

A voice of her own: speaking her narrative through *pointure*-practices

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ABSTRACT

Jacques Derrida's (2009 [1978]:301-315) metaphor of "*pointure*" forms a *leitmotif* in the final narrative series of the *Dis-Location/Re-Location* exhibition (2007-2008), titled *A Room of Her Own* (2006-2007). The metaphor of "*pointure*" itself is doubly-bound: although *pointure*-practices may be aligned with actions that connote mastery such as "penetrating", "piercing", "pricking", "puncturing" or "rupturing" a surface, their consequences also "point to" restitution: a conjoining of otherwise discreet elements through stitching, lace-making, binding, braiding and weaving type practices historically associated with femininity and domesticity.

In *A Room of Her Own*, conceptions of what I propose to be three *pointure*-type practices – the Victorian construct of needlework, the historically gendered nineteenth-century psychosomatic disorder of hysteria and the contemporary practice of self-mutilation through cutting – as signifiers of passive, self-negating "femininity" are subverted through redefinition as forms of agency. With reference to the ways in which these *pointure*-practices are played out in *A Room of Her Own*, and by aligning these practices with Julia Kristeva's (1995) concept of 'transgressive writing', I suggest that they can be read as empowering forms of preverbal, bodily-driven self-expression; a means of "giving voice" to unspoken traumas and speaking in the face of being silenced by nineteenth-century gendered discourses.

Keywords: hysteria; needlework; cutting; transgressive writing; agency; empowerment; semiotic and symbolic modes of signification; self-expression.

In that torn bit of brown leather brace worked through and through with yellow silk ... lies all the passion of some woman's soul finding voiceless expression. Has the pen or pencil dipped so deep in the blood of the human race as the needle? (Olive Schreiner cited in Parker 1984:15).

Jacques Derrida's (2009 [1978]:301-315) concept of "*pointure*" encompasses a set of metaphors: as a practice, *pointure* relates to the 'small iron blade with a point, used

to fix the page to be printed onto the tympan' and 'the hole which it makes in the paper' (Payne 1993:228); it also refers to the cobbling or stitching of shoes (Payne 1993:228), and pertains to the modest shoelace drawing together that which would otherwise gape (Payne 1993:229). Derrida ties this term to texts and visual representation, making connections between the act of painting (and, by extension, visual representation) to his textual mode of "pointing" towards and "puncturing" a text, in the sense that the painting "penetrates" the canvas with meaning. Furthermore Derrida relates the "*pointure*" metaphor to a play on the French word for lace (*le lacet*) that can also refer to a trap or snare (Payne 1993:229). Although *pointure*-practices may be aligned with "masterful" actions such as "pricking", "poking", "piercing", or "rupturing" the wholeness of a surface, the consequences of these actions point to additional dimensions related to the concept of restitution: the conjoining of otherwise discreet elements. *Pointure*-practices therefore also pertain to the seamstress, as they resonate with references to stitching, suturing, embroidering, lace-making, interlacing, binding, braiding, knitting, knotting and weaving –activities that have historically been associated with femininity and domesticity. The term "*pointure*" therefore encompasses a double bind in which actions that have historically been associated with the constructs of masculinity and femininity are entangled. By extension, their intertwinement may be related to Julia Kristeva's (1995) conception of the symbolic¹ and semiotic as the two primary modes in the signifying process. For Kristeva (1984 [1974]:24) the two modes of signification are not discreet; 'Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either "exclusively" semiotic or "exclusively" symbolic.' Kristeva's "speaking subject" is produced through, and is dependent on, a continual 'dialectic between the semiotic drive force and symbolic stases' (Oliver 1993:8).

It is in this doubly bound sense that the metaphor of "*pointure*" forms a *leitmotif* in the *A Room of Her Own* series (2006-2007). The series encompasses three photographic prints; an installation comprising three separate sections, and one video² accompanied by four sub-videos. These artworks originated from a live performance of the same title,³ and collectively formed the final narrative of my exhibition titled *Dis-Location/Re-Location* (2007-2008) (hereafter *Dis-Location*).⁴ In *The Room* series 'three yarns are spun' (Ord 2008:107) from the multiple strands of three South African first- and second-generation immigrant female personae's British and Jewish narratives. *Dis-Location* traverses wide geographic and temporal terrain, ranging from the English, Jewish, upper-middle class immigrant, Bertha Marks's (1862-1934) colonial experience of living in the Transvaal Republic from 1885 to 1901; my mother, Freda Farber's (1932) diasporic experience of immigration to South Africa from Eastern Europe in 1935, and my (1964-) "immigrant-like" experience as a postcolonial, second-generation Jewish woman living in post-apartheid South Africa. For each persona, displacement is shown

1. Following Jacques Lacan, Kristeva (1995:104) identifies the symbolic as a system of 'signification that is manifest in linguistic signs and their logico-syntactic organization'. The symbolic order is the homogenous, naturalising structure within language in which 'fixed classifications' such as vocabulary, grammar and syntax, as well as the 'rules of logic' innately suggest a unity (Felluga 2003).

2. The video was exhibited on the *Pointure* exhibition curated by Ann-Marie Tully and Jennifer Kopping (University of Johannesburg Gallery, August 2012). The exhibition presented an extensive collection of contemporary South African artworks featuring *pointure*-type practices, including use of fabric as medium and processes of puncturing, interlacing, stitching and weaving.

3. When referring to the performance or video, I include a descriptor after the abbreviated title (for example, "*the Room* video"; "*the Room* performance") but in referring to the works that constitute the narrative the term "*the Room*" series is used. References to making the artwork and setting it up in the galleries are in the past tense; when speaking of the performance and exhibitions, I use the present tense.

4. The *Dis-Location/Re-Location* exhibition, travelled to seven South African national galleries/museums from June 2007 to July 2008. Comprising photographic, sculptural, installation, performance, video and sound art, it formed the practical component of my practice-led DPhil in Visual Arts (2009-2012). The theoretical and practical components of the research were interrelated in terms of topic, thematic choices and content. This article is based on Chapter Five of my thesis (Farber 2012).

to provoke transmutations in subjectivity, resulting in disjunctive identities and relationships with place. Each subject's genealogy over time, space, history and geography is visually and aurally "stitched together" to form a richly brocaded tapestry of narrative and memory. Their narratives interface in what was originally Bertha Marks's bedroom and is now the main bedroom in the Sammy Marks Museum, Pretoria. *The Room*⁵ is the literal and metaphorical space wherein each persona's body-world relations play out from their respective space-time continuums.

5. In instances, I use the term "the Room" to denote a combination of the "stage-set" (as an artwork) and the conception of it as the protagonist's room before, during and after the performance.

6. As it was associated with docility, obedience and love of the home, as well as the privilege of leisure, the domestic imperative of needlework was considered an appropriate activity for an upper-middle class Victorian lady (Parker 1984:4-5). Rozsika Parker (1984:189) elaborates that the act of embroidering was an index of gentility amongst the upper classes and its content was expected to convey the social and psychological qualities attributed to a lady. The Victorians conceived of the link between embroidery and women as "natural": 'women embroidered because they were naturally feminine and were feminine because they naturally embroidered' (Parker 1984:11).

7. I focus on hysteria during the mid-to late Victorian period (1862-1893) as this was when the disorder peaked.

8. Cutting is a form of self-mutilation; an act of deliberate self-injury to the body (Ellis 2002:4). Psychiatric practitioners classify self-mutilating acts in terms of the severity of the injury – the most extreme being the amputation of a body part and the least being superficial injury such as scratching (Favazza 1987). Researchers have found that most individuals who cut are female (Ellis 2002:4). Although the practice of cutting has been evident in western medical literature since the 1900s (Favazza 1987), it was not until 1995, with the Princess of Wales's self-disclosure of her own cutting practices, that it became well-known to the general public (Ellis 2002:4).

9. This amalgam of Bertha Marks, Freda Farber and myself is hereafter referred to as "the protagonist".

10. The term "self-expression" refers to all forms of representation, but particularly speech.

In this article, I explore how, in *the Room* series, historical and contemporary conceptions of what I propose to be three *pointure*-practices – the Victorian construct of needlework,⁶ the historically gendered psychosomatic disorder of hysteria⁷ and the practice of self-mutilation through cutting⁸ – as signifiers of passive, self-negating 'femininity' are subverted through redefinition as forms of agency. I align the protagonist⁹ of *the Room* series' practices of cutting her skin and stitching indigenous South African aloe leaves into her body, as well as her evocations of hysteria, with Kristeva's (1995) concept of 'transgressive writing' – a mode of signification originating in the semiotic realm. Transgressive writing is phenomenologically-orientated, privileging bodily, preverbal experience over pre-referential language. Forms of speech derived from the semiotic represent a discharge of the subject's bodily energy and drives (McAfee 2004:16); they are related to 'archaic processes whose sensory aspects are often nonverbal' (Kristeva 1995:104) and are not subject to the rules of logic or syntax (McAfee 2004:17). Although it is often interpreted in psychoanalytic, philosophical and feminist discourses as 'that which does not speak' (Irigaray 1985 [1977]:136), I suggest that hysteria, in conjunction with the *pointure*-practices of needlework and cutting, can be read as empowering forms of preverbal self-expression¹⁰ that allow the protagonist to "give voice" to unspoken traumas and to speak in the face of being silenced by colonial gendered discourses. The protagonist's *pointure*-practices mimic transgressive writing, in that both are rhythmic and cyclical: from the self-initiated action of cutting the skin, closure is attempted by means of needle and thread; yet, as the needle's point repeatedly pierces the skin, it reopens the flesh, drawing blood. Puncturing the outer fabric of the body becomes synonymous with restitution and repair. Owing to the constant presence of the semiotic, like transgressive writing, the protagonist's signifying processes can be considered 'disruptive, even revolutionary' in their potential to rupture the unity of the symbolic order (McAfee 2004:38).¹¹ Applying Kim Miller's (2005) comment made in relation to victims of trauma in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to the protagonist, I suggest that, 'speaking about one's experiences as a victim can give the speaker renewed agency, leading to a more empowered life as a survivor'.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (1973 [1982]) novella *The yellow wallpaper*¹² bears striking resemblances to *the Room* series in that both foreground the Victorian trope of the

room as a ambivalent signifier of physical, social and psychological isolation and confinement, while simultaneously representing empowerment and liberation. The trope of the room may therefore be related to Derrida's play on the words lace, trap and snare, as both address the phenomenological discourses of imperial and colonial disenfranchisement, and experiences of anxiety, alienation, entrapment and paralysis. Parallels between these discourses and experiences to relations between hierarchical Victorian gender roles, sexual repression, madness and self-expression are drawn in Gilman's novella and *the Room* series. Through her semi-autobiographical narrative of female isolation and madness, Gilman shows how, for a nineteenth-century woman, 'solitary confinement' within the bourgeois family results in psychosis (Showalter 1985:142). As Elaine Showalter (1985:142) observes, because Gilman deals with a woman writer who is denied any legitimate outlet for her imagination, the novella may be interpreted as an account of *female literary confinement*; it is as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (cited in Showalter 1985:142) put it, 'the story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their "speechless woe"'. In this article, I draw analogies between ways in which Victorian women's denial of self-expression under patriarchy is made manifest in *The yellow wallpaper* and *the Room* series, while also exploring the protagonist's opportunities to "speak her narrative". I begin my discussion by interweaving descriptive passages articulated in factual terms and italicised quotes referencing *the Room* series that are expressed in a more affective, poetic flow of words. This interweaving of warp and weft is intended to create an (inter)textual fabric comprising both symbolic and semblances of semiotic modes of signification.

11. Transgressive language has similarities with other forms of "speaking through the body" such as Luce Irigaray's and Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine* ('the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text' (Showalter 1986:249)) in that it privileges non-linear, cyclical, gestural, rhythmic writing. Similarly, Griselda Pollock (2009:10) links Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's textual and artistic practice or '*matrixial écriture*' to *écriture féminine*, noting that in its 'spun-together' formation of logos, matrixial articulation disrupts the phallic domination of language.

12. *The yellow wallpaper* is a collection of journal entries written by a late nineteenth-century woman, who upon failing to find fulfilment in her prescribed roles as wife and mother, is imprisoned in the upstairs bedroom of a mansion by her physician husband. She is forced to take the "rest cure" to remedy what he terms 'a slight hysterical tendency' (Gilman 1973:10). The rest cure, often used to treat hysteria, depended on bed-rest, seclusion, sensory deprivation, immobility, and excessive feeding for a period of six to twelve weeks (Showalter 1985:138). During this time, the woman channels her repressed creativity into the yellow wallpaper, imagining that she and other women are trapped in its patterns. Finally, in a psychotic state, she rips the wallpaper off the wall in an attempt to release herself (Showalter 1985:141). Her entrapment within the wallpaper pattern is metaphoric of her imprisonment within the confines of the room, and within patriarchal nineteenth-century sexual politics.

A room of her own

Hooves clop, a steam-train pulls into a station, a car revs. With these sounds, each denoting a spatio-temporal frame, the three personae's generations are "stitched in time" '*such is the thread of time*' (Deleuze 1997:30) unravelling in a chronologically linear sequence. The sounds form part of the soundtrack of the performance that takes place in real time and plays out in the video of the same title, produced from edited footage of the performance. In the performance and video, the dramatisation is enacted in a three-dimensional photographic, archival re-creation of a section of the main bedroom in the Sammy Marks Museum (Figure 1). The recreated room (hereafter "the stage-set") was made by digitally grafting photographs of architectural elements and furniture from the room (a glass door, curtains, skirting board, floorboards, carpet and fireplace) and architectural elements and furniture from other rooms in the house (a frieze and dado rail), adding "fictitious" wallpaper depicting a Victorian design of intertwined roses and combining these two-dimensional, illusionistic representations with actual period furniture.



FIGURE N° 1



Leora Farber, *A Room of Her Own*, 2006. Stage-set re-creation of the main bedroom in the Sammy Marks Museum. Performance still.

Photograph by Michael Meyersfeld.

Following the Victorian codes of respectability and surrounded by colonial comforts, the protagonist is seated within the stage-set, with a sewing box filled with fresh aloe leaves next to her. She sews demurely – not the conventional forms of embroidery or tapestry traditionally expected of a Victorian lady – *‘[h]er work is a kind of post-feminist penal colony in which the machines of torture and, ironically, liberation are needle, thread and thorn’* (Law-Viljoen 2008:4). Rather, she inserts an aloe leaf into her cut flesh, and delicately “stitches” the indigenous South African succulent into her body – *“the lily-white corpus of Europe”* (Ord 2008:106). Beginning with one leaf, she stitches a rosette of six leaves around an already completed *petit point* wild rose (Figures 2, 3a & 3b) *‘[t]rying to find the thread that will tie her to place’* (Murray 2008:54). As foreign to the body, the aloe signifies insertion of an(other) culture that may take root and grow under the skin; *‘[t]he skin is made porous by a needle at work ... needlework ... is simultaneously the rupturing of skin, as thread is replaced by suture in the labour of grafting, of affixing one composite to another, so that they are complements of each other and supplements of others’* (Ord 2008:107).



FIGURE **N° 2**



Leora Farber, *A Room of Her Own*, 2006. Performance still. Photograph by Michael Meyersfeld.



FIGURE **N° 3a**



Leora Farber, *A Room of Her Own*, 2006. Performance still. Photographs by Michael Meyersfeld.



FIGURE **Nº 3b**



Leora Farber, *A Room of Her Own*, 2006. Performance still.

Photograph by Michael Meyersfeld.

The first narrative of the soundtrack is that of Bertha Marks's; voice-over quotations from her letters to her husband are audible over the classical piano music in the background. The audio sequence flows into Freda Farber's articulation of anecdotal memories of leaving Latvia and her childhood experiences in South Africa. The third segment, representing the postcolonial persona's narrative, comprises an excerpt from South African Prime Minister BJ Vorster's infamous *We will Fight to the Bitter End* (*The Winds ...* 2004) 1970 speech, protests of Amandla Maatla (*The Winds ...* 2004) from the Soweto uprising of 16 June 1976, and ambient sounds recorded in contemporary Johannesburg (glass breaking, cell-phones ringing, taxis hooting and house alarms blaring). These increase in volume to create a cacophony that finally overwhelms the harmonious music underpinning each narrative.

Before the performance the printed wallpaper of the stage-set was built up into relief using pigmented wax. Each rose of the wallpaper motif was replaced with a three-dimensional wax counterpart and the smooth background was modelled into an irregularly moulded, tactile surface (Figure 3). During the performance, application of heat from the back of the aluminium surfaces of the stage-set causes the wax to shift



FIGURE N° 4



Leora Farber, *A Room of Her Own*, 2006. Detail of wallpaper before the performance.

Photograph by Michael Meyersfeld.

and melt and the roses to drop to the floor –'[s]he is a patiently sewing woman whose quiet undoing is suggested by the wax roses sliding down the walls of her boudoir, whose obsessions with the minutiae of thread and needle is, to our horror, a passage into her own flesh, her own past' (Law-Viljoen 2008:6). The melting wax reveals that certain printed roses have been digitally transformed into images of aloes. Wax, as used in this artwork, embodies states of formation and transformation; heat is metaphoric of the "African sun" that destabilises the fixed certainty of the protagonist's colonial world; '[t]he camera evokes her still, with her world melting around her, the walls more porous than skin, as porous as time, as porous as borders of countries and cultures and cultivations' (Bishop 2008:115).

The narrative extends into a series of three photographic prints, titled *Generation*, *Generation* (detail) and *Redemption* (2007). Time has elapsed since the protagonist stitched the aloe leaves into her thigh '[h]ere, in this room, we have the long, slow smear of time, as the materiality of the world undoes itself, is undone, comes undone' (Bishop 2008:117). Seated amongst the mounds of fallen wax roses and lumps of melted wallpaper, she lifts her skirt to reveal that the aloe leaves have withered and

at their central core, in place of the wild rose, a new, succulent hybrid plant has emerged. The blood-red embroidery cotton that she used to stitch the leaves into her skin has grown into her flesh, forming a system of roots and veins in her calf. In *Redemption*, she collapses amidst the debris. Her pose suggests that she might have undergone, or is undergoing, an hysterical fit, given that its theatricality is reminiscent of, but not a direct reference to, poses adopted by women in what the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) diagnosed as the third stage of an hysterical attack. In this stage, known as the *attitudes passionnelles* (passionate gestures), the hysteric embodied heightened, transformative emotional states, such as rapture, ecstasy, rage or hatred.

In the exhibitions, the three segments of the stage-set are displayed as freestanding units each of which has been reworked to form an individual installation. Cast-wax aloes of varying scales, suggestive of new growth, nestle amongst the melted roses and wallpaper remnants; hybrid combinations of wax roses and aloes rupture the upholstery of a Victorian tapestry chair (Figure 4) and two large-scale wax “rose-aloe plants” penetrate the floorboards (Figure 5) of *the Room*. With the exception of the



FIGURE **N° 5**



Leora Farber, *A Room of Her Own*, 2006-2007. Detail of tapestry and upholstery of chair, main stage-set installation.

Photograph by Clive Hassall.



FIGURE N° 6



Leora Farber, *A Room of Her Own*, 2006-2007. Detail of *cultivars* growing out of floorboards, main stage-set installation.

Photograph by Brent Meistre.

tapestry roses, the upholstery of the chair is covered in wax; its texture and range of tones suggests Caucasian flesh and skin. '*She is tracked down by the long trail of her beautiful embroidery*' (Parker 1984:7) as trails of cotton emerge from the unpicked tapestry roses cascade onto the floor in gradations of light to dark pink and peach hues. '[T]hread can be used to embroider and embellish ... to fabricate a fiction falsifying a face – the masking of a culture by its colonisation; or the Africanisation of the European immigrant?' (Ord 2008:107). "Root-vein systems" emerge from the lowest rung of the sewing box, each sprouting a strand of thread that collectively form an entangled mass which spills over the edges of the main stage-set. At the lowest register of each stage-set, photographic prints of "red" African soil, roots and rhizomes create the illusion of being able to see into the foundations of *the Room*. Prints of a cross-section of Victorian brickwork, in which young aloe seedlings protrude from the plaster, form side panels.

The culmination of these additions and changes to the stage-set creates a sense of the room as having shifted from being a transitional space for the performance of self-transformative rituals to being a site of transformation itself. In the gallery installations, *the Room* appears to be in arrested, yet continual processes of becoming:

the decor and the flowers ... are in constant process of morphing into something else: the wallpaper flowers slide down the walls of the room and decay; Bertha's/Farber's body is pierced by the grafts of tropical plants; it is as if everything has been invaded by a viral contagion already accomplishing transmutation (Venn 2010:330).

As the "African" aloe has germinated in the protagonist's body, so indigenous plant growth pervades the colonial room. Together with the melted roses, the growth reflects the demise of the protagonist's colonial lifeworld; *[t]he room may well be a prison, or purgatorio, an in-between place where one awaits transmutation or deliverance: from the past, from dislocation, from the unfamiliar or unhomely'* (Venn 2010:330).

A voice of her own

Nineteenth-century female experience usually entailed domestic confinement wherein, given the authority of the Victorian *paterfamilias*, the woman was silenced and spoken for. To fit the feminine ideal of passivity, docility and submissiveness, Victorian women had to stifle their independence and intelligence. Bereft of voice and agency, if nineteenth-century women did find a means of intellectual, emotional, sexual and/or creative self-expression, this had to be exercised covertly. One may recall Jane Austen hiding her half-written manuscripts or covering them with a piece of blotting-paper (Woolf 1989 [1929]) and the narrator who secreted away, writes because 'I must say what I feel and think in some way' (Gilman 1973:21). For her and Bertha Marks, the room is paradoxically a space of liberation and confinement: both women deploy the room as a private space in which they have the freedom to become a "speaking subject", yet for both, the room represents a "space of otherness" that signals their physical and intellectual isolation from society.

Virginia Woolf's essay *A room of one's own* (1989:4 [1929]) – based on lectures she delivered in 1928 at the two Cambridge women's colleges on the subject of Women and Fiction – in which she observes that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction', provides a literary parallel to the protagonist's quest to deploy her "room of her own" as a liberating space. The metaphor of the room as a liberatory space also features in EM Forster's novel, *A room with a view* (1988 [1908]). Forster's young heroine, Lucy Honeychurch, struggles to reconcile her experiences of conformity and freedom signified by the well-bred sterility of England with the warmth and violence of Italy. For Honeychurch, Italy is a place of passion that liberates her from the sexual repression of English society. For the narrator, the room is a space of enforced infantilism and "regression" into psychosis, yet paradoxically, it is through her

psychosis that she achieves liberation. Woolf's room signifies intellectual freedom and economic independence; Forster's protagonist experiences newfound sexual awareness and the narrator escapes her physical and mental imprisonment in the room through madness. For the protagonist, *the Room* and the body are private, privatised; it is from these inner, interiorised spaces that her forms of self-expression emerge.

While the nineteenth-century woman was denied logistical forms of self-expression (physical space and financial means) and was psychologically "silenced" by her required deference to patriarchal authorities, she was also, more fundamentally, assigned to 'a zone of silence' in western philosophical discourses structured around the male as the paradigmatic sex (Irigaray cited in Evans 1991:213). For Luce Irigaray (cited in Evans 1991:213), 'the silence of women results, then, not only from the denial of their authority to speak, but also from the lack of a symbolic system reflecting their experience'. Feminist writers such as Showalter (1985, 1997), Mary Evans (1991), Noëlle McAfee (2004), Linda Jones (2012) and Amanda du Preez (2004, 2009) concur that psychosomatic symptoms such as hysteria arose in reaction to the systemic repression of nineteenth-century women's speech. As Showalter (1997:55) puts it, since hysterics 'suffered from the lack of a public voice to articulate their economic and sexual oppression' their symptoms 'seemed like bodily metaphors for [their] silence'. By 'converting their bodies into the site of another language, women/hysterics communicate[d] in the pantomimic mode of fits, trances, paralysis, anaesthesia, blindness, pain ... [to relay] the message of their gender as illness, as unsayable' (Evans 1991:214).

Two interrelated ways of considering hysteria as a form of bodily speech can be identified (Showalter 1985:5). In the first, hysteria is regarded as an unconscious form of feminist protest within the historical framework of the nineteenth century; in the second, it is considered as a form of desperate communication by the powerless. Feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Xavière Gauthier, and Irigaray adopt the first position, in which madness is associated with female protest, resistance and revolution (Showalter 1985:5). Nineteenth-century hysterics are celebrated as 'protofeminists'; 'champions of a defiant womanhood, whose symptoms, expressed in physical symptoms and coded speech, subvert the linear logic of male science' (Hunter 1983:474). In her embodiment of western constructs of femininity (such as irrationality, instability, emotionality, madness and "reversion" to the unconscious and/or semiotic), the hysteric signifies the 'woman-type in all her power' (Cixous cited in Showalter 1985:161). These feminists connect 'the hysteric's silences, symptoms and distorted speech to female symbolism, semiotic or infantile wordless verbalisation' (Showalter 1997:5). Cixous and Irigaray argue that by using a form of communication that lies predominantly outside of the symbolic, the hysteric

establishes a site of *différence* from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be deconstructed. By extension, Irigaray and Cixous propose that in order to establish a position in language in which specifically female sexualities are dominant, contemporary women should ‘speak from the place of the hysteric’ or the bodily drives associated with the semiotic (Evans 1991:203).¹³

The second position is encapsulated in Shoshana Feldman’s (cited in Showalter 1985:5) statement that ‘madness is quite the opposite of rebellion. Madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation’. Similarly, Showalter (1997:7) proposes that hysteria is ‘an expression, a body language for people who otherwise might not be able to speak or even to admit what they feel’. As Robert Woolsey (cited in Showalter 1997:7) notes, in this reading, ‘hysteria is a “protolanguage”; its symptoms are “a code used by a patient to communicate a message which ... cannot be verbalized”’. Following Woolsey, Sigmund Freud (cited in Evans 1991:242) considers hysteria as the ‘pathology of powerlessness’.

John Everett Millais’s pre-Raphaelite painting *Ophelia* (1852) formed an important reference for my depiction of hysteria in *Redemption*.¹⁴ In making reference to *Ophelia*, I was aware that the work may be seen as aestheticising and romanticising historical associations of women with pathologies of madness, and that the imagery might be construed as sentimental and clichéd. In an attempt to circumvent these readings, I heightened the constructed nature of the image through overt use of theatricality. The protagonist’s pose is over-dramatised; she performs hysteria almost to the point of parody, echoing the way in which Charcot’s hypnotised patients put on a ‘spectacular’ show for their voyeuristic, curiosity-seeking audiences (Du Preez 2004:49) in the ‘theatrical space’ of the Salpêtrière mental asylum (J Matlock cited in Du Preez 2004:48). Similarly, in *Redemption*, like the nineteenth-century hysteric who was both specularised and sexualised by medical science, the protagonist’s body is offered as a spectacle for the (male) gaze. Use of chiaroscuro heightens this sexual fetishisation; the figure, clothed in white diaphanous garments, is bathed in light and set against a background of evocative darkneses. By performing the part of the hysteric, a figure already ‘conflated with the signifiers of femaleness (sex) and femininity (gender)’ (Du Preez 2004:47), the protagonist enacts femininity as a masquerade. Her overtly dramatised performance of nineteenth-century feminine ideals draws attention to the artifice of these constructions.

13. This strategy is fraught with contradictions. As Evans (1991:205) notes, it is difficult to speak of the category of “woman” without the ideological weight that has historically been attributed to it. The alignment of women with madness and hysteria as a form of feminist protest are contested positions for, as Showalter (1985:5) comments, such associations risk romanticising madness, reinforcing essentialist connections between femininity and insanity, and endorsing hysteria as a desirable form of rebellion.

14. William Shakespeare’s *Ophelia* was a prototypical figure used by Victorian artists, writers and doctors to represent the madwoman and, by extension, the young female asylum patient (Showalter 1985:90-91).

Transgressive language and the speaking subject

Although it is unclear whether the protagonist has undergone, or is undergoing an hysterical seizure, or is overwhelmed by the transmogrification of her body and identity as a result of her self-induced implants, her pose in *Redemption* alludes to her being in a liminal state, oscillating on the threshold between the symbolic and the semiotic. I suggest that it is owing to this fluid and evolving nature of her subjectivity that the protagonist might assume the role of the speaking subject and that her bodily speech may be construed as a form of transgressive language. For Kristeva (1989:265, 272) language is the signifying system in which ‘the speaking subject makes and unmakes himself’; the subject is both

immersed in the logical order of symbolic meaning, where identity ... reigns [and] riven by the body’s and the psyche’s semiotic charges and energy displacements. The speaking being is a subject in process because her identity is never fixed in place; [it] is continuously disrupted by semiotic language’s heterogeneity, polyphony, and polysemy (McAfee 2004:105).

If the protagonist is acknowledged as a speaking subject, needlework might be proposed as a means of speech through which she “makes and unmakes” her subjectivity. Rozsika Parker (1984:10) observes that in nineteenth-century British oil painting genres, women engaged in needlework are conventionally depicted as silent and still, with ‘eyes lowered, head bent, shoulders hunched’. As Parker (1984:10) points out, in romantic fiction, the needleworker’s silence and stillness can have multiple connotations, ranging from ‘serious concentration to a silent cry for attention’, but is usually underpinned by a fundamental contradiction: while it represents the “ideal” feminine traits of repression, subjugation, submission and modesty, the ‘embroiderer’s silence, her concentration also suggests a self-containment, a kind of autonomy’.¹⁵ Parker (1984:165) extends this contradictory signification to the way in which needlework was synonymous with femininity in Victorian society, noting that in Charlotte Brontë’s writing, embroidery (and thus femininity) emerges as a means of self-denial and self-defence, portraying ‘female subservience and availability’, yet simultaneously acts a means of establishing an ‘inviolable female space’.

Parker’s contention that needlework enabled nineteenth-century women to enter an ‘inviolable female space’ finds support in Freud’s and Joseph Breuer’s (1893:13) anti-feminist claim that needlework was a potentially ‘disruptive’ activity for Victorian women. In their clinical studies, they propose connections between nineteenth-

15. The needleworker’s “stillness” and “silence” may also be linked to a stereotype of femininity in which self-containment is interpreted as seductiveness (Parker 1984:10). In Victorian women’s novels, sewing is considered as a signifier of self-containment and restraint, yet, as Parker (1984:166) comments, the critical encounter between lovers is invariably marked by the moment when the woman drops her work and ‘with her embroidery ... goes her self-containment ... she surrenders to her lover’.

century women's monotonous existence, needlework and hysteria. According to Freud and Breuer (1893:13), needlework induces a form of private daydreaming that renders women 'vulnerable' to 'hypnoid states'. In these states, their repressed imaginative, creative and emotional energies and drives, or "feminine excesses" and, by association, the semiotic, are activated, leading to pathogenic associations that engender hysterical symptoms (De Mijolla 2005). Thus, if seen through a feminist lens, needlework could be a means of creating a psychic space for Victorian women to express their "selves" in order to escape culturally constructed and constricting feminine roles. In Jane Przybysz's words, 'it led to states of mind where women experienced their "selves" creating and enacting narratives in a private theater to which men had no access'. Unpicking this argument further, needlework, as a form of transgressive language, might be considered a "disruptive" force; like hysteria, it has the potential to rupture the containing boundaries of the symbolic through the release of "excess".

The protagonist of *the Room* series adopts a similar pose to that of her painted nineteenth-century counterparts: immersed in her needlework and oblivious to the catastrophe of her colonial world collapsing around her, she is the embodiment of submissiveness, passivity, docility and modesty – qualities that signify compliance with the Victorian codes of femininity and position her as operative within the symbolic order. Her heightened sense of self-containment reiterates that she is, as Joseph Conrad's (1971 [1902]) narrator in *Heart of darkness* (cited in Allara 2008:54) describes nineteenth-century women, 'in a world apart' as she sits isolated in a room that is 'so much her own that it becomes enclosed and claustal' (Murray 2008:54). Yet, while remaining linguistically silent, her enactment of needlework as a form of bodily praxis enables her to speak her narrative through means that originate in the semiotic.

Further threads connecting needlework, hysteria and the contemporary practice of cutting as forms of transgressive language may be unravelled. Cutting the skin to the point of releasing blood is a form of self-mutilation practiced predominantly by westernised teenage girls. It is not about the conscious intent for self-harm, nor the experience of physical pain; rather, the cutter craves the relief provided by endorphins released into the body that 'anesthetise' emotional pain (Levenkron 1998:24). Like hysteria, cutting is a way of speaking when one is unable verbally to express overwhelming emotions or unfulfilled emotional needs. It is a desperate cry for help in the face of a devastating sense of alienation, lack of belonging, powerlessness and abandonment (D'Arcy 2007; Ellis 2002:12). Feminist writers such as Rose Ellis (2002) suggest that cutting, like the eating disorder anorexia nervosa,¹⁶ is not merely a symptom of individual psychopathology, but an extreme

16. Although it is usually considered as being a disease that affects contemporary western women, anorexia nervosa was first diagnosed in 1873 (Evans 1999:229). It was characterised as a subset of hysteria. Modern medical investigations into the psychic dynamics of anorexia point to a range of underlying personality disorders, although its root disorder is still considered to be hysteria (Evans 1999:229).

bodily response to expectations embedded in patriarchal ideologies. Like the late nineteenth-century hysteric, the present-day anorexic responds to situations in which she feels powerless by exercising control over her body in a bid for independence and autonomy (Przybysz 1992:180). From this perspective, cutting could be seen as a non-verbal way in which contemporary women might respond to the patriarchal regulation of the boundaries of femininity, using their bodies as means through which this is effected.

Ellis's feminist reading of cutting prompts the question as to whether Bertha Marks's self-mutilation could be read as a desperate attempt to speak through the body from within the rigid constraints imposed on it in the Victorian era? According to Ellis (2002:10), acts of self-mutilation 'create a renewed sense of external agency, through control over [the] body'. While the action is external, it provides 'an internal sense of self-control' that compensates for those external circumstances that the cutter perceives as uncontrollable (Ellis 2002:11; see also Favazza 1987). Speculating further, if this contemporary practice were to be reframed in the light of Bertha Marks's alienated, isolated life in the Transvaal, perhaps it could be said that for her, cutting is a reaction to feelings of numbness and sublimated desires that such alienation probably provoked. If the contemporary psycho-somatic disorder of cutting could be projected into a Victorian context, these emotions might be read as symptomatic of the gendered constraints and restrictive social norms with which women of the upper middle classes were expected to comply and, like the historically gendered disorder of hysteria and its attendant sublimation of desire, might be seen as enabling a sense of liberation and release.

My representation of Bertha Marks cutting herself may therefore be read as affording her agency to speak in the face of situations in which she felt powerless. From this perspective, through its evocation of abjection and potential to act as a means of self-expression that derives from the semiotic, cutting, as it features in *the Room* series, has the transgressive potential to "rupture" the sameness of the symbolic order. The cut is a "traumatic incision" that is not only a marker of physical pain but may be read as a signifier for the psychological trauma that accompanies the protagonist's experiences of dislocation. As forms of transgressive language, hysteria, needlework and cutting become means through which the protagonist is able to articulate her trauma and, for Bertha Marks, act as empowering mechanisms that enable her to speak out against being the victim of colonial gendered discourses. For each persona, cutting, together with needlework, may be construed as empowering in its potential to lead to new, hybrid identity formations and generative cultural fusions. I therefore suggest that perhaps the protagonist's act of "speaking her narrative" is not dissimilar to the manner in which processes

of giving testimony at the TRC enabled individuals to achieve a sense of cathartic agency and empowerment as survivors. In so doing, I am not proposing any connection between the protagonist's traumas and those of individuals who testified before the TRC, but rather that, as Douglass and Vogler (cited in Miller 2005:41) note with reference to subjects of trauma, through her narrative testimonies she is able to 'move from a state of helpless victimage to a mode of action and even potential self-renewal, demonstrating that new actions can still be possible in spite of the trauma of suffering'.

From the self-contained confinement of her room and her position within the suffocating patriarchal conventions of the Victorian era, Bertha Marks is shown to take advantage of these delimitations; although tightly bound by convention, she, like Lucy Honeychurch, Virginia Woolf and the narrator, finds opportunities to convert those bonds into wings of flight. And, like the narrator, she attempts to reformulate herself within the very space that represents her physical, social and psychological confinement. Through enactments of semiotically driven speech, Bertha Marks and the postcolonial protagonist are empowered towards achieving an (ultimately unresolved) sense of self-renewal. As a speaking subject, the protagonist's transgressive language takes the form of what Couze Venn (2010:334, 335) terms 'an anamnesis ... a process of working-through taking place at the threshold between unconscious psychic economy and conscious activity, individual ... and collective identity'. In the final image of the exhibition, *Redemption*, she is infinitely suspended in a perpetual state of becoming, continually crisscrossing the boundaries¹⁷ of self and Other, the conscious and the unconscious, the symbolic and the semiotic, insiderness and outsiderness. Through these ongoing processes of negotiation and transformation, the "me/self" and "not me/Other" lose coherence as discrete entities, creating an ambiguous space of in-betweenness in which the 'logical certainty of either the subject/object or self/not-self binarism' is threatened (Wolfreys 2004:3). It is thus in the contested space of the limen, which represents 'neither/nor ... both, [but] not quite either' (Lugones 1994:459) that her subjectivity-in-process is situated.

17. Boundaries become spaces where insiderness (self) and outsiderness (the psychoanalytic Other) are under constant negotiation. These boundaries, or bodily borders, are symbolic (Grosz 1994:79); they are neither physically nor psychologically fixed, and are not confined to the anatomical 'container' of the skin but rather, 'have the remarkable power of incorporating and expelling outside and inside in an ongoing exchange' (Grosz 1994:79).

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