

A Different Path: Marginality, Resistance and Drusilla Modjeska's Poppy

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Focusing on Drusilla Modjeska's fictionalised biography, *Poppy*, and making use of a range of contemporary feminist resources, this paper has three main goals. First, to highlight the ways in which the text highlights the impact of "being a woman" in a world where women's bodies are discursively constructed in narrow and limiting ways. Second, to emphasise the ways in which *Poppy* works to make explicit the constructed nature of the meanings associated with "Woman" and thereby highlights the potential for the term—and all it stands for—to be understood outside phallogentric logic. Third, to outline some of the ways in which the text demonstrates that specific forms of embodied subjectivity can be challenged and creatively re-written. The emphasis throughout is on the transformative potential of narratives such as *Poppy* that work to render problematic and move beyond traditional and normative understandings of Woman, towards representations of post-"Woman" women.

Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* was published in 1990. Presented as a fictionalised biography (and labeled simultaneously, "fiction" and "biography" on the jacket cover), *Poppy* is at once the story of Lalage, a woman working to write a biography of her recently deceased mother and the story of the mother, Poppy, herself. Moving between various historical periods, geographical settings and points of view, the novel traces the story of Poppy's uncertain childhood, her unsatisfying marriage and her bewilderment with motherhood—all of which culminate in her "breakdown" and confinement to a mental institution. This is followed by an exploration of Poppy's "recovery," her husband's affair and their subsequent divorce, her romantic relationship with a Catholic priest and *his* affair!, her move into public life via her work as a parole officer/counsellor, her journeys to India, Crete and other locations, and, throughout, her attempts to explain to her daughter, Lalage who is the text's narrator, something about the complex and contradictory forces shaping her life which she simultaneously struggles against

and acquiesces to.

In this paper I am interested in exploring the ways in which *Poppy* contributes to the broad feminist political project of contesting, subverting and ultimately displacing phallogentric understandings and representations of women. The main means of contestation consists in a blurring of biography and autobiography in narrative. I am specifically concerned with the ways in which this text operates at two levels: at the level of critique and the level of creative invention. This interest reflects the call by Elizabeth Grosz for feminists to attend simultaneously to two agendas. In Grosz's terms, the first calls for:

serious questioning of patriarchal adherence to the following: universal concepts of truth and methods of verifying truth; objectivity; a disembodied, rational sexually indifferent subject and the explanation of women's specificity in terms that are inherently masculine. (cited in Wearing 1996, 37)

This phase has also been described by Grosz (1990, 59) as the necessarily "negative" or "reactive" dimension of feminist theory: "the project of challenging what currently exists, or criticising prevailing social, political, and theoretical relations"—work that is about developing what she describes as anti-sexist theory.

Equally important, however, is the constructive, positive dimension of feminism: energy directed into the development of creative alternatives to mainstream, masculinist practices (Grosz 1990, 59). This dimension celebrates women's abilities to resist, challenge and transform phallogentric systems of thought and their material consequences. Through alternative stories about women, their subjectivity and their power, "patriarchal systems, methods and presumptions" are, in Grosz's terms "ultimately transformed by feminist revisioning so that a discursive space is created where women's experiences can inform an alternative epistemology that acknowledges sexual difference and women's autonomy" (cited in Wearing 1996, 37).

I am interested in the ways in which *Poppy* operates both as a critique of dominant cultural constructions of woman and as an example of how women can and do move beyond these constructions. In exploring both of these dimensions I am concerned with the way in which this combination results in a text that functions as a creative *counternarrative* to traditional stories about women. In using the term counternarrative I am echoing the points made by theorists such as hooks (1990) and Trinh Minh-ha (1990) who write of the political importance of counternarratives: stories, histories, representations that stand in opposition to and, as such, implicitly critique the legitimacy of mainstream texts. Counternarratives provide alternatives to authorised, mainstream, normative enactments of "womanhood" and work to disrupt the culturally dominant understandings of what a "good" or "natural" woman is and provide, instead, evidence of women's multiplicity, diversity and power. Conceptualising *Poppy* as a counternarrative, there-

fore, draws attention not only to the ways in which it makes explicit Poppy's experience of sex-based oppression but also serves to emphasise the ways in which she moves beyond these experiences.

This introduction, therefore, is followed by three main sections: in the first I will identify the various ways in which *Poppy* can be seen to highlight the impact of "being a woman" in a world where women's bodies are discursively constructed in narrow and limiting ways. In the second I will emphasise the ways in which *Poppy* works to make explicit the constructed nature of the meanings associated with "Woman" and thereby highlights the potential for the term—and all it stands for—to be understood outside phallogentric logic. In the third I shall outline some of the ways in which the text demonstrates that specific forms of embodied subjectivity can be challenged and creatively re-written. It is important to note that, despite this structure, I am not suggesting that the separation between critique and counternarrative is clear cut. Nor am I privileging one over the other. Instead, I am proceeding from the basis that both /all levels of feminist critical practice have the potential to function within what Michele de Certeau (1988, xi–xii) identifies as a tactics of subversion, namely those "models of action" which work to "write off" marginality and characterise those whose "status" is that of "the dominated element in society (a status which does not mean that they are either passive or docile)."

To begin, then, with the issue of critique, Modjeska's text works to make explicit the ways in which Poppy suffered as a result of the meanings routinely ascribed to "girl" and "woman" in her cultural context. In reviewing Poppy's life, the book works to identify and problematise a range of what de Certeau (1998, x–xii) refers to as "strategies of marginalisation": activities and institutions which hold positions of power within certain cultural contexts and which are involved in the regulation of activity and thought. In this case, institutions and traditions which work to regulate women's actions, thoughts and desires.

As a result of the operations of such strategies of marginalisation as the family, marriage, health systems and the church and their narrow views of the subject position "Woman," Poppy was constrained not only in terms of what she was physically "allowed" to do, but with regard to what she was supposed to think and feel and desire. This is made particularly clear through the text's exploration of Poppy's relationship with her parents, with her husband, with her children and with her lover. I shall look briefly at each of these relationships.

First, within a traditional pre-war patriarchal family, Poppy suffers the disapproval of a father, Jack, who can forgive her neither for being the female infant who survived whilst her twin brother died at birth, nor for being a silent adversary in the face of his regular fury with her. Unable to please her father, Jack, in either her appearance or actions, Poppy retreated into passivity: "silence, she wrote, is my only weapon" (Modjeska 1990, 19). Similarly she

is rejected by a distant mother, China, who is “condemned in every account of that distant childhood . . . the heartless figure of the bad mother”(18) and left to grow up in the company of a loved, but impermanent, nanny (17). Within her own family, therefore, Poppy experienced a “typical” girl’s upbringing. Whilst this is not to say that all girls at the time were devalued in their family, Poppy’s experience is far from unique.

This critique of patriarchal families implied by the text’s overview of Poppy’s childhood is expanded and consolidated via an exploration of Poppy’s experiences in marriage. Ironically perhaps, Poppy suffers in her marriage because of the silence she learns to display as a child. Her husband, Richard, cannot cope with her inability to articulate her growing discontent within their marriage. As the narrator writes:

Her silence, practised to an art in childhood, infected the marriage. It was not that she was veiled. On the contrary she was wide open, with nothing hidden, but the messages that came from her were, literally, unspeakable. This is what had enraged Jack. It is what Richard could not understand. (49)

The description of Poppy’s life after her marriage provides a graphic illustration of the work conducted by Betty Friedan in the 1960s when she coined the term “feminine mystique” in an attempt to capture the “‘problem with no name’—the psychic distress experienced by women who had no public careers and were immured in domestic concerns” (cited in Humm 1992, 182). With every external reason to feel happy, Poppy wrote in her diary “something has gone badly wrong” (52). She felt herself oppressed and smothered within her domestic environment. Looking back on the experience years later she identifies the difficulty she had articulating her distress:

“Yes,” she said. “That’s how I’d put it. I was living with too much that was unspeakable and unsayable . . . Maybe there were moments of insight, I don’t know. Mostly we lived by moving from one thing to another, children, daily chores, vegetables to be prepared, small repetitions. I lived by them. I had to. They sustained me. And brought me down. (Modjeska 1990, 73)

Ultimately, Poppy’s inability to give voice to her sense of alienation, despair and depression within her own “loving” family and despite her own three daughters, leads to a mental state that can, within the dominant family and medical discourses of her time, only be defined as insanity: there is no other way to speak about a woman’s discontent with what is perceived—in dominant discourses of the time—as a perfectly adequate situation. She is accordingly admitted to an institution, subjected to traditional forms of therapy including electric shock treatment and insulin shock treatment, and “released” only when she has begun to display once again her acceptance of motherhood and her status as a wife. Parallels with Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, not to mention Janet Frame’s novels and autobiographies, make this institutionalisation generic. The narrative thus clearly, if not stereotypically, demonstrates the consequences of being a woman in this particular context. This evi-

dence is not confined to the times prior to Poppy's breakdown. Even after she emerges from her stay in hospital Poppy experiences regularly the expectations of a culture that asks her to perform a particular version of femininity. Her children look for a "mother" they can understand and her husband continues to look for a practical and pragmatic "wife." When Poppy is unable to maintain a convincing performance of this role he begins an affair and ultimately leaves Poppy feeling abandoned, humiliated and cast off (Modjeska 1990, 129).

Following on from her divorce, the man who eventually becomes Poppy's lover, Marcus (a catholic priest), expects a stereotypical level of loyalty to him, despite the fact that he is a priest, and is unwilling to make any public commitment to her. This relationship is also characterised by an affair, with Marcus pursuing a relationship with another woman (Alice), confessing it to Poppy and excusing it with the claim that he "needed the space" (Modjeska 1990, 215). The text describes the emotions of the situation clearly:

Now she is bound by an invisible thread to a man over whom she herself exerts no control; his comings and goings affect her in the most vulnerable place, but he is bound to her by no tie which the world recognizes. If he is seriously ill, she may no go to him. If he leaves her in anger, she cannot follow to be reconciled with him. These limitations are constantly in the background of her mind. Poppy marked this passage in her well used copy of Esther Harding's *The Way of All Women*. (Modjeska 1990, 179).

In exploring some of the relationships that Poppy has as a child and as an adult, the text works to foreground a state of quiet despair. This is illustrated most powerfully by the silence to which Poppy regularly finds her self reduced and the sense of powerlessness which results. This resonates with much feminist writing that identifies one of the key consequences of being a woman as silence within official discourse. Commenting on her own suffering within a family, bell hooks writes:

when I ponder the silences, the voices that are not heard, the voices of those wounded and/or oppressed individuals who do not speak or write, I contemplate the acts of persecution, torture—the terrorism that breaks spirits, that makes creativity impossible. I write these words to bear witness to the primacy of struggle in any situation of domination (even within family life), to the strength and power that emerges from sustained resistance, and the profound conviction that these forces can be healing, can protect us from dehumanization and despair. (hooks 1990, 339).

With hooks' words in mind, it is important to acknowledge that, whilst the extracts to this point document the pain and sorrow of Poppy in the face of meanings ascribed to the subject positions "daughter," "wife," and "mother," they are not the only stories contained in the text. Whilst they work to critique the dominant ideological and philosophical perspectives on "woman," *Poppy* illustrates also a range of ways in which these meanings are

resisted and displaced.

In the next two sections of this paper, therefore, I am interested in exploring illustrations of Poppy's resistance—and her power. Before moving to discuss in detail the ways in which *Poppy* celebrates women's power and potential, it is important to acknowledge that the ability of the text to function as both a critique of dominant representations of "Woman," and the celebration of transformative alternatives to this representations is closely tied to the ways in which it draws attention to the constructed nature of both phallogentric and transformative representations of women.

McLeod makes the point that post-structural feminist practice involves

theorising subjectivity, understanding it as non-unitary, non-essentialist, gendered and contradictory, as discursively constituted, produced rather than already and unproblematically present: [one] task is to understand the ways and means by which gender identity is produced. The other [involves] "deconstructive readings" of dominant narratives and "regimes of truth," denaturalising the taken-for-granted of particular educational practices and sets of beliefs (McLeod 1993, 107).

This commitment to identifying gendered identity as a cultural production and thus, as a set of behaviours that can be problematised, resisted, and re-written, is central to Modjeska's text. There are a number of ways in which *Poppy* denaturalises the "taken for grantedness" of the discourses which reduced Poppy to silence and despair. In this second section, therefore, I shall review briefly some of the key ways in which the text denaturalises the gender norms that Poppy negotiated. I will then follow this, in the third and final section, with an exploration of some of the specific ways in which Poppy demonstrated her ability to move beyond these norms.

To begin with, the ways in which the text de-stabilises "norms" involves the identification of normative notions of women as *fictions* rather than as truths based on fixed, given or essential realities. *Poppy* highlights the ubiquity of politics in all story telling and begins, not by attempting to demonstrate its "legitimacy" as an objective explanation or account of the world, but rather by foregrounding its own constructed and subjective nature. This is achieved in a number of ways: firstly, Modjeska clearly acknowledges Lalage's (the narrator's) personal agenda and the impact that this must have on the narrative. Lalage writes:

My mother had died and it was true what I'd said, I did not know her, and that night, under a sky weighed down in my memory by all that had gone before, I knew that by not knowing her, I could not know myself. It was a frightened, selfish grief. (Modjeska 1990, 5)

As this quotation reveals, the narrator of *Poppy* wants to make sense of her mother's life in order to better know and explain herself. By acknowledging this the narrative foregrounds the "self-serving" nature of the text and consequently prevents the reader from accepting this version of the story of Poppy

as "disinterested," authorised, valid or unproblematic. As de Gabrielle (1991, 126) (one of the few people to review *Poppy* "positively") notes, the narrative "disturbs," "questions," "probes" the reader and is not easy to read in a passive or unreflective way.

This points to another, and closely related, technique working to destabilise the authority of the text: the use of material that highlights the connection between explanation and power, and the overt discussion of the potential of an authorised biography to limit what can be known or understood about a person's life. This is achieved via the inclusion of the narrator's "confession" that her text is an explicit attempt to render familiar a life and experiences which seem foreign and threatening.

Spivak suggests that "the possibility of explanation carries the presupposition of an explainable (even if not fully) universe and an explaining (even if imperfectly) subject. These presuppositions assure our being" (380). This political drive to understand "the other," in order to better assure one's own subjectivity is illustrated well by the character of Lalage. At many stages in the text Lalage represents the voice of masculine rationality exemplified by her commitment to uncovering "the truth" about Poppy's life and the circumstances which worked against her. But the narrative works to identify the political nature of this initial desire and shows its flaws and weaknesses. In the introductory chapter of the text Lalage overtly acknowledges this point. She admits to her own desire to explain Poppy's experiences in terms of an historical framework which she, Lalage, is comfortable with. But she also points out the way in which such a desire can easily limit what she can understand and, by extension, the kinds of stories she is likely to tell:

I now think that Poppy's reluctance to give me what I wanted that last summer, talking sporadically, sometimes directly, sometimes elliptically, which I understood at the time as capricious, was on the contrary her last gift. "Use your imagination," she said, not hesitating to use hers. She knew that the answers to the questions I had would not be found in newspapers. The clues she was leaving were in the gaps and holes I was busily bricking up. I have been slow to come to this conclusion, wary of letting go the ways I know....
(Modjeska 1990, 12)

Coupled with the discussion of her own subjective desires is the narrator's continual interrogation of the sources she uses to construct her story: this is another important dimension of the narrative. Lalage is shown regularly questioning the veracity of her information and admits that there are always stories that are left out or silenced in any story. In Lalage's reflections, a reader can witness an exploration, not just of the politics of explanation and power, but also of those oppositions that support and sustain various reductive explanations of the "other." Specifically, Lalage draws attention to a conflict that stems largely, within western culture, from the continual division of the public and the private. That is to say, she describes herself as caught between "facts" and "imagination": an opposition that is, in many texts, ho-

mologous with a masculine/feminine binary. For Lalage and hence some readers, the process of exploring Poppy's story, then, becomes as much an act of listening for what is *not* heard as it is of taking note of what is. As Lalage acknowledges:

I ask for evidence but yet when I get it I am more interested in the silent, forgotten stories, in the everyday, the ordinary, the unsystematic and unrecorded, the omissions and slippages, the ways of living that affected us quietly, their meanings accruing over years, not exposed in a single, masculine climax. (Modjeska 1990, 26)

There are resonances here with the words of Michel de Certeau (1988, 131) who, in discussing the various ways in which strategies of marginalisation are made manifest, argues that "Finally, beyond the question of methods and contents, beyond what it says, the measure of a work is what it keeps silent".

This leads to the identification of a fourth narrative technique employed by Modjeska in highlighting the constructed nature of gendered norms. *Poppy* makes the processes of selection and omission that are more commonly kept invisible an explicit topic of discussion. The self-conscious and self-reflexive narrator, while inevitably participating in the construction of Poppy's "true" story, nevertheless makes significant efforts to "prompt" the reader to look behind the final version of any event, and to continually ask questions of the text. The narrator, therefore, problematises the text's authority even as she produces it. Indeed, this self-reflexiveness is so pronounced that it has appeared to irritate readers such as Gerster (1990, 10) who describes "narratological anxieties that are not only self-punishing, but tediously demanding of her readers."

In a similar vein, Jennings (1990, 78) claims that *Poppy* "raises more questions than it answers," but this emphasis on the ways in which textual authority is constructed is, in my reading, far from being "narcissistic" or self absorbed. Indeed, I would suggest that this level of self-reflection is necessary to support the dismantling of the text's authority which, in turn, allows for constructedness of lived experience, and the meaning that is attached to these experiences, to be highlighted effectively. This then opens up space for and indeed provides assistance to the reader for identifying the double truth: not only is Poppy's posthumous biography a construction, her life was a similarly contrived existence. This in turn allows a reader to recognise the vital point that Poppy's life could have been otherwise. In other words, the deliberate undermining of narrative authority that occurs throughout the text helps to support a reader who looks for alternative stories about women. It highlights the fact that stories are always produced, and that there is always more than one way to make sense of a given set of "facts."

This leads me to the third and final section of this paper. Traditional readings of Poppy's life may have seen her as either a "failure" in her relationships or as a "victim" of dominant cultural norms. Neither of these inter-

pretations, however, are ultimately supported by the book. Instead, Poppy works not only to provide evidence concerning the construction of realities, but *also* builds upon this opening in the text by circulating detailed counter-narratives about "being a woman." Poppy's resistance to and transcendence of gendered norms—and her ultimate discovery of peace, contentment and happiness—is illustrated in a diverse range of ways within Modjeska's book. Here I will examine only two: Poppy's move from silence into speech and her employment of her hard-earned voice in a range of public and private contexts.

It is important to begin this next section with an acknowledgment of the connection between speech and subjectivity, the significance of which is well captured by many feminists including hooks:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life, and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back" that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice. (hooks 1990, 340)

Given the pain experienced by Poppy as a result of her silencing within various social contexts, her shift from silence into speech—her move towards "talking back"—cannot be overemphasised. After being defined as "insane" as a consequence of her silence, and "cured" in response to the same thing, it was imperative for Poppy to find a way of speaking which was comprehensible by others in her environment, but which was suitable for expressing herself. The narrator explicitly suggests this point:

Poppy didn't recover by asserting her will, towering over her contemporaries . . . Poppy recovered because there was strength in her, but what it was, or is, eludes me (and drives me on). The best I can do is to say Poppy recovered because she found her voice. (Modjeska 1990, 93)

In other words, Poppy found a way of speaking about herself and her life that was neither dependent on the stories of others, nor completely outside of the discourses she was familiar with. As Lalage suggests: "she found a voice that narrates, orders, considers, reconsiders, backtracks, and gives life to a story, and a story to her life" (Modjeska 1990, 94).

This movement from speech to silence is communicated powerfully by a text that documents not only the pain of silence and the development of speech, but also the expansion of Poppy's speech-making practices into ever widening areas of her life. Thus the voice she invents or re-claims is not the tentative voice of a political novice but the powerful voice of political subject. Lalage writes:

I can no longer avoid the diaries, or the voice (abrasive, powerful, scratching) that comes with them, a voice that disturbs the smooth surface of my narrative just as it had my childhood disguises, and leaves me feeling the way as if I were the one in the

maze. (Modjeska 1990, 101)

In contrast to her earlier inability to articulate anger or frustrations, Poppy's diaries record the anger, pain, rejection and confusion. She is able to name her sense of alienation in her family:

Family. Family. That's all it ever is. The children always wanting, wanting, their mouths open like little birds. Richard wanting, his mouth like a beak, peck, peck, peck, pecking. And me? That's beside the point. Pointless. (Modjeska 1990, 77)

Later in her life she is able to critique the operations of universities as well as her own responses to it. In making this critique to her daughter Lalage, Poppy pointed to the distinction between theory and practice, which lies at its heart, and challenged the unspoken acceptance of a distinction between intellectual life and "real" life:

[s]he'd found intellectual anxiety and an emphasis on theories about life that seemed to her disproportionate to the living of it.

"Did you disagree with the theories you were taught?" I asked. The literal-minded daughter. "Or did you resist having to learn them?"

"I didn't resist learning anything," she said. "That's the point. I was an embarrassingly eager student. And it wasn't that I disagreed. It was that I wanted to test everything against the things I knew."

... "You can't limit knowledge to your own experience," I said.

... "But you can expand the experience of what you know," she said, "I felt as if I were being trained to speak in someone else's voice." (Modjeska 1990, 141)

With a similar kind of self-reflection, Poppy learned to operate as a competent parole officer and to defend her "clients":

Now she spoke on her own behalf, and on the behalf of people whose fears she understood. When questions were insinuated about a practice of work to which she had brought clarity and consciousness, she responded with fury. (Modjeska 1990, 150)

A similar ability to speak out characterises Poppy's later relationships. Whilst once she was reduced to silence by her marriage to Richard, in a later, equally difficult relationship with Marcus, the catholic priest, she is first able to identify the inequities in their relationship, then to make a conscious choice to accept this situation, and, finally, to reject Marcus's attempts to dictate her behaviour. This independence is illustrated well when Poppy responds to a letter, sent to her by Marcus whilst she is in India. Marcus offers Poppy material and emotional support: he volunteers to repair her car, loan her money and share a life—and contextualises all of this with the words: "the Lord is inviting us to share the future." Poppy's response is succinct:

Dear Marcus, Poppy wrote.

Bugger the Lord.

Thanks for the car.

Money no problem.

Heaps happening here too.

Love *Poppy*. (Modjeska 1990, 269)

These extracts illustrate the important point that *Poppy's* discovery of her own political subjectivity sustained her in both traditional spaces—such as her family—and in new, “non-traditional” roles such as that of university student, parole officer, priest's lover and traveler. This leads me to my final major point. As a political counter-narrative, *Poppy* demonstrates explicitly a woman's ability to move beyond the constraints of private life—and the silence associated with it—into spheres where she can demonstrate independence, competence and critical analysis. This not only involves taking up time and space within environments that have traditionally rendered women invisible and silent, but also articulating sustainable criticism of various marginalising strategies. In this way the text itself becomes more than a discussion of the way in which one woman gained power despite her circumstances. It becomes, instead, an interrogation of the entire phallogentric system within which she lived and a celebration of a woman's ability to exceed normative understandings of women—to move beyond the kinds of norms that once reduced *Poppy* to silence.

Significantly, this interrogation goes further than simply defining the public as masculine and limiting, and the private as feminine and comforting. Indeed, it seeks to problematise the relevance of this very distinction by demonstrating the ability of an individual woman to operate competently within both the public and private spheres, and to make use of both “masculine” and “feminine” discourses. *Poppy* argues that neither masculinity nor femininity are naturally or inherently privileged over the other, nor a fixed locus of power and authority. Instead each of these terms and the subject positions ascribed to them can be seen as mutable and open to redefinition. In this context, the emphasis shifts from a woman's powerlessness within dominant discourse to her power to refuse to be defined and constrained by authorised stories of femininity.

Whitlock (1992, 243) suggests that *Poppy* favours a total rejection of “masculine” discourses: “The masters and the institutions must be abandoned in favour of an inconsistent, fluid and feminine writing.” In contrast to this, I would argue that what the narrative shows is a desire to incorporate *any or all* ways of speaking so that neither one is always associated with the “rational” or the “emotional,” nor with “man” nor “woman,” nor “academic” nor “personal.” This is a both/and rather than an either/or model of subjectivity within which the distinction between masculinity and femininity and their associated norms is ultimately displaced. In this way, essentialist understandings of “Woman” are contested and the traditional, reductive meanings that are made of a woman's life are displaced. *Poppy* demonstrates the important point that it is possible to give voice to the experience of gendered oppression without re-inscribing that oppression as natural or inevitable, and simultaneously, as an alternative to that record of the status quo, to highlight a potential for resistance and transformation.

In Trinh's (1990, 332) terms Modjeska's text can be read as an example of how a narrative can work by "unceasingly introducing difference into repetition. By questioning over and over again what is taken for granted as self-evident." Ultimately, the representation of subjectivity as fluid, diverse and multiple works to destabilise the category of "Woman" and allows for multiple enactments of sexed identity. Indeed, it is possible to argue that *Poppy* functions as an example of what Braidotti calls a feminist figuration:

Figurations are not pretty metaphors: They are politically informed maps, which play a crucial role at this point in the cartography of feminist corporeal materialism in that they aim at redesigning female subjectivity...In this respect, the more figurations that are disclosed in this phase of feminist practice, the better. (Braidotti 1994, 181)

As an example of how female subjectivity can be redesigned, *Poppy* works to de-naturalise traditional (historical) readings of women as helpless, passive, defenceless and voiceless and replaces these regularly valorised stories with a set of alternative narratives. In other words, *Poppy* can be understood as a feminist figuration who illustrates the importance of departing from traditional, well trodden representations of "Woman." Reflecting on the experience of marginality de Certeau (1986, 96) emphasises the value of these alternative pathways when he argues that: "Rather than remaining within the field of a discourse that upholds its privilege by inverting its content (speaking of catastrophe and no longer of progress), one can try another path."

Perhaps more than anything else, *Poppy* works to demonstrate the existence and the positive potential offered by these alternative pathways. This is made particularly clear via Lalage's retelling of the reaction both she and *Poppy* had when they encounter, during separate trips to Crete, ancient statues representing the women of the island. Lalage writes:

I was not expecting the shock that made me sob out loud when I stood in front of the figurines that *Poppy* had described so well: the agile, the squat, the working women of Minoan: mothers, priests, animal handlers, acrobats, preparers of food. *Where do such women come from*, *Poppy* had written. Where indeed? Their images are quite unlike any we are used to from Hellenic Greece, the idealized classical feminine. I sobbed, as *Poppy* did, out of shock, and also recognition, as if in those figurines and frescoes, still singing with life three or four thousand years later, there was something I already knew; and that something ran counter to everything I'd learned. (Modjeska 1990, 115–16)

Lalage's and *Poppy*'s recognition of the political and personal significance of these Minoan figures provides an effective summary of the importance of alternative figurations of Women. By extension, the significance of *Poppy* as a counter-narrative is once more made explicit. The text as a whole and the diverse range of stories it contains, combine in a contemporary version of the Minoan figures: an artistic, dramatic and powerful testimony to the

diversity, strength, passion, independence, difference and multiplicity of women.

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