts as something of a “ghost” or ally or facilitator, whereas in biography, the respective roles are more separate and the writer may adopt a more critical stance in relation to the subject. For the purposes of keeping the focus on biographical authority, I have excluded life history, as such, from the boundaries of this research.

Another connected area is law. Biographical law, like any other, is culture-specific. Broadly, the laws that affect the practices of biography are those of copyright and personal or professional reputation (to which laws of libel and slander apply). And yet, “how a biographer works depends very much on his or her attitude toward biography, and this attitude, in turn, will influence how he or she deals with legalities” (Rollyson and Paddock 138). Copyright laws restrict the extent to which biographers can draw on the written words of others (limited to “fair use”) so that some speech can be protected by legal frameworks. J.D. Salinger, for example, used copyright laws substantially to restrain Ian Hamilton from using Salinger’s letters—an act that impeded, but did not succeed in totally suppressing, Hamilton’s book (Hamilton 1988:8; Rollyson and Paddock 139). Otherwise, a biographical subject can bring legal action on the grounds of an untruthful account or

commentary. However, the law falls short of censoring representations that the subject does not like. Ian Hamilton puts it baldly:

Sometimes, arguing about biography is like arguing about abortion or capital punishment: minds tend to be made up before you start. There are revealers and there are concealers. The agents of reticence have no truck with the agents of disclosure. (vii)

We do not own representations of ourselves for these are social constructs.

A number of western countries including Australia have a Breach of Confidence law that can affect the biographical process. There can be some legal ramifications for the professional codes of biographical researchers divulging personal information. This kind of legal action could place limits on biographers but since the grounds appear both complex and specialised, I have not focused on law as a significant aspect of this thesis. Much like a liberal discourse on “rights,” laws affecting biography generally seek to preserve a democratic freedom on a basis of ownership, privacy or (conversely) freedom of speech—so many individualised freedoms that must (and, in the case of biography, frequently do) conflict. The question of what is, or is not, fair and reasonable to write or say about another person therefore falls more readily into the question of ethics—an issue with which feminists are very preoccupied and which impinges substantially on the question of ethical authorities. Biographer Carl Rollyson comments that “policies about getting consent from a subject . . . simply don’t apply to the individual biographer unless he or she thinks it

is the only ethical way to operate” (e-mail 6 Nov. 2000). For feminists, then, it is not simply a matter of observing laws and codes, but of accepting responsibility for potential harm and of negotiating conflicts of rights.

Can feminists legitimately construct official representations of others in the light of their own insistence on self-determinism? When they write biographical portraits or confidential professional reports, when they gossip and confer, when they make choices about inclusion and exclusion, are women at the very least surviving as subordinates and at best “progressing” into quasi-membership of male-dominated structures? Are they effectively deploying retrograde behaviours in both the contexts of feminist ethics and of postmodernist theories of difference? Given that postfeminist politics of difference are now firmly grounded in a legitimate postcolonial ethics of self-determination, is there an acceptable place from which to speak of a new form of patriarchal domination—this time one enacted from “within” the ranks of feminists trying to behave well?

This study interrogates some of these conflicts from the perspective of the postfeminist project, this being to *respect* differences whilst simultaneously telling stories that can *make* a difference. Clearly there is a good deal of conflict in this paradoxical agenda. I do not presume to offer a simplistic answer to any of the major questions preoccupying new millennium feminisms. Answers are provisional

and contextual. This is not to be unduly equivocal, but more because the feminist responses of our time are politically contingent and contextualised. The empowerment of [life] storytelling and respect for difference do not at first appear to be antithetical. Yet from a biographer/researcher's perspective, they readily become so. Once established as paradoxical, they enter (as Diane Elan frames it) "the realm of continual negotiation" (81), a climate that has increasingly become unfavourable to published biography.

In order to explore the complex and inter-related issues of biographical representations and women's authority, this thesis is constructed on an interdisciplinary basis, drawing on the fields of gender studies, literary theory, social psychology, socio-linguistics, political theory, cultural studies and, of course, ethics. This has to mean that none of these immense and highly cultivated fields can be explored in great depth, and their collective inclusion pays scant justice to the complexity of each area. Nevertheless, these tools, and others, are the legacy and burden of contemporary analysis. Within the realm of continual [re]negotiation, there is always so much more to be said. The methodology employed is largely concerned with narrative theory and the politics of representation that impact on it at this time. However, these theories do not adequately account for the construction and deployment of gendered subjectivity, and material written from a sociological/behavioural perspective has enriched the analysis of situated speech.

The thesis comprises six chapters whose themes link them into pairs. Chapters One and Six look at literary representations (biography), discussing the ways in which biographies of women written by women are both potentially powerful, and highly problematic, feminist acts. Chapters Two and Five discuss feminist politics and ethics, and Chapters Three and Four consider women's oral socio-linguistic behaviours, all in the context of women's subordinate status. The debate moves from "classic" women's biographies, through the feminist politics of these representations, towards women's social/inter-personal behaviours, and then back through a similar route, ending with contemporary feminist biographies. This shape evolved from moving through the various social structures that have governed women's practices and performances in the public sphere (that is, their presence, or lack of presence, in biography) through to the private and, at times, even unconscious, factors which historically mould such practices. Subsequently, it became important to re-ground the theoretical observations in women's biographical practices and, thus, to end with contemporary biography and pointers towards the future. The overall question is: what might constitute "women's authority" in the public domain, and what problematises its trajectory in biographical forms? Biography, with its incumbent sub-genres, is a crucial (and very popular) means of asserting authoritative representations of women by women and its politics are therefore worth detailed post-structuralist analysis in the interests of a constructive and dynamic empowerment for both women writers and their subjects.

Chapter 1

Women and Biography:

A Collision of Humanism, Postmodernism and Feminism

Pasts we inherit affect who we become. As gendered beings in a society with a history of patriarchy, women and men inherit different pasts and consequently different social expectations, lines of communication, opportunities, and barriers. (Claudia Card)

This examination of the politics of women's authority in biographical speech begins with a feminist genealogy of biography. It does so because the publication of a considered, researched and highly crafted life story is, in itself, a formidable manifestation of authority that women have historically lacked and that, this thesis will argue, remains problematic. Because the history of women's formal representations in biography largely constitutes a history of their exclusion, their restricted and tenuous presence inevitably creates a diachronic focus on their gender. Thus, women's formal representations raise questions of inclusion and exclusion, the normative (versus the "exceptional"), private versus public and the creation of gendered role models, heroes and anti-heroes, the "answers" to which are culturally specific. Yet women have continually operated within a social context that favours

the sanctioned male life-course as the norm and perpetuates the disenfranchisement of women. Whilst post-feminist lifewritings of women have made substantial inroads into these auto/biographical genres, I argue that post-colonial politics of voice and representation (designed to safeguard less powerful groups and individuals from exploitation by those able to do so) often work to create new difficulties in textual authority for women. This occurs within, and indeed because of, an overall context of patriarchal control in western societies.

Biography carries the promise of constructing women as authoritative, both as writers and exemplary subjects. It also carries some intrinsic generic problems for women because it is constructed for, and by, the structures of male dominance. The genre of biography has evolved within contexts of Christian liberal humanism and individualism, and is therefore imbued with foundationalist thought. Women's biographies (particularly those post-dating the Second Wave) demonstrate a plethora of creative uses of form and subject matter that act redressively to the genre's historical essentialism and masculinism. But biography has itself run into a theoretical crisis with postmodernist criticism of such modern tenets as identity and the self. For women, and especially for feminists, biography (which has always been somewhat problematic) has become very problematic indeed, just when the need to investigate and establish new representations is so important. However, the "causes" of the trouble appear to have shifted from pre-modern and modern exclusion to post-

modern self-censorship and co-censorship within the movements through the politics of voice and representation. Biography's emphasis has been built on the premise of the self, the founding tenet of liberal humanist authority. Female selfhood has not kept pace with male selfhood because women have been denied access to the institutions in which representations of the self are manifest. Now that women have begun to gain widespread access to these institutions, the rules have changed again. Biography now finds itself in collision with postmodernism that negates the existence of the self in favour of theories of subjectivity which, I will argue, remain phallogocentric⁷. I will demonstrate that women's exclusion is quite the opposite of historical accident, and constitutes a systematic marginalisation of women by (western) patriarchal societies.

I begin, then, with a consideration of biography itself and, specifically, with a brief history of biography in modernity (assumed to date from the Renaissance). I examine the ideological conditions of women's exclusion, which change constantly with the social climate, but always retain elements of misogyny. In the first section, I look at biography's relationship with humanism and the consequent development of the formal, written (and male) lifestory, which negates and marginalises women. In

⁷ I argue further, in this thesis, that whilst post-colonial politics of voice and presentation are quite understandably and appropriately upheld by most contemporary western feminisms, these politics work simultaneously to support the patriarchal structures fundamental to a patriarchal society. This situation results in feminists working towards conflicting goals.

the second section, I examine biography's vexed relationship with postmodernism and, lastly, I discuss both biography and postmodernism in their paradoxical relationships with feminism. Feminists have conflicting needs in telling the stories of women: they aim to place the experiences of women on the cultural map, but, conversely, they are concerned to avoid the patriarchal objectivisation of women subjects in the process of their stories being told by a biographer.

Their emancipatory politics resist essentialist representations that have previously rendered Woman marginalised, constrained and disempowered; but simultaneously depend on a coherent explanation of embodied gendered experience. This chapter establishes that women in western societies have a historically problematised authority in their formal representations, both in the sense of their authority as writers and, also, in the sense of achieving representations which demonstrate actual or potential authority in the public domain.

To begin with a western cultural equation, speaking and, indeed, *knowing*, about other individuals (at least in a social/psychological sense) is culturally associated with women in the form of observation, intuition and insight. Thus, there is a link between contemporary constructions of western women and biographical speech; enough, perhaps, to argue that many women writers would make good biographers by virtue of their social training as caretakers/observers of individuals within the

private sphere and, specifically, as custodians of the family's emotional life. Biographer and critic Robert Gittings remarks on "human observation which is perhaps the hallmark of the many fine biographies by women writers of our own time" (29). And yet Gittings does not acknowledge the proportionately low numbers of women biographers or speculate on the numbers of women biographical subjects - particularly low with regard to those women in public life. Rather, he notes in *The Nature of Biography* (and that in passing, in a treatise on biography which almost exclusively focuses on the doings of men), that "women biographers have found themselves particularly adept in disentangling the mixed-up masculine heroes of the British nineteenth century" (90) so that "in the last few years, there has been example after example of difficult male characters portrayed with understanding by women biographers" (91). Finally, he arbitrarily dispenses with any feminist claims of exclusion with the astonishing statement: "One can say that whatever pockets of sex-discrimination may remain, the profession of the biographer is not one of them, and that both public and fellow authors have acclaimed [the successes of women biographers]" (91). Gittings offers little evidence for his odd assertion. In practice, post-Boswellian "intimate" biography has been overtly associated with the public domain, and therefore mostly with men in leadership, excepting "popular" biography (which draws on the association of women with gossip and "trivia") and literary biography (which draws on the Victorian lady's penchant for journals and romantic novels).

It could, of course, be argued that biography is generically associated with the public or professional career and that more male than female lifestories are more likely to be suited to the genre since more men than women occupy prestigious public roles. However, this particular explanation does not extend to male dominance in traditional or popular forms of biography. Firstly, significant numbers of nineteenth- and twentieth-century women have [had] impressive public/professional lives. Yet somehow a woman's lifestory has an altogether different cultural significance which remains curiously at odds with biography's codes and conventions, despite innovations to "get around" the difficulties and conflicts. As a result, few female subjects make ideal material for formal or "official" biographies, despite an obvious feminist agenda in which it is regarded as desirable that increasing numbers of women should become identified as public/professional role models. Rather, the inroads made by female biographers and subjects have tended to change the genre to further encompass the informal and private. It must therefore be questioned whether these biographical codes and conventions (which clearly endorse very masculine concepts of what constitutes a notable lifestory) are necessarily or intrinsically male-oriented or whether they can be easily adjusted to accommodate "female lifestories," whatever we suppose these to be in relation to "male lifestories," and whether these adjustments are necessarily advantageous to the advancement of women collectively.

A second site of challenge to the automatic “maleness” of biography is to question the very existence of a western bourgeois cultural split between public and private lives which has been of so much interest to feminists (see Bok 1978; Elshtain 1981; Nicolson 1984; Brill 1990; Walsh 1995; Jakobson 1997). This split is by no means a casual or accidental by-product of the Industrial Revolution and is, in itself, a political phenomenon (Althusser 145) that warrants a careful gender-oriented historical analysis. The feminist-inspired aim of seeing representative numbers of women in public life necessitates the parallel goal of establishing women as significant in their own cultures—arguably the main purpose and effect of biography which is, we are told by journalist Murray Waldren, “a resurgent genre in our computer-isolated and nuclear-familied age The effect is a positive rush on books and/or courses to do with life stories” (6). Whilst this offers an ideal opportunity for women’s lives to be examined and, indeed, valorised, in print, it is disappointing that the effect is not generally one of “elevating” women to perceptions of public empowerment.⁸ What then is the historical relation of western women to the publicly told lifestory?

⁸ It is important to clarify, here, that the writer recognises the immensely valuable changes made by women writers and subjects in placing greater emphasis on the private and domestic roles of women. But I argue that this can also have the effect of reaffirming the value of women in the private sphere *as opposed* to (not *in addition* to) the public.

Biography and Humanism: The development of the lifestory genre

Biography is certainly one of the most popular literary genres of contemporary western society. As Waldren (6) observes, it seems to be gathering impetus rather than going out of fashion, as the quest for “information” extends into the nooks and crannies of lives to reveal (or generate) more and more data about individuals. The genre of the lifestory, in both classical and popular form, is itself a success-story. The following brief history of (predominantly English) biography aims to show the genre’s foundation in liberal humanism and empiricism, and also its propensity for favouring the masculine lifestory.

Biography-as-we-know-it flowered in the context of late eighteenth and nineteenth-century liberal humanism—a humanism that endures in the late-twentieth century in a world sometimes described as postmodern. Most of us manage to meld the two on a daily basis, apparently experiencing no real conflict between the singular, whole, fixed and permanent essence of human spirit which transcends cultural variations, and the diverse, partial, fragmented and contingent qualities of postmodernity. Contemporary bourgeois humanist thought results in a merger of the two, in which the effects of human cultures are seen to be mutable and transitory, whereas humanity itself presumably has universal and enduring characteristics. In these terms, the postmodern world is seen as a superficial material covering for the true interior world of the transcendent human spirit. In this philosophical climate,

biography not only survives but also prospers, since a profusion of biographies yields a never-ending diversity of human manifestations in a never-ending variety of individualised circumstances. Moreover, in a patriarchal society, a large majority of readers and writers fail to notice biography's emphasis on the masculine life experience/truth/reality, tacitly accepting Robert Gittings' view that the universal "nature" of biography amounts to a "comment on the human spirit itself" (14). Gittings upholds Carlyle's comment that "Man's sociality of Nature evinces itself in the unspeakable delight he takes in Biography" (Gittings 15). Gittings then goes on to question "[Carlyle's] somewhat curious phrase 'unspeakable delight'" rather than the commonplace (but equally curious) word "Man." But a feminist history of biographical exclusion reveals the trouble a ruling group goes to, whether consciously or unconsciously, in order to construct and maintain the marginality of its subordinate Other(s).

Harold Nicholson's classic *Development of English Biography* (1928) traces biography's roots to pre-humanist cultures with "the ancient runic inscriptions which celebrated the lives of heroes and recorded the exploits of deceased and legendary warriors" (17), and to old sagas and epics such as those of Beowulf in the seventh century. In the Middle Ages the advent of hagiography (and martyrography) had created a morally didactic agenda for the writer of life-stories. Written lives of female saints and virgins served as exemplars (for the educated classes) throughout

the Middle Ages, but these have a rather dubious connection with contemporary biography as “the centre of interest was never the individual but always the institution” (Nicolson 19). In the ninth century, Bishop Asser’s *Life of Alfred the Great* marks the first Life of an English secular subject, the institutional focus of the hagiography now having come to encompass the Crown as well as the Church. Thus, medieval saints and kings officially acquired an innate nobility marked out by “destiny,” a metaphysical phenomenon that incorporated an inborn propensity for greatness, actualised in life by noble deeds. Because a Great Man *is* great, he naturally goes on to do great things. The life of the common man unfortunately lacked such distinction and the common woman further lacked even the rudimentary distinction of common manhood. Saintry women were, of course, selectively enshrined as role models of the appropriately submissive woman. The use of hagiography continued into the twelfth century (Nicolson 21).

The twelfth century brought an avid interest in the acquisition and recording of historical detail, giving rise to the work of historiographers and chroniclers in “the golden age of the monastic historian” in the thirteenth century (Nicolson 24). Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, in the fourteenth century, appears at the ebb of English patriotic self-absorption, and reflects the Court’s growing interest in the artistic cultures of France and Italy. By this time, English interest in biographical writings had waned in favour of more “imaginative” genres, as the artistic culture(s) of

Europe increasingly fascinated the English court. Thus, through the employment of a fictional form, Chaucer—drawing on his experiences in Europe as a soldier and as envoy of the English Court—peoples his tales with fictional sketches of “commonfolk” such as the Jolly Monk, the thin Oxford Scholar, the Squire and the gentle Knight (depicting types rather than individuals). Female characters comprise The Prioress, The Nun and the Wife of Bath—women distinguished by their conjugal relationship with a man or the notable absence of such.

Subsequently, Italy’s developing intellectual communities were incubating a literary and philosophical movement later known as [Renaissance] humanism, which can be defined as a movement asserting the innate value of human life and positioning “Man” as a central unifying force in nature. This Italian humanism would flourish in Europe in the fifteenth century and reach England by the turn of the sixteenth. Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* of 1516 is a Christian humanist vision of an ideal world of brotherhood and innate “human” worth. *The History of Richard III* (attributed to More, written approximately 1513 and printed in 1543) stands as an early (unfinished) marker in the history of biography. It is the first critical portrait of an individual written in the English language, creating a basis for Shakespeare’s play, *Richard III* some eighty years later. The number of Shakespearean plays bearing the names of individuals for titles is a measure of the influence of humanism and individualism in Renaissance England:

The biography of praise, the laudatory chronicle, was a pre-Renaissance idealization of man under God's rule. The Renaissance, with its emphasis on man as individual, ushered in its opposite. Part of this was the biography of denigration, used, after some successful political coup, to demonstrate not the virtues but the vices of the previous regime and its prime leaders. (Gittings 21-2)

Thus, More's Richard is a villainous king—one who is born into nobility but whose nature is perverted by worldly ambition resulting in excessively evil acts. The seeds of contemporary biography were therefore sown with the humanist combination of destiny through human nature and moral/rational choice.

Another important Renaissance biography is William Roper's *Life of Sir Thomas More* (actually, *The Life, Arraignment, and Death of that Mirrour of all honour and virtue, Sir Thomas More*) written after the latter's execution in 1535 and, because of the controversial nature of its subject's life and death, finally published in 1626 in Paris, where More's family was exiled. By this time, the development of the printing press meant that the book was more widely available than a hand-written manuscript, though not, of course, widely circulated. Nicolson classifies *More* as "the first sustained narrative of an individual's life written in English" (29). Though critical of the writer's bias (Roper was the devoted son-in-law of More) and the story's supposed inaccuracy, Nicolson hails this *Life* as being "eminently readable and eminently vivid," as it contains personal detail not yet seen by Renaissance readers,

and Roper had a flair for written dialogue. George Cavendish's *Life of Wolsey* (1554-7) is also notable as an early contrived (that is, self-consciously artistic) biography:

Both Cavendish and Roper mark an immense advance. . . . The centre of interest, the emphasis of their curiosity, has shifted: they neither of them regard their subjects as types representative of institutions, but as individuals representative of human personality; they are more interested in the internal than the external, in character than in action. It is owing to them that English biography was first differentiated as a species of literary composition distinct from history and romance. (Nicolson 36-7)

Thus, biography has come to focus on "character" and to celebrate human qualities, which divide "Man" from the animal world.

In humanism, Man is, of course, naturally divided from woman by God-given superiority and rulership, and thus there is an absence of Eve(s) in the developing genres of the elevated (formalised) lifestory. For Christian humanists, Man is to be honoured as a fragment of divinity by virtue of his being made in the image of God. Moreover, the Old Testament injunction to Man to "be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish in the sea, the birds of heaven, and every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1.28) incorporates an automatic hierarchy in the Christian humanist premise, whilst maintaining a general ideal of human

equality. Woman is honoured for her purity and selflessness in contrast with, and to complement, Man's autonomous selfness. Renaissance humanism signals the germination of democratic thought but we should not conflate this with egalitarianism. Renaissance Christian humanists posited an elevation of human beings over all other earthly life forms but subject to a kind of "natural" order of things in which each gender achieves salvation by the diligent fulfilment of their respective sex-roles.

Nevertheless, Renaissance humanism has the distinction of originating formal education for women. Thomas More established a family school for his children and some of his friends' children. His daughter, Margaret, was a noted educated woman of her time. It is even said that Margaret Roper's Latin was better than the king's—a delicate and even dangerous situation that called for tact and discretion on the family's part and her own. In Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for All Seasons*, when King Henry remarks "Why, Margaret, they told me you were a scholar," she carefully replies, "Among women I pass for one, Your Grace" (27-8). Renaissance scholarship for women did not have the aim of emancipation; rather, it was to make women more interesting companions for their educated husbands. Nevertheless, Margaret More-Roper and some of her female contemporaries became early participants in the tradition of schooling noblewomen at home in "suitable" academic subjects. Incidentally, as late as 1910, in his Introduction to More's *Utopia* John

O'Hagan delivers the following verdict (originally an address given by Judge O'Hagan to the Catholic Union of Ireland):

There can hardly be a more beautiful picture than that of a husband of high tastes and attainments thus forming and training the mind of a loving and sympathising wife. (Introduction to More xiii)

Thus, relatively recent Christian humanism retains the gender-biased ingredients of its sixteenth-century foundations, notwithstanding its endorsement of spiritual egalitarianism. Significantly, it coincides with, and comes to embrace, a narrative emphasis on the autonomous self (which also hails from individualism) at the root of the biographical life story. Moreover, as feminists would later point out, this selfhood invariably encodes the accepted traits and characteristics of masculinity and the sanctioned male life-course.

Another important Renaissance social development is the rise of the middle, merchant or trade, class. This is not, of course, a rise into respectability, as Shakespeare's disreputable Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* exemplifies. However, it does signify the appearance of the self-developed man through the success of his own worldly efforts, as opposed to a purely spiritual rise to redemption through obedience to God and the sovereign. Thus, merchants, explorers, adventurers and tradesmen became individuals worthy of some interest, in contrast to the non-nobility of the Middle Ages who were simply members of the common herd.

This did not, of course, qualify such commonfolk as suitable subjects for Renaissance biography, but it retrospectively marks out developing discursive circumstances which would come to fruition in bourgeois biography in the capitalism of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In logical progression to these developments, there should have been a continuum of the published lifestory into the seventeenth century, but this was hindered by a partial return to “character sketch” brevity and by a renewed focus on types, characters or temperaments. Bacon’s *Historie of the Reigne of Henry VII* (1621) typifies such an approach. For his part, Bacon claims that this is the history of a specific individual and yet Henry’s character is only vaguely visible in a chronicle of political/historical events which begin with his accession to the throne (Nicolson 38-9). Ironically, however, it is during the seventeenth century that the word “biography” first occurs in the English language—in Dryden’s preface to *Plutarch* in 1683 (Nicolson 70), and in Isaac Walton’s *Lives* (1640-78)—when we first see the biographer as “a conscious artist” (Gittings 26). Thus, “fact” and “art” begin to combine in biography, producing a humanist-style fusion of the “historical” and the “literary” which would, in post-Romantic eras, cause much debate about the nature of biographical truth.

Then, almost a century and a half after *The Life of Thomas More*, the social climate of the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century gave expression to the newly-perceived drama, pathos and general significance of bourgeois life: fair seed time for the genre of the detailed lifestory. The ground had been laid by what many consider to be the first English realist novel, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1701 (Skilton 12; Evans 134-7; Albert 123; Allen 37; Watt 65-105). This new and exciting genre heralded the celebration of the ordinary, but unique, individual man and was born in a time when Enlightenment humanism and the birth of democracy were about to spawn the related, interwoven and contrasting movements of capitalism, empiricism, liberalism, Romanticism and (very significantly for biography) historicism. Indeed, *Robinson Crusoe* takes the form of an autobiographical account, emphasising its individualistic premise. Skilton says that the novel "stood for revolutionary change, for economic individualism, social mobility, trade and industry, and freedom of conscience" (12), so that by the 1840s "the novel had a greater confidence in its own social and political role than ever before or since" (123). During the eighteenth century some biographies appeared, but it was in the novel that the detailed lifestory of the ordinary individual first found its niche. Furthermore, such writers as Dickens, Gaskell and the Brontes did much to focus humane attention on the poor and the dispossessed, pointing the way to the rise of socialism in the twentieth century.

What is now regarded as the breakthrough biography appeared in 1791. James Boswell's much-vaunted *Life of Samuel Johnson*, arguably the most celebrated biography of all time (Fuller 1966, 5; Wolf 125-67, 235; Nicolson 79) undoubtedly because of its extraordinarily detailed and personal approach, was the forerunner of classic and popular biography as it exists today. Boswell was a contemporary and personal friend of his celebrated subject, and was himself a renowned lawyer, poet, diarist and raconteur. The *Life of Johnson* is based on Boswell's extensive diaries, notes and first-hand observations. Harold Nicolson, disparaging of what he considers Boswell's florid, exhibitionist, undisciplined style, instead names Samuel Johnson himself to be "the real founder of pure biography since he was the first to proclaim that biography was a distinct branch of creative literature" (79). Nevertheless, Nicolson acknowledges the annotative and analytical methods that Boswell inscribed into his method of biography, which gave rise to "the Boswell tradition" of so-called intimate biography:

For James Boswell invented actuality; he discovered and perfected a biographical formula in which the narrative could be fused with the pictorial, in which the pictorial in its turn could be rendered in a series of photographs so vividly, and above all so rapidly, projected as to convey an impression of continuity, of progression—in a word, of life. Previous biographers had composed a studio portrait, or at best a succession of lantern-slides. (87)

Thus, Boswell's *Life of Johnson* marks the advent of realist biography, following in the footsteps of the realist novel. The publication of this biography marked a distinct discursive formation in bourgeois humanism; that is, the preoccupation of the post-Industrial English middle-classes with the "self-made man" in capitalism, whose innate human qualities developed over time and effort into a mature character and social leader. So it is that contemporary classic biography is intrinsically concerned with liberal (bourgeois) humanism and the historicism of its era. The focus is on an individual man who is both "born" to greatness through the spirit of humanity but also who, by his own efforts, rises to social greatness in the context of western individualist, humanist, capitalist (and, indeed, patriarchal) culture. And so it is that biography's history is specifically designed to focus on the public lives of exemplary men.

Nevertheless, the liberationist era, retrospectively known as the Enlightenment, represents a gestating moment in (although not the birth of) the women's movement. This may not seem all that remarkable in a socio-political climate of freedom, liberty and brotherhood but (as this account shows) progressive movements in patriarchal societies almost always refer to the progress of man, not woman. Moreover, the intended "libertee" is, specifically, bourgeois man, as he would come to be termed a century later. However, as with the flowering of Second Wave feminism, women inspired by important social justice movements came to apply the tenets of freedom

and equality to their own predicament and to aspire to equality with men. The most famous of these Enlightenment English feminists is, of course, Mary Wollstonecraft whose *Vindication of the Rights of Women* appeared in 1792.

At this time, the (bourgeois) focus on the self-made industrial capitalist created, or at least formalised, a new class distinction between ruling/owning and subordinate classes. This distinction ensured a supply of labour serving the interests of the dominant groups (Marx and Engels 79-94). Ruling/owning classes became overtly associated with public life and related discourses, and subordinate groups (significantly, women of all classes) with private/domestic/unofficial concerns. Put differently, working class men and women continued to have little or no public authorities. Bourgeois women, despite their education, became newly subordinated within the private realm and newly excluded from the public. Marx and Engels identified the *political* connection between class, gender and the dualism of public versus private (101), resulting in the further oppression of both working class and bourgeois women. When the public/private split occurred, bourgeois women became the centre of men's private lives in a much more pronounced fashion than had been the case in pre-modernity. Indeed, in capitalism, western women (especially middle- and upper class women) came to personify the private lives of public men, after which they were additionally positioned as consumers as well as possessions, and guardians of hearth and home. One could say that through the

practice of some education for middle-and upper-class women from the sixteenth century onwards, a biography of a self-developing (bourgeois) woman became at least a hypothetical possibility. However, the genre's pre-modern emphasis on "natural" leadership, and its modern emphasis on *public* achievement in the world of commerce, made official reification of women's lives an unlikely prospect. As Raymond Williams points out, writing structures and practices are always aligned with socio-political experience (*Marxism and Literature*, 45-54) or, in Foucaultian terms, with historically-specific discourse. In the world of biography, the arbitrary separation of the public life from the private was a crucial factor in creating the biographical (public) lifestory as bourgeois and male. This public/private split is evident during the two notable post-Enlightenment periods of (English) biography's extreme popularity. These respectively saw the rise of Victorian biography and the spread of "popular" biography in the 1950s, both known as "golden eras" of biography due to the quantity, if not quality, of third person lifewriting forms (Gittings 39).

Victorian biography combines Boswellian detail with a return to hagiography, resulting in large tomes that catalogue the lives of heroes, leaders and moral exemplars of Victorian society. Because of its preoccupation with accuracy, often in the form of highly mundane realistic detail, Victorian biography is often retrospectively described as very dull and tedious, despite (and because of) its

painstaking scholarly research and its application as a didactic tool (Strachey 10; Nicolson 138). Aesthetic concerns gave way to an extreme emphasis on “the facts” of a life, notwithstanding Victorian biographers’ propensity for ignoring any embarrassing events or circumstances which threatened to spoil the carefully constructed public images of their subjects. The modernist school of New Biography in the 1920s and 30s was highly contemptuous of Victorian biography for these reasons. Harold Nicolson does not deign to discuss the Victorian era, save for a few passing remarks, because he considers the style to be too biased or too sentimental to be “pure biography” and too slavishly empirical (bound to facts) to be literary. Indeed, he considers that the art of biography “collapsed under the Victorians” (138). Similarly, Lytton Strachey says in *Eminent Victorians* that “the art of biography seems to have fallen on evil times in England” (10). Ironically, this era saw a somewhat increased emphasis on women as writers and heroines of novels, if not as subjects of biography. Victorian diaries and journals reflect a growing interest in the publication of women’s lives to cater for educated women readers. The fact that these records did not often extend to “biographies,” as such, suggests that the personal or domestic subject matter, which formed the basis of most Victorian ladies’ lives, was construed as relatively trivial. On the other hand, the extraordinary detail of notable public lives was prevalent enough eventually to attract the disdain of Strachey (10) and Nicolson.

New Biography sought to redress these errors in literary taste by emphasising form over volume. Strachey speaks of “a becoming brevity,” the preservation of which he considers “the first duty of the biograph[er],” the second being to maintain “his own freedom of spirit” (10). In *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf uses form to play with the notion of biographical truth, constructing a fantasy known to be based on (selected and semi-fictionalised) circumstances and characteristics of her close friend, Vita Sackville-West, to whom the book is dedicated, and subtitled “a biography.” Woolf considered biography inferior to fiction, on the basis that the constraints of empirical data are secondary to artistic form, making it the “most restricted of all the arts” (*Collected Essays* 221). Woolf was keenly interested in the boundaries between fact and fiction. The New Biography did much to question the function of genre in the construction of meaning, the nature of truth and the parameters of disciplines. Nicolson points out that the values of a specific era dictate the ways in which biography is perceived and utilised. In religious societies, for example, “biography becomes deductive, ethical, didactic, or merely superficial:”

In periods, however, of speculation, doubt, or scepticism the reading public becomes predominantly interested in human behaviour, and biography, in order to meet this interest, becomes inductive, critical, detached and realistic. (138-9)

New Biography came to the fore in this latter climate of intellectual and artistic cynicism about, and rebellion against, Victorian conservatism. However, modernist art was predominantly an elite intellectual response, as opposed to a grass roots or

popular movement. The predominant effect was that classic biography dwindled in popularity amongst scholars and writers, since the genre had lost empirical ground as “objective” social history and artistic ground as an aesthetic art form. Whilst the Bloomsbury group produced a few exciting *avant garde* works which remain icons of modernist biography, these literary forms largely occupy an “exemplary” generic space, rather than stand at the vanguard of any widespread changes to the association of biography with fact (albeit “biased” fact).

However, the New Biography represents the point at which the critique of modern biography’s stifling conservatism was taken up by feminism, most notably in the personage of Virginia Woolf. Moreover, this point is highly germane to the argument that women’s authority cannot be constructed independently from the forms of representation employed. Woolf’s *Orlando* affirms the link between patriarchal practices and patriarchal structures, an example being the sailor falling from a masthead at the sight of a woman’s ankle (119-122). (The newly female Orlando, pondering on the implications for women, concludes a wider social structure framed in the interests of men.) Despite a long history of women’s tentative, fleeting and constrained ventures into biography, the modernist school represents the first organised moment in which feminism began to demand more than simple equality—in effect, feminist initiatives moved towards changing the *structures* that excluded them. This is not, of course, to say that books like *Orlando*

[have] had the potential to overturn women's subordination simply by critiquing the patriarchal premises of biography. But Woolf's (modernist) writings are clearly forerunners to the work of Second Wave feminists in the (postmodernist) last quarter of this century, wherein representations of women came to the fore as having an enormous political potency in themselves⁹. Again, this is not to credit feminists with the insights of either modernism or postmodernism. Rather, it is to observe that women's occasional, and partial, inclusion in patriarchal structures has not added anything to their authority. But when women have utilised revolutionary discourses to serve their own emancipatory purposes, and, moreover, when those revolutions have attacked exclusive *structures* as well as addressed the fact of women's social exclusion, significant advancement has been made in the quality of women's public authority. Thus, we can reasonably say that much of Woolf's writings (attacking the structures of writing, war, education, marriage and more) stand as landmarks of feminist revolutionary thought. Carolyn Steedman comments:

So, the biographical and autobiographical terrain was a male one, and as late as 1938 Virginia Woolf still understood biography to be the form that served above all others to express and affirm a particular kind of masculinity. ('Decoding' 107).

⁹ Nevertheless, as Drusilla Modjeska points out, even in the 1970s when "the lines between history, biography and fiction [were] being challenged by historians, by critical theorists and fiction writers" the issues of structure, truth and feminism (then and now) have remained prevalent for feminists (I have come round from thinking that the lines can be blurred to thinking that there are distinctions, one should not be passed off as the other, or used to paper over the gaps") (Writers' Week Panel p 32).

This is certainly true of the so-called feminist lifestory, in which she stands as a founder of feminist anti-biography through *Orlando* and her essays on biography.

However, in spite of Woolf's assiduous attacks on patriarchal structures and institutions, there was still no real questioning of the public/private split; nor, indeed, of the tenets of "success" valorised by biography. Though the New Biography presented a critique of modern biography, its practitioners and advocates hailed from within bourgeois circles and therefore (no doubt unconsciously) left many stones unturned and unexamined. For example, Woolf did not question the choice of biographical subjects beyond their gender, or engage in meditations on the nature of feminist biography. Indeed, she considered biography irrevocably constrained by "the facts" and as unquestionably distinct from "fiction" ('The Art of Biography' in *Collected Essays* 221).

Notwithstanding the apparent promise of the New Biography school, classic biography was to undergo a twentieth-century resurgence during the Fifties and Sixties, with the addition of "popular" biography, when new types of heroes and heroines, idols and goddesses, were created by the rise of mass media. In this consumerist climate of new flavours and old styles, war heroes, political leaders and Hollywood stars, and increased access to books and newspapers, radio, film and television, there was a revival of interest in self-determination—in the appeal of

“making good” through capitalism and democracy. Once again, biography became popular for its strong propensity to reflect development and transformation, most especially for individualistic self-development and self-transformation. The endless tracking of the life-course of a “successful person” held the promise of revealing the secrets of success, which anybody could emulate at will. Moreover, women-in-public could be included as biographical subjects without incorporating threats to the (again highly conservative) *status quo* of liberal humanism in a setting of consumer capitalism. Thus, the Fifties and Sixties saw a rise in biographies of women as artists (ballet dancers, opera singers and writers), as secular saints (rescuers, nurses and founders of altruistic organisations) and as actresses, fashion models and pop singers. In Britain, such women as Margot Fonteyn, Julie Andrews, Peggy Ashcroft and members of royalty made excellent visual subjects for lavishly illustrated coffee-table biographies. In America, there was seemingly no end to the public roles in which women could be (and must be) glamorised: First Ladies, for example, and “heiresses,” if not exactly female tycoons (an exception being Joan Crawford’s publicised association with Pepsi Cola). Popular western biography of the Fifties had shed the tedium of Victorian detail but had managed, in its new glossy shapes, to retain all the conservatism with which classic biography was imbued. Women were now more visible but remained marginalised as a gender group—especially so, since the 1950s was a time for notable gender stereotypes, ostensibly as a “return-to-hearth-and-home” reaction to the second world war. Nevertheless, “working girls”

constituted an exciting post-war breed of young women. They had money to spend, and there was clearly a developing market for info-tainment—biographical data about popular heroes and heroines including, for the first time, “pop stars.” Popular biographical forms, then, targeted the young, including teenagers (a brand new social group) wherein teenage girls became notable consumers of gossipy magazines. As gossip, the “biographical” content had a dubious relation to truth, but it nevertheless continued to be seen as closer to fact than fiction—indeed, its appeal was in its claim to yield information about the actual lives of fantastical figures.

It appears that the debate about biography as a purveyor of fact versus biography as an art form is centred on its historical ties with realism and all the political and philosophical implications of realistic non-fiction. The New Biography arose as a reaction to Victorian realism, in a “golden” conservative age of realism in which the reader could seemingly rely on the connection between fact and truth. Similarly, the Fifties consumerist era of the self-made man and the good housewife or glamour queen gave way to the radical movements of the Sixties and Seventies. The realism of popular biography was undermined by anti-humanist and anti-realist postmodernism. The implications for women are comparable to those of modernity: revisionist movements contain much revolutionary promise, but of course turn out, in a patriarchal society, to be more conducive to the interests of men.

This genealogy of the formal or official life-story (based largely on canonical accounts of biography by Strachey [1918], Nicolson [1928] and Gittings [1979]) reflects the extent to which the exclusion of women is anything but a “natural” consequence of their preference for anonymity in the private sphere. Indeed, to a feminist eye it indicates the extent to which the dominant ideology consistently manages to endorse the authority of men at the expense of women. As women gradually gain access to public institutions, discursive conditions change to modify the significance of this access so that women’s authority remains problematic and *relatively* ineffective—relative, that is, to men’s authority, although the overall extent of women’s authority continues to gain strength. This phallogentric phenomenon continues with the advent of postmodernism, in which the life-story itself becomes at once increasingly “popular” but falls into scholastic disrepute as an authorised vehicle of postmodernist knowledge. Women writers and subjects are seen to make substantial gains in the latter half of the twentieth century, yet the issue remains one of problematic authorities to “speak about” the stories of women.

Classic Biography versus Poststructuralist Anti-Humanism

In a postmodern society, which resides in a philosophical climate of poststructuralism, biography finds itself in a theoretical crisis. In *Contesting the Subject*, editor William H. Epstein poses the question:

Isn't postmodernism an antihumanist, neoformalist movement that, among other things, seeks to demystify if not displace subjectivity, authorship, intentionality, facthood, totality, coherence, and other conceptual practices crucial to the recognition of the biographical? (1)

In other words, are not biography and postmodernism antithetical and mutually exclusive? In order to answer this, it is necessary to consider the humanist-inspired premises (specifically codes and conventions) of traditional or classic biography and to compare these with the postmodernist view of them.

In my (unpublished) Honours thesis on the form and reform of biography, I observe that the key determinant of biography is its classification as non-fiction. Within this overall framework, there are "generic prescriptions," to use Heather Dubrow's term (3). These are as follows: firstly, biography functions as a third-person narrative, which implies that the writer is speaking objectively about another party; secondly, biography is a representation of a unified identity which is the core of an individual's "character;" thirdly, a biography represents this life in terms of its human development over time; and fourthly, biography assumes the organic nature of both text and life (Esten 1).

The overall coding of non-fiction comes directly from the traditional view of language as a mere vehicle for a pre-existing reality, a view endorsed by nineteenth-century empiricism. Clearly, since postmodernism disputes any such unmediated

possibility, the grounds for writing the true story of a real person are substantially undermined at the outset. The biographical code creating an objective third-person narrator is the textual practice that perpetuates this empiricist claim to truth or fact. This device effectively posits a clear separation between teller and tale that traditionally is not an assumption applied to the writing of “fiction.” Postmodernism disputes all such arbitrary boundaries on the premise that “reality” is plural, subjective and contingent and never absolute or fixed. Therefore the division between fact and fiction is inevitably problematised at the outset, creating fundamental postmodernist conflicts with biography as the true story of a real person.

The second biographical code posits the textual representation of a unified identity. Again, poststructuralism negates the existence of this concept in favour of “subjectivity.” That is, where “identity” suggests the permanent, strictly individual and recognisable wholeness of the subject of biography, poststructuralism emphasises the subjective, changing, pluralistic, contingent and cultural formation of subjectivity. In these terms, biography loses all claim to be “capturing” anything but the biographer’s impression which may or may not coincide with the views of the reader or, indeed, of the subject. Moreover, the biographer must inevitably take responsibility for the creation of more myths around the chosen subject, rather than

stripping away false myths and exposing the true identity of the subject, as is frequently claimed.

Thirdly, the textual representation of an unfolding life in terms of its human development over time posits the notion of linear progress (or its antithetical form, deterioration). Part and parcel of such progress is the accompanying notion of “destiny” which is common to classic biography. The biographer begins with the reason for the subject’s fame or notoriety, and retrospectively traces this continuous thread through the lifestory, offering evidence that the biographical subject was born to a certain fate. (It helps if the subject is dead by the end of the story, the better to secure a symmetrical closure.) Western concepts of developmentalism are, of course, heavily influenced by Christianity: by the image of the human journey across a life-span in which the individual either gains spiritual enlightenment or morally degenerates according to “his” actions. From the late eighteenth century onwards developmental theories abounded, so that Darwin’s theory of evolution and Freud’s theory of the growth of the personality reinforced Wordsworth’s observation that “the child is father of the man” (“My Heart Leaps Up” 1807, *Norton* 551). However, within poststructuralist literary theory of the mid-twentieth century, such a conveniently linear shape of the life-story is seen as no more than narrative construction, the aesthetic ordering of the so-called facts to suit the writer’s hypothesis, as in “history” (Foucault, *Archaeology* 3-17). The narrative process itself

creates a linking of cause-and-effect. In contrast, postmodernist biographies seek to disrupt the linear time frame, in order to subvert humanist assumptions of natural progression.

The fourth convention of classic biography is the assumption of the organic nature of text and life. This convention is clearly borrowed from Romantic humanism, in which all that is “natural” automatically takes the shape of an organic whole. This metaphor of the living organism, then, is classically applied to the physical, mental and spiritual human being, to human life and, finally, to the lifestory, so that the biographical text is seen somehow to mirror the holistic experience of human life as a part of the natural world. Again, such convenient completeness is entirely rejected by postmodernism, which instead emphasises the gaps, subjectivity, myopic perspective and, indeed, effective “fictionality” of any biography.

It would appear, then, that the inherent humanism and empiricism which form the philosophical roots of classic biography are indeed at odds with a postmodernist view of both “life” and text as socially constructed, fragmented, subjective and partial. Postmodernist “anti-biography” in its various forms attempts to invert or subvert the conventions of classic humanist biography, in order to expose humanist assumptions as fraudulent claims to tell the truth about a real person. Two interesting examples of Australian anti-biographies, which approach this task of

simultaneous inversion/critique of classic biography and the construction of a more politically/theoretically acceptable form of portrait production, are Humphrey McQueen's *Suburbs of the Sacred* and Brian Matthews' *Louisa*.

Australian journalist and writer Humphrey McQueen adopts, in his postmodernist biography of artist Keith Looby, a strategy intended to de-individualise the subject by showing him to produce, and also to be produced by, social forces and circumstances of his times:

Suburbs of the Sacred locates Looby within his society by showing him as an active participant in the remaking of social relationships, as well as being on the receiving end of some events that are almost totally beyond his control. Those events and social relationships have distinct histories that cannot dissolve into a mass labelled 'society'. Organising the details of his life around themes will not deliver the 'real' Keith Looby, though it might bring us up against the limits of what it is possible to know about anyone. (3)

McQueen's anti-biography of Looby is, by its inversion of classic biographical conventions, a meta-text that acts as a critique of traditional biographical practices in order to emphasise their false claims:

Despite inherent shortcomings, books about individual artists remain the most usual kind of commentary on Australian painting. Such monographs often begin with the artist's ancestors, seeking out some grandparent who sketched, before proceeding in chronological order to sew together personal details, a catalogue of the major works, comments

from contemporary critics and stray references to other cultural events, perhaps even social, political or economic ones. Such books are divided into time-slots that get the artist buried and the author to a final page. No matter how well such monographs are researched or written, they cannot escape from the inadequacies of grouping information around one human body, and arranging those details according to that body's movement from birth towards death. To do so is to mistake physiology for history. A life story offers a false unity and a fake progress, failings that cannot be overcome by adding in more of the social context. (McQueen 4)

Suburbs of the Sacred amounts to a discussion of the cultural myths surrounding Australian suburbia. McQueen attempts to locate Looby as both a product of, and a contributor to, such mythology. This approach foregrounds the social construction of Looby's identity, thereby presenting the individual as simultaneously active and passive in the ongoing process of self-creation:

To turn aside from the conventions of biography is not to abandon interest in subjectivity. Rather, it is to allow for a genuine subjectivity, one that is not reflected back from isolated individuals, but is carried forward by historical actors who help to create themselves and society anew. (4)

In this way, a postmodernist writer works with conventional tools, but attempts to use them against the grain; that is, as a means of exposing, even shaming, the old pretences of truth upheld in classic biography. This amounts to an inversion of tradition because anti-biography stands as a deconstructive reaction to biography and

therefore as a critique of the classic tradition. However, the biographer still stands outside the text, speaking as a kind of expert on culture, if not on Looby's life experience.

In contrast, Brian Matthews' *Louisa*, a lifestory of Australian feminist Louisa Lawson, places the author inside the text, allowing him(self) to appear vulnerable and presenting him as a social construct. This much-acclaimed book was considered a groundbreaking anti-biography (Usher 13; Wheatley 155-64; Pierce 15). *The Canberra Times*, quoted on the dust jacket, describes the text as paradoxically "building an unforgettable portrait and undermining all the certainties of biographical narrative." The narrator portrays himself as a victim of conservative social values that construct narratives and then interpret them as truth. He ruminates on his entrapment, and then "solves" his dilemma by establishing himself as three separate identities: "I," "the biographer" and "Owen Stevens." To each of these identities he ascribes quite separate and sometimes conflicting agendas, as he seeks a feasible textual reality in which to present the emerging portrait of Louisa Lawson. In doing so, Matthews emphasises the subjective nature of the biographical narrative, in which the actual subject is produced by the various social and psychological needs and conditionings of those who discuss her and who try to establish an aesthetically pleasing textual identity from her various images:

Each protagonist, by his own special and fantastic means, and in the ultimate act of biography, both creates and records the life of the other self. We do this very thing in our dreams, where we are always two people: on the one hand, observer/narrator; on the other, protagonist. In our dreams we are always conscious of our role as a shadowy watcher, through whom the 'story' is somehow flowing, while at the same time we are the protagonist—experiencing the same events we are watching. And then there is the third self: the recumbent figure sleeping, the dreamer. (Matthews 13)

Matthews' *Louisa* is a contradictory and, in many ways, confusing portrait of a strong identifiable personality and a multi-faceted mythical heroine which her biographer constructs through his view of her work:

Her poetry, unlike Henry [Lawson's] sprawling and raggedly diverse output, shows consistently the influences of a controlling, unifying vision: it is a vision of the many faces of woman—mother, daughter, lover, victim, independent spirit, wife, suppliant. And each face is also Louisa's face. (232)

Thus, Matthews' biographical portrait emphasises the plurality of "identity," together with the active presence of the biographer in the shaping of that image.

This problematising of stable fact and truth is, of course, a significant feature (and effect) of postmodernist theory. Terry Eagleton says that, in poststructuralism, the signifier is divided from the signified (128). This is the core concept that, in turn,

divides poststructuralism from the neat, enclosed, self-referential linguistic system of Saussure, in which *the* meaning (the signified) is produced by the signifier in the mind of the reader or beholder. In contrast, in the poststructuralist world, nothing is stable or simple:

Meaning, if you like, is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers: it cannot be easily nailed down, it is never fully present in any one sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together. Reading a text is more like tracing this process of constant flickering than it is like counting the beads on a necklace. (Eagleton 128)

Thus, meaning becomes pluralised :

Instead of being a well-defined, clearly demarcated structure containing symmetrical units of signifiers and signifieds, it now begins to look much more like a sprawling limitless web where there is a constant interchange and circulation of elements, where none of the elements is absolutely definable and where everything is caught up and traced through by every thing else. (129)

Such theories of fragmentation have induced a head-on collision between the theoretical stability of liberal humanism (every life has a meaning) and postmodernist chaos (individuality is a politically convenient ruse). Such theories have greatly undermined the authority vested in “the author,” at a time when women have begun substantially to access the published life-story as a means of establishing

cultural authority through the subsumption of formerly buried (discarded) knowledges.

Biography, Anti-Biography and Feminisms

Some female biographers have embraced the structures of classic biography, together with its textual anomalies and conflicts, and despite its inherently masculine-oriented structure. They have attempted to shape the lives of female subjects into conventional biographical lifestories. From the nineteenth century onwards (the era of the western bourgeois revolution), women have been variously enthused, puzzled, attracted and repelled by the practice of public lifestorying and their own relations to it. If women write, and if women have stories to tell about other women's lives, why is the genre of biography so incongruous with the cultural experiences of womanhood? By way of engagement with this question, I will discuss four biographies by women, three of which are also about women and one of which is ostensibly about a dog¹⁰, which are chosen to represent three distinctive periods of literary/philosophical western history. These are: Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857), written during the first age of widespread classic or humanist biography, which has been a catalyst for considerable biographical debate about representation of the [Victorian] subject; two mock biographies by Virginia

¹⁰ The story of Flush, Elizabeth Barratt's famous cocker spaniel, is really the story of his mistress, to which Flush is witness.

Woolf—*Flush: the Biography of a Dog*, largely ignored by literary critics, and *Orlando*. Woolf's texts hail from the New Biography school of the 1920s and 30s and herein represent the modernist school's resistance to Victorian biography. Finally Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* (1993), a contemporary text on the posthumous public life of Sylvia Plath, deconstructs the process of biographical myth-creation from a writer's view of other writers, and represents the postmodernist era and style(s). Curiously, this text critiques both classic and postmodernist biography. These texts are explored not because they are necessarily "typical" of anything (although they do represent a variety of styles within their socio-historical contexts), but more because their authors use the respective Life or anti-Life to work as a stand for, or against, the genre of biography as well as the values implicated by textual form. Gaskell, for example, is emphatic about biography's role in hailing the subject as a role model (of Christian womanhood), whereas Woolf's semi-fictitious biographical subjects deliberately call the genre into disrepute through satire. For her part, Malcom makes a point of sidestepping traditional schemata whilst at the same time critiquing biographers themselves.

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, according to Edel, is "the first successful biography by and about a woman" (125). Within a generic discipline that routinely employs superlatives, Gaskell's *Life* has been called "the best English biography of the nineteenth century" (Gittings 36), but it has also been denigrated as

gushing, inaccurate (Nadel 127) and dishonest and therefore sometimes dismissed as inconsequential (Nicolson 140; Barker 792-7). For example, in the light of the book's notoriety it is conspicuous in its absence from A.O.J. Cockshutt's *Truth to Life: The Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century* (Shelston in Gaskell 16).

Elizabeth (or "Mrs") Gaskell, a Victorian novelist, was a friend of Charlotte Brontë, and it is believed that she wrote the biography at the request of Patrick Brontë who wanted a tribute to his deceased daughter's memory¹¹. Patrick Brontë also hoped that the production of an authorised biography would quell the flood of public interest attracted to the family by rumours about Charlotte's life although, of course, interest subsequently increased. Mrs Gaskell brought to the two hefty volumes that ensued a missionary zeal and an application to detail that yielded a (then) unusually personal portrait of a lonely, reclusive but tough-minded Victorian woman novelist. Gaskell's aim was to emphasise the domestic, or rather "interior," Charlotte because "I am sure the more fully she—Charlotte Brontë—the friend, the daughter, the sister, the wife is known . . . the more highly she will be appreciated" (qtd. in Barker 784). It would appear that Gaskell is not necessarily suggesting a deeper connection between life and art in the case of women writers; rather, she presents Brontë's life as itself a piece of Gothic fiction rooted in reality. To shape her novelistic biography, and to

¹¹ Juliet Barker in *The Brontës*, disputes this (780-82), saying instead that Ellen Nussey originally proposed the Gaskell biography.

preserve the respectability of her heroine, Gaskell is known to have suppressed contentious or inconvenient pieces of data; in particular, she expunged evidence of Brontë's infatuation with her married Brussels teacher, Clementin Heger, and also the cheerful influence in the Brontë household of a young curate called William Weightman. The latter presumably did not fit Gaskell's picture of unrelenting gloom and pathos. The basis of this real-life fiction was Gaskell's apparent wish to present Brontë as an icon of Victorian Christian piety. Nevertheless, to many readers and critics the detailed and eloquent focus on character that results from Gaskell's personal knowledge, insight, research and imagination is riveting. Says Gittings, "Charlotte emerges as a real smouldering person, a credible creator of the barely-concealed and sometimes quite unconcealed passions of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*" (36).

But the New Biography school would later despise what they saw as the pretension of Victorian biography with its minute detail and moral prudery. Lytton Strachey wrote contemptuously of such works:

Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead—who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design? They are as familiar as the cortege of the undertaker, and wear the same air of slow, funereal barbarism. (10)

Similarly, Harold Nicolson wrote of “religious earnestness which is responsible for the catastrophic failure of Victorian biography” (111). Nicolson pointedly omits Gaskell’s *Life* from his “pure biography” inventory in *The Development of English Biography*:

I have dismissed Mrs Gaskell’s *Charlotte Brontë*, since, in sacrificing truth to sentimentality, those amiable though misleading volumes fall under the heading of historical fiction. (140)

Penguin editor Alan Shelston also speaks of the inaccuracies and omissions of the biography:

There are, one suspects, whole aspects of Charlotte Brontë’s character, for example, which Mrs Gaskell preferred to play down or to interpret in the light of her unfaltering belief in her subject’s perfection. (Gaskell 36)

However, Shelston clearly feels that New Biography condemnation of the work has been unjust:

None of its shortcomings can undermine the literary achievement that the *Life* represents. Far more intimate, far more imaginative, and far more controlled, in artistic terms, than those works of Victorian hagiography that Strachey derided. (36)

But criticism of Gaskell’s distortion of her subject’s life persists. In a recent highly detailed biography of *The Brontës*, Juliet Barker is similarly scathing of Mrs. Gaskell, portraying her as a careless and self-indulgent “scandalmonger” (792). In effect, no biography since Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* has received, and still

receives, such literary tribute and vilification as Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* and the book remains an icon in mainstream history of biography and also, necessarily, in any feminist history of biography. It therefore warrants some further consideration of its impact.

Mrs Gaskell demonstrates the kind of woman's relation to classic biography that, ironically, both humanist literary critics and "realist" feminists (whether from liberal humanist or Marxist/socialist perspectives) endorse for different reasons. That is to say, all of these schools of thought embrace realist concepts of truth versus fiction, and cling to espousals of "appropriate" role models which ostensibly emanate from the kind of social values these theorists seek to promote, whether these be conservative liberal, conservative Marxist or feminist. On reflection, the political motivation behind such classic biographies (meaning the goal of producing liberal humanist, capitalist or socialist heroes/role-models) is obvious, and yet such literary character portraits are invariably presented as being value-free. Of course there is a didactic agenda in this kind of classic biography that is not unlike the hagiography of the Middle Ages, but it masquerades as critical or objective biography because it implies that its underlying values are universal, or at least morally superior. For her part, Mrs Gaskell presents a "woman's view" of her female subject from her own personal and cultural experience as a Victorian woman novelist, speaking in detail about family relationships, the restrictions of a Victorian woman's life and the

demands of propriety and religion. She carefully gauges the expectations of her readers and caters for them in eloquent form, allowing Victorian society at once the opportunity of seeing itself validated and of questioning, to some extent, the narrowness of its own restraints; hence, the book's popularity and hence the popularity of biographies which fulfil similar tasks today. Biographies *conserve* so that the readership may see itself and its values reflected positively in the main and, to some lesser extent, questioned and challenged but ultimately restored. This is the standard recipe by means of which they are acceptable to their contemporaries and simultaneously hailed as new or special.

The Life of Charlotte Brontë reflects this pattern. Although a friend and admirer of Brontë, Gaskell was evidently disturbed by the controversial reputation that her subject had attracted. Brontë's literary aim was clearly a revolutionary one: for example, although she emphasises the Christian piety and sobriety of Jane Eyre, the girl's fiery independence and undisguised passion are the real causes of her mistreatment by harsh purists. *Jane Eyre* is an overt attack on Victorian prudery, both religious and social:

Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion

These things and deeds are diametrically opposed: they are as distinct as is vice from virtue. Men too often confound them. (Brontë vii)

Brontë is well aware of the controversy of her work and does not flinch from its probable outcome:

The world may not like to see these ideas dissevered, for it has been accustomed to blend them; finding it convenient to make external show pass for sterling worth—to let whitewashed walls vouch for clean shrines. It may hate him who dares to scrutinise and expose, to raise the gilding and show base metal under it, to penetrate the sepulchre and reveal charnel relics; but hate as it will, it is indebted to him. (viii)

Gaskell, however, takes it upon herself as biographer to whitewash Brontë's politics into fitting the acceptable image of Victorian womanhood. This she achieves by emphasising the evangelistic mission behind the creation of Brontë's controversial heroines (that is, Brontë's womanly Christian goodness) and the patience and unselfishness with which Brontë endured her bleak life. Gaskell anticipates the dangers in allowing the inflammatory potential of Brontë's writing to create her subject as unworthy, unstable or aberrant. Her mission is to rescue her esteemed friend from misunderstanding and eventual oblivion and to establish her, through the "evidence" presented by the biographical text, as a true heroine of her times. No doubt the discrete suppression of some awkward fragments from Brontë's past seemed as justified to Gaskell the biographer as to Gaskell the novelist. However, in so doing she unwittingly betrays her subject, flying in the face of Brontë's courageous stand on truth versus conventionality in order to defer to Victorian respectability. Paradoxically, Gaskell has also been accused of sensationalising the

Brontës' quiet, bookish lives but, if she has done so, it is perhaps in order to create an effect of Gothic pathos, rather than titillation.

It is improbable that Gaskell saw herself as feminist, even in Victorian concepts of women's liberation, since the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* apparently valorises female sobriety and subservience in traditionally Victorian Christian ways. Yet the *Life* can be retrospectively viewed as a laudable achievement in contemporary feminist terms. Gaskell has taken a significant, controversial woman of the times and transformed her "story" into biography. This act indeed enshrines Charlotte Brontë as a female cultural icon. It also enshrines the biographer as a notable woman achiever. In addition, Gaskell has written Brontë's biography from the point of view of a "woman's life," avoiding arbitrary distinction between the public and private Charlotte, between her life and work as was, and is, usual in biographies of men. Thus, the *Life* is indeed a forerunner in the notion of "woman's experience" as a basis for women's lifewriting, an approach that very much includes the personal or interior life as relevant to politically-motivated and public acts, and which resurges in the political context of Second Wave Feminism in the 1970s. Gaskell also approaches her task with insight and knowledge, following the developmentalist or historicist line that remains very relevant to the disciplines of psychology, sociology and historiography today, and which trace the development of an educated woman.

For example, in this excerpt we retrospectively follow the unfolding line of childhood education and family environment:

[The Brontë children] took a vivid interest in the public characters, and the local and foreign politics discussed in the newspapers. Long before Maria Brontë died, at the age of eleven, her father used to say he could converse with her on any of the leading topics of the day with as much freedom and pleasure as with any grown-up person. (Gaskell 95)

This is just a fragment of the fascinating insights we now have into the intellectual, social and psychological goings-on in the Brontë household—the kind of information for which we are greatly indebted to biographers, as Virginia Woolf herself has pointed out (*Collected Essays* 227). It would be churlish, at best, not to recognise the important role that biography plays in the historiography of women—a role rejected by other social historians of every patriarchal age. Gaskell also emphasises the sisterly motivation for her task. Brontë’s father for this very reason commissioned the biography, and it includes many letters sent to Gaskell by Brontë (“It is with a sad, proud pleasure I copy her words of friendship now”) (492). For these reasons, it is folly to dismiss the *Life* as reactionary or trivial or, indeed, as non-feminist, though it may not have done full justice to the fiery spirit of Charlotte Brontë. Such Victorian fiestiness is, of course, tempered by the times. Jane Eyre’s is suitably modified by her own brand of submissiveness to Victorian patriarchy, as symbolised by the now-famous line, “Reader, I married him” (Brontë 552).

The constraints and demands of the biographical form necessarily require some significant compromises. Biography is, above all, a literary act and, as such, is fundamentally concerned with aesthetics. The balancing of what must finally appear both reasonably objective and reasonably truthful involves not only judicious pruning of available “facts” but also the suppression of inconvenient matter. As Victoria Glendinning points out, “In fact this is what happens . . . in the writing of biography. We do not have much choice about lies and silences. They accrue whether we will it or not” (49). Mostly, it must be borne in mind that the objective of Victorian biography in the first place is the production of role models in the moral sense of the word. If Charlotte Brontë were not preselected as suitable for this function, then she would not have been appropriate material for a biographical subject. The “shape” of her written lifestory is therefore preordained to a great extent by the expectations of the genre. Biography is an intrinsically conservative genre, regardless of the extent to which its contents are “controversial.” Somehow, the biographer must ensure (and is, indeed, predisposed to ensure) that the biographical subject is made to fit the role for which s/he has been cast. Apparently this is why Gaskell suppressed evidence of Brontë’s love for Clementin Heger, in the awareness that this would probably overstretch the already “shocking” reputation that Bronte had acquired, in which event Gaskell would have failed to secure an

empathetic readership for her book.¹²

Whilst much Victorian biography now seems prudish and even faint-hearted in its restraint, Marxist theorist Raymond Williams points out that a large amount of “residual” content (established values) necessarily makes up the basis of any present culture (and therefore, presumably, of any cultural artefact or process). This is in order for the present culture to make sense of, and accept, anything that is “new.” This new or “emergent” content “will in most cases have had to be incorporated if the effective dominant culture is to make sense in these areas” (Williams 123). Williams nevertheless discusses the problems of trying to separate the various diachronic strands:

It is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture . . . and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it: emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely novel. Since we are always considering relations within a cultural process, definitions of the emergent, as of the residual, can be made only in relation to a full sense of the dominant.
(123)

Thus, as a genre which is traditionally set to uphold or valorise bourgeois culture by

¹² See also Barker’s comments of Gaskell’s misuse of letters in *The Brontës* (792-5). Indeed, Barker devotes an entire chapter (“Saintliness, Treason and Plot”) to what she considers Gaskell’s reprehensible mismanagement of Charlotte Brontë’s reputation and of the Brontë family’s interests.

idealising its role models, Victorian biography (and, to a lesser extent, fiction) could not be acclaimed or, indeed, accepted, unless it was largely *conservative* in its content. For Victorian readers excessive or inappropriately directed passion is taboo. Then, of course, there is the opposite problem of presenting a woman's life as dramatic enough to satisfy the demands of biographical conventions which are geared to public life, whilst also grappling with the limits of language in discussing the interior or 'soul-life' of a writer in a genre that deals largely with externals. In these terms, the *Life* was undeniably a ground-breaker in its presentation of a writer's interior life, though it also visibly demonstrates the limits of biography to do full justice to the complexities and subtleties of Charlotte's experience.

As previously observed, the New Biography school rejected and scorned the conformity, prudery and, indeed, garrulousness of Victorian biography. Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* stands as the ultimate critique of such classic biography in its laconic brevity and incisiveness. Virginia Woolf makes this same point by producing an obvious literary fantasy which is nevertheless known to be based on the character of Vita Sackville-West, peer, friend and one-time lover of Woolf, ambiguously entitled *Orlando, a biography* (1928). *Orlando* blends the techniques of two genres: biography and the novel.

This hybrid genre defies the reader to sort fiction from non-fiction, as a testament to Woolf's avowal that "pure biography" really presents to its readers the identical problems as those of fiction although it lays claim to absolute truth. Throughout, "the biographer" is foregrounded in the text, generally in a derisive tone:

Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand disagreeables that it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore. (13)

This kind of derision continues throughout the text:

The biographer is now faced with a difficulty that it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over. Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads. (51)

To Woolf, biography is inferior to fiction which, as a more elevated art form, captures truth more readily; truth, that is, of a deeper nature than can be redeemed from mere "fact." Thus, Woolf creates a vehicle in which the truth about her subject, whether this be Orlando or Vita Sackville-West, is only suggested in rainbow-like fragments of imagery rather than nailed down by hard evidence.

Orlando is, at the book's outset, a young nobleman in the court of Elizabeth 1, for whom he is a special favourite because of his good looks and charm. Elizabeth

makes gifts of fine estates and honours, and he goes on to pursue an adventurous life as ambassador in Turkey, searching for love and truth. However, fate dictates that Orlando fall into a sudden deep and mysterious sleep, and when he awakes he discovers himself now to be a woman. In female form, Orlando perceives her life to have an altogether different meaning and flavour. Thus, a central theme of the book is an exploration of gender and its meanings across time, as the woman Orlando lives and loves across the centuries, surviving for some three hundred years and diachronically experiencing patriarchal societies in their various forms. The second overt theme is, of course, a critique of the biographical process. Seen from another angle, the book's twin motifs of truth (fact versus fiction) and experience (which is located in specific bodies within specific social contexts) amount to a formidable critique of patriarchal empiricism and the so-called facts it upholds and generates.

In tandem (and to some extent in contrast), Woolf later wrote *Flush, the Biography of a Dog*. Although *Flush* and *Orlando* are both undisguised fantasies whimsically called biography, *Flush* does not *contain* criticism of biography; rather, it demands to be read as such throughout because it is a parody of straight or classic biography. Enshrined in literary and movie fable (and even in a stage musical), Flush was the adored pet and companion of Elizabeth Barrett throughout her lonely invalid days in London, her courtship with Robert Browning and her married life in Italy. Since he rarely left his mistress's side, Flush is an important eyewitness to the events at

Wimpole Street and beyond. This, then, is the justification for Flush as biographical subject: he has been a participant in another famous story and therefore must be important in himself—not the most promising of biographical beginnings but certainly not uncommon. (Duller subjects have undoubtedly been selected on flimsier grounds.) Woolf sets about tracing Flush's impressive pedigree and development into a significant historical figure. It is, at times, obviously difficult to fashion the paper-thin raw material of Flush's life into an eventful real-life tale, but the biographer does so by applying what we realise must be the usual bluffing and padding techniques of the biography business.

Woolf, like Strachey, was a great supporter of biography as well as a critic of it and, of course, they were both serious biographers in their own right. In her essay, "The Art of Biography," Woolf says:

The biographer must go ahead of the rest of us, like the miner's canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality and the presence of obsolete conventions. His sense of truth must be alive and on tiptoe.

(Woolf, *Collected Essays* 226)

Thus, some eighty years after Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, the emphasis is still on biography and truth. Yet the truth of modernism allows somewhat more room for manoeuvre because it perceives the authentic truth as residing in art and not fact, in imagination and not information, or (as Woolf puts it) in rainbow and not granite:

We live in an age when a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters, and diaries, at every character from every angle. [The biographer] must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face. Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking-glasses at odd corners. And yet from all this diversity it will bring out, not a riot of confusion, but a richer unity. And again, since so much is known that used to be unknown, the question now inevitably asks itself, whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Is not anyone who has lived a life and left a record of that life, worthy of biography—the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what smallness? He must revise our standards of merit and set up new heroes for our admiration. (Woolf, ‘Granite and Rainbow’ in *Collected Essays* 226-7)

Modernism, then, questions many of the “givens” of classic biography and seeks progress. Woolf describes this as a change in the role of biographer, a shift from adoring follower of her/his subject to equal (*Collected Essays* 231). This, of course, coincides with First Wave feminism that demands an increased female presence in line with the male, and yet it seems plain that the very methods and forms of biography are still somehow connected to the male experience. John Graham (commenting on *Orlando*) elucidates:

The absurdities of the biographer are the absurdities of the whole approach to things which [Woolf] considered typically masculine: the pompous self-importance; the childish faith in facts, dates, documents, and “evidence;” the reduction of truth to the logical conclusions

deducible from such evidence; and the reluctance to deal with such nebulous aspects of life as passion, dream, and imagination. (Graham 107)

Carolyn Steedman concurs through her comment on Woolf associating biography with masculinity ('Decoding' 109).

It is curious that while the subjects of Woolf's two mock biographies are a woman and an animal, the subject of her only straight biography (Roger Fry) is a man. Thus, we never see Woolf tackle the issues of the New Biography and feminism in practice; nor did New Biography produce any such non-fictional feminist work. From this we may be tempted to deduce that, for Woolf, women are closer to truth and men to fact; furthermore, that modernist truth lies essentially in fiction because fiction is "art" and, therefore, biography can never aspire to significant truth, though it can aspire to moments of truth when it uses fact sparingly and imaginatively. At the same time, Woolf considered biography an indispensable, if relatively lowly, aesthetic form:

We come to the conclusion that [the biographer] is a craftsman, not an artist; and his work is not a work of art, but something betwixt and between. Yet on that lower level the work of the biographer is invaluable; we cannot thank him sufficiently for what he does for us. For we are incapable of living wholly in the intense world of the imagination. (*Collected Essays* 227)

For New Biographers, the “solution” was for biography to be content with its lowlier role as “a restricted art” and to concentrate on eliminating the bulk of dreary fact that made Victorian biography so pompous and so dull. A biographer may not aspire to the “immortality which the artist now and then achieves for his creations” (*Collected Essays* 227) but s/he may achieve a modest degree of aestheticism by aspiring to briefer and more incisive sketches than the tomes that Victorian biography had the temerity to inflict upon its stupefied readers. Therein lies some modest recognition of the biographical hack, perhaps, but no further potential for feminists grappling with the conundrum of what constitutes effective women’s lifestories. Nevertheless, the modernist school of literature began the emphasis on form as opposed to mere “content.” It lessened reliance on “reality” or rigid fact in writing, shifting the emphasis instead to images that stay in the mind of the reader. And, as has been observed, it enabled feminists to equate patriarchal practices with patriarchal structures. Thus, modernist biography’s real gift to feminism was an active critique of the genre’s oppressive tendencies to enshrine politically convenient “fact” as simple truth.

Postmodernist biography has developed from this point of resistance against crude foundationalism into a displacement of the very concept of truth. Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman* may arguably be termed a postmodernist biography largely because it ingeniously negotiates the issue of fact versus myth, rumour or speculation

in a way that foregrounds conflicting truths and realities. It is “biography” because it still purports to be a true story of a real person. However, it is transgressive both in a modernist and postmodernist sense because it is also an overt critique of the biographical process, continuing the modernist interest in subversive structures. The widely known (one might say “overdetermined”) story of Sylvia Plath acts as a backdrop to the book, rather than its central focus. Following a brief but illustrious career as a writer and poet, and a long period of struggle to balance this work and identity with her marriage (to Poet Laureate, Ted Hughes), and parenting of two young children, expatriate American writer Sylvia Plath committed suicide in London in 1963. In *The Silent Woman* Janet Malcolm traces the afterlife of Plath, the possessive (not to say obsessive) control of her estate by Plath’s widower Ted Hughes and his sister Olwyn Hughes, and the various efforts of biographers to access and tell her story. Malcolm also discusses her own experiences as Plath’s latest biographer, criticising such important features of biography as the public/private split and the violence of the biographical act:

Biography is the medium through which the remaining secrets of the famous dead are taken from them and dumped out in full view of the world. The biographer at work, indeed, is like the professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewellery and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away. The voyeurism and busybodyism that impel writers and readers of biography alike are obscured by an apparatus of scholarship designed to give the enterprise an appearance of banklike

blandness and solidity. The biographer is portrayed almost as a kind of benefactor. (8-9)

This, Malcolm says, is the only explanation for biography's popularity: the reader enjoys the brutal act of transgression and voyeurism and is enabled to engage in denial (by the codes of biography) that such brutality is really taking place. Instead of concentrating directly on her biographical subject, Malcolm runs a circuitous course through a detailed commentary on Plath's five biographers, their work and their often-fraught relationship with the guardians of Plath's estate. She is thus one step back from biography itself. Indeed we, the readers, find ourselves observing an observer of an observer of an observer (that is, following the tactics of a journalist critiquing biographers of a dead writer). It is a tantalising idea, filled with multifaceted postmodernist potential, but for me the question is: does *The Silent Woman* present itself as a text which is itself subjective, contingent, partial and flawed, or does it ultimately maintain the game of traditional biography by asserting an implied final authority? In the final analysis, my impression is the latter. Malcolm's narrative voice provides a very authoritative commentary:

Bitter Fame . . . is by far the most intelligent and the only aesthetically satisfying of the five biographies of Plath written to date. (10)

This commanding voice is acceptable on some levels. Malcolm is a professional and her job is to critique those writers she is discussing. Yet she does not shy away from quite heavy-handed judgements on individuals:

Olwyn seems motivated purely by an instinct to protect her younger brother's interests and uphold the honor of the family, and she pursues this aim with reckless selflessness. Her frantic activity makes one think of a mother quail courageously flying into the face of a predator to divert him from the chicks scurrying to safety. (31)

Malcolm clearly recognizes and identifies this biographical phenomenon:

I felt there was something here that illustrated a problem of biography—the problem of how to write about people who can no longer change their contemporaries' perception of them, who are discovered frozen in certain unnatural or unpleasant attitudes, like characters in tableaux vivants or people in snap-shots with their mouths open. (71)

However, she indicates that this is a problem in biographing the dead, and says that a biographer of the living has an opportunity to change this frozen vision. What she does not say, or really address, is that the second or subsequent biography, whatever its form, inevitably produces just another “snap-shot” which merely alters or replaces the first. Thus, whilst *The Silent Woman* is a fascinating insight into biographers and biography, it does not reflect a radical change in objectivist constructions of the biographer as expert and merely replaces male authority with female whilst, at the same time, suggesting that such authority is unjust.

Postmodernist writers, then, apparently seek to undermine hierarchical structures, although male theorists rarely turn their attention to dismantling patriarchy. The force of postmodernism is largely in its propensity for deconstructing established

systems. Commenting on the literary implications of this, Sharon O'Brien has said that "new challenges to the notion of the self now coming from a variety of theoretical directions—primarily deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis—question the very existence of biography as a genre" (O'Brien 125). Postmodernism has had an enormous impact on the theoretical world, and the process of deconstruction has yielded highly valuable insights into the power-laden effects of language. Many women are drawn to postmodernist positions as they allow them to speak from a place that is fairly specific to themselves. In other words, their authority is limited and therefore limits pretensions of omniscience. Nevertheless, anti-biography, like classic biography, has failed to offer feminists a positive place from which to tell each other's lifestories:

It is interesting that no feminist biographer as yet has taken up the notion or form of anti-biography, since on the surface it offers an escape from traditional biography, a form feminist readers connect with patriarchal as well as Western humanist definitions of the individual self—a self imagined, although frequently not admitted, to be male. The fact that feminist biographers have not yet begun to write poststructuralist anti-biographies is connected, I think, with current tensions and contradictions in feminist theory. Some strains in feminist theory challenge the assumptions of traditional biography, while others support those assumptions; some strains are compatible with notions of the decentered or multiple self, others are not. These tensions are creative ones, and as they collide and combine with each other over the next

several years they could give rise to new forms for women's biographies.

(O'Brien 126)

O'Brien offers some possible explanations for the various levels of tension between feminists and biography. Firstly, she considers that feminists are inhibited from making their feminism overt, because this implies a reduction in the "objectivity" which biography demands. Part of this inhibition is a fear of alienating other feminists who hail from different theoretical perspectives and therefore a fear of attracting their criticism (which, of course, would undermine the ability of any one form of feminism to speak of or for "women"). Indeed, deconstruction itself questions this right and is therefore also one of the chief contemporary threats to a unified feminist movement. If women have a "different voice" from men, does this not have the further implication that women's voices are all the same? Deconstructionist feminists continually struggle with the differences *amongst* women within the context of postmodernist feminism. It is this struggle that has made biographies of women's lives such a theoretical anomaly amongst contemporary women biographers who aspire to just, fair and, indeed, empowering representations of others. Most significantly, the unified subject is discredited, removing the last solid justification for a literary reflection on identity whilst, at the same time, revealing literary truth as subjective and politically strategic. Safely outside of these theoretical conundra, however, "popular" biography continues to be

produced and devoured, perhaps even by those of us who feel personally stymied in our own leanings towards biographical acts.

Thus, contemporary biography is experiencing several partings of its ways. The first biographical path is still strewn with tomes of Great Men, high achievers, film stars, writers, artists, politicians, criminals and ever-more exciting rebels and eccentrics, dead or alive. This is the “life-course” emphasis, when events themselves are the framework (producing a great deal of infotainment). These biographies are called “serious” when they concern serious or important people, like political leaders, and “popular” when they concern entertainers or miscellaneous Others (including women in traditional roles). Carolyn Steedman has remarked on the way in which women’s lives have negotiated an entry here with mixed results:

I would suggest that in looking at the history of biographical and autobiographical accounts of women’s lives we look particularly at the use of their own childhoods, as a means women found to make interiority, smallness and insignificance work as a mode of interpretation. (‘Decoding’ 109)

Thus, there has been (and is) scope for women’s lives but the issues of form and content remain problematic.

The next path is the scholarly or academic biography that incorporates discussions of the subject’s work. Whilst these are invaluable to all scholars, feminist or otherwise,

they raise the question of the connection between life and work, between Lifestory and Career—a question rarely, if ever, addressed within the work itself. Three recent biographies of the French philosopher, Michel Foucault collectively illustrate such complex questions, not least because Foucault’s now famous essay, ‘What is an Author?’ specifically rejects the reification of the individual which is the focus of biography. On the other hand, the information available through these biographical texts (for example that Foucault was a keen human rights activist) is surely relevant against a backdrop of his theories on the dynamics of power. This is clearly promising ground for academic feminists (a good example being Toril Moi’s *Simone de Beauvoir: The making of an intellectual woman*, discussed in detail elsewhere in this thesis). In this strand of biography, the feminist view would not be unlike any other: biography performs an interesting and no doubt useful role which remains under-theorised as far as the relevance of life-to-work is concerned.

Finally, there is postmodernist (anti-) biography that exists in sparse numbers. As each new model appears it is hailed as another groundbreaker, but in effect these are generally new styles rather than breakthroughs in a constructive (as opposed to a deconstructive) sense, or it seems to be the case so far. These biographies act as interesting critiques of traditional biography. As yet the matter of the objectivisation of the subject through language has not been entirely “solved,” and, ultimately, a relatively unified biographical identity apparently remains necessary to the concept

of a written Life. Feminist writers are at once enthused and inhibited by theoretical impasse, and the following chapters will further investigate the issues behind and around such a conundrum, and finally attempt to construct guidelines for alternative models to be developed in the future. At the present time, humanism, postmodernism and feminism remain in conflict around the genre of biography.

Public authority has been denied to women systematically and historically, in the continued interests of patriarchy. This is important information, since the past impinges on the present and future. This is not to say that we can predict the future from knowing the past. As Diane Elan says, “the writing of history . . . should expose itself to the *political* question of what women *will have been* and thus destabilize any claim to positive knowledge of restrictions on the non-category of “women” (41, original italics). Whilst contesting the role of history as a moulding force of absolute knowledge, Elan elsewhere concedes that the history of oppression is clearly relevant to present and future social agendas:

Whites in America have a *historical* responsibility for the sins of their forebears, although they may not have committed any individual acts of racism. They have a responsibility to the Other that no amount of goodwill or equal rights legislation can wash away. This is an ethical responsibility that the singularity assumes precisely because it recognizes that the individual is not an autonomous subject responsible only for its own action. The singularity is responsible to an Other that exceeds and

precedes it; it owes a debt that can never be *fully* repaid, but it must be honored, be recognized, with consistent attention. (110)

Therefore, the historical oppression (including through omission) of women is entirely relevant to their present performances, agendas, restrictions and engagement with the genre of biography. This is not, of course, to say that women have, in the past, never achieved authority as writers and as subjects, because clearly they have done so and continue to do so. But a group's repressive history is an aspect of its subject position and continues to operate as a somewhat repressive force. Thus, feminists remain substantially restricted in their access to the sanctioned female life-story, although the power to deconstruct patriarchal systems has increased through modernist and postmodernist knowledges of power. The establishment of a provisional authority of the self is still problematic for women, in such a way as to retain authoritative coherence in the public domain. I argue that the concept of public authority remains an anomaly for women, despite their improved access to public roles that carry the vestiges of authority. This is largely because authorities remain defined within an overall context of male-dominance, and result in a separation of authoritative figure and subordinates which, to a significant extent, isolates the former and oppresses the latter. Hence, contemporary feminists tirelessly work to redefine the concept of authority in such a way as to avoid an undue conflict of interests between the parties concerned; in other words, they seek to turn "authority over" into an organising, facilitating and equalising ethos. For feminist

biographers, however, this paradox continues to challenge and results in significant suspicion of the genre of biography. These difficulties will be explored in the next chapter in the context of the politics of postmodernism.

Chapter 2

The Politics of Agency:

Feminism, Postmodernism and Biographical Speech

To write is to become. Not to become a writer (or a poet) but to become, intransitively. (Trinh T. Minh-ha)

In the consciousness of our failures, we risk lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making a partial, real connection. (Donna Haraway)

Central to contemporary western feminism is the uneasy relationship between feminism and postmodernism (Yeatman, "Postmodern Epistemological Politics" 188). This debate occurs in a complex political climate of factions within what used to be called the women's movement and is now simply "feminisms." Internal division, fragmentation and mutual deconstruction obviously lessen the force of a redressive gender-oriented movement, at a historical juncture when women's public lives are at their most active. The disdain of many postmodernist feminists for identity politics is a side effect of the trajectory to move beyond the limits of foundationalist (and therefore oppressive) "justice" because, as Anna Yeatman says, the foregrounding of identity works to foreclose politics by suppressing the contested differences (229).

In the case of feminism, division is nothing new. Women are not a monolithic group and are slower than most to join ranks with their peers in oppression. Nevertheless, the “difference” debate is undoubtedly the most painful encounter to date that feminists have had with *themselves* and with other feminists. It is no wonder, then, that biography poses complex issues of representation since biography is predominantly concerned with the representation of identity, a unifying device which postmodernism says is a sham and a fraud. This thesis contends that biographical speech, including published feminist biography, is a vital process of emancipated female selfhood. Certainly, feminist biographers must necessarily engage with post-colonial ethics of representation. Yet we must not permit our authoritative representations—whether of self or Other—to be scuttled like obsolete vessels whose seagoing days are behind them, just as we begin to have access to the open seas. In understandably joining the condemnation of imperialism as an oppressive force, feminists are losing sight of global injustices against women as women. Moreover, in the case of feminist biography (that is, processes of biographical representations to which a feminist ethics has been applied), there is a danger of a double dosage of intra-feminist disapproval. Post-colonial thought is suspicious of global initiatives that may result in the suppression of difference. For this reason a global women’s movement is in disfavour. Representations of the Other are challenged by a politics of self-determinism. Attempts to represent the Other risk being condemned as a breach of the right to self-determination.

This chapter interrogates some of the challenges presented by alliance politics to women's authoritative representations of others and to their support of other women as a feminist prerogative. It elucidates the fundamental issues that have made difference and diversity welcome to feminists who have found equality and sameness restrictive and, moreover, to be oppressive elements amongst and between women, but which have since created fresh (post-colonial) restrictions and divisions at the level of subjectivity. These issues are then related to the agency of voice and representation. Finally, the matter of telling the stories of others (the primary function of biographical speech) is discussed in terms of women's self-determinism.

Feminism and Difference

The various factions of the women's movement are not in conflict simply about future directions, but about which theoretical path is most "natural" to feminism and therefore, of course, inevitable if logic is to prevail (although it is by no means agreed that logic, or reason, can prevail as a unifying axiom). Each contemporary line of feminist thought is powerfully persuasive in its own terms and, on some levels, the women's movement in postmodernity is comfortable, even happy, with diversity and with the subsequent right to disagree. Such a rich and fruitful notion of conflict advocates alliances between women who come together on specific points in a bid strategically to tackle common oppressions (as and when they are identified by the experiencing individuals or groups). The main issue is whether feminism as a

movement for women by women can work rigorously with differences between women and simultaneously retain its avowed aim to further the social advancement of all women in societies that favour the interests of men. The politics of difference, then, represent both the threat and promise of the future. They certainly impinge on the literary field of women's lifewriting in comparably paradoxical ways.

Simone de Beauvoir commented that women's oppression by men has continued because women have lacked the material means to organise themselves into a cohesive resistance, but also lacked the collective identity necessary to form a rebel band dedicated to fighting women's systematic domination by men (19). Women's racial, ethnic, class and sexual diversity has historically divided them and, indeed, rendered them "attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men—fathers or husbands—more firmly than they are to other women" (de Beauvoir 19). They lacked an identity politics—found it, lost it, regained it and, most recently, engaged in infra-structural struggles with the representations by other feminist groups. When the women's movement, both First and Second Wave, has succeeded, it has done so in triumphant (albeit culture-specific) moments when a common identity as "women" has been strongly manifested against a correlative gender identity assigned to "men." These moments are increasingly rare because post-colonial feminists do not see them as constructive. When they do occur, they do so mainly as a result of the actions of two specific

groups: liberal and radical feminists—two factions which are increasingly discredited from *within* the women's movement, as well as from without. These groups (if, again, they self-identify as “groups”) are respectively seen to invest in the outdated goal of equality with men (implying sameness), and as being naively “essentialist.” Identity politics, even when based on a contingent or politically strategic identity, are often considered too simple and obvious for contemporary feminist theorists engaged with matters of difference (Cohen 187-8). Many of the specifically “women-centred” material resources, such as women's refuges and clinics, are the work of radical and liberal feminists.

Some feminists argue for a Habermasian solution in which it is supposedly possible to embrace difference without losing the strengths of humanism. Pauline Johnson in *Feminism As A Radical Humanism* contends that feminism is a liberationist politics whose roots lie in humanism which posits humankind “as the only binding integration” (ix) with a corresponding commitment to the uniqueness of the human personality. Without these founding premises, Johnson insists, there is no basis for a women's movement. But she sees a feminist radical humanism as simultaneously acting as a critique of modern humanism. In other words, Johnson does not advocate a return to nineteenth-century patriarchal humanism, but instead posits a revised

humanism that incorporates a respect for difference and diversity¹³. Neither does she see this as plundering postmodernism to redress the flaws of humanism, but considers that humanism itself embraces difference in its emphasis on the unique individual.

Difference, then, cannot now be ignored by post-structuralist feminisms (that is, feminisms living in the aftermath and awareness of constructivist theory). Liberal and radical feminisms can choose to prioritise sameness in an actual or strategic bid to achieve certain goals, but they do so under constant risk of knowingly undertaking acts of oppression—indeed of practising a kind of wilful ignorance in a game of identity politics which now includes extreme right-wing groups which have appropriated the concept and tactics to their own ends (Cohen 187-8). As part of the process of this research, I took the opportunity carefully to reassess my own position. My theoretical sympathies lie with a post-structuralist recognition of difference, but they stop short of sanctioning the disintegration of a global women's movement. In this respect, I retain a respect for "radical" (even liberal) feminisms which are self-empowered to act in a redressive situation for social justice where women's needs

¹³ Although the terms "difference" and "diversity" are used interchangeably in many postmodernist texts, Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, emphasises a distinction between the two terms. He posits diversity as "the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs: held in a time-frame of relativism it gives rise to liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity" (34). Thus, diversity invokes a model of difference-tolerance by a normalised and normalising "mainstream". Difference, on the other hand, refers to the enunciation of culture "as a knowledge of referential truth" (35), invoking a struggle for self-definition from a premise of culture specific subjectivities.

implicate *gender* difference—actions that invariably require a *temporary/ strategic* flattening of differences between women, albeit with heightened sensitivities to Otherness in place. We can, for example, thank liberal feminists for such far-ranging projects as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the Women’s Electoral Lobby and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, and we can thank radical feminists for a plethora of women’s health and welfare resources, refuges from domestic violence, rape crisis centres and invaluable meetings procedures which systematically make room for the voices of women. Many of these successful projects are made possible by some feminists’ retained conviction that they serve the interests of women as women, generally as distinct from the interests of men.

In acknowledging the very positive input of these feminist factions, I am myself engaging in alliance politics with an *attitude* of sisterliness, whilst also resisting solidarity through assimilation which, as Diane Elan comments, can only be based on denial of Otherness (114). This seems to work, ostensibly so long as my own boundaries are not lost or unduly smudged, at which point difference will be erased and assimilation will supposedly result. Difference-oriented respect is vital. The new concern is now that too much may be lost in the process of breaking down into ever-diminishing factions because “solidarity” has become a bad thing where once it was a good thing. The strengths of solidarity lie in its being unconditional,

overarching, concrete and wide-reaching (if also oppressively assimilationist); alliance, on the other hand, is conditional, specific, contingent and self-serving (and may also be oppressive).

My contention is that in any performance of biographical speech, the “rights” of representer and represented subject are necessarily at odds to some degree, and that these odds create sites of oppression for one of the parties—more frequently, it is true, for the ‘object’ of the biographical speech act. In view of this, feminist writers, artists and speakers are constantly and inevitably in the process of negotiation with their subjects and audiences, constantly risking ethical choices that can be judged anti-feminist in post-colonial societies. The extent to which this ethical anti-feminism (or, put another way, unethical feminism) is sanctioned (censored or self-censored) obviously varies widely. The point is, biographical speech can be seen as a very sisterly/feminist or unsisterly/antifeminist act, and can be both simultaneously. As a post-structuralist (and post-colonial) feminist writer, I see no easy solution to this inherent risk of domination. This anxiety is not merely personal but an intrinsic aspect of anti-foundationalist western feminism, of which ethics of voice and representation are, quite rightly, important aspects. However, there is a new kind of silencing of women from feminists themselves, albeit for the right reasons and with good intentions. This is a new way in which women (now feminists) are also serving the interests of patriarchy whilst they are occupied in

policing themselves and each other. Meanwhile, hegemonic inscriptions of women in all classes and cultural orders continue to thrive unfettered by ethical constraints. This alter-effect of contemporary feminist discourse is one that must be taken seriously alongside of, and simultaneously with, difference-awareness in anti-foundationalist politics. It is important, then, to trace some of the journey that the women's movement has travelled from solidarity to alliance, and to keep in mind these questions: What are the dangers of disbanding a global movement? Do alliance politics sufficiently address ethical questions of the Other? What is wrong with solidarity amongst feminists?

In *Inessential Woman*, Elizabeth V. Spelman describes the current issue of cultural diversity as a problem of exclusion in feminist thought. Feminism presupposes—indeed creates—a universal community of women through their subordination by gender. This is done by speaking of “women” in general, but most speakers are members of the dominant cultural group(s)—that is, they are the white, middle-class feminists who have access to public discourse. When these feminists speak of “women” they speak of themselves and thus exclude other women in exactly the same manner as men have excluded women:

The problem with the “story of man” was that women couldn't recognize themselves in it. So those who produce the “story of woman” want to make sure they appear in it. The best way to ensure that is to be the storyteller and hence to be in a position to decide which of all the many

facts about women's lives ought to go into the story, which ought to be left out. Essentialism works well in behalf of these aims, aims that subvert the very process by which women might come to see where and how they wish to make common cause. For essentialism invites me to take what I understand to be true of me "as a woman" for some golden nugget of womanness all women have as women; and it makes the participation of other women inessential to the production of the story. How lovely: the many turn out to be one, and the one that they are is me. (Spelman 159)

Such women feel well qualified to speak about women's oppression, Spelman argues, through the following reasoning. The various aspects of subjectivity through which "experience" is conceived and constructed (that is, gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality) are (misguidedly) thought of as so many "popper-beads" on a necklace; in other words, as separate facets of *oppression* as opposed to facets of social *experience*. A black working-class lesbian woman, then, has collected four popper-beads of oppression—or four separate "minority" lenses through which she perceives the world and through which the world perceives her. A white middle-class heterosexual woman carries only one bead of oppression—or perceives the world through only one filter or lens. This supposedly moves her closer to "the real world" (the world of "majority") and allows her to perceive her oppression on the basis of her gender more clearly, more purely than her black working-class lesbian sister whose view is far more obstructed by other lenses or filters. Gender oppression is thus seemingly isolated from other kinds of oppression in the writings

of white middle-class heterosexual women, which qualifies them to speak on behalf of all women. In the interests of democracy, such women often speak of making room for, or including, “difference.” In so doing, Spelman argues, they do not lessen the ownership of feminist discourse by privileged women; rather, they re-establish their entitlement to speak for all. In inviting an “underprivileged person” to our home we do not dispel our privilege, we affirm it. Such are the politics of tolerance that, in practice, affirm the right to rule “justly” on behalf of all. Indeed, as Thomas Hobbes’ enlightenment theory of consent to representation (social contract theory) indicates, the very presence of the “underprivileged” at our table appears to signify their tacit assent to this rule (Jones 42-7).

Spelman argues that a white middle-class heterosexual feminist does not escape the bias of her racial, social and sexual identity and, in pretending that she does, she merely renders privilege invisible and, thus, unassailable. She asserts a new system of domination over her sisters comparable to the one that patriarchy asserts over women (and, of course, on a different basis, over men). To Spelman, then, race, class and sexuality are aspects of subjectivity through which everybody inevitably experiences their social world. A white middle-class heterosexual woman, no less than any other person, constructs her world through lenses or filters of her race, class, sexuality and gender (as well as many other lenses, such as health, psychology, etc.). When she speaks about “women” she must do so with a signalled awareness

that she does so from this position, that this political identity shapes her views. A similar point has been made by Donna Haraway in using the term “situated and embodied knowledges” (583), these being the only knowledges that a writer can produce and must own to producing. If certain aspects of privilege go with that knowledge, they too must be owned and made visible.

In this thesis, I argue that, in any case, the process of subordination itself carries within it aspects of privilege and inclusion as well as aspects of negation and exclusion. A white middle-class heterosexual woman (for example) functions from, and within, a dominant position through her racial, ethnic, class and sexual “identities” but from a subordinate position through her female gender. A comparable man speaks from dominant positions on all five counts. However, these positions do not unproblematically equate with privilege or underprivilege. Obviously, a white middle-class (wealthy, educated) heterosexual man does not operate from a position of unadulterated privilege all the time because patriarchy can at times exert demands on the privileged which are high, even excessive, in relation to the demands exerted on subordinates. One has only to consider the suffering that boys and young men experience in expensive boarding schools and officer-training schools to know that privilege comes at a considerable price. The more elite the structural position, the higher the degree of conformity required and, therefore, subordinate positions have certain “privileges” with respect to non-conformity.

Thus, it is dangerous to take the moral high-ground, as Foucault's theories have shown, in equating dominance with power and power with privilege at all times. Such a view also equates power with evil and powerlessness with goodness. Such a view also valorises, and thus perpetuates, subordination as the only position from which a "real feminist," like a real proletarian, may speak which, of course, creates enormous obstacles to the avowed goal of feminism—women's emancipation. In such terms, a successful woman (a woman whose gendered subjectivity is, in a sense, in transition) is no longer an authentic feminist, perhaps no longer really a woman, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters. The difficulty is in maintaining an agenda of social justice (after all, best conceived and enacted by subordinates from their experience of injustice) once they "succeed" by availing themselves of positions within dominant groups. Then there is the difficulty of how subordinates can avoid simply copying the behaviour of dominants, which Spelman effectively discusses in her concerns about white middle-class heterosexual privilege in white feminism today.

The question of difference, then, is a very significant challenge to the emancipatory agenda of feminism. Postmodernist Anna Yeatman agrees with Pauline Johnson that the concept of emancipation itself resides in a concept of liberation—in a utopian vision of a just (and rational) world that belongs to the discursive innocence of the Enlightenment. But Yeatman believes that such innocence is irrevocably lost by the

advent of the politics of difference (7) since its cogency depends on a unified rational subject. Who, Yeatman asks, (and, of course, from whom or from what) can the postmodern world be trying to liberate in the politics of self-determination “when there is no self in question, only selves who are positioned in different ways?” (5).

Yet the theoretical death of radical politics is, of course, no such thing in practice. Those who are disposed to pursue a radical politics do so, and those who are disposed to political conservatism, it would seem, remain indifferent, throughout and beyond any philosophical theorising. Michel Foucault’s participation in human rights marches (despite his implied contention that the individual can do little to effect social change) suggests the need, at times, for a leap of faith in which a *sense* of justice, whether global or local, occasions an act of resistance based on a sense of individual agency in everyday life. Foucault’s semi-private activism no longer had a force of righteousness behind it, for which we may be thankful, since it was presumably not enacted in a *political* climate of universal human rights—more of responsibilities to the Other¹⁴. This may be classified as alliance activism, not as the self-interested politics of identity. Samantha Brennan notes that “feminist moral theorists have, in the past, been consistent critics of rights-based moral theories”

¹⁴ Dennis K. Mumby, in his comparison of Habermas and Foucault, argues, *qua* Blair and Cooper in “The Humanist Turn”, that “in turning his critical method on humanism, Foucault turned towards a humanist ideal” ... “by deconstructing humanist discourse, Foucault exposes the constraints that are placed on human freedom, and by doing so simultaneously serves a critical (and potentially emancipatory) function. The critique of humanism does not therefore necessarily entail the complete rejection of humanist ideals” (100).

(866), and justice-based moral theories (866) but says that “rights have an advantage for feminist moral theory in that they name the victim; they answer the question, “who is wronged?” (867). I argue that they also allow a naming of what is wrong—not wrong simply for myself but socially wrong. The naming of evil is a double-edged sword—it too-easily facilitates a tunnel-visioned condemnation of difference, but it also generates acts of cross-cultural heroism that is often (unfortunately) dependent on a universalised concept of injustice. An example of this would be aid-agencies and care-agencies which, all too often, come from church groups and extreme political factions, both of which draw on fires of righteousness to ignite, but especially to sustain, redressive actions long after mere allies have turned their attention elsewhere.

The polarities of critical theory are exemplified by the work of Jurgen Habermas and Jean-Francois Lyotard. Habermas, as has previously been stated, posits modernity as an unfinished project and, in doing so, seeks to return to a reworked Enlightenment concept of liberation. Whilst he, like Lyotard, rejects the oppressive nature of humanist/modernist metanarratives, he retains a firm belief in the possibility of, and the necessity for, a rational justice by consensus. Reason, for Habermassians, is the means by which a universal community arrives at a logical truth of what is simply just and true. On the other hand, Lyotard, as a postmodernist, entirely rejects the possibility of consensus, insisting that the politics of difference must prevail in the

form of localised structures of justice. Two recent feminist texts that take the Lyotardian road to the disavowal of metanarratives are Anna Yeatman's *Postmodern Revisionings of the Political* and Patricia S. Mann's *Micro-Politics: Agency in a Postfeminist Era*. Since both these texts work to reinstate a feminist polity that addresses the issues of differences, it is worth a consideration of each.

Yeatman emphasises that western postmodernism depends for its coherence on the continuing existence of modernist thought. Thus, postmodernity is not "post" in the sense of replacing modern values, but in the sense of critiquing and addressing them. Postmodernism does not endorse any specific truth as applying universally because it disavows the legitimacy of consensus, though it inevitably has to work *with* the traditions of modernity. This does not mean that postmodernism is anti-rational—only anti-rationalist. It is not prepared to accept just any negotiated settlement as being legitimate in its own terms but believes in reason(s) rather than Reason.

Yeatman is unequivocal in her belief that any emancipatory project belongs to Enlightenment politics. Yet she sees postmodernism as productive for feminism by virtue of its assumption of a deconstructive relationship to modernity. She considers postmodernism and feminism to be mutually interpolating but does not agree that the concept of emancipation must be lost in the process. Yeatman describes the

emancipatory politics of postmodern movements as “strictly pragmatic,” emphasising the issues of difference, not simply a watered down commitment to women as subordinated subjects.

Patricia Mann’s self-empowering tactic is to think less about “the fragile notions of selfhood” and more about agency (4). She posits a revised concept of agency from the liberal humanist notion of the autonomous individual towards a view of agency as a social, and thus relational, process. This distinction is sited in feminism’s most urgent dilemma. On the one hand, Mann’s emphasis on agency can be seen (despite her insistence on postmodernism) as a Habermasian solution; that is, in seeking to revise and reconceptualise agency, she is actively seeking to retain a version of the individualism which was the premise of the liberal emancipatory movements of the Enlightenment. This could imply a somewhat unsatisfactory attempt to meld liberal humanism and postmodernism by drawing paper-thin lines between the two and expecting this fragile scaffolding to hold strong. On the other hand, no postmodernist stance can realistically maintain an absolute denial of agency¹⁵. Mann situates agency firmly within the confines of a local and partial context which, for feminists, can effectively result in “an embodied micro-politics” (156). She eschews

¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, however, considers that the domination of symbolism effectively denies agency. This, in his view, means that “the loss of reference fatally affected...the revolutionary systems of reverence” (442) rendering a politics of resistance untenable. When I say that such a stance is unrealistic, I mean that it is so from the vantage point of a revolutionary social movement such as feminism, which is committed to social change.

the disembodied rationalism of Enlightenment projects and, instead, moves towards what she sees as a more dynamic and flexible model of political agency in which individuals leave marks on institutions and discourses through engaging in particularly dynamic ways with the social relations that define their subject positions in a given society:

In the battle against patriarchy we must learn to love the struggle itself, as athletes rejoice in achieving a certain level of performance, regardless of whether it earns them a medal of victory. (162)

Feminists must then work within complex subject positions (the effects of patriarchal discourses on subordinates in transformation) and use various tactical responses to foreground the nature of their oppression. Mann uses the examples of Anita Hill, Patricia Bowman and Desiree Washington whose respective legal actions against men they accused of sexual misconduct resulted in international debates on gender relations—a kind of feminist victory despite the public pain and indignity suffered by all three women when they brought their cases to trial.

Desiree Washington's victory will not necessarily enter our symbolic memory as a signal event within an intersectional micro-politics of gender. Kimberle Crenshaw points out that the social and cultural devaluation of black women has been such that within the black community women and men alike failed to recognize or support the claims of Desiree Washington. (199-200)

Mann says that this lack of recognition is partly to do with the complexities of patriarchal gender politics, and partly to do with the fact that, in accusing a black man of date rape, Washington broke racial solidarity in the wider context of white-over-black domination. Thus, it is important to see postmodernist agency as sited on grid-points of multiple subject positions and therefore never as purely or simply resistant (or, indeed, purely or simply right).

Agency is necessarily relational in an extremely complex discursive sense. Janet R. Jakobsen cites the Anita Hill case as an example of “splits or failures in solidarity where alliance might otherwise have been expected” (187). Jakobsen says that even the politics of alliance often require a contingent flattening of difference under the constraints that a moral agency imposes when concern for the Other is at stake. She advocates a position of ambivalence which she claims is an “alternative conceptualization of agency, independent of oppositional coherence” (195). This position places agency in a specific context—that is to say, “agency” becomes pluralised and fragmented, conditional upon specific discourses of race, gender, class and sexual dominance “rather than as the search for a singular right act” (195). In the case of Anita Hill, Jakobsen considers that there was an inability of white feminists to work in the spaces between their identifications with Hill as a woman and the racial difference between their position and hers (195). This reading, which foregrounds multiplicity and ambivalence, resists a (modern) demand for coherence.

This kind of postmodern feminism embraces contradiction as well as a necessary and productive engagement with diversity. My concern is that, at this historical juncture, it also represents a conflict between maintaining the concept of patriarchal domination as a metanarrative and working with diverse, sometimes conflicting, narratives (such as those of racial oppression). In other words, “feminism” is no more than an intellectual enterprise unless it maintains a coherence and cohesion that allows all feminists to act together at times. Currently, feminist discourse is struggling with theories of agency, without which the women’s movement cannot survive. In fact, this is a large feminist concern with the work of Foucault that downplays the extent to which individuals and marginalised groups can subvert the path of established discourse. Many postmodern feminists are optimistic and creative in their responses to the complexities of difference theory. However, if feminism is to remain linked to the historical agenda of the women’s movement (and therefore grounded in material benefit for embodied female persons) it must do more than provide a space for feminists to argue against each other as to whether gender is, in fact, the main issue (or even a significant issue).

As the ensuing sections of this chapter will discuss, many postmodernist feminists’ views of agency rest on the belief that speaking authoritatively from a visibly gendered position is, in itself, to enact an agency of resistance. In so doing (to invoke Foucaultian theory with relevance to groups subordinated by modernity), we

supposedly subsume knowledges which automatically challenge conventional wisdom and, ultimately, bring social change. Nevertheless, to do even this it is vital that feminists work with a vision of agency that positions them to construct, as opposed to one that positions them only to deconstruct. Criticism is certainly a form of resistance but the women's movement cannot be seen only as a protest movement and still retain its influence as a productive force making a positive difference to women's lives. Neither can it afford to become an elite group of intellectuals using feminist discourse mainly, or only, as a theoretical stance. Effective theories of feminist agency, then, must open spaces for dynamic engagement with theories of gendered subjectivity, in such a way as to allow different kinds of manoeuvres by women with differing class, racial and sexual identities, but so as to retain gender as a founding factor of subjectivity (otherwise the action can hardly be described as feminist). At the same time, these engagements must allow for readings of gender that do not negate difference but also permit for a bonding of women across their differences. The question then becomes whether a politics of alliance is sufficiently facilitating for feminist representations of others. Is the business of contemporary feminism to encourage women to speak about women's lives or (as is frequently the case) as policing the boundaries of representational acts?

Agency as Voice and Representation

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak avows the necessity of women telling each other's stories in order to "question the model of criticism as neutral theorem or science" (*In Other Worlds* 15). Seen from this vantagepoint, women's stories are in themselves subversive because they problematise the apparent objectivity of "theory," showing the speaking position of the theorist to be culture-specific and, especially, gender-specific. However, this raises the question of what constitutes women's stories. It also raises the question of whether there is any difference between "women's stories" and "feminist stories." I do not propose to engage in a search for definitive or prescriptive terms that may be applied to actual texts or attempt to sort them out into authentic or inauthentic models. But it would appear that the distinction is primarily one of the implied or overt gender politics of women's stories about each other and also about themselves. Whilst any woman's story may lend itself to a feminist reading, a "feminist text" supposedly demands a reading that is critical of patriarchal gender-politics.

Yet the question arises as to the extent to which positioned readings of certain texts force text and author into a game of identity politics that unnecessarily limits their social mobility. It is perhaps easier to see how this can work in connection with race or class than with gender/sexuality, although I suggest that the same effects prevail in both cases. Stephen Muecke discusses this issue with reference to Aboriginal

literature, and couches it in terms of “the repressive hypothesis” (405-19). Muecke comments that the apparently natural link between texts produced by Aboriginal writers and the genre of “Aboriginal literature” is, in post-Mabo Australia, framed by the hypothesis of racial repression. In this light, each “Aboriginal text” is viewed as having surmounted enormous obstacles to its publication whereas, in fact, Muecke argues, the publishing climate is generally favourable to the stories of Aboriginal writers. He is not suggesting that such writers do not have their difficulties, but that the classification of Aboriginal literature as a genre forces a reading of Aboriginal people as repressed—and only repressed—by the dominant culture. In other words, they force a continual reading of Aboriginality as subordinate to white society. Such a reading has obvious implications for movements committed to social change.

Anne Brewster takes up this point in discussing the auto/biographical texts of Aboriginal women. She considers Muecke’s point to be unduly pessimistic because it negates (or at least downplays) the agency of Aboriginal [women] writers. Brewster does not attempt to deny that Aboriginal literature is constrained by white discourse, but emphasises that it nonetheless transgresses such constraints and is resistant to mainstream values. She makes the connection between the subversive politics of race and those of gender:

I am reminded that a basic assumption of most feminist theory is that, because their experience and writing are embedded in patriarchy, women can never extricate themselves from it completely. However, they can

negotiate a space from which to speak through strategies of resistance and subversion. (40)

In order to make such a claim, Brewster is compelled to retain the apparently dualistic premise of gender for which she makes no apology:

For me, the opposition women/patriarchy will never be displaced. And unlike Craig Owens (1985:62), I do not believe that we should try to conceive of difference without opposition. Rather than lamenting with Larbalestier the fact of opposition—that is, that Aboriginal people can define themselves only in relation to white culture—I prefer to focus on strategies of resistance in Aboriginal women’s autobiographies, and to see those strategies as empowering and enabling. (40)

It is the question of difference without opposition that endangers feminism as a political movement as opposed to a critical epistemology. One cannot speak about any kind of oppression without the ability to identify the source of this oppression. Janet J. Jakobsen, however, considers this a trap rather than the means for getting a purchase on injustice. She holds that the criteria of “subordination” and “degradation” of women can be applied to any social group and can then be appropriated into other (anti-feminist) discourses to oppose their self-empowering acts. She does concede that “the strictures of modern agency are, however, difficult to resist because they are based on demands that appear necessary for the very possibility of self-constitution as a moral agent” (187). It is my contention that, whilst “morality,” “justice” and even “subordination” certainly contain within

themselves a strong potential for disregarding variegated voices of specific oppressions, resistance to a wider oppression cannot be effective without a significant degree of coherence (and therefore cohesion) within a collective (if contingent) moral agency. Moreover, this thesis presents the argument that feminists themselves already [mis]appropriate and subvert the self-empowering actions of other feminist discourses to the detriment of women with whom they do not agree and to whom they are not necessarily bound in an immediate “alliance.”

Brewster, like many other advocates of women’s writing, sees the production and circulation of women’s stories as political because they represent the subsumption of formerly subjugated knowledges. In these terms, the writer (or speaker) acts as an agent of social change, and she does so “on behalf” of others with whom she is associated on a political basis. This brings us to the matter of identity politics which is, as it were, permissible in postmodernist terms but which (hardly coincidentally) is increasingly unfashionable in postmodernist intellectual circles. Identity politics are tolerated in the academy when they do not rest (overtly) on the humanist view of identity as fixed, stable and universal but on the notion of subjectivity as a social construct. On a contingent and politically engaged basis, then, a strategic (or tactical) “identity” can be described as a speaking position rather than as the result of certain characteristics. A woman is a person who inhabits certain kinds of female-gendered subject positions. Feminisms are a network of alliances between women of

various classes, races, ethnicities, sexualities, cultures, ages, psychological experiences and circumstances. Feminists have in common only the gendered aspects of their subordination (although this too is highly controversial because it threatens to obscure other differences). This makes an inter-cultural feminist community an unlikely scenario, and permits only regional communities; feminist politics then replace a feminist polity, and so on. In this context, it is difficult though not impossible, to establish a case for “women’s stories” collectively to amount to a category of writing on any level, from genre to political tendency, yet this is what we must do in order to ground a theory of political agency with reference to women’s stories. Whilst identity politics effectively establishes a basis for feminist voices and representations, they are considered somewhat *outrés* because their effectiveness rests on a relatively simple reflex of identification with others which can be (and often is) construed as a thin disguise for embracing a liberal humanist concept of identity.

Nevertheless, whilst postmodernists do not endorse the concept of emancipation or liberation, they are interested in the transgressive (and the imaginative) and, in this sense, in acts and processes which resist (and, therefore, help to dismantle or undermine) dominating strategies. Michel de Certeau sees these acts not as returns to individualism or individualistic agency (and therefore not exactly “activism”) but as “modes of operation or schemata or action” so that the individual is “a locus in

which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of . . . relational determinations interact” (de Certeau xi). He suggests that even as the subordinated individual or group succumbs to power nuclei by enacting sanctioned behaviours as prescribed by the preferred groups, they also react subversively by making their response distinctively their own. De Certeau terms these responses “tactics,” being practice which “insinuate[s] itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance” (xix). An example of such a tactic is the act of reading, when the reader does not simply import a text as written but appropriates for herself a space which she makes her own (“like a rented apartment”) (xxi). In the same way:

Conversation is a provisional and collective effect of competence in the art of manipulating “commonplaces” and the inevitability of events in such a way as to make them “habitable.” (xxii)

Dominant elites may have the lion’s share of control over the literary or conversational script, but they cannot ultimately control the type of textual production that ensues, since reading and speaking are social processes and result in socially inscribed “products.” Thus, in engaging with the dominant social order, subordinate subjects also deflect its power. This is, of course, the most powerful argument for storytelling. The emergent forms adhere to inscribed generic structures and simultaneously subvert them. In these terms the “consumer” of mainstream culture also “creates” something anew and, in doing so, exercises the power to

change the product. In similar vein, cultural theorist Dick Hebdige speaks of “vital strategies” in which social phenomena occasioning social change do so by both conforming to and subverting existing conditions (210).

Whilst a number of postmodernist theorists present new and intricate possibilities for social agency, they place two interconnected, and highly empowering, aspects of feminism under attack. Firstly, the vision of the fragmented subject automatically creates fragmented enemies as well as fragmented victims. Foucault’s theory of power coming from everywhere and, especially, from “below,” substantially obscures the problematic association of patriarchal society with dominant groups. This, of course, allows for a greater empathy with formerly ostracised groups (notably men), but of course it reduces the possibility of resistance to “patriarchy” in any identifiable form, and even to patriarchal practices. Secondly, the dissolution of grand narratives means that all narratives are seen as partial, contingent and subjective, including those of feminism because of its critique of systems of domination. Western feminism, on the whole, leans towards New Left models of (utopian) radical democracy (liberal feminism having lost its edge in the *apparent* face of equal opportunity), and postmodernism offers a ready-made theory of plurality, although it is by no means automatic that postmodernists endorse left-wing politics. (Keller and Best, for example, argue that postmodernism can be used quite effectively to support reactionary views) (243). There should be room on the

airwaves for a myriad of voices, pluralistic feminisms insist. At the same time, this ideal of diversity from women's perspectives tends to implicate the traditional feminine ethos of self-sacrifice in the interests of others. Even some postmodernist feminists (for example, Kathleen B. Jones) have a resultant sense that women are being coerced into self-censorship even as they begin to come into vocal authority.

Whilst this sounds like an old and now-tedious complaint about the bad old world of men prevailing on the good natures of women, it should be noted that if it is an old argument it is certainly one with a recycled emphasis. It is a historical feminist quandary with post-feminist features and, most importantly, post-feminist pressures behind it. In striking out for themselves as women, early feminists had to contend with accusations of disloyalty to the family, of selfishness, of "shrillness," and, thus, of becoming aberrations of their own gender. They risked being unbecoming and, therefore, of "un-becoming" women. However, once having taken this risk and stepped over the established gender line, feminists were relatively free to engage in militant action, not purely for themselves but for women in general. Certainly, they were attacked and denounced by non-feminist women as well as by men, but gains, when made, were generally hailed by other women as victories for social justice—rights acquired for women in the interests of a general democracy. In true Enlightenment spirit, legal and social gains for women were commonly seen as acts of liberation for those oppressed by virtue of their gender. Woman was simply

becoming modern woman and modern man had to adjust accordingly. In modernity, then, the most difficult step for women in “becoming feminists” was to take the initial step from passivity to activity, from silence to voice and, in so doing, to help move the dividing line between “women” and “men” a little further towards a reasonable, rational and democratic centre.

In keeping with modernity’s consensus of rational, democratic justice, women have made considerable inroads into public leadership. Obviously, these inroads are nowhere near real equity between women and men in practice, but western women in public leadership are increasingly common. Role models of publicly “successful” women are no longer rarities or curiosities. As this thesis will show, the equation of “women” with “authority” remains highly problematic, but significant numbers of western women have begun to access the power centers of the world and have thereby begun to acquire significant authority. On the surface, the majority of western countries can demonstrate something like equal opportunity. The old “rights for women” catch-cry appears trite and anachronistic in contemporary city life because the (First) world appears to be a more just place for women.

For feminists, increased opportunity in the mid-twentieth century permitted many new and redirected activities. Women writers and public speakers energetically applied themselves to telling of women’s lives, women’s histories, women’s needs

and desires, women's sufferings, women's creations. Indeed, feminists have done much to subsume and transform subjugated knowledges of their cultures from women's perspectives. Of late, the gap between feminist and non-feminist women has narrowed, giving rise to talk of The New Feminist of the Naomi Woolf variety. These are liberated women who speak and write assertively but who are, as it were, unashamedly desirous of being beautiful, allegedly braving the wrath of chauvinist men and old-guard feminist women, for different reasons. The new (young) feminist may, and often does, ask whether "feminism" is really necessary at all, since she is apparently the embodiment of the true post-feminist woman, namely a woman with her "own" authority. Not only does she have her equal rights but retains, and enjoys, her (heterosexual) allure and manages a successful public life and a family too. At least, this is the outward face of post-feminism. All this makes feminism as a politics seem obsolete and yet still (the old story) excessive. It makes baby-boom feminists of a certain age appear no longer "militant" but redundant and, significantly, life-denying to the very women whose interests they purported to serve. Again, not a new story but one that is being recycled. It is as though feminism lost its political momentum at the moment of, and because of, its own triumphs.

The resulting new kind of silence, or at least remarginalised voice, appears, on the surface, to be the result of backlash from within the women's movement itself. It

would seem that feminist militancy has simply burned itself out through lack of application to postmodern society. Or, to view it from another angle, feminism has been “elevated” to a series of highly sophisticated discourses best played out within the context of academia and the serious arts. Western feminism has itself become a kind of art form and, as such, seems to be the prerogative of the educated classes. If there is an uncontaminated space for a radical politics within the women’s movement, it is now being occupied by women of colour, of “alternative” sexual preferences and lifestyles and of Second and Third World cultures. Probably for this reason, any form of radical democracy advocated by feminists, as has previously been mentioned, is somewhat denigrated under the label of “identity politics” best suited to overt forms of oppression in totalitarian regimes still demanding “liberation” in the old sense of basic human rights. Alternatively, Indigenous peoples within First World countries are permitted the vaunting of an identity politics in a belated gesture of tolerance by white majorities. In this light, talk of liberation and equality is acceptable on the same catching-up basis of early western feminism but identifies its members, not untypically, as unsophisticated and retrograde citizens of the nation state.

The polyphony of “discourses” and discursive voices has, as has been observed previously, extended to the women’s movement itself. Feminism has earned a discursive space and corresponding voices to be reckoned with, but it hardly has a

place within social justice because we must now ask to whose justice we refer and in what context. However, a coherent feminism is not merely subsumed in a context of plurality (and, indeed, in the context of its own successes) but is substantially threatened through being itself positioned as a challenge to the women most in need of its hard-won knowledges. This seems to be a new and devious form of anti-feminism—one that, like all effective backlash syndromes, uses the strength of a movement (as it were, its “character”) against itself. Feminists who now speak “as women” stand accused not simply of distorting the lives of women by attempting to take their husbands and children away from them (as in modernity), but of stealing from other women their newly-found voices. The voices of white western educated feminists (those likely to have the highest levels of official authority) are now cast by the movement itself as somewhat anti-feminist, in the same fashion as men speaking for women (as well as those ignoring women) are perceived as anti-feminist regardless of good intentions in so doing. It is as though feminists have identified the processes of discursive patriarchal domination, only to have the information used to silence some, even most, of them anew. Feminists, of course, *are* speaking for themselves but, in doing so, they cannot appear also to be speaking for anybody else. Hence, they are denied the solidarity so recently, and provisionally, acquired.

This radical accountability sits well with an ethic of responsibility for the Other with which women are historically comfortable. However, the issues at the core of this

new anxiety about speaking out are especially painful ones for women. For speaking-feminists find themselves in danger of enacting the old (patriarchal) accusations of domination, not simply by being stridently “unfeminine,” but by and through the very systems of ideological domination they have themselves, as the crowning achievement of late twentieth-century feminism, foregrounded and critiqued. This domination in the act of speaking about/to other women is really about the misuse of authority, of insensitivity to the needs of others. Samantha Brennan points out that feminists have traditionally been “good friends to the notion of responsibility” to the point that it is said to be characteristic of women’s ways of responding to the moral world (872). It is as though women’s acquisition of public or official authority renders them automatically selfish and uncaring; as though a sisterhood (even a nominal political sisterhood) is only possible under the conditions of subordination, indeed of submissive behaviours. If the privileged want to help the oppressed, feminists themselves have said, they would do best to vacate the airwaves and make room for the oppressed to speak for themselves. Speaking women may readily be accused of failing to observe the limits of collective speech. Brennan articulates, qua Martha Minow, that the results possibly capitalise on this historical need to seek approval:

Moreover, reforms premised on relational conceptions may actually advance the perspectives and needs of those with greater privilege and authority. (871)

This danger is more visible in relation to the act of storying which we know is, and always has been, a means of resistance exercised by subordinated groups. Thus, the suppression of women's representations is not part of the agenda of postfeminists, even while it may well be a necessary but unfortunate side-effect of anti-foundationalist politics. Ann Brooks notes (*qua* Craig Owens 1983) that the politics of the post have, to some degree, challenged the authorisation of some representations and "women are among those who are denied legitimacy" (96). Again, it is important to note that I do not advocate an abandonment of post-colonial ethics of voice and representation. Yet the suppression of women's stories is a familiar situation which feminism has sought to redress, not perpetuate. A certain subsumption now occurs out a sense of responsibility to the Other. This may well be somewhat unavoidable (given that unethical representation is abhorrent to feminists), but the delegitimisation of women's representations from within feminism must be questioned.

It is obvious that those subordinated by race, ethnicity, religion or sexuality have also suffered attempts by dominant groups to silence their narratives. Yet narratives identified with specific cultural groups tend to be more acceptable to wider societies because they are more readily contained and, therefore, marginalised, as in the Australian system of multiculturalism. "Women's" narratives are especially problematic. Before feminism, these were contained/constrained by boundaries of

women's intercultural, interracial, inter-religious and inter-sexual memberships and, thus, failed to become identified as *women's* narratives except when confined to certain genres considered "feminine." In a post-feminist era, the enormously subversive potential of narratives identified as women's stories has continued to impinge very dramatically on patriarchal discourses. Postmodernism, as a metanarrative denying the validity of other metanarratives, restores some control. It limits the impact that a totalising feminism has on the production of its own gender-based metanarrative. It does so at a particular historical moment in Second Wave feminism when women *en masse* have begun to discover and develop "voice," by revealing to the educated world that metanarratives are not merely false but are corrupt because of their domination of subaltern narratives. Authority itself is then seen as corrupt and corrupting, reinvoking the old Quaker adage about power just as it comes within the grasp of women.

Why, then, are patriarchal narratives not seen to be a part of this "corruption?" Postmodernism, indeed postmodernity, does not preclude or eclipse modernist practices and approaches to the masquerade of narrative as "knowledge." Put differently, narrative is a modernist device that has not been replaced by the advent of postmodernity; rather, postmodernism offers deconstructive insights into the workings of modernity. It is "post" in the sense of existing in the aftermath of modernity's founding moments, just as post-feminism exists as a result of the

influences of feminism and not, as many believe, after patriarchy has ceased to prevail. But feminism cannot, for its part, continue to exist in a similar fashion. The acknowledged stronghold of science, for example, as a metanarrative of western culture is not paralleled by a widespread admission of patriarchy, because the strength of patriarchy lies in its invisibility and, thus, in its resistance to being identified as a primary discourse in its own right. Empiricism is itself a patriarchal discourse but covertly so because it was originally, and still is mainly, identified as such by feminists. Feminism, in contrast, is a counter-discourse that has no choice—if it does not want to be ignored—but to act overtly in order to influence and persuade and, thus, it inevitably attracts backlash (in the form of attack, appropriation, ridicule, discredit and other strategic responses) from dominant groups. As a counter-discourse its survival “from the margins” depends on continually demonstrating its merits and relevance to those whose interests it aspires to represent¹⁶.

I argue, in the light of postmodernist theory, that feminism is not simply being pressured to occupy an increasingly marginal discursive position in the guise of plurality (and, ironically, the interests of equality), but also that its members have come to believe that this new kind of marginalisation—including self-

¹⁶ I am indebted to Ron Blaber for his thought that counterdiscourses may well operate from sites of resistance for a time, but are likely to be converted into oppositional discourses, which are intrinsic to dominant discourse (as in “the other side of the same coin”), qua Foucault’s view that resistance is interior to the discursive system.

marginalisation—is, at the very least, good manners and, at best, intelligent pragmatism. We stand to one side because, as women, we wish to be considered fair, reasonable and possessed of a sense of universal justice. We take stock of the large theatre of action in which we play a small, if important, role; we influence rather than dictate. We no longer aspire to being modernity's higher authority, but are content to be a voice in a democratic cacophony of voices. We do not stop to question how "women" turned into splinter groups of female persons within a vast realm of "others." Rather, we say that women were never a homogeneous group in the first place as our "own" Simone de Beauvoir said all along (19). The women's movement, then, is apparently retrospectively guilty of a gross error of judgement in working towards a consensus, resulting only in the further oppression of the majority of women into a different sort of "otherness." In joining with other women, "we" oppress them in constructive narratives that negate theirs. The only solution is self-restraint.

I do not argue that this new self-conscious self-silencing is imposed from without on feminism by "postmodernism," any more than I cast patriarchy as a conspiracy theory. Neither do I say that the respect for difference created by post-structuralist feminisms are lamentable – quite the reverse. I do say, however, that postmodernist theory is not gender-neutral, contrary to the implications of prominent male theorists (such as Foucault), nor is it devoid of its own conservative impulses.

Postmodernism, with all its advantages to the development of feminist thought, comes to the fore at the point of a very significant breakthrough by women onto the public scene. This is no coincidence. The effects on feminism are much too reminiscent of backlash effects on early feminists to be accidental. These effects need considerable analysis in order to understand in more depth the workings of western power-knowledge systems.

Storying Other Selves

In spite of the mythology surrounding gender and genre, that women write the personal more readily than they write the “objective,” there is a co-existing notion (discussed in more detail in the next chapter) that women are more readily disposed to examine the traits of others than their own, as evidenced in the equation of women with gossip. This thesis is concerned with women’s biographical speech, and this section focuses on the macro- and micro-politics of women in postmodernity (and in the context of postmodernism) speaking about others.

The question of women’s agency in biographical speech continues to be an interesting theoretical issue. The question of their authority, moreover, is a vital political one. Agency, as I see it, is the enactment of discursive will. Agency is the catalyst of direction; the point at which discourse materialises as text, in a wide definition of the word. For the purposes of this thesis, the agent is the writer or

speaker, but it is a very different perception of writer or speaker from the modernist one of creator, originator or god of the word (“I *am* the Word”). Rather, the postmodernist agent is produced in various facets of her/his subjectivity by various discourses, but s/he produces the text by operating at the point of discursive cleavage or rupture, temporarily appropriating the moment of power-knowledge in a tactical display of creativity. The resulting text (biography/speech act) is original by virtue of the unique combination of discursive statements therein, but derivative because all of its components are pre-existed by the discourses which fashion those statements. Thus, agency is both pro-active and reactive but, in any event, is clearly different from the individual premise of authorship. An agent both embodies ([re]produces, disperses) and appropriates (deploys, deflects) discursive power and therefore behaves, in de Certeau’s terms, both strategically and tactically.

Authority, also both strategic and tactical, is also discursively produced. An individual agent borrows authority through the deployment of discourse. A feminist writer/speaker, for example, may be acting subversively (that is, attempting to subvert or transgress patriarchal systems) but also operates within those systems. Her authority as a writer/speaker is thus borrowed (as opposed to inherited), in the sense that she writes or speaks at official levels, but it is also derived from feminism as a powerful counter-discourse. The extent to which she draws on either, or any,

discourse in a given utterance depends on the context and the circumstances (and, of course, the desired response to her words).

One might legitimately say that feminist authority is escalating since it becomes more powerful as feminist discourses accrue historical and social leverage. But it is also experiencing a crisis of diversity. This crisis is especially relevant to biographical utterances. There lingers a perception of autobiographical speech as referring to oneself (that is, the self of the author). However, contemporary theories of subjectivity emphasise the web-effect of “self-construction” and, hence, the impossibility of speaking exclusively about the autonomous self. This applies both in the sense of the formation of the individual personality in conflict with social forces or on the grounds of “experience” which, as Joan Scott points out, is a highly problematic ground on which to stake claims of ownership (24-5)¹⁷. An autobiographical narrative is never completely one’s “own” story. Neither is biographical speech objective, value-free or organically whole; hence the blurring of generic boundaries in auto/biographical texts and theories in the context of the disunified subject. In these terms, autobiography and biography raise similar political issues for feminist writers. Whose story are we trying to tell and why?

Patricia Waugh expresses this narrative crisis as a historical one:

¹⁷ A more detailed discussion of Joan Scott’s work on experience appears in Chapter 4.

Women writers are beginning, for the first time in history, to construct an identity out of the recognition that women need to discover, and must fight for, a sense of unified selfhood, a rational, coherent, effective unity. As male writers lament its demise, women writers have not yet experienced that subjectivity which will give them a sense of personal autonomy, continuous identity, a history and agency in the world. (6)

Women, or at least relatively privileged women, are grappling with the effects of public authority without the benefits of having experienced a unified, and therefore powerful, sense of the autonomous self on which patriarchal systems of authority rely for their force. Hence, there is a sense of fraudulence for many women (further discussed in the next chapter) which is not merely to do with a lack of self-esteem, as is often believed, but to do with the culture's demand to present oneself as unified and rational if one wants to be taken seriously in the public domain and, in contrast, with women's difficulties in this regard. Women as objects in patriarchal culture have not experienced this moment of empowerment. Moreover, many feminists are politically opposed to exaggerated displays of "mastery" because they see them as a patriarchal performance that they do not especially wish to emulate. Postmodernist feminists have a sense of deceit in presenting themselves as more than simply agents of institutional authority but also, as it were, essentially (rather than contingently) authoritative. This patriarchal requirement causes female voices to lack coherence because they manifest more conflicting subject positions than do comparable male

voices (that is, male voices apparently invested with comparable degrees of authority).

Waugh therefore says that the feminine “becomes that which cannot be expressed because it exists outside the realm of symbolic signification” (8). Lyotard calls this area “the sublime” which tries to represent the unrepresentable and Waugh’s argument places women in this unrepresentable realm. They remain displaced and disenfranchised in, and by, patriarchal authorities:

How can they long for, reject or synthesize a new mode of being from a thesis which has never contained or expressed what they have felt their historical experience to be? (Waugh 9)

It is as though the codes of the authority game have changed yet again, just as women have gained access to them. Moreover, it is not just a question of “catching up” with the latest set of theories of subjectivity, but of finding themselves continually outside of societies that are their only link to authoritative self-construction. However, as Lyotard might argue, this makes their visibility, when it is achieved, highly transgressive and a fruitful means of change.

This underlying sense of deprivation tends to overshadow what Brewster, Yeatman and others suggest is the gift of deconstruction: to expose the metanarratives of the dominant groups by replacing these with small subjugated knowledges. Women

have not yet had an opportunity to connect their stories to any consensus of legitimated selfhood as “Man” has done. Without the history of such belonging—without the recognition that “Woman” has [had] an acknowledged place in the world as a gendered subject—women’s narratives can too readily be dismissed as entirely subjective, incidental and individual. There must be a sense that these narratives are pieces of a larger puzzle that the writer/speaker is not able to see in total, but which are decipherable to a significant degree as part of a pattern of selfhood. Otherwise, even the effect of deconstruction (of patriarchal grand narratives) is likely to be minimal. After all, postmodernism has declared that grand narratives are no longer credible, so why bother deconstructing them *ad nauseam*? One must have something to *create* and the authority with which to create it. Postmodernism has undermined both as legitimate projects in much the same way (and, I would argue, for much the same reasons) as modernity undermined the female self as a legitimate subject. It was, in fact, modernism as a subversive movement (that is, as a movement designed to transgress the constructions of modernity) that gave feminism its most authoritative scaffolding.

At the nub of the problem of women’s biographical speech exists, of course, the disintegration of the unified self as a new barrier against speaking about/for others. If one cannot coherently construct the self as an authentic subject in modernity, and now cannot construct the self as a legitimately transgressive subject in

postmodernity, one is left only with the tool of deconstruction (of patriarchy). To deconstruct the unwritable and inexpressible feminine is hardly an act of empowerment. When one woman textually constructs another she is thus producing a politically strategic construct which hardly justifies the choice of one definition over another. Thus, contemporary biographical speech (and, especially, biography which encodes textual author-ity more than do oral genres) becomes an act of violence to the objectified biographical “subject” more than at any other historical juncture. Since we cannot return to the innocence of Enlightenment selfhood, we have no choice but to live with the responsibilities of our political motives in “telling” lives. Lyotard supports this view of textual effect in *Just Gaming*:

I wonder if any book is ever negotiable, in any case. I think books produce effects. Those that pretend to negotiate are somewhat naive. (3)

In this light, meta-biographical speech (that which foregrounds its own constructive practice) becomes more of an aesthetic form than a satisfactory means of avoiding the domination of its subject. The potential for resistance remains but, as Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby observe, “the power of a reverse discourse is precarious” since it cannot exist without recourse to a binarism” (ii).

Where, then, does this leave women’s authority in engaging in acts of biographical speech? In political terms, by which I mean as revolutionary acts, speaking women engage in the sense of playing a jousting game with justices. Their project moves

towards local justices which, one must own, constantly unbalance the justices of others in their very attempt to encompass the justices of others. For white middle-class women (including most women biographers) the game is extremely precarious, perhaps because we are first in line to acquire public authority approaching that of comparable men. Anne Brewster demonstrates this precariousness when she says that First World feminists are beginning to confront the issue of racism by unlearning their experience of privilege (7):

If feminism is to be viable in cross-cultural or transnational contexts, it must serve the agendas of minority constituencies and not use those constituencies to serve the feminism of First World women. (66)

This kind of awareness of the interests of others is both politically and ethnically appropriate and traditionally feminine. As a new kind of feminist self-restraint it is, arguably, productive for global feminism (the metanarrative that postmodernism tells us is a dangerous fiction) but, at worst, inhibiting to the women who are, once again, being urged to self-censorship. The other way of reading Brewster's injunction is that feminists may aspire to emancipation so long as it does not restrict that of others, but even this is a highly precarious call. If a position of power is "occupied" by one person, then it inevitably excludes another and therefore works against their interests.

Carolyn Heilbrun points to this irony which particularly affects white, middle-class feminists:

Only in the last third of the twentieth century have women broken through to a realization of the narratives that have been controlling their lives. Women [poets] of one generation—those born between 1923 and 1932—can now be seen to have transformed the autobiographies of women’s lives, to have expressed, and suffered for expressing, what women had not earlier been allowed to say. Women poets, sometimes in their poetry, sometimes in essays, books, and interviews lifted the constraints on women’s writing the truth about their lives first. These women, all of them middle class and white, simultaneously dismantled the past and reimagined the future. They found a way to recognize and express their anger; harder still, they managed to bear, for a time at least, the anger in men that their work aroused. (66)

Moreover, Heilbrun states that “if I had to emphasize the lack either of narrative or of language to the formation of new women’s lives, I would unquestionably emphasize narrative” (43). But embargoes on women’s narratives continue not, as was once the case, because no opportunities exist for the circulation of “women’s stories,” but because the issues of oppression are increasingly confused and confusing, and primarily because there are new confusions around women’s emergent authorities to speak.

I once discussed gender issues with a Malaysian woman who had made a passionate denouncement of “whitefeminism” at a women’s studies conference. I asked her whether she felt she suffered more from oppression through race or through gender and she replied that, without a doubt, she suffered more from racial prejudices,

excepting her contact with Christian churches in which the sexism displayed was worse than the racism of their leaders. The implication was that, unlike westerners, she suffered more abuse and neglect from outside of her cultural community than within it. She claimed that never had she seen sexist attitudes and behaviour as pernicious and persistent as in white societies, and I have heard similar comments from Aboriginal women. If this is the case (and I am not wholly convinced that it is because perceptions of sexism vary between individuals and cultures), it means that white women experience a particular form of oppression about which they must be allowed to speak without feeling that they are then pursuing a politics of self-interest at the expense of others. Moreover, as feminists they need to feel that their representations of others reflect and promote their gender politics. Heilbrun is adamant that the solution lies in the exchange of narratives:

Women must turn to one another for stories; they must share the stories of their lives and their hopes and their unacceptable fantasies. (44)

These stories are related experiences of gendered enculturation and, as such, are culture specific. Moreover, they are social constructions:

What became essential was for women to see themselves collectively, not individually, not caught in some individual erotic and familial plot and, inevitably, found wanting. Individual stories from biographies and autobiographies have always been conceived of as individual, eccentric lives. I suspect that female narratives will be found where women exchange stories, where they read and talk collectively of ambitions, and possibilities, and accomplishments. (Heilbrun 46)

The problem arises in postmodernity, as it did in modernity under different discursive conditions, of how to produce a mass of “female narratives” which speak exclusively and self-consciously about specific cultural groups whilst having some application to “the female gender.” This is the task of contemporary white middle-class feminists: to use signifiers of gender that incorporate signification of race, ethnicity and sexual identity. I suggest that this becomes more than a matter of inserting disclaimers and qualifiers into narrative forms. In effect, this is a problem of authority that certain advantaged women have found to be problematised simultaneously by feminism and postmodernism as politics of difference.

Whilst it is no easy choice between the confident representation of feminine identities and the appropriation of the right of others to self-determinism, it may be that women should be allowed a little more license than men, given their history as subordinates. Cheryl Walker says in Epstein’s *Contesting the Subject*:

In the past, women have become writers partly to create substantive identities. Too often such women have found themselves ignored, drowned out, spoken for, or spoken against with the result that they have even lost contact with what they might be inclined to think, should they ever have the opportunity. At the level of her own understanding about her role as an author, therefore, it is fatal for such a woman to choose the role of self-sacrifice Foucault describes as characteristic of contemporary ecriture. Self-sacrifice, as Nancy K. Miller suggests, may well be a phase in the development of authorial consciousness not appropriate to

such female authors. But, of course, all of this is only relevant at the level of the author's positionality and intentions, concerns that are frequently ruled out of court by "death of the author" critics. (113)

It is therefore important to feminists that the role of the author be not totally negated or relegated to a wholly deterministic view of agency. One cannot cultivate "voice," most especially a woman's voice as representative of a gendered perspective, outside of a gendered body. The question "who speaks?" remains far more pertinent than "what speaks?" Textual authority is located in, and deployed by, what Foucault calls "the author effect." Says Walker:

As a feminist I find myself dissatisfied with the abstract indeterminacy of "textuality," which has, in many cases, come to replace authorship in critical discourse. It continues to seem to me important to identify the circumstances that govern relations between authors and texts, as between texts and readers, because without such material we are in danger of seeing gender disappear or become transformed into a feature of textuality that cannot be persuasively connected to real women. (110)

Feminism is concerned with improving the quality of actual women's lives, not with a disembodied principle of non-sexism. It is in such political interests that theories of diversity must inform our search for "justices." However, the founding and protection of regional communities must relate to a larger picture in order to understand the ways in which power works, not only in the construction of gendered authorities but in national and international systems of power-knowledge. The alternative (which some feminists are now advocating) is to abandon any inclination

towards a feminist grand social theory, with the added sacrifice of intercultural intervention for reasons and social justice. Given that there are no ready “solutions” to the difference dilemma, how can feminists best proceed in asserting their “own” authorities without undermining the autonomy of other women?

Trinh T. Minh-ha views “speaking out” as a fundamentally important act in women’s empowerment because it is fundamental to a personal and cultural presence. The act of writing legitimises itself and legitimises the writer, and publication even more so:

Writing: not letting it merely haunt you and die over and over again in you until you no longer know how to speak. Getting published: not loathing yourself, not burning it, not giving up. (9)

In these terms, the act of writing as a woman is doubly significant:

For publication means the breaking of a first seal, the end of a “no-admitted” status, the end of a soliloquy confined to the private sphere, and the start of a possible sharing with the unknown other—the reader, whose collaboration with the writer alone allows the work to come into full being. Without such a rite of passage, the woman-writer-to-be/woman-to-be-writer is condemned to wander about, begging for permission to join in and be a member. (9)

This sense of constructing a social authority through interaction with others is a strong part of biographical speech acts, and even stronger in written form than oral. Written forms of biographical speech make public the mutual identification that is a

strong feature of women's relationships in the private sphere of their shared subordination:

I write to show myself showing people who show me my own showing.

I-You: not one, not two. (22)

Minh-ha is unequivocal about the extent to which women writers must empower themselves, if necessary without approval from others:

S/he who writes, writes. In uncertainty, in necessity. And does not ask whether s/he is given the permission to do so or not. (8)

Yet this kind of "seize the moment" injunction invokes a modernist feminist politics (not least because of the androgynous pronoun that brackets female and male writers together in their political identities) which is somewhat out of place in the context of pluralist feminism. Does Minh-ha mean that all feminists can and must speak about others without waiting for approval? She points out that silence can be a refusal to take part in a larger story and a transgressive act which can gain attention, but that a lone silence is simply a lack of voice and is "one more point given to the silencers" (83). Yet a whitefeminist must decide whether her authoritative speech is a point for women (and, thus, for her black sisters too) or a further endorsement of white privilege.

Anne Brewster, a non-Aboriginal feminist who writes about Aboriginal women's writings, maintains that reflexive speaking by white academics, after due

consultation with one's subject, helps to deal with racism when "[the] academic's position is not seen as unproblematic but rather as a site of conflict" (9). Similarly, Laurie A. Finke deplores what she calls a "weak-kneed pluralism" (16) and, instead, advocates something of a protected space for all women's writing, on the grounds that women as women remain disenfranchised subjectivities:

The marginal and the oppressed—those who are not white, middle-class or male—have always experienced the self as fragmented and subjectivity as subjection. Only those who have secure and fixed identities can afford the luxury of fragmenting them. (109)

Some feminists, who are not satisfied with either a reworked humanism or with postmodernism, are giving themselves permission for new kinds of eclecticism, something that is also happening in the work of some male postmodernist critics such as Stephen Crook who says that deconstructionist theory is all very well as a critique of modernist radicalism but it cannot furnish a working alternative. This is, firstly, because postmodernism "resolves into a monistic metaphysics which is no more acceptable than the modernism it contests" (47) and, secondly, because its nihilistic implications are a fatal[istic] flaw. Postmodernism may explain modernity but it does not transcend modernist discourses and fails to become "postfoundationalist" (65). Moreover, it both fails to explain how change is generated, to justify the demand for change and, indeed, to state why change is better than no change (59). Crook's view that theory must remain "accountable" and self-consciously identified and more connected to its own politics (in the form of "radical

enquiry”) is what feminists have said all along: theory must inform social politics and remain accountable to them:

The ‘ends’ which radical theory continually makes and re-makes with metaphysics and modernity (or pre-modernity) always turn out to be something other than an end: a transcendence, perhaps, a negation. A post-foundational radicalism which insisted that the relations between enquiry, context and temporal thresholds were wholly contingent and pragmatic might be able to make an end of the ends. By simply ceasing to address the old questions it may be able to pose new ones about contemporary realities and possibilities. (70)

For feminists, the old questions remain the pressing ones although they are being couched in new terms.

I find Diane Elam’s work on feminism and deconstruction to be of value in the construction of a somewhat workable model of feminist ethics. Elam does not offer any salve to what she calls the “stormy marriage” of deconstruction and feminism (19). She makes plain that feminisms are faced with the ongoing reality that we do not know what women “are” (27) and that we therefore live within a tension of undecideability. This undecideability works for the resistance of feminists to patriarchal foundationalist thought, as women cross boundaries, rise from ever-sticky floors and attack glass ceilings on the premise that they are being unjustly defined through processes which posit fictional representations of womanhood and femininity. It also works against a cohesive women’s movement for the same

reasons. Elan posits women's unions based on "groundless solidarity." I infer this to be something that falls betwixt and between universal sisterhood and a provisional alliance of persons with [female] gendered subject positions (persons who could theoretically be male).

Elan deconstructs the human rights premise of ethics as being against the feminist project. Rights cannot be viewed as natural or *a priori*—or as being automatically attached to a particular subject position because "subjects do not define rights for themselves; rather, rights produce subjects who can hold them" (78). Inevitably, says Elan, rights conflict in the same way that subject positions rest on conflicting determinants. She therefore posits an ethics without recourse to subjectivity—an ethical model that is beyond either rights politics or identity politics. This is certainly not to say that this constitutes an embrace of nihilism or a political free-for-all (81). Rather, it means that "the political is better understood as the realm of continual negotiation, as a matter of negotiation in the absence of any accounting procedure" (81). Elan concedes that such a model, based on what she calls radical undecidability, has its dangers:

Hard won battles carried out in the name of social justice—political struggles to overcome racism or sexism, for instance—may have to be refought, renegotiated. Within the politics of the undecidable there is still, unfortunately, the possibility of injustice, but it is important to

emphasize here that the political would be the space of the contested with regard to the social. (82).

How, then, might feminists identify their attitudes towards other women? Elan's model sets up a premise of "groundless solidarity," in which feminists are ever-open to the differences separating their own realities from those of other women, but nevertheless retain a provisional loyalty based on gender as a complex and varying factor of power differentials. Women are different from each other, and their experiences of subordination are likewise different, but the effects of patriarchy on women are different again from those experienced by men (who also experience them differently). In this, Elan is clear that it is a mistake to do away with the category of "women" altogether. For this reason, the politics of undecidability should not result in the dead-end nihilism of "I can't decide, therefore I can't act" (87) because "the politics of undecidability must, in some way, engage with ethics and consider obligations and responsibilities" (87, original in italics). Such an ethics binds the feminist writer, therefore, into a situation of endless negotiation based on localised situation. Elan calls this radical contingency (111). It is a step away from mere alliance politics (which appear to lend themselves to a good deal of expediency and self-interested opportunism), yet it does not offer any false security against occupying a position of domination purely by being a feminist. Domination, as the work of Foucault attests, can be enacted from any subject position, whether this be one of relative subordination or relative power.

For feminist biographers, this would seem to be both frustratingly paradoxical and cautiously enabling. Alliance politics as practised from within and amongst feminists, surely, must have some grounds if they are not to be utterly expedient and opportunist. If the grounds are gender, then we must ultimately have some further grounds, however provisional, on which to establish a radically contingent sisterhood. If the grounds are marginalisation on the grounds of gender (even given that the manner and quality of this subordination comes in varying shades, tones, weights, styles and qualities), then we are (unfortunately, in many ways) on the way to drawing, once again, some manner of generalised conclusion about the nature of this gendered subordination. In this case, this would be a conclusion based on experience that is problematic as a basis for authority. Our solidarity as women, then, cannot be entirely groundless, although it must be problematised. We simply do not know the extent of the grounds and may be willing to concede, as she does, that sexual difference (and therefore sexual oppression) is one difference, and one oppression, amongst several. On the other hand, Elan's model is promising, in that it exhorts "ethical activism" as a kind of existential charge that all feminists must unendingly carry. And it is relatively enabling for biographers because the writer can begin the task of representing the Other with the awareness that some injustices will occur:

Hence the problem of the Other is not a problem of intersubjectivity: no amount of agreement between subjects can make the Other go away. Whereas the notion of intersubjective dialogue presumes that two

subjects can come to terms, agree and become one so as to put an end to Otherness, the invocation of singularity insists on the radical difference that constitutes any speaking position. (110).

Again, this is not to disregard an ethical injunction to avoid oppressing the Other, but it means that the biographer then considers ways in which the process and product of biography can be *relatively* just. To such a judgement is brought an awareness of, and insight into, the repressive nature of representation.

What seems to remain perpetually in question, and always precarious, is the notion of a feminine and feminist authority, and the questions seemingly take on new and wondrous forms at each twist and turn of “post-feminism.” But these complications do not arise exclusively at the levels of theory and the politics of representation. They are made manifest on an everyday basis at the level of women’s social subjectivities, in which women remain socially constructed as subordinates in western patriarchal societies. For this reason, a research project of representation must necessarily devote attention to social subjectivity within the context of ideology and power.

Chapter 3

Women and the Biographical Process:

Strategic Responses of Gender and Genre

The reading of a biography can be a counter irritant, the sufferings of the subject can be so much worse than our own uneasiness or pain and therefore our lives can immediately be put into some kind of proportion by an acquaintance with the extraordinary details in the life of someone else—ie. the subject of a biography. . . . Reading biography can make the reader feel suitably humble and grateful. Humility and gratitude are relaxed feelings and *good* —not energy wasting like anger and revenge and remorse. (Elizabeth Jolley)

Samantha Brennan’s question, “what is the connection between theories of rights and theories of the self?” (868) is followed by two connected others (*qua* Alasdair MacIntyre):

We answer the question, “What am I to do?” by answering the question, “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?” (qtd. in Brennan 869)

Thus, action is inextricably linked with social subjectivity, and subjectivity with representation. All are personally experienced, socially constructed and politically inscribed.

This chapter examines some of the ways in which women's authority is constructed or, conversely, undermined in formal and informal biographical utterances. These ways, in Gramscian terms, would be classified as hegemonic, being "an organised form of consent" which "secure the participation of the masses in the project of the ruling bloc" (Barrett 54). In Raymond Williams' account, this entails processes in which subordinate and dominant subjects "are involved in a continual making and remaking of a dominant culture" (Williams 209). Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's post-Marxist revisions of hegemony take issue with the class-based (and, therefore, monolithic) premise of a coercive/determinist model, so as to shift the Marxist project to a post-structuralist position (Barrett 51-80). To Laclau and Mouffe, it is the definition of ideology that underpins the workings of a hegemonic response (Mouffe 168). Since, in the discourses of post-structuralism, there is no such thing as "society," then neither is there a total organising principle of difference itself. Differences do not circulate like so many variations of a central theme; rather, they exist as a result of incomplete systems or [dis]organising systems. For Michele Barrett, Laclau and Mouffe's position is pluralist and decentring in a celebration of nihilism that is somewhat existentialist through its extreme resistance to any kind of meaning and, conversely, through an embrace of meaninglessness. They constitute hegemonic reflexes as a response to almost total dislocation and an ill-fated attempt at suture (Silverman 194). Hegemonic behaviours, then, are vain efforts to belong,

to make good, to appease, to create their practitioners as members of an organism that does not, and cannot, exist.

Foucault, in his account of power, makes considerably less of agency, whether dominant and resistant. For Foucault, “ideology” is also constituted falsely as organic. Hence, “power” has given way to “power relations.” Foucault shows how an internalisation of surveillance develops, so that subjects across classes and genders and social groups of any kind become varyingly complicit with concepts of power which are, in effect, disembodied and sourceless. This displaces acts of pure resistance, and creates instead momentary gestures of symbolic resistance at all points of the power spectrum. By problematising fixed sites of power, Foucault also problematises subordination. This, of course, is the main problem that feminists have with his theories of power, since he does not accord with “patriarchy” as a power-holding system of domination. Nevertheless, Barrett observes that, for Foucault, the question of who enacts either assertions of, or challenges to, strategic enactments of power, and how those assertions or challenges occur, is of vital interest.

Therefore, the following analysis of women’s oppression within the biographical process is not to claim that women consistently or unrelentingly occupy victim positions, or that “men” consistently or unrelentingly act as oppressors. However, I

argue, and herein demonstrate, that women are significantly disadvantaged by the symbolic violence deployed against them as a gender, and, further, that the inscription of female gender substantially undermines an otherwise authoritative subject position held by a woman.

It should be noted that in speaking about “the biographical process” I am concerned with the purposes and processes of constructing a biographical narrative; that is, with the act of telling stories about others, and not with the mechanics of gathering, selecting and analysing material about a potential subject. My interest is in the manner in which biographical narrative functions in women’s lives to construct them as authoritative or otherwise, and in the various implications of different genres of biographical speech utilised by women. This results in an examination of the layers of so-called non-fictional or referential storytelling that occurs within the process of constructing a formal biography.

In order to evaluate the relation of women to biographical speech genres used in biography, this chapter posits three categories of biographical research which have varying degrees of relevance to, and preference by, women. These subgenres, subnarratives or, as Agnes Heller terms them, mininarratives (Heller 284), are utilised in the process of research for a biographical narrative (the primary genre). Secondly, the functions of biography and its “alter-ego” or polar opposite, gossip, are

each applied to women in and around the act of public or official storytelling. Thirdly, the observations made in each of these two sections are situated within the range of biographical speech in general and women's lifestory-telling in particular, with specific reference to my own biographical project. The contention here is that at all levels of the biographical process, the subject is determined and pre-determined by the narrative process which constructs a specific subject position for the (in these terms quite passive) biographical subject. This is most certainly not an argument for post-colonial feminist writers to abandon the search for just practices. But it moves the debate on biographical ethics from an inter-subjective relationship (between writer and subject) to Diane Elan's (1994) model of radical undecidability (recognising that biography is inevitably a repressive form and practice to some degree, and negotiating within the gaps and conflicts).

To aid this point with a specific illustration, I begin with a brief account of my own (discontinued) biographical project of which the writing and research experience inspired and informs this extended analysis of women and biographical speech. This, my first venture into biography, became an experiment in feminist postmodernist biography of a living subject—an aim I came to think of as fraught with contradictions.

In 1989 I embarked on writing a biography of a woman who could be described as a minor public figure. Ann Anon (as I have subsequently christened her) was, and is, an approachable and accessible woman of my own Anglo-Celtic culture, class and generation who was then in the public eye, sufficiently famous to attract public curiosity about her life (a primary feature of traditional biography) and sufficiently “ordinary” to appeal to a feminist desire for role models which are “representative” of many women of similar backgrounds. The mutually agreed focus of the biography was to be Anon’s life work for a feminist pacifism. Her personal life was to be seen as a vital part of that work (no arbitrary divisions between public and private), but the overall point was to trace the circumstantial and philosophical links that led from an Australian schoolgirl to socialist-feminist, and then to analyse the functions of the latter role. Since Anon herself was willing, even keen, for this work to be further promoted through the act of writing, and since my own feminist principles embraced subject-friendly practices, there did not seem to be a problem with this kind of feminist biography. Nevertheless, problems of justice and micro-ethics did arise in quite fundamental ways due, I contend, to the process of biographical signification.

Anon has generally considered herself a privileged person who has had a happy life, giving her a sense of fair play and obligation to those less advantaged than herself. Her attraction to pacifism, she said, stemmed from her family’s religious background

that emphasised service to others. I did not entirely accept that altruism was the only motive behind Anon's political interests, sincere though she may well have been about making the world a better place for others, because I viewed people as being primarily motivated by deeper, more personal and also more intrinsically social, issues. One of my initial aims was to identify more specific motivations for a middle-class white woman born and raised in prosperity and peace to take on the world in the dynamic way that she did. I intended to construct a feminist-inspired story of a woman's development that was both honest and positive (and that would therefore not unduly hurt my subject), though (and because) it would not present a final or immovable truth. Retrospectively, I would say that I was attempting a discursive biography centred around an individual[ised] subjectivity because I was interested in the manner in which the often-conflicting discourses of late-twentieth century western society materialised in a woman who was necessarily at odds with the society she wished to change, despite her best endeavours to achieve peace within it and for it.

Biography and Biographical Speech: Genre and Sub-Genres

The life-narrative that results in a biography is supposedly unknown to the author at the outset of the project. Any biographer would say that the finished portrait naturally depends on the result of her enquiries—her “research into” the character and life of her subject. Nevertheless, the biographer's initial hypothesis inevitably

provides the motivation for the project in the first place. In fact, the first question in post-publication interviews with the author is generally “What inspired you to write a biography of . . .?” This hypothesis produces the agenda that pre-shapes the “facts” that emerge. Terrell Carver emphasises this motivational agenda:

The reader should be aware that the biography emerges from a biographer with intentions, and not from some godlike consciousness, omniscient and omnipresent. . . . Biographers and readers both find it easy to pretend that the biographer is a “time lord” opening a “time tunnel” down which readers can peer in utter transparency and thus recapture the past as it was. (57)

In effect, those facts that are not relevant to (that perhaps even contradict) the biographer’s initial beliefs about the subject are often ignored or discarded. Virginia Woolf refers to “a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore” (*Orlando* 13). Although Ulick O’Connor posits two types of biographer—the collector and the selector (1-45)—he is referring more to styles of biography than to processes of writing, because the very act of constructing a narrative demands such a conscious selection, even if the biographer’s personal integrity rejects a conscious suppression of evidence. Biographical facts, like any other facts, present a highly selective kind of narrative truth.

Biography is an overtly narrative genre—overtly because one might argue that, to some extent, all linguistic genres are, or draw on, narrative, from letters to obituaries,

from instructions to reviews, or even recipes. Biography, however, is from first to last a story—ostensibly *the* story of a given life. In constructivist terms, this concept translates into “a story of some aspects of a life-experience.” In other words, textual devices are utilised in meta-biographies that seek to undermine the fallacy of a single, fixed truth, and yet the phenomenon of story telling still gives an overall shape to a “Life.” Biographical research constitutes a series of sub-narratives which the biographer selects, evaluates and either activates (draws on or refers to directly) or rejects (ignores, sometimes suppresses). The biographer is dependent on these sub-narratives which modernists have called the “facts,” and which the reading public imagine biographers string together. Postmodernist writers and theorists, however, would see the sub-narratives (the “raw material” collected during research), as well as the finished biography, as constructs (constructed, that is, both by the author[s] in an overt sense and, ultimately, by the culture). I propose to examine the biographical process from a constructionist premise and to locate some of these sub-narratives within this process—sub-narratives that, in fact, amount to [sub]genres of biographical speech.

Biographical research data may be arranged into the following three categories of narrative structure: factual documents, written commentaries and interviews. The first group comprises items such as birth certificates, baptismal records, voting records, housing deeds, and other apparently neutral, or impartial—that is,

official—documents. All these items reflect and maintain the culture's need to record and store data which identifies individuals and helps to track their movements. The items also reflect and maintain the culture's methods of social order and control (such as the need for professional qualifications in order to be active in those professions, the management and control of private and public finance, the power-systems within the medical and legal systems, and so forth). Thus, the existence of, and the kind of data provided by, such documents is hardly neutral or apolitical in practice (like all texts, these are social constructs). Nevertheless, when used for biographical purposes they are commonly viewed as providing straightforward or value-free data. This is because these items are not open to influence by private individuals (specifically, by the subject and her family/friends/peers or the biographer) but are (relatively) uniformly applied and so appear to be impersonal. Although such documents are not classified as narrative genres, they result from discourses that affect social subjectivities, and within the biographical process they actively help to construct narrative forms.

There is a historical tendency for more formal documentation of this nature to be available in the case of men than women, since women have taken less part in public or official life and since they have owned less property. Indeed, up to the mid-nineteenth century a married woman in Australia could not own property nor carry out legal transactions except with the authorisation of her husband. Today

Australian women comprise 43% of the paid workforce (Women's Policy Development Office 57) and participate in all aspects of public life.¹⁸ Therefore, "factual" documents of this official kind tend to be less crucial to biographies written about women, chiefly because such material is less likely to be extant.

The second category of research data ("written commentaries") comprises public and private written accounts, such as newspaper articles, letters, diaries, journals, logs, testaments, affidavits, obituaries or medical notes, and so on—all of which are more readily classifiable as narratives though they are not always recognised as such, a good example being medical notes or logs in which the narrative function is present but takes a "factual" form). These texts tell stories, or aspects of stories, in forms that are, like the first category of material, recoverable in original (written) form by biographers. As with official documents, these forms are gendered; for example, newspaper articles, logs, affidavits and obituaries, business letters and professional journals apply more to public life, and thus rather more to men than to women; private letters, diaries and medical notes relate to the private life, and today continue

¹⁸ This 1999 document from the Women's Policy Development Office indicates that "the barriers to [women's] equality in education and employment have virtually disappeared" (57). However, there is plenty of data to suggest that this indicates "progress" (as the document is entitled) rather than real equity. For example, women with postgraduate qualifications receive \$6,000 p.a. less than male counterparts (59). The average weekly wage for Western Australian women is the second lowest in the nation compared with that of men—one of the highest (59) – 75% of male wage (65). 58% of women out of the workforce are attending home duties of child care, as opposed to 5% of men (65), and so on. These figures, and others, suggest that the women's roles have widened and extended, but the nature of women's subjectivities remains within a subordinate context in relation to men's subjectivities.

to have especially strong links with women, though the division begins to blur as middle-class women, in particular, gain increasing access to public life. These items are seen by biographers as extremely valuable, as their content is recoverable (and therefore indisputable, so that it can be pointed to as “fact”) and at the same time it often lends quite personal or individualistic insights into people. This research data thus yields both “factual” and “deduced” or interpreted data to the biographer, but is likely to be treated as relatively factual overall because the biographer (or, in many instances, the biographical subject) has not had any input into their actual production (though plenty of input into their selection and interpretation).

The third type of research data is obtained from interviews and conversations with relevant witnesses, including comments exchanged with, and solicited or overheard by, the researcher. These are perhaps the most subjective aspects of biographical research because the biographer has an active input in the structure of the interview, the formulation of the questions and the interpretation of the data. Furthermore, although the results of research interviews (which range from a few scribbled notes to typed transcripts of taped interviews) are supposedly “on record” and are sometimes formally cited in the biography, they remain the property of the biographer and are generally held in confidence unless, for example, the biographer is sued for inaccurate or unsubstantiated comments in which case transcripts may be produced in court. Thus, this category is the most overtly subjective form of

evidence, and yet their subjective nature is frequently disguised under a general heading of “research” which has a tendency to invoke assumptions of relative objectivity (the “witness” phenomenon). On the one hand, there does not appear to be any discernible gender factor in operation with regard to the frequency of use of such interviews (except that more biographies are written about men than women). On the other, it is arguable that women make particular uses of such interviews and conversations as opposed to their use of more formal biographical speech genres and it is entirely likely that these uses are somewhat different from those applied by men.

As one travels down this list of three categories of subgenre utilised in biography, five factors become sequentially apparent which, I suggest, are rather more than coincidentally linked. Firstly, the categories are increasingly **informal/unofficial** in nature. Secondly, the categories are increasingly **narrative** in structure. Thirdly, they are increasingly dependent on the agency of the biographer/researcher, making them increasingly more **subjective**. Fourthly, they increasingly depend on a more **collaborative** process of construction, giving the [living] subject, as well as the author, more control over the content. Fifthly, they are increasingly **likely to be effective in collecting data from women**. In other words, these subgenres of biography (or modes of biographical speech) appear to be more “woman-centred” as the list develops. The point here is that this apparent woman-friendliness does not render the biographical process any less oppressive to women. Indeed, feminist

researchers claim that women interviewees are particularly at risk of exploitation (most notably with a woman researcher) because, in woman-to-woman dialogues, the codes of [female] gender are often foregrounded (especially in relatively informal settings) (Oakley 41; Frame 80; Acker, Barry and Esseveld 427). A woman interviewee commonly deploys terms of reciprocity, trust, sharing of personal information and an implied intimacy with a woman researcher. This feeling of reciprocity tends to evoke inter-subjective (intra-subordinate) relations common to women's friendships, and belies the agenda of the researcher to collect data for her "own" ends.

At this point, I will examine the generic binary opposition of biography and gossip, being a device to consider the differences between formal and informal biographical speech forms. Even in this so-called post-feminist age, gossip remains associated more with women and biography more with men, though members of both sexes apparently utilise both biographical speech forms. Women increasingly want to see more of their stories "on the record" and men, at times, rely on informal, or "off the record" channels of communication. The two are also frequently intertwined. For example, formal biography relies on an enormous amount of biographical subnarratives, many of which contain the ingredients of "mere" gossip. Thus it is germane to consider the different purposes and processes of these two biographical speech genres. These are at opposite ends of the formal/informal, recognised/

unrecognised, recorded/unrecorded spectra of speaking about others. We need to see what possible relation these purposes and processes have to gender constructions in western society. In emphasising the role of informal biographical speech genres such as “gossip” (a widely misused and trivialising term belying the intersubjective nature of intra-subordinate exchanges), I do not so much advocate these genres as being somehow more *suitable* or even *natural* for women. Nor do I posit these genres as inevitably gender-inscribed and thus unavoidable. But I argue that speech is as gender-oriented as any other social practice. It must therefore be examined for its implications and the politics of these in the construction of a gendered authority, since these genres are in daily use whether or not this is readily admitted or admissible in public life.

Conventionally and traditionally, “gossip” (informal, unrecorded, “unsubstantiated” speech) is not seen as “valid” biographical research. This is appropriate to some extent, in the sense that it may be purely subjective or extremely biased, or that it is not necessarily intended for official/formal use, or that it is potentially damaging to its subject. On the other hand, biographers often use informal—and especially “leaked” information, even if they do not necessarily acknowledge the source or call it research. I argue that the line is a fine one to draw and, in common practice, is frequently not drawn at all. Moreover, there are a number of reasons why women sometimes prefer to use less formal or “off the record” speech modes when talking to

researchers/journalists/writers—especially if they, too, are women. Clearly, this point does not validate the use of “gossip” as formal, ethical research. Neither is it the case that informal speech is used only by women. On the contrary, it is widely used in public and private, official and unofficial dialogue. But I do argue that women because of their positioning as subordinated subjects frequently use unofficial speech (which is sometimes dismissed as “mere” gossip). Moreover, I suggest that the reasons for this usage, and the public/official view of it in biographical processes need further scrutiny if we are to understand gender as a significant factor in power relations.

Biography and Gossip: Connections, Contrasts and Contradictions

Biography is a formal, written genre, shaped by a set of rules and conventions into a lifestory that becomes an official document and thus part of the discourses of the day. Conversely, gossip is information given informally or casually. Its content is considered unreliable, largely because gossip apparently has few rules—in fact, it sometimes appears to exist in order to challenge the rules of more formal linguistic genres. These generic rules (those codes or conventions which govern who speaks, when and under what conditions), are primarily concerned with discursive authority—an authority that is, therefore, lacking (or relatively lacking) in the case of gossip. Because of this lack of authority, gossip (unlike a published biography) is

not admitted directly to official discursive channels¹⁹. What, then, are the discursive rules applied to biography and how do these rules relate, if at all, to gossip? What, in fact, do biography and gossip have in common and what divides them?

The authority of a biography is invoked by the biographer who is supposedly in sole charge of what appears and does not appear in the published text (albeit with the final approval of an editor). Other factors (such as the kudos of the publishing house, status of the subject and so on) also mediate this authority but, from a reader's perspective, the professional biographer's role, at least, is commonly inscribed as a powerful one. However, it is also the case that traditional biographers go to some trouble to distance themselves and their authorial presence from their words, because biography is defined as non-fictional, which is taken as meaning that "the facts speak for themselves." A novelist says something because it is artistic and/or textually convenient to say it (and, as modernists like Virginia Woolf suggest, because this process supposedly accesses a kind of higher spiritual truth not readily apparent in simple "information"). But a biographer, we believe, says something because it is demonstrably factual or at the very least because it is a well-researched expert opinion founded in "fact" or intuited truth. This biographical fallacy is assisted by

¹⁹ As observed by Seyla Benhabib, feminists have "revalorized and taught us to view with different eyes such traditionally female and previously denigrated activities like gossip...In this process of the "feminist transvaluation of values" out *present* interest in women's strategies of survival and historical resistance has imbued these *past* activities...with new meaning and significance (*Situating* 220).

the biographer's absence from the text so that, in classic biography, what appears on the printed page stands as simple, unvarnished fact, unmitigated by human agency except for that of a messenger or scribe. Thus, authorial presence, as it were, "around" the text achieves a similar kind of authoritative illusion as the biographer's absence *within* the text. That is, the readership is permitted to know the identity of the biographer and to admire his/her authorial expertise (as in Richard Ellman's *James Joyce* or David Marr's *Patrick White*) but the reader is simultaneously encouraged to view *The Life* as a creatively articulated, but relatively indisputable, fact. Virginia Woolf was caught up in this generic conundrum. On the one hand, she was somewhat disparaging of "the most restricted of all arts" (*Collected Essays* 221). On the other, she emphasises the biographer's use of selection in "a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore" (*Orlando* 13). The biographer is restrained and constrained by "the facts" but is also their editorial master.

The literary device by which such discursive authority is produced is the phenomenon of the author. The reign of the author has been enshrined in western culture since (British) copyright legislation in 1709. We are accustomed to using the noun "authorisation" in a wider sense, as meaning the process by which "authority" is conferred. However, the Macquarie Dictionary reveals that the word "authority" itself means "authorship," an author being the originator of an accepted statement or

“an expert in any question;” (“the person who originates or give existence to anything . . . an inventor, constructor or founder . . . who gives rise to an action, event, circumstances, or state of things; the prompter or instigator.”) Moreover, the connection between this authorial power and patriarchal hierarchy is clear in a further definition of “author” as, “one who begets; a father, an ancestor. (“Still used in Author of his being” and, ultimately, “The Creator” himself”) (134). Ross Chambers concurs in his discussion of “narratorial authority:”

To tell a story is to exercise power (it is even called the power of narration), and ‘authorship’ is cognate with ‘authority.’ . . . Etymology tells us that the narrator is one who knows; one might infer that the narratee’s motivation in authorizing the act of narration lies in the prospect of acquiring “information.” (*Story and Situation* 50).

Thus, the narrator is credited with expertise—with the individual embodiment of empowered knowledge. Liz Stanley says that “narrative is the key to the complexities of the self” (“The Knowing Because” 132).

Postmodernism, however, contests the validity of the autonomous author. In “The Death of the Author” Roland Barthes argues that:

Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing. (68)

Barthes claims that the very act of narration undermines the concept of the author, which (falsely) reigns, for example, in biographies that are “anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs” (168). This cult of the author is merely an “explanation of a work” because the author’s identity is a cultural device for the deployment of discursive power and authority.

Similarly, in “What Is An Author?” Michel Foucault casts the author as a function (and object) of discourse. Western history, he argues, has constructed the author as “the privileged moment of individualisation in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences” (197). Like Barthes, Foucault sees the text as “a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears” (197)—disappears, that is, into the cultural semiotics which produce both text and subject as discursive functions and objects. Foucault points out that if everything the author writes were to be considered as part of her/his work, one would be engaged in infinite trails and traces. For example, an author’s name becomes more than simply a proper name: it signifies a certain standing, heralds a collection of expectations, and shapes textual meaning:

[The author’s name] performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. (201)

In other words, discourses surrounding the name of the biographer play an important part in the construction of textual authority. Foucault terms this the “author function” which serves to limit the otherwise endless flow of meanings which may be brought to (or taken from) the text or, put more strongly, which force certain significant non-fictional meanings to be applied (for example, that the biographical subject is extremely heroic because an esteemed biographer says so). Other biographical codes and conventions support this textual authority: the formal writing practices (references, footnotes, bibliography); the formal citation of sources; the literary writing style; the emphasis on public life; dust-jacket testaments to the author’s achievements; the subject’s notoriety, extracts from favourable book reviews, impressive art-work; often the preface; indeed, the very fact of the book’s publication, all add to the function of limiting the flow of meaning or, indeed, ensuring the construction of textual author-ity. Thus, traditionally, biography is concerned with the creation of cultural role models, whether in the form of heroes or anti-heroes.

In contrast, whereas “the narrator in biography functions as source and guardian of knowledge” (Spacks 93), gossip negates the author function. Gossip is primarily an oral genre and is thus mutable, transitory, ephemeral. It often obscures, trivialises, and even denies its sources. Its agents minimise their authorship, pointing instead to the complex traces and interweavings of sub-authors or sources (“the grapevine”).

Patricia Meyer Spacks says, “gossip insists on its own frivolity” (6). It hails from the realms of obscurity, speculation and uncertainty, and gossipers often renounce individual responsibility for the outcome of the text. Paradoxically, however, human agency is emphasised, since gossip is ultimately acknowledged to be a construct that changes form as it passes along the social network, as in the game of Chinese Whispers. Moreover, unlike biography, the political agenda behind the construction of gossip is often overtly or tacitly acknowledged (“s/he’s only saying that because s/he is jealous”). With gossip, there is by no means the same degree of severance between teller and tale as exists in biography, and thus no real pretension to objectivity.

In addition, gossip is a collaborative act that is in marked contrast to the assumed autonomy of The Author in biography. Anti-authorial (anti-authoritarian) practices certainly trivialise the content of “mere” gossip and deny it a recognised role in public life. Nevertheless, gossip (which, as commonly noted by psychologists and social behaviourists, has other names when applied to the practices of men) plays an important role both in the construction of, and resistance to, official power, and also in the facilitation of everyday social relationships. Moreover, rumour (the more public progeny of gossip) is illicitly employed in public life as a device for either controlling subordinates or unseating leaders. And there are other public/private, official/unofficial levels of distinction. As a result of its subversive power, gossip is

both enjoyed and feared, utilised and controlled, on both public and private levels. As British Prime Minister James Callaghan said to the Franks Committee, “leaking is what you do and briefing is what I do” (qtd. in Michael 8). On a wider social level, gossip is most feared as a private speech genre when it targets the public sphere as its opponent and, in doing so, endangers the authority of sanctioned public figures.

What, then, are the social functions of gossip? Social historian Melanie Tebbutt says:

Talk about other people—gossip—is a significant feature of human language, its observations about behaviour performing an important integrative and socializing function. Social science literature presents a useful working definition of [gossip] as being information exchanged with acquaintances about other people who are known mutually. It is essentially talk about other people’s activities and behaviour. (1)

This definition is somewhat inadequate, however, since it may equally apply to any oral biographical speech genre, such as a medical case-conference, a work review or, indeed, a research interview, none of which can readily be dismissed as “mere” gossip, since they are part of the public/official system. Theoreticians in various fields (historians, cultural- and socio-linguists and sociologists) have broadly defined gossip as having two interconnected strands, arguably the benign (positive/supportive/conservative) and the malicious (negative/destructive/subversive). These “strands” actually refer to gossip’s micropolitical role in what

James C. Scott describes as the respective “hidden transcripts” of both dominant and subordinate groups (that is, an aspect of each group’s behaviour that does not comply with the respectively dominant or submissive “face” they each show to the other group). Gossip is therefore, whilst ostensibly just a subversive act, both complicit and subversive. In these respective roles, it has an application to the lives of women and feminist women.

Thus far, gossip appears to have many social functions in common with biography and, indeed, the two genres are frequently linked together, although the scholarly biographer is at pains to show otherwise. Spacks’ book on gossip includes an entire chapter on biography because, “the pleasure of reading biography, like that of reading letters, derives from the universal hunger to penetrate people’s lives” (93). Moreover, the strongest social and, indeed, political motivations behind this hunger are “to solidify a group’s sense of itself” (Spacks 5), this being “an important bonding function, since group identity is ensured by confirming a sense of shared history and tradition” (Tebbutt 2). Tebbutt refers to this process in the Barthesian sense of myth-making, meaning a cultural narrative which articulates a particular epistemological truth, thus creating and maintaining the establishment of social norms and testing the behaviour of individuals against these norms. In this respect gossip, like biography, is conservative, seeking to uphold the social values of bourgeois ideology and encourage compliance.

The dangers of gossip also have striking similarities to the effects—and, arguably, some of the aims—of biography:

It is the gossip's ability to make and break reputations which make it so often feared, and it is this aspect which frequently forms the basis of popular perceptions of such talk. Gossip's dangerous tendencies [are] well recognized. (Tebbut 9)

As a readily accessible oral speech-form, gossip maintains an unofficial power-system (and thus a social politics) in daily living within the private spheres, a role performed by biography in an official or formal capacity in the public sphere.

What seems to be emerging is that these two forms of biographical speech have broadly similar aims and achieve similar overall results. Both discuss specific individuals who are known to author/speaker and listener/reader, and they do so in terms of the subject's place within the known community. Both measure the subject's behaviour against known social norms, thereby also reinforcing (constructing and reconstructing) those norms. They both achieve this by focusing on individuals who are, as Tebbutt puts it, "colourful" rule-breakers, rather than on conformist or "average" individuals, thereby simultaneously testing and reconstructing existing social norms. In the process, the shared information performs a bonding and socialising process amongst the generic participants. Both gossip and biography are simultaneously accessible and exclusive. Anybody may listen to gossip or read a biography, but in reality both have restricted audiences and maintain

conventions about who speaks, who listens, who is spoken about and why, and who is kept outside of the dialogue. Both biography and gossip, then, are conservative speech-forms. They depend on certain “boat-rocking” stimuli but ultimately conform to the ideological values of dominants. In other words, both biography and gossip function to maintain the status quo of bourgeois ideology.

There are, however, marked contrasts between the two biographical speech genres, which have earlier been identified as polar opposites. Biography is a formal written genre in which the author is constructed as authoritative and the text is constructed as reliable and fixed. The author is thus distanced from the consumer, and the “word” or text is not readily open to change by its audience. Thus, a speaker/listener hierarchy exists. Biography operates within the public sphere; specifically, it is a means by which discursive statements are created at institutional level. As a result, “who speaks?” is greatly controlled by very limited access to the biographical speech employed (not just anybody can publish a biography about anybody) and its effects are aimed at long-term influence.

In contrast, gossip’s orality in the private sphere yields a form of biographical speech that is accessible, in theory, to anybody at any time and with an immediacy that makes gossip a useful practical tool in daily life. The “authorial” speaking-position is not authoritative in any long-term or overall sense, and thus the speaker is not

especially accountable for the effects of what is spoken. Perhaps most significantly, gossip involves a close encounter between teller and tale; in fact, the “audience” or consumer is an active participant in the construction of the tale. In a much more immediate sense than biography, gossip is a collaborative act that establishes intimacy and eschews hierarchy and is thus “illicit” to a more significant degree than even an unauthorised biography can be. The audience is more readily selectable (and thus their reactions are more controllable) than is the wider audience (the readership) of biography. The boundaries between author and audience, teller and tale are much less distinct than in formal, public biographical speech genres.

It is not difficult to see how gossip comes to be associated with women and biography with the world of men, although some women write biographies and most men sometimes gossip. There is, of course, no evidence that gender and genre connect in any automatic or biological sense. However, there is an identifiable link between men and official roles, and between patriarchal officialdom which construct women as subordinates (and so, in effect, with the western social construction of femininity), and unofficial speech forms such as gossip. Scott points out that this kind of link is naturalised by the process of domination:

Patterns of speech that are adaptations to inequalities in power are depicted as natural characteristics of the subordinate group, a move that has, in turn, the great advantage of underlining the innate inferiority of its

members when it comes to logic, truth, honesty, and reason and thereby justifying their continued domination by their betters. (36)

Both biography and gossip conserve the dominant status quo and both depend on an element of subversiveness. Yet plainly, biography (even when termed “unauthorised”) is a sanctioned genre that operates within the official or public hierarchy, and gossip an unsanctioned, even illicit, genre which operates within unofficial and private domains. Gossip, as has been said, undermines the public/private split by taking private acts of individuals into a public sphere and vice versa (it blurs boundaries that exist to impose social order “from above”). For example, it undermines the automatic allegiance of women to the family by forging their bonds with other women. It breaks official discursive rules of who may speak and under what conditions. It exercises political power without public accountability. Its authors can break the reputations of their social superiors. These effects are in line with Foucault’s observation that power comes from below and that oppressed subjects can and do wield considerable power by forming “sites of resistance” to a ruling group. As Tebbutt points out:

The intimacy of gossip between women [runs] counter to their expected family loyalties, and the fact that their first responsibility [is] towards husband and family automatically [makes] meeting with other women a denial of domestic commitments. Perhaps more significantly, it threaten[s] to draw them into an alarming sphere of public (and subversive) revelation. (25)

It is little wonder, then, that there have been constant efforts to control this form of “women’s talk” and that “the Gossip” has been denigrated and trivialised as a time-wasting, foolish and destructive (old) woman in western mythology, especially since the Industrial Revolution (the time of the capitalist public/private dichotomy). Scott describes gossip as “the linguistic equivalent and forerunner of witchcraft” (143):

Gossip is perhaps the most familiar and elementary form of disguised popular aggression. Though its use is hardly confined to attacks by subordinates on their superiors, it represents a relatively safe social sanction . . . Above all, most gossip is a discourse about social rules that have been violated. (142-3)

It is subversive because its very existence as a hidden genre evidences the reluctance of the speaker to articulate its content openly:

Metaphorically we can say, I believe, that the hidden transcript is continually pressing against the limit of what is permitted on stage, much as a body of water might press against a dam. The amount of pressure naturally varies with the degree of shared anger and indignation experienced by subordinates. Behind the pressure is the desire to give unbridled expression to the sentiments voiced in the hidden transcript directly to the dominant. (Scott 196)

Thus, we can say that gossip is dissent that dares not speak its name. Gossip also supplies a social bonding between women and offers opportunities for the informal flow of information to segments of communities that may not otherwise have access to it. In its most constructive light, Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich says, “gossip [is] a

sometimes very fine and subtle mode of analysis developed primarily by women as a result as well as essential ingredient of our “interactional work” and our need to develop a feminist understanding of “everyday life” (292). As such, it is “excellent conversation among women. Together we explore themes, following them where they lead, quoting friends and characters encountered, becoming angry when we feel thwarted or let down” (292). In such a context, “gossip” may well be a misnomer, although its generic informality and avoidance of rules give it its strength and character.

However, it is also important to recognise the way in which women’s gossip inscribes them into complicity with mainstream values. Althusser and Foucault tell us that discursive power is channelled through institutions and institutionally constructed practices. In favouring practices that fall outside official structures, women continue to speak from the margins from whence they can readily be ignored or negated. They may well be more comfortable with unofficial practices but these practices perpetuate their construction as subordinates. The exclusive or predominant use of oral or unofficial (“private”) biographical sub-genres denies them access to discursive influence by maintaining women as non-speaking subjects and thus, in effect, non-persona in public life. Gossip may damage (even break) reputations but on its own it cannot make them. The gossipers are therefore situated only to react negatively to patriarchy, and not to remodel it in any pro-active sense.

The authors of gossip may operate from sites of resistance and may, in so doing, deliver temporarily disruptive setbacks to mainstream systems. At the same time gossip upholds social norms more commonly than it disrupts them:

Gossip . . . reinforces these normative standards by invoking them and by teaching anyone who gossips precisely what kinds of conduct are likely to be mocked or despised. (Scott 143)

Therefore, if they rely largely on unofficial speech-forms to tell their stories, women participate in their own oppression by functioning as an integral part of the system that disempowers them.

Moreover, there is another level of implication in Foucault's theory of discursive power that "comes from everywhere" which has even more significant ramifications for feminists. Foucault tells us that power is never simply "held" in a central source, but instead is "exercised from innumerable points" (*History of Sexuality* 94). Numerous sites of resistance occur within the ruptures, cleavages or gaps within and between discourses, and are thus an intrinsic part of power relations. ("Major dominations are the hegemonic effects that are sustained by all these confrontations" [94]). Since (according to Foucault) resistance is never exterior to power but always a part of it, it follows that some resistance is actually necessary to the deployment of power by and through dominant groups and institutions. We could say that if resistance did not occur, the dominant group(s) would have to invent or create it.

The ruptures or cleavages within and between discourses are an intrinsic link in the dynamics of power relations and thus, to some extent or other, they “feed” the power-dynamics of the major dominations, as well as temporarily disrupt them. This explains why (women’s) gossip, which clearly has some subversive qualities, renders the gossipier a potential threat to mainstream ideologies but then simultaneously renders her complicit with/supportive of it. Women biographical subjects and informants may well feel ill at ease with their official roles, even if, as feminists, they also recognise the value of “feminist biographies” to the cause of women’s emancipation. But, similarly, their use of unofficial speech forms results in this curious revolving-door syndrome which is at once resistant to, and complicit with, traditional or masculinist discursive practices.

Another significant explanation for this paradox is Deborah Tannen’s notion of cultural framing. Individual utterances are framed by “traditions” (or Barthesian cultural myths) as well as by their immediate contexts. Tannen gives the example that when a man makes a protective gesture towards a woman, his action is framed by the cultural narrative in which men protect women, and his action is therefore interpreted as caring, romantic or paternal. However, if a woman makes the same protective gesture towards a man, her action is framed by the tradition in which women protect children, and therefore her “care” is interpreted as treating him like a child. Women speak and act from a collective subordinate position, even when their

individual status is inscribed with a public authority, which renders the (masculine) sanctioned speech-forms and actions they utilise in the public sphere strangely ambiguous and frequently negative. Hence the professional or ambitious woman is seen as a contradiction in terms. This view is compatible with Claudia Card's moral luck, which is also a diachronic view of subjectivity. Card questions the notion of women's sensibilities "that proceeds as though women have no real damage to overcome," (79) an optimistic celebration of "women's virtues" at best with a need to import a few qualities traditionally associated with men. What is "characteristic" of women is historically defined; it is "baggage," both good and bad and cannot be extricated from historic subordination. This has heavy implications for contractarian, or alliance, politics if, as Card suggests, "insight is hard won" when the odds are weighted towards historical "delusion." One does not act out of an unweighted agency. Moreover, even if one were to be acting from within such an autonomous freedom, external perception, as Tannen indicates, is coloured by cultural tradition.

Where, then, is the hope for women's enactment of public authority, constructed from a resistant structural position? Though Foucault negates the possibility of individual change to social relations of power, he leaves ajar a window of hope:

Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds. Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities. And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships. It is in this sphere of force relations that we must try to analyze the mechanisms of power. (*Sexuality* 96-7)

Foucault goes on to suggest that local and specific actions within power-knowledge centres are the means of creating mini-revolutions which, in time, may presumably add up to a groundswell of resistance. This approach is realised in the “think globally, act locally, respond personally” logo of the peace and environmental movements. Therefore, the individual and specific public achievements of women clearly have a bearing on the collective feminist agenda.

However, it is necessary for feminists to attend to Foucault’s account of “furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off

irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds” (*Sexuality* 96). This harrowing and determining procedure describes the production of social objects by discourse, though it is not difficult to see that it also describes the effects on individuals by “authoritative” social processes. Certainly, the process of constructing a biography of an individual woman involves a significant act of violence, regardless of a feminist biographer’s intention to celebrate the subject as an individual, and women as a group. The biographical subject’s individual actions, however well-meant, are framed by the betrayal of her gender-construction as a subordinate of her society, and therefore her example as a public “success” is seen also to reinscribe the old myths, as much as to subvert or dislodge them. She becomes an aberration and, thus, to some degree, monstrous.

Constructions of Authority in (Selected) Biographical Research Interviews

The overall formal narrative ultimately published as a biography comprises many sub-narratives that the biographer collects as part of her researched data on the life of the biographical subject. In this examination of the road to biography, I will focus on the third category of biographical data described earlier; that is, research interviews and conversations (because this category best illustrates the ways in which women tend to enact biographical speech) and some of the gendered problematics within the process of constructing “a biography.”

My five-year project on the unfolding work (and life) of a woman involved research interviews which broadly fall into three categories. The first group was composed of regular interviews with Ann Anon herself. These interviews continued for five years after which my subject concurred with my decision to discontinue the biography. The second type of interview involved informants selected on the grounds of their being placed to act as “witnesses” (including character witnesses). These people were family, friends, colleagues and ‘observers’ of Anon. Sometimes Anon herself or others suggested names to me and sometimes I initiated a choice. The third group was composed of “experts,” meaning interviewees selected because they were in a position to speak authoritatively on social, political or professional matters which would help me in constructing a wider picture. In the main, these people were involved in non-governmental organisations and community groups. In most interviews more than one of these types were identifiable. The majority of interviewees were women. (Anon’s family and collaborators are/were predominantly women).

All interviews were pre-arranged, tape-recorded and transcribed by myself and took place in locations chosen by the interviewee. Research interviews generally lasted about an hour and a half, and the majority of interviewees (other than Anon herself) were interviewed twice, for reasons that will be explained later. I was highly selective about interviewees (many were suggested, few were approached) because

the process involved considerable time and work for both parties. For my part, each interview took many hours of patient listening, pausing, rewinding and transcribing which had benefits in the quality of observation I was able to bring to the tapes. At the outset, I asked the interviewee for permission to tape-record, with an assurance that the transcript would be kept confidential. However, it was also made plain that the respondents were giving information to a writer conducting research for a published biography. In this context, the information given would provide background information (inform the finished document), appear in the manuscript without identification of source(s), and possibly be directly quoted except in instances when the respondent requested otherwise or when the material was obviously not intended for direct publication. Two people asked if they might be specifically consulted if any of their comments were directly quoted in the finished work, and this assurance was given (although this is not commonly the case with biographical research). Participants were further assured that the aim of the work was a constructive and sympathetic approach to an individual's life-course and public role. However, there was no apparent reluctance to be interviewed, nor was the research of a generally contentious nature. Indeed, Ann Anon said she had no actual secrets in her life. It is more a matter of how information is handled that requires discretion from a biographer, and I made every effort to be considerate throughout the project, as many biographers do. Any concerns expressed by sources

and Ann Anon herself were not the result of secrecy or undue sensitivity about publicity, but ordinary levels of interest about positive representations.

It should be noted (as I do retrospectively) that this applied discretion and sensitivity was relative to a biographer's role of telling a life story of another person. I did not apply—nor was I, as a biographer, required to apply—the standardised rules associated with professional or academic research on human subjects (rules that are still not mandatory—probably not even common—to the process of biography, either legally or ethically in this specific context)²⁰. Nor did my biographical subject expect the latter kind of rules to apply to a biographical project. “Human research” rules would include the right to full and complete confidentiality, the right to withdraw co-operation at any time, to withdraw permission for the use of this research, to informed consent and so on (Leitmann 1). Biography falls outside the terms of professional or academic research, in the sense of quantitative or qualitative research. Biographical research is construed as a *literary* enterprise, subject only to laws of copyright and libel²¹. As in the case of documentaries, the interviewee generally signs a waiver in advance of publication/broadcast of the text, but does not have the

²⁰ Broadly, “biographical law” is liberal, in both senses of the word. Susan Sontag’s biographer, Carl Rollyson, confirms that “biographers can say pretty much what they want, provided of course that they respect the copyright and libel laws” (e-mail 6 Nov. 2000). As observed in the Introduction, the common law of Breach of Confidence can apply to biographers as it can to any person who is entrusted with private or confidential information. However, this law is mostly concerned with the economic value of information.

²¹ As above.

automatic right of subsequent withdrawal. This is mainly because the power of withdrawal (for individuals) amounts to a power of veto over the whole text, a situation hitherto treated as unacceptable by writers and film-makers in the interests of freedom of artistic license, free speech and, indeed, the use of their time (is it realistic to discard several years' work?) In fact, the assurances I gave to my sources went far beyond the usual terms of *biographical* research, which may have a professional understanding of what is fair game but which is not legally required to honour any formalised codes of ethics. The ethics applied to this biographical project, however, were a feminist ethics of care. The concern was to foster a relatively inter-subjective approach based on non-violence to research participants, including (and, of course, especially) the biographical subject²².

Again retrospectively, I observe that an interviewee's gender made a significant difference to the style of interaction between us and, thus, to the "content" of the interview. Either the women interviewees required a different approach than the men, or my own feminist politics induced a subtly different approach. It is impossible to say for sure which applied but that is not especially germane to my point here, which is that interactions between people are inevitably gendered. It

²² Indigenous writers and researchers commonly use, and speak of, this kind of radical accountability in biographical texts and research (Stringer 102-3). Individuals who chronicle histories or any sort must be willing to withdraw the entire text at any stage if a key stakeholder wishes to withdraw from the project. This is in line with the collaborative principles of community action research (Stringer 1996; Atweh, Kemmis and Weeks 1998; Newman and Brown 1996; Denzin 1989) in the context of social justice.

became clear from listening to the tapes that one of the major differences was in the preamble to the interview. In the case of the male respondents we seemed to get more quickly to the avowed focus of the interview and so the encounter was more directly concerned with information content than with interaction between the two parties. I would say that this was largely because the men were less likely to impart “personal” observations or remarks than the women were, and were more inclined to discuss events and circumstances than personalities and social dynamics. However, when there was a contentious opinion to be given (especially a politically contentious opinion), it was given with noticeably less equivocation by the men, even when female interviewees had evident professional experience and self-confidence. To put this another way, the women often placed more emphasis on “subjective” or emotional aspects behind events, whereas men moved more quickly to discuss the events themselves.

Arguably, this greater decisiveness or clarity on the part of the men was due to their perception of their input as being based on their professional expertise. The women evidently considered some of their testimony to be more nebulous and/or to have an ambiguous place in my research. Thus, the function of the research interview itself was possibly seen differently by men and women. I imagine that for women, the one-to-one interview situation was at once professional/official and also informal/interactive. Probably because of the more subjective nature of their input,

the women tended to spend some interview time evaluating the response their comments might elicit from me, before carefully placing their revelations into that pre-tested atmosphere of "trust." They often did so with various signals of hesitancy, such as "that's only my opinion," "that was how I saw it," "I might be wrong," or "don't quote me," even when opinions were strong and strongly expressed, and with more obvious concern as to how that information might be used. This response apparently contradicts sociological researcher Janet Finch's observation that women are only too eager to impart information to a woman researcher, purely on the grounds of mutual gender (76). However, in the case of Finch's research interviews, the anonymity and confidentiality of the information yield was assured at the outset, whereas my informants were often imparting data which could well appear in print, in a form that could possibly make the informant's identity known (or at least guessed). Moreover, Finch's respondents were speaking less about themselves and their own lives than about a known individual whose reputation and relationship with the informant were directly at stake.

For these reasons, the relationship between myself and the women interviewees played a strong part in the quality of information I was able to obtain from research

interviews, although this relationship was solely professional²³. Some understandable equivocation was displayed, more noticeably by women than by men. On the one hand, the women speakers tended to downplay any overt “authority” over their words. That is, they were reluctant to take primary responsibility for being the creator of information or to play the role of expert. On the other hand, the women were much more conscious of the subjective nature of “truth” or “evidence” and, from this perspective, placed rather more emphasis on having some knowledge of other participants in their story so that they could evaluate how this knowledge would ultimately be shaped and utilised. In all cases, I tended to volunteer assurances that none of their testimony would be used in the final project without their approval, although I could not legitimately vouch for the influence their comments may have on my [re]construction of situations and events. Jean Baker Miller ascribes the trait of women’s emphasis on “subjective truths” to the condition of subordination:

Subordinates [then] know much more about the dominants than vice versa. They have to. They become highly attuned to the dominants, able to predict their reactions of pleasure and displeasure. Here, I think, is where the long story of ‘feminine intuition’ and ‘feminine wiles’ begins.

²³ The biography was undertaken for purely professional reasons and no prior relationship existed between myself and my subject or any of the sources interviewed. However, this thesis argues that a certain reciprocity frequently develops in women’s interactions and this quality in many respects invokes the intimacy of women’s friendships. This, coupled with women’s tendency to seek control over their narratives, draws on a gendered code that, this thesis argues, conflicts with conventional modes of public authority. This is because women’s behaviour invokes their gender in an overall context of subordination, whereas public authorities are widely constructed in an overall context of dominance.

It seems clear that these ‘mysterious’ gifts are in fact skills, developed through long practice, in reading many small signals, both verbal and non-verbal. (11)

It was apparent that my women interviewees had a heightened awareness of being at a potential disadvantage when “handing over” their stories and views—at once seeking more control over, and being less inclined to accept individual responsibility for, their narratives. In saying this, I again emphasise that this biographical research was not especially contentious; nor did the women respondents appear to be treating it as especially contentious. I retrospectively observe that there was an overall equivocation in the handling of information by women that is common in interactions between women. These observations have formed the hypothesis as the basis of this research, and at this point are merely an illustration of the theoretical research undertaken to investigate this hypothesis about gendered behaviours.

Thus, for the women, the question of “who speaks?” was more of a conscious—and contentious—political factor in the evaluation of “meaning,” but at the same time the author function was seen to be plural and collaborative (“who listens?”). For example, they were more likely to be ambivalent about my taping the interview, because that might mean a loss of control in terms of audience, even though they were aware that they were being interviewed with the express approval of the subject

of our discussion²⁴. This was at least one reason why two interviews became the norm with female interviewees. It often took the first meeting to establish the ground for the actual interview to take place on the second attempt, since I was writing a biography and was thus as much concerned with the human biography subject as with “mere” concrete events. In my experience, then, information given by women interviewees was, on some levels, more overtly evaluated at the outset in terms of its immediate consequences than it appeared to be for men. This was presumably because women’s public words may simply be interpreted more contentiously than men’s public words. Certainly, the concept of “trust” is used frequently in terms of women’s relationships and is an expected ingredient of the collaborative, co-operative social relationships of western women. Indeed, at the end of our initial “ground rules” meeting, Ann Anon made the comment to me that “in the end, it all comes down to trust,” a remark that left me in no doubt that our relationship was to play a key part in the resulting biography.

These anxieties were often maintained in addition to, even in spite of, my every observance of both conventional, and supra-conventional, biographical ethics. That is to say, my sources were *only* those approved by my biographical subject (which is unusual). They were aware from the start that they would probably be named

²⁴ Again, this observation is academic in nature and does not reflect any unusual behaviour on the part of the female sources. The taping of the interviews was not an essential prerequisite and would not have happened if the interviewees had indicated their actual reluctance.

sources in the final publication. Generally, a biographer has the right to publish a demonstrably “accurate” account of an individual, regardless of the subject’s wishes for, or against, a published biography (Rollyson 141). Biographers also retain the right to refer to unacknowledged and unnamed sources, invoking the prerogative of protecting sources. Because this was a feminist enterprise, I aimed to apply some inter-feminist ethics as far as possible. Even having obtained written permission to use interview material, I accorded my sources the right to withdraw from the project at any time (a right more usually associated with academic/professional research than with biography). Moreover, whilst my subject was not offered rights of veto over the finished manuscript, it had been agreed that she would read it before publication and that her comments would be honoured as far as possible. Some of my advisers thought these practices overly idealistic (meaning unworkable). Indeed, it seemed to me that my female subjects constantly placed me in contentious situations because of their preference for, and sometimes insistence on, speaking “off the record” about material they considered to be either personal but necessary, or simply contentious because it was seen as significant. In other words, my women interviewees were ambivalent about both their use and “misuse” of official biographical speech but expected me to be “discrete” in my own use of this material. Of course, this raises somewhat unanswerable questions about public and private, official and unofficial roles and data. It also raises intriguing questions about why material considered delicate—even private—is given to a writer in this way, and, about the manner in

which I would give comforting assurances that I was trustworthy, believing myself to be so, when in fact my overt function was to obtain interesting information for public use.

The significance of gender in these biographical interviews appeared to me, as a feminist writer/researcher, to be extensive. For example, as a result of the slow and monotonous process of transcribing taped interviews, I began to notice that, in the case of female interviewees, I was editing out many of my own casual pleasantries and preamble to what I considered the main interview. Much of this preamble involved my imparting a good deal of information about my project and the way I saw it, or even about the kind of data that was coming in. I initially regarded my pre- and post- (even mid-) interview chatter as something of an embarrassment in what should have been a “professional-sounding” interview, even though the transcripts were used only for my own research. Later, I came to evaluate my own input as part of the process of the research interview. Intuitively, I felt the need to build a collaborative, interactive atmosphere with the other woman if she were to speak as frankly as my project required. The building of such trust required a degree of mutual disclosure—mine in exchange for hers. The content (in terms of quantity, quality and ethics) of my disclosure would have some influence on hers. Thus, my seemingly irrelevant chat was establishing the terms of our exchange. I did not, and do not, consider my behaviour to have been unduly manipulative, but simply gender-

specific good manners and interpersonal behaviour. Indeed, I went to considerable lengths to ensure that I neither distorted nor exploited my informants' input, nor allowed them inadvertently to misread the terms of our exchanges. But like Janet Finch, I sensed that my informants somehow needed protection from people like myself (Finch 80).

This process was not the same in the case of my interaction with male interviewees when I felt that, instead of creating an aura of reciprocity, it was incumbent on me to display my "professionalism." This supposedly meant the degree to which behaviour conditioned by and for the private world of western bourgeois society could be risen above to establish a more impersonal "public" exchange. Interview preamble was thus shorter. My aim was to demonstrate that my expertise in the field enabled me to get quickly to the 'real' purpose of the interview with a minimum of time wasting. Some pleasantries were certainly involved, but their purpose was virtually the opposite one from the all-woman interviews where the "information" given was strongly connected to, and dependent on, the personalities concerned. In the case of my interviews with men, social pleasantries were constructed as incidental, designed merely to establish cordial channels of communication but in no way to be confused with the interview *per se*. Incidentally, as Finch has said, it is always possible that the effects of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee are peculiar to the characteristics of the individual researcher, and yet

these responses have been documented elsewhere, for example by Ann Oakley (1982), Janet Finch (1984) and Joan Acker, Kate Barry and Joke Esseveld (1983).

To explain these gender differences in terms of Jakobson's theory of communication: the men in my research interviews placed a greater emphasis on the *referential* function of this particular kind of social exchange, and social pleasantries were constructed as *phatic* ("to keep the channels of communication open" and "to confirm that communication is taking place") (Fiske 37-8). Conversely, with my female interviewees, whilst both referential and phatic functions were identifiable, the *emotive* ("to communicate the addresser's emotions, attitudes, status, class; all those elements that make the message uniquely his [sic.]") and especially the *conative* "[which] refers to the effect of the message on the addressee" (Fiske 37-8) were much more vital. It is interesting to note that John Fiske presents the conative function as emphasising hierarchy:

In commands or propaganda, [the conative] function assumes paramount importance, in other types of communication it is relegated to a lower priority. (37)

This is apparently not generally the case with women's communication. Whereas Fiske implies that ordinarily people (I would argue male people) emphasise the effect on the listener mainly if the listener is a subordinate responding to a command, I believe that women commonly place this emphasis in their communications, and

for the opposite effect. That is, they do so in order to establish reciprocity and/or to calculate the risk of their words being misinterpreted or in some way used against them. This shows that whilst some overall “human” rules may possibly be applicable to all speech acts (or at least may be in common with women and men of the same culture), gender makes a difference as to how a particular communication system is utilised. Indeed, socio-linguist Deborah Tannen likens male-female speech structures to “cross cultural communication:”

If women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy while men speak and hear a language of status and independence, then communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversation styles. Instead of different dialects, it has been said they speak different genderlects.

(Tannen 42)

It should be noted that Elizabeth Aries has since disputed the findings of Tannen and others, arguing that gender alone accounts for less than ten percent of demonstrable variance in social behaviours. However, though it is undoubtedly true that class, race and other factors problematise differences attributed to gender, it is also the case

that gender accounts for a significant difference in social behaviours, if only on the grounds of learned behaviour and expectations.²⁵

The place of “gossip” in the biographical research process invites a consideration of such possible gender difference. First, however, it is necessary to look at the general use of informal sub-genres within the non-fictional research process. In biography, journalism and even history, off-the-record information is both part of the researcher’s tools and part of the yield. More specifically, gossip is both a part of the process and part of the result of biographical research. Both male and female biographers regularly speak of their use of such apparently casual information in putting together a fuller picture of their subject. In my own project, both male and female informants gave me off-the-cuff information that could be construed as gossip. I would classify this information as being of two sorts: firstly, “alternative” or subversive views of publicly-known events and, secondly, descriptions of an

²⁵ Whilst Aries disputes Deborah Tannen’s views that men and women speak differently, I have not made extensive use of Aries’ work because I do not find that, in general, it changes a great deal of Tannen’s concepts of gendered tendencies. Aries is concerned not to allow any undue essentialism or generalisations to creep into her findings, but she owns that certain tendencies are indeed identifiable: Women continue to use [subordinate] speech forms more than men when they are assigned to comparable positions of power, because women in positions of power violate sex role norms for behaviour. The use of these language features may make women less threatening and more acceptable to men, and it may be the only way they can have their ideas considered. Men and women both use the strategies that will be most effective in meeting their interactive goals. (142) This is, after all, the argument that both Tannen, in her work, and I, in mine, wish to make, not to imply timeless or universal qualities of either women or men. Moreover, Aries writes that “what people feel they hear based on speech stereotypes may be more important to their experience than what actually occurs in speech” (186). This point is the premise for my discussion of gender and speech, rather than the empiricised data of what “the majority” of women or men say and do not say.

individual's character (not necessarily the biographical subject's) that were in some way critical or derogatory. Both types of talk would frequently include lesser known "facts" or details of events that illustrated the speaker's point. Both types would present some reluctance on the part of the speaker to be publicly identified as the source. This is not to say that the information given was necessarily a secret; in fact, some "gossip" was widely known and given to me by several sources. And yet an *aura* of secrecy lingered. I frequently had a strong impression that my informants were sometimes themselves puzzled as to why the information had not previously been publicly articulated, as it seemed important and, indeed, common knowledge in some circles, in which case I had the sense that it had been "leaked" to me so that pockets of futile secrecy would end. Most commonly, the information was seen to be potentially damaging on a wider, public level whereas it was less harmful in a contained (private or semi-private) setting. Alternatively, the information was seen as constructive and valid but there was an awareness that "the system" somehow did not permit, or account for, its use.

The following are three examples of off-the-record data given to me by interviewees²⁶. The first was a male spokesperson within a non-aligned non-government organisation (NGO) and during our on-record interview he discussed a

²⁶ Off-the-record data is herein discussed in terms of its overall style and context. No confidential or private information has been disclosed, nor any information that is likely to embarrass or otherwise compromise my sources.

political group in terms of a well-publicised clash between the middle-ground mainstream and an extreme left wing, resulting in a split. As he walked with me to my car, however, my informant's personal views of the situation were enunciated in a much more direct way than during the interview. From these comments, it would seem that his private views had, hardly uncommonly, played a significant role in his public office. Publicly (including during our taped interview) my informant maintained a stance of neutrality, as befitted his organisation. His off-the-record conversation with me was not "secret" because his views and his conversations about his views were widely expressed elsewhere, even when representing his organisation (so there was nothing wrong with his personal stance on the issue, nor in his off-the-record expression of it as an individual). However, his discrimination in the content of "official" versus "unofficial" speech modes observed the *conventions* of public office. His unofficial comments were (quite legitimately) designed to influence my writing-up of the situation, whilst keeping intact his official impartiality in his "public" speech. Of course, other layers of his privacy existed that he did not reveal, so that he was constructively selective in his disclosure. Thus, he used gossip sparingly and advisedly so as to effect a carefully measured extent of disclosure, sufficient only to bring about the desired effect, but not as an automatic or intrinsic aspect of our exchange. In behaving so, this informant merely observed the conventions of his role in a way that is usual and, moreover, which displayed simultaneous diplomacy and effectiveness—a productive blend of withholding and

revealing. The incident would not have been especially noteworthy, except that the *style or mode* of speech was different during the formal part of the exchange than the informal context which followed. The point of discussing this example is merely to demonstrate that “unofficial” speech modes in effect have an unacknowledged, but necessary, place in public life. Some forms of unofficial speech (broadly dismissed as gossip) are necessary colloraries to official speech. They permit official speech to have its effect and maintain a frequently untenable stance, because they add to it and compensate for its limitations. However, the terms of such blends are influenced by the additional codes of gender that are rendered invisible in the case of men in patriarchal societies, but much more visible when employed by women attempting to conform to [male] rules of public office.

It may thus be concluded that the public/private split necessarily applies to speech acts, in which the matter of who speaks, where and when, is open to manipulation during the exercise of power. If such behaviour seems devious and dishonest, it is normal western bourgeois practice to operate within private and public, official and unofficial binarisms and for holders of public office to make some distinction between public speech and private views. Therefore, my interviewee was breaking no established rule in making his “private” view known to a biographical researcher, because he had taken no public action to compromise the organisation he represented. His views were well known in some circles, and, in any case, the

holding of political views is inevitable for individuals. This man simply represented an organisation that professed to favour no particular party. It is debatable whether his individual views in this case were actually “private” at all, since they clearly concerned public issues and were probably the basis of his employment (non-aligned does not mean apolitical). In this case, “gossip” allowed him to function as an individual whereas his official capacity did not. Most significantly, it also allowed him to function more effectively in his formal/official role by using an informal/unofficial channel to reinforce the official speech modes. This technique, of course, is commonly known as leaking information, and is a widely used device for dealing with the gaps and failings of official systems. I would argue that such leaking is a common daily practice in all forms of public life, that it takes place in corridors, tearooms, bars and golf clubs the world over, and that it is an essential (although generally unacknowledged) aspect of “public” communications²⁷.

The second situation concerned a bereavement in Anon’s family that, as observed by several interviewees, had affected her at a key moment in her career. The event was not vitally relevant to my project, except that it possibly gave some insight into her character. Again, this story was generally known but was the object of an

²⁷ I further suspect that these compensatory/supplementary speech modes carry their own ethical frameworks – possibly such that fall somewhere betwixt and between comparable “public” and “private” frameworks. I do not say that such speech modes are necessarily ethical or unethical (this would necessitate a research area of its own, somewhat outside of this thesis). I discuss them here to raise questions about the ethics of biographical research that tacitly relies on unacknowledged uses of unofficial speech modes.

unarticulated contract to ignore it because members of the extended family had expressed distress about it being mentioned in a feature article. Thus, the story was public knowledge but was dealt with as a private matter because its effects were construed as “personal.” Whilst the story could well have been discussed by either male or female informants as being of interest, women informants laid particular emphasis on it. Anon’s response to bereavement was seen evidence of “character,” and character itself seen as the foundation of a person’s work or public actions. This manner of analysing relationships and the management of emotions is common amongst (western) women. Psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller has explained this as a classic “woman’s view” of events:

Women are trained to be involved with emotions and with the feelings occurring in the course of all activity. Out of this, women have gained the insight that events are important and satisfying only if they occur within the context of emotional relatedness. They are more likely than men to believe that, ideally, all activity should lead to an increased emotional connection with others. (41)

Nevertheless, my female informants were aware that the story would be generally labelled “private” information that the public world considers relevant to public acts only when there is a specific reason for doing so. This kind of information is very frequently used by biographers to inform the finished biographical commentary, whether or not it is officially acknowledged as research data. Indeed, few post-

Freudian biographies could be published without it, since we now place so much emphasis on psychological determinants.

Women involved in my project who worked in the public arena conformed to that standard on the surface, but were nevertheless inclined to take some compensatory action to redress the situation according to their own beliefs. However, they did so with a sense of illicitness, indicating concern that this behaviour trivialised or undermined them as mature professionals. On the one hand, they knew they were breaking no established rule in speaking of “personal” matters. On the other, they knew it had some connection with the unofficial channels of “private” information used by subordinates, and therefore felt a sense of awkwardness (even betrayal) in making it an aspect of public life:

Psychological and social difficulties have come from the distortions taught to women Such precepts have led to terrible twists, so that women are made to feel that their strongest assets are really liabilities.
(Miller 41-2)

The use of gossip (or what became construed as gossip) sometimes provides an unofficial site for women to cope with the gap between their own trained behaviour as subordinates and their “professional” judgements about what is important or relevant (that is, their need to be seen to act appropriately according to male rules for official behaviours). In this particular instance, my sources evidently considered the sharing of grief a natural (automatic) bonding and healing activity in female groups.

Several women pointed out to me that the story was of interest *only* because it was not talked about, which they considered usual in men but unusual in women.

The public/male world does not officially sanction the use of such “private” revelations (or, indeed, acknowledge its relevance); and even the private/female world might regard it as a betrayal of confidence, if only because it is considered “intimate” (an interesting word indicating something deeply felt, but often assumed to mean private). Again, I did not seek or encourage this kind of confidence for the reasons identified by Janet Finch (80-1) that she felt her women respondents needed protection from herself as a female researcher because of their insistence on treating her as a confidante. However, it seemed that the more trustworthy I appeared (and, indeed, thought I was), the more likely I was to receive information that was deemed necessary but somehow awkward to divulge officially. In retrospect, I would say that my role as female (possibly feminist) biographer was to find a way of applying this data honourably, if not conventionally, and without breaching my own concept of feminist ethics or, of course, ignoring it to the best of my ability. Whilst, in the final analysis, it was a calculated guess that any minor hurts would have been forgiven me as a professional and ethical biographer by my subject and the informants she herself approved (sometimes selected), it remained doubtful whether the project could be at once published and innocent of subject-domination. This in a context where permissions had been given, confidences honoured and quite strict

ethical procedures followed. Moreover, in the context of a biography that was to focus on work more than on private life.

The third example of informal speech was the way in which women interviewees gave expression to character descriptions of key individuals. Typically, these revelations were concerned with unresolved (and apparently unresolvable) conflict but fundamentally, with differences. Again, it seemed to me that women had particular concerns with, and also interest in, emotional/inter-personal matters, and that they saw them as central issues, indeed, the core or root of external events. I argue that ambivalence about the constitution of legitimate (even “worthy”) information creates this diluted authority to speak, rather than any contentiousness of content. Dealing in emotional truths is trivialised by bourgeois society

Woman-to-woman encounters commonly involve the establishment of emotional truths that are often constructed as “gossip”. It is therefore important for feminists to reconsider the legitimacy of so-called gossip, not simply in research but in other public/official capacities. In saying this, I do not, of course, suggest that inappropriate (or inappropriately framed or handled) data should be indiscriminately admissible to public documents. However, in the interests of reconstructing public spaces to address the existing interests of women in transition (from subordination to public authority), it is desirable for feminists carefully to reassess the kind of

woman-centred data and communication processes currently dismissed as mere gossip. On one occasion, quite late into the project, I was engaged in an interview with a woman who had played a key professional role in the events about which I was writing, and I ventured some comments on emotional and political conflicts that existed within and between key personalities. “Now” she said, “you are finally getting to the main point of all this; the nitty-gritty of what is *really* important.” However, her remarks also indicated that she knew this view was somehow unlikely to be taken seriously by “the real world.”

It is within this “real,” or public world, that discursive standards and practices are set for both public and private speech modes: standards and practices which are apparently universal, but which feminists point out are based on, and for, masculine perspectives of “appropriate” public and private behaviour. Since western constructions of femininity result from women’s general consignment to the domestic/private domain, it is necessary to consider women’s gender-specific selection of speech genres in relation to a wider schema of public versus private, formal versus informal behaviours.

Carol Gilligan’s *In A Different Voice* argues that subjectivities, and their resulting constructions of social values, are gender-specific according to men’s and women’s distinctive psychosexual developmental processes. Gilligan’s dual-voice treatise is

based on her critique of the Freudian deduction that women have a less developed superego than men due to their unresolved Oedipus complex and are therefore less capable of applying ethics of justice. Gilligan asserts that instead of a *lack* of moral development, women evolve a *different* concept of morality: in effect, a different voice that is simply given a lower value by male-dominated systems. Gilligan, a Harvard psychologist specialising in moral development, thus activated the concept of “an ethic of care” which stems directly from women’s systems of connectedness, as opposed to men’s systems of autonomy. Gilligan’s work has been widely discussed by feminists and others in a variety of behavioural and cultural disciplines. The most common criticisms are that such a discussion of “women” suggests a biological essentialism, and is therefore an oversimplification of social development (even of gendered social development), although Gilligan asserts that:

The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but by theme. Its association with women is an empirical observation, and it is primarily through women’s voices that I trace its development. But this association is not absolute, and the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex My interest lies in the interaction of experience and thought, in different voices and the dialogues to which they give rise, in the way we listen to ourselves and to others, in the stories we tell about our lives. (2)

However, Gilligan's model of two voices remains open to accusations of essentialism because she posits a binarism, which is necessarily reductive as a process and effect. I take a similar approach in this discussion of gender and genre, and though I emphasise that my view is based on western constructs of femininity rather than any concept of "women's nature," I must own that the distinction is a fine one.²⁸ It is interesting that the genre of the research interview has so often given rise to this kind of discussion on the binarism of men and women and their relationship to speech-acts. Sociologist Ann Oakley has commented on the research interview as an all-too-accessible tool for the acquisition of information from women (45) and Janet Finch has likewise described the "extreme ease with which, in my experience, a woman researcher can elicit material from another woman:"

Women are almost always enthusiastic about talking to a woman researcher, even if they have some initial anxieties about the purpose of the research or their own 'performance' in the interview situation. (73)

The main requirement, it seems, is a sufficient degree of "identification" made with the interviewer, in order for a substantial degree of disclosure to take place. For example, Finch discovered that the clergymen's wives she interviewed were especially forthcoming after she had disclosed that she too had been married to a clergyman:

²⁸ A more detailed discussion of Gilligan's work, and that of selected revisionists, appears in Chapter 5.

However effective a male interviewer might be at getting women interviewees to talk, there is still necessarily an additional dimension when the interviewer is also a woman, because both parties share a subordinate structural position by virtue of their gender. This creates the possibility that a particular kind of identification will develop. In my own research experience, I have often been aware of such an identification, as women interviewees have begun to talk about key areas of their lives in ways which denote a high level of trust in me, and indicate that they expect me to understand what they mean simply because I am another woman. (76)

Since this kind of identification plays a particularly important role in women's relationships (as Finch has said, by virtue of women's subordination), and since it also has such strong applications to women's speech modes, it follows that women can readily feel betrayed when their openness has particularly ambiguous (not to say disadvantageous) results in the public world.

Liberal (read masculinist) humanism has traditionally regarded the personal as private and therefore separate, and inter-personal dynamics appear to have no significant place in the public or professional world. Women's emphasis on connectedness and mutuality is a behaviour constructed in and for the private/domestic sphere to which women have traditionally been confined. Again, in the public/official world of biography, "gossip" (confidences, disclosures, discussion of emotional and interpersonal matters) fills the gap between what the public and

private realms considered important. Therefore, it effectively bridges the gender gap for women in public roles (that is, the gap experienced by women between expected official behaviour and their more usual forms of interaction). The “professional” women I interviewed had retained a “feminine” style of emotional/interpersonal priorities but in their professional dialogues they had developed the skill of shelving or suspending their feminine modes of speech in favour of what they saw as (and imagined were seen as) “professional” (arguably masculine) speech-modes. However, rather than abandon their feminine-learned skills altogether, they used informal speech modes or genres to supplement or adjust their “professional” style.

Clearly the genre of “gossip” was also used by men and women to exchange important information that the genre of biography had difficulties with canvassing overtly or officially. By this I mean that the formal discourse of biography necessarily relies on informal sources of information which must then be processed into a formalised document of selected “fact.” This is hardly a gender-specific use of an informal speech genre. However, there is an evident difference in the example I have given of my male informant’s application of gossip. He maintained a relatively unproblematic separation between his individual feelings and his social/public actions, and also maintained an emphasis on events as opposed to individual opinions or feelings. Conversely, in the case of the female informants, their use of gossip was seen as containing the real, if restrained or suppressed, point of the

interview; aimed at closing the gap between public and private selves, and placed a semi-secret or semi-suppressed emphasis on feelings as opposed to events, whilst at the same time embracing the interview as the official or “correct” site of what was true or important (that is, of externalised events).

The public/private split is strongly equated with the binarism of gender, and this equation frequently extends to “external” versus “internal” factors. Moreover, because private, domestic, internal and individual concerns equate with femininity, women in public life are often obliged to treat such “feminine” thinking as a suspendable mode of experiencing the world. Such a suspension (which not infrequently creates, and is created by, a degree of shame about feminised behaviours) is necessary for a woman to be taken seriously in a public role. Being a woman is secondary to, and frequently even at odds with, being “a professional.” A woman does not bring to her professional role any natural authority—rather, her professional authority is borrowed from the male. In my experience, women professionals often speak of feeling somehow fraudulent about the authority which is supposedly vested in them in their public role, but which they either do not think belongs to them (and which they half-expect to be discovered as a subterfuge), or which they adopt to their cost because it effectively separates them from their gender. Psychologists Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum explain some of these pressures:

The successful woman becomes the focus of enormous amounts of interest and gossip. Her private life and her work actions assume proportions out of kilter with their actual importance. She becomes a figure of fascination and interest to those around her. A woman placed in such a position can become extremely isolated. Other women cease responding to her woman to woman. . . . It is as if, in being in a position of authority, of power at work, she is no longer a woman. (31)

Orbach and Eichenbaum describe women today as living “with a barrage of contradictory images of femininity,” saying that the effect is like “living in the heart of a social tornado” by adapting women’s very identities to the polarised worlds of public and private (24-5). Again, informal speech-genres, such as gossip, often bridge the “identity gap” and/or “authority gap” in women’s public lives, allowing them to function more comfortably in a world which was not created around the needs and values of women. To put this another way, informal speech genres such as “gossip” can facilitate women to function from, and out of, a subordinate subjectivity whilst simultaneously adopting some aspects of dominance in a public/professional capacity.

A curious feature of my own biographical research was that in our professional exchanges, Ann Anon mostly appeared to resist being drawn into a more collaborative woman-to-woman speech-mode, despite her declared need to “trust” me (bearing in mind that this research continued over several years). In her public

office, Anon adopted the public model of professionalism, and she deeply resented the tendency of her male colleagues occasionally to lapse into “personal” gendered comments about her. With her female colleagues she adopted the “private” or feminine mode—informal, collaborative, non-hierarchical, reciprocal, mutually accountable and with a high degree of implied intimacy not merely present but expected. This is simply the way that women commonly relate to each other, but it was also because she and her pro-feminist team made a point of feminist egalitarianism and collaborative practices. When I interviewed female members of Anon’s team, to a degree we automatically adopted the more intersubjective mode of interaction described earlier. However, Anon herself maintained a more distanced “public” stance throughout all our interviews, only shifting into the “private” or collaborative mode during our occasional informal contact or as a kind of back-up to our task-oriented relationship. Sometimes, however, she treated me as a trusted colleague, even as a friend. I had the distinct impression that because a biography involves a protracted time frame, Anon herself often became confused about how to relate to me, given the strange and complex power dynamics of the biographical process. From my perspective, Anon’s inconsistent behaviour was constantly puzzling and thwarting to me. Instead of considering the barriers between us predictable and perhaps (on her part) quite sensible, I came to regard them as a failure, on my part or hers, to build a more productive relationship (even a more

productive professional relationship). Orbach and Eichenbaum describe this 'feminine' mode of interaction thus:

[Women's] emotions are intrinsic to [their] contact. They make up a patois - a distinctively women's language. Confidences are readily and easily shared, assumptions made about difficult emotional states, disappointments acknowledged and solutions sought. Women unguardedly confide in each other with an ease that often astounds men. Sharing is not a concession, a particularly difficult struggle, an extraction; rather it is part and parcel of women's relating. It is second nature, a habit, a way of being. Not sharing feels odd, a holding back that feels almost like a betrayal. (16)

In creating distance between us, Anon was sometimes treating me as a potential oppressor, in effect an appropriate response given the terms of our relationship. As a biographer, my task was to "extract" information about my subject and her life, and then to interpret it and publish my own version as I saw fit, without undue recourse to her views—clearly the role of an oppressor and hardly that of a trusted confidante. This is inevitable, since an aspect of the biographer's role is to act as a referee in the collision of mininarratives (Heller 284) yielded by research interviews. However, this mode of interaction was clearly at odds with both our more usual gendered behaviours. At other times, therefore, we behaved "as women," meaning that we interacted in an inter-subjective, collaborative, even conspiratorial way as befitted our growing personal intimacy. Again, this analysis has made retrospective sense, but at the time it simply left this feminist researcher in doubt of how to treat the

ensuing information *honourably*, which was an overt aim of my project. It did not occur to me that the codes of my respective roles as biographical researcher and woman were at odds with one another. What then did honour mean at any given moment?

Women commonly have various ways of dealing with this conflict in their public lives. One of these is to adopt public/professional codes of speech and behaviour that ape those of men. This I did when the experience of being a biographical subject locked Anon into this guarded “professional” role, which pre-empted the kind of collaboration that usual woman-to-woman interaction entails. Possibly as a result of her predicament, Anon’s aids sometimes “leaked” information to me on her behalf, in effect, to “gossip” to me when her public role forbade her from indulging this luxury. They did this with the air of performing a supportive service for us both. This use of informal speech was very much akin to my male interviewee’s approach, except that the kind of information leaked in the second instance was of a more personal/emotional than a political kind. For example, Anon’s women team-members would often tell me how she felt, what upset her, her unexpressed wishes, and so forth, which was helpful to me as a woman researcher to avoid breaking the woman-to-woman terms of an honourable exchange).

However, it is interesting to note that, in declaring her need to trust me, Anon was invoking a more collaborative “woman’s code” in order to control my behaviour. Traditionally, a biographer’s “professionalism” involves a degree of tough-minded detachment in the interests of an analytical biography, whereas a woman’s traditional role is to protect others from being hurt. Both Anon and I, therefore, moved between two distinctive codes of behaviour without much awareness of doing so at the time. It is small wonder, then, that women in public life are often accused of being more devious and complicated than men. They are, after all, aiming to “succeed” using two virtually oppositional criteria of success; indeed, using two oppositional models of subjectivity. This raises interesting questions about the role of women in the professional lives of men and, thus, the active role of the private sphere in maintaining and facilitating the public. Men frequently live their emotional lives vicariously through women, and women their public lives vicariously through men. The merger of the public and private through the entry of women to public authority is necessarily a difficult collective process for men, as well as a complex personal process for women.

Claudia Card discusses women’s relational ethos as being a product of their subordinated subjectivities, in a way that has historically assigned spaces to gendered responsibilities:

Different kinds of relationships have been differently distributed among women and men in patriarchal society: a larger share of the responsibilities of certain personal and informal relationships to women, a larger share of the responsibilities of formal and impersonal relationships defined by social institutions to men. It is plausible that a result has been the creation of a significant difference in ethical orientation. (80)

As a result, certain behaviours are indicative of gender-specific “moral luck:”

The oppressed are liable to low self-esteem, ingratiation, and affiliation with abusers (“female masochism”, as well as a tendency to dissemble, a fear of being conspicuous, and chameleonism—taking on the colors of our environment as protection against assault. Histories of exploitation lead us to identify with service, to find our value in our utility or ability to please. Moral damage among both privileged and oppressed tends to be unselfconscious, mutually reinforcing and stubborn. (80)

Feminist ethics, therefore, must take account of the assigned responsibilities for informal and personal relationships to women which, Card emphasises, “tend to underlie formal ones, circumscribe them, come into play when formal ones break down” (89). By way of distinction, she adds that “the personal . . . suggests closeness, intimacy . . . Informal relationships are characterized by responsibilities that can facilitate relationships of attachment” (89). What is plain, is that women’s behaviours in public or formal/official spaces is underscored by their deeper knowledge of, and responsibilities for, personal and informal relationships. It is these latter relationships, therefore, that dictate the terms of ethical responsibilities in

the public. This lays women open to accusations of manipulation and deceit whereas, in effect, they cannot afford to abandon a focus on personal responsibilities for one of 'mere' rights. This being so, a post-colonial ethic of representational responsibilities places (in woman-on-woman biographical contracts) an impossible and impassible onus on the biographer to make decisions *in the best (personal) interests of the subject*, regardless (in my case) of the declared wishes of the latter. This is a burden, which is obviously not the case in non-feminist and non-Indigenous biographical contracts.

This ethic of responsibility imbricates an additional injunction on the feminist biographer to construct herself as an effective moral subject. Arguably, this is a common aspect of female subjectivity. Claudia Card maintains that women's self-esteem is contingent upon primary personal relationships:

[This is] the sense of ourselves as capable of faithfulness, understanding, warmth, empathy, as having the qualities we would want in a personal affiliate, not only the qualities that it is rational to want in a "fellow citizen." . . . If the connection with self-esteem explains part of the ethical importance of justice in institutions, it also explains part of the ethical importance of the responsibilities of informal personal relationships. (91)

Thus, women operating in a public or official setting know that they incur a particular set of consequences for violating either their own gendered moral agency

or the codes and conventions of [masculinist] public discourses—a situation that frequently results in confusion, conflict and, no doubt, ineffective utterances and practices.

In this chapter, I have asserted that biographical speech has particular relevance to western constructs of gender, and therefore to women's own construction of female subjectivity. Related practices can be theorised by Marxist concepts of hegemony, or by Foucault's model of complex multi-dimensional deployments of power (*Sexuality* 92-8). Speaking about others has traditionally offered women opportunities of solidarity with other women, of gender-identity, the construction of norms and access to an unofficial power system. However, the productive process of formal biography is problematic to women because it involves a loss of control, both as authors and as subjects. At the level of collective subordination through their gender, women are therefore positioned as vulnerable because they stand to lose the advantages of subordination with no easy access to comparable advantages of authority. The biographical process involves some oppression of the subject by the biographer in telling the subject's story for her. It also involves some risks to the woman biographer for the following reason. Speaking about others, in the sense that it is an act of representation, is traditionally a method of social control and an exercise of power. Women as subordinates tend to deploy this at the level of, firstly, communication (bonding) and, secondly, resistance/subversion. They do so in a

private setting and by means of an informal (often oral) genre, such as gossip. To do so in a public setting by means of the formal (written) genre of biography is, to some degree, an act of betrayal within their codes of gender. Nevertheless, the act of speaking about others is politically important to women at a formal level, in order to give them access to public authority (and, indeed, public subjectivity) which gossip, for example, does not accord.

It should be noted that I do not suggest that raw and indiscriminate gossip should be sanctioned as appropriate purely because it is an aspect of women's historic subordination that has become a feature of female subjectivity. But since women as socially constructed gendered subjects have come to rely on specific forms of communication, and commonly use these forms to supplement or shape their public/official interactions in particular ways, it does seem necessary to re-evaluate ethical frameworks in more honest ways. These ways should take account of factors that support and facilitate official ethics but which themselves are considered somewhat unethical because they are unacknowledged (and which therefore create in women a sense of shame, guilt or fraudulence that I suggest is less apparent in men using similar practices).

It is relevant, then, to look further at the social dynamics of revelation and secrecy, since these implicate a trading in information at the level of subjectivity.

Chapter 4

Telling, Knowing, Withholding:

Women's Relations to Power-Knowledge

As countless feminist critics and historians have suggested in past decades, the power to name is the real seat of control. (Linda Wagner-Martin)

The ideology of self-subordination implies, among other things, suppression of narrative about the self. (Patricia Meyer Spacks)

In this chapter, the mechanics of (western) feminine subjectivity and its problematic relation to the public sphere are examined in further detail, with a view to better understanding the difficulties with authority that official lifestorying presents for women as patriarchal subordinates. To this end, I firstly establish that biographical speech is fundamentally important in women's lives, and, in so doing, outline its purposes and problematics with regard to the establishment of authoritative subjectivities. I then discuss, in more specific terms than in the previous chapter, some of the dynamics of women's ways of gaining and constructing knowledge, indeed in relating to established concepts of authority. In the process, I further consider some socio-psychological theories of women's behaviours and subjectivities (with the observation that these theories tend towards a totalising

effect). These gendered behaviours are then addressed in terms of women's relation to biographical speech acts. That is to say, I examine women's particular needs, as subordinated subjects, to divulge and conceal. In total, this chapter is concerned with analysing the power play deployed during the process of creating or, conversely, undermining the biographical speaker as authoritative.²⁹

A substantial amount of the material utilised in this research to substantiate women's gendered collusion with their strategic oppression is couched in the language of dualities. Whilst this invokes reductive models of power relations, it still constitutes important insight into behaviours that result from, and produce, oppression. Post-structuralists problematise the workings of power, diffusing sources and resisting the attachment of labels to individualised identities. Therefore, contemporary theories of power and domination—whilst their effects on less advantaged subjects are not denied—are discussed in terms of effects, rather than origins.

In any event, it is the technologies of power and their apparent links with gendered subjectivities that interest me for the purposes of this thesis on women's socially and politically constructed authorities. To this end, the work of psychologists (such as Jean Baker Millar) and sociologists (such as Harriet Goldhor Lerner) and radical

²⁹ It seems counter-productive to ignore or discard all the work done on speech and subjectivity which has been done, even that couched in terms without due regard for qualifiers honouring difference. I apply this qualitative research and discussion advisedly, on the proviso that cultural factors will undoubtedly have a bearing and produce variable effect, even with, "Western" cultural groups.

feminists (such as Adrienne Rich) remains a rich source of knowledge which feminists ignore to their cost.

Telling: Lifestorying and Authentic Experience

How crucial is the act of telling stories about women's lives? Ross Chambers attests to "the social fact that narrative mediates human relationships and derives its 'meaning' from them" (4). The dynamics of story are two-directional, in that story is at once created from, and enabled by, life events and itself creates, or enables, life events. Paul Lutzeler says that "narration can be viewed as one of the primary tools of knowledge" (qtd. in Wagner-Martin, 80). Similarly, Chambers tell us that "storytelling not only derives significance from situation but also has the power to change human situations" (7). This change can occur as a result of either a reader's endorsement, or reversal, of the situation depicted in the story. For example, readers may either identify with some aspect of the narrative or place themselves outside of it. Either way, the lifestory is measured in terms of a hypothetical norm. Modernists may describe this process as one of art imitating life and subsequently life sometimes imitating art, or as the biographer "setting up the looking glass at odd corners" (Woolf, *Collected Essays*, 226-7). Lacanians may translate this concept into that of two mirror images set opposite each other, each producing various multi-layers of reflection and self-reflection *ad infinitum*. In any event, we know that narrative and 'reality' are intertwined and inseparable, each producing the other.

Chambers goes on to describe narrative as a “transactional phenomenon:”

Transactional in that it mediates *exchanges* that produce historical change, it is transactional, too, in that this functioning is itself dependent on an initial *contract*, an understanding between the participants in the exchange as to the purposes served by the narrative function, its “point.”

(8)

Chambers is herein referring to the function of fictional narrative. When we apply his comments to a so-called non-fictional narrative we must search even deeper for the basis of a contract between participants.³⁰ Why discuss an identified individual in public if we cannot lay some claim to a shared reality—indeed, to some extra-textual referent? Chambers expresses the phenomenon of narrative as a social process:

When narrative ceases to be (perceived as) a mode of direct communication of some pre-existing knowledge and comes instead to figure as an oblique way of raising awkward, not to say unanswerable questions, it becomes necessary for it to trade in the manipulation of desire (that is, the desire to narrate must seek to arouse some corresponding desire for narration) to the precise extent that it can no longer depend, in its hearers or readers, on some sort of “natural” thirst for information. (11)

Narrative is apparently justifiable for its own sake. In psychoanalytic terms, it is a pleasurable act, driven by desire—a desire to “know” for aesthetic pleasure or the

³⁰ Phillipe Lejeune’s “pacte autobiographique” (qtd. In Elbaz 7) refers to autobiography’s generic “pact” with the reader, in which the text is believed to refer to an actual person. This is, of course, the basis of any non-fictional generic classification.

fulfillment of a drive. Laura Mulvey says that this has a historico-cultural link with the feminine:

Curiosity describes a desire to know something secret so strongly that it is experienced like a drive. It is a source of danger and pleasure and knowledge . . . In the myths of Eve and Pandora, curiosity lay behind the first woman's desire to penetrate a forbidden secret that precipitated the fall of man. These myths associate female curiosity with an active narrative function. (Mulvey x)

In the case of "non-fiction," there is a didactic drive in the quest for "empirical" information about the perceived lives of actual people. This quest encompasses something other than a hunger for facts about a known individual. It includes the wish to construct social/cultural truths that act as role models in the social/cultural construction of the self or subject³¹. Terrell Carver says that "narrative is crucial to understanding; neither texts nor lives are strings of propositions" (56). Instead, each gives coherence and culturally specific meaning to the other.

Thus feminists have an emancipatory investment in getting women's stories on the record as *women's* stories, so that these individualised narratives will somehow speak to (and for) other women about their own circumstances and subjectivities.

This is the argument that reifies experience as an authoritative stance in

³¹ Fiction and non-fiction genres can be subject to similar motivational desires. Post-structuralist literary theories have blurred the boundaries. Nonetheless, the attraction to "true stories" remains a tantalising phenomenon of so-called non-fiction, driven by a notion of referential truths.

autobiographical speech (“this is my experience and therefore I am best qualified to write about it”). In the case of biographical speech, this stance broadens to group identification (“this is my cultural experience and therefore I am qualified to write about it as a member of this cultural group”). However, Joan Scott elucidates the way in which this claimed “authority of experience” is no different than the authority of expertise which feminists reject as oppressive power play in patriarchal hierarchies:

When the evidence offered is the evidence of “experience,” the claim for referentiality is further buttressed—what could be truer, after all, than a subject’s own account of what he or she has lived through? It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontested evidence and as an original point of explanation—as a foundation upon which analysis is based—that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference [which] take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalise their difference. They locate resistance outside its discursive construction, and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualizing it. (Scott 24-5)

This is the same, Scott points out, as the objectivist view wherein the facts speak for themselves. In these terms, we may presumably conclude that a woman writing her autobiography, or a woman writing the biography of another woman, is hardly a more justifiable act in terms of the authority of experience than David Marr, for example, writing a biography of Patrick White by virtue of shared gender or wider cultural experience or, indeed, David Marr writing on a female subject by virtue of

shared culture (class, profession, etc.). Whereas a traditional biographer claims “expertise” as her/his authority, the politics of difference claim “experience” to the same effect.

This concept of the authority of experience gives rise to identity politics. The communality of experience creates a communality of identity, the grounds, in fact, for the existence of the women’s movement. But how, asks Scott, can we, as postmodernists, write about identity without essentialising it? This question is further addressed in terms of discursive politics in Chapter 2, and of feminist ethics in Chapter 5. Here, it must be asked in terms of sheer possibilities: how can we tell women’s stories whilst assuming enough discursive authority for credibility, and as little authority as it takes to avoid buying into patriarchal oppressions? Though an essentialist view of “women” binds together all women under the banner of biological sex, postfeminist women may be bound together by some gender-specific experiences (although sex is as much a social construction as gender). Scott concludes that the concept of experience is culturally a fundamental one:

Experience is not a word we can do without, although it is tempting, given its usage to essentialise identity and reify the subject, to abandon it altogether. But experience is so much a part of everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion. It serves both as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, of claiming knowledge that is “unassailable.”

(37)

Certainly, it seems unthinkable for women to be deprived of the validity of their own experience just as this has begun to be accepted, and, in some feminist circles, even valorised. Experience is, after all, the basis on which women's confined domestic authority is deployed. Experience has come to the rescue when qualifications and public accolades have been withheld. It amounts to the accumulation of knowledges that have been undervalued in the public sphere. If we can find no basis for reifying experience to some extent, then we can find no basis for women's biographical speech, in effect, for storytelling, which provides the glue of personal and social interactions, the establishment of norms and the potential for creating change. Thus, this project constructs experience as a way of knowing without recourse to an unproblematic definition which traverses culture. Historically, some well-documented experiences have become attached to gender differences.

Chambers' notion of transactions which mediate exchanges that, in turn, construct histories is an appealing one, and certainly one that fits with concepts of women's tendency to collaboration and networking in their relationships with each other. Such a textual transaction undermines author-ity (the sovereignty of the author) in two ways. It constructs the text as the result of various contracts between writer and subject, and between each of these and the readership. In other words, it makes the text contingent and conditional upon context, and eschews emphasis on an externally imposed author-ity. Then, it undermines individualism, by problematising

experience or history as attached to a personal identity. Experience is thus a social and cultural process. Text, writer, subject, reader and culture are credited with producing each other and being produced by each other. This is, of course, a postmodernist notion. It substitutes “writerlyness” for “the author,” conviction and convincingness for objective expertise. Whether such an idea is viable as a form of biography which both endorses women’s public authority and maintains women’s traditional collaborative systems remains to be seen.

Speaking out about one’s own experiences can certainly be classed as an act of self-empowerment for the speaker/writer. It also brings women’s realities to a wider audience and therefore validates women’s experience in general, an aim called for by Anna Yeatman when she said that the “domestic domain” (of women’s experience) should be regarded as part of the public domain (160). The theme of silence (and its accompanying visual metaphor of invisibility) is a notable one in women’s studies and women’s writings, because it obviously indicates a denigration of women’s lives in the margins of patriarchy. Some women (the young and glamorous in particular) are visible by virtue of the male gaze, but voice is a different matter entirely. Much second-wave feminist endeavour has therefore been devoted to “giving voice” to women’s experience. Janet Pine, in the Foreword to *Herstory*, says that “it is necessary to record and recognize women’s lives, their struggle for equality and their many achievements” (iii). Lisel Mueller says we tell because “the story of our life

becomes our life; because each of us tells the same story but tells it differently and none of us tells it the same way twice” (qtd. in Wagner-Martin xiv). Psychologist Harriet Goldhor Lerner asks:

Is there a “true story” of female experience? If so, then surely it cannot be told by experts who have never been women, nor can any one of us speak for all. Each woman is ultimately the best expert on her own self. But to begin to know our own truths, we need to examine our own stories and those of other women. Telling a “true story” about personal experience is not just a matter of being oneself, or even of finding oneself. It is also . . . a matter of *choosing* oneself. (67)

Notwithstanding Goldhor Lerner’s simplistic concept of truth and authenticity, the authority to tell our story is, nevertheless, the authority to contribute directly to the construction of our collective and individual (gendered) subjectivities—to assert our female “selves.”

All of these statements in favour of “speaking out” are concerned chiefly with the expressive aspect or view of writing/speaking. They hold that an individual (or individualised) utterance becomes, or can become, a political act of self-determination for the group with which the writer/speaker is identified. (“Voice” establishes presence.) Therefore the collective expressions of individual women’s “lifestories” becomes a powerful endorsement of women in general (or at least women of that particular culture) and, when published, of women’s authority in the

public sphere. Speaking out is an exhilarating experience. James C. Scott says that whilst we must not assume that more overt confrontational actions or statements “in the teeth of power” are necessarily the most effective means of resistance to oppressive practices, they are exciting, meaningful and fruitful moments. He says, “both the psychological release and the social meaning of breaking silence deserve emphasis” (213). It is also something of a bridge-burning step for the individual who takes it, so it is not without its risks but clearly has wide-ranging value.

Whilst the emancipation of women is aided by the increased audibility of women’s voices in authoritative speaking roles, there are some notable critiques of the expressivist position on experience. Firstly, as Kathleen B. Jones points out, the implied authenticity of experience points to an *ownership* of experience which can effectively mean a silencing of those people who are not seen to share this ownership:

We notice that even the scripts of feminist theory move towards the climax of exploitation and the denouement of liberation. Telling the stories of women’s lives was intended to uncover the gendered patterns of oppression and resistance that framed those lives. Now we have warned ourselves about the disciplinary effects of giving authoritative readings of others’ lives. (189)

These self-warnings or feminist inhibitions are quite legitimate, framed as they are by women’s experience of having been “spoken for,” without any accompanying

right to speak for ourselves. However, Jones is very concerned that fear of being accused of “appropriation” effectively means that women cannot legitimately speak about each other in case, in so doing, they newly contest other women’s ownership of their own experiences:

“We” have complained that in . . . canonical works, descriptions of women’s experiences often have been either ignored or distorted by the biased frame of the researcher whose objectivist approach to knowledge constructed women’s lives in terms of a male-centred perspective. Lacking was what women themselves experienced, expressed in their own terms. Yet as we have set ourselves the task of correcting for this bias by placing women’s experiences at the centre of our epistemological enterprise, we have continued to insist on the authoritativeness of our own subversive texts. Now the legitimacy of such a claim has been challenged with renewed vigor; postmodernity has undercut the foundation of both authority and the authoritative . . . so that even the category “women’s experiences” seems to have lost its coherence. (189)

A “woman’s voice,” in terms of the ownership of a gendered experience, seems to be more acceptable in the case of autobiographical speech, as opposed to biographical. “A woman’s experience” has become and, arguably, must remain, distinct from “women’s experience,” and certainly from “woman’s experience,” all of which has implications for identity politics. Yet, how can we claim that women are subordinated by virtue of gender, if “we” cannot lay claim at least to a tentative and qualified communality of experience?

Fear of appropriating another's experience is all well and good in terms of avoiding the exploitation/domination of others as we ourselves have been dominated by the deployment of objectivist authority, manifested in biography as the sovereign voice of the biographer. Yet it can hardly be acceptable to feminists that the politics of representation be too vigorously used, at the behest of feminists, to silence women anew. If women may not speak about each other, may not evaluate, describe and, at times, judge each other's behaviours and lives, we are deprived of author-ity to a debilitating degree. There are, of course, two kinds of representation in question here: the first is that of speaking *about* others and the second is that of speaking *for* others. Both are potentially problematic and, moreover, they can easily become conflated because representations construct social identities.

Stephen Muecke presents another side of this conundrum in his discussion of Aboriginal literature. He describes the way in which contemporary auto/biographical texts by Aboriginal writers tend to be seen as experiences of racial oppression, and he questions the autonomy of the Aboriginal writer in the light of the popular construction of Aboriginal people as oppressed and rejected. Muecke asks how we can determine to what extent an individual literary text can be viewed as the expression of political activity. On the one hand, the classification of authors in groups (that is, "Aboriginal writers") takes a step away from that of the author as creator of an original expression (and therefore as a kind of gifted exception to

her/his social group), and towards a postmodernist concept of author as an individualised manifestation of a social group. On the other, individual writers are seen as representative or typical of a certain group that encourages generalisations (specifically racial stereotypes) to be deployed.

Muecke argues that the view of “authentic” cultural experience (which at least has begun to replace the denigration of Aboriginal culture by white society) still locks Aboriginal writers into very limited perceptions of their race. He mentions, for example, Bob Hawke’s endorsement of Glenyse Ward’s *Wandering Girl* as containing “the truth,” although Hawke had not read the book, because of the myth of indigenous authenticity (the belief that Aboriginal people have a kind of primitive instinct for ancient/sacred knowledges). Hawke’s apparently unqualified authorisation of books by Aboriginal writers was clearly intended to redress a historical rejection of Aboriginal experiences. However, an effect of this expression versus repression view of “subordinate” texts, is that both individual writer and the group to which s/he is seen to belong are maintained as stereotypes, and thence it becomes more difficult than ever for a “marginalised” text to be seen as a manifestation of power as opposed to evidence of powerlessness. For example, Muecke comments that it is not especially difficult for Aboriginal writers to publish in the present climate of interest in Aboriginal culture(s), yet the notion of great struggle persists. In saying this, Muecke does not suggest that Aboriginal people are

no longer oppressed, but that they are persistently constructed as oppressed, even on those occasions when they are operating from a position of advantage.

Curiously, another side-effect of this seeming obligation to deny any advantages for an oppressed group is that opponents claim the group is exploiting or manipulating the sympathies of others by “pretending” to be victims of domination. The chief reason for this view is that authority is commonly associated with *privilege*. If a member of a subordinate group or, indeed, the group itself, is constructed as authoritative, it is then assumed that the claim to oppression is suspect. Thus, a paradoxical situation arises when Aboriginal writers, for example, find ready markets for their stories about oppression, within a sympathetic mainstream readership. Even more problematic is the Aboriginal writer whose text does not readily lend itself to this kind of reading or, even more significantly, whose perceived identity does not lend itself to victim constructions of Aboriginality. An example of this puzzle is the ongoing debate about, for example, Sally Morgan as an *Aboriginal* writer and artist, which is infused with concerns about her possibly “cashing in” on the “privilege” of Aboriginal oppression which may not rightfully belong to her. Ironically, *My Place* tells of Morgan’s oppression by virtue of her *withheld* Aboriginal identity, and of the cultural implications of such secrecy. Thus, the perceived connection between authority and privilege creates complex problems for members of subordinate groups.

Clearly, the publication of significant numbers of women's auto/biographies is both a result of, and aid to, women's increased standing in their communities. The right to share the airwaves also means a right to share in the construction of social meanings, an exercised right to determine what is of value to a given society. Yet, as we have seen, this right, when exercised assertively by an individual operating from within an emancipatory movement, must also consider ways in which "typicality" and "exceptionality" can be both useful and disadvantageous to women in general. The endorsement of women's authority as women must encompass textual representations of individual "lives" which may be seen as having useful knowledge to contribute about the effects of gender on culture-specific subjectivities. And clearly women must continue to be sceptical about generalisations and stereotypical images of women. The fact that either or both can be used to women's detriment, however, should not result in women writers' anxious silence. Caution is needed although total control over the interpretation of one's own or another person's "experience" is neither a realistic nor a desirable aim of auto/biographical representations of women's lives.

Knowing: Authority and the Construction of Knowledge

The construction of authority takes place by and through the enactment of authoritative behaviours. Foucault tells us that power is not simply held; it is deployed from numerous sites along the social network (*History of Sexuality* 93).

Thus, the construction of power is a dynamic process, always on the move, never fixed. Likewise, authority (the symbolic manifestation of power, if one can put it that way) exists because it presents itself as authoritative. If this argument holds, we must assume that, for whatever reasons, women do not generally present themselves as authoritative in the public sphere.

The bumper sticker that proclaims “It’s No Secret—Girls Can Do Anything” tells a strategic lie. It remains clear from the statistics that the proverbial glass ceiling is intact and operating efficiently. Indeed, the very existence of the bumper sticker makes self-evident the problem of inequity. This is despite a century and a half of the women’s movement, despite legislation, public education and institutional policies, and despite twentieth-century social change of large proportions in terms of removing traditional barriers of gender, race, class and sexual preference. Our golden age of opportunity may be a theoretical fact for many, and a kind of reality for some, but it is still a seductive and very elusive dream for most women; even those women who are relatively privileged in western society. Alison Jacobson’s analysis of (American) women’s authority in the public sphere in 1985 concludes that “very few women have reached the peaks that males define as the top” (222). Judy Marshall’s (1988) study of (British) women’s authority proclaims that relatively little has changed; indeed that “women are actually losing ground in relation to men” (2). In 1996, for example, Gisela Kaplan noted that in Australia

“women today do not earn incomes comparable to those of men and in practice often do not even have the same rights or the same value” (168). She cites Scott Henry’s (1995) calculation that at the present rate of closing the gap between women’s and men’s pay awards it would take 168 years for women to catch up (169). Clearly there have been vast gains in the status of western women³². (What, then, are the factors that continue to separate women from public or official authority? Whilst overtly restrictive practices by men undoubtedly still exist, my focus is primarily on ‘internalised’ aspects of gendered behaviour.

Jacobson says that women’s assertive styles are commonly perceived as aggressive and thus as unfeminine. It is certainly the case that male authority is in keeping with masculine subjectivity (a man’s gendered identity), whereas a woman who assertively exercises public authority may well be perceived as “a bitch,” that is, as an aberration to womanliness. On the other hand, “feminine” women in authority are perceived as ineffective. Jacobson describes “The Quiet Syndrome” which prevents many women from taking a full part in public affairs:

Women’s silence in mixed groups is not news to any attuned observer . . .
Acting like a lady often means acting like a child, being seen but not heard. Or it may mean being a good listener, the old advice to teenage girls on how to catch a man. (13-4)

³² Data from The Women’s Policy Development Office (see Chase, Krantz and Jackson 1999) indicates that for Western Australian women “the barriers to equality in education and employment have virtually disappeared” (57). However, “there are [other] downsides” (59) so that “somehow all of the changes have not yet translated into full equity” (59).

She points out the more overt problematics:

Women are plagued, more than men, by physical characteristics not generally considered authoritative. For instance, they are more likely to have high voices or be short. Also, because of the dictates of our society, most women wear makeup and dress more elaborately than men . . . features that most people have not been accustomed to associate with people in power until very recently. (15)

Judi Marshall's findings yield a similar picture:

Legislation officially gives women the opportunity to be equal to men on men's standards. It does not allow questioning of current norms or foster growth towards a jointly meaningful, mixed-sex public world. . . . Women seeking to be 'equal' to men in the world of work and public affairs will continually find themselves in conflict with men's traditional expectations of femininity, and their interest in enforcing these. (37)

But conforming to men's expectations is apparently no advantage in the construction of public authority:

Women are censored for conforming to images of femininity—they give different explanations to men of successful performance—and for failing to match characteristics of masculinity—wanting to be top of the medical class. (36)

Women are thus censored both for conforming and not conforming to images of femininity and, perhaps even more hazardous, they censor themselves and each other for both, because women have been trained in and for patriarchal value systems and have no independent standards to apply. Thus, as Marshall asserts, women in such

circumstances are doomed to be “deviant,” to the point where failure to observe the “appropriate” gender code is as much a result of what a woman does *not* do as what she does.

Since women often have trouble perceiving themselves as legitimately authoritative in the public sphere, it is important to examine their gendered relation to external authority from within a subordinated structural position. Woman-to-superior positions are examined in terms of women’s attitudes to learning by the collective of Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jill Mattuck Tarule in their popular book, *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (1986). In this study, the authors posit five ways in which women commonly engage with the act of gaining knowledge. In effect, these are five ways in which women perceive authority and authorised information and, therefore, the ways in which women construct the notion of authority in what Foucault calls the power-knowledge game. These “ways” can also be considered five stages, described in ascending order of their representing advanced states of self-empowerment in women. Some women apparently progress through all five stages; some remain at one stage or another:

Building on [William] Perry’s scheme, we grouped women’s perspectives on knowing into five major epistemological categories: **silence**, a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority; received **knowledge**, a perspective from which women conceive of themselves as

capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from the all-knowing external authorities, but not capable of creating knowledge on their own; **subjective knowledge**, a perspective from which truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private and subjectively known or intuited; **procedural knowledge**, a position for obtaining *and* communicating knowledge; and **constructed knowledge**, a position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing. (15)

Belenky *et. al.* clearly view subjective knowledge as a kind of first-step of valuing their own knowledge and judgement, in which “women become their own authorities” (54) and they regard this as a sort of adolescent stage in the personal development of individual women. Subjective knowledge is adolescent because, although it is assertive, it limits women to that knowledge and experience which exists amongst women, depriving them of the potentially useful knowledge inherent in the expertise of men. Adolescents have a tendency to reject older and more senior knowledges and authorities out of hand, on their way to incorporating these into their own opinions and methods. Nevertheless, subjective knowledge is considered by the authors as preferable to the responses of the silent woman and the received knower, whose “infantile” passivity is immobilising, although their openness to wider knowledge and expertise is greater. Belenky *et. al.* also point out that subjective knowers are more valued in non-western and non-technological societies. In western societies, such women are likely to be highly disillusioned about “failed male

authority” which, ironically, is likely to limit their advancement in the public domain through cynicism about “the system.” (One can also argue that subjective knowing has been a mind-set of the women’s movement and remains a branch of it in some forms of radical feminism.)

Belensky *et. al.* assert that procedural knowing takes two forms: separate and connected. In the former, the knower learns by “reason” and through viewing the information through the eyes of various disciplines or theoretical stands; in the latter, the knower learns by empathy, viewing the information through the eyes of other individuals. In the case of connected knowers, objective and subjective knowledges are evaluated and integrated. Such knowers resist hasty or premature judgement, and consider as full a picture as possible before coming to a personal conclusion about the value that they will place on the available information. This is an advantage over subjective knowing, because it allows for a fuller picture to emerge, taking into account both subjective and objective (external) knowledges and evaluating them in a logical way.

The ideal position is, of course, seen as connected knowing, from which position women can sift through all available knowledge, see this clearly as constructed by people and institutions which are as subjective and fallible as themselves. They then go on to measure this external information against their own rich experience,

whether this latter be comprised of objectively learned knowledge or subjectively intuited “truth” via a lived reality (if, indeed, a difference exists in any final analysis of what we “know” as truth).

It is interesting that Belenky *et. al.* discuss the act of gossip as being a tool of constructed knowledge which they posit as the highest, most promising and most sophisticated form of learning to which women can aspire. They refer to Patricia Spacks’ term “small shared truths” which confidantes exchange in a climate of connectedness. These shared truths move between the particular and the general and, in the process of such movement, test what is received from external sources against what the gossipers know within the context of their lived experience. The participants of gossip also learn to see things through the eyes of another person. Although gossip certainly establishes and reinforces social norms, there is also a strong element in which judgement is suspended for reevaluation, arguably to achieve a degree of objectivity:

Connected knowers begin with an interest in the facts of other people’s lives, but they gradually shift the focus to other people’s ways of thinking. As in all procedural knowing, it is the form rather than the content of knowing that is central. Separate knowers learn through explicit formal instruction how to adopt a different lens—how, for example, to think like a sociologist. Connected knowers learn through empathy. Both learn to get out from behind their own eyes and use a

different lens, in one case the lens of a discipline, in the other the lens of another person. (Belenky *et al.*, 115)

This does not mean, of course, that the act of gossip *necessarily* produces, or is produced by, a connected knower. However, the potential for connected knowing exists in this kind of social exchange, which is associated more with women's relationships than with men's and of which women tend to make particular uses. In other words, women's peer group (intra-subordinate) relationships with each other carry the *potential* ingredients for inter-subjectivity—a mature, egalitarian construction of authority (and authorised expertise). However, they certainly do not manifest that quality *in actuality*, because they are framed by the overall context of women's subordinate status.

Alison Jagger takes the view that a chief inhibitor of women's self-confidence in their construction of knowledge is the western tradition that emotion, from nineteenth-century British empiricism to twentieth century positivism, has been discounted as a reliable source of knowledge (130). Emotion is viewed as the opposite of reason, creating an epistemological conflict between “facts” and “values.” Elizabeth V. Spelman calls it “the dumb view” of emotions, this being set in binary opposition to the cognitive view, which holds that emotions come from knowledge rather than from ignorance (“dumbness”). Jagger similarly argues that emotions are socially constructed and are therefore “about” something. They are

also culturally specific and not some raw, instinctive, universal phenomenon that bypasses actual conditions and circumstances:

This is not to say that group emotions historically precede or are logically prior to the emotions of individuals; it is to say that individual experience is simultaneously social experience. (136)

This means that emotions are the very opposite of “blind”—they are specific responses to information, so that “emotions and values are closely related” (137). Both are ways in which we construct the world. That feminists are angry about the inferior status of women is construed as irrational by advantaged others specifically because the subordination of women is denied in patriarchal society. However, being angry is being aware of one’s own oppression, and passivity can readily be linked with being unaware or oblivious as opposed to being content. Once women see emotion (albeit couched in reason, or what James C. Scott calls “cooked anger” [119]), as being a useful resource, they have a very immediate clue to their “real” conditions. Conversely, denial, or the suppression of emotions in the form of convenient ignorance, is more likely to result in “blindness.” Intelligent emotional awareness, when seen as a real skill that women frequently possess, can be turned into a route to self-reflexive ways of knowing. Indeed, Jagger claims that “the emotional responses of oppressed people in general, and of women in particular, are more likely to be appropriate than the emotional responses of the dominant class. That is, they are more likely to incorporate reliable appraisals of situations” (140).

This simply means that advantaged groups have more to lose by acknowledging the fact of dominance than do subordinates, notwithstanding collusory practices in which subordinates also work to disguise the terms of their own oppression. For this reason, Spelman links women's anger with "insubordination," which implicates those threatened by such a reaction since "it surely signals that subordinates take themselves seriously" (267). In feminist terms, it is apparent that women's applied use of their emotions in constructing knowledge adds to their *sense* of authority (for its part, a vital ingredient of social authority). Jagger says that women must begin with this self-validation of their own value systems:

We can only start from where we are—beings who have been created in a cruelly racist, capitalist, and male-dominated society that has shaped our bodies and our minds, our perceptions, our values and our emotions, our language and our systems of knowledge. (148)

These systems of knowledge are rooted in the context of subordination and must be developed into an assertive sense of gendered reality.

Women's subordination conflicts with contemporary western constructs of authority because it is inculcated with dependency. Self-development books often admonish women for this tendency, and encourage them to become self-empowered through "independence." In *The Cinderella Complex*, Collette Dowling eschews what she considers to be the unhealthy (and unnecessary) dependency that women perpetuate, and even valorise as an appealing feminine quality. Her principal target is, of course,

women's dependency on men, which she considers a very child-like refusal to accept the responsibilities of mature adulthood (ignoring the inconvenient factor of systematic male dominance). Psychologists Eichenbaum and Orbach consider Dowling's perspective misguided and unfair to women. They attempt to "explode the myth of [women's] dependency" (15) by pointing out that women are often *economically* dependent on men, that dependency of various kinds is a factor that runs through all human relationships, and that modern marriage (and, undoubtedly, the nuclear family) creates anew this concentrated dependency on certain intimate relationships.

From a psychological perspective, Jean Baker Miller says that dependency is a feature of subordinates' social roles as part of the mythology promulgated by the dominant group, this being an automatic part of the process of domination:

Subordinates are described in terms of, and encouraged to develop, personal psychological characteristics that are pleasing to the dominant group. These characteristics form a certain familiar cluster: submissiveness, passivity, docility, dependency, lack of initiative, inability to act, to decide, to think, and the like. In general, this cluster includes qualities more characteristic of children than adults—immaturity, weakness, and helplessness. If subordinates adopt these characteristics they are considered well adjusted. (7)

Women's friendships take on their distinctively intimate and intersubjective qualities which distinguish them from relationships that are less equal in authority or social

status (that is, from female to male and adult to child relationships). They do so because of the demands and the emotional isolation that results from being emotional carriers and caregivers for others, and from being doubtful of their place in the “outside world.” Women require both support and education from their peers—a kind of access to wider experience that the domestic experience does not offer. As Miller says, “subordinates themselves can come to find it difficult to believe in their own ability” (7). Thus, it is even difficult for them to ask help from those whose “expertise” seems to pre-empt the kind of ignorance that women frequently imagine is their own fault, the result of their own lack of ability. Such women prefer to seek out other women whose skills exceed theirs a little, but who personify the same kind of authoritative limitations as themselves. It is interesting to note, then, that “women’s” friendships may be relatively egalitarian/collaborative, but they are still contained within different class groups and are by no means “universal” or otherwise non-discriminatory. They are sufficiently exclusory to sustain a localised flavour of egalitarianism endemic to female gender in an overall context of subordination.

This brings us, then, to a consideration of women-to-women friendships, in terms of the balance of authority that operates in these seemingly egalitarian interactions, within the context of intra-subordinate relations. Orbach and Einchenbach describe the positive attributes of women’s friendships:

Women can share intimacies with each other without much hesitation or embarrassment. From adolescence onwards young women have tried to understand, with one another, the world around them. Female friendships have taken on enormous significance and prominence. (17)

These intra-subordinate friendships are instructive as well as social:

Women's role as nurturer and mother has always provided them with the skills and opportunities to relate and to not be frightened of emotional connection. Long before the women's movement, women achieved deep and significant friendships. Mothers and daughters, sisters and aunts, friends and neighbours relied on one another for practical and emotional support. Then, through the women's movement women's connection to one another deepened still further. As women revealed their most private thoughts and experiences they broke through to new levels of intimacy. Nothing had to be hidden. (26)

This support and intimacy, then, which encompasses the distinctive feature of revelation, disclosure or "sharing," has been a factor, arguably even a result, of women's subordinate status within patriarchy. Moreover, as women's awareness of their oppression *as women* has grown, they have used their existing skills and resources both to empower themselves and each other, and also to focus on, and nourish, a social system which is directly related to the history of their gender, and which has therefore become (and perhaps should remain) a feature of "being a woman" which is considered worth retaining as women's oppression gradually

reduces. Indeed, some feminists envisage women teaching these skills and practices formally and informally to men and women in the public sphere.

On the other hand, Orbach and Eichenbaum have emphasised the weaknesses and difficulties in the dynamics of female-to-female friendships. To begin with, “within women’s relationships, there is not yet an accepted context for talking about anger or hurt as there is within a marriage” (19). That is to say, women certainly can, and do, talk with female confidantes about anger and hurt that has been sustained outside of the relationship, but conflicts and resentments within woman-to-woman friendships are strangely difficult to tackle. Janet Lever’s observation of schoolgirls who ended their games when disputes broke out, rather than devise a system of rules, is highly relevant here (Gilligan 9-10). Women frequently “resolve” their friendship difficulties either by ignoring the problem and/or soothing their hurt feelings in secretly discussing the issue with another friend (that is, gossiping), or else by ending the friendship altogether. Sometimes, relationship problems between women are solved over a period of time when the errant party “gets the message” and changes her behaviour without being directly asked to do so, but this is an awkward and protracted method and much discomfort ensues in the meantime, causing men to comment that women make mountains out of molehills and are petty and cruel. Girls of all ages commonly go through “not speaking” periods with best friends, resulting in intense emotional pain on both sides and in vain attempts by parents and teachers

to restore peace. In this situation, exclusion is the price paid for a *faux pas*—one of the most painful sanctions administered in women's relationships. If a woman or girl feels emotionally isolated, she is often quite unable to go about her life in a balanced way, so important is the network of care and support that connectedness implies (but does not automatically offer). In male to male relationships, open conflict or rivalry is probably more likely to result from disagreements or rifts. In female-male relationships, open (verbal) rows are more common solutions to disagreements, and/or "talking things out," which is frequently instigated by women. In women's relationships, talking things out takes place mainly with regard to the doings of others, and rarely extends to self-examination, at least not in terms of conflict between present parties.

Although James C. Scott, does not deal with the question of gender, he does discuss these features of subordinate peer-group relationships, but in strongly negative terms:

Granting the relatively democratic aspect of social pressure among peers, these mechanisms of social control are painful and often ugly. Slander, character assassination, gossip, rumour, public gestures of contempt, shunning, curses, backbiting, outcasting are only a few of the sanctions that subordinates can bring to bear on each other . . . Solidarity among subordinates, if it is achieved at all, is thus achieved, paradoxically, only by means of a degree of conflict. Certain forms of social strife, far from constituting evidence of disunity and weakness, may well be the signs of an active, aggressive social surveillance that preserves unity. (131)

This is a surprisingly harsh view of intra-subordinate relationships, and does not take into account the cheerful sub-cultural “folkish” patterns that Scott himself describes as being part of the hidden transcript. He calls this form of peer control “domination within domination,” (26) saying that “any subordinate who seeks privilege by ingratiating himself (*sic*) to his superior will have to answer for that conduct once he returns to the world of his peers” (191). Whilst there is no denying that this kind of competitiveness exists in women’s relationships, it is, of course, also the case that positive collaboration, warmth and generosity are shared. However, Orbach and Eichenbaum, for their part, are also keen to draw feminists’ attention to the negatives of “collaborative” peer group reflexes so that we can better deal with these without idealisation of women’s relationships with each other.

Orbach and Eichenbaum say that there is not yet an accepted context in which women can deal with the feelings of envy and competitiveness between themselves that increasingly exist as women enter the public domain and seek leadership challenges. Women’s traditional family roles cause them to focus on maintaining harmony or, at the very least, domestic order. As Miller explains this, women do have considerable interest and skills in sorting out emotional conflicts, but they are also trained to put the interests of others before their own. This often means creating “peace” by putting their own needs and feelings aside and then feeling resentful that

these needs are not met by others. Moreover, human beings in general have difficulty in understanding why everybody does not think and act as they do.

There is not much to indicate that women extend their insight to themselves, any more than do men. Structural positions of subordination tend to require considerable skills of observation in the sense, that is, of observing those positioned to control. This certainly does not mean that subordinated subjects observe themselves with the same degree of efficiency; in fact, quite the reverse. Their energies go into observing others because it is in their interests to do so, and also because they have been taught that they are neither interesting nor important. In comparison, women's own relationships with each other, though important to them, do not receive nearly the same attention or evolve the same skills. These friendships must simply "work" in supplying support, comradeship, affection and understanding. When they do not "work" they are neglected or rejected accordingly rather than the participants go through the trauma of dealing with them as rigorously as they would, for example, a marriage or a parenting role. Therefore, one could argue, women's relationships are often more intersubjective than men's mainly because this is the only premise on which they may continue. On the other hand, since tradition endorses these gender-inscribed practices, such an interpersonal schema does seem worth preserving, although the dynamics of women's friendships in the context of increased power and authority will certainly have to incorporate better systems for resolving conflicts.

Nancy Friday says that “we learn our deepest ways of intimacy with mother” (29). This connection between mother-love and intimacy, of course, has its drawbacks. Women, as well as men, grow up to learn that if intimacy is associated with mothers and young children, then it is something we need either to outgrow or to suppress as a personal indulgence, rather than see it as a primary and positive need and skill. Moreover, we accept the need to learn the skills of adult objective learning, rather than learning through intuited subjective processes as young children do. Merged attachments in women’s relationships, then, are commonly perceived (including by women themselves) as somehow infantile in comparison to those of men, as well as correct for their gender³³. Their collaborative and connected flavour has an uncertain place in the public sphere. Some women in public roles pull away from former women friends, feeling that they no longer meet their more sophisticated needs. In addition, women’s private groupings, in the sense of their being framed by and for subordination, have a tendency to reject, and feel alienated by, members who “ascend” into public authority:

There is an ethos within women’s relationships—prevalent in both those informed by feminism and those with no formal regard for it—an ethos about staying in the same place together, or moving forward together at the same time. In other words, there is a sense in which difference cannot be allowed. It is experienced as dangerous and threatening. It

³³ This perception, although an aspect of ‘traditional’ women’s subjectivities, in postfeminist climates can operate simultaneously, or alternately, with an attitude of superiority, in the sense that men’s interpersonal relations are frequently constructed as inadequate, and men as emotionally inept.

invokes feelings of abandonment . . . If we act on a want, if we differentiate, if we dare to be psychologically separate, we break ranks. We are disrupting the known: the merged attachment. (Orbach and Eichenbaum 76)

This control of “renegade” members of women’s friendships is not merely a jealous or punitive reflex (though either may be present). It is also a genuine difficulty with incorporating a member who is no longer “an equal,” and whose increased public authority therefore becomes an alien commodity. Women, as well as men, have to deal with the reality that the public world is given a higher social value than the private and, therefore, that the “official woman” has effectively changed sides. This syndrome can exist within professional groups also.

Orbach and Eichenbaum suggest that this is a problem of merged attachment. The rejection of other women who aspire to public “success,” can ultimately be resolved by learning to accept that “separated attachment” does not involve a loss in intimacy; rather, the latter *is* the more adult form of merged attachment because it accommodates the autonomy of individuals. Where merged attachment says “we are the same and therefore we can be close,” separated attachment says “we are different but equal, and we have much in common.” This enhanced thinking seemingly results in a state that Orbach and Eichenbaum call “connected autonomy” (169) that is comparable to Belensky *et. al.*’s “connected knowing.” However, it is plain that this desirable idyllic state involves considerable confidence on both (or all) sides of

women's friendships, and also it does suggest that the women concerned should have a certain equality of access to resources (that is, cultural capital), or astonishing selflessness without subservience, if such is possible. It does seem that connectedness or attachment is something that women generally enjoy and value in their relationships, and that they wish to preserve along with increased public authority. However, because it is the product of subordination, it is problematic as a transitional trait.

This section has examined some basic elements of women's relationships to authority (or lack of authority) within the various hierarchical and/or gender groupings. It has considered woman-to-superior, woman-to-inferior, and women's intra-subordinate relations. It has considered these relationships in terms of the dynamics that create power-knowledge. This discussion has been largely based on psychological/behavioural theory which is materially grounded in practice, but which also carries with it a sense of "being" or knowing rather than "doing." It is true that these discipline-specific discourses also speak of "women" as a universal category, and of domination and subordination as fixed binaries, *qua* classic Marxism. Nevertheless, I retain them as useful insights into the behaviours attached to subordinated subject positions which are also gender-inscribed, and which are dynamics of power relations, in the sense that these are heterogeneous rather than simply adversarial (Barrett 137). As such, this material retains its coherence and

validity in poststructuralist terms, provided it is scaffolded to signify western, and probably bourgeois, tendencies to which factors of cultural variation must be conceded. Thus, I deal with these views as broad tendencies of gendered power relations. The widely influential work of Foucault on the workings of power does not adequately account for women's subordination. Yet he does suggest that "the problem [is] to understand *how* power operate[s] in specific methods and strategies, and *how* major shifts such as the increased disciplining of individuals in modern western society [has] taken place" (Barrett 136) (original italics). The following section will locate these theories in discursive practices—specifically, in the need for control over disclosure that is attached to social inferiority.

Withholding: Secrets, Lies and Pretences

Karl E. Schribe, in *Mirrors, Masks, Lies and Secrets*, highlights the power-struggles that invariably occur around concealment:

To penetrate the secrets of another person is to gain a predictive advantage over that person, while the holding of secrets from others makes the holder of secrets less knowable, less controllable, less predictable. This is easy to see both at the level of small-scale interactions and in intergroup relations. (97)

Schribe concludes that, in some cases, the holding of secrets poses a threat which is more symbolic than real. From this we may conclude that often the dynamics around secrecy are dynamics of power relations, and that the actual information being

hidden or, conversely, discovered is frequently of secondary importance to the existence and process of secrecy. This may be explained in Foucaultian terms of the power-knowledge game.³⁴ James C. Scott describes subordinate concealment in its various forms as part of the hidden transcript that, in turn, is a feature of the infrapolitics of power dynamics:

That [the hidden transcript] should be invisible . . . is in large part by design—a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power. (183)

This awareness and resulting caution is both self-protective and politically strategic. As Scott repeatedly emphasises in his treatise on domination and resistance, infrapolitics (or, to use another term, micropolitics) within the social formations of power are *simultaneously* symbolic and material because symbolism and materiality are mutually sustaining effects (194). Thus, secrecy is both a symbolic and material form of low-profile resistance.

Speaking about others is an act of personal and social empowerment. The speaker assumes the authority to construct a kind of reality in the form of information or knowledge. The textual subject in this relationship effectively becomes objectified.

³⁴ Foucault defines power as productive and constituted through discourses. Thus, the deployment of power is concerned with the production of truths that are always saturated with specific values and political concerns (1988). Moreover, “everything is never said” (*Archaeology*, 118) and there are always “gaps, voids, absences, limits, divisions” (119). By the same token, the exercise of power involves “the nearly infinite task of telling – telling oneself and another, as often as possible” (*Sexuality*, 20). This production and management of information constitutes the power-knowledge game.

This author-ity applies, in varying degrees, to both formal and informal, official and unofficial, forms of biographical speech. Women, from their gendered subject positions (that is, when invoking the codes of their gender), are both drawn to and away from biographical speech acts. They are culturally associated with gossip in the private sphere, as unofficial access to information about the world and as a means of establishing intimate relationships. They are often less comfortable about “going on the record” with this kind of analytic information about another person or, indeed, about themselves. This is not simply because the commentary is nasty or malicious (as is often assumed), but also because “the record” demands a lack of control of the usage of their comments. What, then, are the difficulties women experience in telling their stories publicly?

Or, to put this the other way around, is the factor of concealment as important a feminist consideration in auto/biographical speech as the revelation of truths?

Much has been written about women and enforced silence, and much feminist effort goes into redressing this silence, certainly when it manifests as silence through omission, through lack of opportunity to speak. But what of reluctance to speak when the opportunity to do so apparently exists? Adrienne Rich says:

“Women have always lied to each other.”

“Women have always whispered the truth to each other.”

Both of these axioms are true.

“Women have always been divided against each other.”

“Women have always been in secret collusion.”

Both of these axioms are true.

In the struggle for survival we tell lies. To bosses, to prison guards, the police, men who have power over us, who legally own us and our children, lovers who need us as proof of their manhood.

There is a danger run by all powerless people: that we forget we are lying or that lying becomes a weapon we carry over into relationships with people who do not have power over us. (189)

Rich concludes that one way or another, women as subordinates lie constantly:

Women’s honor, something altogether else: virginity, chastity, fidelity to a husband. Honesty in women has not been considered important. We have been depicted as generally whimsical, deceitful, subtle, vacillating. And we have been rewarded for lying. (198)

But Rich sees this “lying” as ultimately damaging to the “liar” herself:

To lie habitually, as a way of life, is to lose contact with the unconscious.
(187)

Rich is speaking about “lying” as meaning that women often conceal what they know to be true, but also that they pretend, at times without necessarily being aware of pretending. They lie as “powerless people” lie, as a form of self-protection, as well as a form of people-pleasing which is part of their “struggle for survival” (a means of placating the dominant group). Again, Jean Baker Miller identifies this as classic subordinate behaviour (that is, a submissive aspect of subordinate behaviour):

Direct, honest reaction to destructive treatment is avoided. Open, self-initiated action in its own self-interest must be avoided. Such actions can, and still do, literally result in death for some subordinate groups. In our own society, a woman's direct action can result in a combination of economic hardship, social ostracism, and psychological isolation—and even the diagnosis of a personality disorder. . . . It is not surprising then that a subordinate group resorts to disguised and indirect ways of acting and reacting. (10)

This is because the most effective results of domination occur when subordinate subjectivity is significantly internalised. As Baker Miller confirms, “all forms of oppression encourage people to enlist in their own enslavement” (98).

Women's “lyings” or “pretences” are not simply based on fear of retributions following disclosure, although this is real enough. They are also strategic, in both a “constructive” and “destructive” sense of colluding with, and resisting, established constructs of feminine behaviours. They represent a social struggle for survival, that also means a struggle for socialisation through acceptance, comfort, a positive self-image as a “good woman,” enacting an internalised sense of surveillance which Foucault attributes to power relations in a given society and which Freud had earlier attributed to the superego, albeit one that is supposedly underdeveloped in women (Gilligan 7).

Like Adrienne Rich, psychologist Harriet Goldhor Lerner describes deception as being not simply behaviour in which women, like men, sometimes engage, but a kind of reflex which is at the centre of feminine subjectivity:

We say, she fibbed, fabricated, exaggerated, minimized,
withheld

We say, she told a white lie, a partial truth, a falsehood, a tall tale.

We say, she keeps secrets (and also, she can't keep a
secret).

We say, she covered up, covered over, concealed, misled,
misinformed, twisted, distorted, falsified,
misrepresented the facts.

We say, she is false, elusive, evasive, wily, indirect, tricky, treacherous,
manipulative, untrustworthy, unfaithful, sneaky, scheming, calculating,
conniving, corrupt.

We say, she is deceitful, deceptive, duplicitous, dishonest.

We say, she is a hypocrite, a cheat, a charlatan, a callous
liar, a fraud.

We say, she presented a clever ruse, a bogus deal, an
artifice, a pretence, a fiction, a sham, a hoax.

We say, she is phoney, artificial, affected.

We say, she is pretending, charading, posturing, faking,
holding back, being an impostor, putting up a good
front, hiding behind a facade.

We say, she did not own up, come clean, or level
with me.

We say, she gaslighted me, messed with my mind,
mystified my reality, betrayed and double-crossed

me.

We say, she is two-faced; she speaks out of both sides of her mouth.

We say, she speaks falsely.

We say, she cannot face reality; she cannot face the truth; she is engaged in self-deception.

We say, how brave she was to reveal nothing, how clever to throw them offtrack.

We say, she acted with discretion.

We say, she lied out of necessity; she lied for the greater good.

We say, she lied with honor. (9-10)

Thus, women's deception is perceived as something crooked and dishonest. Scott explains this as a strategic effect of domination: namely, that when the subordinate group is deferent they are suspected of shamming, and when they engage in low-profile resistance they are seen as crafty:

To the degree that the dominant group suspect that the public transcript may be "only" a performance, they will discount its authenticity. It is but a short step from such scepticism to the view, common among many dominant groups, that those beneath them are deceitful, shamming, and lying by nature. (3)

The practices of subordinated subjectivities, then, must somehow appear sincere, natural and even enthusiastic which, indeed, they may at times be, given the unconscious element of collusion at all levels of power relations. In this light, the

“hidden transcript” can conversely be seen as something noble because it is connected with the greater good of the community by maintaining the established social hierarchy. At the level of subjectivity, then, this “feminine deception,” manifests either as selfless diplomacy or, conversely, manipulation—the total effect of which is both admired as an important aspect of protecting others and ensuring their happiness and feared as a sign of corruption and deviousness.

Goldhor Lerner’s persuasive book, *The Dance of Deception*, is subtitled *Pretending and Truth-telling in Women’s Lives*, and she is clearly preoccupied with the concepts of truth and authenticity and their opposites, falsity and, presumably, inauthenticity. She does not define her concept of truth but its implied meaning derives largely from its binary opposite “deception.” Any form of deliberate deception or pretence, whether in words, deeds or, indeed, silence, constitutes, for Goldhor Lerner, a lie:

There are lies, secrets, and silences that begin with the self. We are not clear about what we think, feel, and believe. Our priorities and life goals are not really our own; our behavior is not congruent with our stated values and beliefs. On important matters, we give in, go along, buckle under. We may not feel genuine or real. We are not “centred,” “grounded,” or in touch with ourselves. (13)

And, also like Rich, Goldhor Lerner recognises that women also have “developed an extraordinary capacity to tell the truth, or at least to whisper it” (15). The control of certain kinds of information (that is, control in terms of measured disclosure and

withholding) seems to be vital to survival in the context of a subordinate subjectivity. However, the culture usually conveniently “forgets” that this is learned behaviour (learned, that is, by women and taught by patriarchy), and frequently constructs it simply as an aspect of manipulative female nature.

Rich, as a radical feminist, Goldhor Lerner, as a psychologist, and others like Sissela Bok, a moral philosopher, generally assert a moral, as well as a psychological, need to speak the truth, speak out and rupture the bonds of silence that enslave the liar or keeper of secrets. In other words, Rich’s and Bok’s views of lying and secrecy are generally that the effects are morally negative. Yet they also recognise the “positive” functions of concealment:

Secrets forge boundaries, create bonds, isolate, connect, and estrange. Secrets produce coalitions, triangles, insiders and outsiders. Keeping a secret can make us feel powerful, superior, special and loyal—or anxious, burdened, guilty, and ashamed. . . . Privacy and secrecy have overlapping functions in our lives. We rely on both to control the flow of separateness and connectness in relationships, and to provide us with a layer of protection against intrusion, reaction, and encroachment. (Goldhor Lerner 38-9)

Goldhor Lerner calls this kind of lying “pretending,” in order to suspend moral judgement about it and emphasise the hegemonic aspects:

Our failure to live authentically and to speak truly may have little to do with evil or exploitative intentions. Quite the contrary, pretending more frequently reflects a wish, however misguided, to protect others and to ensure the viability of the self as well as our relationships. Pretending reflects deep prohibitions, real and imagined, against a more direct and forthright assertion of self-definitions of self that women often absorb without question. “Pretending” is so closely associated with “femininity” that it is, quite simply, what the culture teaches women to do. (14)

Tillie Olsen’s *Silences* also exposes some of the more complex reasons behind women’s inhibitions of speech:

Of course it is not fear alone.

Fear—in itself—is assailable. As every revolt against oppressive power throughout the human past testifies.

There is also—love. The need to love and be loved.

It has never yet been a world right for love, for those we love, for ourselves, for flowered human life.

The oppression of women is like no other form of oppression (class, color—though these have parallels). It is an oppression entangled through with human love, human need, genuine (core) human satisfactions, identifications, fulfilments.

How to separate out the chains from the bonds, the harms from the value, the truth from the lies. (258)

This concept of “love”—particularly when it is expressed in terms of concern for others—is undoubtedly a feature of women’s familial roles. But clearly there is

more at stake here than the welfare of others; namely, as Goldhor Lerner suggests, at the very least the psychological wellbeing (or self-preservation) of the concealer. In postmodernist terms, the notion of “opacity,” conveys the management of constructed power-knowledge from a subordinate perspective, where “secrecy” perhaps suggests the presence of an independent and fixed reality.³⁵ In any event, we are inevitably faced with concealment as a necessary tool of a subordinated subject position.

It should be noted that there is a difference between the conscious concealment of somebody else’s secret (presumably motivated by loyalty), and concealment for self-protection, whether conscious or unconscious. However, both (arguably all) kinds of secrets are clearly to do with the exercise of control. Harriet Webster says:

Through the conscious, deliberate concealment or disclosure of information, we take some control over our lives and exercise a degree of power over those with whom we interact . . . Secrecy provides a layer of protection. (11)

Secrecy is a method rather than an end product:

Sometimes, I began to realize, a secret is not so much fact as circumstance. Sometimes it develops around the way information is handled. (7)

³⁵ I acknowledge David Buchbinder’s observation to this effect. However, I retain the word “secrecy” to emphasise the tactical concealment of information. In the context of subordination, secrecy is employed to avoid surveillance by dominants, the desired effect being one of opacity.

Secrecy is an important aspect of collusive behaviour that is commonly ignored or forgotten in books that encourage women to “speak up” and tell all. It is a vital part of their gendered subjectivity and, hence, even survival, that they know how to access and conceal selected information. Baker Miller speaks of the “secret” or underground pursuits that subordinates develop, such as folk tales, “black jokes” and women’s stories, told to construct a kind of hidden defiance of the dominants. This not only provides comfort, but an emotional solidarity through the exclusion of members of more privileged groups:

One important result of this indirect mode of operation is that members of the dominant group are denied an essential part of life—the opportunity to acquire self-understanding through knowing their impact on others. They are thus deprived of ‘consensual validation,’ feedback, and a chance to correct their actions and expressions. *Put simply, subordinates won’t tell.* For the same reasons, the dominant group is deprived also of valid knowledge about the subordinates. (It is particularly ironic that the societal ‘experts’ in knowledge about subordinates are usually members of the dominant group.) Subordinates, then, know much more about the dominants than vice versa. They have to. (11, my italics)

That subordinates “won’t tell,” then, is a crucial tactic in dealing with the dominant group. It is clearly a site of resistance, though it may also condemn subordinates to a life “in the shadows” of public authority.

This kind of “defiant” concealment is a resistance to yielding oneself as an experimental object, over which information another person has control and from which, undoubtedly, another person will profit. These are the effects of surveillance, of a powerful gaze that enacts the right to observe, to witness, scrutinise and objectify. Indeed, Foucault specifically refers to the biographical process as a means of objectifying its “subjects” through surveillance and examination:

The child, the patient, the madman, the prisoner, were to become, with increasing ease from the eighteenth century and according to a curve which is that of the mechanisms of discipline, the object of individual descriptions and biographical accounts. This turning of real lives into writing is no longer a procedure of heroization; it functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection. The carefully collated life of mental patients or delinquents belongs, as did the chronicle of kings or the adventures of the great popular bandits, to a certain political function of writing; but in a quite different technique of power. (*Discipline and Punish*, 192)

Biographical speech enacts this kind of surveillance in speaking about others. The ultimate effect of surveillance is that its objects (and those who identify with its objects) ultimately takes on self-surveillance, having internalised panoptic control, so that things are arranged “that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary” (201). Thus “control” is at its most effective in the form of self-control:

A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. So it is not necessary to use force to constrain the convict to good behaviour, the madman to calm, the worker to work, the schoolboy to application, the patient to the observation of the regulation. (202)

In effect, the subjected individual “becomes the principle of his own subjection” (203). Foucault, as feminists have frequently pointed out, ignores the subjection (or objectification) of gender, yet we know it generally works in much the same way as objectification on other grounds.

The power-knowledge game is designed to produce “docile bodies,” but docility does not preclude (indeed, it demands) a degree of resistance to, as well as collusion with, strategies of dominant power. Subordinates withhold for their own protection; but they also withhold for the sheer wish not to tell, and thus to retain a little power over the dominant. And they withhold for unconscious reasons that may be founded in either “real” or “fictitious” material effects. The actual reasons for the secrecy may even be long past, but the hegemonic reflexes remain apparent in the subordinates’ behaviour, because the fact of subordination continues, where its *visible* enforcement is no longer necessary.

Something of the sort goes on in my extended family. My mother was Maltese and came from a large family of women who dominated in numerical terms but clearly not in overall power and status, either within the family or within their community in

Malta between the wars. My grandmother died in childbirth at the age of 36, leaving six children to their embittered authoritarian father. The girls (there was just one surviving brother who was sent away to school) formed a tightly knit group of co-comforters and co-conspirators. Despite their father's surveillance, they developed a complex and very adept underground system of interaction and limited social mobility. For example, they became very adept at making clothes and hats secretly (from material gained through unpicking garments given to them by others), and hiding these outfits which they took turns at wearing, covering for each other whilst meeting forbidden friends and boyfriends, and so on. On the surface, their father and his agents had absolute control, whereas the children had no money and very little freedom or spare time. However, Father's "punishment" for having this control was total alienation from the subordinated group. He would be the last to know what was really going on in his daughters' lives because of his exclusion from the underground network they had constructed. The girls' secrecy both resulted from, and produced, fear and mistrust. But it also produced some very positive sub-cultural side effects for the group's members: camaraderie, consolation, fun, humour (including ridicule of the oppressor) and so on. The children's father had overall economic and structural control of the family unit, and he clearly set the terms for the family's interaction. Yet the children created, and operated from, sites of resistance that were parts of the whole power dynamic.

Moreover, much of this subversive behaviour was still apparent some forty or fifty years later, by which time my mother and aunts were themselves grandmothers. They had many secrets and secret alliances, such as private arrangements with their children and each other, or secret funds stashed away. Though overt oppression by husbands did not exist to the same degree as had been the case with their father, the need for secrecy remained. One might think that this was merely habit-trained behaviour that continued though it was no longer required. I would argue that the women remained economically, physically and emotionally dependent on men and, therefore, they remained oppressed. Men's authority remained predominant and continued to set all the terms and values for daily and long-term living. The women had learned to view this authority as synonymous with the family's survival, but also with family honour. It was their duty as women to uphold the patriarchal system, but also to survive within it. To synchronise the two (that is, family/patriarchal survival and the fulfilling of their needs as women) involved a good deal of negotiation and deviousness. In many instances, men as simply being a part of the whole mechanism tacitly upheld this "female manipulation." Thus, men also played the game. For example, they frequently pretended not to notice secret arrangements, not to know that the banished daughter was secretly visiting the house in their absence (tacitly maintaining both family unity and patriarchal authority), or that goods or money changed hands mysteriously. Father's authority set the official terms, and Mother's

secrecy represented an acceptable site of resistance and a tacit acquiescence to the axiom of patriarchal status (a man's "honour").

For the women, their secrecy forged gender bonds and familial bonds between them, established trust, provided an important information network and generally, as has been said earlier about gossip, both upheld and undermined the power play. It constructed, and operated from, sites of resistance, and yet these were temporary and contingent sites, not to be confused with real revolutionary practices which would have offended and frightened the women as much as threatened the men. Indeed, men often relied on this female grapevine when they needed to know what was going on. Thus, there is a difference between *resistance* and *subversion*. The former avoids certain consequences of dominant rulership. The latter actively seeks to overturn, or at least undermine, it. Yet James C. Scott asserts that these are both subversive acts, whether the intention is merely to minimise, defer or deflect control by "the dominant group" or, indeed, to inflict real damage. Scott identifies four kinds of political discourse among subordinate groups.³⁶ Secrecy takes place on the middle two levels: within the hidden transcript of subordinates, and also within what Scott terms "a politics of disguise and anonymity" which takes place, in a sense, under the noses of the dominant group but on the basis of a double meaning, as a

³⁶ These can be synthesised as follows: (i) submissive behaviours that flatter the dominant elites. (ii) The hidden transcript itself. (iii) "A politics of disguise and anonymity" that takes place covertly but in front of the dominant elites. (iv) Overt dissent or rebellion. (19)

joke or euphemism, or (as in the case of gossip) with an anonymous author or agent (18-9).

This hidden or disguised subordinate behaviour is also visible amongst the Aboriginal women in Sally Morgan's *My Place*. The need for secrecy was apparently past, as children were no longer being removed from their Aboriginal mothers (though the fear remained active). However, the oppression of Aboriginal people clearly remains, and certainly carries within itself the history of more overt repression, so the need for self-preservation also remains. In telling Aboriginal stories, or at least in facilitating them to come to the fore, Morgan has had to operate with extreme care not to offend or undermine the "positive secrecy" that Indigenous people may either consider necessary, desirable, and even sacred. It is difficult to separate old fears from new ones, and old repressions from new liberationist practices and, indeed, "progress" from continuity.

Both Goldhor Lerner and Bok are careful to differentiate between concealment in terms of privacy and in terms of secrecy. Goldhor Lerner says that privacy is a "human right" which "protects me from intrusion and ensures my separateness as a human being among others" (35). Bok in turn breaks down secrecy into intentional concealment and what she calls "the sacred" (that which is precious). She generally defines secrecy as intentional concealment for whatever purpose, and defines privacy

as “the condition of being protected from unwanted access by others—either physical access, personal information or attention” (*Secrets* 10-11). Although Bok acknowledges that these two definitions of secrecy clearly overlap, she considers that whilst secrecy may guard privacy, the former has a wider scope, so that what is private may be secret whereas secrecy extends to far more than information which is simply personal.

Bok’s analysis of secrecy centres on “the ethics of concealment and revelation,” the subtitle of her book, *Secrets*. She thus goes into great detail on the various kinds of secrecy that exist, evaluating them on the basis of moral choice. However, because she does not apparently consider gender to be a factor in mitigating behaviours and codes involving secrecy, Bok limits her view of secrecy to a conscious act, and even an act with a calculated outcome. Secrecy, however, is only one aspect of concealment, and, one might also say, deliberate concealment is only one aspect of secrecy, so deeply rooted is internalised gendered identity. As Goldhor Lerner and Rich have pointed out, concealment or pretence by women as women tends to be a virtually automatic reflex to many situations. Again, it is a habitual way of “being” as much as a way of “doing.”

In their discussion of the autobiographical writings of seventeenth-century English women, Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby and Helen Wilcox say that

autobiography is always inevitably bound up with issues of secrecy:

What is told and now told, through conscious and unconscious decisions about inclusions and exclusions, is the primary choice in the process of self-writing. The interplay of revelation and secrecy is the essential element . . . fundamental to both the control of meaning and the possibility of self-construction. (Graham, Hinds, Hobby and Wilcox 51).

This is, of course, pointedly the case in seventeenth century women's lifewritings, but to some degree it remains a feature of speaking from a subordinated subject position for twenty-first century constructions of womanhood. Graham *et. al's* point about secrecy being fundamental to self-construction is an important one, since this refers to the writing control exercised in constructing preferred meanings of texts. They emphasise that "the construction of the self seems to rely on a kind of secrecy or concealment" which is effective illusory and elusive:

As the textual selves multiply, it becomes more and more difficult to maintain a sense of a textual and acceptable self . . . " (58).

The control of information may yield only a partial control of meanings, yet, in this sense, secrecy is vital to the selective nature of communication.

Interestingly, discussion about lying and pretence versus truth telling and authenticity, and specifically about power play, frequently encompasses some reference to storytelling. Goldhor Lerner includes a chapter entitled "We Are The

Stories We Tell” (in fact, the premise of this thesis on biographical speech and subjectivity):

[We do not] have one “true self” that might unfold in some ideal “free” environment, unfettered by roles, rules, traditions, and myths of family, culture, and context. The self does not “unfold,” but instead is continually reinvented and re-storied through our interactions with others. (97)

These comments are somewhat at odds with the concept of “truth-telling,” but, again, both Goldhor Lerner and Bok (though clearly not taking a constructivist stance) are aware of the difficulty in defining truth in any absolute sense. It does seem, however, that many of us (including structuralists) are unhappy with both deliberate falsehoods and unnecessary secrecies. Bok points out that most social systems rely on a concept of truth/accuracy, rather than on an assumption that most people will lie most of the time, simply as a means of social order. Moreover, Rich raises the matter of psychological health, claiming that to lie habitually is to lose touch with the unconscious mind. To put this another way, we begin not to know what we are hiding from ourselves and we become confused about who we are. Thus, an important feminist aim of exposing women’s pretence is to give them the means to construct a confident self-image:

Feminism [has] widened the range of stories women [can] construct about our lives. I credit feminism, more than any other force in my life, with allowing me to move toward the truth, toward greater congruence between my private life and public image. (Goldhor Lerner 73)

One of the values of a counter-discourse is that it creates a place from which subordinate/subjects may speak and a reading position that is both resistant and subversive. Again, we see a continuing emphasis on the importance of “authentic” storytelling for purposes of self-liberation and emancipation; indeed, for the construction of a new and vigorous feminine authority. Non-fictional storytelling, as in forms of biographical narrative, has particular needs to lay claim to verisimilitude in providing us with stories we feel in some way come more directly from life-models than fiction, however accurate that notion may be. Goldhor Lerner mentions both the plurality of women’s experience (so that we need many stories) and the concept of *choosing*, or constructing, oneself, and also suggests the problems of appropriating someone else’s experience, all of which are at least translatable into concepts of subjectivity and constructedness. Her approach is located within the psychology of women as an oppressed group, and within cultural expectations of femininity. Under patriarchy, she says, privacy (“a legitimised form of silence”) is both necessary and dangerous. It is necessary as a form of protection from sanctions, and it is dangerous because it “isolates us, shames us, and keeps us trapped in narrow, false myths about female experience” (45).

Finally, and most significantly perhaps, Goldhor Lerner discusses the work of Peggy McIntosh who has examined the sensation of fraudulence in women’s lives:

When we feel fraudulent, or even tentative, apologetic, silenced, and self-doubting, it may reflect our honest refusal to internalize the idea that having power, prestige, or public exposure proves merit and authority. Feeling like a fraud in such circumstances may express our awareness that the dominant culture's form of leadership and authority—and the concomitant images—do require fraudulent behaviour. (75)

Thus, Goldhor Lerner's aim is to encourage a sense of entitlement in women, to produce, and be produced by, their speaking openly and "truthfully" about their experiences.

In *Toward A New Psychology of Women*, Miller includes a chapter on dominance and subordination, in which she refers to the need of a dominant group to suppress and repress open conflict, and the tendency of subordinates to go along with this need by avoiding conflict-provoking actions:

Subordinates who accept the dominants' conception of them as passive and malleable do not openly engage in conflict. Conflict occurs between dominants and subordinates, but it is forced underground. Such covert conflict is distorted and saturated with destructive force. . . . Women as a group . . . have been able to conduct almost nothing but indirect conflict until they could begin to act from a base of strength in the real world. (133).

Lies, deceptions, secrecy and manipulations give subordinates at least some opportunity to construct a site of resistance. Simultaneously, of course, they force

women's realities underground where they can give little constructive service in the redress of patriarchy:

Everyone has a special interest in personal information about others. If we knew about people only what they wished to reveal, we would be subjected to ceaseless manipulation; and we would be deprived of the pleasure and suspense that comes from trying to understand them. Gossip helps to absorb and to evaluate information about other lives, as do letters, novels, biography, and chronicles of all kinds. In order to live in both the inner and shared worlds, the exchange of views about each—in spite of all the difficulties of perception and communication—is indispensable. (90-1)

Yet Miller also views revelation and secrecy as two aspects of the same power-knowledge structure:

Secrecy is one of the factors that make gossip take the place of more formal communication about persons. Gossip increases whenever information is both scarce and desirable—whenever people want to find out more about others than they are able to. (91)

The first sentence helps to pinpoint the kind of control women find desirable, maybe vital, in telling their stories. Secrecy constructs a restricted audience where formal communication often does not.

If women utilise a degree of secrecy in biographical speech, it is possible that negative emotions such as fear or shame are significant reasons. Undoubtedly, this is

somewhat the case, based on the situation outlined by Goldhor Lerner, that women's lies, secrets and silence begin with the self. They begin, of course, with the process of subordination that creates a sensation of unworthiness and a pervasive uncertainty about who we are and what we think in the first place. This feeling of unworthiness, which goes on to create a sensation of fraudulence in women with public authority, is likely to produce a greater need for privacy and, indeed, secrecy, than a man may generally require in a comparable situation. The male is the subject in patriarchy—he is the originator, the creator or, at the very least, the legitimate heir to sovereign authority. He is far less likely to overstep the rules by accident, because he himself (or someone who represents, for him, at least a hypothetical self) makes the rules in the first place. The world is created by and for him if, indeed, he is a member of the dominant group. (In the case of non-white, working class or gay, men, for example, the sense of entitlement is obviously problematised.) Thus, men have the challenge of living up to their potential patriarchal inheritance; women are necessarily outside that potential except, of course, provisionally and contingently.

Another important aspect of the need for pretence or hiding is that women themselves are located within the private sphere. I do not say, in this case, the private "domain," because although women's authority is more prevalent within the private sector, the overall control of the private sector falls within the government of the public. In this light, it is plain that women themselves are often somebody else's

secret or at least somebody else's private life. Because they are either agents or objects of the privacy the bourgeois nuclear family demands for itself, it is difficult for women to make a case for having privacy of their own. Everything about them is apparently knowable. What is not is rarely considered worth knowing. They have rarely appeared in the annals of Man's History, in biography or in any official documents. Woman exists in obscurity so that Man can achieve individual and collective notoriety. Her worth as wife, mistress and mother has been tied up with her ability to be "discrete" and undemanding. Her authority over home and children is temporary and contingent upon the man's circumstances and her relationship with him. As her sons grow to manhood they complete the process they have been learning for many years—to disengage from someone who exists to serve their needs, but who cannot act as a role model for their future authority. Her daughters will also disengage from her, particularly during puberty, because mother represents the model of inferiority that they must inherit. This despite a [post]modern illusion that they might inherit the earth in their own right, and that their power belongs to themselves and will lead to a significant authority over their lives and the lives of others.

Moreover, women are constructed as "angels of the hearth" from the perspective of their silence. Angels give service discretely, demanding nothing for themselves. Since women are defined *primarily* by their relationships to others, it follows that

these relationships must command their first loyalty, a cornerstone of which is maintaining silence on their own oppression.

How, then, can women be expected to tell stories with confidence, and with any degree of legitimate hope that the telling will create and develop their authority? For many women, a hidden or disguised form of subversion is the strongest form they are able to apply. This is because “the hidden transcript comes . . . to be the repository of the assertions whose open expression would be dangerous” (Scott 40), since “ideological resistance can grow best when it is shielded from direct surveillance” (xii). Many resistant and subversive stories are told but relatively few are accredited in conditions wherever they are very likely to have the most impact.

For these reasons, feminist biographers and researchers sometimes feel they have a mission to bring the stories of women out into the open where they can liberate and challenge the tales told by dominants. Yet it is plain that such biographical missionaries must be keenly aware of their responsibilities in telling the stories of others, and in becoming advocates for unmitigated revelation of other people’s secrets and lies:

[Feminist biographers] had to resolve issues concerning our subjects’ need for privacy. A woman’s struggle sometimes to fuse, sometimes to sever, the private and public dimensions of her life is one of feminist biography’s most important themes. But, in unravelling the strands of

that struggle, because of our personal involvement in our subjects' lives we also felt more conflicted about revelations that violated their privacy. One of [this book's] essayists tells of a dream in which she appeared as a mugger. Others worry that the very act of appropriating another's life infringes on the subject's privacy, perhaps even violating her identity. (Alpern *et al*, 11)

Russell McDougall takes this analogy further:

Is the biographer a detective or a burglar, a lover or a killer? Is the self-effacing biographer more or less honest than the intrusive biographer? How much importance should be given to the subject's own view of himself or herself? What is the distinction between the truth of invention and the truth of the known facts? How is the significant event to be determined? How is indiscretion to be defined? When is it best not to tell? (2-3)

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have said that "women will starve in silence until new stories are created which confer on them the power of naming themselves" (qtd. in Heilbrun 33). "Naming ourselves" as an academic exercise is difficult enough and can be construed as a whistle-blowing act. Critical feminist biography, moreover, is naming an other on the grounds of a common identification and, hence, a presumed empathy—a double act of betrayal. Biography is not about destroying "myths" (read "lies") and revealing truths. It is about probing and damaging the life-narratives of one another, only to face that there are just more narratives to replace the ones we strip away. When we do this kindly, we undertake to preserve some pleasant shared

narratives and to construct a few others to compensate for the ones we have exploded. When we do it harshly, we explode more than we create. Yet at no time is this a non-intrusive or non-violent enterprise because the activity is “naming,” where some things are intended to be named and some are not³⁷.

When stories are about named individual women, there is clearly a conflicting agenda that the feminist biographer must also address, described here by feminist biographer Jacquelyn Dowd Hall:

I tried to break two kinds of silences: the silence that surrounded the historical roles of Jessie Daniel Ames and the women like her and Jessie Daniel Ames’s own silence about herself, her deliberate masking of the private self behind the public persona. (20)

This is a common experience of biographers. There is a valid argument that the impact of disclosure on the world deepens and enhances knowledge about, and the collective status of, women. Yet we must also account for women’s complex reasons in deliberately enacting silence for purposes of self-protection. In whose interests do we rupture such a silence imposed by an individual woman, violated by a biographer/researcher supposedly in the interests of the greater good? On the one hand, if we seek out, and obtain, only such information as other people want us to

³⁷ In Australia, as in some other western countries, it is possible to bring a “Breach of Confidence” action on the grounds that personal information given “in confidence” has been revealed. The grounds — particularly as they may or may not apply to biography— appear to be complex and possibly merit a study that is outside the boundaries of this thesis.

have about them, our knowledge of the world would be very lacking and, moreover, all kinds of undesirable and socially unacceptable practices would result. On the other hand, the “curiosity killed the cat” warning against undue prying is well established in most cultures in the form of myths, legends and fables of horrors which have befallen the snooper. Sissela Bok says:

Outsiders to secrets recognize the tension between fear and awe on the one hand and fascination on the other. The desire to learn, to know, to quench one’s curiosity determines the attitude toward many secrets, not only on the part of those with most at stake but on the part of all who gossip and wonder. Other powerful motives behind the attraction of secrets are the desire to gain control, to feel superior to those not in possession of the secrets, and the longing for the sheer enjoyment and intimacy that learning secrets can bring. (*Secrets* 34).

The acquisition and maintenance of control is a sensitive feminist issue, fraught with conflicting and paradoxical desires to redress a historical wrong through an emancipatory agenda. There exists an understandable guilt in desire for control, since it raises questions about the use and abuse of power and the further oppression of others. For these reasons in particular, feminist ethics have evolved into a complex and fruitful field of enquiry that deeply impinges on the genres of biographical speech.

Chapter 5

The Ethics of Feminist Biographical Speech

It was as if women in their own books viewed admissions of pain, anger, or confusion—or even just telling the true story about their roles as wives and mothers and friends—as betrayals of one of their central responsibilities as women. They seemed to have taken a blood oath to present the family as the font of all virtue and goodness. But it was no wonder. The rare writer who broke the taboo was met with scorn and shock. (Elsa Walsh)

In a sense there is a conspiracy of trust between biographer and audience. This, in my view, should be replaced by mutual suspicion, as otherwise a mutual tendency to intellectual laziness takes over. (Terrell Carver)

Contemporary debate over feminist ethics is largely preoccupied with what kind of ethics is appropriate to feminist politics (Parkins 377). Wendy Parkins comments that the debate on ethics *is*, to a great extent, a debate on feminist politics. I argue that, despite inspired work in the academy, both are hampered by the dissolution of a global women's movement which has left a political (and therefore ethical) vacuum. Whose cause are we now serving when we invoke the name of feminism? In this chapter, I discuss the development of post-colonial feminist ethics, in terms of a

“progression” from a universalist, rationalist (masculinist) view of moral development, through a duality of gendered moralities, and towards pluralistic politics of voice and representation. I then apply some emergent theory to biographical utterances and, finally, relate some of these issues of “discursive ethics” to the research interviews mentioned previously. Ultimately, my research question interrogates the connection of post-colonial justices and gender.

Ethics are commonly defined as the study of moral principles, and even more commonly perceived as sets of rules or guidelines of conduct based on moral principles. Morality refers to the distinction between right and wrong. Thus, if we “apply” ethics to a foundation of moral judgements, we perceive ourselves as doing so in one of two ways: either as a process (that is, as the ongoing study or analysis of moral principles) or as a result or product of *a priori* moral principles. Feminist ethicists clearly assume the former definition—that is, ethics as a perpetual reconstruction of established, rejected and re-established moral principles. This view of ethics as a process is in keeping with the feminist imperative to question any kind of traditional or rigid structure as being the result of patriarchal systems. In this chapter, I therefore consider how the linguistic power play imbricated in the impetus to speak about others can be couched in terms of ethical concerns that arise from feminist politics.

Freud, Gilligan and beyond: Man's, Woman's and women's moralities

Contemporary feminist ethicists from all disciplines must contend with Freud's theories of the dualistic moral development of boys and girls, men and women. A basic feature of Freud's work on morality is the assumption that moral judgement develops through the formative years and is social in its construction and application. The baby is born a polymorphously perverse creature dedicated to its own survival and self-gratification by whatever means available to it and develops, through contact with its carers, into a maturely moralised (or under-moralised) adult man or woman. The child does not simply "become" moral with maturity but learns its morality through inter-personal dynamics. The ability to create and apply a moral code in adulthood depends on development of the necessary "moral equipment." By adulthood, therefore, the capacity for morality is greatly predetermined by the "strength" of the superego. This capacity for morality and its gendered effects has created the greatest contention for feminist ethicists. The second significantly contentious matter is the question of what is, or is not, a suitable moral code for feminists, if such can viably exist. The two issues are intrinsically interlinked.

Freud's theory of psychosexual development in humans focuses on the boy-child's relationship to his parents, which culminates in the Oedipus complex. The boy's fear of punitive castration by his father gradually creates a rupture in intimacy with his mother and causes him to identify with his father's relatively autonomous phallic

power. Freud considered girls lacking this important emotional rite of passage, and thus they remain linked in identity to the non-phallic mother. As a result, their objectivity—in effect, their ability to transcend mere emotions and apply a more objective sense of justice to their practices—is weakened, through an under-developed superego (“for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men”) (Freud qtd. in Gilligan 7). Most significantly, this difference is not allocated an equal, if alternative, status to the male. For Freud, women “show less sense of justice than men . . . they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life . . . they are more often influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or hostility” (qtd. in Gilligan 7). Thus, whilst Freud is speaking of trained behaviour rather than simply “nature,” he considers that the traits of men and women are inextricably linked to biological difference.

Post-Freudian theorists have similarly based their findings on this assumption that women’s moral maturity is somehow stunted in comparison to men’s. Feminists in the latter half of this century have pointed out that such a view is entirely based on patriarchal benchmarks of masculine development as the norm, and that “difference” in patriarchal systems is inevitably hierarchical. Thus, women are commonly seen as less or Other, rather than as reflecting an equally valid experience and “way of being.” One of the most significant redress responses is Carol Gilligan’s now-classic text, *In A Different Voice* (1984). In this widely-debated work Gilligan develops

Nancy Chodorow's theme that girls' uninterrupted identification with their first love-object—their mother—actually equips them for a greater empathy with others “as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world, and as differently oriented to their inner object-world as well” (qtd. in Gilligan 8). This different view gives rise to a different (woman's) “voice” which Gilligan is careful to link to enculturated gender experience rather than to sex:

The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but theme. Its association with women is an empirical observation, and it is primarily through women's voices that I trace its development. But this association is not absolute, and the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex. In tracing development, I point to the interplay of these voices within each sex and suggest that their convergence marks times of crisis and change. No claims are made about the origins of the differences described or their distribution in a wider population, across cultures, or through time. Clearly, these differences arise in a social context where factors of social status and power combine with reproductive biology to shape the experience of males and females and the relations between the sexes. My interest lies in the interaction of experience and thought, in different voices and the dialogues to which they give rise, in the way we listen to ourselves and to others, in the stories we tell about our lives. (2)

Gilligan's central assumption—the experiential premise that masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment (8)—is given

considerable emphasis in other feminist work on gender as a fundamental axis of difference.

Gilligan takes up the findings of other theorists that boys and girls demonstrate, from an early age, a different concept of justice and fair play. For example, she notes Piaget's observation that boys become, throughout childhood, intrigued by rules and regulations in their games and interactions, whereas girls are more willing to make exceptions or seek inventive strategies for getting around (as opposed to sorting out) conflicts (10). Similarly, Janet Lever observed from her study of playground games that boys' competition was much more overt, and disputes resulted in active debates about rules; conversely, the girls ended their game when disputes arose (Gilligan 10). Thus, many boys' games have an intrinsically competitive element, whereas popular girls' games (such as skipping) tend to involve turn taking or role-play. Piaget concludes that morality development "is far less developed in little girls than boys" (qtd. in Gilligan 10), and Lever finds that girls continually reject opportunities for the learning of independence and organisational skills. However, Gilligan emphasises girls' need for continued connection and, thus, the tendency evolves in women to dislike overt competitiveness and conflict. If women have extra difficulties in conflict-resolution, in her view, it is because of a general tendency to undervalue their ways of being, and hence to ignore their "voice:"

The difficulty women experience in finding or speaking publicly in their own voices emerges repeatedly in the form of qualification and self-doubt, but also in intimations of a divided judgement, a public assessment and private assessment which are fundamentally at odds.

(16)

Women supposedly experience “a splitting of love and work which relegates expressive capacities to women while placing instrumental abilities in the masculine domain:” (17)

Yet looked at from a different perspective, these stereotypes reflect a conception of adulthood that is itself out of balance, favoring the separateness of the individual self over connection to others, and leaning more towards an autonomous life of work than toward the interdependence of love and care. (17)

Gilligan thus establishes the concept of an ethic of care which she equates with the formative process of subjectivity in be[com]ing a woman:

To understand how the tension between responsibilities and rights sustains the dialectic of human development is to see the integrity of two disparate modes of experience that are in the end connected. While an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality—that everyone should be treated the same—an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence—that no one should be hurt. (174)

This concept of dual vision or dual voice has been taken up by some feminists in the notion of a women’s culture. Note the comment, for example, of socio-linguist Deborah Tannen (quoted earlier) that conversations between men and women are

acts of cross-cultural communication (42). Similarly, Nel Noddings' concept of "caring" invokes "a feminine approach to ethics and moral education" (1984). Again, Sara Ruddick posits "maternal thinking" as a politics of peace based on three basic demands made on mothers in supervising the welfare of their children: preservation, growth and social acceptability ("to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by work of preservative love, nurturance, and training" [17]). All these perspectives, and others, take as axiomatic that gender is a basic difference in itself, which produces two distinctive sets of experience, views, subjectivities and, hence, two distinctive "voices."

Feminists have widely hailed Gilligan's celebration of difference as a corollary of masculinist developmental models of "the human being." But criticisms of her distinctive woman's voice have centred around the tendency towards reductionism, biological essentialism, the negation of differences amongst women (intellectual imperialism), romantic oversimplification and generalisation, and insufficient empirical evidence for her claims. For example, Linda K. Kerber agrees with Gilligan that "our culture has long undervalued nurturance and that when we measure ethical development by norms more attainable by boys than by girls our definition of norms is probably biased" (Kerber 106). Yet Kerber points out the dangers in an automatic assumption that women's affinity with "care" is either biologically natural or necessarily good:

If women can be counted on to care for others, how are we to deal with self-interest, selfishness and meanness of spirit which women surely display as much as do men? If we let the cycle of historical revisionism come full circle, are we not back once again in the world of the angel in the house? And if we permit that, how are we to deal with the occasions when women's supposed ethic of relationship and care does not seem to have been an adequate moral imperative for all men or all women? (106)

Perhaps most importantly, Kerber cautions that much of women's distinctive psychology is rooted in their subordination, which feminists are only too anxious to shed:

Gilligan describes how women make lemonade out of the lemons they have inherited. She does not tell how to transform the lemons into chocolate. (107)

Like Kerber, Linda J. Nicholson also mentions the weaknesses of Gilligan's historicist approach, which transforms "women's experience" into "women's psychology" with hardly a pause for considered implications:

The use of such expressions [as a "woman's voice" and "women's development"] without supplementation by an historical account, which would make clear of which women under what circumstances her descriptions might be generally true, leads to a certain implicit false generalization. What tends to get ignored are such factors as class, race, and again sheer changes in history as variables in her analysis. (Nicholson qtd. in Larrabee, 98)

Nicholson, like Kerber, readily concedes that two voices are better than the original one, and that “social theory requires a certain amount of abstraction” (and, thus, a certain obscurity of difference in the interests of conceptualisation). However, she also makes mention of the political/cultural climate in [western countries] today, in which the cutting of “the human voice” simply into two is much too limited.

At this point I would like to consider two contemporary American texts, both of which address the dilemma of feminist ethics in the light of poststructuralist displacement of binaries. The first is Susan J. Hekman’s *Moral Voices, Moral Selves: Carol Gilligan and Feminist Moral Theory* (1995); and the second is Kathleen B. Jones’ *Compassionate Authority: Democracy and the Representation of Women* (1993). The former directly addresses Gilligan’s work with a view to reconceptualising the dual-voice theory and co-opting the vocal metaphor into a pluralist structure.

Hekman is of the view that Gilligan’s work is certainly valuable as an insight into the shortcomings of male-dominated structures, and specifically as an attack on the patriarchal absolutism of western thought. But she is much concerned that any feminist initiative must seek to displace traditional dualisms, rather than reinstate them in another form. If two voices, why not more? What attracts Hekman to Gilligan is that “her work contributes significantly to [the] deconstruction [of the

moral subject]. Gilligan articulates a relational subject that is the product of discursive experiences” (2). Thus, Hekman embarks on a rereading of Gilligan, or what she sees as a reconstruction of moral theory. She seeks to retain Gilligan’s concept as something of a framing device, using a broadly interpretative strategy in what is traditionally an empirical discipline (that of developmental psychology):

Gilligan is advancing two key theses: first, that we need to alter our interpretative framework in order to hear [women’s] stories as *moral* stories, and, second, that women (and men) make sense of their lives by telling stories about themselves. The link between narrative and selfhood has been explored by a number of contemporary theorists. Narrative theorists argue that subjects make sense of their lives and constitute themselves as subjects by the very activity of constructing stories about themselves. At this point in her work Gilligan does not elaborate on the role of narrative in her theory. It is clear, however, that viewing subjectivity as a function of narrative is incompatible with the empiricist accounts she is challenging. Two themes emerge from her account: that women’s moral stories were not heard by her male colleagues as *moral* and that it is her intention to replace their interpretative framework with one that does not ignore or silence the moral voice of women. (7)

Thus, it is the revolution of *systems* that interests Hekman, rather than any specification of “women” and their intrinsic characteristics. She posits a Foucaultian (discursive) approach to the question of ethics, considering that since power comes from everywhere, and sites of resistance are an intrinsic function of the deployment of power, then, similarly, ethics are inseparable from the politics of power-saturated

dynamics. She also believes that feminism *per se* automatically presents a change in views of the subject as non-autonomous, non-individualist, saying that “not all feminists agree with the non-autonomous subject but all have a problem with modernity” (67). Thus, Hekman appears to see the postmodernist ethos as somehow “naturally” compatible with feminism but she qualifies this view by asserting the existence of two kinds of postmodernism: apolitical and political, of which she clearly favours the latter, and identifies Foucault as belonging to this second group.

Hekman posits “discursive ethics” as being a somewhat automatic effect of contemporary postmodern discourses. She claims that discursive ethics do not constitute a separate structure or system that she seeks to impose or install. They simply “are,” and need to be brought to feminist awareness as a useful mode of conscious practice. She upholds Foucault’s view that description and prescription are blurred and intertwined, so that some kind of political change is always present in the action of description, or analysis, or criticism. Morality is not aside from politics; it is an intrinsic aspect that arises from a specific life-philosophy. The overt political effect, then, of women’s stories, is the act of subsuming formerly subjugated knowledges. These knowledges are plainly subjective but then, Hekman stresses, there is no overarching feminist meta-narrative; there are only diverse political and moral stories which must be heard as such. All knowledges are situated, some are

reified and some are subsumed. It is the extent to which this order can be changed around which constitutes a feminist ethics.

Hekman questions whether an epistemology that eschews absolute foundations can provide a coherent ethical or political position. Her view is aligned with that of Foucault who, she says, does not so much answer this question as displace it (152). Once the fact/value absolutist dichotomy is displaced, then a multiple ethics must ensue. Hekman posits a discursive feminist morality, and she does so on a simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive basis. Her supporting arguments are threefold. Firstly, masculinist moral theory that has dominated the West since modernity is hierarchical, exclusionary and, therefore, oppressive, and feminisms of all strands need to embrace a plurality of moral voices in order to “liberate” those marginalised and silenced by a universalist view of morality. Secondly, if we are to “come to grips with subjectivity,” (67) we need to understand that any subjectivity is necessarily a moral subjectivity (that morality is intrinsic to politics). Thirdly, feminism needs a “reconstructed moral theory” which accounts for difference. Hekman’s thesis calls for a recognition that “power produces resistance, that resistance is and must be local, and that the relativism/absolutism dichotomy is not relevant to defining political action” (161). In other words, she seeks to abandon the search for any overarching meta-ethics that is grounded in an anachronistic

metanarrative of “women.” This means also abandoning the search for a specifically female identity:

As we begin to explore the variety of power relations that script the lives of women, we are discovering that these scripts differ by class, race, and culture. But the spaces that this opens up need not divide us—unless, that is, we assume that only a common identity can found our politics. This assumption is yet one more modernist concept that feminists should displace. The outlines of such a politics of difference are beginning to emerge in feminist writings. (161)

Thus, for Hekman, the task of feminism is to create space and affirmative opportunity for many voices to emerge, in which event formerly subsumed knowledges will increase in status.

It is interesting to compare Hekman’s politics of difference with that of Kathleen B. Jones in *Compassionate Authority*. Jones undertakes a critique of the masculinist construction of authority, calling for the concept of authority to be reconceptualised from “power over” towards a more difference-tolerant notion of the word. Like Hekman, who does not accept that postmodernist negation of universalism necessarily implies a negation of any kind of feminist ethics, Jones deplores the tall-poppies anti-authority tendency that frequently manifests itself in contemporary feminism. But while Hekman is calling for the subsumption of many female voices, Jones problematises this by pursuing the logical end of Hekman’s argument. In

deconstructing any kind of overarching metanarrative (whether patriarchal or feminist), we have necessarily deconstructed the value of “women’s experience” in general, but also—it then follows—in the particular. Since women’s experience is the basis of the subjective knowing which has given them authority when the public world has withheld it, feminism itself is experiencing a moral crisis.

“Authority” has become our totem and taboo; we consider those who claim authority to be powerful and controlling and, simultaneously, we regard them with the deepest suspicion. (Jones 189)

How can “we” begin to develop a polity that is friendly to women, if we may not classify ourselves as women with any justifiable degree of authority? To put this another way, are identity politics axiomatic to working for women?

Jones, like Hekman, believes that identity must be seen as constructed and therefore open to question, although she allows that “a strategic assertion of identity remains necessary to the development of any political movement, even a movement towards “open” coalitions” (16). But to demand the right to question masculinist absolutist structures and to reveal the power-play that renders these structures politically convenient to some (and therefore inconvenient to others), is also to accept that the questioner herself is also open to question:

Our identity is not whatever we declare it to be. Instead it is bound up with our own specific individual histories, as well as with the complex web of cultural practices that we share with those with whom we most

closely identify. These cultural practices, in turn, are structured by institutions, ideologies, and practices that exceed the boundaries or the origins of the immediate group to which we claim to belong. (148)

Jones' notion of "compassionate authority" supposedly posits an umbrella feminist style, or structure of, authority. This is sufficiently "universal" to provide a cohesive, collaborative, non-oppressive, non-hierarchical style of authority for which all feminists could aim, but also one which is sufficiently flexible to suit specific groups of women according to specific locations, contexts, cultures. One might say that this is "a different voice" which carries within itself the capacity for many different sub-voices. Jones is clearly interested in the implications of the feminine image of caring and compassion, at least because it is an image born from the prevailing identification of women's experience in the family. Yet there are obvious pitfalls in employing stereotypical images as idealised realities:

We may be capable of caring far more than we do at present about the sufferings of those who are more distant from us than our immediate circle of family and friends. But we need to consider, as part of the feminist project of recasting authority and the means by which to establish a polity that is friendly to women, exactly how we can encourage the development of these caretaking enterprises in ways that neither overburden women, who have been disproportionately burdened with the demands of caretaking, nor require us to reduce the feminist concern with caretaking as a model of judgement to what Kathy Ferguson has called the advocacy of a "warm, mushy, and wholly impossible politics of universal love." (151)

What Jones rejects outright is the post-Enlightenment authority of Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory: that is, "democratic" authority as a [different] form of social control which enforces order and conformity and silences opposition, this time by means of tacitly authorised "representation" (190-1).³⁸ Instead, she posits a mode of authority that does not seek sovereign control but which empowers, facilitates, and which does not claim women's experience as a replacement foundational truth. This means giving up the struggle to place ownership boundaries around the various categories of experience, seeking instead to reconcile conflicting accounts as simultaneously valid.

Experience, then, becomes defined not in territorial, possessive terms but as a smorgasbord of diversity. And gender itself, Jones argues, can retain its position as one of the key principles of experience and of subjectivity, without itself being constructed as a founding duality:

Treating gender as a central category of analysis does not require constructing a hegemonic theory; it does not require making gender sovereign. As a code of meaning, gender may be wedded to a binary structuring of reality, but there is nothing necessarily binary, or necessarily essentialist, about such a code. If we are careful to distinguish between the experiences and behaviors of particular men and

³⁸ In a sense, these objections to liberal democracy are curious and paradoxical. On the one hand, post-colonial feminists rightly eschew consent, which is implied, or tacit, but not informed. On the other, alliance politics assume a consciousness of consent, which is overtly attached to agency, something that poststructuralist (including post-Freudian and post-Marxist) theories have problematised.

women—the experiences of one sex or another—and the representations of certain experiences and behaviors, regardless of which sex group has or practices them, as masculine and feminine, then we can avoid treating gender as the sovereign sign of identity. I argue that gender should be understood as a space whose occupation we negotiate, instead of as an “identity card” we display, as fixed and determinate identity. (222)

Similarly, Jones posits a feminist authority that is constructed not as a controlling agent but as a means of benevolent facilitation:

We can think of authority not as border-patrolling and boundary engendering, but as meaning giving; and as with all gift giving, we should prepare ourselves for the disappointment of possible refusal. (229)

This, then, is compassionate authority: a beginning and not an ending, an act of giving (and not just seeking) empowerment, a means of celebrating difference, and not uniting it through the foregrounding of some voices at the expense of others. Jones envisages this structure as horizontal authority, as opposed to the traditional vertical.

Both Hekman and Jones, then, argue that a binary view of gender and, thus, of a gendered ethic and gendered authority, is not merely an over-simplification but also a moral outrage, effectively replacing the stranglehold of patriarchal foundational truth with a woman-centred concept of oppression. Absolutism is not merely impractical (or, indeed, “incorrect”) but also unjust, because it seeks to obscure

difference and different voices. Hekman's discursive morality and Jones' compassionate authority amount to more contingent, more inclusive reworkings of old concepts. Both hail from politics of difference, of multiplicity. Both Hekman and Jones refuse to accept that postmodernism negates, through deconstruction, the validity of any sort of working theory of morality or leadership, and they call, instead, for a reconceptualisation or reworking of old ideas through the replacing of a foundational voice with a chorus of formerly-subsumed voices.

Both these theorists lucidly describe and discuss the oppressive and (retrospectively) illegal implications of a "false" generality as a universal truth. Yet the ultimate conclusion of postmodernist theory *is* nihilism. For this reason, the term "poststructuralist" offers a fallback position of a contingent morality valid in its own terms. This compromise retains the insights of constructivism and post-colonial politics of representation, but also permits a relatively secure authoritative grounding in provisional truths. Yet there remains a search for authenticity. While Jones urges the abandoning of "the discourse of authenticity" (243), her gift-giving authority is described as "a more fruitful, more humane practice of authority" (245). In the existentialist universe, authentic choices (the burden of "Man's" condemnation to freedom" is the only means of coping with the death of God. Man steps in where God's absence leaves a moral vacuum. But existentialism does not offer a coherent reason why Man should want to shoulder God's moral burden for the sake of the

universe, and thus we must take a leap of faith from amorality to morality with no theorised motivation for so doing. Similarly, poststructuralism does not readily suggest reasons for supposing that one practice is necessarily “more humane” than another, except that an identified feminist deems it so for today (and, of course, post-colonial discourses have their own ethics of difference).

Most significantly, neither Hekman nor Jones effectively anchors her suggested approach into a concrete model of ethical practices or systems of leadership. Hekman sidesteps the issue by reiterating Foucault’s statement that ethics are intrinsic to discourse. And Jones, ultimately, suggests that we avoid contentious authoritative acts, rather than tells us *how* we can speak authoritatively (and compassionately) and, at the same time, avoid sovereignty. Making alliances across our differences means that we must give up the practice of speaking for others and appropriating the voice of the Other. Additionally, we must speak advisedly about our “own” experiences, being sure not to lay a sovereign claim to heavily authorised speech on that basis. The question remains, however, of what is left to speak authoritatively *about* and on what grounds.

Feminists have long opposed foundational thought, and have embraced post-colonial views of voice and representation with an understandable enthusiasm for a political ethics that acknowledges symbolic oppression. But simultaneously we have left

ourselves without, and beyond, a feminist model of authority. Jones seeks to avoid the construction of a distinctively feminine style:

My effort is not to replace one (masculine) set of marks of authority with another (feminine) set of marks but to contribute further to the displacement of the binary logic to which analytical thinking is often subjected. (107)

Yet she laments the way in which women's authority to speak is inhibited by their fear of acting oppressively:

Simply to reject authority as inherently tainted is naive and concedes too much to the dominant tradition defining it. (3)

However, Jones' envisaged compassionate authority owes far more to the existentialist ideal of the intersubjective relationship than to developments "in the gap" of anti-foundationalist theory. As a result, it is effective in its deconstruction of overarching authority but lacks a substantive material framework for an alternative modality.

Thus, whereas Hekman and Jones offer brilliantly insightful analyses of contemporary discursive paradoxes fail to offer more than ideals on resolution which to begin constructing ethical practices.

It is however, feasible to argue that a focus on specific moralities may increase the chances of achieving communal justices. Anne Phillips, for example, insists on an

equality that is compatible with radical pluralism because it is grounded in material practices of specific groups:

In the last decade of political theory, there has been a powerful move against 'grand theory', and especially against the kind of abstract theorizing that deduces principles of rights and justice from metaphysical assumptions that have their foundations only in thought. An increasingly preferred alternative is what has been described as the 'communitarian' approach, a perspective that grounds our moral and political beliefs in the experience of specific communities and challenges the false abstractions of 'the' individual. Within this rather broadly defined (and by no means unitary) tradition, attention has shifted from establishing universally applicable standards of morality or justice towards elucidating the principles that are already present within any given society. (59)

I do not disagree with these aims, and certainly concur with the need to work with differences as they are manifested in concrete practices. But I consider that these justices fail to take adequate account of gender if they do not make simultaneous provision for communality at a wider social level. Wendy Parkins discusses these concerns as a confusion between ethics and politics, resulting in post-feminist focus on purely personal benefit seen as benefiting the collective cause of 'women.'" On the other hand, "any emphasis on organised intervention is regarded as naïve and even oppressive to women" (Catherine Orr qtd. in Parkins [377]).

And yet post-structuralist feminisms continue to struggle for a substantial framework that extends beyond conditional and contingent alliances. Any feminism rests on the significance of gender to concepts of morality, regardless of their differences in how to apply principles of a radical pluralism. As Naomi Scheman puts it:

We learn to think and to be moral in ways that are as gendered as the ways in which we learn to be sexual—a conclusion that ought to be unsurprising, given how thoroughly gendered social life is, and how thoroughly social thinking and morality are. (175)

If moralities are indeed gendered, then feminists are still left with the question, how are women's moralities affected by their gendered subject positions? And which of these ways do feminists wish to import into their public roles?

The Ethics of Biographical Speech

We are by now only too aware of the negative effects on women's status and authority by their omission from official expressions of discourse. Women's silence is currently a motif of women's writing, although the apparent irony of voice discussing lack of voice often seems to render the point moot, to non-feminist readers. Adrienne Rich writes:

The entire history of women's struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over. One serious cultural obstacle encountered by any feminist writer is that each feminist work has tended to be received as if it emerged from nowhere; as if each of us had lived, thought, and worked without any historical past or contextual present.

This is one of the ways in which women's work and thinking has been made to seem sporadic, errant, orphaned of any tradition of its own. (11)

One effect of women's enforced silence is that their private contribution to men's achievements generally goes unacknowledged. Another is that their own achievements are regarded as minimal, of lesser value or aberrant. In general, women's silence yields to their ongoing construction as subordinates and denies them the visible authority needed for empowerment. This is an important factor in a call (such as this thesis enacts) for women's representations to be actively fostered by all feminists.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, breaking silence also carries certain risks and, from a feminist researcher/biographer's perspective, the risks incorporate significant ethical considerations. These concerns (which include those emanating from empirical fields of human research) comprise two interconnected processes of biographical research. There is the collection of data from women for research purposes, and also the construction of that data into recognised official forms which are inevitably construed by the reading public as authentic or true to some degree; indeed, that is the point of "referential" writing. Such feminist research and biographical speech is intended to be helpful to the cause of women's emancipation by breaking repressive silence. But the woman whose story or stories provide the raw material for the researcher/biographer remains not merely silent now, but also vulnerable, having

neither her secrets nor the chance of telling them herself. In other words, the interviewee or research subject tends to have a passive role in the process.

With regard to the woman-from-woman collection of data, Ann Oakley terms the process “objectifying your sister” (41). She underlines the hierarchical nature of the research relationship:

Interviewers define the role of interviewees as subordinates; extracting information is more to be valued than yielding it; the convention of interviewer-interviewee hierarchy is a rationalisation of inequality; what is good for the interviewers is not necessarily good for interviewees. (40)

Thus, Oakley considers that when a feminist interviews women using conventional interviewing practices, the resulting exploitation is “morally indefensible” (41), chiefly because the face-to-face woman-to-woman interaction implies, or even apes, a kind of egalitarian friendship which cannot really exist, due to the researcher’s motives:

A feminist methodology of social science requires that this rationale of research be described and discussed not only in feminist research but also in social science research in general. It requires, further, that the mythology of ‘hygienic’ research, with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than a dangerous bias—it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives. (59)

Janet Finch echoes this view. As a woman sociologist, she discovered “the extreme ease with which, in my experience, a woman researcher can elicit material from other women:

That in turn raises ethical and political questions which I have found some difficulty in resolving. One reason for this difficulty is . . . that discussions of the ‘ethics’ of research are commonly conducted within a framework which is best drawn from the public domain of men, and which I find at best unhelpful in relation to research with women. (71)

Finch attributes this ease of disclosure to the fact that women “are more used than men to accepting intrusive enquires into the more private parts of their lives” (74), for example, as mothers from health officials. Also, with women’s tradition of sharing personal information with other women, and due to many women’s isolation in the private sphere, they are often glad that someone takes an interest in them. On the one hand, as Linda J. Nicholson points out, “women commonly suffer unwarranted losses of informational privacy in the hands of the state” (‘Feminist Theory’ 239). Women’s search for secrecy, anonymity, and solitude (the three chief dimensions of privacy) are attempts to limit this kind of statutory and cultural invasion - the invasion, in fact, of lives subordinated by what Foucault (somewhat evasively) terms “strategies” of power which constitute the subject (Barrett 147-9). On the other hand, the interest of the dominant group implies a paternalistic care, on which women have come to rely for a sense of well being. This double bind of exploitation versus care is demonstrated within the writing of a booklet called *The*

Use and Abuse of Oral Evidence by Roy Hay, which is based on a talk he gave to schoolteachers. Hay suggests that the history of women in their domestic, industrial and political activities is a promising area of oral history:

There are hundreds of old ladies within walking distance of your schools, who carry between them the collective memory of the communities in which they live and of their own social role within them. They are often lonely, neglected and what is more they are unaware that the facts of their narrow, circumscribed lives and their experience of discrimination could be of any interest to the younger generation. Is it possible that some of you could use oral history projects as a means both of tapping this source of information and giving your local old people back some of their dignity and a sense of comradeship at the same time? (13)

In a popular text that purports to discuss use and abuse of oral evidence, Hay is evidently oblivious that his own patronising discussion of “old ladies” constitutes a kind of abuse in itself. The service that the interviewee is providing to the researcher and others is turned into a therapeutic service given to her by the researcher. Certainly, interviewees may enjoy, and indeed benefit from, telling their stories to attentive audiences, but of course this is hardly protection from exploitation by researchers or writers—quite the reverse. Even with a more “sensitive” approach, Oakley’s point is that it is all too easy for the interviewer to exploit and manipulate the disclosure scenario to her or his own advantage. Moreover, the higher status of the interviewer (evident in Hay’s view of the elderly female interviewees’ pathetic

lives and the special wisdoms that a clever researcher will bring to them) remains at least an opposing factor in biographical speech forms.

In addition to the potential within the research interview of disguising its own hierarchical nature, there is the matter of its propensity to disguise the role of the research dynamic in shaping data, as well as simply collecting it. Kathleen B. Jones describes it thus:

Once we are asking questions, we are no longer looking and listening unobtrusively. Nor could we ever be looking and listening unobtrusively, disinterestedly. Neither speaker nor listener is engaged in a locationless, boundaryless, disinterested conversation; you are always speaking from somewhere, I am always listening from somewhere. The conversation, the dialogue, is an effort to bridge the gap between us. Through dialogue it becomes possible to recognize that the sovereignty of the subject as originator of meaning can only be purchased at the expense of the context, including the research process itself, within which it operates. (212)

Indeed, women biographers have specifically commented on their own pseudo-therapeutic role during research interviews, which sometimes causes the interviewees to remark on their own change in perception of the events or circumstances they “relate” to the researcher. Biographer Anne-Katherine Broch-Due highlights this dual-dynamics of the interviewing process:

This “therapeutic effect” is well known. New understanding and meaning for the interviewee about her own life also means another way of thinking about possibilities and action, because it is always the last interpretation about your life that counts—that lays the ground for the way the future is viewed. Choices, plans, and wishes a person has in the present are based upon her interpretation of her life story in the past and lay the ground for how possibilities are viewed in the future. Change can take place during the interview, but may not be evident until afterwards. Indeed, if reinterviewing does not take place this aspect may not be shown at all in the research. (99)

This propensity for changes in lived experience indicates that talk changes lives as well as merely reflects lives. Whilst such change may well be very positive and desirable, it is rarely owned as an effect of auto/biographical speech. Indeed, such dynamics are often pointedly hidden, since they serve to undermine the illusion of truth and fact supposedly “captured” through the biographical process. Such change may also be unpleasant or detrimental to the interviewee or biographical subject which again raises questions about the innocence of biographical research. Feminist researchers are calling for urgent safeguards for respondents that go beyond (uninformed) consent (Finch 85; Oakley 31; Acker, Barry and Esseveld 425). Hay’s remark about improving lives through the act of interviewing does not totally contradict this, although his attitude to the women in his sights is hardly respectful (Hay 13). He plainly considers that the interviewee’s supposedly renewed “dignity and sense of comradeship” is separate to the purity of the “source of information”

which will supply quantifiable data by virtue of memory transcribed into narrative. In fact, the act of narration is a socially constructed means of producing knowledge that is relative to, and dependent on, the conditions under which it is (re)produced and utilised.

The second aspect of the biographical process that gives rise to ethical concerns is the interpretation of research data by the researcher/biographer. Whilst poststructuralist anti-biography continues to experiment with textual forms that emphasise the subjectivity and (culture-specific) contingency of the authorial presence, it is highly debatable whether any such device has so far totally circumvented the oppression endemic to textual authority at the same time facilitating biographical speech. Biographical theorist William H. Epstein describes the resulting domination by author of subject as “interpretative violence inflicted upon [subjects’] lives by biographical recognition” (222) and he claims that this textual violence “takes the form of an abduction” (223). In an interview with Gail Porter Mandell, biographer Phyllis Rose terms her response to her chosen subject’s perceived character “appropriation” (Mandell 113). The biographer seeks ownership of certain characteristics manifested by the biographical subject and, presumably, enacts this seizure of identity by “retelling” the life, or aspects of the life. Epstein puts this reflex in even stronger terms:

By abducting the biographical subject as the discursive model through which individual human existence was to be expressed (and suppressed), hierarchical culture effectively controlled the distribution of extra-discursivity. Although the political and social economies of the post-Renaissance industrialized nation-states have tended to democratize this network of distribution, they have not relinquished their control of it; it is still micro-managed by the kind of hegemonic cultural practices that Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault attribute to such disciplinary institutions as the prisons, the schools, the family, the church, and, I would add, biographical recognition. (223)

James C. Scott also picks up this theme of appropriation:

Virtually every instance of personal domination is intimately connected with a process of appropriation. Dominant elites extract material taxes ... in addition to extracting symbolic taxes in the form of deference, demeanor, posture, verbal formulas, and acts of humility. In actual practice, of course, the two are joined inasmuch as every public act of appropriation is, figuratively, a ritual of subordination. (188)

It is therefore the task of subordinates to avoid and protect their resources from such seizure:

The hidden transcript is not just behind-the-scenes griping and grumbling; it is enacted in a host of down-to-earth, low-profile stratagems designed to minimize appropriation. (199)

This seizure includes appropriation of information, stories, histories, cultural resources, minds and, of course, bodies. In the form of surveillance (through which

emanates the power to define, normalise and regulate) the dominant group can make good discursive use of subordinate knowledge (which, in dominant hands, becomes merely “data”), adapting it to its own needs with a convenient change of emphasis, at the very least. In Althusserian terms, then, biography is blatant Ideological State Apparatus, making it predominantly an instrument for the deployment of dominant ideology. Sharon O’Brien observes that feminists have tended to stand clear even of anti-realist meta-biography, because of these very tendencies:

From the perspective of deconstruction . . . the influence on biography of the “different voice” theory of women’s self and writing is problematic: this theory seems to promote the notion of the unified self and an essentialist definition of “woman.” Thus, the emphasis on female difference obscures differences among women, differences connected with race, class, ethnicity, culture, or sexual identity. What seems to be the case at the moment is that feminist deconstructionists, not unsurprisingly, have not been attracted to biography as a genre, not even desiring to write feminist anti-biographies. (128)

Not all of these feminist concerns are ethical ones (see Chapter 6), but a number of significant ethical concerns do seem to present formidable obstacles at the outset, largely, of course, because of the power-saturated dynamics of discursive authority:

The quarrel over biography . . . has always been enmeshed in emotionally charged struggles for institutional identity and power—literary, social, political, economic, and sexual—and has always turned upon and metonymically entangled (mis)representations of gender and popular culture. (Epstein 138)

These (mis)representations are not the exclusive creation of the author, but must inevitably remain the ethical responsibility of the author, most especially, I would argue, in the case of feminists whose declared political aims incorporate an ethic of caring for women.

This leads us, then, to a re-consideration of the possible effects of biographical speech on women subjects. These vary, depending on the level of institutional authority deployed by the speaker/writer. As we have seen, the negative effects of gossip amount to a social control that can directly damage an individual's reputation and standing in the immediate community. The effects of a published biography can, of course, be similar but are likely to be much more intense with further-reaching consequences. The divulging of secrets in either medium are frequently experienced by the subject as an attack and/or betrayal by others, especially by the writer. Moreover, the official context of a writer's opinion—even when widely considered to be "accurate" may be said to appropriate the individual's "identity" (that is, his or her self-vision) in a way that is experienced by the subject, or the subject's family or close associates, as significantly hurtful and harmful. Conventionally, practitioners of biography defend these as unavoidable side effects in the recounting of fact or expertly constructed truth. Deconstructionist writers have no such ammunition at their call and must find other justification for telling or not telling when it comes to the lives of actual persons. If there is indeed a tendency to a feminist ethic of care,

then it applies very specifically to official biographical speech, and clearly this is a strong factor in feminist writers' avoidance of biography.

In addition to the possible injuries that authority-inscribed biographical speech can, and does, inflict on individual subjects, some feminists have asserted that they also have a responsibility to the status of women in general. Janet Finch, for example, discusses this in relation to her sociological research findings:

In both my playgroups and clergymen's wives studies, I was very aware that aspects of my data could be discussed in such a way as potentially to undermine the interests of wives and mothers generally, if not necessarily the specific people I had researched in a direct way. For example, many clergy wives expressed satisfaction and contentment in living lives centred around their husband and his work (in which they essentially acted as his unpaid assistants). This could be used to argue that most women would be much happier if only they would accept subordinate and supportive positions instead of trying to establish greater independence from their husbands. My developing commitment as a feminist made me very unwilling to see my work used to support such a conclusion. (83)

Finch classifies this as another kind of betrayal because her woman subjects opened up to her in the context of their shared subordination as women. She is aware that her feminist-inspired restraint in the use of research data could give rise to accusations that such feminists are not "serious sociologists, but merely using our work to promote our politics" (86). Finch clearly does not advocate the active

suppression or distortion of politically contentious (or merely inconvenient) data. But since tests have no intrinsic or stabilised meaning, they can be used to support a variety of political/ideological agendas.

Kathleen Jones repeatedly underscores this point in discussing the representation of women as heavily imbued with political (and therefore ethical) implications:

Maybe “speaking for” is a position we will need to abandon even when the ones we are speaking for are “like us,” at least according to our wishes and needs. (242)

Jones does not tell us how to differentiate between “speaking for” and “speaking about,” since she also advocates “weaving stories together that invite dialogue across our differences” (245), and, at the same time, discourages feminists from engaging in jealous defence of our specific territories of “experience” (“border-patrolling”). What she does insist on is “avoiding having the reader/listener/citizen merely retranslate different voices and visions into the language of the dominant” (243) which, in turn, requires an (unspecified) method of ending, or at least limiting, the sovereignty of the author.

Thus, feminist poststructuralists are understandably anxious to avoid what Linda K. Kerber calls “feminist self-righteousness” (105), when they feel justified in replacing patriarchal with matriarchal omniscience or even “expertise,” and even claims to

truth by virtue of “experience.” Yet to aspire to, let alone to apply, the equally lofty moral principles of total textual non-violence is inevitably to dice with a different form of control of women’s writings. The question of whether we can yet conceive of methodologies that adequately address these complex ethical issues, but which at once inscribe feminine and feminist voices as authoritative, remains a post-colonial feminist challenge.

Public and Private Speech

At this point it is germane to consider newer concepts of public and private which are a cornerstone of ethics in general, and biographical ethics in particular. André Maurois’ (1942) paper, ‘The ethics of biography,’ posits verisimilitude as the primary duty of the biographer, with aestheticism running a close second (44-45). He adds that “in a few cases, a biographer may have to suppress a fact for ethical reasons: for instance if the hero of the biography is a contemporary of the writer, and if premature publication of a certain fact could injure a third party; or if it is against public interest to lessen the prestige of a man who still has an important part to play in public life” (46). Maurois does not enter into any debate about public and private; rather, he takes refuge in greatness as a given (“Great lives show that, in spite of all, it is possible for a man (sic) to act with dignity and to achieve internal peace . . . If the writer respects his hero, the reader will respect the writer”) (50).

Maurois' complacency is, to some extent, attributable to the undisputed "greatness" (and distant demise) of his biographical subjects—namely, Shelley (1923), Disraeli (1927) and Byron (1930). Nevertheless, issues of public and private have been, and are, central to modern and post-modern biography. In December 1890, Boston lawyers Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis published an article entitled "The Right of Privacy" in the *Harvard Law Review*:

They concluded, after an analysis of the precedents, that the law recognized a right of privacy, the protection of one's private feelings, the right to be let alone—and they sought to define its limits. (Fein 9)

In 1967 Judge Arnold L. Fein (serving on the bench of the civil court of the City of New York) is unequivocal in his affirmation of the legal right to privacy, but distinguishes between the rights to privacy of a private figure and the comparable rights of a public figure. Says Fein, "that the law now recognizes and protects the right of privacy is beyond doubt" (9), citing New York Civil Rights Law Sections 50 and 51, "making it a misdemeanor to use for advertising or trade purposes the name, portrait, or picture of any living person without written consent" (10). In addition "the author of a letter and his (sic) legal representatives after his death have the sole right to permit or withhold its publication, except that it may be used by the addressee when required or justified to establish his rights in a lawsuit or to protect himself against aspersions or misrepresentations by the writer" (11). Fein was dubious about the application of these laws to public figures, citing an orchestral

conductor Serge Koussevitzky who could not prevent a prominent music critic from writing an unauthorised biography about him, even though it allegedly contained misstatements and unauthorised use of photographs:

Said the court, the great public character of his own volition dedicates to the public the right of any fair portrayal of himself. But the portrayal must not be essentially fictional. In the public interest, the factual reporting of newsworthy persons and events overrides the right of privacy, statutory or otherwise. The fictional does not. (Fein 10)

Since post-structuralist discourses of the self and subject, voice and representation do not have recourse to a ready dichotomy of truth and fiction, the notion of what constitutes a fair portrayal is now secondary to the matter of whether any public representation that is unwelcome to the living biographical subject can be fair. A substantial aspect of this question is the qualifier “public” which, in this case, clearly becomes a key factor in biographical ethics. In modern biography, the public’s “right to know” and freedom of speech have generally prevailed over the individual’s right to remain private. Said Fein in the Sixties:

The conflict between the right of privacy and the right to know is obvious. The resolution of any particular cases of the conflict provides a point of departure for the next. There are no final answers nor can there be. The need to protect both rights is manifest. Marking out the shadowy borderline is one of the prices of a free society. (11)

Feminists have long been interested in the constitution and reconstitution of public and private powers, rights, responsibilities and delineation’s, but recent discussions

have focussed more on the reformation of the public as a primary focus, with the private as a secondary emphasis. Currently, “the new privacy” (Cohen, 1996) debates the locus of the individual’s right to self-determination and self-erected boundaries. Mary Ann Glendon (1987) rejected the American constitutional right to privacy (the right to be let alone, as elucidated by Judge Fein twenty years earlier and as currently upheld by the Supreme court, claiming that this stated right invokes a conception of the individual as autarchic, isolated, sovereign. Glendon’s objections rest on what she considers to be a false autonomy of the self-presupposed by the new privacy (Cohen 1996).

Cohen, however, writing in 1996, endorses the new privacy feminist doctrine, albeit with qualifications. This doctrine is based on Jurgen Habermäs’ model, also selectively endorsed by, for example, Seyla Benhabib in *Habermas and Modernity as an Unfinished Project* (1992), which posits the necessity of a normative democratic public space. Benhabib insists on the plurality of this space, creating delineated and protected sub-spaces for diverse public voices, thus correcting the universalising tendencies of Habermäs. Cohen goes further, advocating a radically democratised public in which the private (individual) boundary is both politically and legally and protected. Seeking to reconcile democracy and difference, Cohen points out that previous feminist theory has been mainly concerned with validating the roles of women in the private/domestic sphere, and with expanding notions of the

public to include the interests of women. Now she calls for “the next step” (191)

which she identifies as feminist reconceptualisation of the private. Says Cohen:

It is time to enter the fray, and rethink privacy rights in ways that enhance rather than restrict plurality, difference, freedom, and equality. The old certainties are gone, as the heated debate over the very meaning of privacy has revealed. . . . I see the debate over the meaning of such a right as part of an ongoing contestation over the vocabularies, idioms, and cultural codes available for interpreting needs, for pressing claims, for constituting identity, for asserting difference and for gaining recognition” (193).

Cohen’s proposed model of the radicalised private is based on the situated agency of the individual, bearing in mind that she advocates a boundary line drawn “somewhere” between public and private. She of course endorses the self whose identities, self-understandings and values are shaped through community-mediated communicative processes of socialisation (197). But she insists that the existence of the moral self is evidence that the individual is constituted by a variety of community values and concepts, drawn from membership of a considerable number of social groups on which the individual may draw at any given time. That being so:

The principle that individual privacy rights protect decisional autonomy (choice) regarding certain personal or intimate concerns can go quite well with a recognition of the intersubjective character of processes of personal identity formation, and an awareness of the historical, contextual sources of our values. (197-8)

Cohen's radicalised privacy model centres on identity, therein specified as "the right to inviolate personality" (199). Since the perceived good of the community and the self-perceived rights of the individual do not necessarily overlap, the centrality of individual agency must be acknowledged with reference to choice in the shaping of a life. In so acknowledging, the community concedes that "their opportunity for self-development, and experimental self-presentation require protection. Such protection affords to the individual *a sense of control* over her self-definitions, over the self-creative synthesis that only she can fashion out of her various locations and background, in part, through communicative interaction with others" (original italics) (200). This is an extension to the right to be let alone. Cohen refers to, "the protection of concrete, fragile identities and self-formative processes that are, indeed, constitutive of who we are *and* who we wish to be" (original italics) (201). This protection would secure for the individual the right "*not to have an identity imposed upon one by the state or third parties that one cannot freely affirm and embrace:*" (201) (original italics):

Indeed, even if one's personal identity needs conflict with the majority's interpretation of community values, personal privacy rights protect them unless, and only unless, they violate universal moral principles. That is why personal privacy rights (together, of course, with communicative rights) secure the right to be different. (201)

In the case of the biographical process, such rights would have obvious implications for constructing a life and textual persona of a living subject, so that the biographical

subject would have automatic powers of veto over the prepublication manuscript. In reference to feminist biographical ethics, this may well be a reasonable proposition, although it would certainly have rendered many contentious, but fascinating and arguably valuable, biographical portrayals null and void at the outset. On the basis of a legal framework, however, it is highly questionable whether such a policy is workable or even productive, except perhaps that it would undoubtedly provide much business for litigation lawyers. Moreover, such a policy has highly contentious implications for journalism, with positive effects of clearing up the most outrageous acts of blatantly false representations that damage lives, but of course very serious restrictions on the constructive freedom of the press in a democratic society. No doubt many would consider such radicalised individual rights to be a pendulum swing away from full censoring.

Yet “privacy doctrines” of the sort proposed by Cohen *are* very relevant and fruitful post-structuralist explorations of public/private boundaries, notably for feminists and other identity formations marginalised in modernity and still grossly under-represented in post-modernity. They deal directly with issues of subjectivity and identity which we now know to be at the root of power-knowledge systems and therefore of civil liberties. However, such a discussion—resting on the pluralist and constructivist tenets of postmodernist theory—necessarily has recourse to modern terms of legal equality, universality, rights of the individual, freedom, moral agency,

the common good and the like (all used by Cohen) albeit with a view to re-envisioning such concepts.

What, then, are the experiential implications for feminine and feminist biographical speech, which deal somewhat ambivalently with public/private ethics?

Speaking from Experience: The Ethics of Biographical Research Interviews

At the time I conducted extensive research interviews for my proposed biography of Ann Anon, I anticipated that the extracted information could well pose some complex questions of ethical judgement on my part, in terms of how to use contentious data in a text intended for publication. I had certainly not imagined that a feminist interviewing women could in itself be an especially contentious act. However, as we have seen, feminist sociologists have pointed out that it is so because the tradition of the interview situation constructs the interviewee as ultimately beholden to the researcher/biographer.

This directly contradicts the egalitarian gender codes between women that place considerable, even primary, value on reciprocity and intersubjectivity. Oakley says that because of this endemic conflict, the act of a feminist interviewing women is actually *more* problematic than other interviewing situations, not less so:

These ethical dilemmas are generic to all research involving interviewing for reasons I have already discussed. But they are greatest where there is least social distance between the interviewer and interviewee. Where both share the same gender socialisation and critical life-experience, social distance can be minimal. Where both interviewer and interviewee share membership of the same minority group, the basis for equality may impress itself even more urgently on the interviewer's consciousness.

(55)

Thus, feminists have added ethical burdens, not simply because of their political agenda to promote the cause of women's welfare and emancipation, but also because of the conflicting feminine/gender versus masculine/professional codes which underpin their public/official interactions with women.

Janet Finch notes the ease in which woman researchers can get women interviewees to talk to them and reveal quite personal aspects of their lives—an ease that often surprises the interviewees themselves. Janet Malcolm says:

In most interviews, both subject and interviewer give more than is necessary. They are always being seduced and distracted by the encounter's outward resemblance to an ordinary friendly meeting. (173)

This is especially relevant in woman-to-woman interviews (at the time of writing, Malcolm was referring to her interview with Jacqueline Rose) and, indeed, this was my own experience. On a few occasions I received somewhat anxious post-interview telephone calls from women who feared they might have been overly frank

during the interview, and emerged wondering why they did so and what consequences might ensue, if any. On those occasions, there was also a marked sense of shame in having possibly been “verbally incontinent” in a way that mature adults are supposed to control. Moreover, they (and I) were aware that this *apparent* lack of grown-up control of information is generally constructed as a negative feminine characteristic. The women were given the necessary assurances that their wishes would be respected and their permission sought before publication of their comments. Nevertheless, their equivocation was significantly painful. They had previously felt (and apparently continued to feel) that their input was generally honourable and well-motivated. Moreover, they thought that they had articulated data that was both “truthful” and relevant to a wider truth that they did wish to see in print, and that they had upheld their feminist principles in speaking frankly to a feminist writer on feminist matters. What caused the pain and doubt was the dilemma about the public/private dichotomy and attendant rules of “trust,” even despite the fact that Anon herself had either initiated or otherwise endorsed their being interviewed by myself.

Finch says the women’s motivation to “share” is entirely understandable and appropriate to their subordinate status and a lack of opportunity to analyse their experiences:

Almost all the women in my two studies seemed to lack opportunities to engage collectively with other women in ways which they would find supportive, and therefore they welcomed the opportunity to try to make sense of some of the contradictions in their lives in the presence of a sympathetic listener. There seems no reason to doubt that most women who similarly lack such opportunities will also find such an interview a welcome experience. (75)

In my experience, even women who do have such opportunities appreciate chances to employ their collaborate reflexes with other women in analysing shared experience and its implications. This behaviour is a learned aspect of subordination, for better or worse. As a result, Finch says that feminist professionals have a definite political and ethical responsibility to install appropriate safeguards for women into their research methodologies:

Once (gender) identifications are made, it does indeed seem the easiest thing in the world to get women to talk to you. The moral dilemmas which I have experienced in relation to the use of the data thus created have emerged precisely because the situation of a woman interviewing women is special, and is easy only because my identity as a woman makes it so. I have, in other words, traded on that identity. I have also emerged from interviews with the feeling that my interviewees need to know how to protect themselves from people like me. (80)

This protection needs to be offered not on the grounds that women are innocent, child-like people, as Hay appears to suggest (13), but on the grounds that such responses to the interview situation are the result of confused codes of behaviour

respectively sanctioned amongst women in private life, or men in public life. When applied simultaneously, the codes create confusion and a strong propensity for exploitation by the researcher. Nevertheless, Finch, like Jones, does not believe that such careful attention to ethical safeguards need inhibit feminists from their work. Rather, they are calling for a more active commitment to restyling old concepts in order to fortify women's confidence in their valid place in public life. In addition:

It does mean . . . that sociologists who are also feminists need not be defensive about the relationships of our political commitments to our work, nor embarrassed when we resolve the moral dilemmas which it raises by frankly political stances. In doing so, I would argue, not only do we avoid compromising our feminism, but we are likely to produce more scholarly and more incisive sociology. (Finch 87)

In the biographical process, where it is not always so easy to offer interviewees the protection of anonymity, comparable safeguards must apply. However, as I will discuss further in the next chapter, the generic codes of the biographical process have made this extremely difficult, even in the idealistic realms of *avant-garde* anti-biography.

The greatest ethical dilemma resulting from my proposed biography of Ann Anon arose, in the final analysis of textual representation, in the question of whose truth could and should prevail in print, and how I might effectively avoid the pitfall identified by Jones:

Besides broadening the range and scope of experiences considered relevant to social and political inquiry, the feminist strategy of “returning to women themselves” was a political strategy, one that aimed to subvert the claim that the researcher was the uniquely qualified expert, and authoritative reader of experience whose readings were legitimated by their distance from subjects’ immediate rendering of their lives. Instead, a standard feminist tenet became the assertion that *the meaning of any experience was best expressed by the subjects themselves, in their own terms.* (198 Original emphasis)

This tenet, when applied to biography, grapples to avoid the “voice over” of the biographer, in favour of “treating what the subjects said about their lives as truthful and authoritative, and by structuring the research process as an egalitarian, collaborative event, it was assumed that the power relations of the research process could be transformed” (Jones 198). However, two problematics arise from this thinking when applied to the biographical process. Firstly, this is a view of “experience” as being an individualistic founding truth in itself, as Joan Scott attests. It denies that the voice of any speaker is a net manifestation of socially constructed and socially deployed discourse and, on a new level, clings to the author (this time the author of supposedly unified experience) as creator.

In addition to a non-recognition of the factor of interpretation in the construction of knowledge, the second ethical problematic (incurred through strict accord of direct experience to the one-who-experiences) is the matter of multi-voices. What happens

to the negation of a unifying voice-over when the sub-voices conflict in their opinions, as they frequently do; indeed, in their *experiences* of the same situation? I have said earlier that the narrative genre of biography incorporates many sub-narratives. I now add to that network effect by pointing out that a researcher/narrator's ethical responsibilities towards women sub-narrators incorporates those that the sub-narrators have to people who objectivised by their own biographical speech. That is to say, biographical research sources (or informants, or sub-narrators) are speaking about others to whom they have certain ethical responsibilities, and so on, down and across the social network. Should the biographer have direct or indirect loyalties to all these people? As biographer Ann Nilsen says:

The history of social research does reveal occasions when people have felt betrayed and presented in an inappropriate way in biographical (and other!) research . . . Because one must take for granted that researchers do not intentionally present their informants in such ways, it is crucial to give thorough consideration to this in the various phases of the research process. (104)

Nilsen's awareness extends to the effects of biographical speech on all such distant subjects (or, rather, objects):

When interviewing women for my own research project, I have found that they are more concerned about the hurt they may inflict on others than about themselves, if their identity is not kept confidential. During the interviewing, sensitive information about persons, relationships,

emotions, and situations is revealed. Such information need not always be part of the published story. Sometimes, however, it will be necessary to give account of this too, in order to understand both the person and her times more fully. (106)

Nilsen is arguing for the preservation of the women's anonymity, whenever possible. I would qualify this by saying that even if this were possible all the time, which it is not (in published biographies it is not difficult for those "in the know" to make educated guesses about sources), this only resolves part of the problem. Even if we allow that all of these sub-narratives in some authentic way directly reflect the speaker's experience, how can we coherently import them all into one person's "story" without undermining the subject's own self-vision? As Jones points out, our "identity" cannot truly belong to us as individuals. It is never only how we perceive ourselves but feminists still feel that they owe allegiance to the ethic of non-violence by ensuring, as far as possible, that no-one is unduly harmed through the unnecessary sabotage of somebody else's public image and self-image. True, the biographer can, and must, convey that accounts differ, and can certainly incorporate some equivocation or room for doubt into the emergent picture of a "personality." But this inevitably brings us back to the matter of a voice-over interpretation. The biographer can, and often does, change her opinions of the biographical subject as the research progresses. But it is a nonsense to say that she must not have an opinion, or that this opinion must not be clear in the text. Indeed, post-colonial politics are very concerned with a situated textual voice. It is for these reasons that poststructuralist

feminists, no longer able to be sure about what divides constructive representation from exploitation, are avoiding biography altogether. Moreover, the same issues apply to autobiography (in which the writer can hardly discuss herself whilst avoiding any mention of other people) and, of course, research which directly involves human subjects.

To return to my own biographical project, by way of example, my chosen subject, Ann Anon, was (and, no doubt, still is) an interesting, complex and dynamic personality, who manifested a myriad of perplexing contradictions. She was, in short, a good subject for a feminist biography. Moreover, I intended to present Anon's life as an individual manifestation of a discursive grid. That is, I wanted to examine the actions and beliefs of an individual woman with reference to the discursive conditions which enabled this particular kind of life at a specific time in a specific culture. It is not that I meant to reduce the woman to a mere object of discourse. But I certainly hoped that a less individualistic approach would be more relevant to constructivist views of the subject, and, on an ethical level, would avoid any unnecessary prying into Anon's personal life or overly clumsy second-guessing of her thoughts or motives. I believed that I would also be protected against accusations of "inaccuracy" from Anon's point of view, since I would effectively be writing as an "expert" only from the vantage point of our shared culture.

Nevertheless, the project was eventually discontinued because these ideals proved unworkable in textual practice. Ultimately, a published biographical truth, however much it is deliberately problematised as meta-biography, has the last word from the construction of a formalised image. The subject is rendered mute in the process, whether or not she agrees with the biographer's findings. My concerns for my subject extended to worries about my own self-construction as a good feminist who should not betray or oppress other women. As we perform ethical acts we construct ourselves as moral agents for a specific good, thereby participating in a reconstructed social value so that we become part of an ethical community. Inevitably, a biography of a living subject is ethically, as well as legally, risky.

What, then, in the final analysis, gave substance to my fears of betraying my subject? At the centre of my ethical concerns about possible betrayal was the matter of constructed identity. Whilst I did not, and do not, believe that a self-image is sacred and must be preserved intact by its apparent "owner," this nevertheless presents a contentious situation, most especially in regard to a living biographical subject. There is simply no denying that talk changes/constructs lives and does not simply describe lives. Such linguistic construction is inevitable, ongoing, and undoubtedly necessary. However, the advocacy of many voices and views tend to obscure the fact that such voices and views are inevitably micro-managed. There are always politics behind who speaks and who does not, and the construction of meaning that

results. The extent to which the subject can comfortably offset or endure the resulting textual assault on her self-image depends on two factors: her emotional security around her own psychological construction of her identity and/or her ability to sustain some dismantling of this constructed identity. The two may go together or may not. For example, a woman may feel secure because she rigidly holds to her own self-constructed identity regardless of the stated views of others; or because she is flexible enough not to mind doing some re-evaluation and, thus, reconstruction of her self-image (that part of her constructed identity which she experiences as internal). Moreover, internalised identity is never very separate from, or unaffected by, external identity (aspects such as “reputation” or public image).

Another factor that mediates the extent of personal damage is the degree of authority being deployed around the external construct of a subject’s identity through acts of biographical speech. In other words, a gossip may inflict some damage on the reputation of the subject of gossip, and the extent of the damage depends on the power of the gossip to make her version prevail on the subject’s material life. In the case of biography, the biographer has very significant authority at her disposal to ensure that her truth prevails, because the published text is produced through, and also for, the assertion of institutional power. In the matter of a socially constructed identity, it is often the last (or most forcefully stated truth) that dominates. Published truth commonly prevails over oral truth. In modernity, we could perhaps justify a

degree of injury to the subject with a shrug of “after all, truth will win out.” [Post-] feminist biographers must think in terms of biographical violence inflicted by writers (who have access to a stronger discursive authority through publication), on those who do not have redress through the same resources. For biographers who are members of broadly the same social group(s) as their subjects, discursive authority rests on more contingent factors.

A biographer obviously does not have total control over the shaping of a public identity. The evidence of known character, and also prior and ongoing social forces, pre-shape identity. Nevertheless, the writer [re]constructs these images according to a specific literary convenience (sometimes called “vision”). Additionally, public figures are more vulnerable to the onslaught of biographical violence than private citizens. Aspects of my own subject’s public identity, in pre-biographical forms, were up for textual grabs in a double sense of private and public, woman versus professional. It is important to realise that “on the record” information is just as potentially damaging as information about private lives, as James Walter illustrates in his paper on biographing a contemporary figure:

If your biography is a good biography, encompassing intimate details and both the virtues and the weaknesses of your subject, it will almost certainly embarrass and offend the subject, family, friends, and acquaintances. If it takes seriously the task of probing the “ego defences” (or what Edel calls the “life-myth”) of your subject, then you

can be sure your subject will not recognize your interpretation, and will publicly proclaim its inaccuracy. If, however, she/he is introspective, it may cause more serious hurt: Jean Genet, for instance, never denied the accuracy of Jean-Paul Sartre's *St. Genet*, but he said it was five years before he could work again. (62)

This is strong evidence of the layers of truth and reality in which an individual lives, and in which whole groups or societies live. These are not layers of skin (as in a peach) to be stripped away revealing the stone of truth at the heart of the exercise, but, more like those proverbial layers of onion, in which each is equally relevant and vital to the "onion-ness" of the object of scrutiny. This requires ever-more justification of what biographers decide to strip away and how this may be done.

All this, of course, takes a rather negative view of the effects of biography and there are also many positives that make the biographical enterprise a very promising one for women in general. For individual subjects, biographies break, but mostly they make, or help to make, reputations, images of fame and fortune, and even of materially successful people. However, a consideration of ethics exists to protect people against negative effects, and these must not be underestimated in the case of women who, as subordinates, tend to be especially disadvantaged when they tangle with patriarchal systems designed for the interests of men.

Ethical constraints were obviously applied in the writing and research of the biography of Ann Anon, but they proved to be inadequate to the task. This was despite fairly elaborate attempts on my part to safeguard my subject's wishes and interests, to honour her few and basic requests for privacy, and to keep her generally informed about proceedings. When I interviewed people, I did so with my subject's knowledge and sometimes at her suggestion. I did not deliberately seek out those who were likely to have derogatory views of Anon personally, since this seemed to be unnecessary prying or dirt digging. In other words, I did not lurk around neighbours or friends in a way that would seem unduly threatening to her. I did not consider that omitting such research meant a biased result. Selection necessarily means omission. I did plan to interview some of Anon's more colourful opponents whose views were well known and had at times appeared in the press, but she did not object to this. Otherwise, any criticisms invariably came to me from those who were generally well disposed towards her, either personally or professionally or both, but who included positive and negative remarks as part of their commentary. On the one hand, this seemed to make the criticisms more valid—more balanced and well-motivated than attacks from her critics. On the other, such comments from our allies cut us more deeply.

Biographical research yields/constructs data that can be much more threatening to the self-constructed identity than public attacks from political enemies. Even when

well intentioned, constructions of a third-party identity by those in a position to observe at close quarters (at times when defences are down and public-face shields removed) are frequently threatening to self-determined concepts of self. For this reason, they are rarely made public and just as rarely disclosed to the party in question.

Moreover, Anon herself did not speak of personal conflicts in our regular interviews, although at other times it was plain that she was not unaware of my knowledge of them. Indeed, she skilfully avoided any difficult or painful topic. Her control over her lifestory events easily rivalled my own, and I felt unable to lead her into any detours or alternative routes to the ones she preferred. This censorship demanded my complicity as my subject generally eschewed actual secrecy. In “private” dialogues, however, she would make veiled and passing references to personal matters, making me complicit in a woman’s game of public and private.

After an extended period of my making internal and external excuses about the slow progress of my written work, I explained to Ann Anon that I had decided to discontinue the project. I gave as my reason that I wanted more speculative freedom than I thought was justifiable, that the many conflicting versions of truth given to me might not accord with hers, and that I did not feel able to stand behind a project that could cause any upset to a living subject. Anon’s outward reaction was one of

ambivalence and puzzlement. At first she thought I should just go ahead and take the consequences (whatever those may be), but then she said she owed some allegiance to members of her extended family, especially her mother. I imagined that, in this, she was thinking of family matters, whereas I was thinking of personal criticism, although my general view of my subject and her work remained positive. At the time, however, I remember I did not point out this variance because I wanted to come out of the project gracefully. She reluctantly concurred with my decision, but when we occasionally met since, she would sometimes mention the possibility of future completion. She had, of course, given much of her time and had presumably come to expect a positive outcome. A discussion on the implications of a disunified subject for postfeminist ethics never seemed a very fruitful “solution.”

In terms of an ethic of non-violence, I was destined to fail on both counts. If a published biography offended my subject, her heirs or my sources, then I had failed in my attempt to prove that a feminist biography (as defined in relatively traditional terms) could be non-exploitative³⁹. When I withdrew from the project before and without publication, I know that the action somehow (if quite incorrectly) implied to my subject or others that she was inadequate for, or unworthy of, the notoriety that

³⁹ I am, of course, aware that contemporary “feminist biography” includes a variety of inter-subjective approaches. These include methods such as giving the subject direct access to the text (eg Helene Cixous’ *Rootprints*), selecting one aspect of the subject’s “life” (eg Toril Moi’s *Simone de Beauvoir: the Making of an Intellectual Woman*) and other techniques. However, here I am discussing a writer’s construction of a subject as a person which, however constructive and positive, necessitates a degree of “criticism.”

published biography is supposedly positioned to bestow on its subjects, willing or unwilling as they may be. It is indeed possible that publication of a biography could have given some further public validation to her work and public reputation. It is also likely that my subject would have validated the published document however deconstructive it turned out to be, or at least have seen it as a useful process. Less positive results are also predictable, even with a well-intentioned document, and especially with a book about the rather fraught political arena in which my subject worked. For my part, my ethical concerns about Anon and others achieved the best feminist non-violence that I could manifest over a difficult situation. In deciding not to publish, I hoped to protect my subject from a fate to which she had apparently given consent but may not have anticipated. I certainly rescued myself from a situation that threatened my self-construction as a good feminist. Biography is an official form of biographical speech that insidiously jousts within the borders of public and private speech-forms and, therefore, with linguistic power play of the most intriguing and dangerous kind. This is not to imply that Anon's life was unduly affected because she had had any egotistical investment in further public notoriety, but she had given considerable time and energy to a project which then failed to materialise, for reasons which have no doubt remained rather obscure from her perspective.

Retrospectively, however, I am more able to articulate some reasons for withdrawal in terms of recent “postfeminist” ethics. The initial biographical contract between my subject and myself aimed for an *intersubjective* relationship, yet subjectivity became an unworkable basis for an ethical framework. Since subjectivity (unlike identity) is neither fixed nor singular, Anon’s social and political positioning varied and was (as formerly described) constantly at odds with various codes and conventions attached to her (and my) various subject positions. She was not, therefore, in a position to give *knowing* assent to my terms at the outset of the project, although she was required to do so in order to make the project viable. As an ethical feminist and biographical researcher, I, for my part, was faithful to the terms on which we had agreed; faithful to the letter and, as far as possible, to the spirit too. The overt ethics of representation were, thus, well covered from both a professional and feminist perspective.

At a personal level of inter-subjectivity, however, contractual feminist ethics proved inadequate to the question of representation. This, I conclude, is for two fundamental reasons. A notion of inter-subjectivity rests on a premise in which (in this instance) a biographical subjective and biographer respectively give and receive consent for a ‘constructive’ representation; in the case of a biography, this concerns the representation of an individual’s “life myth.” Effectively, I realised that subject was giving permission for the kind of publication she had in mind, and I was

receiving that permission for quite another. No amount of discussion or explanation between us could apparently make the situation otherwise. Anon “trusted” a working biographer not to offend her; a trust that would turn out to be misplaced if publication followed because it would construct elements of her projected self that she apparently did not foresee or necessarily agree with. Whilst I anticipated that she would give consent to the resulting manuscript (on the grounds of its being “fair”), I was not convinced that she would be emotionally unaffected. I largely based this assumption on my own intuition and on the extent to which her friends and colleagues tended to act protectively towards her, often identifying her as quite vulnerable despite a “tough” exterior. As Carolyn Polizzotto said of her subject, Elise Blumann:

I had become deeply fond of her. I would not have hurt her for the world. And yet I could not tell her story in [her] terms. (24)⁴⁰

An ethic of care demands a “no harm” result, as far as this can be anticipated. I envisaged a choice, on my part, between my lost integrity and my subject’s unspoken wishes. When she suggested that I simply go ahead and take the consequences, she tacitly claimed the right to cry betrayal at a later point, should the need arise. This was unacceptable to me. If my subject felt betrayed, then the ethic of care was not effectively in place. This would adversely affect two people simultaneously. My subject’s trust would have been misplaced and she harmed, and I would have failed

⁴⁰ A more detailed discussion of Polizzotto’s *Approaching Elise* appears in Chapter 6.

to care for myself in risking the morally clean subject position I had earned by applying a feminist ethic throughout the project.

An ethic of care requires more than a simple contract of ethical practice (Brennan 859). It requires a level of responsibility beyond that specified in an intersubjective relationship. Effectively, it requires a protective care for the good of the Other—one that, if necessary, disregards the expressed wishes of the Other for something deemed to be better in a wider picture. This extends Janet Finch's findings on feminist research (1984) or, indeed, of Ann Oakley (1982). The respondent, in order to remain unharmed, apparently needs protection not merely from the researcher but from her own cultural tradition that is intrinsically male-advantaged, and which interpellates her as doubly vulnerable and unknowing. Conversely, the researcher is interpellated as protector and, therefore, knower, perpetuating the model of expert and client in psychoanalysis to which feminists have taken such exception. This feminist model invokes a maternal approach that can obstruct self-determination and its incumbent right to decide what is best for oneself. As Brennan notes, "there are risks associated with power . . . reforms premised on relational conceptions may actually advance the perspectives and needs of those with greater privilege and authority" (871).

Nevertheless, Brennan also discusses the difference between rights and responsibilities as including one's responsibilities to oneself (872). Feminists are therefore re-evaluating contractarianism (875). If morality is a social construct, it cannot be seen as distinct from the *moral performance* that feminists, like others, choose to enact. Hence, it is not simply a question of what is right, but of what is seen to be right—or, in this case, the lesser of two evils. In different senses, it would have been wrong to continue with a publication that could possibly harm without (perhaps even with) the Other's clear consent to experience harm—disregarding the premise of consenting adults in public. But it appeared equally wrong to withdraw from publication after my adult subject had consented, on the basis of my judging her own good better than she could presumably judge it herself. This latter choice can be considered “matronising” in a negative sense of maternal care (oppression through over-protection). What perhaps prevailed in the face of this ambivalence was my responsibility to myself, in which I disavowed a contract that, as it turned out, may have constructed me as a betrayer when I had specifically been charged (and had charged myself as a feminist) with keeping trust.

This can be seen as a different version of contractarianism “which use[s] the notion of hypothetical consent [asking] what people would agree to were they appropriately informed, rational, and uncoerced” (Brennan 877). Indeed, my biographical subject was only partially informed (despite my best efforts, because she was not in a

position to anticipate a “constructively critical” biography), and contingently rational (given that she constructed my attitude to her as sisterly with all the incumbent implications of a positive representation). As for Brennan’s uncoersion, in my view Anon was coerced by the nature of biographical signification and representation, and by her structural position as a [subordinated] woman. She was also coerced by me in my role as biographer, since I skilfully elicited information that I would use according to my view and not to hers, knowing that she could not control or anticipate these uses. Alison Jagger (1993 qtd. in Brennan) problematises contractarian care by pointing out the difficulty of knowing what women would want were the world different; or, indeed, the elitism inherent in claiming that we can know what others would want under other circumstances (877).

There is even another layer to this particular ethical conundrum that is related to the question of justice in different way. A central reason for my choice of biographical subject was my intention to examine feminist-inspired social justice. Ann Anon’s work was ostensibly difference-oriented through its concept of social and political inclusion. Her activism used a model of participatory democracy to activate individuals and political or religious groups of widely varying hues to join in a non-violent trajectory for justices (both localised and global) and, therefore, peace. On some levels, and in some quarters of the peace movement, this operated in genuinely pluralist mode and took the form of *alliances* between members of widely differing

political and cultural positions. On other levels, and at other times, however, this trajectory was *assimilationist*, working on the basis that people put aside their differences to work for a single notion of justice and peace. In this, it was much like multi-cultural Australia, incorporating an international flavour at the level of variety, but ultimately demanding that “we sing with one voice.” As a lobbyist and community activist, Anon deployed alliance politics, carefully acknowledging difference. But as a Christian she frequently slipped into assimilationist/unifying rhetoric, employing terms like good and evil to justify wiping out the nuclear industry, logging and woodchipping, mining in national parks, and so forth. It was the former speech modes that alerted me to the perceived rightness of her work that, to her, was self-evident. Oppositions to this stance from within her own ranks were experienced as more devastating than oppositions clearly emanating from an opposing viewpoint. Anon had consented to an in-depth biographical project from the former perspective. There were also, as one might expect with any individual, unreconcilable splits at the level of subjectivity, and there were comparable conflicts and divisions in my own subject positions and agendas. Thus, any contract between us ultimately failed to correspond to our expectations of a feminist ethics based on an intersubjective relationship, on the grounds of *micro-differences*, and also on the grounds of limited agency driving the act of consent.

Some biographers, feminist and others, maintain firmly that they will only write about deceased subjects. This is partly a legal consideration, but it is clearly also a diplomatic/ethical one. The death of a subject offers the biographer some (though not total) release from the awkward issues raised in this chapter. Conversely, a consideration of live subjects brings these issues to the fore in a way that emphasises the full implications of feminist postmodernist biography. These implications are as follows. Firstly, identity is a social construct—specifically a textual construct, which does not exist as a pre-linguistic phenomenon (and therefore cannot be “discovered” and “revealed” by a biographical speaker/writer). Secondly, language produces reality. Therefore, texts construct value-laden realities. Thirdly, there is always a hierarchy of speech modes that often operates on a hegemonic basis. In contemporary western society, the published word holds sovereignty over the oral. Fourthly, western societies still deploy a humanist concept of truth, which is frequently termed “accuracy” or “authenticity,” on which the distinction between “fictional” and “non-fictional” writing remains operational. Finally, feminism seeks to undermine hierarchical objectivist systems because they oppress and disadvantage women. Those five factors come together in the writing of feminist biography in a way that significantly undermines the oft-declared feminist goal of subsuming formerly hidden knowledges about women’s lives. The result is a paucity of texts

written by feminist biographers that results from a substantially weakened *feminist* authority to speak⁴¹.

One explanation for my (and other) feminist dilemmas pertaining to biographical ethics is the ongoing disagreements and precariousness of a public/private dichotomy, as discussed early in this chapter. Another is ongoing confusion about the role of women's lifewriting, including and especially feminist. Despite the demise of medieval hagiography, the chronicle of praise haunts feminist work to this day. It is a fine thing for Maurois to say that great lives ultimately transcend private misdemeanors (50) and, indeed, to invoke Edmond Grosse's observation that the biography is the faithful portrait of a soul in its adventures through life (44). The [post]modern woman's biography has exchanged the unproblematic grandeur of "portrayal" for the political and literary imperative of cultural construction. Moreover, the [post]modern woman's soul is decidedly more fragmented and conflicted than that of the great modern man, reflecting (if anything) the fragmentation of many greatneses and failures that no longer operate *a priori*. Nevertheless, media attention conceivably yields "stars" but rarely "heroes,"

⁴¹ Again, I stress here that I am not advocating the unmitigated right of women writers to speak for others. Post-colonial politics of representation rightly inhibit universal authorities. However, this thesis argues the importance of noting the inhibition of women's authorities to speak and write, even within stringently applied ethical guidelines. I further argue that this kind of inhibition within "liberationist" movements all too easily fits the kinds of non-assertive behaviours that apply to subordinated subjectivities to their own political disadvantage. The writer acknowledges the fine lines that must be drawn in interpreting these remarks in such a way as to avoid any inference of reactionary political views.

although validation remains the implied promise. My own project offered “appreciation,” and possibly “constructive criticism,” but even that came at a cost to the biographical subject which was not entirely justifiable to the individual on the grounds of a feminist ethic of non-violence.

Since biography operates very much at the level of subjectivity (now seen to be fragmented, contradictory, conflicted and subject to imaginative production), its “non-fictional” premise is decidedly at the base of its decline in feminist and scholarly demise. Yet, also at the level of subjectivity, the need for effective, relatively authentic and ethical representations of the feminist Other is without doubt. Popular culture has no apparent problem with maintaining its commitment to Greats and Stars and, indeed, with constructing hoards of highly problematic role models for which feminists currently offer little in the way of assertive redress. In these terms, it is clear that emancipatory and liberationist responsibilities by no means dissolved with the major institutional successes of the women’s movement.

The final chapter reviews the issues that imperil feminist-inspired representations of women’s lives, discusses some relatively recent women’s biographical texts, and considers the implications for the future of postfeminist biography.

Chapter 6

In Practice:

Towards a Representational Future in

Speaking About Others

WOMEN!

Should be a priority, respected and upheld in society

Given all the proper notoriety

Never used or abused by authority

WOMEN! Should be a priority

(From a rap song by Aisha Khall & Nitanju Bolade Casel

of "Sweet Honey In The Rock")

Women, like men, speak and write about others constantly. In our narrative forms we invoke external referents to construct some kind of common realities with people of the same cultural groups. Often we feel the need to transcend cultural differences (which can function as barriers) and search for referents or models which are simply "human." Perhaps people manifest more qualities that unite them than divide them, or perhaps this is an illusion perpetuated by biographical speech. But the constant searching and testing, constructing and reconstructing that we enact through

biography supports the view expressed by a character in the film *Shadowlands*, that “we read to know we are not alone.” We also write to know we are not alone.

So when we write we reach out for contact, however tentative. Moreover, this wish for contact is also a socially creative act (or at least one of social reinforcement) wherein we construct and reconstruct systems that produce bonds with others. Whether or not external referents are invoked in our speech acts, we selectively seek out models of subjectivity that help us discover, test and establish norms. We construct models, whether by speaking or listening, reading or writing, which help us to set boundaries and limits, and also which imaginatively push us beyond those limits to let us explore potential futures beyond our immediate reach. And, of course, we write, and speak, to exert power—in effect to construct ourselves as authoritative. Communication is a social business, whether physical or imaginative or both; it is also inevitably political. Terrell Carver says, “biography is not a window on the past, but a political act in the present” (79). Life experience and political thought are inseparable, and biographical narratives connect the two in meaning making ways (99).

The final chapter discusses the politics of authority in speaking about others. This leads to a provisional construction of feminist biographical speech, elucidating the features presently endemic to a postfeminist ethic of representation. Then, taking up

the literary theme of the first chapter, a sample of contemporary women's biography is reviewed and is followed by a consideration as to whether these revisionist approaches to life-storying offer, or begin to offer, the basis of feminist textual authority in the light of a radical split between the self that writes and the self that is written (Marcus 183). And finally, I return to the original driving force of life-storying: the desire for narrative itself, in order to question what is justifiable and unjustifiable in the pursuit of biographical narrative.

Chinese Whispers versus The Power of Naming: An Overview of Women's Biographical Speech

Chinese Whispers is a children's game that trades in confused and confusing messages. Its title draws on a western image of eastern culture as something almost deliberately unintelligible, mysterious, and filled with dark secrets that move beyond the realms of what is demonstrably real and true. This concept is the polar opposite to western empiricism which, instead, gives value to what is concrete, visible, rational and ostensibly provable. That which is clear, hard and bright is good; that which is dark, moist and misty is evil. Similarly, what is permanent and indestructible is good, what is transient, relative, contingent is bad. Thus, women's private gossip is seen as destructive at worst and trivial at best; whereas the (supposedly enduring) facts of science are monuments to the progress of Mankind.

I have argued earlier that women's gossip, which is a long-favoured networking outlet for suppressed conflict and a leveller of differences is subversive to, but also complicit with, structures of subordination. Gossip and other oral narrative forms (for example, oral histories and storytelling) in patriarchal societies cannot, arguably should not, compete for authority with published written forms. However, this is not to suggest that women should exclusively adopt more overtly sanctioned forms in order to gain collective public authority. Oral speech forms are also creative and transgressive, and part of a cultural experience that has a valid place within cultural histories. That certain practices become marginalised and trivialised does not mean they are in themselves trivial.

Moreover, I have shown that there is a genuine place for secrets in people's lives—for information that is shared by a few, and to which certain others are denied access. Secrets provide the shadow from the glare of a stronger, overarching power. Not everything can be named, and what can and should be named requires discretion, timing, appropriate speech forms and suitable contexts. Some cultural stories are designed to forge bonds between certain group members: between women, for example, or between mothers or young people. Some stories are designed to protect. To force the inappropriate telling of such secrets is to rupture those bonds, to enact violence. Some stories need to be told with conviction, others to be whispered to selected audiences.

The majority of feminists want to preserve and honour women's work, women's relationships, women's pleasures in all their forms. But, at the same time, it is necessary to recognise that the acquisition of authority—indeed of power—in what we still must call the public sector, necessitates certain changes, and thus certain losses, to the women who pursue it and, ultimately, to women generally. When and as the changes to women's identity unfold, they bring new styles and values. We must build into our practices an awareness that change happens differently to different women and is not a linear trajectory of all feminisms.

This analysis of women's authority in biographical speech has interrogated the problematics of ethically telling each other's stories, and even those of our own which implicate the construction of external referents. The use of oral histories as an official means of accessing women's narratives is certainly a welcome move towards reducing the hierarchy of published over written and written over oral forms. In terms of authority, however, this is a reduction or concession rather than a fundamental change in the status of linguistic forms. Moreover, the politics and ethics of feminist biographical speech apply, to some degree, to all forms of speaking about others. We must, then, consider the basis of these political factors.

Feminist Biography: The Needs, Restraints, Pleasures and Uses of Telling

Contemporary feminist biography is, more frequently than not, described as a

challenge. Feminist biography amounts to a plethora of conflicting responsibilities and pleasures, the complexities of which only seem to increase with time and discussion. In their introduction to *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, editors Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Israels Perry and Ingrid Winther Scobie say that “feminist biographers are not only restoring ‘invisible’ women to the record but enlarging our perspective of the record” (6). They claim that this change tends to occur automatically because “when the subject is female, gender moves to the centre of the analysis” and that “this is true even when a woman is unaware of or inarticulate about the effects of gender on her life” (7). Alpern *et al* say this happens because women’s lives necessarily implicate an emphasis on the private, thereby inverting the established focus on “public” (read masculinist) achievement. Inversion, however, creates its own dilemmas:

A woman’s struggle sometimes to fuse, sometimes to sever, the private and public dimensions of her life is one of feminist biography’s most important themes. But, in unravelling the strands of that struggle, because of our personal involvement in our subjects’ lives, [feminist biographers] also felt more conflicted about revelations that violated their privacy. One of our essayists tells of a dream in which she appeared as a mugger. Others worry that the very act of appropriating another’s life infringes on the subject’s privacy, perhaps even violating her identity.

(Alpern *et al* 11)

The will to produce feminist biography is underpinned by a need to avoid exploitation of the subject. Other significant factors are the rejection of an objective

truth and of an individualist approach to identity in favour of an emphasis on the social formation of subjectivity.

We may ask, are not these also concerns of male contemporary (postmodernist) biographers? Alpern *et al* concede that biographers in general face such challenges in the light of the disunified subject. However, biographies of women pose additional problems unique to the genre, due to the political agenda of feminism to support and maintain the welfare of women as individuals and as a gender group. Nevertheless, some feminist biographers see these as problems to be addressed *during* the writing of women's lives, and not by the avoidance of this task:

Although biography, by focusing on one person, may exaggerate the importance of individuals in history, we would argue that feminist biography not only expands our knowledge about women's lives but alters the frameworks within which we interpret historical experience. Writing the lives of the women in this book, for example, has led the contributors to reconceptualize many facets of twentieth-century political life, including the advent of the welfare state, the processes of formal and informal education, labor history, and the history of racism and of the avant garde, among other major topics. For all of us, then, the engagement with biography has been significant in several important ways. It has helped us illuminate the lives of vanished or obscured individual women, our own experience, and the broadest reaches of women's history and of historical change in general. (Alpern *et al* 13)

This argument says that a focus on the particular is a necessary gateway to an understanding of the universal; that in telling an individual woman's life we gain insights into women's lives but also into conflicts within our own individual life. This curious swing from the particular to the general and back to the particular is certainly connected with the function of writing and reading "to know we are not alone." To make specific links between our lives and the lives of other individual women is to make links between the self and society in a way that is not readily possible through, for example, the genre of social history. In its focus on the individual biography can work in relatively fine detail and, of course, on specific instances and contexts. The particular is grounded in the material whereas the general is an abstraction. This has obvious connotations of foundationalist/universalist thought, and yet it is also applicable to broad brush-strokes of culture-specific subjectivities which are clearly socially, and not individually, constructed.

Dee Garrison endorses this social vision of feminist politics inherent in feminist biography. She observes that feminist scholars are more likely to highlight the intersection of public and private, to "rely on knowledge of gender-specific social constructions to shape the central pattern in their work" (77) and, thus, to foreground gender as a central factor of agency. Finally, gender-specific constructions can also highlight diversity in women's lives, so that lesbians, women of colour and "working" classes are not simply "included" in history but can take an active part in

its construction. Not only is feminist biography necessary, says Garrison, but “women’s lives are the very foundation of feminist theory” (77). In the same volume, Kathryn Kish Sklar sums up feminist biography thus:

One possible difference between a feminist work process and that of a nonfeminist biography might be the degree to which a feminist biographer is willing to connect her work with the vulnerabilities and struggles associated with her own life. (32)

Thus, feminist biographers [re]construct the category of “women” through forging links between one woman’s life and others at the level of subjectivity.

Feminist biography works towards both personal emancipation (in providing inspirational models) and the building of a sense of communality (in shaping a sense of gendered experience). This assertiveness exists also in process of naming – another effect of biographical speech that Linda Wagner-Martin says is the basis of authority:

What is at stake here is, in fact, the process of being able to define both art and its categorization. As countless feminist critics and historians have suggested in past decades, the power to name is at the real seat of control. (80)

Whilst Wagner-Martin recognises the need for discretion and a deep consideration of personal needs for privacy, she views secrecy and silence as failures to act with authority, to the cost of women in general:

Particularly for biography of women, whose private lives have often been marked with such events as abuse, rape, and psychological manipulation, allowing discussion of painful subjects has been useful—even crucial. [Joyce] Oates’s complaints about the biographer’s focus on “dysfunction and disaster” discount the fact that many women’s stories include such elements. (79)

In addition, seemingly ordinary facts of women’s lives have been neglected, even hidden from view, with the result that women have been confused or made ashamed about them:

History proves that cultural focus on issues of propriety and suitability usually turns back on women’s art and women’s themes in writing. Most obviously, in women’s writing and art, readers object to unseemly body parts and such physical processes as menstruation. They also face the conundrum of names or, more accurately, the need to rename. Feminist writers through the past fifty years have called for renaming, yet cultural patterns have changed only slightly. (82)

Thus, “speaking out” has a material function in the creation of a social authority:

Naming has given the world a vocabulary for [such] unmentionable subjects. (82)

Moreover, Kathleen Jones points out narrative is fundamental to this process:

Talk about action consists of “stories” we reconstruct after the fact, which are always representations. And as representations they are practices of authority; that is, they augment action by re-telling it. (211)

The exercise of the power of disclosure, which women's friendships have long enacted in private, is indeed a powerful one. Women's silence, and the negative results of such, are a constant motif in feminist writings. Conversely, women's naming exposes patriarchal constructions of masculine norms.

However, not every woman whose lifestory "demands" to be told is willing or able to tell it herself. And not every feminist writer wants to tell her own story. Moreover, the act of autobiography clearly incorporates the telling of other people's stories and even if it did not, strictly individualist claims to "experience" are inherently conservative and work against a collective authority of women:

If everyone is speaking for and about herself, then how can we articulate, without subverting this practice, any collective goals? (Jones 217)

Perhaps even more significantly, we would not then be reading or writing to know we are not alone. If we were alone in our experiences, what, then, would be the point of reading about other people's specificities? Conversely, if we attempt, as Jones suggests, to loosen our possessive grips on individual experience, we open up a world of narrative possibilities to the feminist biographer and potential readers of feminist biography. In doing so, as Wagner-Martin proposes, we take control of women's stories and increasingly avail ourselves of new opportunities to challenge patriarchal values.

The production of feminist biography, then, remains a significant utopian project within a movement that has, at its base, a notion of equity that is inevitably utopian. But to what extent can the production of biographical texts continue to be seen as ethical activism in a political climate of difference? The power of naming may well benefit women collectively, although not necessarily. (As Janet Finch has pointed out, information about women can also be used against their collective interests [83]). But what about the interests of the individual woman, whose privacy or the privacy of her friends and family is ruptured, or her/their sense of self violated? To what extent, in Gilligan's terms of reference, is a broad ethic of care viable with regard to the authority of the biographer? What can we, in fact, make of Kathleen Jones' contradictory suggestions that, on the one hand, we must share ownership of experience and avoid "rushing to put up fences to keep others out" (232) and, on the other, her last-minute equivocation that:

Maybe "speaking for" is a position we will need to abandon even when the ones we are speaking for are "like" us, at least according to our wishes and needs. (242)

Even if the biographer consciously avoids using a sovereign voice-over, s/he invariably constructs a dominant representation that, to some degree, asserts a truth fixed in time. Is this, in fact, an inevitable side effect of signification that must be minimised but endured? If so, whose rights can and should prevail?

In pondering such questions in the next section, I will discuss some specific feminist revisionist biographies, consider their contribution to the power of naming that Wagner-Martin considers necessary to feminism and evaluate the extent to which they may have achieved a non-violent process and effect in representing women's lives.

Voices of Experience: Formal Representations of Women's Lives

For the purposes of this analysis I have chosen seven biographical texts which represent a range of approaches to the task of speaking about a significant other. These are, in order of discussion: Brenda Maddox's *Nora: A Biography of Nora Joyce* (1988); Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachments* (1987); Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* (1990); Carolyn Polizzotto's *Approaching Elise* (1988); Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987); Janet Malcom's *The Silent Woman* (1994) and Toril Moi's *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (1994). These reflect, at least to some extent, the collective determination of women writers to address the political and ethical issues of writing women's lives which poststructuralist feminisms present.

I begin with Maddox's life of Nora Joyce because this, of the seven, is the most classical approach to biography, except that it seeks to redress a patriarchal wrong to Nora by biographers of her husband James Joyce. She was often overlooked or

discarded as unimportant, sometimes actively disparaged since, as Maddox wryly observes, “Joyce was extraordinary. Nora was ordinary” (3). Though a rich and complex portrait of Nora emerges from Maddox’s research and narrative skills, the biographer never minimises Nora’s ordinariness. Indeed, she makes of it a virtue, presenting Nora in the traditional sense of lacking individual public distinction through heroic or academic/artistic achievements and the like, but also celebrating her qualities of earthiness and outspoken authenticity which others could like or dislike as they saw fit. Maddox’s Nora emerges quickly and dynamically as an “unrefined” but strong and intelligent woman, whose physicality is part of her emphatic presence. She is capable at once of enormous devotion to her famous and gifted husband but unafraid of making demands, setting limits or manipulating his emotional and sexual needs when she chooses. Nora manages Joyce, not the other way around, as indeed, according to Maddox and others, he needs and even seeks. Nora is the archetypal lover/mother. Thus, a feminist biographer is deftly able to present a mere wife as a central figure in the story of a couple, when seen from an emotional/interpersonal/psychoanalytic perspective of heterosexual partnership and family life. Moreover, Maddox achieves this apparently without padding or stretching the known life because she brings to it both a feminist perception of women as significant in their own right and, also, the imaginative enthusiasm of a good narrator. Nevertheless, as a classic-style biography, *Nora* is inarguably a voice-over approach, merely substituting male biographers’ sovereign authorities for

a female version of same. We can therefore argue that this is a revisionist biography only in the sense that it brings a woman's life to the fore (and thus challenges male supremacy in the construction of what is laudable), and not because it in any way revises the traditional elitism of textual authority.

In contrast, Vivian Gornick's story of her relationship with her mother attempts a textual revision by writing what is largely her own experience and not the experience of a separate other. It is a markedly feminist enterprise because it displays many important features of feminist writings but there is no overt feminism in the narrative voice. *Fierce Attachments* is subtitled *A Memoir*, and is about the writer's relationship with her mother and with her mother's life as they each conceive it to be. The text explores and describes the paradoxical qualities of an intense mother-daughter relationship:

My relationship with my mother is not good, and as our lives accumulate it often seems to worsen. We are locked into a narrow channel of acquaintance, intense and binding. For years at a time there is an exhaustion, a kind of softening, between us. Then the rage comes up again, hot and clear, erotic in its power to compel attention. These days it is bad between us. (6)

The attachment is fiercely bad and fiercely good, but always powerful:

I absorbed the feel of her words, soaked up every accompanying gesture and expression, every complicated bit of impulse and interest. Mama thinking everyone around was undeveloped, and most of what they said

was ridiculous, became imprinted on me like dye on the most receptive of materials. (12)

The resulting “memoir” is the story of the writing process, as much as the story of her mother’s life. It becomes an exploration of the two women’s interwoven identities. Gornick becomes, through the act of writing, the repository of her mother’s life, as the character of her “self” says in the book. The two parallel stories: that of Gornick’s developing identity through this process, and that of her mother’s past life, are suitably interwoven and presented in fragmented time-frames. The text presents an active merger of biography and autobiography; the author is infinitely subjective and self-constructed (also socially constructed). It suggests that because identities are constructed, whether directly or indirectly, through narrative, then they unfold over time, but not linear time. Finally, but not exhaustively, it focuses specifically on women’s relationships, capturing the pain and force of merged attachment in women over (at least) two generations of one family group. Unfortunately, the narrative’s shift in focus to the author’s relationship with lovers seems rather self-indulgent and unconnected to the main theme.

However, this is a book of beautifully articulated insights into the construction of a woman’s identity through family narrative on a variety of levels. The focus on attachment is a vital one in feminist work since, as we have seen, attachment is at the root of women’s joyful connectedness and enormous difficulty in a confident

worldly autonomy both within and beyond immediate relationships. Gornick's approach asserts "feminist authority" for several reasons. Firstly, it appears as a published work and thus creates the author as publicly authoritative. Secondly, it demonstrates that this authority is feminist-inspired, through its content and style. Thirdly, it foregrounds problems with the formation of individual identity and with the validity of a sovereign truth. And fourthly, it both draws on and reflects the social/collaborative process of narrative. Gornick writes her mother's story with her mother's permission and, indeed, at her mother's request. However, this approach fails to avoid "speaking for" her mother (ostensibly the textual subject), since Gornick's word is, of course, the last one, despite the writer's purposeful downplay of author-ity.

A different approach to the mother-daughter theme is to be found in Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy*. This book adroitly avoids naming its genre and, instead, leads the reader into a continuing speculation about fact and fiction. It is dedicated by Modjeska to her mother who apparently "never kept a diary," an intriguing revelation since *Poppy* is at least partly autobiographical, though the narrator/protagonist is named Lalage, and the story is based on Lalage's mother's diaries. We might construe it as a novel, save for the publisher's blurb on the back cover:

In this book, Drusilla Modjeska sets out to collect the evidence of her

mother's life. But when the facts refuse to give up their secrets, she follows the threads of history and memory into imagination. There she teases out the story of Poppy, who married at twenty and sang to her children until, suddenly one day in 1959, she was taken away to a sanatorium. . . . In accepting the force of both history and fiction, the biographer becomes as vulnerable as her subject, drawing the reader into her reflections on the resilience of love, and on the nature of family, faith and friendship.

Poppy thus pursues some of the techniques established in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, playing with the concepts and styles of biography and fiction. Again, this is feminist work because it explores the lives and relationships of women—notably a mother and daughter—and between fact and fiction, self and others. It also overtly pursues other feminist themes such as silence and voice; sanity and insanity, the aberrant nature of women (“is there something monstrous at the heart of femininity?”) (116), inter-generational links between women and the connection between women's writing and their propensity for connectedness. (“I've never believed my life has happened unless I've had someone to tell it to”) (265). Neither the author nor the subject offers reliable truths. Says the narrator:

Perhaps everything I have written, every memory I have presented to you is equally unreliable. Maybe all I have succeeded in mapping is not Poppy but my own neuroses. This is not an avenue of thought I wish to pursue. (233)

Also, the authorial voice varies throughout the text. Sometimes the autobiographical and subjective “I” is used. Sometimes the narrator disappears from the text, apparently allowing Poppy to speak through her diary voice. Sometimes the narrator becomes a novelist, offering fictional or fictionalised dialogue in place of biographical prose. And sometimes the narrator becomes an objective voice-over, giving us the benefit of her authoritative insights and interrogations of political/historical contexts:

History does not move in straight lines, it is fractured and uneven and runs off at tangents. The temptation is to talk as if the chronology went somewhere, and changes have clear derivations and destinations. The pattern that emerges as I think back through Poppy’s life, and the drama of this modest family, doesn’t take anyone on to a triumphant future.

(90)

Poppy differs from the preceding two biographical texts in that the use of semi-fiction deliberately makes a nonsense of the search for an unproblematic referent outside of the text. One might say that this betrays the verisimilitude owed to the “real” Poppy, if she exists, or alternatively that Modjeska has side-stepped the moral dilemmas implied in the public discussion of the private lives of members of her family. Modjeska both “owns” the experience and is thus an inside witness to her story, and yet stands outside of it. By means of the “characters’” fictional names, the readers may guess at actual events and persons whose stories have inspired Modjeska’s book, but “real” persons are also protected as is, indeed, the

autobiographer, if that is what she is. Therefore, it could be said that this is a politically and ethically correct auto/biographical text in both postmodernist and feminist terms. If it fails at all in these terms, it is perhaps by “cheating.” Rather than resolving the textual dilemmas of non-fictional representations of women’s lives, it sidesteps them by refusing to declare where it stands on the boundaries between actual persons and fictional characters and events. This boundary may be disposable in “art,” but not always in other forms such as journalism and, indeed, biography.

Carolyn Polizzotto’s biography of West Australian artist Elise Blumann confronts these problems head-on and exposes them, though the writer declares herself unable to resolve them. *Approaching Elise* also utilises the subject’s diaries, but it is as though Polizzotto reproduces large extracts from them as a last resort, having failed to persuade her subject to speak openly to her and been unable to permit herself to speak for Elise. Polizzotto was heavily criticised for giving this impression of biographical failure. Janet Malcolm lucidly describes this phenomenon:

Every now and then, a biography comes along that strangely displeases the public. Something causes the reader to back away from the writer and refuse to accompany him down the corridor. What the reader has usually heard in the text—what has alerted him (*sic*) to danger—is the sound of doubt, the sound of a crack opening in the wall of the biographer’s self-assurance. . . . A biographer ought not to introduce doubts about the legitimacy of the biographical enterprise. The

biography-loving public does not want to hear that biography is a flawed genre. It prefers to believe that certain biographers are bad guys. (9-10)

That is to say, the hegemonic reflex to any visible workings of ideology in a text is to pretend that the individual is lacking rather than to acknowledge the problematics of “truth” and “expertise.” *Approaching Elise*, however, openly explores such deficiencies and anomalies in the genre of biography. It relies heavily on the biographer’s wistful ruminations about her difficulties to gain Elise’s trust, together with her own unwillingness to betray her subject. What makes it interesting is that Polizzotto is specifically and centrally concerned with different versions of the truth and the moral responsibilities that go with her biographical authority:

Elise wanted the official version of her life as a painter to remain intact. I wanted to explore her life as a woman; and never mind what that did to her public persona. I believed that, once she read my words, she would be as willing as I was to discard that persona in the interests of a greater truth. I refused for a moment to entertain the possibility that my truth might not be hers. (18)

In the interests of Elise’s streamlined and sanitised truth, the biographer “had a sense of losing my bearings as the tensions between her public and private lives were smoothed away as though they had never existed” (20). This, in effect, is a feminist writer who discovered she had not chosen a feminist subject: indeed, a postmodernist writer whose writer’s worldview was inscribed with an ungendered humanism. Elise herself wanted a traditional biography that would yield the textual seamless “Life”

she envisaged retrospectively from her acknowledged achievements as an artist. She was at a genuine loss to know why her biographer would not get on with the job of producing this. Finally, unwilling to confess herself beaten or to refuse to go ahead with the project, Polizzotto did the best she could with the material to which she had access, stepped back and let the subject take centre stage in her own words.

Some might consider that this book should never have been published because it fails to engage fully with its chosen task. But others may applaud it for its willingness to reveal the struggle, gaps and flaws of the biographical process which, once begun, can neither go backwards or forwards with honour unless it “sells out” in either feminist or deconstructionist terms, or both. As a would-be biographer who relinquished the task in hand, I found in this text my own professional dilemmas precisely articulated, whether or not I gained much from textual insights into Elise as artist or woman. Polizzotto had apparently refused to validate her subject’s considerable status as a successful artist and neither had she not delivered an in-depth “portrait” which would satisfy her readers need to know. The conundrum of feminist ethics, on which Polizzotto had ultimately focused, was a “problem” of production and not a founding issue at the heart of the text.

Of the seven books described herein, Sally Morgan’s *My Place* alone claims to be neither autobiography, biography nor even a feminist text. Neither does it present

entirely as an Aboriginal or white Australian text, a woman's story, nor even an individualist focus on an artist or celebrity. It does not foreground individual achievement at all, nor does it employ very sophisticated or intellectual or particularly "writerly" techniques, yet it makes fascinating reading. *My Place* is a groundbreaking non-fictional published story of Aboriginal experience, and remains a uniquely charming and very disturbing collection of the "layered" stories of three generations. Its uniqueness and enormous success were partly due to the seemingly artless storytelling talents of first-published writer, Perth artist Sally Morgan, and partly due to the devastating revelations for a (mostly white) readership of the reality of very recent and ongoing Aboriginal oppression by white Australia. The first part of the book is written as an autobiographical retelling of Morgan's journey of discovery from an unspecified "foreign" identity to Anglo-Aboriginal parenthood. Morgan reveals that the mystery behind her birth-origins is because her mother and grandmother feared the children's removal from their care, should their Aboriginality become known. It is a very moving story of cultural oppression, as the readers, alongside Morgan, gradually come to a realisation of the real horror behind the family secrets: the forced removal of Morgan's mother, Gladys Corunna, at the age of three, from her own Aboriginal mother. Once Morgan's discovery is complete, she goes on to tell of her self-appointed task as scribe or mouthpiece for the stories of Arthur and Daisy. (Gladys wrote her own story.) Thus, "the author" moves aside to give her subjects (almost) direct access to the readership.

This book is very useful to feminists because it offers, if not a feminist experience, a comparable account of racial oppression through the manipulation of identity. Morgan's search for information is a search for self through others, and for unity with others through the construction of a self-narrative. It is neither politically constrained nor politically empowered (except, perhaps, for its publication and ultimate success as an international best seller). It simply does what it has to do, and says what it must say, in order to bring clarity and comfort to those in similar situations or to those disadvantaged by racist discourses. It is very rare to find a reader who has not enjoyed this book and who has not been moved by its dreadful revelations of a people's cultural dispossession in their own country during a time of apparent peace and prosperity.

At first reading, Morgan appeared to be exercising an unopposed freedom to tell both her own story and the stories of other Aboriginal people. On the surface, the book seems relatively uncontroversial, since the secrecy ruptured by Morgan is a result and symptom of now-discarded colonial racist policies, if legislative reform is anything to go by. Indeed, *My Place* quickly rated best-seller status and international popularity. However, "new" Aboriginal identities are sometimes treated as suspect. Morgan was ignorant of her Aboriginality until adulthood. Meantime, she received a university education and other supposedly privileged trappings of white middle-classes. Thus, Morgan's work and, significantly, the authority to produce and sell it,

are closely linked with her identity—an issue that becomes more visible in connection with race than with gender.⁴² Morgan continues to paint and write as an Aboriginal person. *My Place* is often discussed by undergraduates and writing students as providing a useful example of the intersection between women's issues and issues of race. It highlights many issues of feminist textuality, rather than directly addressing or resolving them.

My sixth choice, Janet Malcom's *The Silent Woman: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath*, has been discussed in Chapter One as an example of revisionist biography. It is mentioned here because its unusual approach to speaking about others is worth considering as a possible means of foregrounding what Susan J. Hekman calls "discursive morality." Unlike the previous five biographical texts, *The Silent Woman* discusses not so much the life but the "afterlife" of its subject, American poet and writer, Sylvia Plath, whose estate is controlled by her widower, poet Ted Hughes and his sister Olwyn Hughes. The result is both a critique of the process of biography and a simultaneous biography of Plath's biographers. Malcolm's innovative approach "gets around" the question of whether biography itself is a legitimate enterprise, by discussing various textual realities that followed Plath's

⁴² Similar debates about the identity of artists and writers, and their authority to utilise a public "voice," have arisen recently in connection with Helen Demidenko/Darville and Elizabeth Durack/Eddie Burrup. Cultural identity is invariably political (as in the assumption of male pen names by nineteenth-century women writers, such as the Brontë sisters, George Sands and George Elliott).

suicide, in the sense that these biographical processes incorporated dealings of various biographers with the managers of Plath's literary estate. Thus, the issues skip a generation, as it were, from subject's life and work, to subject's heirs and biographers.

This approach to biography seems to be a very promising one, as it moves the debate onto a less personal, more discursive level of published (and publishable) information. Ian Hamilton, as a formerly embattled biographer of J.D. Salinger, has taken up this theme in a different way in *Keepers of the Flame*, a book about the literary estates of biographical subjects. But Malcolm is also speaking about the mythological estate of Plath. She is thus, as a kind of biographer (but rather more as a journalist discussing biography), free to speculate about the construction and implications of Plath's life and work.

However, although Malcom avoided producing an actual biography of Sylvia Plath or of anyone else, it was apparently not for fear of giving offence. She is a scathing critic of many of the people she discusses. Whilst Malcolm confines her remarks to professional lives, her comments are no less personal or judgmental for all that. Indeed, though this is a remarkable and expertly written book, Malcolm is somewhat ungenerous towards other professional women and even other biographers (though Malcolm seems not to include herself in this generic category). In particular, Linda

Wagner-Martin and Jacqueline Rose attract rather unflattering remarks. Wagner-Martin was sufficiently stung to include a response to Malcom in the subsequently-published *Telling Women's Lives*, when she spoke of being “battered from dealings with [Plath's] hostile estate” (ix). She mentioned “Janet Malcom's highly subjective exploration of the various Plath biographies—and biographers—[which] recast a number of issues about biography in general” (x). Wagner-Martin concluded that “telling a woman's life [has] become a dangerous cultural and literary project” (ix). Jacqueline Rose is constructed as intelligent, cold, and stuffily academic (172-83). But although Malcolm sees her as “serious and worthy” (176), she is both dismissive and disapproving of Rose's seemingly cold-blooded, politically-correct intellectualism (“her fur sleek and a few feathers still around her mouth” [187]).

In terms of feminist politics, *The Silent Woman* represents an opportunity for a biographer to analyse a subject discursively. This could have taken a number of forms. For example the biographer could have discussed what has been publicly said or construed “on the surface” about the subject, avoiding investigation into her personal life or avoiding undue speculation on her relationships (though this might make quite dull reading). Or, the biographer could have discussed the subject in terms of being the locus of a discursive grid (though this reduces her to a mere object of discourse). However, Malcolm would probably (correctly) scorn such a restrained

approach to the vibrant possibilities of biography, the subjective nature of which is surely the point:

Writing cannot be done in a state of desirelessness. The pose of fair-mindedness, the charade of evenhandedness, the striking of an attitude of detachment can never be more than rhetorical ruses; if they were genuine, if the writer actually didn't care one way or the other how things came out he [*sic*] would not bestir himself to represent them. (Malcolm 176)

And Malcolm unequivocally holds to her stand in *The Silent Woman*:

As the reader knows, I, too, have taken a side—that of the Hugheses and Anne Stevenson—and I, too, draw on my sympathies and antipathies and experiences to support it. (177)

Perhaps it is the clear evidence of Malcolm's sympathies and antipathies that make her book somewhat unpalatable, although in theory it is difficult to argue with the virtues of such an approach. Indeed, I have tacitly argued for it throughout this thesis. Thus, this is a formidable and worthy piece of work that presents the basis of a new and promising biographical form, moderated by more compassion and sensitivity towards those discussed, no doubt at the risk of sacrificing some boldness and honesty displayed.

Finally, in *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, Toril Moi has produced another kind of discursive model which is considerably more academic and

less literary in style than *The Silent Woman*. Moi deftly and painstakingly sets her (formerly well known and much-discussed) subject within the various discursive settings which create “an intellectual woman” of her culture. Moi is thus free to speculate on de Beauvoir in particular, and women in general, with political impunity:

Whether or not they choose to turn their intellectual interests into a profession, such women know what it means to take pleasure in thought. More often than not they also know that powerful strands of patriarchal ideology hold that such pleasures are not made for them: one does not have to have a PhD to fear that an active interest in intellectual matters will label one a blue-stocking or a dried-up schoolmarm. Nor is it unusual for intellectual women to have a difficult time with their mothers, or to develop what Michele le Doeuff has called ‘erotico-theoretical transference relations’ with male intellectual figures. In these and many other respects, Simone de Beauvoir’s experiences are far from unique. (3)

However, this does not prevent the biographer from discussing the individual:

But I am not studying Simone de Beauvoir only because she is an emblematic intellectual woman. . . . To write about Simone de Beauvoir without taking *The Second Sex* seriously is to refuse to take her seriously as a philosopher, as a feminist and as an intellectual woman. (3)

However, note the term “intellectual woman” as opposed simply to “woman.” The qualifying adjective places the emphasis on de Beauvoir’s professional life, as opposed to her gendered subjectivity as an individual.

Moi is not so much interested in writing biography as personal genealogy:

Genealogy . . . seeks to achieve a sense of emergence or production and to understand the complex play of different kinds of power involved in social phenomena. Personal genealogy does not reject the notion of the 'self' or the subject but tries instead to subject that very self to genealogical investigation. (7)

Moreover, "there is nothing reductive about this procedure" (7). On the contrary, Moi says that much more reductive are biographical efforts to reduce de Beauvoir's achievements "to mere effects of her personal circumstances" (5). Thus, she reads de Beauvoir as an individual locus surrounded and constructed by a number of socially produced "texts" (effectively discursively produced phenomena). This will not result in a seamless or unified individual self but rather the task of the "personal genealogist" is to identify elements in the discursive network surrounding her subject, and identifying some of their main "points of tension, contradictions and similarities" (7). The result is an impressive, if somewhat exclusive and, at times, a little protracted, exploration of the simultaneous life and cultural times of Simone de Beauvoir.

This is certainly an approach that goes a long way to solving the political dilemmas of feminist biography. However, it does not amount to a technique which can, or should, totally replace the literary art of biography. To begin with, this academic approach demands a subject whose life and work is very well documented. It is

framed in, and for, a relatively academic audience. De Beauvoir was primarily an intellectual and political woman, whose private life was quite public most of the time. Moi is able to draw on the extensive writings about de Beauvoir and the question of invasion does not really arise in this particular case as de Beauvoir's life and work have already been biographically plundered many times over. In addition, de Beauvoir's life, work, politics and personal relationships are firmly established as interconnected. That the personal is political has never been truer than is the case in this woman's life and work, regardless of the conflicts and contradictions that subsequently became evident. Thus, Moi's personal genealogy constitutes only one possible model of feminist revisionist biography, but one that is not applicable to all needs of feminist lifewriting.

These seven texts exemplify a range of current efforts of women writers to produce effective and subject-friendly textual lives of other women. They represent a sample of serious engagements with the conflicts that the process of biography creates for feminists. Yet each individual text, like each individual writer and subject, is inevitably flawed and only partially successful in terms of the self-appointed task of representing women in a simultaneously intriguing, honest and just way. They indicate that women writers have not given up the attempt to produce something we may still call feminist biography, but also that the road to biography continues to be a challenging one for feminists.

The Impetus of Women's Biographical Writing: Narrative and Desire

At this stage of the critical analysis of the biographical impulse, it is productive to take up Janet Malcom's point that the act of writing is driven by desire. Taken though it is from a psychoanalytical discourse of subjectivity, desire is comparable to the quality of imagination, to which postmodernism is so indebted for its notion of performativity. The recognition of desire as part of a technology of the self is deeply relevant to biographical representation. Ira Bruce Nadel elaborates on this psychoanalytic view of the biographical process, for both writers and readers:

In its process of demythologising and creating myth, biography parallels the central archetype of death and rebirth. Reading lives both destroys and creates our image of the subject which is one of the greatest attractions to biography: even though the historical figure dies, the biography continues his presence—in itself a mythic, phoenix-like activity re-creating and perpetuating the self. Biography, in its gratification of wish-fulfilment, embodies a dream; in its stress on moral example, it becomes an allegory. In this way biography sustains its duality in mythic as well as generic ways. (181)

The biographical process is thus both a god-like and visibly mortal impulse. The will to create and experience narrated lives arises from a basic drive for creation and procreation; the will to destroy them comes from a corresponding death wish. A degree of violence is to be found in the material expression of both drives.

Therefore, the production of, and access to, biographical narratives are simultaneously facilitatory and restrictive, paralleling creation and recreation, birth and death. Thus, an element of denial tends to accompany the creation of narrative, if only to justify wish-fulfilment. Janet Malcolm asks, "How can one see all the ants on the planet when one is wearing the blinders of narrative?" (72). We are always wearing the blinders of narrative, sometimes consciously and sometimes not. Narrative is a driving force in itself, and one without which we absolutely cannot function. For writers, narrative is a conscious and compelling desire and driving force. The question is how far may we go in the pursuit of narrative that is always at the expense of some truths, of some extra-textual ants?

The writing of this thesis has resulted from and reflected (my) conflicting desires. On the one hand, the drive towards the construction of women's authority has been a primary motive; on the other, the concern for an appropriate kind of "woman's justice" has restrained inclinations toward "progress" at all costs. There is a need to tell and retell, to impose my vision, to construct according to my wishes and views; there again, to show respect by limiting imposition on the lives of others who may well not agree with my observations. And there are also social desires. My desire to tell the stories of women comes not only from a pro-woman polity, but from an individualised process at the level of subjectivity. Conversely, my disinclination to

write my own story comes, at least in part, from an awareness of the consequences of such telling – also at the level of subjectivity. As Kathleen Jones expresses it:

Contemporary feminists have contributed to the rejection of authority while they continue to demand the status of the authoritative for their own narratives including, ironically, the narratives of post-structuralists.

(3)

It is, of course, necessary for feminists to demand authority. To say that they should demand only a certain kind of authority assumes that even were suitable reconstructed forms readily available to women, and that this authority would be welcomed and accommodated by the (patriarchal) world at large, which it probably would not. Thus, many women are unavoidably caught up in the paradox of rejecting external authority and seeking it for themselves, and feminists have the additional burden of rejecting authority *amongst* themselves, even *within* themselves, even as they desire and court it. Perhaps the very act of desire encompasses guilt regardless of the object of desire, but it is also true that women acting from a gendered subject position are likely to have extra difficulties with power-laden practices they have experienced as dominating.

Classic texts on biography allude to the responsibilities of the biographer, but rarely, if ever, is this power openly discussed. This is the case with all such loci of influence: power is the force that dare not speak its name. The construction of meaning is presented as the discovery of meaning; the construction of the subject as

the discovery of identity. In biographical terms to disclose is really to create. This allots a great deal of power and responsibility to the biographer and, as I have said, there is a godlike impulse, both creative and destructive, present in the will to construct through narrative. However, if we accept that the author, too, is a social construct, that the “will” to write is only in part an individual or autonomous will, then both the powers and responsibilities of writing a biographical life are modified. Cheryl Walker posits a certain compromise in autonomy versus social construction:

I find that in my own practice I am loath to give up all vestiges of the author. The strategy I have chosen is what I call persona criticism, a form of analysis that focuses on patterns of ideation, voice, and sensibility linked together by a connection to the author. Yet persona criticism allows one to speak of authorship as multiple, involving culture, psyche, and intertextuality, as well as biographical data about the writer.
(109)

Walker’s persona criticism brings the concept of the author more into line with Foucault’s “author function.” This allows us still to demand an answer to the matters of who speaks and from where do they speak. The origin of power may not be the author, but the author has relative rights and responsibilities (and, indeed, freedoms) for discretion as to the precise manifestation of textual authority. Walker points out that in the past women became writers partly to create substantive identities and some still work to do so. But others can write to examine the ways in which gender is a significant factor in the deployment of subjectivity and, of course, each person

acts as a locus of discursive formations in a unique way. Both of these approaches, and others, are available to women and to feminist women. As Sharon O'Brien says:

Some strains in feminist theory challenge the assumptions of traditional biography, while others support those assumptions; some strains are compatible with notions of the decentered or multiple self, others are not. These tensions are creative ones, and as they collide and combine with each other over the next several years they could give rise to new forms for women's biographies. We may be about to see a new and exciting era of experimentation in the writing of female biography. (126)

Undoubtedly, some feminist writers have abandoned the project of biography altogether. But O'Brien is persuasive when she argues that "biography is too essential a means of communication and connection for feminists to abandon, even if they are troubled by seeming incompatibilities among feminism, deconstruction and biography" (128). So, too, Valerie Ross, writing in the same volume, says that biography "facilitates and provokes the construction, consolidation, and reinforcement of professional identity and authority" (138). To say that authority and identity are constructions is not the same as saying that they do not exist. They exist in material form, through the linguistic and artistic forms that give them existence. To say that the biographical process is (like birth) an act encompassing violence, is not to say that feminist biographers should become barren in order to be non-violent. Margaret Somerville elucidates this birth of self through writing but, even more significantly, in processes which entail communion with others:

The self that is produced through the life (hi)story method is potentially the most challenging of all to traditional conceptions of the self and the genres of biography and autobiography because it is created out of the collaborative relationship between two people. As a self that is constructed in written form out of oral data, the life story process brings together sociological notions of the self and subjectivity (and how these are researched) with the literary forms or genres within which the self is presented. It is the interaction of two selves which is critical in producing the final form through which the life is expressed. If this form emerges from the relationship and more particularly from the talk generated in that relationship, the boundaries of traditional literary forms and structures are necessarily challenged. (31)

It is essential that all creative processes remain available to feminist writers and readers, though this requires us to be fully accountable as to their use.

On this note of potential, I want to revisit the notion of biography (perhaps especially popular biography) having an expansive social impact. By way of illustration, I will briefly explore the “mighty scoop” (as Germaine Greer’s recent biographer, Christine Wallace, called it) that scandalised the royal-watching world in the form of Andrew Morton’s, *Diana: Her True Story*. This was allegedly one of the “most successful” (best selling?) biographies of all time, second only to Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* (Wallace 2). This book obviously falls into the genre of popular biography, though Morton is an established royal biographer who has some claim to “serious” journalism. *True Story* is a departure from his previously authorised books

but, although its revelations clearly caused a sensation, it is not in itself “sensational.” Morton’s position is clearly pro-Diana, but his style is frank and interrogative. The subsequent Squidgy and Tampax tapes, respectively revealing Diana’s and Charles’ extra-marital affairs, made Morton’s book appear, in retrospect, both vindicated and quite restrained.

The role of the biographer in relation to the subject is a curious one. Morton both “exposes” Diana and acts as an apologist for her. Details of her conflict with the British royal family have been relished by royalists and anti-royalists alike, giving birth to a strange new era of populist monarchy (as the New Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has since demonstrated in his attempts to reshape the image of the monarchy after the death of Diana).

When the news of Diana’s death circulated through the media, a new cult-icon was crystallised, in the mode of Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley and James Dean. The book constructs a [counter]myth that had been launched by Morton’s first edition, in a significant moment in biographical history (experienced even by those of us who did not read it at the time). The biography is an intriguing and deft piece of information and, in the context of its publication, quite startling in its commonplace style. Through his busy research and journalist’s nose for news, Morton has crafted a very plausible psychological portrait of an unremarkable, if unhappy, upper-class

English schoolgirl born at the height of popular revolutions but cocooned in the institution of a hedonistic British aristocracy. It would not have been written by a feminist and yet it does not repel a feminist reading from the perspective of the cultural and psychological data contained therein. Similarly, it is not reflective enough to be termed psychobiography, but it invites this interpretation. The hyper-famous subject and her life are striking in their “underneath” everydayness, something difficult to read into the flagrant mythology generated by, and about, rich and powerful lifestyles, especially those of royalty despite (and because of) the copious information published. Of course, beneath Morton’s revelations lie further layers of mythology generated by and about Morton’s textual characters and, indeed, about “that book” itself.

True Story explains so much, not just about the actual players in the royal farce, but about women in the British [upper] class system. It explores the ways in which major institutions (such as the monarchy and, indeed, authorised biography) deliberately circulate quite untrue stories about their members as part of their “public relations,” concealing gaps, weaknesses and ordinary emotional responses. An enticing question is, why are particular kinds of stories circulated at the expense of others? In Diana’s story of fame, fortune and personal unhappiness, it is easy to miss that the aristocracy’s privileged lifestyle “belongs” to the men, the women being so many consorts, breeders, pawns, hostesses and diversions. Morton’s book, of course,

does not investigate patriarchy or even royalty, but it does give rise to such questions. This is a central role of biography—to tell a different story which, in Morton’s case, was the story Diana wanted told but could not, or would not, tell directly. It would be difficult, in fact, to imagine contemporary democracy, even to its present limits in elitist societies, without this kind of biographical function. We cannot have powerful cultural spectacle without outspoken social critique. In this light, the biographer can indeed be seen as the child whose power lies in denouncing the king’s new clothes. Strategic and tactical disclosure is an essential counter-balance to secrecy in the politics of the power-knowledge game.

Christine Wallace, a biographer who came under considerable attack on the publication of *Greer: Untamed Shrew*, vehemently defends this function of biography as the instrument of tactical disclosure in the interests of democracy. She is disgusted at Susan Mitchell’s reported remark that biographers are like the vulture paparazzi that allegedly hunted Diana to her death. She considers the role of *exposé* biography to be healthy and constructive, notwithstanding claims that popular biography is somehow in bad taste:

[Morton’s book] was proof that popular opinion significantly shaped by a biographer’s work could really have consequences. [But] just as the idea of aristocratic legitimacy like that underpinning Britain’s polity should be rejected by us, so should the idea that there is some natural aristocracy of biographers, with dons writing authorised lives at [their]

peak. Bounders? *Billets-doux*? Bah! In the democracy of letters, may biography broadly bloom. (Speech to the Sydney Institute reported in 'Opinion', *The Weekend Australian*, 22 October 1997, p2)

Wallace comments that because an individual's constructed reputation has a great value, and because biography targets public figures in possession of power and influence, then the criticism of such individuals is necessary and useful in redressing the balance of power. This is, of course, the standard journalistic argument for biography, that it cuts down tall poppies as much as raises them to greatness and (as Wallace also claims) that biography has a "fundamental obligation to ethical behaviour and truthfulness incumbent on all writers dealing with the real world" (2). In other words, Wallace upholds biography's traditional claim to truth and fact, and the dispelling of myths (as opposed to the creation of them).

Ultimately, I think, there is some validity in biography's common claim to tell what is discovered, known and believed, within the context of post-colonial ethics of representation. Biographical ethics, particularly with reference to feminism and feminists, are another matter, discussed earlier. But here we need to consider Wallace's view of biography as a vehicle for social commentary. Feminist analysis, assessment and commentary on all aspects of society and culture have been the bedrock of the women's movement. Critical women writers who

describe life as they experience it completely upend male stories about what women think, how they feel and what is in their best interests. Of course, feminists must continue this project, whilst working through the issues of the difference debate and the flaws in identity politics. Wallace is unequivocal in her insistence that a biographer's truth must out:

It is really a lot of rot, this business of authorised and unauthorised, of wounded and wounding. When it comes to biography, there is a huge risk that authorised will mean compromised. (2)

When it comes to feminist biography, there is a huge risk that feminist means either unnecessarily whitewashed or unnecessarily blunt, or else it means withdrawing from the too-hard task, leaving women's stories to men and non-feminist women and amounting to a kind of voluntary silence. Cultural studies have, to an extent, filled this gap with a more academic trajectory. Whilst not exactly biographical, *Planet Diana: Cultural Studies and Global Mourning* (1997) vigorously participates in the *political* construction of public (indeed cult) identity, under such marvellously cryptic descriptors as “Diana: Princess of Otherness” (Nava 19), “The Face of a Saint” (Davis 93) and even “Diana as Gay Icon” (Benzie127). However, within the spectrum of biographical projects, this kind of representation is at the level of cartoon art, reducing (or is it inflating?) the original referent—who may have long-since disappeared even before her physical death—to becoming an icon and, therefore, a cultural object.

The experience of biographer Christine Wallace is another cautionary tale. Would a male biographer have been accused of such ruthlessness in telling a story that the subject did not want told? Sybil Nolan comments that, in her opinion, the book is far more benign than its reviews suggest, although there are places where Wallace inflicts “telling hits” on her subject and, Nolan considers, some “plainly unfair” commentary on her work (2). Perhaps some reviewers were unduly influenced by Greer’s hostility to her biographer and envisaged a feminist “cat fight.” There will indeed be wounded and wounding, and no presumption to Truth can obscure or entirely justify that effect. Biographical speech will continue regardless because it must, but for feminists it often proceeds under a shadow of guilt for committing an unworthy, if “feminine,” act of betrayal.

The construction of women’s authority through biographical speech acts is a problematic course. Feminine subjectivity is created and recreated within an overall gender context of subordination. This subordination is now in transformation to encompass the enactment of public authority. But public authority, as we yet know it, is gendered male. Hence, for women, the acquisition of public authority remains at odds with their internalised gender codes. It also remains at odds with feminist politics, to the extent that this inevitably means aping patriarchal behaviours despite tremendous efforts to avoid doing so. Writing was never going to be easy:

Writing is a curious imposition: a burden and a trick, an exercise imposed on impostors as a punishment. It is a laying-on of hands, an attempt to heal the breach, to close the wound, to exorcise and expiate. And—*pace* Derrida—it never works; we never get it right. What we write defers and differs from our original intentions. The post-scripts are a final imposition (on the reader, on the writer); an attempt at writing out—an excription—of the dichotomous either/or (either Gramsci or the Post) which in-forms (“imbues, inspires [Wycliff]; furnishes with knowledge”) and dis-appoints (“frustrates the expectation or fulfilment of”) the what-it-was that wanted-being-said. (Hebdige 208-9)

However, a number of contemporary theorists (including Lyotard) consider that literature and art are likely to pave the way out of most philosophical dilemmas and blockages. In dealing with the particular, the specific, the material and the present, we (often inadvertently) access the still unknown in a creative and imaginative way that is beyond the reach of theory. What Dick Hebdige calls “a shift from semiotics to pragmatics” (223) may be somewhat alien to male intellectuals but normal practice for women and other oppressed groups. Hebdige (who currently works in a college of art) holds to the infinite possibilities of material transgression in artistic forms, and of defeating the nihilist tendency intrinsic to “postmodernism” which speaks constantly of deaths and endings:

Of course, we don't have to go there, and if for whatever reason, we do get dragged in that direction then we can always pass through the gates: there is another side, an after-life beyond the multiple fatalities announced within the Post. And in this other space a sense of possibility

is being engendered as new and different voices emerge to articulate positive critical energies, energies which cannot be appropriated to the “fatal” systems favoured by some (predominantly? exclusively?) male intellectuals, and which are conveyed along networks and circuits within which the university, the academy and the gallery no longer function as significant termini or are bypassed altogether. (210)

Herein lies an assurance that women’s stories, as “vital strategies,” are still rich potential sources of change and are infinitely worth all the problems in the telling. Production of these new versions and structures means production of what Larry Grossberg (referring to new musical forms) calls new “structures of desire” (qtd. in Hebdige 212). Women’s desire has been the hitherto unspoken and unspeakable. As it comes into the open it disturbs, alters, threatens established practices and structures that are made to serve only phallic desires. And women, too, feel disturbed by changes that take us outside of our comfort zones and towards unknown ways of being about which, and for which, we may be unsure and inadequately prepared. Hebdige, a cultural studies academic, comes to this revolutionary conclusion:

In a sense I think that everything hangs upon it—upon the survival of the capacity of ordinary people to identify, to bond together, and to act constructively in concert to make things better; the capacity of ordinary people to discriminate when it really matters between what is real and what isn’t, to decide what the real priorities are. (221)

Hebdige's valid and important point is, nonetheless, something of an admission that grand theory of any kind is little more than idle speculation, whereas concrete action on a local, specific and material basis is necessary to create change. Women are useful to this end. Before the women's movement, they lacked the means to bring about social change on a widespread and organised basis. But a subordinated group's work in essential services has always given its members a practical feel for "reality," as opposed to the world of ideas and ideals, and certainly it has given women substantial powers of resistance. Whether women *can* bond together politically is surely no longer in doubt. Whether a women's movement *should* bond women together in any sort of collective commitment to a productive gendered authority is likely to depend on the quality of a narrative that can be called both feminine and feminist. Nowhere is such narrative more at risk than in post-feminist biographical speech. And nowhere is there greater potential for the development of new feminist authorities.

Conclusion

Move the cotton oven mitts next to the bowl of lemons.

Stand the pepper grinder up and put it beside the wine glasses.

Reach out and feel the loaf of bread, touch the handle of the broom.

Gently fold the blue checked tea towel.

This is as far as it is possible to go in creating order in the world.

(Brigid Lowry, 'Flimsy Everyday Kitchen Mystery')

This thesis considers the notion of authority in the light of two perceptions common in western society. Firstly, authority is an institutionally sanctioned means of using discursive power and, secondly, it is a kind of personal and social confidence in the right to speak. Of course the former tends to give rise to the latter. Authority is thus socially constructed, institutionally managed and personally experienced. In total, authority (or, conversely, its lack) has a major effect on subjectivity which, for its part, is inevitably gendered. To put this another way, the authority inscribed in gender plays a significant part in the quality and quantity of authority deployed by an individual or group. Where, then, are the grounds for a women's authority of speech?

Authority has a marked potency with reference to biographical speech genres. It is not difficult to see, for example, that gossip, for example, is both "positive" (socialising, affirming, bonding) and "negative" (threatening, destructive,

oppressive). What we say about others constructs the reality of those others to a significant degree, and it constructs onlookers, readers, listeners who encompass the social norms it asserts. Just as significantly, biographical speech constructs the speakers and their realities. Women's gossip, in particular, is *a product* of their gender roles and their self-perceived female subjectivities. At the same time, gossip *constructs* women as women; it *asserts* certain kinds of social authorities, and it *confers* and *withholds* certain levels of official status, both to speaker and object. An utterance is never simply a passing thought manifested in speech. It is a social manifestation and, is as such, a building block. It has specific (personal) and general (social) implications. And, of course, all of these implications are political and carry overt or covert—deliberate or implied—moral codes of conduct.

Herein lies another aspect of discursive authority. It is undoubtedly the case that all conferred authorities come with responsibilities and liabilities. Indeed, Carol Gilligan's ethic of care was one of the first to point out that women's concepts of justice entail a greater degree of responsibility for the welfare of others. Claudia Card (1990) has since observed that women in patriarchal societies hold a larger share of the responsibilities of "certain personal and informal relationships defined by social institutions [than do] men" (80). Card says that this has often resulted in an ethic of care that is really an ethic of [seeking] approval—a need endemic to women's subordinated subject positions; a need significantly at odds with the

construction of public authority.

For women, the acquisition of public authority is, by implication, a feminist act because it transgresses the subordinate status of women in patriarchal societies. However, if women in public leadership roles consciously and deliberately align themselves with the avowed principles of feminism, they supposedly take on a “feminist authority” that comes with its own set of conditions and liabilities, and an agenda to change existing models of authority. These, in turn, take the form of responsibilities to other women, whether women in the flesh or the abstract, women as peers, superiors or subordinates. This account has been at pains to show that these feminist responsibilities, whilst a vital aspect of feminist-inscribed ethics, simultaneously act as inhibitors to women in leadership roles because they are inculcated with a fundamental conflict. Feminists who aim to place women “on the map” by foregrounding qualities associated with their gender are automatically guilty of pigeonholing. Any such characteristics have historically developed in, from and through, a structural inferiority in male-advantaged societies. This being so, they are recognisable aspects of femininity that conflict with (male) premises of public authority that women must enact in order to access “leadership.” Where women work to utilise reworked concepts of leadership, they find themselves to be holding a paradox in tension with continual fear of failing on one premise or another. In this regard, Anne Phillips seeks to maintain a politics of difference without the

total abandonment of any globalised agenda:

We must give up on the yearning for an undifferentiated unity as the basis for democratic politics [but there] is a sense of the dangers in abandoning the aspirations towards universality: the risks of declining into an individualist politics of self-interest, of reinforcing a patchwork of local identities from which people can speak only to their immediate group, or of forgetting the continued salience of class.” (5)

This is a difficult call for “post-feminists” who do not wish to be associated with reactionary views of unmitigated “free” speech. Phillips’ statement draws attention to the complexity of contemporary feminisms that draw fine lines and operate within a number of moral dilemmas. My point is that the abandonment of any impetus towards a universal women’s movement is politically retrograde. It certainly creates and maintains a consciousness-raising amongst “whitefeminists” that they are part of the problem of white racism and not of the solution. This awareness is a positive legacy of difference-oriented feminisms. Along with this, however, there is a silencing of women’s representations of women that have been a highly creative aspect of women’s narrative writings. This silencing is effected by gatekeeping amongst feminists who have no theoretical unity of sisterhood to bond them together but only the contingency of alliance politics. This is a negative legacy of difference-oriented feminisms, a side-effect of post-colonial ethics that all feminists must take seriously if they continue to foreground gender *per se* as an identified factor in subordination (albeit qualified by cultural differences). Of course, alliance politics

do not preclude a loyalty to other women (indeed, a fairmindedness or warmth towards all people), but they problematise the clarity—even the wisdom or justice—of bonding across our differences. It is this very problem that Simone de Beauvoir first identified in 1949 as a handicap to the political force of an effective women’s movement (19)⁴⁵. The political context may now be different but the effects on women, I argue, are still rooted in old fears of speaking out of turn and incurring disapproval, and not simply from a straightforward humanitarian concern for others.

Whilst this thesis does not offer concrete “solutions” to the questions raised and interrogated in this analysis, some projections are called for. To this end, I am indebted to Diane Elan for her model of groundless solidarity (67-88). This model is “not grounded in the truth of a pre-social identity” (109). Yet it *is* solidarity (as opposed to alliance) because it rests on some kind of unconditional liaison with other women across cultural differences. Alliance, on the other hand, is contingent and conditional and lends itself too easily to self-interest and disinterest. Groundless solidarity at least keeps a feminist door ajar for personal connection with global feminist issues that require a “community of women” arranged differently around a

⁴⁵ De Beauvoir commented that “women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit” because “the bond that unites [woman] to her oppressors is not comparable to any other” (19). De Beauvoir evidently considered this a serious flaw in the authority of women to speak of, and act on, gender issues because such issues are rendered indistinguishable from other contributing factors through the lack of situated voice based on gendered identity.

commitment to moralities that spring from gender as a factor of power dynamics. Yet groundless solidarity is “not the foundation for political action and ethical responsibility” (109) which then, presumably, calls for alliance politics. For Elan, this moral community of women exists “only in a very limited and restricted sense” (109) or, one could say, a very broad sense. Elan’s groundless solidarity is only marginally more workable in material practice (fine lines are being drawn here), yet it addresses the issues of representation in a substantially more satisfactory way. This is because “postfeminists” do not have a problem with intra-feminist *identification*, as such (meaning that empathy is by no means discouraged), but only with *actions* that come from this identification and that so endanger the post-colonial project of self-determination. Hence, the global sisterhood of radical feminisms gestures too much towards an authority of “speaking for,” although the mutual identification process and, indeed, the moral commitment to supporting other women, is retained.

In terms of biographical representations, Elan’s model of groundless solidarity establishes “a political coalition brought together on the basis of shared ethical commitments, but it would make no claim to inclusiveness (all communities are formed on the basis of some type of exclusion)” (109). It inculcates an agency of making *somewhat* contextualised ethical decisions in a wider context of “radical undecidability,” presumably applying a very broad premise of feminist-style ethics,

whatever we assume those to be:

It is in this way that deconstruction and feminism reveal that ethical judgements are actually groundless. Which is not to say that these judgements are without cause or without purpose. Their groundlessness might better be explained by saying that we have to try to do the right thing, here, now, where we are. We must judge where we are, in our pragmatic context, and no transcendental alibi will save us. (108).

Thus, my own decision to discontinue my biographical project was the best that I could do at the time, with the knowledge that I had and the conditions I perceived. My action arose out of an ethical commitment to do the least harm to another woman, but with an ongoing awareness that no recourse to an ethic of care could fortify the resulting work against that harm. In effect, I had no recourse to a politics of rights—either mine or those of my subject—because our rights conflicted both in the scenario of writing and in that of not writing. This rationale attests to Elan's "realm of continual negotiation" (81) that is never ultimately resolvable but is at least framed by the somewhat existential premise of ethically grounded choice.

This study of women's authority in biographical speech has considered the conflicting codes of radical pluralism on an ethical activism. In post-colonial representations, difference is celebrated and diversity validated. This is highly liberating for feminists across the political spectrum. The power to construct positive representations of women is both necessary and desirable on the road to

authoritative subjectivities in public spaces. This power does not result so much from a historical “right” as from a historical tradition underpinned by a genuine need. Lidia Curti’s view of historic connection between women and narrative suggests that tradition becomes “natural” over time, so that the narrative function appears one with life itself (viii-x). To rethink the politics of narrative representation, both fictional and non-fictional, is not to condemn the act itself but instead to reframe it.

Contemporary “western” women receive more contradictory and confusing messages about gender and subjectivity than did their first-wave and early second-wave foremothers, through increasingly complex and indecipherable representations of themselves. Despite their outwardly impressive post-feminist authoritative roles, with their full admission to public discourses of justice and the construction of public policy, most of these representative texts continue to inscribe women into subordinate social structures, whilst at the same time demonstrating that “girls” can have and do anything. For many women, there is an increasing sense of success accompanied by an increasing sense of failure, as they appear to achieve some sanctioned aims only to lose sight of others. Also, for women who are not in positions of public authority, there is the fact of total subordination without any visible means of blaming somebody else, since they are constantly told that “becoming a success” is more available than ever and, indeed, more of a general

expectation than ever.

This study of the complex, often hidden, difficulties in constructing and maintaining an active, and simultaneously benevolent, authority is not intended to produce a sense of helplessness so that the odds are stacked against women's assertiveness. The achievements of women in patriarchy this century are awesome. As Mary Daly has said, "overcoming the silence of women is an extreme act, a series of extreme acts" (21). When a society, and group of societies, is intrinsically and fundamentally located within a hierarchical system of domination and subordination, the odds against "reversal" are astronomical. When the revolutionary subordinate group additionally aspires to "liberation" without domination, authority without oppression and power without violence, we enter the realms of futuristic fictions. Yet many such moments have occurred and have produced substantial changes. This means that it does not pay to stand at the bottom of the mountain and gaze up in a dispirited fashion, whereas it is reassuring to climb some of the way, perhaps without thinking too much about it, and then look down. This thesis has looked sideways and across, at some of the factors that can make each step laborious work.

It is certainly not my wish to create undue cynicism about ideals, particularly ideals of working towards more just societies. I consider that the aims of criticism should be to work towards ever more practical models, based on a clear-eyed recognition of the contradictions inherent in every utopia.

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