Transformations

Writing On/the Lesbian (Body)

by Amy Cowen

L'auteure examine les possibilités qu'offrent l'écriture sur le corps dans le contexte de la représentation lesbienne. Dans le texte lesbien, le corps lui-même sert de point de départ pour (re)définir le langage qui, à son tour, peut (re)définir le corps.

Writing the body as a way of subverting phallocentrism, has been repeatedly challenged by feminist theorists.

> Articulacy of fingers, the language of the deaf and dumb, signing on the body body longing. Who taught you to write in blood on my back? Who taught you to use your hands as branding irons? You have scored your name into my shoulders, referenced me with your mark. The pads of your fingers have become printing blocks, you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body. Your morse code interferes with my heart beat.... Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like braille. (Winterson 89)
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> When I write about lesbian : writing, I take my life in my hands, as my text. Or is it that I take my text as my life in search for a language capable of expressing what those words—lesbian : writing—mean when our fingers, soft and electric, just meet, pulled together by their own magnetically charged engagement as (though) they have a life, a movement, of their own. Or when my tongue slides over the osmotic, lively breathing surfaces of your skin like words in the more elusive glissement, gliding like waves, one just over the other, enveloping their letters, as, in their representational capacity, they produce signification which we tape as meanings. (Meese 3)

Not surprisingly, within contemporary (feminist) texts, the body is a recurrent, and often central, image. While the trope of the body has obvious roots in feminist reclamations of self and sexuality, the recurrence of the body, I would argue, has specific ties to French feminism. The French feminists' advocation of the (female) body as a source of transgression and power, of writing the body as a way of subverting phallocentrism, has been repeatedly challenged by feminist theorists as sounding empowering but ultimately leaving no pragmatic recourse. Even though it may sound liberating to suggest that "to write from the body is to recreate the world" (Jones 361), the question that remains is what does it actually mean to write (with) the body?

The phrase "write the body" can, of course, be read several ways. We automatically fill the sentence in in order to make sense of it. For the most part, "write the body" has been interpreted as "write with the body." Nevertheless, the manifestation of the body as a recurrent fictional theme is not one which utilizes this concept of "writing with the body." Although performance art has represented the body as a producer of texts (I think specifically of Carolee Shneeman's *Dead Scrolls*), fiction has not done so as overtly. In fiction, "write the body" has appeared in two main forms—writing about the body and writing on the body. The two texts I will talk about illustrate these two manifestations of the body's translation from feminist theory into fictional (feminist) narratives.

The effect of configurations of the relationship between the body and language differs between heterosexual women's and lesbian texts. For the heterosexual woman's narrative, the body may well be a site of autonomy, of liberation, and of a movement from a silenced position to voice. However, unless the woman remains (only) auto-erotic, fulfillment (always) involves a return to a male/female construction in which her newly formed/found language reverts to (or is subsumed by) the phallocentric language and maintains, rather than surpasses, male-centered binary logic. Conversely, in the lesbian narrative, (the) lesbian bod(y)(ies) constitute(s) a primary way of giving "voice"/ (word) to the lesbian experience, of challenging traditional narrative constructions, and of achieving an "other" (linguistic) agency. This does not suggest that the lesbian body cannot operate, speak, or be represented within the dominant discourse; that the lesbian body has been constructed by the language of that discourse is inescapable. Nevertheless, through the interactions of lesbian bodies, it becomes possible to bypass the heterosexual binary system and begin a process of charting/ writing/ constructing/ defining in a space beyond that binary system, a space marked by the dissolution of categories of phallocentric difference. In this space, the theoretical premise of writing the body has been subtly transformed to

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a metaphor of writing on the body.

The metaphor of writing on/the body reverses the typical process of language redefinition. Rather than language (or the word) being a starting point which defines and contains the body, in the lesbian text, the literal body is used as a starting point from which to (re)define the language which can then (re)define the body. Significantly, the agency achieved by the metaphoric lesbian-body-as-text is an agency that does not depend upon static subject/object roles. Whereas the heterosexual woman's position as subject will diminish with the "entrance" of the male agent (and the simultaneous objectification of the female body), in the lesbian text, the positions are constantly in flux. The subject/object construction is dismantled, and, often, the language, too, dissolves into that of a singular agent/text. For example, Judith Roof cites that Olga Broumas "merges writing and images of the body, circling one around and through the other, *losing where one begins and the other ends*, making a 'curviform alphabet that defies decoding'" (129) (emphasis mine). Through a brief analysis of the ways in which the relationship between the female body and language is configured in two short stories—one heterosexual, Margaret Atwood's "Loulou, Or the Domestic Life of Language," and one lesbian, Rebecca Brown's "Isle of Skye"—the liberatory potential of the metaphor of writing on/the body for the lesbian narrative will be underscored. Furthermore, the interstitial relationships between (lesbian) desire and both mapping and (defining) meaning will also be explored as they are fostered specifically by images of writing on/the body in Brown's "Isle of Skye."

The metaphor of writing on/the body reverses the typical process of language redefinition.

Margaret Atwood's short story "Loulou, or the Domestic Life of Language" exposes women's continued lack of control of, and exile from, language. Furthermore, the story suggests that regardless of women's progressive (bodily) autonomy, language will remain beyond the range of reform (or always linked to male power). The story chronicles the relationship between Loulou and a series of her ex-lovers, all of whom are poets. Although Loulou seems to have achieved sexual agency, and even uses her body to escape a tax problem, she remains excluded from (and contained by) the poets' language. The poets spend a great deal of time describing/inscribing her body; this objectification is further problematized by the fact that the words the poets use are words Loulou does not even understand. For example, early on, the reader confronts Loulou looking at her

> own solid, smoothly muscled arms and broad, capable but shapely hands, so often admired by the poets. Marmoreal, one of them said—wrote, actually—causing Loulou to make one of her frequent sorties into the dictionary, to find out whether or not she'd been insulted. (60)

That Loulou doesn't know whether or not she should be offended by the word "marmoreal" might suggest that the (men's) language is ineffective; if she doesn't know the word, it can not manipulate her? However, their language prompts Loulou to track down meaning; their language, therefore, retains the power to confuse, tantalize, and subordinate. Furthermore, because the poets know that Loulou does not understand the words they use, they "had started using words like that on purpose" (60). Language becomes a game specifically tied to Loulou's body. Her own reclamation of her body is, therefore, voided by their continued linguistic control over her sexuality. For example, they describe her as "geomorphic," "fundamentally chthonic," and "telluric," (60). Similarly, when her hair is described as "rank," Loulou does not know whether the denotation is "too luxuriant or offensive and foul-smelling" (67).

In their journals, Loulou reads that she "is becoming more metonymous" (61). The ambiguity of this line—whether "Loulou" (the name) is beginning to signify the whole (physical) "Loulou" or whether (physical) "Loulou" is slowly being so objectified by their language/words that she is disappearing and being replaced by an image constructed by their words—underscores the conflation of (male) power and (male) language. Loulou is helpless, despite her hormones. As she later learns, it is not even the signifier which interests them; it is the gap between the signifier and the signified. They have explained to her that part of their fascination with her stems from the gap between her name and her (reality):

> Loulou, as a name, conjured up images of French girls in can-can outfits, with corseted wasp-waists and blonde curls and bubbly laughs. But then there was the real Loulou—dark, straight-haired, firmly built, marmoreal, and well, not exactly bubbly. More earthy, you might say. (Loulou hadn't known then what he meant by "earthy," though by now she's learned that for him, for all of them, it means "functionally illiterate.") (66)

Loulou fails to understand the significance of this (deconstructionist) explanation: "At first Loulou was intrigued by this obsession with her name, mistaking it for an obsession with her, but it turned out to be no such thing. It was the gap that interested them" (65). Immediately misunderstanding the "gap," Loulou associates it with her body: "'What gap?' Loulou asked suspiciously. She knew her upper front teeth were a little wide apart and had been self-conscious about it when she was younger" (65). But the "current" sexual-partner-poet quickly explains that they are intrigued by "[t]he gap between the word and the thing signified" (65). Importantly, as Phil explains this, "[h]is hand was on her breast and he'd given an absent-

minded squeeze, as if to illustrate what he meant" (65). The connections between language and (her) body are inescapable and provide a realistic counter to both the liberatory view of the body proposed by Cixous and Irigaray and to the assumption that access to language follows (or is a by-product of) bodily agency.

Though the narrator explains that "[o]vertly, Loulou takes care to express scorn for the poets; though not for them, exactly—they have their points—but for their pickiness about words" (61), Loulou can not excise herself from the game because she is dependent upon her body as a tool (like a good Cixous-ian feminist?). Arguing linguistics at the same time as she exposes her body, Loulou asks:

Ultimately, they still "own" her body because they define, re-define, de(con)struct, and reconstruct it.

> "Who cares what a thing's called? ... A piece of bread is a piece of bread. You want some or not?" And she bends over to slide three of her famous loaves, high and nicely browned, out of the oven, and the poets admire her ass and haunches. (61)

Despite her complicity in the process of her exclusion, Loulou refuses to grant the poets the satisfaction of seeing her retreat to the dictionary. "She's not so dumb as they think, she remembers the words, and when they aren't watching she sneaks a look at the Shorter Oxford" (60). However, and problematically, Loulou treats her own forays into (their) language as if she was a spy. She reifies their superiority by denying her own "right" to language; before looking in the dictionary, she washes "her hands first so she won't leave any telltale signs of clay on the page" (60).

Loulou never makes the connection that she (her body) is a text for the poets even as they write texts about her body. She may not know the words, but neither does she doubt their applicability. The/her body as text is not a woman-authored text. She has no control over the meaning(s) assigned to her (body). Consequently, though her body is undeniably written, the result is a text she has to use a dictionary to translate. Regardless of how often or how blatantly she uses her body, she can not know the body they speak (her own but not her own) because she does not know the words. She's trapped. Ultimately, they still "own" her body because they define, re-define, (linguistically) de(con)struct, and reconstruct it.

Rebecca Brown's "Isle of Skye" merges the themes of body, language, and mapping in a specifically lesbian triangle. The story (and the meeting between the two unnamed women) begins innocuously with "hello" which one of the narrators explains "is easy. It's the same in most places" (25). The critical distinction here is that though the word does not necessarily sound the same in different/"other" places, it (generally) means the same. With "hello," there are few levels of meaning, few pitfalls of connotation. With other words, both women realize this is not necessarily the case; for example, the traveler confides that

> [w]e try to talk and think we do, but we are each afraid. We know when we say blue that we mean blue. But maybe when you say blue, you mean sky. And maybe I mean water. Maybe we don't know to ask more than that. (26)

Although the words exchanged early on are non-sexual, sub-textually, the women's meditations on language indicate that not only are the differences between words in different countries/cultures/places critical, but the differences between words for heterosexuals and lesbians are also imperative.

When the traveler arrives, she brings with her a Berlitz so that this time they can talk. Not surprisingly, the dictionary facilitates their communication process. Moreover, the dictionary also enables the traveler to translate her own, unspoken, thoughts into the other's language: "Sometimes I look up a word you don't say, but just a word I'm thinking. I want to know how you'd think this feeling if you were thinking it yourself. Such as Desire, Longing, Want, Desire" (26). Contrary to Loulou's use of the dictionary to translate others' inscription of her, the traveler uses the dictionary in order to manifest her own desire in the language of the other woman. The traveler explains:

> [w]e share an interest in foreign tongues, the languages you need when you're away. But you've never been abroad; I've always left my home. Maybe our interests are compliments, exactly polar opposites. Or maybe they're just the same, two parts which once were intimate. We try hard to find out. We try to teach each other language. (26)

The emphasis here on the "we" further distances this (lesbian) relationship to language from Loulou's. Neither one takes a solely superior role. The positions shift back and forth as they teach and learn without any intent to alienate/control.

The relationship between the body and the process of learning language is slowly meshed throughout the story. Small fusions like "Your voice is slow, deliberate, printing deep inside me" (27) prepare the reader for the consummation between linguistic and bod(il)y textuality. The body also becomes a means of mapping. In the midst of continuous discussion of places, atlases, geography, topography—and on the heels of the traveler's disclosure of her lesbianism—the body, too, becomes landscape:

In the discussion of places, atlases, geography, topography, the body, too, becomes landscape.

> Here's what I'll remember: your dark hair framing your brightened face, every shallow wrinkle near your mouth and eyes. Your cheek. I want a map of these soft creases. They look like tiny deltas. Your eyes are hard and soft like warm ice lakes.... " (28)

For these women, the gap between their native languages is geographic; however they find that bridging the language gap through sex(uality) involves less confusion over meanings and the subtleties of idioms.

Though it is in their shared sexual preference that they find *an/other* lexicon, the traveler expresses some hesitation in opening that discourse. The women are "trading stories. In particular, your life story and my life story" when the other woman asks the traveler "about my first lover and then my first love. *I'm dying to confess.* In broken phrases I explain, and hope you'll see my floundering as the struggle of a foreigner with language" (28) (emphasis mine). The fear of disclosure, of leaving the closet (particularly through a dictionary translation), immediately underscores the lesbian issue which, until this point, has been hinted at but not overtly referenced. But though the traveler locates her fear as linguistic, she justifies (to herself) her disclosure, and the woman's ability to understand it despite the traveler's "floundering," through reference to the (perceived trans-locational similarities which regulate the) body: "The difficulty, I decide, is just in language, the time it takes to find things in Berlitz. I know, I know, that in your country, as in mine, our needs come from our bodies" (28). Importantly, the other woman's response is not worded; instead, she "raise[s] her hand" (28). Again, the traveler hesitates because in her "country, this means I want you," but here, in this "other" country, she is unsure. Not only does verbal language provide a challenge, but bod(il)y language, too, with its levels of meaning, threatens to keep them apart. Metaphorically, the levels of meaning coded in one country (heterosexuality) are not necessarily the same when transferred to an "other" (lesbianism). Nevertheless, the traveler "lunges" and discovers that "when my mouth reaches yours, I think that I believe I understand you" (28). Although the body, too, presents risk, in its speech, the traveler finds a more solid lexicon.

Subsequently, new language lessons begin:

> We try to get the basics. You explain mouth and thigh and knee to me. I define tongue and tooth and palm. You tell me what neck and breast and stomach mean. I say navel, leg and thigh. You give me the etymology of elbow and shoulder and back. I expound on figers and flesh and thigh. You derive the roots of calf and rib. I trace back the sound of lip. You deliberate the covert meaning of arm and ankle and wrist. I tell you mouth and breast and thigh. (29)

Just as the consummation of language and body occurs—"We make up words that we can't write or say, delicious, private, warm as thighs" (30)—so does the consummation of mapping and body:

> This night we take each other to new countries neither of us has been to before.... There are no maps. I travel the cities from your knees to your thighs. My hands find avenues and lanes. This is a country road, a freeway, a round smooth cobbled street. Your skin has deltas, soft like silt. (29)

Simultaneous to the women using the body to linguistically re-define the body, they use the body to begin a process of (re)mapping that (lesbian) body (with the new language). Having undomesticated the body linguistically, they are now faced with a blank expanse which can be drawn/viewed outside of the phallocentric discourse. (What that expanse and that process might be like we, as readers, can not know. Though Brown represents the mapping through sexual analogies, the mapping cannot be wholly contained even in her images because that lexicon is not translatable to the [academic] page.)

In subsequent descriptions, the distance between the traveler and the other woman has disappeared and everything is described as (or belonging to) "we" or "one"—and "[b]oth of us learn this means Yes" (30). The traveler reflects:

> We whisper syllables and touch. Our tongues touch and part, make words on fingertips, phrases from the tips of shoulders to chins, whole sentences and paragraphs on breasts. Pages on thighs. I think this time we forget what we know; that language is the only thing that lies. (30)

As in Nicole Brossard's *Amantes*, "the knowledge derived from sensations of taste and touch enables the lesbian lovers to rediscover a multidimensional language" (Rosenfeld 202). An insistence on this type of (sex)/(text)-ual discourse drives Meese's delineations of her lover, of the "L," and of lesbian(ism):

> I see the book of my lesbian : lover's body. As already scripted, that is, understood and felt in someone's words, it writes to me—doing love—one letter to another. It is written in a language I think I can read, and write. We study each other together, perfecting our letters. When I connect them into a lover's alphabet, what meanings can I read there? And my lover—how does she read my hand : writing? (130)

This connect-a-dot process of alphabet—>word—>meaning becomes, in these texts, a language/process which only works in the lesbian context. Though coded/constructed within patriarchal dis-

course—"'Lesbian' is applied to me in a system that I do not control, that cannot control itself" (Meese 14)—there is no justification for the lesbian couple remaining there.

Although it is obvious that, just as texts written with bodily fluids have not dominated the *New York Times'* best-seller lists, lesbians do not lie around either (consciously) writing on their partners or (consciously) (re)defining their partner's body parts through touch, as a metaphor, the process of writing on/the body is enabling. Conversely, for the heterosexual woman, the metaphor remains less enabling. Loulou's plight is not unfamiliar. There is a need for a reclamation and re-evaluation of a theory that has been repeatedly dismantled and challenged but has virtually always been examined from a heterosexual premise which has denied or ignored the specific implications and ramifications of writing the body for (the) lesbian(ism). Indeed, the similarities between the non-gendered/-sexed, but arguably female, narrator of Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*, Brown's "Isle of Skye," and Meese's *(Sem)Erotics: Theorizing Lesbian : Writing* suggest that questions of lesbian representability and definition are more and more often—and not just in poetry—becoming inscribed in questions of the relationship between (lesbian) bodies and metaphoric (lesbian) texts.

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