

*Wom(b)en Soundings*

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with

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One must listen to her differently in order to hear an "other meaning" which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized. (Irigaray, 1983, p. 103)

The matrixial processes continue to form, inform, 'exform' and transform us throughout life, though the matrixial space-time is usually foreclosed or infolded inside more phallic dimensions and ignored. (Ettinger, 2006, p. 220)

Within the space-time of matrixial borderspace(s) fourteen women unfold a co-poetic language, fed by the connective resonant chamber of the womb. To enter the co-poetics of this writing, which includes several voices and several genres, one must shift ones perspective from the dominant phallic sphere and enter what artist theorist, Bracha Ettinger describes as the matrixial sphere of knowing, which is also a place of co-generative not-knowing. To assist the re-emergence of our understanding of the matrixial, Ettinger has developed a theoretical language that has, as its foundation, the symbology of the womb. Unlike prior theories of development (e.g., Freud & Lacan) that begin at the time of birth and situate it in the trauma of castration, her theorizing begins in the gestating space of the womb where the I and non I co-poetically unfold in relation to the m/Other (Pollock, 2004).

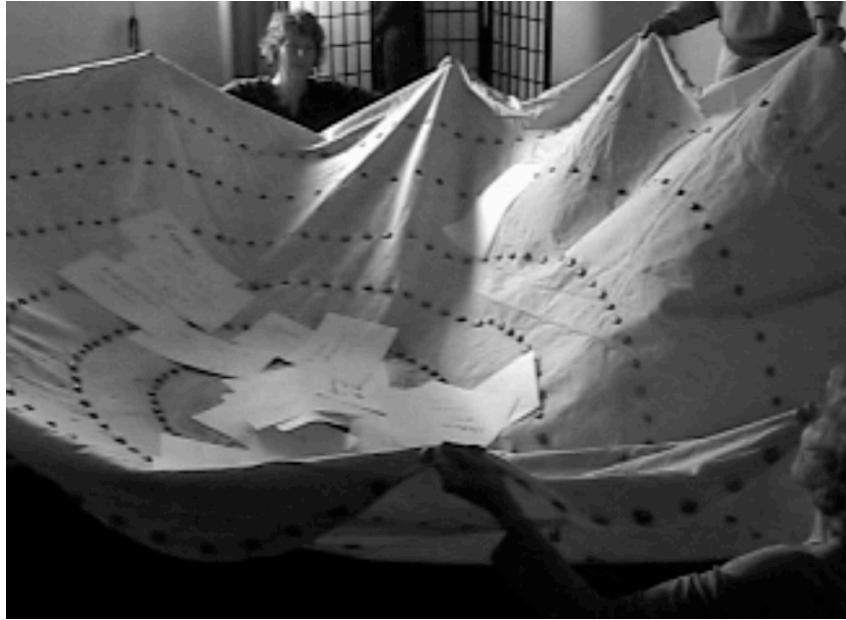
Ettinger describes this matrixial borderspace as a "sphere of encounter-events where intensities and vibrations as well as their imprints and 'memory' traces are exchanged and experienced by fragmented and assembled experiencing partial-subjects who are

reattuning their affective frequencies” (Ettinger, 2006, p. 219). As women gathering within a shared sacred space of vulnerable co-inquiry, our voices encounter and reattune with the m/Other through a process of co-emergence and co-fading. Co-encountered moments of certainty and uncertainty frequent the time together. This work vibrates with the frequencies of several strings that perform a poetic of ethics, holding the potential to shift, transform and reform each of us in the midst of relations of difference.

The visual and textual language that co-mingles below takes on the aspect of lyric prose as it appears on the page and comes from: individual poetic writing; transcribed individual trances;<sup>ii</sup> art that was collaboratively conceived and created as part of an arts-based study;<sup>iii</sup> feminist writers, as well as writing, video stills and transcripts from a performative, writing and movement workshop<sup>iv</sup> that took place two years after the completion of the original study.<sup>v</sup>

The voice that emerges in a matrixial shared zone... borderlinks by resonances that link the inside of the several different individuals in a shareable outside. (Ettinger, 2004, p. 81)

a matrixial shared zone



here with these *womben* is the opening

here in the embrace of loving trust

the possibility  
that the opening once found may return  
wider longer deeper  
welcoming me into myself

now knowing the returning

embracing the expression  
waiting for the timely essence of creation

sounds feed me  
music of drum and voice  
vibration of crystal and copper

sound waves rock me in her breast  
running over me like her milk  
flowing through me like her heartbeat

returning to the familiar resonance of  
collective *wombing womben*

this journey of women

who fly across time

“Flying is woman’s gesture—flying in language and making it fly.” (1997, p. 356)

we are flying  
across time and  
picking up  
all the pieces  
of each woman’s body

the dis-  
membered goddess  
across the lands – we re-  
member her

we put her  
back together – her  
womb holds us  
while we find  
her arms  
her legs  
her feet  
her ears eyes

nose

her heart, we cradle  
in our hands

the mirror at the centre

she is made whole every time we gather together



On the way here, I was taking the bus and it brought back a lot of family memories waiting for the bus in the wind, even though I told two strangers on the bus that I was going to a writing workshop. And also a friend thought at first it was going to be just listening to poetry, and I said oh no we'll be doing some writing. She said oh okay.

I was thinking about the wind and thought I would like to write about the wind, and just the power of the wind. And that brought back a lot of sadness because my mom has a lot of sad feelings about the wind. She grew up on the prairies in the Depression, and the wind took away their livelihood several years with crop failures. She has ended up living in a very windy place now.

But I still appreciate the power of the wind to lift up tiny dust particles and big huge things and blow away the clouds and bring the sunshine.

How different we are!

How each woman's voice is so much

their voice!

We can come together collectively and have a collective experience and out of it come words that speak to the experience and yet are completely unique to each one of us.

I'm welcome to come with what  
I have to offer  
  
and that's the way it will be.

I realized this morning that I cannot separate  
my creative work from my spirituality  
  
that is really what it is for me.

Then I have this image of between:

I am in a movement place - so much is in flow and flux, so it's wanting to go back to  
flux. Sometimes I feel like we are working in such multiple realities.  
And I get so easily stuck in that world of schedules and I know better than that but I am  
so in there too.  
And when I am here it is so good to get the awareness of actually this is real, all of that is  
a sub-trip I'm running and what am I doing with that trip. Like what is reality? What a  
reminder. Anyway,

I'll go unconscious again I know  
  
but it's that call.

And this holding-  
the unthought knowing.  
I feel like I have no thoughts,  
I have no knowing. I just feel like I am living in this extreme.

Trying to hold both these worlds.



Sometimes I think we are lost

in many ways, lost in male energy and lost in female energy too. The need for power is there all around us, or need to control is there, and what we are trying to be. We are trying to be in control of our own lives yet not to be in control of others.

Is it possible?



"This living, this paradox of power and powerlessness that's what I feel I'm living at the same time and it makes no sense."

"Yet, it's real. And it's our experienced reality."

"And in a way it's true, we are part of something that is so much larger. We are the power and it comes through, but it is an interesting one to hold both of them."

"And to let go of both of them."

"I'm thinking of just last night singing putting Shanti to bed. Our co-op [home] is being dismembered... a lot about that is quite amazing. For some reason I'm finding it almost thrilling, being dismembered. I thought I would be more upset about it. There's guys working and I gotta work too, I'm typing and everyone is working and ripping apart..."

"Like Kali..."

"I'm ripping apart too. Wow, I didn't expect to be empowered by this thing coming down around me."

"I'm surrounded by a metaphor!"

It's reality now. And I'm putting Shanti to bed and this one really sad thing, the tree outside our window was taken down yesterday and that tree has been in our home since Shanti was born, almost 7 years. We always say like we live in a tree house cause its right against our windows and it fills it, us and we don't have to close curtains in the summer because we have this tree... it's been such a part of our living space. And it was gone and I could feel it physically. Ah, the tree is gone. When I put Shanti to bed she likes me to sing lullabies, so I'll sing something about our day or her day, or sing to her how's your day and she'll sing something back. So I sang her about the tree, just about the tree we love the tree the trees gone, but we can think about the tree and singing to the tree, I was singing to the tree and to her and I often cradle her and she wasn't saying anything and she was just doing this... but she wasn't saying anything... and she was just going to say goodnight. And I asked is Shanti crying for the tree and she said yeah, and she had this big cry for the tree and it was so beautiful. You know and I realize we can't control these things in our life but just having the space, I mean she just blows me away with this tender heart. What a gift.

I said, "Shanti it is so beautiful you are crying for the tree and the tree knows and you can cry for the tree and your tears are for the spirit of the tree."

spiral of womentoring

reaching out

in all directions

and dimensions

opening  
inviting

through manylimbed expressions

spiral turns

receiving and giving

grace and dissolution

what we don't know

we flow into

vast expanse of possibilities

ever in motion

circling  
surrounding always  
telling from center

*oom*

sound of the deep

blue waters

coming alive

grain of sand

creates the pearl of beauty and wisdom

nurtured by grandmother's essence

in silence it grows

in the simplicities and celebrations of

common days

how to speak our minds

how to laugh

how to respect ourselves

hearts leading

inviting communion  
shaping our vision

bodies over new terrain

opening spaces

to birth  
unimagined form

gaps for understanding

to flow in

folds of new matter  
of thought  
of love

reaching to touch

new relationships

sharing

seeds ripe fruit  
guidance support

learning from each other<sup>vi</sup>

imagination--the womb's shawl we

who are mostly water

fall out of

naked feet keep walking,  
naked earth hold her up,  
naked soul bless the work,  
that all may be seen, and heard, and known.

Within me resides a very ancient wise entity that I see with an inner eye, who is located  
in my sacral space. She mostly rests in a sitting pose,

faceless,  
calm,  
still,  
silent,  
steady.

As I hold the pose and open to the trance

She rises,  
Arches back,  
Sure, strong,  
Vertebrae aligning,  
Inhabiting her full extended form, limbs unfolding,  
Lifting,  
Airborn,

Soaring

soaring

soaring,

over lonely landscape

Back,  
Back,

To earliest form,  
Calling, lone, long, plaintive,  
High and piercing,  
Throat open,  
From the chest.

Aaaia,

Aaaiiaaaa,

Aaaaaaaaaaiiiiiieeeeeeeaaaaaaaaa

Looking, looking,  
Searching....for what?

(no home to lay its head and rest)

Aaaeeeeeeaaaaaaah

eeeeiiiiieeeeeeeaaaaaAAAAAAAAAH!

Primordial Being,  
Alive and present,  
Always Looking,  
Watching,  
Searching,  
Sound of My Being,  
Pterodactyl Memory

What I see while drumming for the trance:  
I see a gold disc with low relief designs, of pre-Columbian style, in front of me.  
It is spirit energy challenging me to pay attention, and to accept my imperfections.  
I see a light wave in the center of the circle, then a fountain of light.  
The room is full of spirits' energy vibrating.  
There is a whirlpool in the earth – very dark with brilliant light embers in the center.  
A gold energy pool grows in the center of my body.  
A snake with wings, a dragon appears before me and flies.  
I am flying on it. I hear it call, a high sound like a bird.

I wanted to have the intent of being completely open and not need it to be a certain way. As a yoga person I focused on my breathing. My mind went to my breath and the drum. I felt a central breath as one with the drum and the women around me. I was conscious of someone yawning and it manifested a cougar/mountain lion animal. The experience was as if I was a bat, an odd creature for me. I was with it going over and seeing things. Then it removed itself and looked at me "I am the bat." Then it came back and went back to surveying, there was a very intentional division between me and the bat – this is me, this is it, this is me. I experienced a lot of brilliant colour, very, very red, very, very purple, variations of the colour, not just visual colour. It flowed through me and everywhere were explosions of colour. The colour took over and there was a funnel or tunnel that came up. As the bat was experiencing the journey it saw scenes of a warrior and a woman who went through things. Wherever there should have been water there was no water. A boat goes over a cliff but there's no water. How does that happen? There's a shark, sea coral, but no water. Somehow, then it's a desert. The man changes his features from a man, to a horse, to a man. The woman seduces him by becoming different creatures then going back to being a woman. It's inside a very ornate tent – brilliantly decorated, colourful, rich and luxurious and there is still no water. At the end the bat finds the water.

bat find water/eagle takes flight



An eagle took flight and began soaring over the landscape. It went to the ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, a site of pain, death, Kali energy. The eagle plucked a serpent from the water, and the large bird began flying with the serpent in its talons. There are serpents everywhere, an image of Medusa flashes through my mind and suddenly serpents are flowing all around us, pouring out of us, and one is flowing up my spine. There are phallic serpents too. I think of David and suddenly Tannis is vomiting. I start to feel my arms heavy and it's now hard to hold myself up. I'm afraid to make fists and place them on my waist, afraid of the imposing posture, anger, darkness, shadow. I'm also feeling the light coming in on my left side, the warmth of the rising sun, hope, it is so present. The light said it remembered me, it came back for me. My body now wants to be strong.

Drum is like a heart beat that wouldn't end, like our own hearts that beat onwards from the moment of our conception. The victory eagle plucks healing archetypes from the unconscious.

Diving Deep.

It is not easy for my hands and feet to hold the posture. It is painful, particularly my left side, and the pain keeps me in my body. I am very sensitive to sound. I can hear heavy breathing behind me on my right side. It is not human or any animal that I know, but I am not concerned. The breather is a witness to my vision. I think it is male. I am aware of others breathing around me. My own breath feels silent. My journey comes in fits and starts like a movie where I can see segments or frames. I can go back and replay these segments to look again and get more details. I see Quetzacoatl flying over me. He looks at me as he passes over and then flies towards the mountain. His feathers are green and gold and his tail is long and snakes across the sky. My vision seems a bit like an illustration of a story or a myth. There is a country of green jungle between me and the mountain which is a volcano with smoke rising from the peak. But he looked at me and he is so beautiful my heart aches. I follow him to the mountain. It is a long journey, but the movie I am in can show glimpses of the terrain without having to show the whole way. I come close to the mountain top and enter a crack in the cone. It is warm and dark – black and reddish from the light of the molten core. I only walk a little way inside. There are caves latticed like a honeycomb. The walls are smooth obsidian. I wish for water. I leave the inside of the volcano returning through the crack in the cone to go out and lie on my back on the grassy slope.

A misty rain washes me as I breathe deeply.



Toes tingling. Sound of tones under the drum changing. Circle breathing.  
Large mouth in centre breathing out. Feet feel heavy, solid, attached to the ground.  
Posture lightens, hands not touching sides. Hot. Heat especially right side, shoulder, arm,  
chest. Fall energy: red, orange, pulse. Individual's breath, circle breathes,  
radiating in and out. Energy in and out, not solid: air, breath in and out pulsing  
colours. Feet and legs one with ground, solid, heavy, rocks, rooted. Whole  
weight of body in feet.

Drone of sound, waves of sound, waves of heat,  
waves of energy, waves of colour spiral in and out.

on the edge of a deep lake cratered by volcano  
mistblue mountains bowl of sky stars bowl of earth  
body spun by vortexes  
on the other side a polar bear with each paw on a mountain  
top its offwhite oily fur stiff on its neck black nose  
sniffs all directions smell of fresh tanned leather  
i'm in chamois trousers and tunic black hair pulled back  
in a heavy braid feet rooted in clay see history spiral  
through the lake into a fire circle black silhouettes  
dance a ring like leather creatures moving in the water  
a palomino head whisking side to side leaps in front of me  
i'm horse my hooves pound clay circle the lake i call  
the herd i hear their thunder suddenly all's still  
  
all is still

My dreams in the past year are full of men, men I know or have known, men who are  
unidentified in the dream. A book by Jung says the animus is harder to define than the  
anima. "Their name is legion". Legions of animus figures sleep with me each night.  
I record their visits and take the records to my analyst and dream group to ask, "Why?"  
Various dream figures are bailing on me. One resigns, one returns to me the key he had.  
Others support me – Milton has the tickets for the ocean voyage; Graham leads me  
through the house to the yard where people are dancing. David and Charles join me and  
Dawn at a round table. A balance of opposites in age and gender.

I wonder about the inner-masculine in this group of females.

The womb supports both feminine and masculine.

You gave your hands and your voice  
ten years ago--  
buried, wailing

lament  
lament

is part of the journey

Let the lament  
lead to its sister

joy

She awaits

“The daughters never were  
true brides of the father

the daughters were to begin with  
brides of the mother

then brides of each other  
under a different law

let me hold and tell ...” (1978, p.  
52)

The matrixial is... an aesthetical and ethical compassionate environment which is, for each becoming-subject,... the Cosmos. (2006, p. 220)

From Nihilo...from nothing  
From Chaos & darkness  
The Holy Spirit births the cosmos  
She births the earth  
She births from the earth... substance  
Pulsating, vibrant beings.

The Holy Spirit overshadows...  
The woman comes into being....  
The woman the carrier of the womb-waters  
The woman the carrier of the unformed  
that transforms into being.

Naked I lay in my mother's womb  
Naked into this world I came.  
My innermost being is created by Her  
She wove me in my mother's womb...  
In the dark and secret place,  
She knitted me into my form and shape.

In the depth of the earth's womb,  
Where I began as dust...  
She envisioned my body & mind.  
That very darkness where I began  
is filled with the light that is you, O Essence.

O Holy Spirit, can I hide from you?  
I knew you before sound & language  
touched my tongue.

I long to enter the light...

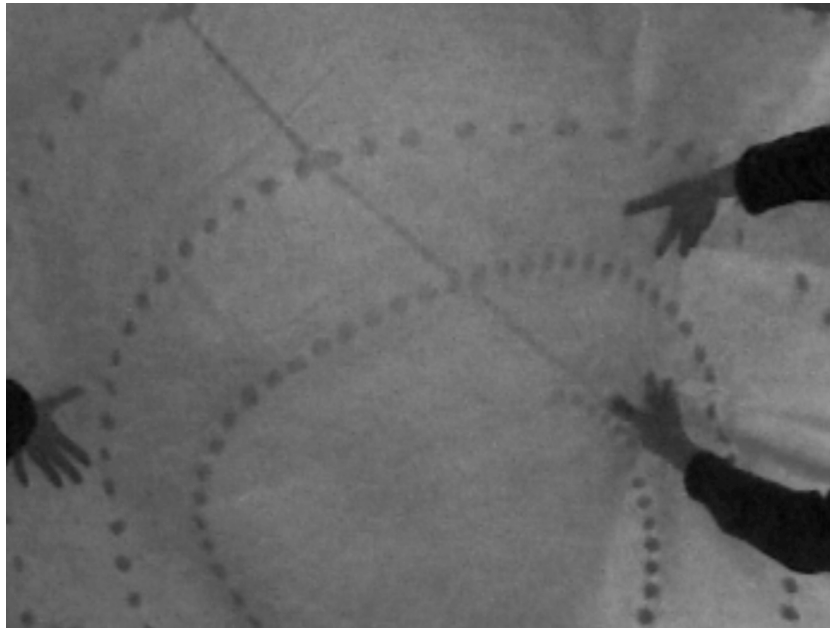
I long to reenter that womb....

I long to reenter the darkness that is light....

I long to relearn the holy language of peace...

I long to be recreated and re-formed...

I long to reclaim my being in you.



strains through the wom(b)an's shawl

until feet of clay emerge to

root in earth's bowl

The sacred labyrinth is so much of my spiritual journey  
Throwing caution to the wind as it blows away my rules about the labyrinth  
Be free -  
colour in the lines -  
colour outside the lines

Walk wherever you want -

just start at the beginning -

go straight to the middle

Walk the path

a new definition of sister  
one that comes to me  
freely, lightly  
stripped of the old weight of obligation

with these women there is no need to earn  
the trust and love are simply there  
held in the circle

with these women sharing is mentoring  
together we enjoin in the gestation  
seeking germination  
waiting with reverence

our bodies move in harmony  
we are sacred  
we hold faith in our  
gentle cup of compassion  
learning and loving the sounds we hear

drum shubum  
shubum drum  
drum shubum  
drum drum

sounding sensing  
nourishing such intimacy  
in each true expression  
of grief and wonder

we create

we resonate

we are

I'm welcome to come with what I have to offer

and that's the way it will be.

There are many places in my life where I have long checklists of what I have to bring and what I have to do in advance. There is something about that aspect of what we have done, that feeds the expressive and creative spirit, it frees us to believe that we don't need tools, we, who we are, what we are, is all that we need.

We are enough, we're perfect. Just come.

That is such a rare gift especially for women,  
in our world.

deep intake of breath

bowl of sky      bowl of nuts

stones draw me expanding the future

shaboomb drum

across the land women's circles sing to us

words of delight, sister reverence, signals of infinity

singlenotes, large spider hands in the womb shawl

hands point

spiral dance cross the land

women's circles singing to us

spaces vary between us

balance of opposites

womb women's waters

bodymind substance beating now

holy spirit

essence

*herstory*

mystery joining

women naked

knitted secrets stone encased stitched in place

bodies spun

by vortices

lingering trace of soul and dancing and light

peace  
language  
sound  
naked light  
chaos vibrating  
soul subtle supple bodies

do don't do don't do don't

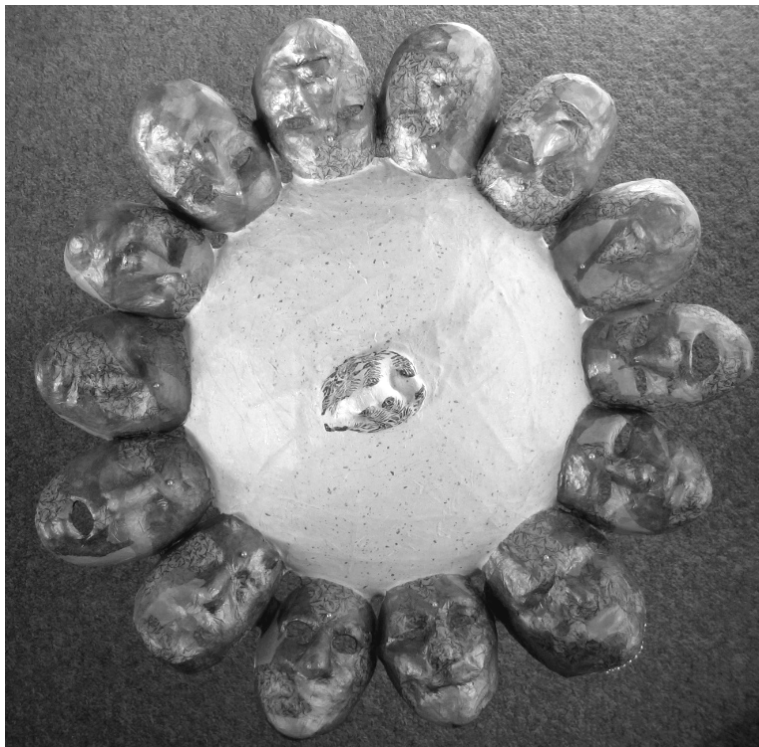
single notes  
single notes draw me

bodies by seas

shaboom drum  
shaboom drum  
salaam shanti

mystery mystery

enjoining single notes



Note: Quoted authors in order of appearance in the lyric prose text: Irigaray, Ettinger, Cixous, Rich, Ettinger

### References

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### List of Images

[All images are documented by Barbara Bickel. All art co-created with the women.]

- A matrixial shared zone*. Water Labyrinth with writing sheets from *Sounding the Writing* workshop –video still
- She is made whole every time we gather*. Co-creative art making process – video still
- Try to hold both these worlds*. Co-creative art making process – video still
- Her Divine Countenance*. Mixed media in plaster sculpture, inside view – digital photo
- Strains through the wom(b)an's shawl*. Water Labyrinth being held up at the *Sounding the Writing* workshop – video still
- Enjoining single notes/Her Divine Countenance*. Mixed media in plaster sculpture, outside view – digital photo



### Author Bios:

*Barbara Bickel* is an artist, researcher, and educator. An Assistant Professor in Art Education and Women Studies at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, she teaches art as an inquiry and meaning making process. To view her art portfolio and arts-based research on-line visit <http://www.barbarabickel.com>

*Ingrid Rose* taught “the language of living” in England, America, Belgium and France before immigrating to Canada in 1996. She teaches creative writing courses in Vancouver, in continuing ed. at the universities of Emily Carr & Simon Fraser as well as *writing from the body*. <http://www.ingridrose.com>

### End Notes

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<sup>i</sup> This essay was compiled and written collaboratively by Barbara and Ingrid. The women co-participants are listed alphabetically in the order of their participation in the writing workshop (entitled *Sounding the Writing*) and the original study.

<sup>ii</sup> The practice of individual and group trance, supported by drumming, was used during the study. During the original study Tannis led us in what is called Ecstatic Trance Posture work, a form of trance work developed by the anthropologist Felicitas Goodman (1990) from her study of bodily postures and altered states of consciousness. The thirty trance postures that she has uncovered she terms “psychological archeology.” Trance can be described as a form of active or process meditation and visioning, a waking dream state, and a practice of active imagination or free association; where one can journey to other realities through an altered state of consciousness. Within the waking-dream-state of trance, time and space become fluid, non-linear, and most normal physical restrictions and barriers dissolve.

<sup>iii</sup> The arts-based ritual inquiry involved fourteen women spiritual leaders who are or have been part of an annual women’s spirituality conference planning team. The research was conducted by Barbara Bickel as part of her Ph.D. in Education at the University of British Columbia. The women in the study are representative of a diversity of religious and spiritual practices. As part of the complex and non-traditional flavour of this work Barbara was a co-participant as well as the main researcher in the study. The full dissertation entitled, *Living the Divine Spiritually and Politically: Art, Ritual and Performative Pedagogy in Women’s Multi-faith Leadership* can be found on line at [www.barbarabickel.com](http://www.barbarabickel.com)

<sup>iv</sup> The *Sounding the Writing* workshop was facilitated by Barbara Bickel and Ingrid Rose and funded by a *Joint Women’s Studies & University Women’s Professional Advancement Research, Scholarly and Creative Activity Award* from Southern Illinois University Carbondale where Barbara now teaches.

<sup>v</sup> Voices are demarcated by space/silence. Sending a nearly completed draft to the women for their final comments and edits initiated an email conversation where uneasy feelings arose from the choice to blend the women’s voices rather than identify them. As lead authors Ingrid and Barbara made this decision as an aesthetic one but it was in the

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conversation that followed that the significance of the decision became clearer. We share here some of our email conversation:

Barbara wrote:

Dear Tannis (and Ingrid)

I love and appreciate your insight below. I myself had reservations sending it out to everyone feeling a bit bad that each woman was not going to be recognized uniquely for her contribution. There is a powerful double contradiction going on in this work. We are choosing not to participate in an individualistic ego inflating patriarchal system, which I see as positive, and at the same time are keeping women's specific voices unrecognized, which can be seen as negative. We are enacting another way here. I find myself quite moved and amazed by the whole piece.

With gratitude for this community of women,

Barbara

Tannis wrote:

Thank you Ingrid and Barbara for creating this piece - a lush kaleidoscope inspiring and moving and challenging. I have no suggestions for improvement.

I begin finally to understand the value of anonymity, which I think for me was my egoic block to our collaboration. I want to know who everyone is - yet value that I can do no more than guess

- the creative source is the same.

Love to you both,

Tannis

Annie wrote:

I think that there is an interesting tension between the multiple voices and the collective representation. Tannis' response is very like my own. It will be a wonderful experience for readers. I was crying as I read. The Gift of Tears - thank you.

Much love,

Annie

<sup>vi</sup> This poetic piece of writing was compiled by Ingrid from individual writing done by the women at a pre-conference planning retreat.