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The Cry:
Silence & Sound in Six Contemporary Canadian Works of Fiction

by

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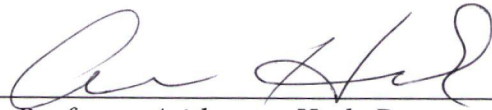
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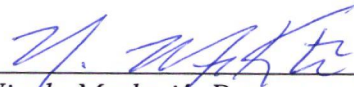
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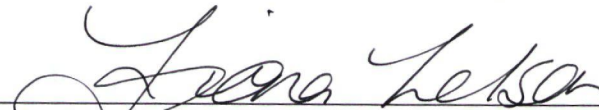
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "THE CRY: SILENCE & SOUND IN SIX CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN WORKS OF FICTION" submitted by Brea Oneal Burton in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts.



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Abstract

The cry within fictional texts can be sexual, fearful, sorrowful, triumphant, animalistic, cathartic, but always raises multiple questions of articulation. The contemporary Canadian works studied here all contain instances of glossolalia, ululation, spelling, echolalia, babble, wedged in between words, demanding space for the disembodied voice, the displaced voice, the silenced voice. A Jest of God by Margaret Laurence, What the Crow Said by Robert Kroetsch, The Double Hook by Sheila Watson, "A Song for Nettie Johnson" by Gloria Sawai, Beautiful Losers by Leonard Cohen, and Coming Through Slaughter by Michael Ondaatje, each offers its own distinctive outpouring. Such a frustrated chorus of sound or silence allows for transcendence from the human, the physical, and the stereotypical. The cry does violence to normally articulated narrative, enters this gap between silence and sound, and gives utterance to body language.

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I also wish to acknowledge the Department of English and the Faculty of Graduate Studies for giving me opportunities to learn, to teach, and to travel.

Dedication

Dedicate, consecrate, inscribe. This thesis is dedicated to:

My parents Duane & Rod, who have always loved me, encouraged me, held me up and helped me up. I could never have done this without them.

To my other half Brett, who has shared more intimately than anyone my struggle to complete this project.

To my friends, who have lent me their ears and their shoulders to cry on many times.

To my team-mateys, Cara & Jill, who always talked me down from the ledge and encouraged me to drink and be merry instead.

There's a little bit of pirate, belly dancer, and hockey player in all of us, yaarrrrr!

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Epigraph

We can hear howling winds and we can hear grass brushed by snakes and crickets
rubbing their feet and frog songs outside at night. We can hear the wings
of a dragonfly and the breath of a new lover and the sigh of the dying, but
there is sound all around us that we cannot even hear.

Kim Echlin, Elephant Winter¹

¹ Toronto, ON: Penguin Books, 1997. p.21

ON THE TIP OF THE TONGUE

A scream goes like a shark attack, rises up through the ampersands, bumps the corners of an exclamation. The first exploratory bite, the first flinch, then the blood, seep, seep, seeping. Into the white, ink, ink, inking. Lunar eclipse, black blood thick, salty and rich, metallic on a geographical tongue. Sink, sink, sinking. As water, words displace. Ululation, glossolalia, echolalia, as various manifestations of the cry, create gaps in narrative where trespass can occur, blurring, bleeding, a shark bite, a sharp bite, a sound bite.

In “Preface to Transgression,” Michel Foucault discusses how limits and consequent transgressions of those limits function together. One cannot exist without the other. “[T]he limit opens violently onto the limitless, finds itself suddenly carried away by the content it had rejected and fulfilled by this alien plenitude which invades it to the core of its being. Transgression carries the limit right to the limit of its being” (Foucault, “Preface” 34). Foucault’s argument focuses on the nature of transgression as straining against and towards its counterpart, yet he does not reduce the transgression/limit relationship to a binary. He describes their relationship as a spiral that permits the possibility of limitlessness. “Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust” (“Preface” 35). I am interested in examining how eulalia performs as such a complicated spiral.

Six contemporary Canadian works of fiction contain an instance of what I have termed the cry: A Jest of God; What the Crow Said; The Double Hook; "A Song for Nettie Johnson"; Beautiful Losers; and Coming Through Slaughter. These texts explore questions of placelessness and place, desire and repressed desire. They enter this gap between silence and sound, escape the confines of normative narrative, and interpret wordlessness, ululation and glossolalia. They "give tongue" (van Herk, Frozen 197) in response to a body of language and body language.

In "The Eulalias of Spinsters and Undertakers" Aritha van Herk suggests that the cry acts as a language of desire rooted deep within the body:

Eulalia: a wordless cry, the 'extremest coming' an/other singular fictional occurrence of the ultimate ululation. To give tongue to craving, the secret vowels of a secret language, wordless and yet articulate, with a coherence belonging only to itself. Give tongue to longing, to give tongue, to cry out intense delight/rapture, to call desire by its proper sound. The cries of love and the cries of longing are sisters, a kinship formed from the dream language that returns us to our bodies, unverballed, postlexical. Eulalia: a woman's cry at the moment of orgasm. No other word – glossolalia, ululation, lallation – is enough. (van Herk, Frozen 197)

Eulalia remarks a gap, an opening, a break in a previously predictable and comfortable narrative space. A question of outpouring and narrative disturbance as a transgression of language enacted by language, the cry explores what lies beyond the confines of narrative limitation. Ululation can manifest itself in a multitude of ways. It breaks language open, allowing for alternative expression and experience. As speaking in tongues, as ululation or a wordless wail, and even as silence, the cry ventures beyond words, reading between lines and letters. The cry also offers an alternate mode of expression, one that does

violence to language and articulation by crossing imposed limits and allowing for trespass. The authors of the texts that I have chosen to examine seek these alternative modes of expression. Each narrative seeks entrance into the gap between words and each has its own resounding chorus connecting desire to the body and body to language.

“*A Jest of God* gives novelistic tongue to a language that silences the body and to a language that speaks the body” (van Herk, Frozen 197). One of Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels, A Jest of God tells how Rachel's glossolalia acts as a catalyst for her sexual awakening and subsequent psychological dissociation from her domineering mother. Rachel experiences a moment of speaking in tongues when she accompanies her friend Calla to the Tabernacle. Pressed up between the hot sweaty bodies of strangers, Rachel has an out-of-body experience. She hears for the first time her body's clamour expressed in a voice separate from her mother's. When Rachel returns to herself, she reacts in horror to the uninhibited chattering that poured from her mouth. Rachel's ululation permits her to access the stream of desire babbling below the surface of her skin and previously articulated only in her fantasies. Her shocking glossolalic moment poses a question: does such a frustrated outpouring of sound without syntax demonstrate transcendence, an escape from the human, the physical, the stereotypical? Or does her 'ejaculation' root her firmly within her body, articulating her desire? The answer is contained in Rachel's sexual awakening; as she learns to speak to her body in her own voice, she learns to listen and to translate what her body's language says to her.

The works that I have selected for this study utilize the cry in multiple ways but they all perform as transgression, and enact violence on articulation. These novels have entered the domain of violence Kroetsch refers to in his essay, “The Exploding

Porcupine” where he states that “English-Canadian writing is a writing that has too often avoided its own violence” (Lovely Treachery 108). He calls for that writing to “learn the grammar of violence,” to “become a continuing apocalypse,” and to become “the gangster of love” (Lovely Treachery 115-116). He asks writing to engage in storytelling in a particular way, “Not violence done, but violence in the doing” (Kroetsch, Lovely Treachery 116), to shake itself up. Kroetsch argues that “[t]he ultimate violence that might be done to story is silence” (Lovely Treachery 109), meaning that stories must be told despite themselves, despite their language, form, and inevitable endings. Instigations of the cry can be cataclysmic, can springboard characters into altered states, providing a moment of shock and transformation, a removal from the familiar and known. For example, Robert Kroetsch opens the narrative of What the Crow Said with Vera Lang’s explosive and cataclysmic orgasmic utterance, challenging the normative narrative practice that builds towards a climax by beginning the novel with one and thus reversing the usual narrative structure. Vera’s climax to end all climaxes acts as a trigger. Her ululation perches the town of Big Indian on a precarious ledge of cause and effect, setting off a chain reaction of events.

In contrast, Sheila Watson's novella, The Double Hook, contains no overt instance of one pivotal cry. Instead, an oppressive silence permeates the narrative. The characters in The Double Hook speak in a language of domesticity with only metaphor and aphorism to convey meaning. The hook of The Double Hook reveals itself most in the voice of Coyote. As the most articulate character, perhaps even the only character who speaks his mind, Coyote always get the last word. To the ears of the characters of The Double Hook, Coyote's cry manifests itself as tumbling rocks, trickling water and

cracking thunder, his pronouncements accessible and understandable solely to the reader. Watson's creation of an isolated community with its inhabitants held hostage by their inability to articulate their aspirations demonstrates that there are restrictions to language as a means of expression. The novel reaches for a level that explores the effect of silence and the slippery slope of thwarted, unexpressed desires: lust, murder, mutilation, and suicide.

"A Song for Nettie Johnson" by Gloria Sawai examines words within a metaphor of hostage and release. Nettie Johnson's spelling and singing become her outpouring of liberation. She will not leave the quarry where she lives, the quarry where she was abused, until she can voice her own departure by shouting aloud the words that held her hostage there – rock, dust, bird. Her cry, not wordless but full of words, transcends its meaning and its negative associations. Nettie's claiming of the word 'bird' reconfigures its meaning. She is no longer held hostage by the words of her abuse; she is no longer tied to the quarry. The binaries of silence and sound, absence and presence dominate "A Song for Nettie Johnson." Nettie's spelling as a narrative moment problematizes these binaries; "a void has been hollowed out in which a multiplicity of speaking subjects are joined and severed, combined and excluded" (Foucault, Language 42). Eulalia moves from sight to sound, from memory to mouth, from one sense to another. As vocable, the cry is sound; as text, the cry is silent but sounding. Spelling, singing, shouting, or speaking in tongues enable words to perform a powerful release. Nettie Johnson deconstructs 'r-o-c-k' and 'd-u-s-t' and translates them into 'bird', which empowers her separation from the quarry and its horrific associations. As she breaks down words into their components and puts them back together, she un-spells questions of absence and

presence. If there is a correlation between voice and place in the context of the quarry, can her cry be an expression of separation from place? Nettie spells her freedom to separate herself from the rocks and the dust. She carries her new definition of home/place within her as she moves past the edges of the quarry and into the landscape, into a new lexicon.

Leonard Cohen's Beautiful Losers, manipulating and masturbating normative text, challenges staid views of sexuality. Regarding modern sexuality, Foucault writes:

We have not in the least liberated sexuality, though we have, to be exact, carried it to its limits: the limit of consciousness, because it ultimately dictates the only possible reading of our unconscious; the limit of the law, since it seems the sole substance of universal taboos; the limit of language, since it traces that line of foam showing just how far speech may advance upon the sands of silence.
(Language 30)

Meaning, the language that has been used to describe or circumscribe sexuality has been removed from the sexual act itself, taken outside the body. In this context, language used to describe sex and sexuality performs as limitation. Instead of opening up sexuality and reconnecting body language to the languaged body, this language closes it down.

The present definition of sexuality and the present way of defining sexuality restrains us.

Leonard Cohen offers, in Beautiful Losers, alternative ways of experiencing and expressing sexuality, supporting my contention that the cries coming from our bodies speak our bodies' language.

Returning to "Preface to Transgression," Foucault discusses the root action of transgression as a crossing of limits. He also asks what lies beyond the borders of language. In this context, I interpret the wordless cry as a crossing over into an

articulation of the absence of language. Does the texting of ululation then constitute a spatial and lingual transgression? And what is the nature of this inarticulate but articulated language? Michael Ondaatje addresses this dilemma in Coming Through Slaughter, his ficto-historical account of infamous jazz musician Buddy Bolden. Bolden's music was never recorded, yet the narrative demands that readers "*listen* it" (Ondaatje 131). As Ondaatje the author/artist composes words to describe this music, Buddy Bolden's music speaks silently on the page. When Buddy's music stops, he moves into an inaccessible place where his silence becomes his ululation, an inaudible outcry. He enters a gap between words, a gap between worlds, as music and silence merge. As he moves into this outpouring of silence, into a potentially unrecognizable articulation, he separates from language. Buddy Bolden is thus placed in an inaccessible location for both reader and writer; "speech no longer finds recourse in the 'limitless' possibilities of language" (Bouchard 21). Language as we know it no longer possesses the ability to communicate effectively, therein drawing its boundary, placing us on the edge of utterance and meaning.

In The Violence of Language, Jean-Jacques Lecercle explores, from a linguistics point of view, how language lives:

There is another side to language, one that escapes the linguist's attention, not because of his temporary failure or failings, but for necessary reasons. This dark side emerges in nonsensical and poetic texts, in the illuminations of mystics and the delirium of logophiliacs or mental patients.
(5-6)

This "other side" of language, lingual, nonsensical, poetic, which Lecercle refers to, certainly includes ululation. Although I do not agree with Lecercle's comparison of

poetry with mental delirium, I do agree with his concept of “the remainder” as language that does not fit into normative syntactic and semantic patterns. “What we have here is not only a new vocabulary, but a new syntax in the making. It emerges through violence – the violence done to language, the violence of linguistic corruption” (Lecerle 182). Sudden silence or sudden cacophony can be jarring to systems of language. “Before it is a practice, language is a body – a body of sounds. There is violence in a scream” (Lecerle 229). The cry both speaks violence and performs as violent vocalization. The appearance of eulalia in normatively articulated narrative provides a moment of assault and transformation effecting a removal from the familiar and known. Is this ululation then grotesque? One aspect of the grotesque is “abusive language” says Bakhtin (Rabelais 27). “Finally the grotesque concept of the body forms the basis of abuses, oaths, and curses. The importance of abusive language is essential to the understanding of the literature of the grotesque” (Bakhtin, Rabelais 27). I do not limit the cry only to abusive language; its potential for multiple meanings is much more diverse. However, the shock value attached to abusive language is also attached to the cry. Both the grotesque and the carnivalesque allow for numerous unpredictable possibilities:

The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis. (Bakhtin, Rabelais 24)

Bakhtin’s grotesque allows for moments of catalyst, as does ululation. A marker for irrevocable change, the utterer and the utterance provide a site for metamorphosis. “All

the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (*à l’envers*), of the ‘turnabout,’ of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear” (Bakhtin, Rabelais 11). A shifting can occur with the presence of an outpouring, one that enables and allows inversions of dichotomies and binaries. Bakhtin’s grotesque and carnivalesque both permit this catharsis, shaping a framework for the cry, and allow for a “turnabout” that an outpouring so often originates.

Eulalia becomes its own body of language in the context of Bakhtin’s grotesque. “Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (Bakhtin, Rabelais 26). The cry literally trespasses the limits of the body, stems from the mouth, from the body, and enters the world, refusing to be separated from that world. Bakhtin continues his discussion of how the grotesque physically manifests itself: “This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: *the open mouth* [my italics], the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose” (Rabelais 26). Bakhtin’s grotesque encourages liminality; “But at their extreme limit the two bodies unite to form one. The individual is shown at the stage when it is recast into a new mould. It is dying and as yet unfinished; the body stands on the threshold of the grave and the crib. No longer is there one body, nor are there as yet two” (Rabelais 26). One foot on either side of a divide, a space where convergence and divergence occur simultaneously, a space where thresholds make trespass available and possible, Bakhtin’s grotesque locates the body as the site of eulalia,

a body of language that articulates a connection to the world beyond the body, but through the body. The cry is constantly shifting, volume rising and falling, tonguing, transcending, talking flesh, mouths opening. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle writes, “I shall treat every utterance as an instance of Freudian compromise between the two extreme positions: ‘I speak language’ and ‘language speaks’” (Lecercle 5). Read: I speak language and language speaks me.

We are what we speak in the sense that language is a dynamic entity. “On the other hand, these dialects, on entering the literary language and preserving within it their own dialectological elasticity, their other-languageedness, have the effect of deforming the literary language; it, too, ceases to be that which it had been, a closed socio-linguistic system” (Bakhtin, Dialogic 294). Bakhtin might argue that in this context, the context of dialogism, language is limitless. We speak many languages, and “what results is not a single language but a dialogue of languages” (Bakhtin, Dialogic 294). Such outpouring opens up possibilities in language, invites transparency, occupies a narrative space where Barthes’s ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ positions function. In his essay, “The War of Languages,” Barthes states:

Only writing, as a matter of fact, can assume the *fictional* character of the most serious, even the most violent dialects, can replace them in their theatrical distance; for example, I can borrow psychoanalytic speech in its wealth and its extent, but make use of it *in petto* as of a language of fiction. (Barthes 110)

Reader and writer can be viewed as separated by text or in the context of Barthes’s theory, joined by text where text becomes a mode of transference, a bridge. Barthes developed the differential ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ as concepts that propose the blurring

of boundaries between reader and writer, with the text becoming a production of both. In relation to that process, eulalia is a mode of expression, a mode of entrance into text and narrative. For ululation to function, the reader and the writer must inhabit the same space; their fictions must converge. “Moreover, only writing [and reading] can *mix* languages (psychoanalytic, Marxist, structuralist, for example), can constitute what is called a *heterology*, can give language a festive dimension” (Barthes 110). In the context of heterology, the cry then can be sexual, fearful, spiritual, revelatory, and animalistic.

Ululation in text and in narrative is both entrance and exit. “Heterology” is an apt term to describe various and somewhat dissimilar appearances of eulalia in narrative. However, two common denominators of an outpouring are transgression and convergence, a crossing or blurring of boundaries within language that occurs at the sites and instances of exclamation. The inherent difficulty in an analysis of eulalia in narrative is that it is both silent but sounding. Glossolalia, ululation, spelling, singing, babble, outpouring, or in-articulation in narrative permit alternative entrances into text, present multiple openings rather than closings. Hear night on a page, in a dream, in a cry, in the belly of a great white. Slip, slip, slippery. Fish, fish, fleshy. Intrauterine cannibalism in the soft black sack. Perfect pitch. Sonographic. White noise. A vessel, a verse, a salt swollen surf, wordless and watery, waterlogged, pearl diver deep. A new voyage every night, every sentence, always an ocean of words. Always in motion, fluid, dreamy, narcotic. Deep and sonic. The cry manifests itself as a threshold in narrative which can be crossed in many directions, a threshold always available at the edge of the page, always just under the skin, on the tip of the tongue.

***THAT VOICE!:* MARGARET LAURENCE'S A JEST OF GOD**

The howl or wail, the cry of lamentation, can be sexual, fearful, sorrowful, dying, ghostly, animalistic or transcendent. The presence of such ululation within any fictional text raises multiple questions of articulation. Glossolalia in A Jest of God effects a gap between words, a binary of silence and sound, hysteria and orgasmic outpouring. A wordless cry that does violence to normally articulated dialogue in narrative, as disturbance, transgression enacted by language on a page, examples of ululation and glossolalia explore the relationship between silence and sound even while working from the conflicted space of soundless but sounding language.

In a moment of epiphany, Rachel Cameron, the main character in Margaret Laurence's novel A Jest of God, hurtles into the space between sound and silence, utterance and wordlessness. "*That voice!* Chattering, crying, ululating, the forbidden transformed cryptically to nonsense, dragged from the crypt, stolen and shouted, the shuddering of it, the fear, the breaking, the release, the grieving – Not Calla's voice. Mine. Oh my God. Mine. The voice of Rachel" (Laurence 46). "*That voice!*" speaks an acknowledgment of Rachel's fear of her sexuality, her denial of her body's physical desires, desires that have yet to be realized. "*That voice!*" vocalizes her longing to connect to her body; but she cannot refer to "*That voice!*" as her own.

Prior to her experience in the Tabernacle, Rachel expresses her fear of vocalization, likening it to a primal lack of control, almost savage. "Will there be ecstatic utterances and will Calla suddenly rise and keen like the Grecian women wild on the hills, or wail in a wolf's voice, or speak as hissing as a cell of serpents?" (Laurence 39).

Rachel describes glossolalia as instinctual, in animalistic terms. “The lay preacher is praying, and I can’t hear the words, somehow, only his husky voice, his voice like a husky dog’s, a low growling. Beside me, the hulked form of the farmer sits crouched over. They all seem to be crouching, all of them, all around me, crouching and waiting. They are (of course I know it) praying. It’s not a zoo” (Laurence 41). When she is immersed yet observing in the Tabernacle, her experience assumes orgiastic proportions: “The quiet man beside me moans, and I’m shocked by the sound’s openness, the admitted quality of it. Has his pulse been quickened or made infinitely slow? Impossible to tell. But I can see the vein in one of his wrists. Throbbing” (Laurence 45). Rachel’s description of the Tabernacle scene shifts from animal to human, human to sexual. As the sexual tension in the Tabernacle rises, so does the fervent praying which precursors Rachel’s own outpouring, her glossolalic release and consequent horror at the recognition that “*That voice!*” is *her* voice.

“I can’t stay. I can’t stand it. I really can’t. Beside me, the man moans gently, moans and stirs, and moans –” (Laurence 46); and then Rachel ‘comes,’ her verbal orgasm rooted so deeply in her body that she does not even recognize her own vocalization. So disconnected from herself that her voice is foreign to her, she literally speaks an unknown language; she speaks in tongues. Afraid of her own utterance, of the possibilities of what she might say, she views her ‘gift of tongues’ as too sexual, too sensual, revealing that Rachel fears being consumed by her sexuality. “The noise and sweat – the sound of their breath – the slaves looking on, having to stand itchy immobile while they watched the warm squirming of those – The night is a jet-black lake. A person could sink down and even disappear without a trace” (Laurence 73). This

image reflects Rachel's own displacement. Her apprehension of her own sexuality enslaves her as she stands by itching, immobile, in danger of slipping into what she perceives as sexual oblivion and delicious darkness.

During her moment of glossolalia, Rachel experiences the action of speaking but not understanding. She momentarily slips into the darkness and separates from her known language and from her recognizable self. She "can't think of that place without dread. The abandoned voices, abandoned in both ways – their owners bereft and because of it needing to utter with that looseness. And the one voice which can't be forgotten" (Laurence 160). Her own voice has seared itself into her memory. Rachel has difficulty with vocalization and her cathartic experience of separation from a familiar and comfortable language briefly releases her from her stasis. This verbal revelation happens early in the narrative, before she encounters Nick Kazlik and before she has her first sexual experience with him. However, no stranger to desire, she imagines multiple sexual encounters. "She cannot see his face clearly. His features are blurred as though his were a face seen through water. She sees only his body distinctly, his shoulders and arms deeply tanned, his belly flat and hard. He is wearing only tight-fitting jeans, and his swelling sex shows. She touches him there, and he trembles, absorbing her fingers' pressure" (Laurence 24). Rachel fears acting on her fantasies. Yet, after her verbal and public ululation at the Tabernacle, her desires, once spoken aloud, cannot be taken back. As Rachel uncovers her own voice and begins to learn to speak her body's language, she is eventually deflowered by Nick; and she slowly deflowers herself, opening herself to desire, orgasm, grief, transcendence, rage – "the shuddering of it, the fear, the breaking, the release, the grieving" (Laurence 46). With her frequent inability to communicate or

to exist within language comfortably, Rachel's disenfranchised voice metamorphoses from closed to open, powerless to empowered, as she eventually asserts herself as a sexual being.

Under the cover of darkness and under her covers, Rachel explores her sexual fantasies. She views her own sexuality almost shamefully, as primordial, uninhibited, and dangerous. Yet, this element of darkness in Nick Kazlik is what attracts her to him, what she perceives as his freedom, inherent in his sense of a sexualized self. Rachel attempts to pinpoint this when she says, "I don't know how to express it. Not so boxed-in, maybe. More outspoken. More able to speak out. More allowed to – both by your family and by yourself. Something like that. Perhaps I only imagined it" (Laurence 106). She confuses Nick's outspokenness with his sexuality. He has a freedom of voice that she envies. Her own voice speaking her desire, words made flesh, are unfamiliar to her. In Rachel's first sexual experience with Nick, her first sexual encounter ever, she seems confused about how she thinks she should respond when fantasy and reality converge:

A brief searing hurt, and then his sex is in mine and I can feel him piercing warmly, unharmed. And – oh, Nick, I can't help this shuddering that is not desire, that's something I don't understand. I don't want to be this way. It's only my muscles, my skin, my nerves severed from myself, nothing to do with what I want to be. (Laurence 111)

Rachel shudders with release but also with something "that is not desire." She does not understand that she has experienced orgasm. Feeling beyond rationality, Rachel's first sexual contact echoes the Tabernacle incident. Again, she momentarily enters her body's language, speaks it to her self.

Rachel meets her self once more when she passes through a sexual mirroring of two bodies. Her experience with Nick, whom she identifies as outside/separate from her self, places her there; “It is here that she inevitably touches herself, gets past the two-dimensional pictures of her own body” (Bowering, “That Fool” 221). She begins to abandon the two constructs she previously trapped herself between, her own negative view of her body and Nick’s view of her body. In her eulalic moment at the Tabernacle, Rachel splits in two. In her echolalic experience with Nick, she has a ‘mirror’ moment. Jacques Lacan developed the theory of the mirror stage as an instant of awareness of self as a separate entity from an other. In this flash of displacement, Rachel is able to look upon herself from somewhere else; she is able to see her self, if only briefly.

In her essay, “Silence, Voice and the Mirror: Margaret Laurence and Women,” Diana Brydon offers the mirror as escape for the Manawaka women and the gender roles assigned to them:

Forbidden speech, they generate a torrent of words. Locked in the private selves assigned to them by liberal humanist discourse, they nonetheless break out of that privacy to define their various senses of selfhood through their relations with others. Given a public identity by their mirrors, they [Rachel, Stacey, Morag, and Hagar] prove elusive, evading the mirror’s reflection for reflections generated by rebellion and desire. (Brydon 203)

In Rachel’s mirror, she sees herself askew. “As in the distorting mirrors at a fair, I’m made to look even taller than I am. I have to pass myself again and again, and see a thin streak of a person, like the stroke of a white chalk on a blackboard” (Laurence 37). Her body is somehow thinner than it should be, somehow not quite there. For Rachel, mirrors seem to “reflect the extreme subjectivity of her perspective on everything” (Brydon 200).

Laurence refers to mirrors throughout A Jest of God, exploring how Rachel views herself and how she is seen through the eyes of others. “And when I turn around I can see myself in the mirror, not quite see but almost, the silver fishwhite of arms, the crane of a body, gaunt metal or gaunt bird” (Laurence 137). These representations of Rachel are always negative and skeletal, paralleling Rachel’s mother’s gaze, God’s gaze, and Nick’s gaze. Reflected and refracted views of Rachel that she looks to in seeking her self. Nick Kazlik offers one of the mirrors that Rachel speaks to:

I talk to him, when he is not here, and tell him everything I can think of, everything that has ever happened, and how I feel and for awhile it seems to me that I am completely known to him, and then I remember I’ve only talked to him like that when I’m alone. He hasn’t heard and doesn’t know. (Laurence 165)

When she speaks to Nick inside her head, she is also speaking to herself, about her desire to be seen and to be heard, naked and stripped of external prescriptions. However, after Nick Kazlik’s departure, Rachel stops looking into mirrors for projected images of her self and begins listening to her own voice. David Lucking relates Rachel’s “redemptive journey into the hitherto unexplored territory of her own inner world” (Lucking 116) back to her moment of glossolalia: “For it is while she is in the grip of what seems to be a power entirely beyond her control that Rachel must, for the first time in her life, confront the possibility that the most authentic voice within herself is one whose language she does not understand” (Lucking 116). Lucking views Rachel’s journey as a redemptive one, one that takes her to an unexplored place. Rachel’s redemption rests in her desire to desire. She is unable to release the voice that is rooted in her body until she rejects the superimposed gazes that look back at her from every mirror she peers into.

Rachel is surprised that there is a (some)body behind the image in the mirror; she is surprised by what she is capable of articulating. When Rachel looks in the mirror, she does not recognize herself: “In the long wall mirror I saw myself running, the white of my dress, the featureless face, the tallness, a thin stiff white feather like a goose’s feather, caught up and hurtled along by some wind no one else could feel” (Laurence 183). Just as “*That voice!*” becomes undeniably her voice, “the featureless face” becomes her face. “Now she does not hurry past the mirror. She stops to look into it and sees actual woman, with blood running in actual veins” (Bowering, “That Fool” 221). She smashes through the looking glass, breaking it with her outpouring.

Nick’s sexual relationship with Rachel constitutes a summer fling. Rachel is the one who experiences ‘le petit mort’ or ‘the little death’ of her objectivity as she learns to love herself. “He is talking. He wants to talk, right now. *For God’s sake hold your tongue and let me love.* But it’s a man who is supposed to say that” (Laurence 173). The words in italics, Rachel’s inner voice, speak of Rachel’s body’s desire. Disinterested in what Nick has to say, her interest lies in what her body can receive from his in order to enter into a deeper sexual relationship with herself. “And while much is attributed to her ‘virginal doldrums’, it might be the case that the entire novel is provoked by her vaginal doldrums; Rachel Cameron’s glossolalia and ululation and lalliance is not only that of a woman grieving but of a woman crying out in the extremes of love, a woman daring to imagine such loving” (van Herk, Frozen 200). As Rachel hungers for release, she also represses herself, two sides of the same woman desirous of a unifying voice, crying out her struggle and her passions.

Brydon speaks to Rachel's repression: "Obedient silence leads to rebellious speech followed by guilty self-recrimination. All these unclaimed voices speak through her – the official teacher's, her mother's, her sister's, her own abortive attempts at self-expression – until finally, under the anaesthetic, she speaks in a voice that seems truly and finally hers: '*I am the mother now*'" (Brydon 189-190). Yet, Brydon's interpretation that Rachel is "begging" (203) and evading (203) and finally "yearning for her lost children" (203) seems reductive. To interpret Rachel's release as stemming from the declaration "*I am the mother now*" (Laurence 219) seems confining and role-oriented rather than articulate and orgasmic. Brydon also proposes, "Unlike the work of many of her North American contemporaries, Laurence's writing is remarkably free of anger" (203). But Rachel rages with "*That voice!*" In her vocalization, body and language converge. She recognizes and acknowledges her voice as capable of combining both pleasure and pain. Rachel divides from the mother tongue and the smothering tongue of her mother; she becomes the mother of herself. She takes control.

Rachel's move to Vancouver, despite her mother's protestations at being uprooted, points her towards a new frontier. In her essay, "Listening: Laurence's Women," Kristjana Gunnars postulates that Margaret Laurence's women are silent and that their silence becomes defiance; she argues that Rachel has been silenced, repressed and misheard or not heard at all. Gunnars references Cixous and Clemente's "*revolutionary stance*" regarding this silence and silencing of women. "Throughout their deafening dumb history, they have lived in dreams, embodied but still deadly silent, in silences, in voiceless rebellions" (124). In the context proposed by Gunnars, Rachel is a silenced and ultimately unfulfilled woman. Metaphorically, Rachel and all Laurence's

women represent “an earthquake waiting to happen, perhaps. A dam waiting to break. The stillness before the storm. That magical moment that takes the appearance of eternity and emanates out of itself as if endlessly” (Gunnars 124). Gunnars has fallen into reading the trope of woman as landscape. She politicizes what she perceives as Rachel’s silent rebellion through Laurence’s prairie landscape, which becomes the site of this silencing. “Seen in these terms, it is easier to acknowledge that finding a voice is not easy, nor is finding a voice innocent. This is an intellectual activity, not to be underestimated. To not-speak is an act of refusal” (Gunnars 126). Yet, when Rachel states, “*I am the mother now*” (Laurence 219) she claims her own tongue and overcomes her mother’s censoring, smothering tongue. She speaks through the mirror; she no longer needs the mirror’s gaze to define her self. Rachel shatters the mirror with her tongue; her tongue scatters into sharp fragments. Ultimately, Rachel is not silent. However, as Gunnars suggests, part of Rachel’s claiming of her voice is her decision to leave Manawaka, to leave the site of her silence. To achieve this, Rachel must first raise her voice over her mother’s; she must make herself heard.

“I very much doubt,” she says, “that my silly old heart would stand the move.” The silence between us seems to spread like dusk. It is up to me to speak, and I have prepared some words for this, but now I am afraid to use them. Afraid of what? Not only of damaging her. Perhaps not chiefly that. Afraid, more, of the apparent callousness her ears will hear and mine can’t bear to listen to or admit. Do it, Rachel. Or else quit. “I have considered that. I’ve considered it quite a lot. But – I think we will just have to take the risk.” She turns to me. She turns on me.
(Laurence 231)

Temporarily afraid to speak, afraid of hearing “*That voice!*” again, Rachel hesitates. She makes the decision to listen and admit to the power of “*That voice!*” as her voice. By

breaking her mother's gaze, speaking through that particular mirror's gaze, Rachel claims for herself her mother's tongue: "I am the mother now" (Laurence 233). Yet, she does not leave the landscape of her body behind. If anything, she traverses further inland.

Rachel's relationships with her mother and with Nick parallel her relationship with God. God holds up yet another mirror, yet another gaze passing judgment on Rachel. Her ambiguous pregnancy becomes his jest; she does not have a child and in her mind, her body betrays her. "That was the night I quit sending out my swaddled embryo wishes for nothing to happen. No use asking the impossible, even of God" (Laurence 222). When she learns that what she thought was an embryo is really a tumour, Rachel's faith in God breaks. Instead, she turns to herself for forgiveness and redemption; and she places her faith in herself. "I will be afraid. Sometimes I will feel light-hearted, sometimes light-headed. I may sing aloud, even in the dark. I will ask myself if I am going mad, but if I do, I won't know it. God's mercy on reluctant jesters. God's grace on fools. God's pity on God" (Laurence 240). Of the many voices Rachel has listened to, of the many-mirrored projections she has conformed to, she now hears her own voice in the dark and sees her own image in the mirror.

Brydon writes about Margaret Laurence's heroines, how "each of these women [Hagar, Morag, Stacey, and Rachel] has her own special relationship with the mirror, which underlines visually the dichotomy between role and real definitions of the self, between what one sees and what one feels, between what one wants others to see and what one wants to see oneself" (187). The mirror is both the 'gaze' and the 'gazer.' Brydon postulates that Laurence's female characters in the Manawaka novels are continuously searching for opportunities for articulation. "The reader leaves these novels

remembering the voices: Hagar remembering, *Rachel begging* [my italics], Stacey worrying, Vanessa re-ordering and Morag re-creating” (203). However, Rachel does not exit A Jest of God “begging” but shuddering with silent shouting and in wordless conversation with her own desires. As Rachel’s inner voice moves outward, her defiance of s/mother begins. Her own voice drowns out her mother’s voice. Initially, Rachel was unable to separate herself from the gaze of her mother/mirror, to see her self clearly through her own eyes. When she does, she interrupts her previously predictable speech and its capitulations. Rachel’s moment of glossolalia in the Tabernacle, where the power of her own voice bursting from her mouth startles her into awareness, ignites her desire and its eventual fulfillment. The realization that she can ‘cry’ initiates a dialogue between Rachel and her body, allows her to speak in a powerful and sexual voice. Inner voices becomes outer voices, mirrors become transparent panes of glass.

THE SOUND OF PISS IN A BUCKET

Voices can be heard across borders. But can these voices be heard over the raging wind and stony silence projected onto so much of what is termed ‘prairie’ literature?

Kroetsch states:

Prairie, then, is as much performance as it is either place or answer. Or to put it another way, it is possible that to become “just prairie” is to recognize and even celebrate the predicament whereby one can either gain utterance by enacting the impossibility of arrival (and the speculations of Gerry Friesen loom large here), or one can be rendered silent (and here looms the spectre of the unnameable) by the merest cognitive acknowledgment of a real prairie horizon. (Kroetsch, “Don’t Give” 210)

Kroetsch’s use of the word “performance” lends an audiovisual context to prairie. His definition of prairie invites “utterance” and silence, movement and stillness, binaries that are often applied to language and landscape. Kroetsch’s novel, What the Crow Said, explores varied relationships with language and prairie landscape through Vera, Vera’s Boy, Joe Lightning, the Crow and Liebhaber. Prairie, for Kroetsch, is both question and answer.

In Making it Home/Place in Canadian Prairie Literature, Deborah Keahey struggles to define both prairie and home as not necessarily simultaneous experiences of space and landscape. “Canadian Prairie literature creates and represents a wide variety of relationships to the shared space that is written out of and about, but even the notion of there being a ‘common space’ is a constructed illusion, one that often privileges a particular type of landscape” (8). Keahey’s analysis of regional declensions associated with “the home place,” a synonym for “homestead” in prairie language (Keahey 3),

concentrates on home/place as a location in a landscape. Like Keahy, I too contend that home/place and landscape are connected. She focuses on the intricacies of how home/place is defined in terms of the regional, social, cultural, and political vistas that make up this collage we like to call 'prairie.' I question how home and place sound. Place, voice, and region, in the context of studying 'prairie' literature, are undeniably intertwined. Yet, their understanding is more a question of borders and temporality than a definitive location. How to voice place? What sound does the cry of home make?

What the Crow Said begins with its climax, Vera Lang's ululation, a cry that opens the door for multiple performances of prairie. Kroetsch's decision to set the tone of What the Crow Said with a eulalic outpouring that takes place among the "coulees and the flats along the Bigknife River" (Kroetsch, What Crow 1) poses immediately a powerful question about place and voice. Kroetsch performs a version of echolalia, repeating back to us the voices from the landscape that he creates in What the Crow Said, voices emergent from his idea of prairie. As Keahey points out, "a large number of writers who have some connection to the Prairies exhibit mobility and settlement patterns that suggest, for whatever reasons, a kind of comfort 'home' zone, or a connection across and within a well-defined regional area" (9). The flyleaf of What the Crow Said describes the novel as "quintessentially prairie" and I take this to mean that Robert Kroetsch not only has a quintessential 'prairie' voice but is also considered a 'prairie' writer. "Already, a problem in the complex dialects of place. He's just prairie. Does that mean that I'm silent, or does it mean that I talk?" ("Don't Give" 209) writes Robert Kroetsch himself on the ubiquitous quality of being "just prairie." Just prairie? What's that supposed to mean and what sound does it make?

The setting of What the Crow Said is the town of Big Indian, a prairie town where as readers we are asked to read between the lines of sky and flat horizon. “The Municipality of Bigknife lay ambiguously on the border between the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan; no one, due to a surveyor’s error, had ever been able to locate conclusively where the boundaries were supposed to be” (Kroetsch, What Crow 28). Kroetsch places What the Crow Said in a borderless, boundary-less space, which sets up the situation that in Big Indian anything can happen, any transgression can occur. Kroetsch’s narrative inhabits these “in-between spaces” (Wilson VI), spaces where tall tales, magical events, bizarre ironies and the macabre can converge. In Kroetsch’s landscape, the place his narrative What the Crow Said calls home, “just prairie” takes on its own identity, its own distinct voice. Is the question of place also a question of voice, and can one exist without the other? Is place the root of voice? The question of prairie voice is as problematic as the question of prairie place and space. Canadian Prairie literature seems to exist in a contradictory and uneasily defined space that is constantly evolving. In his introduction to What the Crow Said, Robert R. Wilson writes about “the possibilities of in-between spaces” (Wilson VI). He refers to Kroetsch’s narrative subversions and inversions that act as a metaphor for ‘read between the lines’ and one that invites transgression.

Keahy’s prairie includes Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba as one regional entity despite the fact that they are three separate provinces and incorporate a variety of different landscapes, economies, ethnicities and histories. This is where the term ‘prairie’ becomes problematic. “To say that the Prairie region, like other regions or even nations, is not ‘natural’ but invented, is not to say, however, that it does not exist” (Keahey 9).

'Prairie' has often been associated with nostalgia, a wanting to return to and glorify the flat, untouched horizon. The Canadian Prairie region has previously been contextualized as "rural, flat, un-treed – as being the norm or standard, the 'true prairie'" (Keahey 8), but alternative prairie voices do not necessarily represent this traditional trope of prairie. Kroetsch refuses prairie stereotypes by dramatizing them with typesetters who reject order, crows that give advice, and bees that effect orgasms.

Kroetsch asks the question, "Does that mean that I'm silent, or does it mean that I talk?" He presents a binary of absence and presence, silence and sound. In What the Crow Said, Vera Lang's cry acts as an articulation of place and a locator of place: voice creates presence.

Her body was not hers now, it moved with the surge of grass in the wind, a field of green oats, a flowering of clover. Her moving crushed the blue-purple petals of the crocus bed, broke the hairy stalks, the blossoms, into the dizzying sweetness of her own desire. The hum of wings melded earth and sky into the thickness of her skin. She had no mind left for thinking, no fear, no dream, no memory. The bees had closed her mouth, her ears. The bees found the swollen lips between her thighs; she felt their intrusive weight and spread farther her legs.

Then she gave her cry. (Kroetsch, What Crow 4)

In opposition to traditional narrative, which builds towards a climax, Kroetsch writes What the Crow Said backwards; he uses the cry as an origin and not a destination. Vera Lang's eulalic orgasm removes her from language. In this context, the sound that Kroetsch's prairie makes is Vera Lang's wordless cry.

The flat and seemingly limitless horizon so often associated with 'prairie' landscape points toward a lack of limits. In "Preface to Transgression," Foucault discusses the root action of transgression as a crossing of limits, of borders. Does being

“just prairie” then constitute a transgression? Kroetsch has crossed a line with Vera Lang’s ululation. Tucked away amongst the coulees that “were too rough for wheat farming” (Kroetsch, What Crow 1) her cry has already dispelled several regional declensions regarding prairie region and landscape. It is not flat and not silent. At once fantastical and erotic, several transgressions occur during Vera Lang’s cry. Several laws of nature are broken: Vera Lang becomes pregnant; and what is typically an ending becomes a beginning. Kroetsch’s prairie transforms into an erotic and transgressive space; normative narrative breaks open with a soundless but sounding cry. It was “[T]errified and prolonged, but not a cry for help; despairing and ecstatic too. At first it was a cry of joy, a joy inhumanly exquisite; then it released a sorrow beyond all sorrow. They knew then, the men outside in the streets, the women in their houses, it was a human outcry, pain-filled and sweet, beautiful, wild, terrified” (Kroetsch, What Crow 5). Vera Lang’s wordless cry separates her from ordinary language, that separation is so acute that it becomes transcendental. “Not knowing her name, or where she was, or what had touched her into that fierce and passionate and desperate ululation: they knew no man would satisfy her. Not one. No mortal man would satisfy her” (Kroetsch, What Crow 6). Her ululation becomes legendary, mythological, part of the history and landscape of Big Indian. The townspeople blame Vera’s cry for their misfortune, tracing the root of all strange and unfortunate events back to her cataclysmic outpouring. “They knew, the women sitting over coffeecake and gossip before they started supper, they knew it was a woman’s outcry, lament and song in one, even if they did not know its secret origins, its wail and hardihood of source” (Kroetsch, What Crow 5). Vera Lang’s primal, visceral, and sexual “outcry” connects her body to the landscape and its geographical birth.

Vera's cry grounds her, places her firmly in Kroetsch's 'prairie' landscape, and literally impregnates her. Vera gives birth to another language through her son, Vera's Boy, who, raised by coyotes, is unable to speak English. "What astonished people was the way he jabbered on, hardly stopping to listen, in a kind of speech that was half yips and barks, half what his listeners took to be pig Latin" (Kroetsch, What Crow 119). For Vera's Boy, language is backward in the manner of pig Latin. He develops his own language of ululation through a combination of human and animal vocalizations, paralleling his origin and parentage. His conception occurred at the time of Vera's wordless cry; he is the result of a union between landscape and body.

Joe Lightning, another character who experiences a moment of ululation, also gives a wordless cry when he falls from the eagle's grasp to his death. "It was a simple laugh of pleasure and yet it was a kind of scream too, a scream of release. Joe, in his mile-high fall, with his arms spread like wings, his torn hands bleeding – perhaps, after all, he did learn something of the eagle's secret" (Kroetsch, What Crow 141). When Joe falls, he lets go of his humanity and his language and dives into the sea of prairie. Characters in Kroetsch's landscape, bees, coyotes, and eagles, speak their own tongues, discourses that Vera, Vera's Boy and Joe Lightning are unable to experience until they abandon language and accept the wordless cry as entrance to this transgressive landscape.

The crow speaks mostly to JG, the one character in What the Crow Said who refuses to talk, and to Liebhaber, the typesetter who mistrusts words.

And that was the first time the crow spoke. People, years later, insisted that it learned to talk from listening to Liebhaber piss and moan about the world. He was always pissing and moaning, people said. Whether or not the crow was speaking what was on the silent child's mind, that was

never clearly determined. But there were those who insisted that the black crow sometimes spoke on behalf of JG. ‘Liebhaber,’ the crow said. It had never spoken before that moment, had hardly bothered to say caw. ‘Liebhaber, you don’t know your ass from your elbow.’ (Kroetsch, What Crow 56)

The crow knows what Liebhaber does not, that words are both blessing and curse. As a typesetter, words are Liebhaber’s livelihood, yet he also feels that they fail him. He asks language to contextualize his place in the physical landscape and in his landscape of text as a typesetter. Liebhaber attempts to manipulate language in an effort to avoid its meaning. “He left the T on the table. He placed the U on the windowsill. He carried the O into his living room. But he knew the word OUT was still OUT. It was the failure to reduce a mere three-letter word to nothing that made him attempt a sequence of illogical sentences” (Kroetsch, What Crow 47). He thinks that there is no escape from language. That is Gutenberg’s curse because, as a typesetter, Liebhaber works with language upside-down and backwards, his view of language skewed. Instead of controlling language, language controls him. Aritha van Herk writes in response to Liebhaber’s predicament, “The typesetter/writer, having stolen into the prison of the alphabet, is unable to escape its relentless order, its sharp light” (van Herk, In Visible 149). Trapped in silence under his boat, removed from his blocks of wood type, Liebhaber tries to take control of language. Only when he is literally at a loss for words can he enter a gap between words, a gap between letters:

He hung onto a rib, in the cold water, trying to remember a life he hadn’t lived. Without Gutenberg’s curse; yes, that was it; without Gutenberg and moveable type, he would have lived another life. And finally he was free of Gutenberg. *I perish*, he imagined, *but only in a dream*. No,

that wouldn't do for an opening. Yes, he was writing his own story, at last. (Kroetsch, What Crow 146)

Liebhaber's voice leaves him when he is under the boat. He becomes speechless. In the absence of sound, "[h]is voice was failing him. He realized his voice was gone blank. His pleading went silent from his lips" (Kroetsch, What Crow 147). His voice becomes a blank sheet of paper. In a momentary return to orality, Liebhaber begins to invent his own story, a story without type. With his departure from text and from typesetting, Liebhaber experiences relief. "He wanted to die. Liebhaber wanted to die; he let his right leg go limp. Liebhaber's right foot touched the river bottom. The humiliation melted his arms. He shat himself" (Kroetsch, What Crow 147). Liebhaber returns to his body language as narrative landscape; he does not speak, but his body does.

Kroetsch's Liebhaber problematizes, at a bricks and mortar level, the relationship between reading and writing, reader and writer, and the production of text (van Herk, In Visible 149). Aritha van Herk in In Visible Ink/crypto-frictions states:

Yes, Liebhaber [read: Kroetsch] represents the problematized nature of reading/writing: the text, in replacing memory, reads the reader, turns an implacable eye upon its reader as though to question her act, and whatever order the text pretends to offer, it distributes the reader back into "the neat chaos." The alphabetized world has stolen into the precinct of the text, the text that can no longer exist as isolate, inviolate. (van Herk 149)

The text "reads the reader," disintegrates the binaries between reader/writer. Liebhaber's epiphany under the boat is his realization that there is narrative beyond text, beyond words. "He knows now. Gutenberg too, was only a scribe. Liebhaber, turned end for end in the old bed, his head to the foot, like printers of old, always, reading backwards,

reading upside down” (Kroetsch, What Crow 194). Ironically, for Liebhaber the typesetter, words are no longer enough.

In What the Crow Said, Kroetsch plays with normal and abnormal, crisscrossing perceived narrative boundaries and upsetting stereotypical binaries. He establishes motifs of upside-down and backwards to dispel regional mythologies associated with prairie place and voice. He creates a state of being “just prairie” that gleefully embraces aspects of prairie representation and then parodies them. Thomas King, in The Truth About Stories, also addresses stereotypical binaries in response to the contemporary Canadian narrative landscape.

You’ll recognize this pairing as a dichotomy, the elemental structure of Western society. And cranky old Jacques Derrida notwithstanding, we do love our dichotomies. Rich/poor, white/black, strong/weak, right/wrong, culture/nature, male/female, written/oral, civilized/barbaric, success/failure, individual/communal. We trust easy oppositions. We are suspicious of complexities, distrustful of contradictions, fearful of enigmas. (King 25)

King speculates that binaries or dichotomies are a comfortable method of navigating through the language we use to tell our stories, to invent and explain ourselves. In A Likely Story, Kroetsch tells a story about pissing into a bucket:

I filled the pail, and then, for whatever reason, I urinated into it. Just slightly. Not enough to change the color or the taste of the clear, sweet water. But I urinated into the full pail. When I delivered the pail to the two men, I told them, I said, “I peed in the water.” “You didn’t,” the Swede said. He was standing on the ladder, reaching out of the dry well to take the pail from me. “I peed in the water,” I said again. “You did not,” my cousin Leo said, from down at the bottom of the well. His voice had a kind of an echo-y quality about it, coming from down there. The two men took the pail and drank the water, and I marvelled that men are so impervious to truth. They carry

with them the paradigms of their claims to the world, and no mere words will deter them from believing. (Kroetsch, A Likely 45-46)

As an untrustworthy narrator, Kroetsch illustrates the unreliability of voice, continually placing his characters and his readers in unbelievable places, in-between spaces, continually pissing into a bucket, just colouring the story. “What devices of rhetoric, I asked myself, in a rudimentary way, of course, might have persuaded those two men that I had peed in the very water they were so determined to drink? What strategies of narrative and discourse might have persuaded them to go fetch their own pail of water?” (Kroetsch, A Likely 46-47). Kroetsch tells the truth about peeing in the water yet neither man believes him, neither man bothers with the implication that Kroetsch’s “mere words” convey. Liebhaber as Kroetsch comes to the same conclusion; alternative narratives can exist in the in-between spaces in text. In What the Crow Said, Kroetsch rejects dichotomies that have dictated and informed what is considered ‘prairie’ literature. He disrupts conventional narrative practice with Vera Lang’s beautiful and impossible orgasm of bees that sets the tone of the story of Big Indian – a prairie town that doesn’t quite know if it’s coming or going. As readers, we also do not know if we are coming or going when we enter Kroetsch’s narrative.

King speculates that “[t]he truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2). He refers to stories that form the parameters and paradigms that determine whether we drink from Kroetsch’s bucket. What the Crow Said is another one of Kroetsch’s buckets. A bucket full to the brim with narrative possibilities, Kroetsch offers a multitude of prairie voices and experiences to drink from. In What the Crow Said, Kroetsch problematizes narrative voice in regards to the paradigm of prairie and regionalism. He

examines the definition of prairie voice, asks how voice and place are connected. By beginning his novel with Vera Lang's shout of wild abandon, Kroetsch immediately poses questions of voice and place, plays games with regional declensions, listens for the sound of a region rather than determining a region's location. Landscape moves to soundscape. There are as many possibilities and permutations available in attempting to define 'prairie' as there are various voices and sounds arising from the prairie horizon. We can do what Kroetsch's crow suggests, enter the horizon with a shotgun (What Crow 56) and hope for the best or we can be "just prairie," traveling between words, between worlds, ululating, undulating.

LANGUAGE AS FOREIGN LANDSCAPE

In her novella, The Double Hook, Sheila Watson writes of a community unable to locate a voice or formulate a sense of place, a community navigating through a rift between the spoken and the unspoken. Silence in The Double Hook is not only an absence of articulation, but also an absence of ritual and an absence of the tangible. In “Fiction, Break, Silence: Language. Sheila Watson’s The Double Hook” Margaret E. Turner describes this dissociation from language as a “zero zone.” “The language of this zero zone is, strictly speaking, silence. Not until this silence is perceived for what it is – a kind of naming – can a language appropriate for speaking of it become possible. We have – a double hook” (Turner 66). Turner postulates that until silence is recognized and named appropriately, we will be “haunted by absence” (66). Without articulation, without an oral ritual of language, an oppressive and almost corporeal absence permeates The Double Hook. Turner refers to this absence as a “loss of language” (66), a process that conversely becomes a struggle to find language, to find a voice and break that silence.

The characters in The Double Hook struggle with articulation, trapped by the confines of a language that imprisons them but that is also necessary for communication. Language in The Double Hook represents limitation but simultaneous necessity. Godard describes Watson’s “treatment of language as an autotelic rather than representational entity” (157), meaning that the narrative turns on itself, turns inward, paralleling the community and characters that Watson creates; they too are contained and internalized. Watson problematizes this space between the spoken and the unspoken “to base her

fiction on an interrogation of the origins of language” (Godard 153). She enters into the “modernist crisis of language” (Godard 152), self-reflexively examining and experimenting in the microcosmic world of text; “the only subject left for writers [is] that of their difficult relationships with their medium, language” (Godard 152). Godard discusses how Watson subverts conventional narrative in The Double Hook through “an adoption of nonlinear spatialized form, a rejection of ‘prose’ in favour of ‘poetry’, an identical [in comparison to Eliot’s *The Wasteland*] turning to symbolism, music, and foreign languages to carry the burden of meaning English can no longer express with freshness, with authenticity” (152). Watson performs this narrative subversion through the voices of her characters who speak in a language of domesticity, using metaphor and aphorism, and consequently avoiding any ‘real’ discussion. The white space, what is left unsaid, unwritten, in The Double Hook, becomes as important and explicit as the words on the page. “Sensitive always to the thinness and inarticulateness of modern language, Watson seeks other ways to disturb the reader’s conventional consciousness of words and their so-called corresponding realities and compels the reader to enter a realm of aesthetic possibilities and values foreign to his experience in his practical reality” (Godard 153). The language of domesticity stereotypically speaks about the mundane and secure patterns of cooking and cleaning; however, in The Double Hook the domestic sphere becomes a place of danger. On the very first page of The Double Hook, in the space of ten short sentences, Watson turns cooking pancakes into murder. This inversion of domestic harmony disturbs the mythology associated with community and home as safe places when violence works its way into the everyday.

Margaret E. Turner asks, “[w]hat happens to people without language, without ritual, without a religion of beauty, without a sense of the sacred? Watson lists the choices: violence, insensibility, stasis, invisibility, silence” (Turner 74). The characters in The Double Hook are perpetually trapped between what is spoken and unspoken; the only universal language available to them is violence.

And there was something I wanted to say: about how people are driven, how if they have no art, how if they have no tradition, how if they have no ritual, they are driven in one of two ways, either towards violence or towards insensibility – if they have no mediating rituals which manifest themselves in what I suppose we call art forms.
(Watson, “What I’m” 15)

Without language rituals, without communal stories, there is only “violence” and “insensibility” for the characters of Watson’s novella. Community in The Double Hook does not equal communication. The communication that does take place within the community is couched in metaphor – saying one thing and meaning another as a community “turned against itself” (Scobie 35). For example, the narrator describes Lenchen’s illegitimate pregnancy in terms of animal husbandry; “When a stallion’s broke down your fence, he said, there’s nothing you can do except put the fence back up again” (Watson 19). The deceptively simple language that Watson uses turns the narrative in negative directions:

Greta was at the stove. Turning hotcakes. Reaching for the coffee beans. Grinding away James’s voice. James was at the top of the stairs. His hand half-raised. His voice in the rafters. James walking away. The old lady falling. There under the jaw of the roof. In the vault of the bed loft. Into the shadow of death. Pushed by James’s will. By James’s hand. By James’s words: This is my day. You’ll not fish today. (Watson 11)

Hidden in the narrator's depiction of this domestic sphere is death. The old lady's ritual of fishing, her disregard for him, is what enrages James; consequently, he takes away her ritual, her life, and her voice. He thinks that by removing the old lady, his mother, he will gain control of the women in his life and escape the hearth and home that entrap him. "He asked himself now for the first time what he'd really intended to do when he'd defied his mother at the head of the stairs" (Watson 86). James becomes the head of the household because of his act of defiance but his new position of power is false. The old lady continues to fish and James remains tied down and tongue-tied by the women in his life.

As Greta makes breakfast and grinds coffee beans, her brother James kills his mother, a murder swaddled and muffled by the language of the kitchen. When James silences his mother, he in effect attempts to kill his mother tongue and in doing so renders himself incommunicado, speechless. What element in The Double Hook produces and examines this dangerous silence, this murderous silence? In Stephen Scobie's words: "Insensibility and violence [...] Together, they form the most sinister of the novel's double hooks, on which the whole community lives suspended, isolated from each other" (Scobie 39). Scobie's "double hook" points towards isolation. The "most sinister of the novel's double hooks" (Scobie 39) is the silence/violence paradigm that Watson's narrative builds in The Double Hook. Watson twists images of agrarian tools, inanimate and voiceless, into a sickness. "This is the way they'd lived. Suspended in silence. When they spoke they spoke of hammers and buckles, of water for washing, of rotted posts, of ringbone and distemper. The whole world's got distemper, he wanted to shout. You and me and the old lady. The ground's rotten with it" (Watson 33). When James

and Greta speak, they do not speak of James's affair with Lenchen or Greta's incestuous love for James or their mutual hatred for their mother, the old lady. James wants to shout, to articulate, to cry out, but ultimately he is unable to; their "rotten" domestic sphere and a landscape that has "distemper" silence both James and Greta.

Watson creates an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia through her use of the sounds of the landscape in contrast to the silence of its inhabitants. "Dear God. The Widow waited too. The country. And the moonlight. And the animals breathing close to the house. The horses in the stable. Pawing. Whinnying. The house cow moaning in the darkness, her udders heavy with milk" (Watson 44). The landscape appears to work against its inhabitants. "In the sky above evil had gathered strength. It took body writhing and twisting under the high arch. Lenchen could hear the breath of it in the pause. The swift indrawing. The silence of the contracting muscle. The head drop for the wild plunge and hoof beat of it" (Watson 31). Violent and animalistic imagery constitutes Watson's narrative landscape. Ara describes the sky: "The sky, Ara thought, filled with adder tongues. With lariats. With bull-whips" (Watson 26). This description presents a landscape that is uncontrollable, constantly changing shape and intention, punitive. Watson presents a narrative and textual landscape that is difficult to inhabit, barely hospitable, almost sinister. "The hills were touched with light, but darkness had begun to close in" (Watson 26). These oppressive images escalate the pervasive silence, and escalate violence as a means of articulation. "The silence is physical, emotional, theological, eventually metaphysical. It invades character and event; it saturates words and dampens reference and resonance" (Turner 66). In their own ways, both James and Greta try to escape each other. James physically leaves the community but ultimately

returns. For Greta, the death of her mother should allow her to speak out but she remains silenced by her possessiveness of her brother James and by her loneliness. “The bitterness licked up. I tell you there was only James. I was never let run loose. I never had two to waste and spill, like Angel Prosper” (Watson 55). Greta’s answer to the claustrophobic community, her unrequited love, and the ghost of her mother is to incinerate herself. She burns herself to death when she realizes that she has never been free to speak her mind or to reveal herself emotionally. “Greta is trapped too deep in the community’s paralysis to be capable even of outward-turning violence. She has no course left but to turn all the violence against herself” (Scobie 37). Greta achieves this through suicide, effectively silencing herself. James also uses action as articulation but he projects his violence onto others. He expresses himself by literally lashing out with his whip, blinding Kip and whipping Greta’s legs and Lenchen’s knees.

Greta’s cry is one of unfulfilled desire: “She wanted to cry abuse through the boards. She wanted to cram the empty space with hate. She wanted her voice to shatter all memory of the girl who had stayed too long, then gone off perhaps to die in the hills” (Watson 74). James’s cry is one of violence and imprisonment. He tries to abandon all the women in his life, to reject his mother tongue and all that is feminine, but Greta and Lenchen are bound together by James and James by them. “He lifted his whip. It reached out towards her, tearing through the flowers of her housecoat, leaving a line on her flesh. Then as the thong unloosed its sweep it coiled with a jerk about Lenchen’s knees” (Watson 56). With his whip, James simultaneously punishes and binds Greta, Lenchen and himself together. Tied by blood and by birth, James is unable to articulate his escape, unable to effect his escape, even though he runs away.

In his failed attempt to leave the community, it is, ironically, a woman who sends James back home by stealing from him what he thought was his means of escape, his money. “Alone outside the glass of the cabin window James laughed too. Laughed looking in at someone else. The price of his escape lay snug in one of Traff’s trouser pockets” (Watson 95). Like Traff, Lenchen contains “the price of his escape,” his child. When Traff and Lilly steal James’s money, he does not say a word but laughs self-consciously, realizing he no longer has the means to chart an escape, that he must go back to the community he fled. Watson suggests the problem that language constantly presents, its inadequacy. “Here is speech at its thinnest – tautological, noncommunicative. To underline the mindless absurdity of this rote repetition, Watson introduces the talking parrot” (Godard 156). When James laughs at himself, he is like the parrot, trapped between two worlds, the spoken and the unspoken. “James could see the lights of the station and across from them the lights of the hotel where the parrot who lived between two worlds was probably asleep now, stupid with beer and age” (Watson 95). Margaret Turner argues that the parrot is “the only real character in the book” (71), and “the fact that it *speaks* threatens the structure of the work and its meaning” (71). Turner postulates that the parrot’s humanity, its ability to speak, juxtaposed with James’s difficulty with articulation subverts “[t]he idea of human beings *being human*” (71). In accordance with Turner’s analysis, yes, the parrot speaks easily while James cannot and yes, the parrot adopts a humanity missing from many of Watson’s characters. However, Turner does not fully acknowledge the characters in The Double Hook who desire articulation, the Widow’s Boy and Felix Prosper.

Although speaking is not necessarily appreciated within this community, the Widow's Boy wants to speak out, to break the silence surrounding James and Lenchen's affair. He is unsuccessful because of his fear James, of what the repercussions might be, of what James might do. "When they'd gone, the boy had hung around thinking: I'll pull James out and make him speak. There won't be women to interfere. Wondering what he'd do if James answered his question" (Watson 44). James's propensity for violence as a substitute for articulation instills fear in the community. Yet, Felix Prosper, like the Widow's Boy, questions the communal silence. In the Latin of his liturgical speech, he hints at the power of words:

I've got no words to clear a woman off my bench. No words except: Keep moving, scatter, get-the-hell-out. His mind sifted ritual phrases. Some half forgotten. You're welcome. Put your horse in. Pull up. *Ave Maria*. *Benedictus fructus ventris*. *Introibo*. *Introibo*. The beginning. The whole thing to live again. Words said over and over here by the stove. His father knowing them by heart. God's servants. The priest's servants. The cup lifting. The bread breaking. *Domine non sum dignus*. Words coming. The last words. (Watson 41)

Or does Felix's rumination describe the powerlessness of words? "In his personal crisis, when he realizes that he has no words, that all is silence, Felix announces the central theme of the book: a concern with the act of writing as the actual reality of the moment, metalanguage, which opens up the disintegrative possibilities of language" (Godard 156). Felix Prosper attempts to bridge the break between articulation and in-articulation, attempts to reconnect ritual and tradition, grasping at a faith of some sort through half-remembered Christian phrases. Through his chatter, he tries to place himself inside an understanding of language but fails: "He'd had his say. Come to the end of his saying.

He put a stick on the fire. There was nothing else he could do” (Watson 41). Felix Prosper’s understated epiphany infers that Watson has engaged in a difficult dialogue with language and its potential limitations in The Double Hook. Watson turns to Biblical language, language stereotypically imbued with power, in Felix Prosper’s scattered speech. He reaches towards babble/Babel, yet, after a moment of clear articulation and realization, Felix Prosper abandons his efforts at metalanguage. He puts a stick on the fire; he returns to the limiting language of the domestic sphere.

“Because of its generally stereotyped nature, language constitutes a problem for Watson. How or where can she find words with more potential as vehicles of meaning?” (156) asks Barbara Godard in her essay “Between One Cliché and Another: Language in The Double Hook.” Godard posits Felix Prosper’s liturgical ramblings as those of a prophet. “In his search for the right word, it is purely ironic that Felix’s phrase of greeting, that of the Angel announcing Christ’s birth to Mary, is appropriate for the arrival of the pregnant Lenchen” (Godard 156-157). Yet, it is Coyote’s cry at the birth of Lenchen’s child that offers a voice of redemption to the silenced community. This cry is far more powerful than either the talking parrot or Felix Prosper. Although Watson begins the novel with a death and a silencing, references to the birth of Christ are unmistakable and Lenchen’s child assumes the role of saviour. The Double Hook ends with the birth of Lenchen and James’s child, ends with a genesis, and the accompanying cry of outraged life. Death begets life in The Double Hook. “It is James’s violent action of pushing his mother downstairs which initiates the movement of the book. Again, the action is itself a duality: on the one hook, is the violence stemming from the community’s spiritual sterility; on the other hook, it is the first necessary step in the

process of the community's regeneration" (Scobie 39). For Scobie, the death of the crone must precede the birth of the child to enable the community's renewal. The novel travels in a circular fashion along this chronology; however, from the violence Greta enacts on herself, Lenchen's baby rises from the ashes.

At the birth of Lenchen's child, we hear Coyote "crying down through the boulders" (Watson 118). Coyote's cry breaks the community's silence, but does not provide resolution:

How Coyote can take any credit for Felix's birth is not clear, nor are "soft ground" and "sloping shoulders" the most stable of foundations for the infant Felix's feet. Coyote's claim is as usual a lie, but he does make it, and he does have the last word. Coyote is never completely defeated; fear and division, insensibility and violence, exist still for every generation. (Scobie 50)

For Scobie, the language Coyote speaks becomes another metanarrative that we do not have access to, a parallel language for a parallel universe of articulation. Coyote's crying down from a cleft in the hills is both proclamation and warning. The narrative of The Double Hook is a 'dog-eat-dog' world where only Coyote is allowed a position of power. In his essay, "Coyote as Trickster in The Double Hook," Leslie Monkman uses Paul Radin's definition of the trickster figure:

Trickster is at one and the same time, creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself ... He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being. (63)

Coyote is the only character who 'sees' everything stereoscopically. All seeing and all knowing, Watson embeds Coyote in the narrative as an omniscient narrator, the oracle of The Double Hook. His voice is the last one we hear, and he gets the last laugh:

And from a cleft of the rock she heard the voice of Coyote
crying down through the boulders:

I have set his feet on soft ground;
I have set his feet on the sloping shoulders
of the world. (Watson 118)

Yet, Coyote's language is one that mystifies the rest of the characters, his unheard voice present only in the landscape. "[H]is presence does not rest at the level of an unseen divinity; indeed, the whole landscape is presented as embodying his immediacy" (Monkman 64). Coyote's unbreakable connection to the landscape provides a sharp contrast to the fragmented connection between the characters and their community. There is one exception, the character of Kip. Kip is Coyote's interpreter and consequently his human servant, even Kip's name sounds like a coyote's cry or a 'yip.' "And in a loud voice/ Coyote cried:/ Kip, my servant Kip" (Watson 26). Coyote and Kip are connected to each other through their shared occupation of the landscape, a landscape that is their domestic sphere. Kip is the only character who possesses this connection with Coyote. Their shared landscape represents a source of sound and movement, providing a contrast to the stasis and apathy of the inhabitants of the community.

Coyote speaks throughout The Double Hook; it is his voice heard in the gaps between the spoken and the unspoken, the cleft in the rocks. "The voice out of Coyote's mouth is heard when the human component is shifting, at Greta's death and at young Felix's birth" (Bowering, Sheila Watson 195). At the birth, the moment of regeneration, we hear "the voice of Coyote crying down through the boulders" (Watson 118). Watson's Coyote speaks in a language outside the communal language and exists in a parallel landscape to that of the community. His cry at the end of the novel, combined

with the cry of the child, breaks the silence. Their cry together interrupts the connection between violence and silence within the community. Emanating from the gap between the spoken and the unspoken, screaming new life and regeneration, this cry is both wordless and alive. The gap is what is tangible, audible – fish you can eat, a baby that's born, a coyote's yip in the darkness.

HER WORDS BECOME BIRDS

In “A Song for Nettie Johnson,” Gloria Sawai writes of one woman’s struggle to define and accept home despite its terrible associations. “*Home, home...* Eli Sings. ‘Home!’ Nettie shouts. *Sweet sweet home...* he sings. ‘Sweet home!’ she shouts. *There’s no place like home, oh, there’s no place like home.* Nettie sighs. ‘That is so true,’ she says” (Sawai 58). Nettie Johnson’s sentiment that “there’s no place like home” has a double meaning in the context of “A Song for Nettie Johnson.” Her relationship with her home/place is problematic; it is both her home and her prison. Nettie continuously struggles with her definition of home, her definition of place. Does inhabiting a particular place make it our own? Make it our home?

Defining terms is usually a tricky business, and “home” is no exception. It is not, for instance, simply a domestic residence but instead can be placed in or around a larger community, or even the entire earth. It can be a physical location or a psychological sensation. It can be individual, social, or communal. Similarly, “place” can be a geographical location, but it can also be a symbolic, social, cultural, or psychic one. To know “your place” can mean to know who you are, or how you are defined by others, and your relationship to the world around you. The complexity of the concept of home, both as a noun and as a verb, is also revealed in the fact that it is entirely possible (and often actualized) to be “not ‘at home’ at home.”
(Keahy 11)

Deborah Keahy’s definition of home seems to suggest that home and place can be synonymous, but her definition also allows for the problematization of home and place. Keahy’s concerns with home centre on the location of home, the placement of home, and defining where home fits, yet Keahy does not address the voice of home. A dilemma in

defining 'home,' Nettie's connection to the quarry and her difficulty with articulating certain words asks whether home, voice and place are synonymous.

In her attempt to define her home/place, Nettie constructs and deconstructs words, spells them out in an effort to place herself within a safe language:

She touches a word with her finger, presses on it hard.
 Maybe if her skin and the bone under her skin can reach
 beneath the print, dig under the letters, press together the
 parts of each letter, crumble the parts into tiny pieces,
 discover the ingredients of each piece, then, maybe, she
 will be able to tell exactly what the words are saying, what
 each word means. (Sawai 13-14)

She struggles to connect the words that she spells to meaning and memory; once she can determine their meaning, she can understand her memories. Nettie's notion of home resides in the quarry. She associates the quarry with her experience of sexual abuse. Her home beside the pit is both her metaphorical big silent mouth and a physical hole in the landscape. The quarry evokes Nettie's memories of abuse and keeps the secrets of the men who have visited her there. She is unable to speak about her abuse, but she can spell out the words, s-t-o-n-e, r-o-c-k and d-u-s-t: "And that's where he did it. That's where my daddy always did it to me after Mama died. Down there on the stones" (Sawai 47). Nettie mistrusts language, and she will not spell certain words. Her need to place herself within language is a desire to make sense of her sexual abuse; her spelling represents an effort to manipulate language towards closure, to understand her experiences through words. She struggles to articulate words that she is unable to spell, words of healing, words that do not negatively denote her definition of home.

Sawai works with the dichotomy of absence and presence on several levels in “A Song for Nettie Johnson.” The pit is a space where Nettie digs for meaning, a place of absence.

Nettie points to the town. “Well, if you stayed away from there,” she says. “They’re mean over there. Over there they do not have a heart.” She taps Eli’s chest with the tips of her fingers. “Do you know what they’ve right where the heart’s supposed to go?” Eli shakes his head. “Well, they don’t have a heart there, I can tell you that.” She knocks against him with her knuckles. “Do you know what they’ve got there?” “No,” he says. “A hole,” she says. “Well, so what?” Eli says. “Everybody’s got a hole somewhere inside of them. And everybody fills it up the best way they know how.” (Sawai 49-50)

Eli fills his “hole” with music and with liquor but Nettie’s “hole” is the quarry and the memories that it provokes. Nettie’s relationship to the quarry is complicated by the fact that it is both the place of her abuse and her home. For her, home, place and memory converge. Her negative memories can be interpreted as her “land imprint”; she will forever associate the quarry with her rape. In Fresh Tracks: Writing the Western Landscape, Pamela Banting asks, “Precisely how does the land imprint itself upon us? What kinds of imprinting do we make upon the land?” (Banting 15). Banting asks what our relationship to the physical landscape is. How are we impacted by the landscape? How do we affect the landscape? Nettie’s relationship with the pit appears one-sided; she seems to have been marked by the quarry far more than she has left her imprint on its rocks and dust. However, her “land imprint” is not entirely negative. She carries on a constant conversation with the quarry, with nature and the natural objects that surround her. “‘I’m looking for my old pals,’ Nettie says. She hollers into the pit, ‘Hey, you bugs, come on out and play’” (Sawai 44). Nettie sends her voice into the gap hoping for a

response but only echoes come back. She attempts to fill the silence of the quarry with her voice. Nettie's echolalia into the pit questions the ability of speech and song to fill silence, to create presence, to fill an absence. Absence and presence, silence and sound, language and meaning become the dichotomies Nettie functions within, and that entrap her.

As Nettie spells, the quarry becomes her mouth. As she fills her mouth with words, spelling and sounding, her voice fills the pit. She attempts to define her sexuality, a sexuality that was 'mined' as a quarry is mined. Nettie does not speak in a normative sense; instead, she spells the words that trap her and that spell out her escape. Does the word 'bird' still mean 'bird' or 'dust' or 'rock' when it has been broken up into four letters, meaningless on their own? And what effect does their breaking up accomplish for Nettie? For Nettie, language is both a method of construction and a method of deconstruction. By de-constructing certain words, she reclaims them, robs them of their power. But, unable to spell bird, to spell her release from the past and from the place she has constructed for herself – a place formed of mute rocks and stones – the edges of the pit are still beyond her speech. Her unwillingness to spell 'bird,' a word synonymous with flight, conflicts with her ability to spell other words such as rock and dust, words that infer grounding: "Lovely," he says. "You fill the air with your spelling. And it's very nice." "Oh it's not that great." He strokes her neck, nuzzles into her ear. "Try bird." "I never could spell that one," she says." (Sawai 36-37). Nettie's refusal to spell bird parallels her refusal to move past the quarry and all its connotations. Birds represent movement, noise, whereas stones are static, silent. When she chooses to spell bird, Nettie

will become like a bird, she will allow herself movement and release herself from the rocks and dust that confine her.

Yet she still refuses to leave the quarry, a synonymous representation of the physical and psychological construction of her home/place. Metaphorically, the quarry represents Nettie's body as site of her rape. The giant mouth of the pit and the memories it holds swallows her whole: "That old Swede was right, you know, about the blessing. A blessing as big as a boulder ... as big as this hill ... as big as the whole damn prairie ... and it comes to you ... over and over ... but you just don't see it, Nettie ... your eyes are stuck shut, and you miss it" (Sawai 72). Weighed down by rocks, blinded by dust, Nettie cannot speak her own release or break the silence that has been imprinted on her, a silence that surrounds her victimization. "She calls out, her voice wheeling into the sky. Silence. She runs around the quarry to the rim of the hill, stops, and calls again. Her voice echoes across the prairie" (Sawai 42). Nettie looks to the quarry, the sky, the bugs, and the landscape around her to give her answers, to translate her home/place. "To know 'your place' can mean to know who you are, or how you are defined by others, and your relationship to the world around you" (Keahy 11). She tries to define her 'place' through her conversations with the landscape.

She turns to the quarry and leans over its edge. "Hey you down there, vy did God create man?" She waits. "No answer," she says. She calls again. "Stones and bugs and snakes and toads, wake up!" She looks out across the pit. "Magpies and ugly buzzards, do you know the answer?" She stretches her neck back and looks straight up. "Hey, wind and clouds, and all you angels on top of the sky. Doesn't anybody know the answer?" (Sawai 46- 47)

Nettie literally loses her voice speaking into the quarry. No one can hear her and she receives no response from a landscape as silent witness, one that cannot provide answers to her questions.

Sawai presents a difficult interpretation of the landscape that Nettie inhabits. “Landscape writes itself over our sight, hearing, touch, smell and even taste. It constructs our sense of space – it even etches itself over our bodies – but we lack a vocabulary, other than the slightly derogatory word ‘nostalgia,’ to account for the impact and nuances of these inscriptions,” (Fresh Tracks 14) writes Banting, referring to her question of “land imprint.” Banting speaks of landscape as an inscription on our bodies, difficult to describe, a moveable feast of sensory impact but one that is grounded in the ground, the soil, the roots of prairie. Unlike Banting, who claims that, “we lack a vocabulary” to voice our connection to the landscape, Nettie has no problem spelling out her connection to the quarry “account[ing] for the impact and nuances of these inscriptions” (14) on her body. For Nettie, there are words “that affirm [her] corporeal connection with nature” (Banting 14). She ‘spells’ and ‘reads’ the landscape; she contextualizes herself in relation to the landscape, placing herself there. “Her face listens. Eyes narrow, lips tighten. Her gaze moves from the book on her lap to the ground at her feet, to the quarry in front of her, to the pasture beyond the quarry, to the horizon’s edge and up, more, still more, neck stretching, to the blue dome directly above her” (Sawai 5). Eli asks her to leave the quarry, to shift her context. “‘That’s what you say.’ She opens the book again, face sour. ‘Come with me,’ he says. ‘Never.’ ‘Leave the damn pit for awhile.’ He slides his hand across her slim back, feels its firmness. ‘And come.’ ‘Don’t try any of your tricks,’ she says. ‘I’m not going anywhere’” (Sawai 5). She refuses Eli’s request,

choosing not to leave the context of the quarry, her textual environment. Nettie feels safe there, just as she feels safe only with certain words. The quarry is a place that she knows, her own private landscape, her own private lexicon. Only her voice occasionally escapes the pit, flies past its edges as she calls to Eli. “The tiny particles of her voice flow over the hillside, over the creek bed and the willow tree, and into the pasture. She calls louder. ‘Keep your eyes open. Don’t step in a gopher hole.’ And the little pieces of sound speed through the air and almost touch him” (Sawai 6-7). Nettie’s unwillingness to leave the pit creates a textual horizon, a binary between land and sky, closed and open. Both birds and words are able to cross this boundary, but initially, Nettie is not.

Eli attempts to shift Nettie’s perspective of herself by bringing her a new dress. “Nettie opens her eyes and sees the dress. She sees it moving gracefully under Eli’s right arm, like a person, a friend. Like a pretty lady. A woman loved. Her breathing stops, then moves ever so lightly inside her, soft as dandelion fluff. And she feels sunlight all around her” (Sawai 66). Despite Eli giving this symbol of renewal, of newness and cleanliness, to Nettie to wear to his performance of the *Messiah*, she still refuses to leave.

When Eli leaves;

She scrapes at the snow with her foot until she can see the dirt beneath the snow, and the stones, and dead and frozen thistles. She bends down and tears at the stones with her hands, but they’re frozen into the earth. She stands up, kicks at them with her foot, and some dislodge from their icy niche. She picks one up and throws it at Eli. Then another, and hurls it at him. And another. (Sawai 72-73)

Still afraid, still unable to separate her ‘home’ with Eli from the ‘place’ of her abuse, Nettie casts the first stone at her shame and anguish. As she tries to dislodge frozen

stones from the ground, so she tries to dislodge herself from the quarry, to throw away her anger and her pain.

She watches him finally disappear over the hill. Then she kicks more stones loose, picks them up, and shoves them into her pocket. She makes her way to the edge of the quarry, to the wide white hole of the pit. And she pulls a stone out of her pocket and hurls it into the hole. "This is for you, Daddy!" She throws another and another until there is only one stone left. "And I'm not saying thank you!" (Sawai 73)

Nettie symbolically fills the empty hole of the quarry by throwing down her burden, although she keeps one stone. "Then she digs her hand into her pocket and pulls out the last stone. She holds it close to her face, turns it this way and that, examining its shape, each sharp edge, each small indentation. 'I nearly did a very bad thing to you.' She presses it against her chest and pats it with her hand. 'Hey, don't cry, I'll take you home'" (Sawai 73). She almost throws every part of herself away but the one stone she holds back becomes a symbol. She returns the stone to its home as she wishes that she had been, intact. Nettie verbalizes for the first time what occurred at the bottom of the quarry: "'I remember now how it was. I forgot but now I remember. You said I was your new bride, that's what you said'" (Sawai 74). This unburdening opens her vocabulary to the word 'bird.'

Previously Nettie could communicate, but she was not able to articulate or to negotiate her inability to leave the quarry, to move outside of her constructed and constrictive landscape. "She thinks of the pit. Deep. I can pull you down to the bottom just like that. And it's always watching you, waiting for you to take one wrong step, spell one word wrong" (Sawai 70). Yet, in an image reminiscent of a newborn chick, "She

spreads her feet apart, lifts up her head, stretches her neck, and opens her mouth wide. ‘B-i-r-d. Bird! Did you hear that?’ She waves the dress in the air, back and forth and up and down, flapping” (Sawai 89). Nettie gives her ‘cry’ and reclaims her voice, severing herself from the quarry. Spelling out birds that can fly, the weight on her back lifts, and the stones that weigh her down become mere words. “Hal-le-lu-jah, hal-le-lu-jah, hal-le-lu-jah, hal-le-lu-jah Hal-----le-----lu-----jah! And Nettie shouts, ‘Crow. C-r-o-w. Duck. D-u-c-k. Loon. L-o-o-n.’ And the sound of her voice speeds through the night, past clouds and stars, to where the white birds hover. And others gather. Blackbird, hawk, thrush, and meadowlark” (Sawai 89). As soon as Nettie articulates her release by spelling ‘b-i-r-d,’ flight becomes freedom, and she is freed. She decides to leave the pit.

Movement away from the quarry changes Nettie’s ‘home/place’ paradigm; home and place no longer occupy the same space. The quarry put Nettie in her place, fixed and fixated her there; the quarry, that ‘place’, is the “determinant,” the “character” that Bowering refers to, “Anyone knows that in novels set on the Canadian Prairie, place is a determinant, sometimes even a character” (Bowering, “That Fool” 210). In this context, as Nettie changes her physical landscape, she changes her psychological landscape. The quarry no longer has power over her. Her metaphorically closed space/place becomes open. Kroetsch genders space and place when he states:

We conceive of external space as male, internal space as female. More precisely, the penis: external, expandable, expendable; the vagina: internal, eternal. The maleness verges on mere absence. The femaleness verges on mystery: it is a space that is not a space. External space is the silence that needs to speak, or that needs to be spoken. It is male. The having spoken is the book. It is female. It is closed. (73)

Kroetsch's implication in this passage is that men need women to speak, to make noise, to provide language, to fill space, to create presence in absence, to furnish a static and dependable horizon. Sawai problematizes Kroetsch's gendered space with Nettie's cry, which takes over both internal and external space. Nettie fills the quarry with her spelling but her voice also carries over the edge of the pit, and her cry is a convergence of absence and presence. In "A Song for Nettie Johnson," Sawai implicitly addresses Kroetsch's suggestion that male means mobility and female means immobility. Although Eli is able to leave the quarry, initially Nettie cannot. Through her spelling, turning her silence into sound and her eventual departure from the quarry, Nettie opens the closed book. "The having spoken is the book. It is female. It is closed" (73). Nettie's action of spelling into the air is active; her words are not on paper, not in a book. She lifts them off the page, and interrupts the closure that Kroetsch refers to. A new dialectic emerges, voice: place.

In his essay, "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space," Robert Kroetsch introduces the horse/house trope as a basic prototype of prairie fiction (76), a trope that tracks movement between place and home.

To be *on* a horse is to move: motion into distance. To be *in* a house is to be fixed: a centering unto stasis. Horse is masculine. House is feminine. Horse: house. Masculine: feminine. On: in. Motion: stasis. A woman ain't supposed to move. Pleasure: duty. The most obvious resolution of the dialectic, however temporary, is in the horse-house. (Kroetsch, Lovely Treachery 76)

In Sawai's text, the dialectic he suggests becomes bird: quarry. The "resolution of the dialectic" then shifts; get out of the house/quarry and onto the horse/bird. Nettie uses her voice to move herself from one place to another, crossing the edges of the pit and spelling

out a new concept of home. For Nettie, “This home is not a centre of gravity that is other and outside the self but something inside of or identical to the self. Or, perhaps, even more radically, something that ‘resides in’ or is constructed by *movement itself*” (Keahy 126). As she separates herself from the quarry, Nettie’s redefinition of home becomes transcendent, transportable within her self and independent from the landscape. Now, her home does not have to be her place, and she can separate that place, the site of her abuse, from her definition of home. The landscape previously anchored Nettie; she was trapped, swallowed by the mouth of the pit. With language as her escape, she cries out another word for home, b-i-r-d.

I return to my original question. Are home, voice and place synonymous? More so than in any of the other works that I have chosen to discuss here, “A Song for Nettie Johnson” upsets ideas of home and place. Nettie’s home, the quarry, is also her place, albeit one with negative associations. “Home appears to be such a fundamental human concern that all manner of other activities are absorbed or co-opted into its large construction project” (Keahy 12); within these terms, the ‘home’ that Nettie constructs is a house of words that anchors her to the pit, occupying an unbreakable silence. I lean towards Keahy’s interpretation of home and place as two heavily laden words that can contain a multitude of possible meanings. However, like Banting, who presents the view that our place defines us, “Place was self” (13), I also think that the self is not easily separated from either home or place. Yet, in “A Song for Nettie Johnson,” home and place splinter; Nettie must leave the quarry to realize that home travels within her. Consequently, when her home no longer defines her, she is able to define her home. Sawai debunks a comfortable and comforting view of home. She sets up the place/voice

dialectic. The dialectic of place/voice within which Nettie Johnson functions offers an alternative to Kroetsch's dialectic of horse: house (76) where horse equals movement and house equals stasis. For Nettie, home, place and voice are synonymous. Place and voice do not necessarily contradict each other.

Providing a contrast to the images of stone and dirt, images of birds and angels throughout "A Song for Nettie Johnson" serve as metaphors of escape for Nettie. Conversely, the stone and dirt of the quarry are metaphors for Nettie's difficulty in redefining the narrow margins which she has placed her home and herself within. She exists in her own deliberately limited lexicon, making an inhabitable text. The words that Nettie chooses to spell are the words that she chooses to translate herself with. When she leaves the quarry, she can redefine her home/place and consequently redefine herself. As she spells b-i-r-d she deconstructs the language that imprisoned her at the edge of the pit. She enters a different context, one that allows for a new lexicon, with new words to spell.

In response to Kroetsch's dialectic, J'nán Morse Sellery argues: "From beginning as spies searching for the thieves of words, women characters and writers turn away from being an actor in a man's book, and turn their silence into the language of nature, body, and self-nurture in arctic or prairie landscapes" (174). Sawai does not deny Nettie's connection to nature and to the landscape. Moments of ululation in Sawai's text are described in animalistic terms, linking the effect of ululation, a departure from language, with nature. An example of this connection is Eli and Nettie's wild songs to each other. Nettie is comfortable with this wordless form of communication.

"Oooowooooo," his coyote voice full of longing. And Nettie slides from her chair onto the ground. She crawls on stones toward the quarry. And she wails the same coyote's

cry, “Ooowooooo.” Then a new sound comes to her, a snake hissing. “S-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s,” it says, long and sleek. “S-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s,” she answers. And the sound changes, and she hears the warbling of a meadowlark, a trill so sweet she has to laugh. (Sawai 30)

Eli metamorphoses into a coyote, a snake, and a bird. Like the animals he imitates, Eli has the ability to leave the quarry and to move freely in the world. He conforms to Kroetsch’s dialectic in the sense that he dominates external space, yet his ability to move beyond the quarry is associated with sound, contradicting Kroetsch’s speculation that external space is silent (73). In “A Song for Nettie Johnson,” voice equals movement, but Nettie’s voice locks her into that confining space until she can articulate her damage:

“Stone,” she says softly to the word under her finger.
 “Stone,” she says again, loudly, as if it were a cry to someone she can’t see, someone beyond the quarry.
 “Stone,” she calls, and her voice echoes above the prairie.
 “S-t-o-n-e.” She spells the word slowly, each letter distinct, melodic. She lifts her finger from the page and looks closely at the printed word. (Sawai 2)

The house of words that Nettie builds collapses and then rebuilds itself as the language that held her hostage releases her. Her voice, her wild song to her self, is the catalyst for her own metamorphosis:

Let us break their bonds a-sunder... Nettie stands beside the tree and wonders. It comes so slow. It comes from far away in the dark, in wide circles in the night. It’s never in a hurry, and that’s how it is. It takes a long time to get the picture. She watches the stick in the window, whizzing this way and that. And she calls out. “I’m here, Eli. I came. A thousand miles. And it wasn’t easy.” (Sawai 88-89)

When her words become birds, Nettie reclaims language. She demonstrates that there is an escape from the language that confines us, that repeats our damage and pain. Nettie

discovers that her own voice allows her freedom of movement. Her 'cry' takes her beyond the edges of the pit and past the horizon to a newly articulated life.

THE TELEPHONE GAME: TRAVELING ALONG A WAVY WIRE

Did you ever play the telephone game? Everyone sits in a large circle and one person thinks of a sentence. The person with the sentence whispers it into the ear of the person sitting beside him or her and the sentence travels around the circle in this way. Eventually, the sentence returns to the person it originated from who then speaks it aloud. Having passed from one mouth and into another ear and so on, the sentence is irrevocably altered. An interesting game of translation, interpretation and communication, Beautiful Losers is like that telephone game engaging in an ongoing conversation, an extended cry that becomes a 'cri de coeur.' Cohen's writing traverses a multitude of ears, a multitude of interpretations, each one a slightly different communication and articulation from the last.

Has Leonard Cohen created a new language, a language of resistance that posits the other where the self resides? Have the boundaries between self and other become blurred? How can we communicate the body? Can we communicate the body effectively using the language of the mind or do we turn to alternate means of articulation? I propose that the narrative of Beautiful Losers and Leonard Cohen's textual manipulations (or are they masturbations?) provide us with an essential currency with which to enter this struggle, this other/ed space, crisscrossing lines of communication and testing the boundaries of meaning.

The 'telephone game' that F. plays with Edith is a metaphor for listening to the body:

I was worried about my eardrums because of her long red nails, she was digging so hard. We shut our eyes and we kissed like friends, without opening our mouths. Suddenly

the sounds of the lobby were gone and I was listening to Edith. [F.'s voice]

— To her body! Where did this happen? When did you do this to me? [I's voice]

— So those are your questions. It happened in a telephone booth in the lobby of a movie theater downtown. [F.'s voice] (Cohen 30)

F., in listening to Edith's body, tunes into the voice of her body and experiences a moment of connection. "—Hear is not the right word. I *became* a telephone. Edith was the electrical conversation that went through me" (Cohen 35). F.'s and Edith's "telephone dance" (Cohen 33) allows them to dial into each other's bodies, discover new ways of speaking. This alternate articulation, their "electrical conversation" with the body and within the body becomes a sexuality that does not rely on conventional sexual practices. Edith and F. attempt a sexual liberation: "Down with genital imperialism! All flesh can come! Don't you see what we have lost? Why have we abdicated so much pleasure to that which lives in our underwear? Orgasms in the shoulder! Knees going off like firecrackers!" (Cohen 34). The margins of what is considered normative sexuality blur. By no longer putting a penis into a vagina but putting fingers into ears, vagina and penis are removed from the equation and the penis/vagina dichotomy shifts. "They are under the influence of telephones. The characters of Leonard Cohen's Beautiful Losers surrender to a mechanical discourse of human desire. They are drunk on an ecstasy that allows for artificial human connection, yet bypasses physical contact" (Markotic 1). Cohen's metaphor of the telephone as a conduit for sexuality allows for a multitude of changing voices, selves, ears and dialling fingers. In response to Nicole Markotic's proposal that the telephone metaphor "bypasses physical contact," meaning the sexual

activity in which Edith, F. and I participate is mechanical, Cohen's call for "orgasms in the shoulder" and "knees going off like firecrackers" invites direct physical contact. The 'telephone game' between F. and Edith asks that we re-examine how we articulate sexuality. "[H]e goes out of his way to confront, even to try to shock, his readers in an attempt, perhaps, to get us back in touch with our bodies – and with the language of our bodies" (Hutcheon 31). Cohen demands that we, as readers and critics, 'read' the body differently from our precedent, shock ourselves into experiencing the body differently from the sanitized and familiar:

Her wondrous nipples were dark as mud and very long when stiffened by desire, over an inch high, wrinkled with wisdom and sucking. I stuffed them into my nostrils (one at a time). I stuffed them in my ears. I believed continually that if anatomy permitted and I could have stuffed a nipple into each of my ears at the same time – shock treatment! (Cohen 28-29)

This 'vocabulary' of "shock treatment" that Cohen carves out of the English language is his celebration of the body and cries for a certain freedom. "This kind of language is not merely abusive, according to Bakhtin; it is also perhaps a sign of irrepressible linguistic freedom and vitality" (Hutcheon 31). Cohen's chaotic narrative pulls the reader into a bricolage of senses and images, devouring, carnivorous, and carnivalesque.

Bakhtin writes, "as opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (10). *Beautiful Losers* performs as a linguistic carnival. "The promise of the carnivalesque is a promise of renewal by

destruction” (Kroetsch, Lovely Treachery 104). Cohen achieves carnival in his narrative in two ways: structurally by the babbling narrative that tells the story and thematically through the sexual exploits of his characters. Structurally, Cohen destroys his novel by disrupting its chronology. He employs elements of epistolary and hagiography in an atypical style, swirling eddies in his river of language, another wave along the telephone wire. As Siemerling says, “[s]imilarly, a new language, a new style of writing would both be and not be language and its opposite; it would say and stutter the unsayable, would visualize the invisible, and come into being at the boundary *between* the language of the self and its unknown other” (Siemerling 49). Thematically, the carnivalesque aspect of Beautiful Losers allows for a removal of boundaries between self and other, performance and audience. The shifting identities that Cohen presents, concoct a carnivalesque narrative where disconnection is destination. As boundaries are blurred, confused and permeated, so do the definitions of self and other confuse their separation in the convoluted world of identity as extended articulation.

The character of I seems to view his body and his bodily functions as separate; he disconnects from himself. In contrast, F. travels indefinitely back and forth along a continuum between self and other, mind and body. As Siemerling notes, “[t]he concurrence of these seemingly opposed tendencies also propels the continual variation of Cohen’s paradigmatic pairs, I and you, self and other, writer and reader, master and slave, pupil and teacher: as soon as they are posited, neither of these identities seems to remain in place for long” (Siemerling 27). The narrator in Beautiful Losers clings to his sense of self, while his friend and lover, F., tears it down. F. and I are perfect foils for each other, representing two sides of the same self. I is the cerebral and F. the corporeal.

Can the two become one? Is Cohen able to reconcile the binaries that he sets up in Beautiful Losers? As Cohen drags us, willingly or unwillingly, down the tributaries of bodily fluid that flow throughout Beautiful Losers, he seems to move endlessly towards convergence: “Welcome to you, darling and friend, who miss me forever in your trip to the end” (Cohen 260). Yet, by avoiding conclusions and by writing another beginning, Cohen’s ‘telephone game,’ his extended ‘cry,’ continues; the sentence travels ever onwards. This continuous cry, a discourse rooted in the bodies of I and F., becomes synonymous with orgasm, both sexually and textually. “Thus we existed in some eye for a second: two men in a hurtling steel shell aimed at Ottawa, blinded by a mechanical mounting ecstasy, the old Indian land sunk in soot behind us, two swelling pricks pointing at eternity” (Cohen 98). The characters of I and F. are constantly searching for their next climax, in perpetual motion until F. dies and I is left to continue on alone.

Any actual sexual climaxes that occur in Beautiful Losers are I’s and F.’s, strictly male. Because of this, one could easily argue that the novel is androcentric; the characters of Edith and Catherine Tekakwitha are present merely to facilitate male satisfaction. Am I able to discuss transgressions of meaning, transgressions in the binary of self and other, and alternative ways of articulating the body without also examining Beautiful Losers in terms of homosexuality? I’s and F.’s ongoing multi-orgasmic sexual/textual ‘cry’ narrating Beautiful Losers occupies this problematic and transgressive space. Their sentence, traveling along a wavy telephone wire, keeps changing. I recognize the homoerotic aspect of Beautiful Losers; in many ways, the novel is a love affair between F. and I. Homo or Hetero, my focus here is a discussion regarding ways in which the cry has been used as a discourse for the body.

There is no isolatable single moment of ululation in Beautiful Losers; rather, the way language is manipulated points towards a continuous cry and another way of describing bodies and bodily experiences. One method Cohen employs is disjunctive language. He uses onomatopoeic words to represent bodily functions: “Glog, glog, dear God, hump, fart push, sweet Almighty, slurp, flark, glamph, hiccup, jerk, zzzzzz, snort, Jesus, she must have made his life hell” (Cohen 17). Sequences of free flowing words effect extended eulalia. Through babble as a literary device, Cohen separates meaning from experience:

Edith Edith Edith long things forever Edith Edie cuntie
 Edith where your little Edith Edith Edith Edith stretchy on
 E E E octopus complexion purse Edith lips lips area thy
 panties Edith Edith Edith knew you your wet rivulets
 Eeeedddiiiiittthhhh yug yug sniffle truffle deep bulb bud
 button sweet soup pea spit rub hood rubber knob girl come
 head (Cohen 68)

These sections of jumbled words inflict a violent assault on the senses. Coherent meaning loses importance in these passages as the rhythm and the staccato shock value of words such as “cuntie” build the text towards a multi-orgasmic narrative experience that takes on the quality of a sexual engagement escalating from one climax to the next. Cohen’s babble performs as a chorus rooted in the body of I, an experience that is simultaneously painful and pleasurable, and ultimately eulalic. Ululation functions as transgression; borders are crossed and entrance into other/ed spaces occurs. Subsequently, the cry is symbolic rather than semiotic, sexual rather than cerebral and emotional rather than intellectual. I and F. assume the role of “*parrhesiastes*” (Foucault, Fearless 12).

In parrhesia, the speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks. The word parrhesia, then, refers to a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says. For in parrhesia, the speaker makes it manifestly clear that what he says is his own opinion. And he does this by avoiding any kind of rhetorical form which would veil what he thinks. Instead, the parrhesiastes uses the most direct words and forms of expression that he can find. (Foucault, Fearless 12)

I and F. channel their sexual energies into words, spewing verbal orgasms, relating anything and everything that represents their truth at that moment.

In response to Cohen's scat, Stan Dragland writes, "There is, in general, such volatility of voice, such thoroughly polyphonic notation of the sounds of 'the tinkly present' that one might be reminded of the dolphin sonographs (depicting multiple simultaneous vocalization) in the epigraph to Ondaatje's *Slaughter*" (16). In Coming Through Slaughter, Ondaatje's "dolphin sonographs" pinpoint the difficulty inherent in translating any sort of sound, music, or in this case cry, into the silent medium of text. His sonographs are representations of sound translated onto the printed page. In contrast, Cohen's response to this difficult question of articulation is to fill silent pages with words that scream off the page, words that attempt to evoke a gut reaction rather than an intellectual one. As David Stacey states: "The concomitant threat to intelligibility, of failing to *mean*, is expressed by the text's use of 'nonsense language' and what in music are sometimes called 'vocables' as the means of conveying sexual experience" (Stacey 227). The effect that Cohen achieves through his 'babble,' provides an alternative translation of bodily experience. "The language of his letter – the 'old language' – cannot really cross its own identity as language" (Siemerling 50). Beautiful Losers

remains as words on a page; but language has become bodily fluid, a tributary converging into a river of sexual experience and meaning. Whereas Ondaatje's sonographs and Coming Through Slaughter pose the question of how to "*listen* it" (Ondaatje 131) in the silent but sounding environment of text, Cohen's Beautiful Losers asks how we '*speak* it,' meaning the body. How, in a language that has become "denatured" (Foucault, Language 29-30) and confiscated from bodily articulation, do we read the body? How do we listen to the body?

Unable to give up the "load of shit" that constitutes how he defines his existence, I struggles to define his self with respect to his body and his relationships with F., Edith and Catherine Tekakwitha. In *Book One*, the character of I suffers from chronic constipation; he views this blockage as a betrayal. His body stages a rebellion, trying to tell him something, but he refuses to listen: "The straining man perched on a circle prepares to abandon all systems. Take hope, take cathedrals, take the radio, take my research. These are hard to give up, but a load of shit is harder still" (Cohen 41). I's wife Edith speaks to him with her body language but he does not hear her. Not comfortable within his own body, I has difficulty listening to Edith's. Only after she dies does he begin to understand what she was saying:

There is no doubt that she believed her belly button to be a sensory organ, better than that, a purse which guaranteed possession in her personal voodoo system. Many times she held me hard and soft against her there, telling stories through the night. Why was I never quite comfortable? Why did I listen to the fan and the elevator? (Cohen 39)

Throughout Beautiful Losers, I never truly becomes "comfortable" with himself; that is F.'s goal and a large part of their sexual journey together. I is more comfortable in the

cerebral, whereas F., his alter ego, represents the voice of his body, a body of language that wants to be heard, that in fact cries out to be heard. “Now that I look back he seemed to be training me for something, and he was ready to use any damn method to keep me hysterical. Hysteria is my classroom, F. said once” (Cohen 59). “Hysteria” is F.’s “classroom,” meaning that the womb is F.’s “classroom.” F. has never left the body; he wants continually to return to it and to bring I with him. In a bizarre scene with biblical underpinnings, Mary Voolnd gives birth to an oilskin package that contains F.’s escape message. Mary and F. are then killed by a pack of police dogs. “— Is it happening, Mary? — Yes, F. — Grrrrr! Chomp! Arararara! Erf! — Mary! — Run, F.! Run. Run! — Bow wow! Hoooowwwlllll! Grrrrrrr! R-i-i-i-p!” (Cohen 240). F. achieves his goal when he is metaphorically devoured by his own desires. In death, F. returns to his body leaving I to fend for himself.

When reading such a painfully intimate narrative one might ask how a reader can connect to this text, Cohen seems to do everything possible to make Beautiful Losers difficult to access or for some, distasteful. “As for Beautiful Losers, I’d like to suggest that, despite its title, it is underwritten by an aesthetics of the sublime that has a great deal to do with its much-celebrated ‘postmodernism’ and everything to do with its much-less-celebrated pornographic elements” (214) writes Robert David Stacey. Stacey addresses Cohen’s use of “pornography and pornographic representation” (228) in his essay, “Pornographic Sublime: Beautiful Losers and Narrative Excess.” He accesses Beautiful Losers by using cinematic metaphor, referring to the novel as “eye candy:”

In other words, they [the readers] would be blocked *from* but not *by* the aesthetic object that they contemplate. In still other words, Beautiful Losers is less a narrative than a

random display (“of diseased virtuosity”) that, given its filmic preoccupations, might be called ‘eye candy.’ (230)

Stacey’s reference is to the visual; however, he ignores the aural/oral aspect of Beautiful Losers. How does this visual interpretation of the text as “eye candy” transfer to the oral/aural? The text becomes ear candy.

As an at times incomprehensible cacophony of words, does Beautiful Losers deafen its readers? Lose its readers somewhere in the translation? Perhaps even reject them? In answer to these questions, Stan Dragland, in his essay, “F. ing Through *Beautiful Losers*,” seems to have been silenced as both reader and writer; the last line of his essay reads, “I shut up, not in defeat but respect” (27). Stacey, who refers to the text as “eye candy,” argues that Beautiful Losers is neither ‘readerly’ nor ‘writerly.’

“Whatever the narrator is driving at, it sounds as though he means it to be watched, but in a way that precludes the viewer’s identification with the spectacle – the reader would be neither an active producer of the text (as in the case of the writerly) nor its implicated supporter (as in the readerly)” (230). My reading argues that the self-reflexivity of the narrative invites both ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ interpretations, creates an open text effect. Stacey also hints at the “anarchical, even irresponsible” (230-231) derivation of pleasure from the ‘reading’ of this novel. The titillation that comes from the abandonment of searching for meaning within its pages affords a guilty letting go. I perceive this babble as an invitation to participate in Cohen’s telephone game, to create my own sentences and decipher my own meanings, to play Cohen’s game. Yes, Beautiful Losers is playful, a “trickster text” (Dragland 25), that relies on the manipulation/masturbation of language through its narrator’s various voices. Cohen’s continually morphing language almost

becomes a character itself as he plays with the mechanisms of language and desire. “She handed me the tube, saying: Let’s be other people. Meaning, I suppose, new ways to kiss, chew, suck, bounce” (Cohen 15). New ways to speak, new ways to fuck, new ways to listen, the voices of Leonard Cohen’s Beautiful Losers call out, saying, ‘let’s speak new languages, let’s defy definition, let’s cross the line.’ His experimentation with language and form within the genre of the novel breaks down narrative and textual boundaries, ‘writerly’ and ‘readerly’ boundaries, the distance between people.

As Canadian history is being debunked, so too are the socially acceptable confines of the body and the body of language. “Perhaps North American culture itself became a kind of carnivalesque response to the ‘authority’ of European cultures and European versions of history” (Lovely Treachery 104) writes Kroetsch in reference to Haliburton, Melville and Twain. His comments apply to Beautiful Losers in the context of Cohen’s attack on the staid language we have always used to describe the body. Through his vulgarity and his use of babble to erode sexuality, Cohen enacts a grand violence upon language and a “grand ironic reversal of the tradition of the Word made flesh” (Hutcheon 27). His struggles within the confines of language typically used to describe and thus distance sexuality from the body placing the text within Dennis Lee’s “savage field” (74)

Dennis Lee examines Beautiful Losers in the context of what he calls the “savage field,” positioning I, F., and Edith there.

Given the reality of savage fields as the immediate structure of things, must we automatically apprehend it with either the suicidal mania or the excruciating experience of victimization which seem the only possible modes of being in the field? Or is it possible that an

ecstatic apprehension will reveal that planet is in fact magical, single, and orgasmically joyous? (Lee 76-77)

Lee proposes that Beautiful Losers asks these questions, presenting an ongoing struggle between intellect and instinct, a connection to the “ordinary eternal machinery” of the body. “And what he heard was the sound of the ordinary eternal machinery. God is not to be sought in some transcendental heaven, F. was teaching, off among the ‘grinding of the stars’. His medium is the ecstasy of the body” (Lee 68). The “ordinary eternal machinery” of the body provides a context and a battlefield for Lee’s “savage field” where conflicts between body and mind cross and uncross lines of communication and modes of articulation.

Beautiful Losers, as Lee has pointed out, is a battlefield where Cohen explores the conflict between body and mind, a conflict enacted on the body, a battle that also becomes a struggle between self and other. By creating chaos at the level of sentence structure, Cohen disrupts narrative to the extent where it becomes its own gap, trespassing on narrative continuity. The narrative of Beautiful Losers and Cohen’s textual/lingual manipulations and masturbations then provide an essential currency with which to enter an other/ed space, a space that was perhaps previously foreign and voiceless or dependant on event as opposed to its pure articulation. Cohen ultimately offers no reconciliation of the binaries of mind and body, self and other; he refuses closure. This battle is ongoing. The ‘telephone game’ that he plays with us as readers simply asks that we begin to listen to the babble of the body, the sounds of an empty stomach in the middle of the night, the crack of an ankle, the seashell noise of a finger in an ear.

CORNERS/CORNETS AND MIRRORS

In many respects, Coming Through Slaughter is an examination of the relationship between art and madness. Ondaatje weaves his own voice as artist into the narrative that he creates for Buddy Bolden, exploring the complex and contingent position of author in relation to art. Coming Through Slaughter has multiple layers, multiple doubles, concentric circles of narrative that spiral inwards toward binaries of silence and sound; music and language; the historical and the fictional; the narrative and the textual; author and character. Yet, he presents these binaries as so many corners and mirrors, not necessarily solid opposites but seemingly discordant notes that are part of the same jazz tune. Most importantly, Ondaatje asks what occurs when these binaries merge.

Buddy, Bellocq, Webb, Ondaatje, and the reader are implicitly placed in a position of liminality, one foot on each side of the threshold, with a potential for either convergence or divergence. In Jon Kertzer's words:

He [Buddy Bolden] is a wild drinker and lover; he plays the loudest cornet in jazz; he is subject to destructive fits of rage; he dreams continually of pain and mutilation; he is suicidal. He finds that to live passionately is to prepare one's death, that art feeds on madness until it is destroyed by it, that art is an act of communion that isolates the artist, that the energy of creation is also destructive. (Kertzer 297-298)

Kertzer describes Buddy Bolden as occupying a state of liminality where “the energy of creation is also destructive.” What happens to Buddy when “in the public parade he went mad into silence” (Ondaatje 108)? What happens when the binary of creation and destruction merges? Perhaps we must be detectives, like Webb, like Ondaatje, to see beyond Bolden's corners and mirrors. Manina Jones postulates, “Both the literal

detective character in the text and the biographer-novelist as detective attempt to track Bolden” (Jones 14). She is referring to Webb tracking down Bolden in fiction just as Ondaatje tries to track down Bolden in history, just as we readers try to track down and detect both Bolden and Ondaatje. In her essay, “‘So Many Varieties of Murder’: Detection and Biography in *Coming Through Slaughter*,” Jones refers to the novel as a “life/text” that follows the pattern of detective fiction (12). “Detective stories might also be considered metabiographical narratives in the sense that they both document and comment on the process of reconstructing traces of (often the last) moments in the life of a missing character” (Jones 12). Bolden is, in a sense, a detective of his own narrative: “*Coming Through Slaughter* is also, like the conventional detective novel, structured by a series of unnarrated biographical gaps, narrative self-mute-illations, perhaps: the loss of Bolden’s music, the silence at the end of his life, his extended disappearance at midcareer” (Jones 13). As readers, we are at the mercy of Ondaatje’s “self-mute-illations.” In re-creating history, piecing together Buddy Bolden’s past, generating a fiction, Ondaatje as both detective and writer has complete control over the narrative; “what he gives us, in fact, are written versions of oral interviews. As readers, of course, we *hear* nothing. We even have to take the author’s word for it that these people even existed, let alone that they said the particular words transcribed” (Hutcheon 49). The dolphin sonographs at the beginning of *Coming Through Slaughter* allude to Ondaatje’s dilemma, how to write sound into the silent medium of text. The dolphin sonographs are our first clue to the “self-mute-illations” that Ondaatje performs by choosing what to reveal and what not to reveal, the white space on the page as important as the black ink.

When Bolden leaves Nora to live with Robin and Jaelin, he separates himself from his 'old' life where "All my life I seemed to be a parcel on a bus. I am the famous fucker. I am the famous barber. I am the famous cornet player. Read the labels. The labels are coming home" (Ondaatje 106). Robin and Jaelin become a refuge for Bolden, a place where he does not have to perform. Bolden's love affair with Robin gives him a private identity separate from his public one, but his music never leaves him. He plays his music on her skin (Ondaatje 59), silently transferring his narrative onto hers, trying to return to a time before he was known for his playing. Perhaps this is when he begins to go silent. "[W]hen I wanted to find that fear of certainties I had when I first began to play, back when I was unaware that reputation made the room narrower and narrower, full of your own echoes, till you were drinking in your own recycled air" (Ondaatje 86). Bolden wants to escape his "recycled air," his constructed identity, his corners and mirrors.

All I [Willy Cornish] had of Buddy was the picture here.
 Webb gave that to me. I never wanted to talk about him.
 Didn't know what to say. He had all that talent and
 wisdom he stole and learnt from people and then smashed
 it, smashed it like ice coming onto the highway off a truck.
 What did he see with all that? What good is all that if we
 can't learn or know? (Ondaatje 145)

He perceives himself as trapped by other people's perceptions of his music and of him, his reputation making "the room narrower and narrower." In silence, Buddy finds refuge from his infamy.

Both Webb and Bellocq are echoes of Bolden. Buddy's art is his music, Bellocq's art is his photography, and Webb's art is his detection. Each man is defined by his profession, by his constructed boundaries, and each man represents a trap for Bolden

in some way. Webb's voice and his telling of Bolden's stories trap Bolden. "He came here and placed my past and future on this table like a road" (Ondaatje 86). Still, Bolden eventually eludes Webb's detection when he disappears into silence, disappears into the gap. Yet, his picture remains. Bellocq takes the only existing photograph of Bolden, trapping his image on paper, in a silent medium. "I think Bellocq corrupted him with that mean silence" (Ondaatje 145). Bellocq's art exists one-dimensionally, visually. Bolden's art exists aurally/orally. He attempts to defy the binary of silence and sound; he searches for the gap where the cry erupts, where he can hit the perfect note. "I [Bolden] had wanted to be the reservoir where engines and people drank, blood sperm music pouring out and getting hooked in someone's ear" (Ondaatje 112). When Bolden's music and his language converge, his throat explodes in an enactment or culmination of all his "self-mute-ulations."

Bolden exists in a visceral world, his music derived from his experiences as a barber cutting hair and shaving men on the side. "This is the power I live in. I manipulate their looks. They trust me with the cold razor at the vein under their ears" (Ondaatje 48). He listens to their stories, changes their narratives, and throws them back into the air through the passion of his music. When Buddy hits his high note,

It follows Buddy's experience in time, telling a story in his words; yet the rhythm is quick and quickens, the words running together even as they swerve out of step. Their referents, moreover, Buddy's senses, are juxtaposed so that his feelings, emotional *and* physical, are condensed, made simultaneous. (Smythe 4)

Music, his narrative, both a generative and a destructive force, converge within his body.

When Bolden's music stops, the narrator picks up the notes and writes the end of the line for Buddy Bolden. "For something's fallen in my body and I can't hear the music as I play it" (Ondaatje 130). Bolden, effectively trapped by the narrator's interpretation of his silence, boxed in by the corners of the page, trapped by the corners of his room at the insane asylum, loses his narrative thread. Bolden then self-imposes silence; he refuses to speak or to play the cornet. He no longer pushes the story farther off the page for the reader. He is motionless, turned inwards and listening only to himself.

The word 'corner' is very close to the word 'cornet' and cornered. As the concentric circles of the narrative close in on Buddy and his music retreats into the corners/cornets of his mind, that music becomes distant, unreachable, un-hearable. There are no audio recordings of Buddy Bolden's music; we are left to imagine it, create for ourselves its fiction, its sound. We can only listen in vain for music we are unable to hear. Subsequently, the narrator does not provide closure, but an ambiguous last sentence that does not give anything away, an end that is not the end. "There are no prizes" (Ondaatje 156). Rooke writes, "And I can understand how one might read that as a statement of defeat. But say that 'You come too. Put your hand through this window' (91), and I think that you would find a place in which the whole, pernicious issue of 'prizes' and the contentious ego has simply gone away" (291). Whose voice says, "You come too" (Ondaatje 91)? Narrator? Ondaatje? Buddy Bolden? Whose voice invites us to enter the narrative, to cross fictional boundaries? In Rooke's interpretation of the moment where the two walls meet, the corner of Buddy's room, the corner of his mind, self and other disappear.

During the parade, Bolden calls to his muse, the unnamed dancer, through his music. The battle between the dancer and Bolden mirrors the battle between creation and destruction. “Self and other merge as Bolden becomes ‘the dancer’” (Rooke 288). He begins to tell their story:

... and the girl is alone now mirroring my throat in her
 lonely tired dance, the street silent but for us her tired
 breath I can hear for she’s near me as I go round and round
 in the centre of the Liberty-Iberville connect. Then silent.
 For something’s fallen in my body and I can’t hear the
 music as I play it. The notes more often now. She hitting
 each note with her body before it is even out so I know
 what I do through her. God this is what I wanted to play
 for, if no one else I always guessed there would be this, this
 mirror somewhere (Ondaatje 130)

Bolden battles with music, trying to capture something tangible, but he hits a corner, or perhaps he enters a riff/t. He searches for that perfect note, his way to play through music, to reach outside his music. He arrives at a corner, an impasse where language/art/music fall short of expression. “We thought he was formless, but I think now he was tormented by order, what was outside it. He tore apart the plot – see his music was immediately on top of his own life” (Ondaatje 37). Bolden silences himself with the realization that he can only travel so far in his own orality, in his own story, toward that perfect note.

Bolden’s absences weave in and out of Coming Through Slaughter like stray notes. The first time he left New Orleans, he went to Jaelin and Robin Brewitt. “The music [Robin’s piano] was so uncertain it was heartbreaking and beautiful. Coming through the walls. The lost anger at her or me or himself. Bullets of music delivered

onto the bed we were on. Everybody's love in the air" (Ondaatje 92). Bolden's music was silent then too. But when he returns, he has entered the pages of history:

The thin sheaf of information. Why did my senses stop at you? There was the sentence, 'Buddy Bolden who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade...' What was there in that, before I knew your nation your colour your age, that made me push my arm forward and spill through the front of your mirror and clutch myself? ... Some saying you went mad trying to play the devil's music and hymns at the same time, and Armstrong telling historians that you went mad by playing too hard and too often drunk too wild too crazy. The excesses cloud up the page. There was the climax of the parade and then you removed yourself from the 20th century game of fame, the rest of your life a desert of facts. (Ondaatje 134)

Here Ondaatje shows himself as narrator, perhaps too a double of Bolden. Coming Through Slaughter becomes as much a ficto-history of Buddy Bolden as an exploration of an artist's struggle on the edge between sanity and insanity, creation and destruction. "When he went mad he was the same age as I am now. The photograph moves and becomes a mirror. When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was a shock of memory. For I had done that. Stood, and with a razor blade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. Defiling people we did not wish to be" (Ondaatje 133). Who is "I"? The identity of author and narrator become confused, as Bolden's breath through his cornet mouthpiece crosses an oral/aural and musical threshold paralleling Ondaatje as author/narrator crossing textual boundaries.

Bolden's music places him somewhere between "God" and the "Devil," a combination of purity and sexuality, sane and insane. He exists within a liminal space, poised on the threshold between these binaries. "The picture kept changing with the music. It sounded like a battle between the Good Lord and the Devil. Something tells

me to listen and see who wins. If Bolden stops on the hymn, the Good Lord wins. If he stops on the blues, the Devil wins” (Ondaatje 81). Does Bolden go to the devil or is his silence an extension of his cry?

Bolden’s music carries with it a thread of narrative; through his mouthpiece, through his music, he tells his story. He is both musician and author.

He [Webb] watched him [Bolden] dive into the stories found in the barber shop, his whole plot of song covered with scandal and incident and change. The music was coarse and rough, immediate, dated in half an hour, was about bodies in the river, knives, lovepains, cockiness. Up there on stage he was showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story. (Ondaatje 43)

When Bolden plays the cornet, his music becomes narrative. He relates history through the metal mouthpiece on his instrument as an extension of his body mouth/piece, composing as he goes along, improvising notes, putting the lives of people in his community into his music. “Buddy was a social dog, talked always to three or four people at once, a racer. He had no deceit but he roamed through conversations as if they were the countryside not listening carefully just picking up moments” (Ondaatje 56). His conversations become his jazz, his mouth/piece.

When his music leaves him or when he leaves his music, Bolden enters silence, a space no longer recognizable or comfortable. Despite the narrator’s description of Bolden spending the remainder of his days being abused in an insane asylum, Rooke interprets Coming Through Slaughter as having a happy ending.

I know that many readers have found *Coming Through Slaughter*, and especially its conclusion, extraordinarily bleak. I do not. The more I read the book, the more convinced I am that *Slaughter* has a happy ending. And I think you have to do that: really enter the book, travel in a

visceral way through the images, to see the affirmation that lies on the other side of *Slaughter*. (Rooke 268)

Yet, his silence can be negotiated, as Constance Rooke feels, in terms of a “*bouleversement*” (Rooke 268), a disruption, a turning upside down (“*bouleversement*,” “*bouleverser*,” def. 119). Rooke applies “*bouleversement*” to Coming Through Slaughter in negotiating a “happy ending” for Buddy. In that ending where self and other have converged in the corners of his grey asylum room (Rooke 291) and “the contentious ego has simply gone away” (Rooke 291), Bolden becomes a ghost. Rooke’s determination of happiness for Bolden hinges upon his movement inwards, his simultaneous letting go of self. “A *bouleversement* has occurred, he has entered another space” (Rooke 289). How can we interpret Buddy Bolden’s silence? As a silence or as an extension, a “*bouleversement*” of his ‘cry?’ Bolden performs a reversal of silence into something that is larger than silence. Like Ondaatje’s sonographs, we are unable to hear dolphin music but that does not mean that they are not singing. The narrative of Coming Through Slaughter represents Ondaatje’s sonograph for Buddy Bolden.

“So in the public parade he went mad into silence” (Ondaatje 108) when Bolden’s senses abandon him:

it comes up flooding past my heart in a mad parade, it is
coming through my teeth, it is into the cornet, god can’t
stop god can’t stop it can’t stop the air the red force coming
up can’t remove it from my mouth, no intake gasp, so deep
blooming it up god I can’t choke it the music still pouring
in a roughness I’ve never hit, watch it *listen* it *listen* it,
can’t see I CAN’T SEE. (Ondaatje 131)

Bolden crosses a threshold, enters a liminal space, stranded between blood and air, music and silence, created by the presence of a gap, this moment of ‘in between.’ He enters his

‘cry,’ and hits the perfect note, blood and music. A “*bouleversement*” of Bolden’s narrative, his music, his source of both creation and destruction, occurs; at this moment the two become one as sight and sound: “*listen it listen it, can’t see I CAN’T SEE*” (Ondaatje 131). His separation from sound, from music, and from his language moves him into silence, into an other/ed space. “When this disturbance is powerful enough to affect us, when our relation with and to language is shaken, there may be a simultaneous sense of freedom (rules are gone) and fear (so is certainty): such are the psychopolitics of bliss” (Smythe 4). In her essay, “‘Listen It’: Responses to Ondaatje,” Karen E. Smythe refers to Ondaatje’s works as “texts of bliss” (3) which disturb our relationship with language on a sensory level (4). She refers to Ondaatje’s writing as both “pleasurable and painful” (Smythe 3). Alternatively, in “Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust” Sianne Ngai states, “desire and disgust are so crucially bound up with one another. Bound together, paradoxically, in two divergent ways: the two are often concomitant, as Sade and others have demonstrated” (Ngai 100). In the context of Coming Through Slaughter, what we are led to believe as possible in Bolden’s music, Ondaatje achieves in writing, a beautiful expression of pain, that the juxtaposition of ecstasy and insanity equals bliss.

In Coming Through Slaughter Ondaatje asks us to imagine Buddy Bolden’s music, a music that has never been recorded; already, a silent but sounding articulation. When Bolden stops playing, we are still left asking the question why? What happened to Buddy when “in the public parade he went mad into silence” (Ondaatje 108)? Is this what happens when creation and destruction merge? “But Ondaatje even disturbs language within these fragments, using a mad discourse – one that demands a different reading practice than we are perhaps used to, one that is disquieting and pleasuring at the

same time” (Smythe 4). Ondaatje places us in the position of reading the creation/ destruction trope. “Put another way, we perceive (as Buddy cannot: ‘I CAN’T SEE’) the slight gap between terms, a likeness just short of dangerous identity: we see through to the pleasure of an ordered disorder” (Smythe 5). But can we really “SEE” into “the pleasure of an ordered disorder,” can we see past the corners and mirrors? Does Bolden lose his self when he appears to give up and/or lose his music, his referent, his signifier, his language? Alternatively, does he enter silence as another outpouring, another jazz tune that only he can hear and that we, as readers, can only imagine?

Bolden’s wordless cry, his unrecorded moment of pure music, leads him to a place beyond language. A character reminiscent of Icarus reaching towards the sun, Bolden presents a terrifying narrative version of the artist. Rooke argues that “[t]he last paragraph of the novel is for many readers a portrait of misery, signalling enclosure, terror, failure – in short, the bankruptcy of extremist art” (Rooke 291). Yet ultimately, for Rooke, Coming Through Slaughter has closure; “if you can go far enough with Ondaatje, follow through the immensely complex and proliferating images, his yearnings, as Ondaatje followed Bolden’s; then a *bouleversement* will occur for you as well” (268). As readers, we are not immune to the fictional or factual horrors that Bolden experiences while in the asylum. Perhaps a ‘happy ending’ becomes irrelevant simply because Bolden’s silence, his refusal to articulate, changes his direction; his breath blows inwards through his mouth/piece and he enters his mind completely, enters his music completely. Perhaps we cannot follow Bolden’s silent scream. “Below our heads all the evil dark swimming creatures are waiting to brush us into nightmare into heart attack to suck us under into the darkness into the complications. Her loon laugh. The dull star of white

water under each of us. Swimming towards the sound of madness” (Ondaatje 69).

Masked in madness, Bolden’s asylum and perhaps ours as well is one of corners/cornets and mirrors. Ondaatje the narrator invites us to go “over the barbed wire attached to his heart” (Ondaatje 97). Yet, I am not sure if we as readers are able to “*listen* it” or if we are even meant to. Jazz is a music of improvisation, the silence in between the notes as important as the notes themselves.

ECHOLALIA

after/word: eulogy in b flat, lower, slower and melodic riddles, morphine ripples, juice slides in along the bone trumpet, soft under the ivories, fingernail flicker, push the plunger, push the notes out, along the curve flow blood, a long vein morph, ology.

Language takes up residence inside us as readers and writers, in our blood like a drug. “Part of this entrapment is because of language, its origins, and its continuing bias. Language arises from the impulse to name, to define, to fix some oral or written delineation to a particular object or sense or emotion. Language acts as both jailer and liberator; its very usage restricts, yet nothing is acknowledged to exist without it” (van Herk, Frozen 81). How do we work around the bars of our prison? For Rachel in A Jest of God, her cry, the voice of her body rooted within her body, releases her. Ivory invitations, an armless torso, a woman alabaster aroused, charmed in darkness, a savoury Magdalena, a Venus de Milo, a marble dream. Her feral muse craves, carves a new she. Rachel comes.

In “Preface to Transgression,” Foucault asks “But what language can arise from such an absence?” (Language 41). He refers to a lack of language that can translate or transcribe transgression effectively. What language can effect our escape? For Foucault, writers must solve this dilemma.

In a language stripped of dialectics, at the heart of what it says but also at the root of its possibilities, the philosopher is aware that ‘we are not everything;’ he learns as well that even the philosopher does not inhabit the whole of his language like a secret and perfectly fluent god. Next to himself, he discovers the existence of another language that also speaks and that he is unable to dominate, one that

strives, fails, and falls silent and that he cannot manipulate, the language he spoke at one time and that has now separated itself from him, now gravitating in a space increasingly silent. (Language 41-42)

Writers must become philosophers of language. Writers must reclaim their medium, their “exploding porcupine” (Kroetsch, Lovely Treachery 116) that “inviolable animal” (Kroetsch, Lovely Treachery 115) of English-Canadian writing which embraces its prickliness and potential for internal combustion. “Story is a mode of thinking. In order to think itself, nowadays, it must do immediate violence to its own conventions. The ultimate violence that might be done to story is silence” (Kroetsch, Lovely Treachery 109). In other words, a story needs telling. “The porcupine of ego. The porcupine of the Safeway novel. The porcupine of English-Canadian self-righteousness And boredom. And self-congratulation. And timidity. And self-deception. The inviolable animal, daring to learn the grammar of violence. The novel itself, acting out a ceremony of disbelief. The novel become a continuing apocalypse” (Kroetsch, Lovely Treachery 115). I would like to replace ‘novel’ with ‘cry’ in this quotation, the cry become a continuing apocalypse. Ululation is an apocalypse of language daring to enact violence to narrative, daring to transgress, daring to explode articulation; “[t]here is no such thing as a stable *état de langue*” (Lecerle 182). Resisting ending, violent articulation, the wordless and worded cry, deafening and silencing, the novels that I have chosen to discuss all commit transgression or treason. Kroetsch calls this “the lovely treachery of words.” A murder of crows: crow eyes cold, blows bye taps quiet, raves stark snowflake mad, fall into my frost, onto me, crow knows body shape, cheek rest, how bone feels, muscles under, skin, tips of fingers, under whorls, underworld, pattern twitch, soundless

dreams, skin itself slides over covers pale lines stretch thin fence line, snowflake naked, melt next to me, nest to me.

Sound can break silence, cross boundaries, and be heard through prison bars. The hook of the The Double Hook, unhooked by the shout of new life, the yip of a coyote. Coyote in the razed field, ears cocked towards the business of being, a downright business related to selling thunder. Coyote in everyone's dream, hard work recycling creek water, rolling boulders, crop dusting, hard work these days in Ninevah, furry and padded paws eat flesh and crunch bones, laugh yippee ky yay. Coyote in business with death, worrying small rodents, playing tricks. Sleepy coyote puts up the moon, takes down the sun, dog, godly.

Nettie Johnson, in "A Song for Nettie Johnson," takes words apart letter by letter. In so doing, she takes away their meaning, their power over her. Her head a quarry dream, stony and smashed and arid, her brow dust, her hair a prairie yellow and hot, heat lines flicker the horizon, feather post to post, red-tailed hawk scream, she could tear the skin off a man, she could rip barbed wire, she's not afraid of blood. Her words become birds. Nettie is no longer afraid. She reshapes her home, reclaims her home, and travels with her home on her back, flies out from the pit of the quarry.

I read numerous contemporary Canadian novels searching for examples of ululation, glossolalia and silence in preparation for this project. Canadian fiction and perhaps all fiction inherently contains, through its very language, the potential to address questions of silence and sound as a medium that is silent on the page but sounding to its reader. The presence of the cry in narrative raises multiple questions of voice, body,

desire, landscape, home, language, silence. It breaks apart the stereotypical binaries that most normative narratives build upon: self/other, masculine/feminine, open/closed.

As F. of Beautiful Losers might say: Latin fellatus, root fellare, to suck language of mouth and tongue, inedible devils, darning needle of the order odonata, on the inside of thighs, blue dragonflies. But, can the cry be genderless when reader and writer are confronted by questions of voice, identity and gender? Luce Irigaray would argue that gender plays a definitive role in the production and interpretation of language:

One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing *an 'other meaning' always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them.* For if 'she' says something, it is not, it is already no longer identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather, it is contiguous. *It touches (upon).* (208)

Irigaray views the language of feminine desire as open, non-linear, and ongoing; the language of masculine desire is closed, finite, and certain. She maintains that language is what creates the very gender codes that ensnare women (and men) within the male/female dichotomy, a dichotomy where women seem to have been put in place and therefore must develop a language of their own. Irigaray's argument locates a new female language within the female body:

Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters. Thus the opposition between 'masculine' clitoral activity and 'feminine' vaginal passivity, an opposition which Freud – and many others – saw as stages, or alternatives, in the development of a sexually 'normal' woman, seems rather too clearly required by the practice of male sexuality. (204)

Woman as other/object and male as self/subject is the androcentric, audiocentric,

phallogocentric and patriarchal binary that Irigaray argues against in terms of the female body and the body of language. She demands a re-reading of women's bodies separate from the male body. Within that re-reading, a space opens for a different, non-verbal code; a space opens for multiple, many-voiced cries.

Hélène Cixous states, "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" (224). Cixous demands a re-writing of female bodies. If language defines who we are (a definition that includes gender but is not entirely limited to gender) as Lacan proposed, and if this language meant to define us is the same male-oriented language that entraps us, then how do we, as women or as men, reclaim and renew this language? If the only language we have has already objectified and defined us; then can the cry as a transgression of language be considered potentially genderless territory? Cixous argues that there is no escape from gender, that writing has already been gendered:

I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as *marked* writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction.... (225)

However, it is the task of women, in Cixous's eyes, "with[in] the mystifying charms of fiction" (225), to take up arms in the form of writing. "[O]nce, by smashing yokes and

censors, she lets it [a woman's body] articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction – [it] will make the old single-grooved mother-tongue reverberate with more than one language” (229). Perhaps usage of the cry in fiction by female writers is an attempt to break free from male-gendered language. Yet, the three male authors that I have chosen to discuss in this thesis, Kroetsch, Ondaatje and Cohen, use the cry as well, each in their own way. Eulalia as violence enacted on phallogentric narrative can be construed as a breaking through of a voice, any voice participating in an action of rebellion. The cry can be considered a moment in language free of gender coding, a moment that moves past gender and crosses gender borders. Ululation performs separately from self/other, masculine/feminine as a language of transgression, offering the possibility of a threshold, a place of either convergence or divergence, liminality. Foucault, Kroetsch, Irigaray, and Cixous all call for a change in the way the languaged body is written. The cry permits this; it rewrites the body, speaks the body, screams the body, presents a moment in narrative that allows and encourages disturbance.

As Lecercle noted, language is constantly changing. However, the cry marks a narrative break, like the eye of a hurricane, a gap in articulation ready for transgression; “a void has been hollowed out in which a multiplicity of speaking subjects are joined and severed, combined and excluded” (Foucault, Language 42). Eulalia offers a way to push beyond normative narrative, an alternate articulation that comes from and encompasses the body of language and the languaged body. What is the cry? A coyote's yip, a shuddering voice, roadside ejaculations, fitting into cracks of language, listening in between the lines, kerning, keening, screaming. Where is the cry? Trumpet player puckers up and blows big time wail, whaling on that smooth round oh. Punches out high

and lean, gloved sounds round those brass curves. Lots of sass. Prefers the saxophone herself, so much smoother metal soother. Her sweetiephone, hits deep and low down, slows the end of a piece to a question mark. Number three reed slices her tongue, bleeds and bleats b flat. Can't seem to get those unknown notes blown out of thin air, out of her heart beaten rhythm like she's some kind of Charlie Parker. More like Charlie Brown than The Bird, oh. (Sonograph of Brea Burton)

EPITAPH

the characters include a spinster, a speller, a honey lover, a love affair, a dead one, a dog, a crow, a music thief, mischief, espionage and spies in the walls have eyes or ears, thick and pulpy, she's gone missing in action. why does the story fascinate, the sheer shock value of near death, near love, near living, a complete mystery. a different kind of white, a different kind of desert, where she travels from room to room, a fleck of soup hits the page, mid-sentence, right in the womb of a d, context stops. after her war, after she has returned to calgary streets, she loses herself somewhere in the translation. in a scream of swaddled dreams, a murder of crows, a town of slaughter, the dream of a kiss on the back of a dark neck, beautiful and b-i-r-d.

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