

"A MOB OF BLOODY WOMEN" – UTOPIA, COLLECTIVITY AND MULTIPLICITY IN SOME RECENT FICTION BY AUSTRALIAN WOMEN.

Eleanor Hogan

This paper sets out to examine groupings of women as they feature in fiction from the '80s by Australian women writers. It is particularly concerned with the ways that such feminine collectivities are envisaged in relation to existing masculinist structures and space, especially in the aftermath of a decade of decade of second wave feminism. Representations of women's collectivities often lay claim to a privileged, if marginalised, site of resistance to patriarchal culture. They are sometimes also accompanied by assertions of an inherent benevolence or moral superiority, derived from their celebration of 'feminine' values, such as mutuality and connection. This paper seeks to critique such claims and to address the problems involved in representing feminine collectivity as independent of patriarchal relations. It will also suggest that such conceptions of collectivity frequently face difficulties in trying to accommodate differences other than sexual difference. It problematises Janine Burke's *Speaking* (1984) and Finola Moorhead's *Remember the Tarantella* (1987) as examples of celebrations of women's collectivity, and discusses Jan McKemmish's *A Gap in the Records* (1985) as a text which, in contrast, parodies idealised notions of women-only forms of social organisation.

Aspects of both recent Anglo-American and French feminist thought have been concerned with ideas of establishing an autonomous sociality or space for women. These include the explorations of French feminists into the repressed realm of the feminine, and the interest of American radical and cultural feminists like Mary Daly (1978, 1984) and Adrienne Rich (1975, 1979, 1980) in developing a 'gynocentric' or 'woman-centred' perspective. The gynocritical thesis of literary feminists such as Ellen Möers and Elaine Showalter (1976, 1977, 1981), who assert the existence of a feminine literary tradition or aesthetic, likewise represents a claim to space for women within the field of literature. Here I wish to discuss Nina Auerbach's book, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (1978), a gynocritical project which seeks to claim a tradition for the idea of a community of women across all literary periods. While I do not share Auerbach's preoccupation with proving the 'transcendent' nature of the idea of women's communities, I am interested in her thesis that this idea has often functioned both as a kind of excess and a supplement to patriarchal culture.

Auerbach's book was published in 1978, and her interest in the idea of communities of women at times seems fuelled by anxieties about a growing tendency towards separatism in the feminist movements of the late '70s. She argues that the idealisation of feminine collectivity by some of her contemporaries has its basis in a nineteenth-century notion of women's communities as essentially harmonious and nurturing social entities. Auerbach cross-references her discussion of nineteenth-century literature to communities of women from this period, such as do-gooding Anglo-Catholic sisterhoods established in the 1850s and 1860s to deal with the single women 'problem', and the emergence of the late nineteenth-century feminist movement itself, with its goals of eradicating social ills such as

alcoholism and domestic violence. She emphasises that the existence of such groups of women was often validated through their representation as a purifying social force. It was presumed that a nurturant property would accompany a community of women, providing a social panacea in the face of a male-organised society perceived as becoming increasingly masculinised through factors such as industrialisation and the escalation of warfare. Auerbach, however, queries such claims, arguing that the notion of establishing a feminine enclave apart from the world of men is always illusory as it is necessarily exists 'within the frame of a masculine universe', and furthermore, that this construction rigidifies the traditional marginality of women in male-dominated societies (307). She suggests that similar ideals and problems have re-surfaced through the tendency towards separatism which marks the feminism of the late '70s, and also through the idealisation of alternative woman-defined forms of social organisation.

In the discussion which follows, I will examine Burke's *Speaking* and Moorhead's *Remember the Tarantella* as two texts that celebrate the idea of a seemingly marginal feminine collectivity which nevertheless provides a highly subversive counterpoint to mainstream patriarchal society. The terrain of both these texts, that of radical or alternative inner-urban subcultures, could be seen as being made possible, in a sense, by Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* (1977). However, they extend Garner's interest in feminine subjectivity and experience from a central focus on a singular female subject to one on a multiple feminine subject, effectively decentring the traditional primacy of the singular male subject in narrative. In discussing their respective imaginings of a multiple feminine subject, I will suggest that although both texts seeks to acknowledge and contain tensions and divisions within this form of collectivity experience difficulties in accommodating other differences. In contrast, McKemmish's *A Gap in the Records* directs scepticism at notions of the supposed otherness and benevolence of alternative forms of feminine collectivity in relation to patriarchal culture.

Speaking

In Janine Burke's *Speaking*, a multiple feminine subject is represented through the friendships of a small group of women who attended Melbourne University together during the heyday of the '70s counterculture and radical student movements. It is presented as a somewhat 'gossipy' counter-counter-history, the unexpected end-result of the character Lily's struggle to produce a 'history' of the anti-war movement. While Lily's voice is the only one to appear in first person, in the form of a tape transcription, it never predominates. Rather than on voice, there are at least five speaking, and the histories which they articulate are marginal, local, feminine and mundane. The text is 'heteroglossic' in Bakhtin's sense of the word, exposing the 'dialects' of five women from the same social context who, despite similarities of age, race, sex and class, possess quite differently marked social voices, especially in relation to second wave feminism. Thus Lily, as a former student activist and member of the anti-war movements of the '70s, is generally aligned with the radical revision of social structures. Beth and Madeleine, on the other hand, are identified with equal opportunity issues, and the negotiation of structures of public poser. The voices of Pook and Kate represent more 'personal' discourses, with Pook associated with the consciousness-raising aspects of the women's movement, and Kate, as a repressed artist and housewife,

suggesting a dialogue with 'feminine mystique' discourses.

Although various antagonisms exist amongst different members of the group, and between the positionalities which they represent, the group is shown to still function viably after ten years' of friendship when other social structures and sources of identity have become defunct. This is demonstrated in the book's closure where the women band together to help save Lily's lover, the Aboriginal activist Raider, climaxing when Madeleine, Lily's arch-rival, agrees to leak vital information from 'Canberra' to aid his rescue. As such, this incident suggests the power of the personal, the private and the feminine to undermine the poser of the public, masculinist domain.

Yet while *Speaking* is sensitive to differences in feminist positionalities, its multi-voiced feminine subject has significant limitations as a representation of the category of women, as it is wholly white, middle-class and well-educated. The text does, however, attempt to suggest an alliance between women and one other marginalised group — that of indigenous people — by virtue of their mutual exclusion from dominant power structures. While his conflation of marginal positionalities occurs on the pretext of reconciliation between gender and race differences through Lily's relationship with the Land Rights activist Raider, it nevertheless suggests an appropriation of 'indigeneity' as a metaphor for feminist resistance and empowerment.

Raider is represented as possessing the sexual and political impetus to re-energise Lily and restore her lost political motivation through his link with the 'binding dream' which extends beyond boundaries and beyond time. Thus, whenever Lily experiences 'an equality of sensation' (307) during intercourse, she is 'taken further than coupling, where territories ended because where she went when she came was perimeterless, there was no upwards or downwards or sideways' (308). The language used here, which draws on Raider's interest as a Land Rights activist in territories and boundaries, implies the blurring of racial and sexual difference (or at least a temporary forgetting), as Lily loses her ideological bearings. Raider, as the embodiment of an exotic, politically vital, and even atemporal racial otherness is thus co-opted to 'reactivate' Lily, the erstwhile dynamic activist of a now defunct movement. After living at home, she renews her links with the other women in the group, and is able to construct *Speaking* in its present form. Lily and Raider's union further implies the bonding of two generations of political activism, linking Lily's involvement in the anti-war movements of the '70s with Raider's participation in ongoing Land rights activism. Aboriginal activism is thus appropriated as a parallel to or a metaphor for feminist resistance, and the 'transcendent' aspect of Lily's sexual experience effectively detemporalises Raider, and the specificity of the issues which he might otherwise represent.

Remember the Tarantella

In contrast, Finola Moorhead's *Remember the Tarantella* attempts to contain differences within its central grouping of women, although it also uses 'indigeneity' at times as a metaphor for its marginality. The text's somewhat universalist conception of the category of 'women' is hinted at in the 'Author's Note', where

Moorhead states her intentions to find 'an "everywoman"', an 'archetypal female', but one which is necessarily multiple, 'a mob of women'. "'Everywoman'", she explains, 'was women; the singular does not compute when one investigates the nature of the feminine' (ix). *Remember the Tarantella* plays with the idea of a 'women's only' text; it was conceived in response to Christina Stead's challenge that 'it's very difficult to make an interesting novel with no men in it at all.' As such, it presents a textual world that focuses on lesbian networks of exchange, with male characters featuring as incidentals, and virtually expendable to the mechanics of the narrative. It draws on different sorts of imagery — from tarot, astrology and even geometry — to create a collective representation of the feminine, with its most obvious metaphorisation occurring through the use of a different letter of the alphabet to identify each character. The spiral, the we, and the dance, specifically the tarantella, also provide strategies to represent the feminine as an aggregate of individuals. The practice of remembering the tarantella is to create a link with the collective memory of womenkind, avoiding reliance on masculinist exchanges and structures as a source of identity. The tarantella's origins are in pagan rites, and it is also connected with oppression through the religious purges of sixteenth century Italy, when women danced hysterically *en masse* to the sea and drowned themselves as a means of escaping judgement for witchcraft. In the final section of the book, which is titled 'The Dance', this continuity with the past is celebrated as fifty women gather to mourn 'the passing of an era', twenty-four of whom build fires, while the rest dance. The letter of the alphabet are used to describe their action, which culminates in a serpent dance and communal menstruation into a pit of smouldering wheat. Earlier in the text, one of the characters describes the centrality of the dance in the following terms:

— The dance is central...There has been such a history, such a fight, and still we return over the ashes of our mothers, through the dark. We will rise, join hands, lining arms and dancing, for dance is consciousness and the spiral is our dreaming (73).

I want to pick upon the use of the word 'dreaming' here as a metaphor for women's collectivity, and discuss its implications, as it points to some inherent dangers in making universal or transcendental projections of women's mutuality. In *Remember the Tarantella*, parallels are made between elements of Aboriginal culture and aspects of women's alphabet. While Oona has a somewhat ambivalent relationship to the other women in the text, whom she describes as '[a] mob of bloody women' and 'university sheilas with knives slung to their waists', she acknowledges their fundamental desire to connect with 'their own spiritual tradition [which] had been drowned in oceans of blood. Bleeding Jesus. Women's blood and coloured blood' (173).

The metaphor of 'blood' is used here by Oona, and by others elsewhere in the text, to represent the universal nature of women's oppression. However, in one incident, Oona disputes this romanticisation of her positionality when another woman, Iona, hints that the Aboriginal woman embodies her own desire for 'blood connection' with the land:

—At least you have a blood connection with this land.
Iona does not have the words to describe exactly what it is about

Oona which excites her envy.
—You're full of shit (97).

In contrast to the essentialist use of 'blood' elsewhere in the text, Oona goes on to emphasise the metaphoricality of this term, as her lack of access to 'learning the tribal ways' 'out there, in the centre somewhere' (98) impedes her celebration of a 'blood connection'. Such connections, she claims, are to be constructed and within a tribal context. Iona's ignorance of the specificities of Oona's Aboriginal context raise further questions about the ease with which existing practices from another culture can be used to map a universal tradition for women. For a text concerned with the 'issue of blood', the conflict between Oona and Iona draws attention to the potential of all-embracing imagery — including that of 'blood' and the 'tarantella' — to deny, rather than accommodate, differences between women.

A Gap in the Records

In contrast to *Speaking and Remember the Tarantella*, Jan McKemmish's *A Gap in the Records* provokes cynicism about idealised notions of collectivity, at the level of the personal and private exchanges which might exist amongst women, as well as those on a more external, macrocosmic scale. *A Gap in the Records* is also a highly parodic spy-thriller, and it parodies both this genre and notions of subversive, marginal groupings of women through its use of a multiple feminine subject. This subject emerges in the context of the Cold War period, the era of the so-called 'feminine mystique', when a group of middle class women band together to run a world-wide spy-ring like a home hobby, then carry out subversive activities over several decades. Nicknamed 'the hen's party', these women use typically feminine and domestic activities as a cover, with afternoon teas, annual summer holidays at Guerella Bay, the State Library newspaper room, art gallery coffee shops and Sunday afternoon cinema providing the unlikely sites for illicit meetings and intrigue.

While *A Gap in the Records* constructs this group of women in terms which undermine popular conceptions of women's positioning in certain periods, such as the '50s, it does not attempt to idealise the potential of such re-readings. The 'hens' ingeniously manipulate the '50s myth of domesticity for their own purposes, but this 'radicalism' does not produce positive interactions amongst the women on other levels. In particular, the mother-daughter relationship is used as an axis to critique feminist romanticism about the possibilities of private and public bonds between women.

In *A Gap in the Records*, Mary Stevens, the daughter of one of the chief conspirators, is given the role usually reserved for the male spy. An autonomous woman largely independent of familial ties, she provides ideal prospective spy material. However, after participating in the assassination of a man, she experiences a breakdown. The problem, as she comes to perceive it, is that of her relationship as an individual woman to larger, often evasive and invasive structures of power. Thus, she muses: 'She had learned something about power. This — that it does not reside in the individual...' And observes that she is 'Powerless before the large, the unspeakable, the unbelievable' (93). The irony is that Mary

experiences this sense of powerlessness in the face of larger, unseen structures at the hands of a spy organisation in which, unknown to her, her mother Joan is also involved.

Throughout the text, Mary sends her mother a series of postcards which provide a private, personal narrative that runs against the grain of the impersonal, anonymous, macrocosmic narratives of the spy network. But Mary and Joan's mutual espionage activities remain veiled; they do not participate in any other level of exchange except that of the personal. The closest they come to communicating their 'spy experiences' is through some encoded letters which Mary dispatches to the post office near Guerella Bay for her mother's safe-keeping. These are, however, intercepted by Mary's superior in the spy-ring, who leaves the message 'Imagine if your mother had opened them' (110). Here, the mother-daughter relationship, celebrated in some aspects of feminist theory as a basic site for developing exchanges between women, fails to override the workings of external poser structures to save the daughter. Significantly, this relationship is not juxtaposed either to structures clearly marked as patriarchal but to a network in which women are engaged in their own subversive activities. The ingenuity and intelligence of the older women is unwittingly pitted against the daughter's increasing despair and fragmentation.

While one possible effect of *A Gap in the Records* is to make feminine collectivity sinister, another is to playfully question the effectiveness of women's exchanges, and to send up idealised representations of women's collective poser. The novel ends with an implicit reference to the 'spy-ring's' lack of control over their own operations with the words 'Of course, nothing went according to plan' (113). In the case of the women's network, they are, despite their ingenuity, ultimately the dupes of larger poser structures. The text further focuses its suspicions on the value of appropriating positions and structures of power, with Mary Steven's breakdown as a spy suggesting that being a feminist 'mole' within established patriarchal structures may have its limitations. Unlike *Remember the Tarantella* and *Speaking*, *A Gap in the Records* has no nostalgia for the feminist activism and movements of the seventies, or any other period, and raises queries about the efficacy of both the individual liberated woman and feminine collectivity as strategic positions for feminists in the face of existing configurations of power.

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