

Bodies/Countries: Mary Melfi's "Flirt" with Feminism in *Infertility Rites*

Eva C. Karpinski

Volume 24, Number 1, 1999

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc124_1art04

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Karpinski, E. C. (1999). Bodies/Countries:: Mary Melfi's "Flirt" with Feminism in *Infertility Rites*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 24(1), 57–69.

Article abstract

Mary Melfi's *Infertility Rites* can be seen as a record of one woman's struggle for control of her body, both in a social and biological sense; it is a struggle she is bound to lose as long as she treats her body as an enemy rather than an ally. Nina's sense of herself as a woman is determined by her ethnic background, where "Canadianness" rubs against "Italianness," as well as by other dichotomies around which her life is structured such as work/home, public/private, motherhood/infertility, sexism/political correctness, immigrant/mainstream or patriarchal/feminist. Nina's increasingly essentialized sense of femininity is projected in the novel as the function of her ethnicity. Her gradual fall into her own body seems to her like a retreat into a new country that is at war with itself. Melfi's metafictional novel, like Nina's subjectivity, is invaded and traversed by many contending discourses. Melfi's insertion of "studies" - brief notes based on statistical data and scientific research - is an important structural device that enhances the novel's focus on female subjectivity as animated by contradictions.

Bodies/Countries: Mary Melfi's "Flirt" with Feminism in *Infertility Rites*

EVA C. KARPINSKI

as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.

— Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938)

Begin, though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in — the body.

— Adrienne Rich, "Notes toward a Politics of Location" (1984)

"I do not care about the country's problems. It is not my country. My country is my body and a revolution against it has taken place."

— Mary Melfi, *Infertility Rites* (1991)

TO PLACE Mary Melfi in the company of Virginia Woolf and Adrienne Rich, as I have done through my choice of epigraphs, is to suggest the possibility of reading *Infertility Rites* from a feminist perspective which can offer an interpretation of the female subject as multiply embodied. Melfi's troping of the body as a country situates her in the tradition of women writers who have tapped the rich semantics of the body/country metaphor, from Woolf casting the female body in opposition to militaristic nationalism, to Rich reclaiming the body as a location to speak from. This trope seems to foreground several recurrent motifs in feminist writing, such as women's relation to patriarchy with which "country," in the sense of "fatherland" (Italian *patria*), shares the same root; women's exile from culture, language, and writing, through the essentialist equation of women with nature; women's exile from their bodies whose sexual and reproductive autonomy has been threatened by the biomedical establishment; and, finally, women's "politicized" embodiment at the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, nationality, or sexuality. Such territorial imagery transforms the female body into

a site of contest over whose body it is, and who has the right to name, represent, and discipline the body. Indeed, to use Ruth Behar's words, "the body in the woman and the story in the woman are inseparable" (270).

In this context, Melfi's *Infertility Rites* can be seen as a record of one woman's struggle for control of her body, both in a social and biological sense, a struggle she is bound to lose as long as she treats her body as an enemy rather than an ally. It is a novel about failure, internalized oppression, and rebellion turned into complicity. The protagonist, Nina DiFiore, caught between the extreme claims of feminist and patriarchal discourses on her self (and her body) does not manage to achieve liberation from categories of containment. I want to read Melfi's text as a narrative that dramatizes the female subject's difficulty trying to negotiate her identity and her body vis-à-vis various essentialized identities culturally assigned to her. Extrapolating from the written text to the process of writing, I will also show at the end that Nina's problems are mirrored reflexively by Melfi's own attempts to navigate the course between essentialism and constructionism while trying to articulate female subjectivity in her fiction.

One more reason to give Melfi's novel the critical attention it deserves is the fact that she has been persistently underrated by mainstream reviewers. Melfi herself seems to be aware of the hostility her work "sometimes generates in some of the establishment's journals" ("Interview" 126). She attributes this lack of acceptance to her "apolitical and surrealist leanings" (126), her predilection for macabre and violent images and the (unpopular) theme of failure, as well as her attempts to break social taboos through writing the body. That Melfi should be suspicious of her critics, comparing them to taxidermists (123), is understandable in the light of their lack of attention to detail, frequent misreading, and careless dismissal of her work, evidenced all too strongly in the case of *Infertility Rites*.¹ Perhaps this resistance to Melfi's "female-sexed text"² reflects a larger problem in mainstream criticism, namely the problem of how to position writing deterritorialized through inscriptions of ethnicity and/or femininity. As an Italian Canadian woman writer, Mary Melfi occupies the space of difference; it is a space "in-between" from which she speaks as an ethnic, as a woman, as not-quite a feminist, not-quite a mainstream writer.³

In *Infertility Rites*, Nina DiFiore, a woman in her early thirties, experiences acute ambivalence associated with living in a female body while she narrates her story of trying desperately to have a baby. Before she can

carry her pregnancy to term, she goes through several miscarriages. In the process, she reveals ambiguities and contradictions inherent in her multiple roles as a wife, a part-time research assistant, an aspiring painter, a daughter, a Catholic, an Italian Canadian, and a self-proclaimed feminist. Unable to reconcile the tensions of her fractured identity, she is quite predictably haunted by a paralyzing sense of inadequacy and guilt. Her sense of herself as a woman is determined by her ethnic background, where “Canadianness” rubs against “Italianness,” as well as by other dichotomies around which her life is structured, such as work/home, public/private, motherhood/infertility, sexism/political correctness, immigrant/mainstream, or patriarchal/feminist. Melfi uses the metaphor of exile to describe Nina’s symptomatic detachment from her country, her co-workers, and her husband (24), a metaphor in which we can detect distant echoes of Helene Cixous’s philosophy of exile as women’s condition under phallogentrism defined as “an economy that works against us and off our backs” (Cixous 877). The trope of exile allows Melfi to foreground the paradox of woman’s situation as both chosen and enforced.

How gender, class, and ethnic determinants converge to produce a marriage plagued by differences can be seen in Melfi’s portrait of Nina and her husband. Viewed exclusively from the wife’s perspective, the story reads like feminist-inspired social satire. It allows the author to bring out sexist underpinnings of the modern institution of marriage, where woman’s work in the house is deemed valueless, and to unveil the pseudo-egalitarian pretensions of such fashionable clichés as “a career woman” or “a childless couple,” which in fact conceal a tacit manipulation of women’s bodies. The irony of Nina’s marital situation is exacerbated by the fact that her own feminist rhetoric of independence and equality has been co-opted by her egotistic and verbally abusive husband and turned against her in the form of excessive demands. As a result, she is stuck between the extreme ideas of marital prostitution and “redemptive” motherhood, which she embraces with a hope that the baby will help her build up self-confidence, improve her marriage, restore her “emotional data bank” (13). As the wife’s obsessive desire for a child develops into an essentialist longing for self-fulfillment, the sterility of her relationship becomes literalized with each subsequent miscarriage. The couple’s respective Italian Canadian working-class and Anglo-Saxon bourgeois backgrounds continually collide, creating a parodic model of marital power politics. What gets simultaneously satirized in the novel is the husband’s bigotry and ethnocentrism and the wife’s transition: from the initial rebellion against both North American middle-class culture and the traditional

Italian patriarchal family to her growing identification with the ethnically marked ideal of motherhood, rationalized as biological necessity.

Similarly, alienation resulting from a sense of exile seems to characterize the narrator in relation to her work both in the office and as an independent artist. The brainy environment of her research institute, with its cult of reason and rationalism, serves as a constant reminder of her own irrational “animalism.” Moreover, she realizes that she is being economically exploited and marginalized in her workplace while her art — as long as it does not bring any profit — is devalued no less than her work as a housewife. In a society that treats art as commodity, Nina refuses to commercialize her work and remains truthful to her vision, no matter how disturbed or insulted her audience may be by its violence. She tries to resist the pressure of stereotypes invoked by her critics, for whom “women painters” are “supposed to provide humour, the human touch, optimism — qualities [she] lacked” (31). Attempts to control and contain her artistic expression also take the form of ethnic bashing, especially in conversations with her husband, an art professor who puts her in place as “an immigrant artist” rather than “a Canadian artist.” Such labels reflect a nationalistic agenda intent on preserving oppressive hierarchies of art classified as either “mainstream” or “ethnic.” Nina, however, rejects the connection between ethnicity and art, believing instead that artists are influenced not “by their external environment but by their internal ones” (123). The “interior landscapes” she paints after a series of miscarriages mirror what she sees inside her body: “the godless gutter, beasts playing with the id, unfriendly-like. Ridiculed for it. Hurt by it. Impoverished because of it” (157). Nevertheless, art is her only solace and perhaps the only sphere where she can feel less constrained in trying to find her own voice. Ironically, her gesture of defying popular tastes still gets appropriated and subsumed under such labels as “neo-surrealism” or “modernism.” Even as an artist, she is defined in terms of “the father’s discourse” and classified as a lesser Salvador Dali or Giorgio De Chirico.

Infertility Rites resonates with feminist subtexts also in its handling of the mother-daughter relationship. Here Melfi seems to confirm Joseph Pivato’s point that for Italian Canadian writers family “cannot be separated from the individual identity or from the larger community” (41). There has never been any real closeness between Nina and her mother. The narrator recalls her joyless childhood in a run-down urban ghetto and her mother’s high expectations for her, expectations that Nina, in her own judgement, has failed to come up to. She has not become “a success story Italian style: through marriage...or better still, through education” (28).

Another barrier between them is the gap between Nina's rudimentary Italian and her mother's virtual lack of English, as well as a cultural heritage that demands suppression of intimate feelings between mothers and daughters as a sign of respect.⁴ The silences between them speak of yet another form of metaphorical exile experienced by the female subject: Nina's exile from the mother tongue and, symbolically, from the maternal body, from the mother's love and support. In this sense, the character resembles what Cixous calls "the hysterical offspring of a bad mother" who has not given her daughter enough love for her "to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was 'born' to her" (881).

However, concentrating mostly on their differences, Nina fails to notice how similar she is to her mother, who "came to America to ensure her daughter would have equal opportunity with men, be one with the rulers of the land (also male in this part of the world)" (29). The narrator's mother has been disadvantaged by her own father, who barred her access to literacy, and she seems to have passed her rebelliousness on to her daughter. Unfortunately, the mother tends to be repressive, particularly in her rejection of the North American in Nina — a gesture through which she resembles those immigrant mothers whom Genni Donati Gunn describes as perpetuating their daughters' double oppression, from inside and outside. Such mothers enforce traditional expectations while at the same time desiring "a better life for their daughters, one filled with the opportunities they never had" (Gunn 143). In this context, Nina's rebellion against her mother acquires a certain ethno-specific meaning: she embraces what William Boelhower calls "the genealogical principle" (234) that pushes children of immigrants to question the original project of their parents.

Inseparable from the narrator's genealogical questioning is her revisionist attitude to Catholicism, which is perceived as both a highly charged ethnic marker and a form of policing the body. Nina seems to be aware that the Catholic Church's policy on reproduction and birth control is embroiled in contradictions as it simultaneously supports pro-life movements while opposing all forms of high-tech reproductive techniques, or as it ignores the risk of AIDS through its ban on contraceptives. She has been a lapsed Catholic ever since she discovered a discrepancy between her inner sense of moral existence and the Church's official rules. Like thousands of other Catholic women who find it impossible to reconcile the reality of life in a female body with the Church's prohibitive stand on abortion, contraception, or divorce, the narrator faces a choice of either rejection combined with guilt or consent leading to hypocrisy. Interestingly, she seems to embody both these opposing tendencies. Ac-

cording to Enoch Padolsky, second-generation Italian Canadian families offer “two different cultural options for the children — escape (rebellion) or remain (stagnation)” (“The Place” 141). Nina literally finds herself in limbo as she oscillates between the extremes of idolatry and blasphemy, alternately begging God to help her conceive or calling him “a male chauvinist pig” (138). As her suffering and depression deepen, her “religiousness” gradually increases, and — tormented by self-blame and self-hatred — she is more and more willing to bargain with God. A striking example of Nina’s ambivalent stance toward any identity discourses is her (dis)identification with different ethnic definitions available to her, including “Italian,” “Canadian,” “immigrant Italian,” or hyphenated “Italian-Canadian.” Her attempts to distance herself from any essentially defined identity reveal a degree to which the discourses of gender and ethnicity intertwine in her narrative. As Francesco Loriggio reminds us, both feminist and ethnic writers are unified by their common preoccupation with the body:

For the former, the body is the entity which has determined the status of women in society and which must be reclaimed and rediscovered if that status is to be modified. For the latter, the body is the purveyor of the ethnos: one is an ethnic above all, even if not exclusively, by descendance, cellularly, by inhabiting and being inhabited by some genealogical continuity. (“Italian-Canadian” 77)

Through the body/country metaphor, Melfi’s novel interrogates this interdependence of gender and ethnicity, based on an uneasy coupling of biological essentialism and ethno-cultural essentialism.⁵ Nina’s initial estrangement from essentially defined “femininity” finds its counterpart in her exile from the body as a locus of ethnic identity which is inscribed on it. Even though she feels alienated from her Canadian environment, she no longer has any attachment to the old country. For her, the condition of marginality results in multiple displacements. She can “never go back home” (31) because she knows she wouldn’t fit in there. She rejects Italian phallogentrism, the heritage that her mother, a peasant from Abruzzi, was the first in her family to renounce. To Nina, Italy stands for the “repression of women and the poor” (32). By the same token, she deplores the materialism of Italian immigrant culture, especially her own mother’s acquisitiveness. She speaks as a victimized child of those Italian immigrants who sacrificed their offspring “to the Golden Calf [of] Real Estate” (93). Although her friend, Mary, defends material success in terms of class mobility, Nina resents any manifestation of a successful integra-

tion into the money culture that, according to her, characterizes the aspirations of the Italian community. She is equally critical of “North American mythology” (32). Due to her class and ethnic background, she feels “out of place in the Canadian mosaic” (56). Beyond the democratic facade, she can see a hierarchically structured system of inequalities, which she tries to challenge by means of irony: “All the orderlies in this hospital are black. Does Ann Landers know why?” (87). Nina is “scared by the spaces between countries; between identities” (38). Always an individualist, she finds this obsession with group identity oppressive. In her case, rigidly fixed “positionality,” what Francesco Loriggio describes as being “aware that one speaks from some point or some status” (“History” 22), is violating her dream of avoiding definition.

Melfi’s narrator repeatedly challenges the discourse of nationalism, each time repositioning herself in relation to it or providing alternative frames of reference. Whether seen from the macro-perspective of global extinction or the micro-perspective of her own body, nationalism appears meaningless and can be equated with brainwashing or childhood conditioning (75). She discards the particularism of nationalistic claims and envisions humanity united by global patriotism, where the national anthem, in a twist of macabre humour, will be replaced by a global anthem: “*We stand on Thee*, rather than *In Thee* (all of us six feet under, regardless of race, colour, or greed)” (34). On the other hand, Nina’s gradual fall into her own body seems to her like a retreat into a new country which is at war with itself. Her “passage into the interior” is echoed by the metaphors of walking through the infertility maze, or going “down into the sewage system to look for her lost baby” (48). During her descent, she discovers that she is “neither Canadian nor Italian, but a citizen of the underworld, trapped in its maze, where it is always badly lit” (48). Driven to remorse, made to feel worthless, deprived of dignity, she despairs: “I am not only missing a baby, I am a missing person” (49). Although she falls short of making a connection between her personal sense of failure and her internalized patriarchal valuation of the female body as primarily a site of reproduction, she nevertheless comes close to understanding the complicity between nationalism and sexism, which in the service of patriarchy use women’s bodies to boost male pride through national beauty pageants.

Caught between “Italianness” and “Canadianness,” Nina is alienated from both and drawn to both, as the ambivalence in retaining her maiden name reveals: “I don’t use my husband’s name. He’s English and I’m not,’ I state, wondering if I was Italian just because my father’s family name suggested it. Probably not” (104). Her increasingly essentialized sense of

femininity is projected in the novel as the function of her ethnicity, suggesting perhaps that embracing one form of essentialism entails the other. The narrator's passage through "infertility rites" seems to bring out the Italian in her. Consumed by her desire to experience motherhood, she seems to be growing more and more estranged from Canadian culture, which is signalled by her rejection of the psychiatrist who "uses English words, English ideas, English civilization to teach me to respect myself and my abilities" (159). In Nina, the same gesture can be read as both anti-traditionalist (keeping her maiden name so as to defy women's subordination in marriage) and extremely traditional (keeping her maiden name so as to honour her Italian heritage).

Melfi's thematic and rhetorical encoding of the contradictions and ambivalences pervading women's lives is further reinforced by other formal elements in the novel. One such conspicuous device is the *mise-en-scène* effect created by the descriptions of Nina's paintings. This art-within-art technique functions as an internal mirror which allows us to have a glimpse of Nina's subconscious:

I draw charcoal sketches of the underworld. In it women are sodomized, raped, cut up, stuffed with old ideas on what constitutes a woman. A woman is only allowed a brief existence (without pain) — when she can yet be called a girl, fresh and pretty in her school uniform, dreaming about princes who will come and transform her ordinary life into an idyllic one. Turning thirty, women in the underworld are treated like nuclear waste: unwanted by-products of a good source of energy. They are hidden, put to work out of sight, while their younger sisters provide their male captors with an endless supply of sexual energy which, in turn, helps the men there to be an evil force. (121)

This is a dystopian vision of a woman's "inferno," reflecting Nina's torment in a world governed and controlled by men. Most unusual about this picture is the fact that women's suffering is related to what they are made to think of themselves as women. Discourses about what constitutes a woman can be as violating as rape. Other paintings, like the one called "The Nuns," showing a group of boys and girls inside a huge bird cage, thematize the problem of gender inequalities by means of surrealist images. Nina's paintings reinforce the symbols of the body as cage, manikin, or wound that Melfi employs in her narrative.⁶ Such symbolism foregrounds the idea of women's obsessive concern with the body image and function, combined with their paradoxical estrangement from their

bodies. Having internalized certain expectations that the institution of motherhood invests in women, Nina becomes “a woman waiting” (Rich 39): waiting to conceive, waiting for a miscarriage, waiting for the birth of her child. On an intellectual level, she is capable of understanding the ideology of motherhood as a patriarchal construct. Emotionally, however, she becomes more and more dependent on it. In the text, her body is represented as a battlefield for competing discourses of gender as biology and culture. Nina’s miscarriages ironically are signs of her inner resistance to or rejection of her biological “destiny.” A chromosomal defect discovered in Nina also suggests her latent refusal to “reproduce” the same pattern.

All these textual motifs converge in the body/country metaphor, which provides the framework for the central idea of women’s oppression, the condition that Luce Irigaray, like Cixous, describes in terms of exile, reminiscent of Nina’s situation:

It’s not that we have our own territory, but that their nation, family, home, and discourse imprison us in enclosures where we can no longer move — or live as ‘we.’ Their property is our exile. Their enclosures, the death of our love. Their words, the gag upon our lips. (74)

In Melfi’s novel, the notion of oppression extends into that of “colonization” or “appropriation” of women’s bodies, either for profit, as in the case of medical institutions, or for pleasure, as in sexual exploitation. The medical control of women’s bodies is presented through Nina’s relation with her gynecologist, Dr. Saad, whom she sees alternately as a “high-tech medical wizard” (26) who can prevent her suffering and as a pimp whose “income comes in part from the use of my body” (82). Subjected to medical and legal technologies of prenatal care, Nina’s body is treated both as an object of pathology and as property. Similarly, she juxtaposes the male economy of sexual desire, articulated by her boss for whom woman’s “fuckability” is quite unrelated to her “ability to enjoy sex” (51), and her vision of female sexuality, demanding recognition of her own needs and asserting herself playfully as a sexual subject for whom “orgasms are easy” (13).

Melfi’s insertion of “studies” — brief notes based on statistical data and scientific research, an equivalent of “ready-mades” in surrealist aesthetics — is an important structural device that enhances the novel’s focus on female subjectivity as animated by contradictions. These studies break the monologic character of Nina’s voice, introducing “scientific” discourses of the body, objective “facts” about women, against which Nina measures

her own experiences. After all, she is a research assistant who likes “feeding on raw facts and figures” and “collecting and re-arranging materials” (152). Like her art, information is part of her attempt to stay in control of her life, even if such control is only illusory (127). The studies intensify and are more frequent and obtrusive as she is consumed by her obsession with motherhood. Ironically, rather than bestowing a sense of authority and control, the studies suggest Nina’s loosening grip on her life and can be seen as yet another form of “colonization” of Nina’s mind. She is now addicted to and enslaved by different interpretations of the body and has learned to view herself through their findings. In a self-reflexive manner, Melfi’s narrative mirrors the protagonist’s increasing confusion by enacting a kind of formal “disintegration” and becoming more and more fragmented. In this sense, Melfi’s metafictional novel, like Nina’s subjectivity, is invaded and traversed by many contending discourses.

The analysis of Melfi’s text finally brings us to the question: Is Nina really a feminist? She calls herself “a woman flirting with women’s rights” (51) and attributes some of her decisions to feminist principles. However, she does not seem capable of sustaining a consistent political and ideological stance in the face of her own problems. Instead, as the pain of miscarriages and infertility intensifies, she identifies with the role of a monstrous, unnatural woman who cannot fulfill herself through motherhood. From what she reveals about her past, this is not the first time that she sacrifices her “revolutionary” beliefs only to adopt aspects of conventional wifehood. Also, her attitude towards other women such as her mother, her boss, or the office secretary seems to suggest that Nina cannot forge meaningful ties with them. To a large degree, she has internalized sexist stereotypes that women are invited to embrace, which points to an ironic contrast between different meanings attributable to “failure.” For Nina, “failure” is a refusal of her body to get pregnant, a betrayal in which she and her body are guilty partners (69). For feminist readers of her story, “failure” is associated with Nina’s inability to resist co-optation by the ideology of motherhood against all odds and to see value in a childless woman’s life. In the course of her narrative, Nina is transformed from a feisty rebel — lively, brilliant, and sometimes sarcastic — into a depressed, withdrawn, self-absorbed “patient” obsessed with redeeming herself through her body’s reproductive success. Incapable of viewing her own or other women’s similar predicament in political terms, she finds comfort in the universality of female experience. She comments during a “girls-only” party at her friend’s house:

When I tell the women in the room what happened to me, some of them seem more upset than I am, possibly because my story gives them a chance to remember their own, which was otherwise hidden, tucked away, until someone pulled the trigger: memory. We are a family of sorts, collectors of stories, of philosophies on life and death, made intimate by our apolitical histories. (94)

In the light of Nina's entire monologue, obviously those histories, including her own, appear less apolitical than she would have them be. Her refusal of any political commitment makes Nina's self-professed feminism at least problematic.

The question asked of Nina could also be addressed to Mary Melfi: How does *Infertility Rites* fit in the body of feminist writing?²⁷ As Roberta Sciff-Zamaro suggests in her discussion of Italian Canadian women writers, we should try to situate their work in the context of feminism and pay attention to how they differ from other writers (135). Interviewed about her attitude to feminism, Melfi declared her support for progressive feminist thought, but hesitated to call herself a feminist writer: "I generally avoid politics in my poetry" ("Interview" 126). Her political circumspection notwithstanding, in *Infertility Rites* she has written a politically charged text that documents women's contradictory experiences of their embodiment. Melfi's text makes "the private public, and the unspeakable speakable" (Behar 276) by naming and representing graphically women's experiences that our society confines to the sphere of embarrassment and shame. Her experiment in writing the body shows some affinity with Cixous's *écriture féminine*, a call for women to return to the body as a source of female discourse:

By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display — the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. (Cixous 880)

Creating in her book what she calls "the Id's diary" (60), Melfi seems to follow Cixous by turning to the unconscious and the body. For Cixous, the unconscious is "that other limitless country...where the repressed manage to survive" (880), the "repressed" here meaning women. Melfi explores the possibility of translating the body into language, and thus

performs what Pamela Banting calls “intersemiotic translation,” in which the body “mothers its own tongue” (Banting 7). As a translator, Melfi drifts between meanings, showing both how constrained and how free this body is to write itself.

In the final analysis, bodies/countries live a double life: the meaning patriarchy gives to them differs from the one that might be given to them in feminist discourse. While Nina often confuses the two meanings, Melfi herself likes to play with them, leaving the ambiguity unresolved, implying perhaps that women’s lives are enmeshed in both. She makes Nina look like Cixous’s hysteric who flaunts her excesses and responds with hysterical laughter to the impossible conundrum of embodying the female in a patriarchal culture. There is further ambivalence transpiring from the title of Melfi’s novel, which sends antithetical messages when read as “infertility rites” or “infertility rights,” confirming that Melfi may have conceived of Nina as someone who cannot rewrite the dominant scripts of femininity. It would be a mistake to dismiss Melfi from the scene as perpetuating an essentialist fallacy. Her novel belongs in the tradition of Canadian feminist writing which, in the wake of *écriture féminine*, explores women’s relationship to their bodies. However, the risk of reductive essentialism in our reading of *Infertility Rites* can be minimized if the author’s performance is separated from that of the main character, and if the text is allowed to stand as a dramatic monologue, a tragicomic enactment of one woman’s fall into the body trap.

NOTES

¹ See reviews by van Herk, Rollins, and Boone. Interestingly, the feminist writer Aritha van Herk seems to be both attracted and repelled by “the intensity of this novel,” finding it both “appropriate and yet awkward, complex and yet essentialist” (13).

² The term borrowed from Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 877.

³ The issue of “the majority/minority binary” in reference to Italian Canadian writing has been problematized by Padolsky (“Italian-Canadian”).

⁴ See Genni Donati Gunn, who comments on the suppression of “emotions, memories, reactions — all those things which the Italian family traditionally dictates should remain unsaid” (144).

⁵ For a useful critique of the concept of ethnicity in relation to the discourse of determinism and authenticity, see Siemerling, 15-18.

⁶ Interestingly, these are also recurrent symbols in Melfi’s poetry, for example, in *A Bride in Three Acts* (such poems as “The Mental Defective” or “Marriage”) or *The Dance, The Cage and The Horse* (“A Wound Left Over In My Womb”).

⁷ Among the critics who regard Melfi as a feminist, see Padolsky (“The Place”), Amprimoz and Visseli, and Sciff-Zamaro.

WORKS CITED

- Amprimoz, Alexandre L., and Sante A. Visseli. "Death Between Two Cultures: Italian-Canadian Poetry." *Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing*. Ed. Joseph Pivato. Montreal: Guernica, 1985 (1991). 103-20.
- Banting, Pamela. "Body Inc.: Daphne Marlatt's Translation Poetics." *Women's Writing and the Literary Tradition*. Ed. C. Potvin and J. Williamson. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 1992. 1-19.
- Behar, Ruth. "The Body in the Woman, the Story in the Woman: A Book Review and Personal Essay." *The Female Body: Figures, Styles, Speculations*. Ed. Laurence Goldstein. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1991. 267-311.
- Boelhower, William. "Italo-Canadian Poetry and Ethnic Semiosis in the Postmodern Context." *Arrangiarsi: The Italian Immigration and Experience in Canada*. Ed. Roberto Perin and Franc Sturino. Montreal: Guernica, 1992. 229-44.
- Boone, Laurel. "The Joy of Genre." *Books in Canada* 22.7 (Oct. 1991): 54.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Carolyn Baker. *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875-94.
- Gunn, Genni Donati. "Avoiding Stereotypes." *Writers in Transition*. Ed. C.D. Minni and A.F. Ciampolini. Montreal: Guernica, 1990. 141-46.
- Irigaray, Luce. "When Our Lips Speak Together." Trans. Carolyn Burke. *Signs* 6.1 (1980): 69-79.
- Loriggio, Francesco. "Italian-Canadian Literature: Basic Critical Issues." *Writers in Transition*. Ed. C.D. Minni and A.F. Ciampolini. Montreal: Guernica, 1990. 73-87.
- _____. "History, Literary History, and Ethnic Literature." *Literatures of Lesser Diffusion*. Ed. Joseph Pivato. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 1990. 21-45.
- Melfi, Mary. *Infertility Rites*. Montreal: Guernica, 1991.
- _____. "An Interview with Mary Melfi." *Zynergy* 4.1 (1990): 118-29.
- _____. *A Bride in Three Acts*. Montreal: Guernica, 1983.
- _____. *The Dance, the Cage, and the Horse*. Montreal: D Press, 1976.
- Padolsky, Enoch. "Italian-Canadian Writing and the Ethnic Minority/Majority Binary." *Social Pluralism and Literary History: The Literature of the Italian Emigration*. Ed. Francesco Loriggio. Toronto: Guernica, 1996. 248-68.
- _____. "The Place of Italian-Canadian Writing." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 21.4 (1986/87): 138-52.
- Pivato, Joseph. "Forever Broken: The Italian-Canadian Family." *Family Fictions in Canadian Literature*. Ed. Peter Hinchcliffe. Waterloo: U of Waterloo P, 1988. 33-44.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton, 1976.
- Rollins, Jill. "Frustrated Longings." *Matrix* 36 (1992): 62-63.
- Sciff-Zamaro, Roberta. "A Different Perspective." *Writers in Transition*. Ed. C.D. Minni and A.F. Ciampolini. Montreal: Guernica, 1990. 132-36.
- Siemerling, Winfried. "Writing Ethnicity: Introduction." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 57 (1995): 1-32.
- van Herk, Aritha. "Letters in Canada 1991: Fiction." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 62.1 (1992): 1-53.