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Topographies of Creativity: Writing and Publishing Digitally

The hypertext work, unstopped mouths, on which this piece centres, won first prize in the short story competition run by Absolutely Women's Health and the Society of Women Writers (Vic).

The genesis of this paper has come from a number of sources. I was first alerted to the possibilities for feminists of using the internet creatively when I read an early draft of Dale Spender's *Nattering on the Net*. The ideas excited me and I decided I needed to know more. A little later Suniti Namjoshi approached us at Spinifex to publish her novel *Building Babel*, and to include an electronic component. She explained how this might work and that there were a number of ways that we might include an electronic final chapter which would be open to others to contribute their ideas. Soon after, we were linked electronically through email along with other independent Australian publishers. In late 1995 we prepared a funding submission to develop an electronic network of Feminist Publishers in Asia. During 1995 I had been involved in the concept development of a feminist multimedia project. In 1996 Spinifex continued to publish books which extended our knowledge and possibilities, and we will continue to do so in 1997 and 1998. We have also extended the Home Page which receives somewhere between 5,000 and 12,000 hits per week.

Cybercreativity

In many ways the contemporary form of electronic creativity is most suited to those who have previously been marginalised, oppressed, and powerless. I say this because what has always defeated us is pulling the knowledge together. Pooling it. And keeping it public. This is now *potentially* possible.

Take for example the Spinifex initiative of Feminist Publishing in Asia. It took a long time to get this project off the ground because we were having to rely on snail mail to get our letters out to the people and organisations whose information and details we wanted to put on the Home Page. Once we had gotten over that initial hurdle and had begun to put up the information we were then flooded with responses, updating the information and filling in the gaps.

Another example is Suniti Namjoshi's Building Babel Site, as mentioned. A site on our Home Page, Suniti Namjoshi invites readers to send their own creative contributions and responses to her novel *Building Babel* (1996) to us. We then add them to the site. This creates an electronic conversation between readers whose hypertextual musings and connections become available to other readers. The potential is for a forever changing combination of responses and connections.

In imagining this I am reminded of medieval and ancient diagrams of the ways in which the world functions. Human beings have for centuries and millennia made hyperimage connections. They used to be called symbols. Think of the way metaphors and meanings coalesce around the image of a snake. In ancient Greece it was used as a symbol of prophecy and healing (Cassandra and Hermes are figures strongly connected with the snake); in the Bible it is associated with knowledge and evil; among the Aboriginal people it is connected with dreamings and regeneration. And I could go on citing cultures from around the world.

- Consider the form of a Hindu Yantra. This is hypertext.
- Consider the form of the Kabbalah. This is hypertext.
- Consider the paintings of Aboriginal artists.
- Consider an astrological natal chart.
- Consider the stained glass windows of a Gothic cathedral.
- Consider the images you find in Russian or Greek Orthodox icons.
- Consider the algebraic architectural and religious designs of the medieval Arab world.
- Consider the image of the labyrinth, the maze. Both are shorthand for hypertext.

Suniti Namjoshi makes the connection between ancient uses of myth, storytelling and cyberculture (1996 ix-xxix). The shift for a poet to hypertext is not a huge one, it is simply a matter of coming to grips with the technology and being prepared to extend the poetic thinking into other media. She writes (1996 xvii):

Poetry wasn't always printed on a page. That was merely the medium for broadcasting. For hundreds of years and in many different cultures poems were recited.

So when she was introduced to the Power Point program, she didn't rush off and create a business presentation. Instead she recognised it as another medium of broadcasting and a potential tool for poets. Similarly, Suniti saw the

possibility for poets of using the internet as a means of generating discussions in poetic, artistic, musical hypermedia.

She writes of the interactive process that goes on inside the head of a reader of poetry and compares it to the way in which hypertext works. In an imaginary power struggle between Writer and Reader she explains to the Reader:

There's everything left for you to do. At least fifty per cent. All that work is interactive. In the end you recreate the poem in accordance with the contents of your own head. It's not win or lose. You get your individual version of the poem. It sings in your brain. And out of that poem you can, if you like, write another poem. There is no power struggle. Nobody wins or loses. I am not trying to fight you. I am trying to please you. (1996)

Suniti has explored how these new technologies might be used creatively. The Babel Building Site exists as a result, and here are some early examples of poetry on Power Point. It was a combination of Suniti's ideas on poetry and my own reflections on how we at Spinifex were using our Web Site in conjunction with a poem I have been writing that has led me to the following presentation.

What I want to mention here is the way in which we as writers, teachers, publishers and activists can use electronic media for creative and political purposes. I have elsewhere written about what defines cyberfeminism. Using the media in unexpected and creative ways is one aspect of that. Another is using it for political ends, activism and campaigns. The third aspect of cyberfeminism is a constant critique which follows you around in your mind, always questioning whether what you are doing is a misuse, or whether you are challenging others who simply perpetuate the current power structures.

A discussion of cyberfeminism, however, is beyond the bounds of this paper. (Editorial note) What I want to do now is to share some ideas I am currently developing on moving from print to the electronic media. This project is both creative and political. It started simply as a poem. But as I wrote the poem I found I needed to add footnotes. Shades of *The Wasteland*, I thought to myself. But no. The reason why this particular poem needed footnotes was because it concerns a hidden history, a hidden culture, one whose works are only gradually being unearthed, and whose shards of culture are fragmented and spread throughout many regions of the world. I am speaking about lesbian culture and traditions.

One of the advantages of reproducing the poem hypertextually is that the reader gets to decide whether to follow any of the hyperlinks. In a print version, the footnotes intrude on the page, the images take up space between the lines, the music has to be imagined and so on. In hypertextual form the different elements can be brought together or remain separate.

Transparency

The strength of using hypertext is that the author can make transparent the process which, as Suniti Namjoshi argues, has been used for thousands of years in storytelling, poetry, music and art. The problem is that it may close off the imagination of the reader. But this may depend on the way the project is undertaken. To what extent are all the gaps filled in? To what extent is there sufficient richness in the material to allow the reader to elaborate imaginatively on the work presented? These are critical questions. The person uploading the content of the web site or the CD-ROM has to know the difference between answering questions (for an information page) or creating opportunities for further imaginative play (in the case of a work of art).

Hypertext allows for a transparency of *process*. That we have not noticed this before, is simply that we have adjusted to the print and other media and allowed it to construct us. Information technologies will also construct us, but process is obvious just now because we are having to change our habits. Along with transparency after the fact, hypertext appears to be generating a before-the-act transparent process. Some poetry is written in this way too. In the example I discuss below, I began by writing out a lateral list of associations.

My starting point was lesbian tradition and culture:
 jade-Chinese-silk workers-hair
 moon-sleeping alone-night-restless-trees-arms-sky
 cows-lovers-horns-sweet peas-cerise
 sisters-companions-mangoes-rice wine
 stopped mouths-statues-silence-multilingual polyps
 stoma-lips-mouth-feasts-tongue
 ache-body-absence-distance-hollow of memory-loss-regret
 morning-flowers
 longing-huddling-squandering time-chamber of the heart
 whistling

There are many images in this list which were incorporated into the final poems, and quite a few which weren't. This is because these are starting points and as the poem proceeds, the mind continues its associative processing, adding and subtracting from the list. Some were subtracted because they were images or concepts I had used previously in other poems and when a choice appeared I selected the image I had not used previously.

In the following draft of a hypertextual poem, some hypertextual links have already been indicated by the footnotes which accompany the print version. What is not possible, or very difficult to achieve in print form are some of the links to other media. The visual images could be scanned and printed, but it is much cheaper to put them on a Home Page or embed them in a digital program such as StoryVision™. The sound of a bone flute or other music referred to in the text is impossible to recreate in the print medium. Similarly the references to the Performing Older Women's Circus could be incorporated digitally into a QuickTime™ or RealTime™ video link.

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TEXT

Vol 1 No 2 OCTOBER 1997

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

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