

**Susan STEWART, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 353, \$49.00 Cdn. (cloth), ISBN 0-19-506617-0)**

**Di Brant**

Volume 16, Number 1, 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083309ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083309ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

**ISSN**

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Brant, D. (1994). Review of [Susan STEWART, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 353, \$49.00 Cdn. (cloth), ISBN 0-19-506617-0)]. *Ethnologies*, 16(1), 202–205. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083309ar>

Iroquois Confederacy often pursued disparate policies; Mohawk actions were usually independent of those of the Onondaga or Seneca. When assessing the declarations of a seventeenth century Iroquois diplomat, one should be aware of which nation he represents, and possibly which village within that nation and even which faction within the village.

Dennis also discusses the nature of the Dutch and French societies which interacted with the nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. His description of "the chaos of Beverwyck" (the Dutch settlement at what is now Albany) is fascinating. "Riding the goose" and cross-sex-dressing on Shrove Tuesday (pp. 148, 150) do not, however, receive the same interest from Dennis that Iroquois oral tradition and ritual receive in earlier chapters.

### Bibliography

HALE, Horatio,

1883 *The Iroquois Book of Rites*, Philadelphia, D. G. Brinton.

HUNT, George T.,

1940 *War of the Iroquois*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press.

SMITH, Ermine A.,

1883 "Myths of the Iroquois", *Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology for the years 1885-1881*, p. 47-116.

TRELEASE, Allen W.,

1960 *Indian Affairs in Colonial New York: The Seventeenth Century*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

Thomas S. ABLER  
University of Waterloo  
Waterloo, Ontario

---

Susan STEWART, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 353, \$49.00 Cdn. (cloth), ISBN 0-19-506617-0).

Stewart takes as emblem for this impressive and at times fascinating study of "the relations between subjectivity, authenticity, writing, speech, and the law"

(p. 3), the blindfolded figure of a seated nude female model, as rendered in 19th century American painter Thomas Eakins' charcoal drawing, "Nude Woman Seated Wearing a Mask". The purpose for the blindfold, Stewart explains, was to protect the anonymity of the model, a device routinely used in 19th century American and European artistic circles. For Stewart, however, the image thus self-consciously represented in Eakins' drawing connotes also the traditional allegorical figure of Justice, blindfolded, who shares her blindness with the anonymous figure of the criminal "facing" punishment, reminding us of their mutuality as abstractions, equally unrepresentable, outside the law, looking in. The figure of the blindfolded model thus dramatizes, for Stewart, by analogy, a central problem of visual and linguistic representation, and the current preoccupation of postmodernist discourse: "the impossibility of a seeing that could see itself seeing, and consequently of a writing that could write itself writing" (vii). Since the fundamental detachment of "writing from context, of speaking from voice, of a proper name freed from its body" (viii), is depicted most clearly in those marginal writing/drawing practices which push against the outermost limits of the law, Stewart takes as the subject of her enquiry here documented historical instances of forgery, imposture and pornography from 18th century European and 20th century European/North American discourses, "crimes of writing", defined and mediated and cast out by law (itself an "impostor", an historical writing practice claiming transcendence), which show us the limit of representation, the "blank or blinded time/space that enables all representation to take time and space" (vii-viii).

Stewart's formidable scholarship enables her to range over a broad range of case studies without losing theoretical substance or analytical depth. Some of these cases will be familiar to the reader, others represent considerable pioneer work. Stewart links the development of copyright legislation in the 18th century, under new market pressures from the proliferating printing press, and buttressed with Romantic ideas of the author's originality, with the contemporary crisis in the notions of "authority", and "authorship", reminding us that even our most basic assumptions about writing are after all recent inventions. Her chapters on the detailed narrative forgeries of George Psalmanazar in the 18th century, the "ballad scandals" of the Romantic period, the imposture of Thomas Chatterton, and contemporary legislation regarding graffiti and pornography offer valuable and interesting historical information about the development of textuality in relation to the law (not to mention fascinating portraits of bizarre episodes in this history). They also point to important insights into the problem of containing representation within a legal code which is itself historically inscribed.

By offering practical examples of the theoretical problems besetting postmodernist discourse at this time, Stewart grounds questions of textuality in the history of human agency, and opens brilliant new spaces in the contemporary language debate. By pushing each case study to a consideration of the contradic-

tions on which it is founded, however, Stewart appears unrelentingly committed, in advance, to demonstrating the Derridean-Lacanian insistence on absence and lack as the defining characteristics of language, and alienation as the only mode of relationship available to use between text and body, in a culture forever suspended above, away from, nature. This has been said, already, so many times: what this reader hoped for, and kept anticipating, was a move beyond the deconstructive stance into new theories of agency and responsibility. After all, we are required as humans to make decisions involving questions of “justice” every day, decisions with important, practical, measurable results, despite the admitted slipperiness of the media by which we do so, language and the law. Stewart herself must rely on the illusion of actual representation in language to make her argument. I couldn’t help returning to the disturbing figure of Eakins’ blindfolded woman; thinking about her eyes seeking darkness under the blindfold, her thoughts and feelings inside the exposed body, eloquent to our ears and eyes, despite her muteness, her body’s silencing. I also thought of Ong’s warning in *Orality and Literacy*; “Without orality, textualism is rather opaque and playing with it can be a form of occultism, elaborate obfuscation — which can be endlessly titillating, even at those times when it is not especially informative” (1991: 169-170). Stewart’s writing is never merely obfuscating, and always informative, but I’m trying to imagine her argument taken, in each instance, a step further, toward politicizing the theoretical dimensions of textuality, toward remembering the more fundamental crimes of writing, and their real, historical consequences; the brutal destruction of oral cultures, the silencing of nature and the commodification of women’s bodies, the suppression of “jouissance” in language through the devaluation of the semiotic aspects of language, rhythm and sound, and the ongoing “murder of the mother” in language, which, Irigaray has taught us, underlies the destructive impulse of Western culture. Maybe, maybe, that will be the topic of Stewart’s next book, since she is a poet as well as theorist, and thus consciously involved in the creative transaction between semiotic and symbolic, the body’s articulation into speech, in the production of writing.

Oh, and one more thing: I hope next time Stewart find a more vigilant editor, so that we don’t have to fluctuate so wildly between dense, almost unbearably opaque prose, filled with such phrases as “distanciated intention” (viii) and the “illusion of intrinsicality” (67), on the one hand, and brilliant passages, marked by clarity and wit, on the other, evoking complex possibilities beyond the scope of her present argument to deliver. I will end with two such passages, which demonstrate Stewart’s writing at its best, the first from the opening of Chapter 6, on the relation between travel writing and the incest prohibition:

*One must travel to find a mate. That is, one must not look too closely, and one must not look too far afield. This aphorism links two*

*projects — travel writing and the prohibition of incest — that have to do with the articulation and maintenance of cultural boundaries in time and space. If we look to the notion of such a “link”, we find a rule of metaphor: that a point of comparison must be articulated within an acceptable field, yet must be novel enough to be “striking”, to make a sign of difference. Such a rule of metaphor is thereby also a rule of writing, or marking, that must be recognizable to others and meaningful to one’s kind (173).*

The other passage is from the closing chapter, entitled “Coda: Reverse Trompe L’Œil/The Eruption of the Real”, and embodies the sense of the body throwing off its gags and blindfolds, at last, and entering speech, which I anticipated, and longed for, throughout the book:

*You notice that the metaphor of surface begins to break down. The metaphor of surface becomes the surface of metaphor; the relation among signifiers, posited as a material and historical relation, nevertheless continues to be haunted by the deferred ontology that is its point of origin. What has been suppressed is the alterity that will erupt as nature and death — the alterity of the Real... what seems to be noise, turns into a cry, what seems to be nature becomes a matter of history. Mr. Lockwood, who wants to enter the house, is the perpetrator of the most violent crime in all of Wuthering Heights, staunching the wound/wind with a pyramid of books. The bough turned into a child’s icy hand: the trauma. The child’s icy hand turned into a dream: the fantasy. The dream turned into the wish of the other: the ontology of the subject. The wish of the other bound about by pain: the ontology of recognition (274).*

## Bibliography

- ONG, Walter J.,  
1991 *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London and New York, Routledge.

Di BRANT  
University of Winnipeg  
Winnipeg, Manitoba