Reading
Margaret Laurence’s Life Writing:
Toward a Postcolonial Feminist Subjectivity for a White Female Critic

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I propose feminist, postcolonial readings of Margaret Laurence’s two book-length autobiographical works: *The Prophet’s Camel Bell*, memoirs of the year she spent in Somalia in 1951–1952, and *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir*, the book she completed shortly before her death in 1987. My purpose is to suggest how white female critics, such as myself, can begin to approach their critical tasks in ways that neither slight their own culture’s supportive and positive accomplishments, nor lead them to critical positions that are ideologically acceptable in established postcolonial practice, but ultimately unproductive in bringing a literary critique to the polyphony of women’s voices currently expressing their experience in the English language. My goal in performing this admittedly political act is to enter postcolonial discourse in a way that requires neither my abjection as a white woman nor the diminution of my feminism.

*The Prophet’s Camel Bell* is based on the diaries Laurence wrote while travelling with her husband as he engineered a project to construct ground water reservoirs in the Somali desert. Laurence narrates an incident concerning the establishment of a *jes*, a “tea-shop-cum-brothel” (141), near their camp at Balleh Gedid. Jack Laurence quickly recognizes the need to share their water and space with the *jes*, accepting that the *jes* “provides amenities of one kind and another” for the men employed at the
site (142). For Laurence, however, the task is harder because of the fact that the jes's prostitute is an eight-year-old girl. Despite the fact that the Laurences are making every effort to abide by local customs, this particular local custom is not one the young Canadian writer expected.

The little girl, Asha, comes each afternoon to visit with Laurence in her camp—asking nothing from her except a comb for her unkempt hair—leaving just before sunset as the men leave work and her night's business begins. The writer and the child do not communicate, Laurence's rudimentary Somali preventing any real exchange. But each time Asha leaves she says to Laurence, "Nabad gelyo" (May you enter peace). Although she knows the correct response, Laurence can never bring herself to give the traditional farewell, "nabad dino" (the peace of faith), for she has neither the peace nor the faith to accept the girl's material conditions of existence as part of normal life. She is very aware of her position as outsider, the potential for falling into a colonial position as memsahib do-gooder. As Canadians, she and her husband take a consciously anticolonial stance, avoiding association with the British administration whenever possible: he has his commitment to bringing practical technology gauged to local needs, built and maintained by local abilities; she has her scholarly exploration of Somali culture and literature witnessed by her carefully researched poetic translations in A Tree for Poverty, and further illustrated by the way in which she exposes and examines her own bias and assumptions in The Prophet's Camel Bell in her subject position as learner in another's culture.

In most of her relationships with males in Somalia, Laurence is capable of establishing largely unexploitive terms of existence, but at such moments as the Asha meeting, in fact in all her meetings with women in Somalia, she cannot maintain her subject position as respectful learner, good researcher, comic westerner having her biases deconstructed by patient mentors. In her meeting with women she is bereft of her strategies; she confesses:

I did not know what to do. If we forbade the jes to stay near the camp, the crone [the old woman who manages Asha] would only move her trade elsewhere, so the child would be no better off. Here at least Asha got enough water. Possibly many Somalis felt
the same as I did about children such as Asha, but how would they feel about my meddling? I had the strong suspicion that I might easily make Asha’s life worse by interfering. I could not take her away from the situation entirely, and what else would do any good?

So, whether out of wisdom or cowardice, I did nothing. The jes remained with us for several months. Then, in the jilal drought, it vanished one day and we heard no more about it. But Asha’s half-wild half-timid face with its ancient eyes will remain with me always, a reproach and a question. (142)

The “reproach” and “question” are made more devastating for Laurence in the face of her awareness of the debilitating and deforming female circumcision and infibulation surgery carried out in Somalia. She learns of the horror of this surgery through the desperate women who ask her for some pills for pain relief from the lifetime of pain, infections, painful menstruation and intercourse, complicated birthing, as well as the pain the deformity caused in walking the great distances required by their nomadic life. Laurence is bitter but helpless in her observation:

What should I do? Give them a couple of five-grain aspirin? Even if they had money to buy future pills, which they had not, the lunatic audacity of shoving a mild pill at their total situation was more than I could stomach. (64)

“I have nothing to give you. Nothing” is the reply Laurence has to make to these women. A painful moment for the young socialist from Manitoba.

Laurence did not live long enough to confront that searing moment of intersection between feminist and postcolonial ethics represented by our growing awareness in the late eighties and in the nineties that as Canada became haven for Somalian and other refugees from Africa, it also became haven to such customs as female circumcision and infibulation, a custom, as Laurence learned, which can be as fiercely advocated by senior women as well as men where the practice takes place.1

I take the time to reconstruct Laurence’s silenced frustration at the fate of women in Somalia, and to remember that the problems of the Empire have come home, because I consider it
emblematic of the discursive disjunction that occurs when feminism and postcolonialism meet. White women literary critics are also sometimes made silent and helpless by the conflicting demands of these two belief systems; we, too, might remember occasions when in our hearts we said, "I have nothing to give you. Nothing," and turned away with that same terrible sense of "reproach," with a question in our hearts and minds that never leaves us. I do not think these problems have been fully admitted by the cultural critiques involved with feminism or postcolonialism, and I propose not to seek a resolution to the issues, but to offer a reading of Laurence's life writing that works "toward" the concept of a female postcolonial position for privileged, white, female cultural workers (writers, intellectuals), like myself, that does not force us into hypocrisy effected to accommodate a seemingly unconflicted acceptance of the challenges of all the newly aroused voices of the postcolonial world.

Late in their study *The Empire Writes Back*, Helen Tiffin et al. devote a three-page section to the intersection of feminism and postcolonialism. While observing the several parallel interests of the two critiques, they admit that they have been largely coincidentally related. They suggest fruitful grounds for interaction, especially in the need of both critiques to "change the conditions of reading for all texts" (176). It is that need to change the conditions of reading for all texts that I would like to begin with and refer particularly to the leading postcolonial feminist critic who has made challenging statements about the place of white feminists' critiques vis-à-vis "sisterhood" with women in oppressive colonial conditions. White women need to meet these challenges with an attitude that seeks neither the hypocrisy of silence nor the humiliation of uncritical acceptance for the sake of political correctness. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, while recognizing the important joint possibilities of feminism and postcolonialism, indicts white women writers and white feminism's reading strategies (as exemplified by Gilbert and Gubar in *Madwoman in the Attic*) for requiring "a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer" (1985, 251). Her illustration of this is her reading of *Jane Eyre*, in which native/Creole Bertha Mason, the dark woman from the colonies, must die a fiery death in order for Jane to realize herself as "feminist individualist heroine" (Donald-
son 29), a bourgeois, colonial, masculinist ideal that Spivak would seem to think white feminists adopt uncritically. While she implicitly indicts the author of *Jane Eyre*, her chief concern is the explicit indictment of Brontë’s white feminist readers, who are blind “to the epistemic violence that effaces the colonial subject and requires her to occupy the space of the imperialists’ self-consolidating Other” (1987, 209). Those accepting Spivak’s accusatory reading might be tempted to apply it to Laurence’s *The Prophet’s Camel Bell*, to show that the white woman confronts the oppression of other women only for the purpose of the self-development of her liberal humanist essential self, thus appropriating the colonial subject’s story for her own edification and reifying the other in a new kind of textual oppression.

In fact, this is exactly what Terry Goldie describes Laurence (and numerous others) as doing in his study *Fear and Temptation*. Goldie is examining the “horizon of expectation” (132) or, more politically, the “concealed but omnipresent ideology controlling the text” (8). He takes up the use of the Jules character in Morag’s story in *The Diviners*, using Jules’s question about their relationship, “I’m the shaman, eh?,” as the deconstructive moment that reveals the ideology of the text. He concludes: “His [Jules’s] primary contribution is as incubus, with a very clear emphasis on his sexual power, but his mystical potency extends through other commodities as well, particularly orality and the prehistoric.” The result of this process in white texts, says Goldie, is that “the essence of Other in the indigene becomes ethereal manifestation, an aura of indigenous presence rather than the indigene as material reality” (138). Thus occurs the commodification and reification that colonial ideology performs on the indigene. I would like to use Goldie’s reading of *The Diviners* as a springboard for differentiating two kinds of reading in my effort to, as the *Empire* authors put it, “change the conditions of reading for all texts.” In *Decolonizing Feminisms*, Laura Donaldson describes the difference between the kind of textual reading that is a “diving deep and surfacing” reading and what she calls, using Alice Walker’s term, a “womanist” reading. She sees both the Gilbert and Guber reading of *Jane Eyre* and the Spivak reading as ones that seek a single strand; the critic engages in an act of “diving deep and surfacing...with the sunken hermeneutic treasure” (20). I would add that the ideological agendas of such
readers are usually well set in advance. I am not arguing against the usefulness of such readings; certainly critical readers in Canada deserved the good shake of the shoulders that books like Goldie's offered us in the late eighties. Comparative studies, however, inevitably do violence to individual works while making very sound ideological and aesthetic observations. Donaldson points out the violence done to feminism, however, when ideological critics engage in a privileging of oppressions, as both the Gilbert and Guber and the Spivak readings do in their desire to validate certain important values in their readings. It is the kind of violence that produces the energy-sapping quarrels of recent years, that keeps feminist critiques from being enabling, and that often leaves feminists caught in using postmodern deconstruction not as a means to an end, but as an end, a rather negative end in itself.

Donaldson sees the problem as one caused by some feminists’ uncritical use of an Althusserian subjectivity definition by which “the classic realist text interpellates or constructs the relationship between narrative and reader so that the reading subject willingly accepts her status as the individual and noncontradictory locus of meaning” (21). This uncritical use of Althusserian subjectivity theory is what Donaldson says Spivak does in order to argue Jane Eyre’s “privatization” of the self into a bourgeois uniqueness, “a woman who achieves her identity at the expense of the ‘native,’ not quite human, female Other” (22). She proposes that an Althusserian attitude to the reading subject and textual subjectivity is inappropriate for feminist readers “because interpellation ignores the fissures that the violent and subterranean pressures of patriarchal society open between men and women” (22). The view of subjectivity Donaldson argues for, and which I wish to advise for reading Laurence’s life writing, is described by the term “sutureing,” borrowed from film theory. Donaldson argues that we can read texts, especially texts with first-person viewpoints, as if they were film, with a view to how various cuts are sutured together to construct our reading:

Since the cut from one shot to the next guarantees that both preceding and subsequent shots will function as absences framing the meaning of the present, it also allows the cinematic text to be read as a signifying ensemble that converts one shot into both a
signifier of the subsequent shot and the signified of the preceding one. The cut... “edits” the thoughts and associations of the reader into a similar signifying ensemble. (25)

She undertakes such a suture-aware reading of a portion of *Jane Eyre* in order to show how reading across the surface of the assemblage of points of views in the text gives an awareness of how “suture enables a resistant reading of the Brontë text by forcing the reader to live in the unsettling contradictions of Jane’s subjectivity” (26). To avoid the “textual distortions that arise from an uncritical appropriation of Althusser,” we need to develop a filmic eye for the “heterogeneous discourse” of books like *Jane Eyre* that “cut the chimerical threads suturing the wounds of the subject together” (27). I would describe this reading across the surface of texts, in a more literary context, as a metonymic rather than a metaphoric reading, by which one builds a reading through joining (suturing) many fragments into a whole, rather than seeking the hermeneutic unity that suppresses detail in a substitutive gesture. To illustrate how this process can work to mediate “diving deep and surfacing” readings such as Goldie’s of Laurence, I picture the incident of Jules and Morag’s sexual encounter in terms of the filmic cuts that frame it, particularly noting that Jules does not exactly become an “ethereal” quality, an “aura of indigenous presence.” He becomes (almost immediately, within nine pages of text, maybe a dozen quick cuts of a film) the father of the child that Morag carries, the Métis child that refuses to become a reification or commodification of essence in the service of a white woman’s individualization, but a real and continuing presence in her mother’s life; indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, she becomes the structural and thematic pivot of *The Diviners.*² To conclude that Laurence’s novel is a reification of the indigene is to confuse the writer with her main characters. Jules may like to esteem his sexual activity as shamanistic and Morag may well wish, at times, to ignore her lover’s or her daughter’s identities as Métis people, but Laurence’s text read more fully, in its sutured variety, does not allow either of these viewpoints to go unchallenged.

Ironically, my effort to decolonize feminist reading practices from the oppressions of hasty postcolonial readings finds a connection with some basic reading strategies in postcolonial
critiques. In his article on "Creolization and the Post-Colonial Text," Graham Huggan argues that for writers all over the English-speaking world, grappling with the problem of (in Raja Rao's words) "conveying in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own" (27) requires a "new cross-cultural poetics which participates actively in the transformations not just of post-colonial, but of all, cultures" in a process, which Caribbean writer Edward Brathwaite coined in the word "interculturative," an interculturative "process of creolization" (29). Huggan describes Brathwaite's use of the symbolic framework of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in a mimicry gesture that skews the Shakespearean characters to "a cast of 'ambiguous products' which conform to 'the personality types of créole cultures'" (30). He transfers Brathwaite's creolization technique to a reading of New Zealand writer Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*, proposing that Hulme's ironic play with the traditional figures of Prospero, Caliban, and Ariel write back to the Empire and its culture in an ironized way. That irony, though dependent on the reader's awareness of the British literary tradition, deconstructs colonialism and participates in a palimpsestic process of building up of postcolonial voices that speaks to the creolization of literature in English and subscribes to "a distinctively post-colonial critical discourse which neither dispenses with nor subscribes to, but problematizes and adapts, European models of literary/cultural analysis and classification" (38–39).

Those familiar with Laurence's work know of her fascination with *The Tempest* as a central text of European culture. It begins in her earliest life writing, in which she uses O. Mannoni's book *Prospero and Caliban: A Study of the Psychology of Colonisation* as a touchstone for exploring the relationship of colonizer to colonized. Fiona Sparrow examines Laurence's use of this work in her book *Into Africa with Margaret Laurence*, and points out that Frantz Fanon has critiqued Mannoni's use of Caliban, pointing out that Mannoni posits an essentialist view of the colonized, a subject who has a "natural" (Sparrow's word) need for dependency. She finds it regrettable that Laurence accepts the Mannoni version uncritically, saying that Laurence uses it to characterize her difficult relationship with Abdi, the subject of "The Old Warrior" chapter, and concludes that such an explanation of Abdi's place "does not
seem just to the man she had earlier described as 'courage and pride and anger writ large'" (32).

I find Sparrow's reading in this instance to be of the "diving deep and surfacing" kind, predicated perhaps on the assumption that Laurence, writing before the whole postcolonial awareness of our own time, must, because she uses Mannoni, subscribe to his essentialist views. Reading more broadly across the surface of the text, we can find that Laurence does not use the Mannoni material in her analysis of Abdi or any Somali, but rather in the chapter called "The Imperialists," in which she explores the British and Italian colonizers. The two quotations she uses from Mannoni are both concerned with the Prospero-type illusions of Europeans and she uses Monnoni's theory to analyze the colonizer: "Whether it is Ariel or Caliban who is chosen to populate Prospero's world, there is no basic difference, for both are equally unreal" (228). Laurence's critique is a very interesting "creolization" of The Tempest in that she locates the play in terms of Prospero's colonizer's subjectivity. She refuses to accept Ariel and Caliban as actual representations of human beings, but rather suggests, as indeed the end of Shakespeare's play does, that Ariel and Caliban et al. are Prospero's illusionary magic. In this way Laurence suggests a postcolonial emphasis on the idea that the colonizing mind reifies the other. Shakespeare's old man, in Laurence's postcolonial reading of the play, is the example par excellence of the colonizing subject. She uses her literary and theoretical acumen, her ability as a reader, not only to expose the colonizer, but also to realize the colonizer in herself. She concludes her analysis of "The Imperialists" with these insights:

This was something of an irony for me, to have started out in righteous disapproval of the empire-builders, and to have been forced at last to recognize that I, too, had been of that company. For we had all been imperialists, in a sense, but the empire we unknowingly sought was that of Prester John, a mythical kingdom and a private world. (228)

Then she goes on to chart her own progress out of the colonial mindset:

Yet something of the real world did impinge upon our consciousness, and portions of the secret empire of the heart had
to be discarded, one by one. In the Haud people died of thirst, people as actual as ourselves and with as much will to live. The magic potion of a five-grain aspirin very quickly proved inadequate, and the game of healer had to be abandoned. The unreal relationship with Abdi as a faithful retainer was shattered by the reality of him as a man—a man with outlooks far different from our own, but valid for him...How many other things there may have been which we perceived not as they were but as we wanted them to be—this we have no means of knowing...

She then suggests how different the reality of Africans may be and how important it is that Europeans take their oppressive desires back into their own psyches:

To Africans, their land has never been "the Africa of the Victorian atlas," and they will not willingly allow it to be so to us now, either. Those who cannot bring themselves to relinquish the desert islands, the separate worlds fashioned to their own pattern and inhabited by creatures of their own design, must seek them elsewhere now, for they are no longer to be found in Africa. (228-229)

I would be doing Laurence's critical intelligence a disservice if I called this a postcolonial view ahead of its time. I would rather say that, as usual, the critical community is well behind Laurence. With the writing of *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* in the early 1960s, and with her experience in Africa and the creative writing that emerged from that experience as part of her critical judgment, one should expect an intelligence of Laurence's calibre to be able to speak from a "postcolonial" insight, even though that word was not yet current in critical vocabularies. It is only when we approach her texts with the belief that our own historical moment is somehow ahead of her that we make such errors. She is proof of a phenomenon that Diana Bryden and Helen Tiffin observe in *Decolonizing Fictions*: "In Postcolonial countries the most prominent theoreticians have always been the creative writers, particularly where, as in the Caribbean and in Canada, they have deliberately transgressed the boundaries between the discourses of the 'literary' and the theoretical critical" (146).

Laurence is not a name that comes up very often in the flurry of recent texts that begin to establish the broad creolized field of interest of postcolonial theory. I would like to propose
that in *The Prophet’s Camel Bell* and *Dance on the Earth* Laurence offers us an important example of a creative writer who has “transgressed the boundaries between the discourse of the ‘literary’ and the theoretical critical.” And while the earlier text begins to construct postcolonial subjectivity for white critics, I would like to recommend the latter as a most important transgressive book of recent years. While I do not want to discourage feminist critics in Canada from honouring the contemporary work of Daphne Marlatt, who transgresses boundaries in bringing etymologized ideology to her poetry, or from praising Marlene Nourbese-Philip’s language experiments in her collages of theory, essay, and poetry, or from exploring Aritha van Herk’s fictocritical practice, I would offer those same critics a caution: there are many ways to have one’s energies reappropriated to patriarchal purposes. One of those ways is to ignore our literary mothers and claim an unwarranted originality for the contemporary generation of writers. If feminist critics interested in the texts being written by all kinds of women in Canada are not to fall victim to the pandemic condition of Canadian literature, the belief that our communities and our literatures begin with the current generation, they had better start learning to read their mothers. In this spirit I recommend Laurence’s life writing as worthy of attention.

For a critical start on this mother/daughter project, let me begin once more with Donaldson’s *Decolonizing Feminisms*, in which she describes the Miranda complex of present-day feminism. Miranda is the only girl in *The Tempest*. I say girl because there are no women, certainly no mothers who have honoured places on Prospero’s ideal desert island, the play that grounds the colonial (and increasingly the postcolonial) worldview. Miranda turns away from Caliban because of his sexual threat (or following Laurence’s reading, the illusion of Caliban’s sexual threat taught Miranda by her father’s magic). Donaldson poses Miranda as the figure who “aligns herself with the benefits and protection offered by the colonizing father and husband” (17). She sees many present-day feminist readers as having a Miranda “complex,” which “raises in a profoundly acute way the questions of sex and race and how feminists ‘read,’ or fail to read, their imbrication [by patriarchal reading assumptions] in theorizing women’s lives” (1).
I would like to expand Donaldson's brief exploration of the Miranda complex to make it part of my own critical practice. One of the ways we can be Mirandas is to accept the traditional view that autobiographical writing is always adjunct to the major accomplishment of the writer, lacking a sufficient distance from the personal or perhaps lacking sufficient use of literary trope to be examined as literature. That is what you do if you are Miranda, the daughter of Prospero, unconsciously bound up in the values of the patriarchal tradition because you have been such a good student of the father. The other kind of Miranda is the wife of Ferdinand. In my formulation of the Miranda complex, she is the feminist critic who accepts uncritically the postmodern, deconstructionist truisms of the rebel sons of the patriarchy who pervasively assume that critical thinking and most creative writing before the contemporary moment are lost in a benighted essentialistic universe called liberal humanism, that genre blending is the answer to breaking the old moulds, and that we are the first generation to do it. This Miranda rushes around looking at the newly arrived fellows from Naples or Milan (or wherever the most recent set of male postmodern gurus are from) and writes a critical preface, uncritically aware of the ungendered nature of her assumptions (despite her feminist stances), one that basically reiterates the first Miranda's sentiment: "How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world/That has such people in't" (v.i. 184.5). When either Miranda reads women's texts, she is always subtly trying to show that these women are good because they do as well or better whatever men do in their texts.

Neither Miranda would think of theorizing her reading of a book such as Laurence's *Dance on the Earth*, since such a book lacks the currently approved postmodern markers that place a text in the category "literary." Yet *Dance on the Earth* is a book that is capable of promoting a decolonized, feminist critical practice in terms of a profound shift in "the conditions of reading for all texts." To illustrate how profound such a shift would be, let me return briefly to the Miranda of *The Tempest*. If Miranda, when watching the play within a play conjured up by her father to bless her marriage, should begin to ask questions about why the spirits of Iris, Ceres, Juno, and the Nymphs are presented to her as mere mouthpieces for pretty poetry in praise of her virginity; if she were
to ask questions about why such representatives of the all-powerful natural world could possibly be her father's servants; if she were to ask further why she herself has never come under the influence of any flesh-and-blood females, females with real stories in real worlds; and if by some miracle she began to connect the pretty female nature stereotypes of her father's play with the despised and cursed Sycorax (mother of Caliban, cursed by her own colonized son), then Miranda would become a decolonized, post-colonial, white, feminist, cultural critic. Quite a leap. Impossible perhaps.

Perhaps impossible even today. But Laurence realized in her time of dying that if we are ever to step outside the patriarchal limits in the plots and characterizations of human lives, we must do it by rediscovering our mothers, and we must find it in terms of a revolution of form. The key to how Laurence made this shift can be found if we carefully read what she says in Dance on the Earth about the difficulty of finding her form and content. She tells of her frustration with her writing process:

After hundreds of handwritten pages, I had got myself to the age of eighteen. I was bored. I knew what was going to happen next...I wanted to write more about my feelings about mothers and about my own life views. I finally realized that this could only be done by coming as close as I could bear to my own life, but in such a way that I could also deal with broader themes that interested me and absorbed me. (7)

Although Laurence's theorizing here may not be expressed in the explicit language of feminist theory, it is indeed an intentionally female-centred stance, and feminist in its implicit instinct that to gain a female narrative one must shift traditional fictional narrative patterns closer to autobiographical and biographical strategies. To say that you must come "as close as [your] own life" is to agree with Daphne Marlatt when she says of autobiographical strategies in writing that "women's lives have been so fictionalized that to present life as a reality is a strange thing. It's as strange as fiction. It's as new as fiction." Marlatt advises writing "directly out of your own life" (qtd. in Williamson 26). This is exactly what Laurence decided to do in her last book.
Her dissatisfaction with what she had produced using traditional writing strategies, familiar to her as a fiction writer, was so great that, according to Clara Thomas's testimony, she threw the notebooks that contained her work in the Lakefield garbage. This certainly speaks to the same concern with finding a form that leads away from the expression of stereotypical viewpoints, a concern that can be traced from her constant revision of her own viewpoints in *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, through her experiments with form in her novels, to this last memoir. Laurence's daughter Jocelyn, her collaborative editor, observes in her introduction to *Dance on the Earth* that her mother's formal innovation led to the foregrounding of the new content:

She conceived of a new structure, one in which she could not only incorporate the facts of her own life but also touch upon the lives of her three mothers, as she called them—her biological mother, her aunt, who became her stepmother, and her mother-in-law. This new approach allowed her momentary digressions, too, into the issues that most concerned her: nuclear disarmament, pollution and the environment, pro-choice abortion legislation. (xi)

This daughter's observation is a succinct statement of Laurence's important creative and theoretical apotheosis in her last book. She "conceived of a new structure" for her literary expression, one based on a construction of the plot of family relationships completely different from the Freudian "family romance" typical of our culture's texts: she liberated a plot that is repressed in all the plot structures of our literary tradition.

As Marianne Hirsch observes in *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, the figure of mother in relationship to daughter is "neglected by psychoanalytic theories and submerged in traditional plot structures" (8), which, if they feature women at all, feature them always in their relationships with men. She suggests that a whole new concept of human subjectivity may emerge if we explore in our creative writing and our critical practice the multiplicity of human interactions that are encompassed in "the mother/daughter plot." She suggests that "although it might be difficult to define, we might try to envision a culturally variable, mutually affirming form of interconnection between one body and
another, one person and another, existing as social, legal and psychological subjects” (197).

I claim that such a body of literature already does exist, but we must look beyond the perimeters of the novel that are Hirsch’s purview, and beyond those creative discourses generally validated by the academy. We must look to women’s texts that bring together a number of generic practices in an effort not only to ironize genre as in a postmodern gesture, but also to find new discourses for the positive expression of women’s experience. We must look especially to memoirs. Laurence names her book “a memoir” in its subtitle. Lee Quinby, in her groundbreaking essay “The Subject of Memoirs” in De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography, sees memoirs as the form where radical change in cultural constitution of the human subject can take place: “This new form of subjectivity refuses the particular forms of selfhood, knowledge and artistry that the systems of power of the modern era...have made dominant” (298).

I propose that Laurence’s Dance on the Earth belongs in this new use of the memoir form by women in postcolonial situations, texts from Australia such as Sally Morgan’s My Place or Tanya Modjeski’s Poppy, texts growing out of Pakistan and India such as Sara Sulari’s Meatless Days, texts from women without a homeland such as Han Suyin’s The Crippled Tree, and texts such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s now paradigmatic The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts. An understanding of these women’s experiments in the memoir form is needed to shift the conditions for our reading of these texts. The feature that especially needs attention is the way memoirs both make use of and negate accepted generic practices so that the human subject escapes the oppression of genre. Therefore, memoirs’ discourse seeks a contract with the reader in which the reader is actively involved in the construction of the subjectivity of the text. The advantage of the memoir form lies in its ability to break the barriers between the public and private, to undo the truth/fiction dichotomy of literary generic classification (novels are fiction, autobiographies are fact) by a process of writing on the boundaries between fiction and autobiography. Another advantage is found in the ability of the form to make the political personal and the personal theoretical. The memoir form,
when functioning not in its traditional place as a subgenre of autobiography, but as a feminist material practice, can play an enabling role in allowing us to refuse the repression of the special features of female subjectivity that occur in generic contracts shaped for and by men. A memoir, though one of the oldest practices in English, is also what Caren Kaplan calls an “outlaw genre,” capable of producing “transnational feminist subjects” (115). Laurence’s decision to use the memoir form in this innovative way is not only her isolated decision, albeit one made by a writer who was never content with easy answers to tough problems of form, but also part of what I see as a growing feature of women’s postcolonial discursive practice.

Let two examples suffice to suggest the trend I am speaking of. In her book *Wild Mother Dancing*, Di Brandt explores the work of several Canadian women novelists and poets seeking the re introduction of maternal narratives long suppressed in the master narratives of the Western tradition. In her final chapter she moves out of the accepted cultural production of literary women and examines the oral childbirth narratives of women of her own community, in order to illustrate the liberating possibilities of such personal cultural expression. Interestingly, an earlier chapter in Brandt’s text deals with what she calls the “amazing comeback” of the mother in Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* and *The Diviners*. For the fullest and most amazing comeback of the mother in Laurence’s work, we must look to *Dance on the Earth*, where the liberating possibilities of memoirs offer Laurence a form that shares much with the oral narratives Brandt explores. In fact, Laurence’s memoirs are oral in that, as Thomas has pointed out, some of the revisionary work on the manuscript was accomplished through using a tape recorder because Laurence was no longer strong enough to type. As Jocelyn Laurence observes, much of this book is “literally written in her voice... the way in which she spoke, the rhythms and idiosyncrasies of phrasing, the choices of language and emphasis, are integral not only to the book but to the actual process of writing it” (xiv).

Both the birthing stories investigated by Brandt and the more consciously crafted stories of *Dance on the Earth* share features with what Kaplan calls the “outlaw genre” of testimonies, a
literature of "resistance" that "usually takes the form of first-person narrative elicited or transcribed and edited by another person" (Kaplan 122). Whereas I would not compare Laurence's privileged class and national position to third-world women fighting in political decolonization efforts in Latin America and other locations (nor would I compare this professional writer's relationship to her daughter-editor to that of subject and transcriber), I would compare the advantages of the form for both kinds of women, its oral component and the interrelationship of writing, transcription, and editing as enabling processes. In both the testimonio and this particular orally informed memoir, the female writing act is able to bring the political and personal together as part of the same discourse in a way that constructs the individual agency of a female person in terms of her representative status as a member of an oppressed group. Who is the oppressed group represented by seemingly so unoppressed a writer as Laurence? It is my strong conviction that the oppressed group is mothers, whose stories are repressed in our culture. The memoir form can help women avoid the binary oppositions of male liberal humanist and postmodern constructions of subjectivity. The form does not bend the writer toward a heroic individuality as does classic realism, does not privilege the artist as originator as does modernism, and does not further disempower her as woman by insisting on the postmodern emphasis on the interpellated subject, governed by the indeterminacy and haphazardness of its construction.

One last example serves to illustrate that this trend is happening in critical writing by feminists as well as in creative writing (the memoir being a site where critical and creative writing blend). A group of women postcolonial critics, aware of their own places as women in situations of creolization, have written a book called Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire (Chew and Rutherford). In the introduction they explain that the book came from their instinctive sharing of personal experiences during an evening together after a day spent at a conference on postcolonial literature in 1990. I find it telling that these women found the sharing of their personal differences and similarities as daughters of the empire at least as important as the proper conference papers on postcolonialism. Indeed, they found it important enough to make a book, a book that is, in fact, a series of critical memoirs, very
informed, scholarly, intelligently theorized, but very carefully documented and integrated with the personal experiences of these women. As Kaplan has pointed out concerning testimonial literature, “our responsibility as critics lies in opening the categories so that the process of collaboration extends to reception” (125).

Just as the “unbecoming daughters” realized a new critical discourse through memoirs and their collaborative efforts to understand their postcolonial places as women, so we may, with careful readings of texts like *Dance on the Earth*, begin our own deconstruction of our imbrication in patriarchal discourses, decolonize ourselves, and prepare ourselves to shift “the conditions of reading for all texts.” If we start with a writer like Laurence, a subjectivity close to ours because she is born of our culture, our place, our white race, perhaps we will be able to honour not only the postcolonial texts that are privileged in the sense that the writers have achieved a class and literary status as “writers” that in many ways makes them exceptions to colonial conditions, but also be able to hear the voices of the silenced women who suffer from doubled and tripled oppressions of race, gender, and class. This is a very necessary task since patriarchy, in its colonial expressions, often forces women to say to other women, as Laurence had to in Somalia, “I have nothing for you. Nothing.” If, as white, feminist, literary critics we work to develop the strategies of reading I have advocated here, we will neither neglect the women writers of our own tradition because they seem old-fashioned by current literary style, nor feel helpless to read the texts of women in other colonial and postcolonial situations because of our fear of appropriation of voice. We will not have to say “I have nothing for you. Nothing,” because we will have successfully shifted “the conditions of reading for all texts” as Margaret Laurence shifted the conditions of writing a woman writer’s life in her memoirs.

NOTES

1. The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women presented “Recommendations to the Government of Canada on Female Genital Mutilation” in March 1994, pointing out that although Sweden, Norway,
the United Kingdom, France, and several states in the United States have passed legislations or announced policy responses on female genital mutilation, Canada has not.

2. See my *Mother and Daughter Relationships in the Manawaka Works of Margaret Laurence*.

3. Thomas wrote of her dismay when "with the smile we always called her 'Cheshire Cat Smile,' [Laurence said] ‘Yesterday I put nine black-covered scribblers, the manuscript of *Dance on the Earth* in the Lakefield garbage.”

4. See Doris Sommers's work on *testimonios*.

**WORKS CITED**


