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P A U L A E . G E Y H

Triptych Time: The Experiential Historiography of Meridel Le Sueur's *The Dread Road*

MERIDEL LE SUEUR'S last novel, *The Dread Road* (1991), might be considered the capstone of one of America's more remarkable literary careers. Part of a generation of midwestern worker-writers that included Tillie Olsen, Jack Conroy, and Josephine Herbst, Le Sueur created a wide-ranging body of work—essays, histories, short stories, poetry, novellas, and novels—from the 1920s through the mid-1990s.¹ Her literary reputation was established in the '20s and '30s through her short stories, the acclaimed novella *The Horse* (1934), and her searing reportage of the plight of farmers and the unemployed during the Depression, including the classic "Women on the Breadlines" (1932). Blacklisted during the McCarthy era, Le Sueur disappeared from view. In the late 1970s, however, her poetry and short stories began to reappear in new editions published by small leftist and feminist presses. In 1978, *The Girl*, an experimental novel based on her experiences at the Workers Alliance and written during the '30s, was finally published; another novel, *I Hear Men Talking*, appeared in 1984 amid a resurgence of popular and critical interest in her writing. *The Dread Road*, Le Sueur's most radically experimental novel, was published in 1991, five years before her death.

Throughout her career, Le Sueur saw writing as transformative political praxis—"art as action," in her words. "I look upon writing as revelation," she explained in a 1976 letter, as a way "to expose and to rouse, awaken."² "Le Sueur wanted her words to transform consciousness," critic Blanche Gelfant has observed, a transformation that constitutes "a necessary prelude . . . to the restructuring of society."³ In *The Dread Road*, Le Sueur uses a triptych structure—the parallel juxtaposition of three texts—to create a novel that enacts this utopian vision of literature and/as politics.⁴ In the center column of the novel is the narrative of two unnamed women's overnight bus trip from Albuquerque to Denver, a trip that becomes a journey through the forgotten history

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of the American Southwest. Functioning as both a commentary and counterpoint to the center text, excerpts from the Gothic short stories of Edgar Allan Poe run along the left side of the page. Along the right side runs a “subjective” text that, while ostensibly the reflections of the narrator (the older of the two women) on the center story, was drawn from Le Sueur’s personal journals. The array of texts on the page mirrors the spatialization of history across the American landscape through which the protagonists travel; the characters’ journey and their “reading out” of the landscape the history buried there correlates with the reader’s own process of traversing the page and forging connections among the three texts. Thus, the novel’s structure links form to content, and both form and content to reading practice.

This unusual triptych structure is a manifestation and implementation of Le Sueur’s conception of literature, and of the complexity of her aesthetic and political vision. While frequently identifying herself as a Marxist, Le Sueur’s ideology (and that of other midwestern worker-writers) was based less on doctrinaire Marxism than on indigenous midwestern socialist populism.⁵ As Douglas Wixson argues in *Worker-Writer in America*, the Marxism of the midwestern literary radicals was “an ‘Americanized’ version adapted to local circumstances rather than any European transplant. . . . The ideological sources of midwestern literary radicals like Kalar, Le Sueur, Conroy, Lewis, Corey, Krensensky, and Porter derive from indigenous traditions of protest—expressed in earlier manifestations such as the Farmers’ Alliance, the People’s Party, the Non-Partisan League, the IWW, certain unions, and various infusions of immigrant liberalism such as the free-thinking Forty-Eighters.”⁶

In her writing, Le Sueur sought to achieve a synthesis of this midwestern socialist populism (coupled with her more traditional Marxist beliefs—she was at one time a member of the Communist Party) and an equally strong feminism. The problem of how (and whether) Marxism might be reconciled with feminism has, of course, been a concern since at least the 1930s (though one might discern intimations of it even in Friedrich Engels’s 1845 *The Condition of the Working Class in England*), and one can also see it in the writing of other women worker-writers of this era, including Tillie Olsen, Muriel Rukeyser, Josephine Herbst, and Agnes Smedley. Traditional Marxist critiques of capital have never been adequate for explaining the specific oppression of women, in part because they have subsumed it under the larger category of the “oppression of the working class.” (Women who have argued the specificity of women’s oppression, among them Le Sueur and the other writers just mentioned, have often been criticized by more doctrinaire Marxists for dividing the working class, and so hindering its revolutionary struggle.) Marx and, to a lesser degree, Engels assumed that patriarchy would finally wither away amid the progressive proletarianization of the populace (an assumption that has not

been borne out by history), so that they did not ultimately address the issue of women's particular oppression with the attention its complexity deserves.

In her attempts to bring Marxism and feminism together, Le Sueur adopts three primary strategies. Throughout her works, she focused on women as the *subjects* of history, effectively inflecting and extending a Marxist critique that traditionally considered man as the paradigmatic subject of history.⁷ For Le Sueur, women are also the best readers of history—those “closest to the root” and most capable of recovering the occluded and forgotten history of the workers' oppression, and then, armed with this knowledge, of laying the foundation for a revolution to come. Finally (and perhaps most radically and problematically), she portrays women's reproductive potential—both in the biological sense and in the broader sense of the nurturing activities involved in the “reproduction of labor”—as a revolutionary force in its own right. She believes that women's dual roles as workers and as mothers, as subjects in both the production and reproduction of labor, give them a wider scope of knowledge and a broader field of action than men have. Thus, Le Sueur's female protagonists become the privileged actors in a new historical narrative—combining both Marxism and feminism—of both their own and the entire working class's oppression and ultimate liberation.

The triptych structure of *The Dread Road* reflects dynamic and dialogical relationships among interrelated versions of American history. At the same time, however, this structure (and the vision of history it represents) derives from and is driven by a new conception of the relationships between space and subjectivity, which arises in part from Le Sueur's feminist ideas and agenda. This relationship, which will be discussed in more detail presently, rejects the traditional philosophical correlation of man with time and history, and woman with atemporal space, and instead renders this female-gendered “space” as the site of history itself. The matrix of the novel is, thus, defined by three key components:

- A. the (“formal”) triptych structure;
- B. the recovery of history (which might be seen to be enacted through that triptych structure); and
- C. a gendered concept of space and subjectivity that connects history and textuality through a gendered “reading” (by a refigured subject) of the American landscape as history (a spatialization of history that will be seen to carry both possibilities and difficulties).

This essay will explore this matrix, working through the text to show how the various parts combine to create a powerful, albeit not unproblematic, new form of fictional historiography.

Like her earlier novel, *The Girl*, which Le Sueur constructed from the narratives of women with whom she worked during the Depression, *The Dread Road* is a collaborative text. Although the original images of *The Dread Road* “were torn out of the subjective pain of the author,” Le Sueur says in the “Author’s Note” that it “is not a book written by one person. This is a communal creation of an image, using the collective experience of a number of people” (61). This refusal of single authorship might be seen as an outgrowth of Le Sueur’s critique of the individualism that has long been seen as a hallmark of the American character. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville coined the term “individualism” (in the first use of the word located by OED lexicographers) to define a tendency in the character of Americans, observing that “they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine their whole destiny in their own hands. Thus, not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.”⁸ Le Sueur’s response to this dilemma is an amalgam of Marxism, with its emphasis on the importance of the collective, and a feminism that posits the fluidity and plurality of feminine subjectivity (close to Luce Irigaray’s vision) against the alienation and putative unity of the masculine model of subjectivity, insisting upon the interrelation of individual experience and public consciousness (“the personal is political”).

This response translates into the collective character of the novel’s authorship. Referring to her four collaborators (who helped to select and piece together the various components of the text)—her daughter Rachel Tilsen, her editor John Crawford, poet-scholar Pat Smith, and typographer/designer Michael Reed—as “gestators,” she sees *The Dread Road* as a synthesis in which “everyone has made an essential contribution, mingling in the creation of the whole” (61).⁹ This collaborative authorship has its counterpart in the collaborative recovery and resurrection of the buried history of the people of the Southwest by the novel’s two female protagonists. Similarly, the unusual triptych structure requires the reader to join in the ongoing process of the work’s “gestation,” assembling the whole from the parts, bringing the work to completion. As Constance Coiner (rightly) argues, all of Le Sueur’s works “implicitly reject passive/receptive reading—the kind of reading so often promoted in training readers to ‘appreciate literature’—and invite, if not demand, active reading alert to multivocality.”¹⁰ Among Le Sueur’s works, *The Dread Road* is arguably the most effective in prompting “active reading” because of its innovative form. This experimental triptych form also sets the novel apart from most working-class literature, which is usually far more “realist” and formally conservative.

The three texts comprising the novel work off one another in complex

ways. Sometimes they appear to be in a dialogical relationship to one another, as one part of the text seems to answer, echo, or rebut those against which it is juxtaposed. (Although an entry in Le Sueur's journal suggests that she saw some of the relationships in the text as dialectical—"Image of the true American earth . . . rising out of the destruction . . . images of destruction . . . images of rising reality from this. Thesis, antithesis and synthesis" (52)—this dialectic, in its historical sense, is mostly confined to the novel's plot, in which the tragic history of capitalism is revealed and confronted by women who then, as historical subjects possessing the power to "regenerate" society, lay the foundation for a revolution to come.) Sometimes the bracketing side texts function as commentaries on the center narrative or as a means of lending resonance to its imagery or events. A reading of *The Dread Road* requires a substantial interpretive effort; the reader must piece the fragments of the text together and map the connections among them. Moving across and down through the text, one weaves a network of connections among Poe's eerie prose, the ongoing action of the center narrative, and the reflections of voices (sometimes the narrator, sometimes Le Sueur, sometimes some unidentifiable "other") occupying the right column of the text. The structure makes one acutely conscious of what French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau calls "the silent production" that constitutes the act of reading: "the drift across the page, the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectation of meanings inferred from a few words, leaps over written spaces in an ephemeral dance."¹¹

For de Certeau, the written text is inherently unstable, open and permeable—"a movement of strata, a place of spaces . . . habitable . . . another person's property [transformed] into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient."¹² Reading is an appropriation of the text by the reader who "poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes [him or her] self in it. . . . A different world (the reader's) slips into the author's place."¹³ Readers bring with them to the reading their own experiences and history, and those too are interpolated into the simulacrum of the read text.¹⁴ In effect, Le Sueur's triptych text elicits (and implicitly models) what is for her the crucial process of working through and making sense, a connecting of communal and individual history (including those of the readers) on multiple levels.

This innovative structure is an attempt to break with the narrative hierarchies and subordinations of the linear text, a text that Le Sueur associates both with capitalist commodities and with patriarchal discourse. "This is not a story to consume," Le Sueur reminds herself in a journal entry cited in the Afterword. "This is a ceremonial, invoked [and] generative, making luminous this murderous space. The linear perspective is flat, objective, seductive, lying" (52). Le Sueur's connection of "line" and "lying" is a departure from the traditional association of truth with a straight line, and lying with the serpentine.

Her position here can be seen as part of the feminist response to the linearity of patriarchal discourse and its many critiques of feminine discourse as oblique, multiple, and circular—responses which in fact validate just those features of what became known in the wake of recent French feminist philosophy as *écriture féminine*.¹⁵

The center narrative is a first-person account of the experiences of a woman traveling from Albuquerque to Denver and of the young woman she meets on the bus. The narrator is on her way to visit her institutionalized son, “buried but not dead in Denver,” who was born grossly deformed from exposure to the fallout of an atomic bomb test (1). In the bus station, she notices a young woman clutching a zippered bag with bloody hands. Like the narrator, the young woman has been the victim of a poisoned land—she is a migrant worker whose exposure to chemicals in the fields has caused her to bear a still-born baby, which she is carrying back to Denver to bury.¹⁶ The two women sit next to each other on the bus and throughout the long night’s journey, they talk about their lives, piecing together their own histories and connecting them to the histories of those who have lived in the land through which they are traveling.

The Poe excerpts running along the left side of the text are in a sense mythic, suggesting not just that “certain nightmares lie especially deeply embedded in the American grain,” as Patricia Smith, one of the editors, observes (57), but also that there are forms of history, beyond the chronicle, that might provide a powerful linkage between past and present. These excerpts frequently create resonances with the themes of the center narrative, as the editors point out, “summoning suggestions of decay, foul things covered up, or unbearable truths brought to light . . . the American earth riddled with unquiet graves” (57). Le Sueur’s reading of Poe as American history runs counter to the prevailing psychoanalytic interpretations that have, largely through the influence of his European readers, from Marie Bonaparte to Lacan and beyond, dominated studies of his fiction for decades. Here Le Sueur offers a vision of Poe’s work as an “underground history”—literally and figuratively—restoring Poe to his peculiarly American context.

The right-hand “subjective text” is the most fragmented of the three, and brings together a wide array of discourses. In many instances it presents the narrator’s (the older of the two women on the bus) stream-of-consciousness narration, which retells the central story from “inside,” as when she muses on the bus driver’s thoughts as he tries to get the girl to let go of her bag (8), or juxtaposes an incident in it to one occurring at another time and place, as, for example, when the narrator’s decision to protect the girl (and her dead child) from a meddling social worker on the bus is paired with her memories of the miners’ determination to protect the bodies of their families who were massacred at Ludlow (33). In many other cases, however, this “subjective text” is

also where Le Sueur, from whose journal this part of the text was drawn, seems most present, particularly as it ranges across discourses and genres in ways that seem unlikely to be the thinking of Le Sueur's narrator. At some points, the discourse is lyrically poetic: "Kali, come to death on the plains of Ludlow. Massacre. Spherical hour. Mother of nomads, see space. Drop of fire on rail and delicate inhabitants. Gravid, void, ageless, speechless, promiscuous carbonized light, calyx of burning lions in a circle of flames, bread, grail, embers" (11); at other times liturgical: "This is my fire. This is my body. This is my shadow. These are my dead" (3); and at still others juridical: "Court opens, millions appear . . . come to judgment" (2). Some of its discourses are philosophical: "We have nourished within us the two opposing forces which produce life, now we must choose. Now we must choose not only our behavior . . . which side we are on . . . but we must choose our inmost sense of responsibility" (5); others are openly propagandistic: "The hurricane of women is simply moving forward, moving over you, something powerful is moving . . . in the hurricane it is said there is the work of workers for centuries, in one hurricane now the world of women rises" (38). Nearly all of these discourses are, finally, Le Sueur's own, and they echo many of her other writings in other genres and discourses throughout her long career.

Frequently, however, the narrator's and Le Sueur's voices appear to be elided, particularly in the passages where the narrator espouses the author's purpose, telling us that the story is "a direction at the fork of the road, [to] save you from the dangers, lighten the dangers, get you both and the whole nation and the cosmos through . . . into the fruit" (6). The urgency springs from the perception (the narrator's? the author's?) that America has reached a crisis point in history, "a choice of the road to humanity" (5). Appearing a year after Francis Fukuyama's famously heralded vision of "the end of history," *The Dread Road* can be read as an intervention—a reassertion of history, specifically the forgotten history of the worker—into the amnesiac triumphalism that has constituted much of American political discourse over recent decades.¹⁷ Le Sueur is keenly aware that much of the history of America's working class struggles has been actively suppressed (as was her own work during the McCarthy era), and while one could argue that the ongoing development of capitalism has changed some of the particulars of those struggles over time, they are not, as Fukuyama claims, by any means ended. Le Sueur's work, then, is a reminder that that history remains, at the very least, unfinished.

Ultimately, the voices of Le Sueur, her two protagonists, and even those whose stories are told indirectly all come together to lend an incantatory quality to the text, an exhortatory insistence on the redemptive power of communal memory. Le Sueur's rhetoric in the novel also has, at times, the unmistakable quality of a jeremiad to it, and in this too, it is part of a long American tradition of populist prose. "I demand that you listen," Le Sueur's

narrator says. "Be with me on the dread journey, that dread road we must take now. We must all take this journey into each other, into the dark but luminous heart, into the human power of memory and time. . . . Luminous and secret I summon our memory, the loving memory that is our transformation" (2). In this chorus of voices merging into one, the reader glimpses Le Sueur's model for a collective historical consciousness created through the interpenetration of personal and communal experience.

Le Sueur models this process of the creation of a historical consciousness through the course of the novel in the figure of the unnamed, older woman, who is protagonist, narrator, and finally, Le Sueur herself. As she travels across the Southwest, she "positions" herself through each site along the way. She forges links between her own experience and that of the young woman she meets on the bus, and then to that of other present-day inhabitants of this part of the country. At the same time, her awareness of the history embedded in this landscape makes it possible for her to reach into the past to connect their experiences with those of their grandparents—migrant workers and miners—and beyond them, with the fate of the American Indians. Her journey becomes a process of cognitive mapping in Fredric Jameson's sense—a way of thinking through her position as a historical subject within contemporary American society and global capitalism.¹⁸ For Le Sueur, this is the essential moment in the formation of the political subject—"the collective building of a social image—impossible for the isolated, competitive, alienated consciousness of cultural imperialism" (61). This process of connecting the individual to the communal history constitutes the first stage in Le Sueur's historiography, and it preserves the specificity that we are accustomed to in historical narrative. As *The Dread Road* proceeds, however, this specificity (of both persons and events) is superseded by the emergence of a new "grand narrative" of history that is both Marxist and feminist in its conception. I use "grand narrative" here in Lyotard's sense of an overarching meta-narrative that seeks to explain the world through a particular legitimating historical or political teleology. A widespread incredulity toward "grand narratives" is, Lyotard argues, a defining feature of postmodernity.¹⁹ Le Sueur's historiography is a return to (or a continuation of) such totalizing historical narratives, and as such, situates even this late work much more within the framework of modernism than postmodernism.

"The earth is a history," we are told at the outset of the story (1). The landscape is legible, and to move across it knowingly is to read that history. And this traveling/reading is itself a form of creation, producing what de Certeau refers to as a "spatial narrative." Movement from place to place, de Certeau suggests, performs three functions: "it is the process of *appropriation* of the topographical system . . . it is a spatial acting out of the place . . . and it implies *relations* among differentiated positions."²⁰ Here he speaks specifically of walking as his model for the production of spatial narratives. Although Le Sueur's

protagonists move through the space of the Southwest on a bus with a predetermined route, and so their travels apparently lack the choice and volition present in de Certeau's conceptual framework, it still seems to provide a productive way in which to conceptualize the actions of the two women on their journey. They direct their attention, rather than their feet, to particular sites.

De Certeau further establishes an analogy between walking and the speech act. Walking has "a triple 'enunciative' function," he asserts, and then he proceeds to compare each of these spatial functions to linguistic ones, for example, "it is a process of *appropriation* of the topological system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language)."²¹ Rather than staying within the confines of the speech act, I focus on the equation of movement through space with the production of a narrative; this amplifies rather than subtracts from de Certeau's argument, which in fact moves in this direction later on. "Space is a practiced place," de Certeau asserts, drawing a crucial distinction between "place," which is inert, "the *being-there* of something dead," and "space," which is dynamic, created "by the actions of historical *subjects* (a movement always seems to condition the production of a space and to associate it with a history)."²² Thus, places become spaces through the actions or "practices" of a traveler who moves through them. Here, the traveler makes them her own by "inhabiting" them, even if only for a moment, infusing them with personal associations and meanings, "actualizing" the possibilities offered by the landscape. In the process, she also traces out her position in relation to the already-existing histories of the spaces she encounters along the way.

At the opening of the story, the narrator says that she has taken this trip to see her institutionalized son many times before. The account of the beginning of her journey is juxtaposed in the text to that of the protagonist of "The Fall of the House of Usher," who also sets out on a journey in a state of foreboding. Like the narrator's previous journeys, this one is begun in denial, in an attempt to forget the past. "I would wait for the night to take that terrible journey along this dread road," she admits, "trying not to remember . . . to close my eyes as we went through in the dark" (1). She is not alone in this erasure of history: everyone on the bus is implicated in a deliberate forgetting: "We drove over those curved hills, over the Indian bodies, over the buried nuclear warheads now ready for the final massacre. It all seemed below us. We *skimmed across the top*" (16, emphasis added).

"This is the dread road toward the corpse, the hidden dead," the narrator thinks as she starts her journey (1). The recovery of history requires digging deep, uncovering the bodies buried in the haunted landscape. Despite her attempts at forgetting, the past is insistent, inescapable. The ghosts in the countryside refuse to remain invisible and silent; they rise out of the darkness,

demanding to be seen and heard. Even as she admits that she has always denied the history embedded in the landscape before, the narrator's thoughts, running parallel to that admission, move toward acceptance: "Open your hand and gather the clustered light of space" she thinks to herself (2). The reluctant traveler and her companion on the bus become guides, like Virgil for Dante and both for Dante's readers, taking us with them through the inferno of history.

Le Sueur's choice of a bus as the vehicle for this journey is particularly apt. The predetermined route of the bus—and the fact that it is driven by someone other than the protagonists—does not deprive them of historical agency; it suggests the material, historical limits within which their choices are made and their actions carried out. "Men make their own history," Marx observed in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, "but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."²³ While the passengers on the bus might be seen to form an allegorical microcosm of contemporary America, they are equally linked to a historical continuum, to the ghosts of the past who rise out of the land around them. "We are all dead in the bus in the poisoned night," the narrator thinks, and the bus is "a glass coffin going to a mass grave" (34).

The catalyst of memory and the reemergence of history is the young woman whom the narrator first notices in the bus station. The sight of her, the narrator says, "was like coming suddenly upon a terrible accident that had just happened. Startling, a fire, something broken and burning" (2). Her appearance is juxtaposed to the arrival of the masked figure of death in Poe's "Masque of the Red Death," and it generates a similar unease among the other passengers. Unlike the others, the narrator is drawn to the young woman. "We sat next to each other," the narrator recalls, "Why did her appearing reveal everything? As if we struck light into each other" (31).

Throughout the novel, the young woman is the site of the intersection of multiple myths, "sitting on the crevasse of prophecy of delphi earth elysian mysteries ceremony of the kernel" (46). She is Kali, the Hindu goddess of death, whose sweeping destruction clears the way for renewed life. She is Persephone, who travels in the land of the dead and returns to the world of the living, bringing spring, regeneration, and rebirth.²⁴ And like so many of Poe's protagonists who appear to be mad, she actually sees the buried truth. Buried alive, her voice muffled but insistent, she brings all the ghosts with her when she comes forth from the tomb. The young woman focuses ("as if she was a lens of some kind through which I saw" 16) and illuminates the forgotten, obscured past: "the light from her seemed to contain all history, generative memory, something lost, now remembered" (13). She makes it possible to exhume the buried past and expose the roots of the present. She is the repressed

returned. This figure of the young woman (who merges at various points with the figure of Le Sueur herself)—in all her “real” and mythic incarnations—offers one key to understanding the mythic, circular nature of Le Sueur’s historiography as it finally emerges in the novel.

As the bus moves through the night, a mist rises from the land, whirls before the headlights and takes on the shape of ghosts. “The road seemed to be drawing us into a spectral world,” the narrator says, “into a landscape more real than the present . . . more remembered. We seemed to part the dark, a turbulent spectral dark on both sides, and then the headlights seemed to be unreal and like a deep sea, dense and clearing and then closing, as if the air through which we penetrated was the body of hundreds of ghosts running alongside us” (20). Embodying the past within the present, they constitute “great shards of memory swimming in the vast sea night” (19). The attempts by the bus driver and the other passengers to explain away these apparitions as fog or mist are paralleled in the text by the narrator of “The Fall of the House of Usher”’s attribution of the appearances of the undead Madeline to “electrical phenomena” or “the rank miasma of the tarn” (19). Though initially unwelcome, the feared specters are finally regarded by the narrator as necessary: “We must have them. We must ask them to our tables, our beds, our festivals. There is a void without them,” the narrator muses (21). To be made “whole” (a central aim of Le Sueur’s historiography) the present must encompass all the experiences of the past.

These specters must inevitably include Le Sueur herself, emerging from the obscurity and darkness of the McCarthy era. There is the ghostly, yet perceptible, outline of an historical allegory of American intellectual Marxism in the narrative of *The Dread Road*. In its text one hears echoes of a rich history of leftist writing of the ’30s and ’40s that was silenced in the ’50s. the “disappearance” of Le Sueur and nearly all of the other worker-writers after they were blacklisted—a kind of burial alive—and their recovery and reemergence in subsequent decades are implicitly evoked by the massacres and ghostly returns of victims in the narrative. And like Poe’s resurrected heroines, Le Sueur returns accompanied by the specters of a buried past—the dark history haunting the American dream.²⁵

In *The Dread Road*, the recovery of memory is simultaneously personal and communal. “Something was happening, some disaster, all over the earth,” the narrator realizes (11). As the bus travels through the landscape of slag heaps and abandoned mines into the town of Trinidad, the narrator moves rapidly from the sudden terrible awareness of her feelings for her son, to a concomitant awareness of the horror of the massacre of striking miners at the neighboring town of Ludlow in 1914. This first awakening of her ability to connect her individual experience to that of others is matched in the text with the return to consciousness of Poe’s protagonist in “The Premature Burial,”

who can only begin to conceive of his situation when his memory—particularly the memory of being “subject to catalepsy”—is restored (11).

The bus’s passage through Trinidad and past the turnoff for Ludlow, Colorado, marks the midpoint on its route from Albuquerque to Denver. And like the overdetermined image of a dream, the Ludlow massacre of striking miners, their wives, and children, lies at the conceptual center of *The Dread Road*’s narrative.²⁶ “If you ever drew into this funeral whirlpool of a communal ceremonial, you would never forget it,” the narrator says, “the real history coming from the event . . . the opening of this century plant of workers’ grief and passion” (17). The memorial to the event literally encompasses the novel: on the book’s front cover are close-up photographs of the faces of the mother and child on the commemorative statue erected by the United Mine Workers of America at the site of the massacre, and on the back cover is a photograph of Meridel Le Sueur walking away from the memorial at sunset. In the text itself, the event forms a matrix within which the personal and the communal, the particular and the general, the real and the symbolic converge. The narrator’s entry into this matrix and her confrontation of the personal and political implications of the massacre signal the turning point of her progress toward historical consciousness.

The arrival of the bus in Trinidad launches a chain of associations across generations for the narrator. She is directly linked to the massacre through her grandparents, who were among those killed. At the sight of the hotel where the union officials received runners bearing news of the Ludlow massacre, she imagines her mother (in the right-hand text) “running across the plains, coming on the dawn light road. Perhaps she has news. I saw her knocking on the window in the dark. She saw us. She never lost sight of us” (13). There appears to be a condensation here, in the Freudian sense, between the runners—those who survived and bore witness—and the figure of the mother. A similar and related condensation occurs later when the narrator connects the survivors who took up field work after the massacre with the young mother beside her, who has also worked in the fields: “I thought I heard her whispering, telling her whole life. I knew it. I saw them stooping in the fields after the men were blacklisted at Ludlow, thrown to the edge of the country. . . . I saw them on a dark screen thrown on my flesh. I read it from the vast dread road we followed” (30).

The narrator (who is also a mother), the narrator’s mother, the young mother beside her, the mothers who died in the Ludlow massacre, and even Le Sueur herself are all part of the same constellation of meaning, as are the dead children of the strikers, the young woman’s stillborn baby, and the “buried but not dead” son of the narrator. The series of mothers and children can be seen as different incarnations of one another; their individual identities and experiences are collapsed, and they become personifications (or even icons) of

history and redemption. Just as capitalism is itself a monolithic force (and evil) for Le Sueur, so too are its victims rendered into a sort of monolithic unity—the victims of capitalist oppression. Throughout the novel, Le Sueur privileges the communal over the individual by subsuming the latter under the former. The individuals are elevated to the position of subjects of history, but in the process, the historical specificity of their experience is to some extent sacrificed. Yet it is also true that certain forms of generalization bring out concrete elements which otherwise might not appear, including the relation of individual experience to communal experience.

A similar, and in many ways even more problematic, collapse occurs in the representation of the histories evoked throughout *The Dread Road*. The women and children asphyxiated underground near the mines at Ludlow represent not just that one historical moment of atrocity, but many others as well. In the text they are linked to multiple histories of oppression in America: the subjugation of the Indians (“The Dresden story, the Trail of Tears, Wounded Knee, Black Hawk’s crossing, where they shot the grandmothers and the children as they floundered, tried to cross the river and sank into the netherworld, sown like seeds into the dark” 15), of immigrants to America, of inhabitants of nuclear weapons testing grounds in Colorado, of agricultural workers poisoned by pesticides, and of industrial workers here and abroad. Throughout the novel, there is a tension between historical specificity and generality, between the stories of individuals and of classes and even nations. In Le Sueur’s view, one cannot shape history without an adequate understanding of it, and this understanding requires the ability to connect one’s own experience with that of others throughout time. Once these connections are made, however, all stories tend to merge into one overarching narrative—that of the oppression of the working class by capital.

In seeking to forge a new “grand narrative” of American history, Le Sueur renders history itself as cyclical, repetitive—history as eternal recurrence. Yet in this dissolution of the historical specificity of these events, it is entirely possible to lose sight of particular cause and effect relationships in those histories. The trade-off all along is between the particular and the general, difference and repetition. Traditional histories are, of course, no strangers to totalizing “grand narratives.”²⁷ Le Sueur’s can be seen to contain aspects of Vico’s cyclical conception of history, of a Hegelian vision of history as the triumph of the Spirit (*Geist*), of the Marxist understanding of history as class struggle, and of a mythic structure of rebirth and regeneration (partly drawn from the European Classical tradition and partly from American Indian philosophies) with a marked feminist inflection.

At least in part, the cyclical/repetitive nature of Le Sueur’s historiography is a result of the spatialization of history across the American landscape, which is itself figured as the female body: “The bus drove into the accepting air, the

earth seemed female, changing utterly and now alight and protecting us, curving around us" (38). Virgin land, mother earth, Plato's *chora*, Aristotle's *matrix*—the feminization of space is deeply embedded in the structures of Western thought. Le Sueur's images of woman as "space, prairie emptiness to be filled, calling for human fulfillment" (4) and her images of the land, which graphically conflate the landscape with woman: "We entered the mountains that spread in the slowly rising light like the knees of the pieta holding the dead sons" (40), and the earth with the womb: "We went over the pass and the open womb of the earth was turned out . . . slag that would last a thousand years" (24), follow a similar trajectory.

Yet there is an essential difference between these earlier philosophical conceptions of space as feminine and Le Sueur's schema. Plato's conception of the *chora* rendered it, as Julia Kristeva observes in her essay "Women's Time," as "matrix space, nourishing, unnameable, anterior to the One, to God and, consequently, defying metaphysics."²⁸ Plato describes this space in *Timaeus*: "And there is a third nature, which is space [*chora*] and is eternal, and admits not of destruction and provides a home for all created things, and is apprehended, when all sense is absent, by a kind of spurious reason, and is hardly real."²⁹ This eternal space, the *chora*, is a particularly complex form of spatiality. As the word itself is also a proper name, a female name, one might think of it as a sort of cosmic womb—the space of possibility and potentiality—from which all things come into being. In the classical binary schema, space (*chora*, earth, land, etc.) has always been gendered female, while time—linear, teleological, historical time—has been gendered male.³⁰ Classically, the two are "married," joined yet retaining their separate, inherent qualities. If woman is identified with any time at all, it is circular, cyclical (seasonal) time—history emptied by the void of eternity.³¹ Le Sueur's "*chora*," however, is not only the eternal space of possibility and potentiality, it also encompasses history itself—womb and tomb—within it. Thus, space and time are conflated, and all past and future history lies within that feminine *chora*. Yet, as I have noted, this version of history does retain a peculiarly circular aspect that seems to link it to the primordial, cyclical (seasonal) time: American history as a seemingly endless repetition of capitalist depredations, the return of the same.

For Le Sueur, the poisoned land encompasses its poisonous past and the future (with all its perils and possibilities). Throughout most of *The Dread Road*, the land is a poisoned womb that brings forth disaster. The symbolic structure is transposable: the land as body, the body as land. "Go into the lost body, the lost country," the narrator thinks (19). The landscape is internalized and coded into the genes. "To my shame I had my child," she admits. "The secret psychic landscape has entered me like the radiated air, radiated calcium, it glows in me. The landscape expands day and night in the mushroom blast

and that terrible light. It entered my unborn child" (14). But the land, like the women, has in it the potential for redemption and rebirth: "violets out of the slag pits . . . the qualities that rise, delicate beauty and strength, generosity . . . the true American earth rising out of the destruction" (24). The redemption is achieved through memory, the uncovering of power's buried past: "They make you disremember, forget, dismember," the narrator says, "Remember . . . remember" (22). For Le Sueur, memory and their retrieval of history—the remembering of the social body—are the keys to a just future.

The catalyst for this process is the young woman, who, the narrator says, "made our present strangely break open" (3). In this opening, the physical and emotional boundaries between the two women seem to collapse: "We were moving through and into one another. No barriers, no skin, all felt open in us" (23). This commonality between women and between workers can only be discovered through memory and the uncovering of suppressed truths—"the sealed lips, the sealed mines, the sealed American silences"—that once broken open become positive forces for social change (39). "Nothing is closed. All opens. No door, frontier wall of death," the narrator thinks in the moment when the girl's secret is voiced, the mysterious bundle unwrapped, the body of her dead child revealed. "I felt strange," the narrator remembers, "as if everything was closer and entered me, and nothing was alien, no suffering too horrible for me. We were all inside together" (39). This sense of commonality, of being "all inside together," is made the foundation of political consciousness and collective political action.

For Le Sueur, this phenomenon—the discovery of the commonality that binds women and workers together—seems explicitly linked to woman's sexuality and her productive potential. It constitutes a refusal of singularity and isolation evocative of Irigaray's description of the peculiarities of feminine sexuality and subjectivity, which are marked by a "nearness so pronounced that it makes all discrimination of identity, and thus all forms of property, impossible."³² This collapse of boundaries between the two women first brings realization, then a metamorphosis for the narrator. "She burned next to me," the narrator recalls, "I felt strange, as if I had changed, something coming in density and force in me . . . about to be embodied or spoken. She had struck into me like a meteor, landing deep within me, fire and blood. . . . as if we knew what to do after years of blindness" (32). This knowledge transforms the narrator: "I was a different woman. The earth had opened, a female passage before dawn. As if I rose out of the threat and silence of my life . . . freed of the threat of the killers" (39). At this moment, she makes the transition from oppressed subject (and, hence, a subject without true subjectivity, almost an object) of capitalism to a political subject who, freed from fear and aware of the past, is capable of political action.

This feminine force brings a collapse of spatial and temporal boundaries

as well as of corporeal and subjective ones: “Apocalypse, no inner and outer. Body and spirit assume one another’s attributes . . . forms of what is called real dissolve” (11, ellipses in original). “There was no distance now,” the narrator observes, and this collapse of spatial difference signals a conceptual synthesis that abolishes distance—the distance between places and events—and makes clear the connections between them (38). The two women’s journey across the Southwest maps a murderous terrain, and the different locations along the way—the cellar at Ludlow, the sites of the underground nuclear tests, the abandoned mines and slag pits, the fields poisoned with chemicals—are all, in Le Sueur’s vision, part of the same destruction and thus in a sense all the same place.

This vast conflation of space, time, and subjectivity brings a kind of healing and transcendence. Suddenly, “Everything had changed. . . . Grief seemed assuaged but not forgotten, and the ghosts of the multitudinous dark seemed penetrated by the vast light of the planet, and the road seemed to rise out of the great dread into [the] coming light” (35). The “fluid power of communal memory” creates a kind of chain reaction, shedding light on a history that is “global,” making possible a far greater reach of understanding. It begins with the ability to ask certain questions: “Is this related to the nuclear tests in Nevada?” the narrator wonders of the Ludlow massacre. “Is it the same thing? A continuation fed by silence? . . . I seemed to be near some terrible revelation, the appearance of the enemy who was always killing us” (13). This “global memory” gives the narrator the ability to make sense across both time and space. “I recognized that in opposite parts of the world, it was the same,” the narrator says. “With the same enemy. It was the Rockefellers in Ludlow, Phelps Dodge and Anaconda Copper. I see they have their hands on the same body. It was British tea that made slaves, and cinnamon and gold lust and sisal and rubber. They hankered after our wealth, the body of us all” (13).

The cognitive map here is totalizing, and in many ways reductive. The narrator’s observation that “it was all the same thing,” is true in some senses, perhaps particularly in regard to motivation, but important differences are obviously being obscured here as well. As *The Dread Road* moves toward its utopian conclusion, the specificity of historical events and experiences is increasingly sacrificed as Le Sueur seeks to link and conflate them in order to create a compelling collective vision of history. In the conclusion of her “Author’s Note,” Le Sueur reaches back to mythos, “ancient sagas,” as a way of grounding her historiography: “I believe this is the way that the ancient sagas were written, lifted from the personal to the tribal, a communal reflection of a collective image. . . . Lorca said that the writer, the tribal poet, should take the collective image of the people, give it form and return it to the people. . . . This probing and creative conjunction of the images of our social agony, of birth, of becoming a new world, this collective global consciousness, is the

lighting and movement of our time, the collective converging toward the birth of a new humanity" (62).

The final scenes in *The Dread Road* depict this "collective converging" through the experiences of the narrator. In Denver, the bus's final destination, she distracts a meddlesome social worker long enough for the young woman to escape, and though she searches for her for days afterwards, she never finds her again. The narrator's encounter with the young woman has fundamentally changed her. Having made the transition from isolated, alienated subject to one with a consciousness of how her own history and experiences are related to others, the narrator is forever joined with the young woman and her child and transformed into a newly politicized subject: "I wanted never to lose the bond, the commitment I had felt, moving into a new reality, moving in closer, moving in" (46).

At the close of the novel, the older woman narrates the Christlike apotheosis of the younger woman's stillborn son, an apotheosis she witnesses through fragmented newspaper accounts of one young woman confronting men in a bar with a dead child, and another who "had stood up in the capitol and held a dead baby up to the pure golden dome as if a sacrifice," and finally with a series of front-page newspaper images of "women in El Salvador, Ethiopia, Pakistan, New York, South Dakota, New Mexico—all over the world holding their dead children on their knees, walking long and dread roads" (47). The image of the woman bearing her dead child is lifted out of the personal to enter Le Sueur's "communal consciousness" that extends around the globe.

The child becomes "an icon of the dispossessed," a witness to the history of the workers' oppression. Descriptions of the child are rife with Christ imagery and terminology. "He is not dead, but risen from the foul sprays . . . he can rise in the light and never grow old . . . dead he speaks for us all . . . the dead children rise in him," the young woman thinks as she shows the body of the child to the narrator for the first time (27). Later, the narrator reflects, "This is our child. We ate his blood in our fruit" (29). Like the other "condensed" figures in the text, the child comes to represent all the child victims of war and oppression throughout the world, and his resurrection prefigures Le Sueur's "birth of a new humanity."

For Le Sueur, the journey down the dread road leads through a confrontation with a buried past to a hopeful future. Memory is generative of the future. "The road is toward bread. The will is to life. . . . We move among each other, arrive at harvest in the midst of holocaust" (30). The recollection of the communal past lays the foundation for a new social relation. *The Dread Road's* utopian conclusion and its representation of a solidarity and sense of community that seem all but unattainable in the present-day world are an attempt to model this "collective building of a social image," to provide us with an image of what might be.

At the same time, *The Dread Road* goes beyond a mere representation of such resolutions; its triptych text effectively bridges the gap between theory and praxis, text and world, by requiring its readers to engage in the very processes of mapping and connecting individual and communal histories accomplished by the novel's protagonists. In this way, it also makes its readers—at least for a time—a part of the collective subjectivity it advocates. *The Dread Road* instructs its readers in an activist reading practice that is not just applicable to this text, but also to the world, in fulfillment of Le Sueur's lifelong vision of art as action.

How viable Le Sueur's populist/Marxist/feminist historiography might be for our historical moment is another matter. The postmodern "incredulity toward grand narratives" is in part based on powerful—and so far unsuccessfully challenged—critiques of their philosophical foundations, foundations that also underpin Le Sueur's conception of history. Nor indeed has history itself been kind to grand narratives of history. The events of the twentieth century alone have given us more than ample cause to be skeptical of such narratives, from the Enlightenment narrative of progress through scientific reason as the agent of human liberation to the Marxist narrative of the inevitable collapse of capitalism that would free the working class. Even if Le Sueur's thought and work do not answer the questions this more skeptical view raises, or even if the answers she had in mind are not quite the ones we might ultimately want, her writings expand the conceptual, historical, and political space of this questioning and might help us to find some answers.

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Notes

1. There are several fine studies and collections of the works of the midwestern worker-writers, among them Douglas Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1889–1990* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Ralph F. Bogardus and Fred Hobson, eds., *Literature at the Barricades: The American Writer in the 1930s* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1982); Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Nora Ruth Roberts, *Three Radical Women Writers: Class and Gender in Meridel Le Sueur, Tillie Olsen, and Josephine Herbst* (New York: Garland, 1996); and Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz, eds., *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930–1940* (New York: Feminist Press, 1987).
2. Neal Schleuning, *America: Song We Sang without Knowing* (Mankato, Minn.: Little Red Hen Press, 1983), 26.
3. Blanche H. Gelfant, "'Everybody Steals': Language as Theft in Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl*," in *Tradition and the Talents of Women*, ed. Florence Howe (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 183–210, 199.
4. For an excellent reading of the utopian impulse in Le Sueur's early work, see Anthony Dawahare's "Modernity and 'Village Communism' in Depression-Era

- America: The Utopian Literature of Meridel Le Sueur," *Criticism* 39.3 (summer 1997): 409–31.
5. Meridel Le Sueur's mother was the daughter of Marian Wharton, who, with her stepfather, Arthur Le Sueur, was among the founders of the People's College in Fort Scott, Kansas. Le Sueur grew up amid the socialist community at the People's College and the family home was frequently visited by such left luminaries as Eugene Debs and Emma Goldman. As a teenager, she lived for a time in Goldman's Greenwich Village commune. In the '50s, Le Sueur wrote a chronicle of the lives of her parents entitled *Crusaders*.
 6. Wixon, *Worker-Writer in America*, 149.
 7. This was a strategy adopted by many of the other women worker-writers of this generation, such as Muriel Rukeyser, Agnes Smedley, Tillie Olsen, and Josephine Herbst. Barbara Foley observes in her article, "Women and the Left in the 1930s," (*American Literary History* 2.1 [spring 1990]: 150–69), that "women contributed to radical culture of the 1930s not by resisting the hegemony of a masculinist Marxism, but by extending the implications of Marxist analysis in a variety of revolutionary directions" (164). How much Le Sueur's membership in the CP—and the strictures it imposed through its definitions of what constituted proper proletarian literature—benefited or impeded her development as a writer is a matter of some dispute among critics. See particularly Roberts, *Three Radical Women Writers*; Coiner, *Better Red*; and Linda Ray Pratt, "Woman Writer in the CP: The Case of Meridel Le Sueur," in *Women's Studies* 14 (1988): 247–64.
 8. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (1835–1840; New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1964), 174–75.
 9. Writing as maternity is a dominant paradigm for Le Sueur—it can be seen in works as early as *The Girl*—yet this maternity is generally communal/collective. As Gelfant observes, "Motherhood connotes control and authority as well as caring, and as a mother-writer who nourishes, Le Sueur claims authority; but she disclaims authorship by saying that . . . [*The Girl*] 'was really written' by the women whose stories it collates. This deferral of authority raises questions about the creative source and language of a mothering text" ("Everybody Steals," 195).
 10. Coiner, *Better Red*, 10.
 11. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), xxi.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. I am using the term "simulacrum" in the sense suggested by Roland Barthes in "The Structuralist Activity," trans. Richard Howard, *Partisan Review* 34.1 (winter 1967)—"intellect added to object." Put another way, it's the text produced by the reader in the act of reading, which because it involves a chain of personal associations will be different from (though it will also overlap) any other reader's text.
 15. This critique is particularly prevalent in the work of such French feminists as Julia Kristeva (with whose work Le Sueur was known to be acquainted), Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous.
 16. In the "Author's Note" at the end of *The Dread Road*, Le Sueur identifies this opening incident of the novel as "the story of her true meeting with the woman on a bus who carried a dead child she had just birthed in the rest room of the bus station" (61).
 17. One finds a similar reassessment in Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of*

- the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), which directly responds to Fukuyama's naive view of both that particular moment in history and his concept of history (and of "the end of history"). As will be seen, there are other suggestive parallels between these works.
18. See Fredric Jameson's "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) for a more detailed explication of this concept and its political ramifications.
 19. See Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, in *Theory and History of Literature*, Volume 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
 20. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 97–98.
 21. Ibid.
 22. Ibid., 115, 118 (italics in original).
 23. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 15.
 24. Le Sueur has a particular attachment to myths of return. The Persephone-Demeter myth is one of those most often invoked in her works.
 25. The image of capitalism haunted by the specter of communism is, of course, famously invoked by Marx and Engels in the opening of "The Communist Manifesto." This image must have been on Le Sueur's mind throughout, and then was transferred to a kind of "spectral" presence of Marxism itself in modern-day America, from the McCarthy era to the present. On the general "spectrality" of Marxism, see Derrida's *Specters of Marx*.
 26. In September of 1913, 11,000 miners employed by the Colorado Fuel & Iron Corporation (owned by John D. Rockefeller) went out on strike. Evicted from their company-owned shacks, the strikers and their families moved into tent encampments they erected throughout the Trinidad-Ludlow area. As the strike wore on through the winter and into the spring of 1914, tensions escalated between the miners, company guards, and the National Guard. On April 20, the National Guard and company men launched an assault on the miners and their families with rifles and Gatling guns mounted on vehicles, firing indiscriminately into the Ludlow encampment. Some of the women and children fled into the surrounding hills; others hid below ground in cellars that became deathtraps when the advancing militias set fire to the tent city. In one of these cellars, the incinerated bodies of thirteen women and children were discovered the next day. By the time the battles were over, the dead numbered at least 66, among them U.M.W.A. strike organizer Louis Tikas (shot by the National Guard when he went to negotiate a truce), whose eulogy was delivered in Trinidad by Mother Jones.
 27. Le Sueur's vision of history might also be seen as in some ways closer to tragedy or poetry, which, as Aristotle observes in chapter 9 of *The Poetics*, "is more concerned with the universal," while "history [is more concerned] with the individual." In *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, David H. Richter, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 48–49.
 28. Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 445.
 29. Plato, *Timaeus*, in *The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 52b.

30. See Diane Massey's "Politics and Space/Time," *New Left Review* 196 (Nov./Dec. 1992): 65–84, for a comprehensive view of the implications of this conception of spatiality.
31. See Kristeva's discussion of these different conceptions and genderings of time in "Women's Time." In Robert's *Three Radical Women Writers*, she reports that "when [she] interviewed Meridel Le Sueur in the summer of 1991, she was reading Julia Kristeva. . . . [I]t was clear that Le Sueur felt that through the French feminists she had found an updated means of connecting her work with the theorizing of a new generation" (53).
32. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 31.