

Towards A Politics of Location

Rethinking Marginality

BY JOAN BORSA

To find someone somehow like us, is to account for our desire, to give it a place from which to imagine and image a writing self: absorbed, drudging, puzzled; at a desk, not before a mirror.

— Nancy Miller¹

Most of us come to feminism because the social situations we experience necessitate struggle, analysis and change, but becoming more politically and/or theoretically engaged does not magically eradicate the complex relations within our everyday realities. Since I have more consciously identified with that large and always shifting terrain of feminism, I have been plagued by what I will call the politics of location — those places and spaces we inherit and occupy, which frame our lives in very specific and concrete ways, which are as much a part of our psyches as they are a physical or geographical placement. Where we live, how we live, our relation to the social systems and structures that surround us are deeply embedded parts of everything we do and remain integral both to our identity or sense of self and to our position or status within a larger cultural and representational field. While many of us are actively involved in feminism, in cultural production and in critical social theory, our historical, social, political and economic realities vary — there is a great deal of structural difference between us. Part of our struggle is to be able to name our location, to politicize our space and to question where our particular experiences and practice fit within the articulations and representations that surround us.

For example, under the umbrellas of critical theory, post-modernism and feminism, how have the topics and agendas been established? Who sets the parameters for discourse, representation and practice and where are we in relation to those agendas? Are our personal and social locations “in” the parameters we take on? And how do we manage that complicated manoeuvre between accounting for our specific circumstances while participating in the larger field that informs, challenges and affects our individual lives and practice? How do we avoid overemphasizing our circumstances and becoming so self-centred and insular that we fall into a rhetoric of intolerance and indifference — or on the other hand becoming so preoccupied with what is happening elsewhere that we act like tourists or hungry consumers fascinated with the new, the exotic, examining distant locations in a way that comes close to escapism, applying imported methodol-

ogy and analysis to our specific struggles without an adequate understanding or acknowledgment of the limitations they present. Either way we fall into the old either/or oppositional syndrome where we accept that the truth lies in wait and that we are about to unearth the solution, the ultimate explanation where we may finally rest. What is missing at either end of these polarities is an acknowledgment of the fruitfulness of struggle, of the benefits of not having the definitive answers and the productiveness of working through the contradictions and conflicts that surround our particular locations.

Structural Difference

The notion of structural difference (the politics of location) seems particularly crucial to those of us involved with feminist struggle and cultural production who live and work in Canada. Except for a handful of Margaret Atwoods, Margaret Laurences, Mary O'Briens and Emily Carrs, it is safe to say that ours is a marginalized and colonial relationship to the larger field of theory, art and representation. As we look around us we see a great deal of imported dominant presence(s). The curriculums we study or develop, the representational practices in play, the critical writing styles, the content of gallery exhibition programs all reveal a strong Eurocentric and American bias. And yet this openness to the outside is also a strength, a willingness to explore the boundaries of our own production, to consider other contexts and to “listen” as well as to speak. My concern is that we may be too skilled at listening and too competent at appropriation. More determination is needed in the area of resistance — not as a reactionary defiant stance but as a process of identification, articulation and representation — a critical positioning which provides a sense of place, a context from which to develop our insights, ideas and responses, a strategic site that allows sufficient grounding for specific forms of thought, speech and representation to emerge and gain meaning.

British cultural theorist Stuart Hall emphasizes that cultural identification need not produce “an essence but a positioning,” not a fixed point but a point in transition, a place I see as a ref-

erence point, and that Hall describes as a site “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.” To conceive of cultural identity in this manner brings out the significance of the politics of location — an exploration of the ways we have been grounded and positioned in particular representations of past and present, where frequently history and culture are presented as static, some already formulated space that we merely pass through. To acknowledge that we are engaged in a “process of becoming as well as being”² de-emphasizes the notion that cultural identity merely reflects or represents a collective or common experience, a pre-ordained “essence.” Emphasizing the “process of becoming” allows for the possibility of a new space, an area of transformation and change where we no longer accept a factual or natural account of history and culture, nor simply seek to retrieve a hidden authentic identity. Although it is crucial to recognize that we have inherited a past that constitutes and positions us in very specific ways and simultaneously to remember that much has been devalued, omitted or misrepresented, neither position goes far enough. On the one side we seem hopelessly trapped, fixed into inherited systems and structures and on the other we appear reactionary, engaged in revisionary tactics, offering new stories as if in themselves they can set things right.

There is no simple truth that must be retrieved, discovered or brought forward that will easily change our circumstances, but by articulating our specific experiences and representing the structural and political spaces we occupy, we offer concrete accounts of where and how we live, what is significant to our experience of cultural identity, how we have been constructed and how in turn, we attempt to construct (and reconstruct) ourselves.

Rethinking Marginality

For anyone occupying a place that could be described as marginal or colonial it is important to acknowledge that one does not “naturally” occupy a site outside the larger cultural and representational field as if irreconcilably “other” but that whether in the centre or in the margin one always speaks from a position, a context, a place which offers the possibility of exploring identity, articulation and representation. As American writer bell hooks suggests there is nothing intrinsically positive or negative, inside or outside, about a specific location.³ Centres and margins — like culture, sexual difference and identity — have been historically produced. The associations that surround particular “placements” are part of a complex “play of history, culture and power” (Stuart Hall) where a particular privilege (in the form of power relations) is naturalized and other positions (different and

less powerful than the first) are neutralized.

Cultural theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has devoted much attention to the process and practice of “othering,” a term she uses to refer to the mechanisms and strategies that manage to construct the orders and relations of power that we come to occupy. In an essay on “The Rani of Sirmur,”⁴ Spivak addresses the problems in “reading” cultural difference and questions how to get at a particular nineteenth-century third world woman’s historical inheritance, structured as it is within the relationship of India to the British Empire, the Rani’s position as woman within an indigenous order of patriarchy and finally her status as wife of the King of Sirmur. As a colonial, as a woman and as a wife, the Rani is constituted in power relations and dominant cultural codes that represent her as a supplementary figure — she is brought in and out of historical records during the constitution of India as a British colony to enhance her husband’s or son’s archives, or to expand the accounts of colonial history but never is she presented as a subject with her own location, her own stories to tell.

In looking for a missing or silenced archive, Spivak dismantles the layers of dominant inscriptions that have enclosed the Rani. Underneath the mediations, representations and discourse that have layered themselves upon her we find not the Rani herself but the space where she resided. Spivak names and politicizes the space the Rani occupied and strips away the naturalness of the power relations that contained her. Spivak believes there is no “real” Rani to be found and that it would be to no one’s advantage to invent or substitute a preferred Rani. Instead we must be satisfied with understanding how the Rani was a site of complex power relations and cultural inscriptions, a fragmented historical presence. Spivak’s work provides a significant example of the

need to explore ways we have been grounded and positioned — the usefulness of examining the conflicts and contradictions that surround our particular inheritances. Spivak suggests ways to begin to unravel the ordering and structuring of dominant cultural codes so that we may better utilize the locations we occupy as sites of resistance — spaces where critical positioning, or a process of identification, articulation and representation can occur.

Marginality and Feminist Cultural Production

In the visual arts we occupy a rather unique relationship to cultural and representational systems. We have the potential to speak in a form capable of re-ordering and re-symbolizing the power relations and cultural codes already in existence. Through visual practices artists have attempted to destabilize



Self-Portrait With Monkey, Frida Kahlo, 1938

lines of natural authority and have attempted to politicize the different positions and cultural identities they occupy. To this end, I have been fascinated with the Mexican artist, Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) and the ways she articulated a politics of location.

In considering Kahlo's work I take on an artist who, I believe, lived and worked outside the dominant structures functioning at her time. I wish to explore how, within the conditions surrounding Kahlo's production, she managed to construct her own history, how she resisted the spaces designated female and artist as laid out by patriarchal and hegemonic systems, how Kahlo's work articulates the "structural difference" of her placement within gender, art and discourse hierarchies, and what she did about the marginality that she was presented with. (Obviously this requires detailed research not possible in an article of this length. I will therefore outline what I consider to be central to my discussion, that is, Kahlo's strategy of resistance.)⁵

Kahlo was a self-trained artist who worked outside the centres and high art traditions of Europe and the United States. As a woman making art she refused the male-dominant language of high art and worked in what has been called a "dialect," which embraced the peripheries of low art practices popular in Mexico at the time. Kahlo's images, numbering approximately 200 paintings and drawings, intimate in scale and personal in nature, are largely self-portraits and references to a private world where woman's body and her own direct experiences come into focus. In Kahlo's work the body and assigned feminine roles are taken on not to celebrate or glorify them but to parody and invert the ways they have been represented.

Kahlo continually gives the impression of consciously highlighting the interface of women's art and domestic space, as though in her life (and in her dress) she was drawing attention to the impossibility of separating the two. However, her art also acts as an ironic, bitter comment on women's experience. The feminine sphere is stripped of reassurance (my emphasis). The haven of male fantasy is replaced by the experience of pain, including the pain associated with her physical inability to live out a feminine role in motherhood.... She takes the "interior" offered as the feminine sphere, the male retreat from public life and reveals the other "interior" behind it, that of female suffering, vulnerability and self-doubt.⁶

This passage by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen suggests that Kahlo's work plays with the spaces she occupies. She acknowledges and manages to image both the structure that contains her, that codifies her existence and asks her to "perform" in particular ways, and simultaneously suggests her awareness and discomfort in carrying this codification. The "interior behind the image" not only suggests an analysis of sexual difference, its formation and impact, but reveals a reworking of the conditions and margins she has inherited. Kahlo's self-portraits, for example, play with the outward appearance of self, the projection and image that is presented for public consumption versus the screened, masked and complex inner workings of the subject behind the representation.

Kahlo's reworking of "otherness" can be seen in her attention to marginality where cultural contradictions and classifications are always in view. For example Kahlo's painting "My Nurse and I" painted in 1973, like much of her work, is in the style of the

popular Mexican ex-voto paintings, religious offerings painted on tin, done on the occasion of births, deaths and other significant events. Kahlo presents us with two female figures, one clearly being nurtured by the other, reminiscent of the many religious representations of the Madonna and Child. The large dark madonna figure, the nurse, dominates the space and is presented as if in two parts: a large fertile, nurturing body contrasted with a much darker carved mask-like face. In the nurse's arms a female adult-child is being suckled – clearly the infant is the artist Frida Kahlo. A similar bodily disjuncture occurs with the contrast between the child-like frail body and the adult artist's face and head. As with the nurse, the child's face is expressionless, mask-like and similar to most of Kahlo's self-portraits. In the disjuncture between the bodies and faces several associations or layers of past and present come into play. The nurse's mask-like face is reminiscent of an Olmec stone mask. The Olmecs were some of the earliest civilizations of ancient Mexico.⁷ Kahlo's detailing of the Indian female body and a pre-Hispanic past suggests a complicated interplay between nature, culture and history, the referencing of Mexico's colonial past, the history of the land, and the continuation of Mexican culture despite massive interventions, fragmentations and disjunctures.

The usual negative representations of gender and race as oppressed or lacking is transformed in Kahlo's work; the Indian/pre-Hispanic figure represents the power of life and the contingency of history. The traditional gendered image of colonization – the female land as overpowered and plundered – is symbolically reworked, suggesting instead a regenerative and powerful presence. The referencing of Mexico's past and peasantry as her own life-line is not isolated to this particular work. Both in her everyday dress (she wore the traditional Tehuana costume of the Tehuantepec women, one of the oldest matriarchal groups in Mexico) and in various cultural codes, Kahlo's identification with Mexican popular culture is obvious. It appears that the language (dialect) and situations that Kahlo understood best, those sites where she staged her struggles and in the end were the closest to home, allowed her to interrogate and speak with the greatest clarity. The structural difference introduced by her particular location as woman, Mexican and self-taught artist was never a place Kahlo accepted. Her production leaves us with a sense of urgency in its desire to announce and understand difference and above all to remain suspect of any practice or process that attempts to speak on one's behalf. In Kahlo's work the concept of margins is not allowed to remain within the boundaries of second-order, peripheral and deprived status.

Within and Across Margins

Similarly, American feminist bell hooks emphasizes the political and productive potential of margins. hooks refers to margins as "profound edges" where one can choose to stay – sites with "radical possibilities that allow lived experience to nourish and develop perspective." In a paper she delivered in England in 1988 called "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," hooks describes the complex shifts possible when people use their margins as a site of political resistance. First, they push against the oppressive boundaries that have defined and restricted them and eventually find themselves in a state of transformation where they "move out of their place" (the place of repression that they have struggled against) to find themselves

“confronted with the reality of choice and location.” At this point they may be tempted or indeed satisfied to leave the struggle behind and “position themselves on the side of the colonizing mentality.” Or they may take full advantage of the ground that has been gained but continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed, recognizing that frequently even to speak about domination in terms that will be heard requires using a language and representational systems that are potentially repressive. But as Gayatri Spivak and Frida Kahlo clearly demonstrate one can take on master texts without subscribing to them, without reproducing their meaning. It is this constant search for ways to play with the relations of history, culture and power, to parody or deconstruct and reconstruct meaning in a way that speaks of structural difference that much feminist work seems to explore productively.

In a Canadian, feminist, visual arts context and particularly at this point in our history, I see much evidence of struggle around developing a politics of location where margins become positive and productive sites of resistance. Until we individually and collectively can acknowledge the power relations and dominant cultural codes that need to be examined (and that we are inevitably implicated in) we continue to operate in an us/them (Canadian/European or British or American), East/West, urban/rural, feminist artist/woman artist, oppositional structure. Ours is a “specific” fragmented cultural and social landscape which requires assessments and engagements within contexts marked by its own heterogeneous and discontinuous frameworks. We cannot simply adapt theories and practices developed elsewhere without contributing to the development of new and equally problematic master texts. Nor can we reduce our struggles to battles within our own Canadian boundaries – between the theoretically informed, politically correct Toronto and the spiritual laid-back Vancouver and the grassroots, out-of-step Saskatoon. To begin with these are all negative, stereotypic and combative responses to location. We are all sufficiently mobile (culturally and geographically) and living within the realm of hybridization to traverse these simplistic structural codes. Across the regional, theoretical and political boundaries that separate us are much larger issues of gender, race and colonial history.

We have long since passed the point of needing to ask permission to speak in our own terms but perhaps we need to repeatedly remind ourselves what our specific struggles are – why it is that we came to feminist practice, why we are engaged with a process of analysis and change – what it is that we are attempting to learn more about. That is, what is the critical and productive value of our efforts? Isn't it that we are accounting for the specific effects of social and historical meaning, while reassessing the terms that have been set in place? And aren't these activities a function of articulating and representing what we know best – issues much closer to home?

¹ Nancy Miller, “Changing The Subject: Authorship, Writing and the Reader,” in *Feminist Theory, Critical Theory* edited by Teresa de Lauretis, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 109.

² Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” in *Third Scenario: Theory and the Politics of Location, Framework 36*, London: Turnaround, 1989, p. 70. The phrase “What are we in the process of becoming?” has been used by Juliet Mitchell in *Women: The Longest Revolution*, New York: Pantheon, 1984, p. 294, to suggest that we cannot live as human subjects without accounting for the effects of history. If we deconstruct the histories we have inherited what do we offer in their place? What are we in the process of becoming?

³ bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” *Framework 36* (see note 2).

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives,” *History and Theory* 24, 1985.

⁵ I have developed these ideas in a dissertation completed in September 1989 at the University of Leeds, England, entitled: “Frida Kahlo: Marginality and the Critical Female Subject.”

⁶ Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, exhibition catalogue, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1982, p.15. My reference to Kahlo's “dialect” is also discussed in this essay.

⁷ My interest in Kahlo's work and particularly “My Nurse and I” has benefited from a discussion of her work by O. Baddeley and V. Fraser in *Drawing The Line: Art and Cultural Identity in Contemporary Latin America*, London: Verso, 1989.

