

Two Women in a Birth

Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland
Toronto: Guernica (Collection Essential Poets 58), 1994

Reviewed by Laurie Kruk

The title of this book by Canadians Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland may be misleading to ARM members: it is not concerned with pregnancy, childbirth or mothering in the usual sense. Instead, these poets who define themselves as lesbians and feminists tackle their partnership, and how they “give birth to” their relationship together. Divided into five parts, this dual-voiced book questions the (hetero)sexist foundations of our society by probing the cultural freight of English. Lesbian desire is essential to their poetic experimentation, for as Marlatt and Warland demand space for their relationship, they simultaneously push the language, through word-play, puns, and etymological speculation, to make room for “the third body,” their collaboration in life, love, and literature.

Marlatt’s “Touch to My Tongue” opens the dialogue, introducing lesbian love texts that blend prose with poetry, often eschewing capitalization or punctuation in dense, packed lines that reflect back on each other, on language and on the creative process itself. Both “Touch to My Tongue” and Warland’s “Open Is Broken,” part two, address the absent lover, revealing language’s paradoxical ability to call up the presence, but also the absence, of the addressed other. Yet this post-structuralist, postmodernist yearning for an out-of-reach connection does not demand a denial of the female/feminine. Marlatt and Warland are well-read in feminist criticism and the questions of feminine “difference.” Marlatt includes as epigraph to “Touch to My Tongue” poet H.D.’s comment that “The brain and the womb are both centers of consciousness, equally important.” Marlatt’s often-anthologized poem/essay (generic boundaries are fluid here) “Musing with Mothertongue” declares language to be “a living body we enter at birth...our mothertongue. It bears us as we are born in it, into cognition” (25). So rather than viewing contemporary English as sterile, male-defined, alien, these two poets prefer to uncover—as have feminist anthropologists—the feminine substrata, the suppressed “mothertongue” that starts with the pre-verbal experience within the womb and is still hidden, they insist, in the unarticulated feminine experiences of menstruation, childbirth, breastfeeding, and, of course, lesbian desire. As Marlatt puts it, women writers involved with this new language-centered feminist poetry are “shoving out the walls of taboo and propriety, kicking syntax, discovering life in old roots” (29). Both women explore “old roots” of language by creating playful, provocative chains of meaning like this one: “*labia ... labilis, labour, belabour, collaborate, elaborate*” (135). Here the genital lips literally “speak” the “birth process” of the

two poets, whether writing to each other or with each other. “Double Negative” is their attempt to capture, in collaboration, a train journey across Australia, Marlatt’s birthplace. Frank Davey calls it a “long-poem/journal about two lesbians crossing Australia’s Nullarbor Desert that draws comparisons between the theft of Aboriginal lands and the denial of space to women who are lesbians” (742). The pun on “birth/berth [train sleeping compartment]” offers another seemingly innocent example of this denied, or unacknowledged, space. An interview conducted by the pair follows, in which they interrogate their own preconceptions about how best to be “in the landscape.” This interrogation continues and is heightened in the last two parts, authored by both Marlatt and Warland. “Reading and Writing Between the Lines” melds the two voices into shared meditations on how they “interwrite.” But it is “Subject to Change,” which concludes the books, that seems the most risk-taking, as the project of writing a poem each per day, presented on opposite pages, breaks down into a maze of hurt feelings, distrust, doubt, and anxiety. For March 7th, Warland writes: “*we talk angrily. you accuse me of leaving the collaboration because it isn’t going the way I want it to. I accuse you of judgement when you say I’m getting too theoretical*” (159). In “Afterthoughts” both acknowledge the “difficulty collaborating on such a microscopic level . . . we’ve had to give up individual control.” But as this piece concludes wryly, “giving each other the gears we are still engaged.” (160). In their sophisticated questioning of the links between gender, sexual desire and language, Betsy Warland and Daphne Marlatt challenge patriarchal and homophobic cultural codes. And in their collaborative efforts at honouring one another’s needs as well as their own, they revisit women’s wisdom of labour and birth throughout the ages: giving up individual control to find a greater wonder.

Work Cited

Davey, Frank. 1997. “Marlatt, Daphne.” *Oxford Companion to Can. Lit.* Second edition. Gen. eds. Eugene Benson and William Toye. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 741-742.

Talisman

Afaa M. Weaver
Chicago: Tia Chucha Press, 1998

Reviewed by Rishma Dunlop

This collection of poems explores the speaker’s relationships with five women in his life. Weaver devotes the sections of his book to Bessie, his mother; Eleanora, his first wife with whom he had two children; Ronetta, his second