



Merlin Homer, Cypress Hills Dreaming, Oil on Canvas, 4' x 3', 1989
Merlin Homer has been making art for over 30 years. She lives in Toronto where she also works as a therapist and healer.

Bordercrossings: Skin/Voice/Identity

by Marusia Bociurkiw

L'auteure examine comment se construit une identité culturelle à partir du langage, de l'écriture et de sa vie en tant qu'artiste. Elle nous fait part de la lutte qu'elle a dû mener pour essayer de retrouver ses origines ukrainiennes et tenter de se définir au-delà de son identité sexuelle.

I. Skin

My public 'outing' as a lesbian occurred through language, and happened to be an accident. Not tragic, like a car crash, but rather like skidding on ice—slippery, and potentially dangerous. Like that moment between standing and falling, when everything safe falls away, and shame and defiance hit you at the same moment. A moment that forces you to improvise, posture, and let go—anticipating stability at the other end of your fall.

I had been billed to appear on some panel as a lesbian artist, but the thing is, I had never actually done it, yet, with a girl. My work had a lesbian sensibility and that was convenient to the organizers. It was the early 80s, and there weren't that many out lesbian artists around in Canada, even then. People were trying to be inclusive the only way they know how, which is to say, they were being tokenistic. It was a free ticket out of the city, it was a costly ticket out of indecision. I got to see Calgary, Saskatoon, and London Ontario, got to have a few plane trips, and the occasional luxury of a hotel room, and it seemed ok. I talked about lesbianism and I talked about cunt and fucking and lesbian sexual representation, and I had no idea of the risks I was taking, or that I was taking any risk at all.

I suppose all this was good for me in some ways. It may have helped my work, it may have helped me get grants—because it was *très chic* then to be the only lesbian, but it's not very *chic* now to be

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one of a whole pack of lesbians. It may even have helped me get that first girlfriend, who knows. (I never broke it to her that it was my first time, because by then I didn't even feel like a virgin anymore..) I tried not to think about how it was also about spectacle, about pleasing other people, about filling out the paint-by-numbers picture. Was it about genuine political struggle? Was it authentic? I'm not sure. I know that sometimes after one of these panels when I talked about lesbian sex and cunt and visibility, my body hurt—my head, my arms, my skin—because I had been asked to represent oppression with my body, and my body hurt from having to do that over and over again.

But the other thing was, that I felt I could never talk about other things besides my lesbian identity—I did not feel the permission to look at where I came from ethnically, or geographically, or to talk about class, to draw upon the rich resources of my own personal narrative of family, culture, and history. The conditions did not yet exist for me to be able to investigate and interrogate both the privilege and the oppressions that had occurred in the history of my own people. I was white, and that was that.

June Jordan:

....we're not going to talk 'white' anymore, any more than we're going to talk 'Black.' We're going to say Irish American, or we're going to say Japanese American, or whatever it is, we're going to be as specific as possible in that way. So that we atomize these humongous concepts, white or not white, or white and Black and people of colour and so on and get very specific like that...to try to really make all the peoples of the world a family to which I can belong and be useful in. And to make the entire planet a home for my spirit and my dreams.

So these days, I'm trying to find a language in my work for what white means, and what ethnicity for me means, years after I thought I'd disowned all that baggage. These days, I've also been caring for two ill parents, and I find myself facing the spectre of their loss. It has become, then, not just the imminent loss of parents, which is in itself profound, and which all of us face or have faced, but also the possible loss of connection to my culture and history. So much of where I come from is located in the unspoken history of my parents' immigration, the why and how of taking that journey across the ocean and then across the country to the Prairies, so traumatic in its import that my Baba, still, 60 years later, tells and retells her ocean crossing story in incredible detail, to anyone who'll listen. All of this has never felt more important to me or to my work than it does right now. What I am not so certain of, and what I am figuring out as I go along, is—will it breathe with the political resonance that I want my work to have? The crossing of borders from the realm of sexual identity to the realm of cultural identity, and of

finding a language that works for both, is, I have to say, the biggest challenge I have faced in my work thus far. Compared to which, talking about cunt was easy. Which reminds me that the etymological old english root of the word cunt is 'ken', which means to know. I began with what I knew and I move out into what I don't know, what has become foreign to me: my mother tongue, no longer mother to me. This was the roundabout way I had chosen to inscribe myself into history. Was I being inscribed, or was I inscribing myself?

Sheila Petty:

Self-inscription does not simply involve the retrieval of neglected histories. Rather, it requires an investigation of the 'colonial moment' or such similar processes which initiated the neglect or refusal of the histories in the first place.

II. Bordercrossings

Both my parents were born in Ukraine, a country with some ten other countries or territories touching its own perimeters, and whose name, literally, translates into English as "border." I have never been to Ukraine, but I learnt the most intimate details of its geography—the names of its rivers, their tributaries, the different regions and their particular characteristics, at the dreaded weekly Ukrainian School. Though I remember none of these names now, I do remember having to memorize and then draw, for an exam, some seven or eight different versions of the border of Ukraine, which changed as quickly as some other country could invade and say 'gotcha.' This in turn led to all kinds of confusing and tiny linguistic taboos, which loomed large for a child trying to function in two languages and two worlds. Like, not being able to say *perogy*—because that was Polish and reminded us of my grandmothers' family sharecropping for the Polish landlords—but having to say *varrenyk* instead, and then having to explain that to the formidable Sister Francis, my grade one teacher. Or training all my friends to say *Kiev* instead of *Kiev*, because the former was Ukrainian and the latter was Russian, and that reminded us of the Bolsheviks invading my father's village. I remember reading that my moth-

er's passport says she was born in Poland, and wondering why she always said she was born in Ukraine. I remember how my father, who has made a career out of denouncing Soviet Communism, took us to Highgate Cemetery when we were in England years ago, and had us stand around Marx's grave while he took off his hat and bowed his head and paid silent homage. The other day, he sang *The Internationale* for me in Ukrainian, from his hospital

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bed, and though I'm sure he hated being forced to learn that song as a child, his love of the song's sentiments was palpable, even now. I had no idea the song had even been translated into my mother tongue, and hearing it moved me quite deeply. "Arise ye prisoners of starvation, arise ye wretched of the earth...." It was like crossing a border and finding to your surprise that a language you've spoken in one country can actually be used in the other as well.

But many borders have fallen in the past five years, the wall's come down, and the Soviet Empire is no more. My father has his free Ukraine, while I say poverty is not freedom, and mourn the loss of a free but impoverished Nicaragua. When my Aunt Marusia, the feisty Siberian prison camp survivor after whom I'd been named, was allowed to visit Canada in 1989, she was both fascinated and bewildered by the fact that I'd been to Nicaragua. So I tried to explain to her in inadequate Ukrainian about the existence of an international solidarity movement, and about how the forces of imperialism in Nicaragua were similar to those historically at work in Ukraine. We tossed back some vodka and had a few laughs, but

then her face went grim and she said: "Why did you fight for them, and not for your own people?"

III. Voice

My mother has lost her voice. This is no fancy metaphor; she has, literally, lost her voice, due to malignant tumors on her vocal chords. On occasion, she speaks in a hoarse whisper and with great difficulty and formality through a plastic tube inserted into her larynx.

Because of her, I think a lot about women's silence, about voice, about coming to voice. My mother tongue, no longer mother to me.

During the period after an operation, my mother doesn't even have the plastic tube. She has no voice at all, and this, ironically, is when she and I communicate most richly.

Notes scribbled onto pages ripped from her steno notebook fly into my hand. She is full of questions about my life, my videos, the teaching I'm doing. Thoughtful observations flow from her pen, homespun *pensées* that she had no time or no patience for when she was well. And when she was well? When she had a voice? The truth is, she was often silent. Or silenced. Why? I find an answer in Robin Morgan's "The Politics of Silence": "For fear. For fear of being misunderstood. For fear of being misrepresented. For fear of never being answered."

IV. Identity

M-A-R- ... No, M-A-R ... U-S-I-A. Yeah that's my first name. Yeah, quite a name. OK here's the second one. B-O-C- ... No, it's a B, not a V. . . B-O-C-I-U-R-K-I-W.

Marusia Bociurkiw. Bo-syer-kev. No, that's a v sound at the end. No, it's not Marushka. No, I don't have a short form for my name. No, you can't introduce me by my first name.

What kind of a name? Ukrainian. Yup, we have great weddings. Yeah, perogies. Sure, cabbage rolls. Unh-hunh, Shumka dancers, garlic sausage, Easter eggs.

Unpronounceable? There are some cultures where your name would be considered unpronounceable, you know.

At Halifax, and at Ellis Island, immigrants were encouraged to anglicize their names, to make it easier for Anglo-Saxon immigration officials to pronounce and spell them. So that Nikolaychuk would become Nichols, and Pylipiw would become Phillips, and Wasyliw would become Williams, and so on. My father kept his name. So that I have this burdensome name, which I am constantly spelling out and repeating. Sometimes I feel that this name makes me invisible, because no one ever says it, or knows how to look it up in the phone book. But I would never change this name. In thinking about anglicizing, shortening, or losing my name altogether, I grow to value what it means and says. Really, in terms of some sort of cultural visibility, this name is all I have. And so this is how I begin to understand the value of naming, and the meaning of identity.

And this is also a starting point for my understanding of the colonial moment as it relates to my identity, and also to my cultural production. That in the need for that long ago panel organizer to have me be lesbian, was a need to collect and to classify—the way colonialists do in ‘foreign’ cultures. I understand that panel organizer/game hunter because I too have organized events based on the same collect ‘em as you go multicultural plan. And that was how I learnt.

That my positioning of my various subject positions, and therefore of my identity in various artistic or feminist or ‘queer’ contexts is constantly renegotiated. Here’s my friend Leila Sujir’s approach to explaining subject position in a video workshop: Imagine what you would say about yourself if I asked you to introduce yourself. And then imagine what you wouldn’t say. Those silent, unspoken identities are the beginnings of the most important art, or films, or stories, we may ever tell. If we ever get to tell them.

That home is a slippery place and is almost never where I think it is. That queer and feminist cultures and events have yet to really grapple with the fact that so much is yet untold. And that there are some who give permission, and some who get permission, and some who never are allowed to tell their silent stories at all.

V. Happy Ending

I show this paper to a friend. Do you think it’s too despairing, I ask her. I wonder that about all my work. I’m working on, simultaneously, a film about the history of internment camps in Canada, starting with wwI Ukrainian internment camps, and a film about a teenager who’s sentenced to six years in prison for having consenting lesbian sex with two other teenagers. I come from a long line of prison camp survivors, escapees, black marketeers, worriers, obsessives, chain smokers, and tortured souls, and I worry that has some bearing on my work. Lately I’ve been tacking on happy endings, like the tail on a donkey at a children’s birthday party, just to see if I can do it.

To paraphrase Adrienne Rich, my oppression comes from the same place as my power. These days, there are over 60 lesbian-slash-gay film and video festivals worldwide, and this past year I got to connect with audiences in Amsterdam, Berlin, and London, Ontario. My friend Nikki calls it the brunette ambition tour. When I come home there are messages from friends and family on my phone machine saying, in effect, where the hell are you and when are you going to be in town for god’s sake, and there is laundry to be done and a Bell Canada operator to be sweet-talked. There are beautiful cinemas with art deco architecture and there is the delicious temporary intimacy of dyke strangers in Berlin bars and artist colleagues around the world, and then there is the day to day grind of letters and grant applications and press kits and filing and phone calls and on and on. There is the energizing and exciting work of teaching and of young lesbians and gay men packed into a classroom, and then there is the incredibly exploitative nature of part-time academic work, and on-going ivory tower racism and misogyny. There is lesbian studies and lesbian/gay/feminist conferences and the happy brushing of shoulders and elbows at cocktail parties, and then there is the stuff we don’t talk about at these events: the rise of fascism in Germany and racist police violence in

Canada and the U.S., and the spread of anti-gay ordinances and anti-obscenity laws across North America.

And there are those nagging questions: Who are my people? Why does so much in the play of power and oppression go unnamed? How does change happen? Or, as Gloria Anzaldua put it so well: “*Where are our alliances, with our cultures, or our crotch?*”

This essay was originally presented as a paper at Ville en Rose Queer Theory Conference, Montreal 1992, and the Women in View Symposium, Vancouver 1993. The title echoes that of Minnie Bruce Pratt’s classic essay, “Identity: Skin Blood Heart.” (Rebellion, Firebrand Books, 1991: Ithaca NY). I do this consciously, in homage to what for me was Pratt’s important precedent—a white woman talking about race and identity through the locating of her own cultural and racial history.

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