JOAN METELERKAMP

POET OF CONNECTION

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Thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts at the University of Stellenbosch.

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December 2007
DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not been previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

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Signature       Date

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This thesis examines the academically neglected work of contemporary South African poet Joan Metelerkamp. It focuses specifically on the drive towards connection displayed in her poetry. The first chapter explores the embodied subjectivity Metelerkamp’s poetry employs, which insists upon connections between language and the body, the self and the natural world. The second chapter examines the connections between Metelerkamp’s poetry and her literary, mythological, academic, sociological and familial legacies which have shaped her work. The third chapter foregrounds the socio-historic location of her poetry, concentrating on the connection her poetry draws between the political and the personal.

All the insights in this thesis are directly initiated by, and accountable to, the poetry. These insights are developed into integrated arguments through recourse to three different but compatible theoretical frameworks: embodiment theory, second wave Anglo-American feminism and contemporary South African literary theory.

By exploring the revelatory connections drawn in her poetry, this thesis will argue that Metelerkamp is an important figure in the South African literary arena. Her poetry, sensual, subtly nuanced and ruthlessly honest, traverses uninhabited areas in South African literature and therefore deserves to receive the detailed critical attention which it has thus far been denied.
Hierdie tesis ondersoek die akademies-verwaarloosde werk van die kontemporêre Suid-Afrikaanse digteres Joan Metelerkamp. Die fokus is spesifiek op die strewe na verbintenis wat in haar gedigte getoon word. Die eerste hoofstuk ondersoek die beliggaamde subjektiwiteit wat deur Metelerkamp se poësie aangewend word, wat aandring op ’n verbinding tussen taal en die liggaam, die eie ek en die sigbare wêreld. Die tweede hoofstuk ondersoek die verband tussen Metelerkamp se poësie en die literêre, mitologiese, akademiese en familiale erfenis wat haar werk onderstut. Die derde hoofstuk beklemtoon die sosio-historiese plasing van haar poësie, en ondersoek die verbinding tussen die persoonlike en die politiese, soos dit deur haar digkuns verwoord word.

Al die insigte in hierdie tesis is direk ingestel deur, en toerekenbaar tot, die gedigte self. Hierdie insigte word ontwikkel tot geïntegreerde argumente deur middel van drie verskillende maar versoenbare teoretiese raamwerke: beliggamingsteorie, tweede golf Anglo-Amerikaanse feministiese teorie, en hedendaagse Suid Afrikaanse literêre teorie.

Deur ’n verkenning van die onthullende verbintenisse wat deur haar digkuns daargestel word, voer hierdie tesis aan dat Metelerkamp ’n belangrike figuur in die Suid-Afrikaanse literêre konteks is. Haar digkuns, wat tegelykertyd sensueel, subtiel genuanseerd en meedoënloos eerlik is, deurkruis onbewoonde terrein in die Suid Afrikaanse letterkunde en verdien dus die omstandige, kritiese aandag wat dit tot dusver ontsê is.
I gratefully acknowledge financial assistance from the National Research Foundation during the writing of this thesis.
I’ll keep them warm, my scraps
of perception, when I’ve dreamed
how to string them together, islands
linked like archipelagoes, nosing out
to sea,
when the plates have shifted,
to settle
contiguous to the mainland,
I’ll tell ....

(Joan Metelerkamp, ‘And listen’, Floating Islands 25, ellipsis in original)
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INTRODUCTION

How shall I trace it more clearly, this connection – youth, friendship, ocean crossings, stories, retracing past prints in the sand, stones, stabbing the flesh, turned in the hand to present mirth: across seas, crossed continents, across generations, who shall I learn from, how?

(Joan Metelerkamp, ‘Stone Game’, Stone No More 63)

Joan Metelerkamp has been recognised as ‘one of South Africa’s most significant poets’ (Berner 131), and called ‘a poetic voice seriously to be reckoned with’ (Woeber, ‘Text’ 137). Her poetry has been described as ‘arresting’ (Sole, ‘Bird’ 30), ‘achingly introspective’ (Klopper 133), ‘vital’ and ‘powerful’ (Thorpe 435). Introducing Metelerkamp at the launch of her fifth collection, requiem, Paul Wessels proclaims: ‘This is poetry, this is art’ (63), and reviewing this collection, Kobus Moolman writes:

Often in my reading and re-reading of the poems, I found myself flinching or gasping. These are poems that do not pretend or dissemble. They are often raw, red and angry as any wound is, and they refuse to accept simple consolations. The poems are stubborn and adamant; they insist on the beauty and the power of their own truth (however terrifying, for the writer foremost). (32)

Similarly, Catherine Woeber, reviewing Metelerkamp’s second collection Stone No More, has written that her poetry ‘is the kind of poetry that resists a prosaic analysis, so stirring the reader with its exquisite use of words and ruthless honesty, that the only honourable response is on the level of soul: art’ (137).

Metelerkamp’s poetry has received various literary accolades. In 1991 she was awarded the Sanlam Literary Award for an author previously unpublished in book form (for Towing the Line), and in 1992 she won third prize in the Sydney Clouts Memorial Award for ‘Poem for my Mother’. The high regard in which Metelerkamp’s poetry is held is also
evident in the inclusion of her poetry in numerous anthologies of contemporary South African poetry, published both locally and internationally.¹

Given this measure of critical respect and acclaim, one would expect her work to have received considerable academic attention. But this is not the case. All the complimentary comments made by critics above (excluding Wessels’ remark at the launch of requiem) appeared in reviews of her collections. Of these reviews, only Catherine Woeber’s review of Stone No More for New Coin, which was extended in a Literatur article ““Text” and “Voice” in Recent South African Poetry’, demonstrates a detailed interaction with Metelerkamp’s poetry. A few articles on contemporary South African poetry (like Woeber’s) do make reference to her work.² However, these articles do not thoroughly examine Metelerkamp’s poetry.³ The only other critical engagement with Metelerkamp’s poetry has been in the form of an MA mini-dissertation.⁴

My decision to write this dissertation is partially motivated by the fact that this highly-respected, award-winning poet has received so little thorough critical attention. As I have remarked elsewhere, I think that Metelerkamp is a scrupulous and searingly honest poet whose work is sensually and intellectually provocative (Weyer 154). Specifically, this thesis examines different aspects of the drive towards connection displayed in Metelerkamp’s poetry: her drive to connect language and the body, the self and the

³ The examination of Metelerkamp’s poetry occupies roughly half the length of Woeber’s article, but in the other three articles, her work only receives attention in a paragraph or two.
⁴ Sarah Frost’s mini-dissertation is on Metelerkamp and fellow South African poet Ingrid de Kok and is entitled The Personal/History: A Feminist Exploration of the Poetry of Ingrid de Kok and Joan Metelerkamp. As Frost’s dissertation was completed in 1998, it only examines Metelerkamp’s first two collections.
natural world, the personal and the political, her own poetry and that of her literary mothers. This drive for connection is interesting because of Metelerkamp’s resistance to poststructuralism. Poststructuralism demonstrates the linguistic links between entities, by reducing everything in the world to a signifier in a text, which is by definition connected to each other signifier in the system. In contrast, Metelerkamp’s poetry shows how disparate entities and categories, in their experiential form, are connected at the very root. She retains the ontological priority of the real, or the material, and seeks to show how abstract signifiers, like self, freedom and love, and even language itself, are equally material and real, while simultaneously showing how ‘dead matter’ is infused with vital force. Because of the radical nature of this poetic aim, Metelerkamp’s poetry certainly deserves the praise and awards that it has received. Beyond this, though, it also should receive detailed and sustained critical attention, in the form of full-length articles, book chapters and academic dissertations, which would elevate Metelerkamp into the canon of contemporary South African poetry. This thesis would like to work towards achieving that aim. This goal is also motivated from a feminist position.

Metelerkamp’s poetry is concerned with the experiences of women, with their material and bodily realities, their political rights, their private and public positioning in, and relationship to, language and the world. As a result of her specific poetic concerns, increasingly popular feminist frameworks like French feminism and poststructuralist feminism, while occasionally useful, did not prove to be sound theoretical bases for this project. As Metelerkamp is a poet of connection, contemporary feminist theories, which focus so heavily on the politics of difference, cannot be effectively applied to her poetry. Metelerkamp consciously and actively forecloses the differences between women (as chapter two discusses, she constructs a ‘house of poetry’ built by generations of female poets from different countries), while contemporary feminisms, heavily influenced by poststructuralism and postcolonialism, emphasise that the idea of a universal feminist identity is always already fractured along cultural, racial and class lines. As Metelerkamp’s poetry reflects on her experiences as a woman, her poetry invites a return to the real, the material and the personal.

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5 Second wave Anglo-American feminist criticism has been heavily censured by contemporary feminist critics for ignoring differences in culture, race and class and thus entrenching the fallacy of the universal woman.
to second wave Anglo-American feminist concerns, which are centred on the intersection of literature about and by women, and the real life experiences of women.\(^6\)

In her poetry, Metelerkamp adopts an embodied subjectivity, and thus the experiences which her poetry examines are firmly located in the body. Consequently, I find that the most appropriate theoretical tool for analysing Metelerkamp’s poetry is contemporary embodiment theory. Because her work is written from a strongly feminist position and, as stated earlier, her poetic concerns correlate best with second wave Anglo-American feminism, this form of feminism is used in collaboration with embodiment theory. As this school of feminism is interested in experiences of the body (its much criticised universalising tendency can be associated with a belief in the identity of female bodily experiences), it is compatible with embodiment theory.

I am strongly influenced by second wave Anglo-American feminism, and thus I strongly agree with Adrienne Rich when she claims that ‘the content of [secondary and tertiary] education itself validates men even as it invalidates women’ (\textit{Lies} 241). The English literary canon is androcentric and women studying this revered male canon are implicitly taught that ‘men have been the shapers and thinkers of the world, and that this is only natural’ (Rich, \textit{Lies} 241). This was certainly my undergraduate experience.\(^7\) The message sent to female students is clear: the bulk of literature that deserves considered, critical attention is written by men. Man is the creator, woman is variously object, muse, or assistant, helping the process of male creation by typing or proofreading manuscripts, and performing other menial administrative and domestic chores. While there are, of course, clear historical reasons for this male dominance of the literary canon, there is no need to

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\(^6\) In ‘Poem’, challenged to define ‘what kind of feminist’ she is, Metelerkamp ‘diffident[ly]’ proposes ‘socialist-feminism’ ‘[f]or want of a better label’ (TL 97). In this poem Metelerkamp criticises ‘this kind of discourse’ which makes ‘reference only to the name’ of a theory, and ‘will not see / which cogs driven by which passion / grinding men and women / in what chains, when, specifically, / make up / the name and reality / to which it refers’ (TL 98). She thus concludes her poem by ‘retaliat[ing]’ to the ‘quick critic’ who asked her ‘what kind of feminist’ she is: ‘what kind of fucking man are you?’, thereby rejecting this limiting, classificatory discourse into which she’d been thrust (TL 99).

\(^7\) In all the compulsory lecture courses in my first and second years of English Studies, we studied only two texts written by women (Jane Austen’s \textit{Pride and Prejudice} and George Eliot’s \textit{Middlemarch}), and only five of the twenty-three authors examined in the lecture courses in my third year were women. A brief survey has shown that this syllabus is in keeping with that of other South African universities.
merely accept the status quo. Rather, I feel compelled to work with other feminist (and postcolonial) literary critics and scholars to challenge the sexist (and racist) bias of the traditional Western canon.

While poetry has traditionally been seen as the highest and most artistic form of literary expression, and is thus well represented within the canon, its place within contemporary university syllabi is not so secure. D. M. R. Bentley and John Guillory have both described and accounted for this current ‘devaluation of poetry’ (Bentley 3). Both Bentley and Guillory argue that the devaluation of poetry is part of a larger process of de-emphasising the liberal arts in favour of a more utilitarian education geared to employment in a capitalist market. As Guillory states: ‘The perceived devaluation of the humanities curriculum is in reality a decline of its market value’ (46). Although the humanities as a whole is in decline, Bentley asserts that

\[n\]owhere … is the ‘large scale “capital flight”’ of which Guillory writes more evident than in current student attitudes to poetry: once the very foundation of humanistic studies, the reading and analysis of poems is now anathema to all but a very few students in the honours-graduate stream because a knowledge of poetry is no longer regarded as a necessary or even desirable component of an education for social and financial success. (3)

However, although poetry does not have the same obvious utilitarian value as other university courses (such as accounting or marketing), poetry, as Metelerkamp, drawing inspiration from Marianne Moore, explains: is ‘useful for the insights it gives us … into the grappling of individual, gendered, historical psyches with the complex struggles of experience’ (‘Ruth Miller’ 256). In interviews, Metelerkamp has declared that poetry is not only ‘useful … as a process of working things out’ (Edwards 58), it also enables ‘the hidden, the solid, the truth, to reveal itself’ (McGrane 3). Similarly, Antjie Krog asserts that poetry is ‘triumphanty powerful because it places people in a heightened state of consciousness, with enlightening consequences. It’s as if you break through the mirror for a moment and touch the riddle’ (Krog, ‘Defence’).

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8 See Bentley’s ‘Art for Arts’ Sake; or, Humanities for Humanities’ Sake’ and Guillory’s Cultural Capital.
In many South African universities’ English syllabi, poetry has been completely displaced by prose-forms, as the technical skills of prose reading and writing have a clearer and more tangible market value than those of poetry. Metelerkamp explores this displacement in her poem ‘After the interview’ from *Stone No More*, where she writes that, during a departmental meeting, poetry was ‘shoved … / into the corner of the syllabus’ (6). My experience as a tutor of first year English at Stellenbosch University over the past three years supports this assertion. The message sent to students is again clear: poetry is less important that prose. As someone who feels the value of poetry, my decision to write this dissertation was thus also influenced by my disgruntlement with the present (lack of) status of poetry in university syllabi.

While poetry in general has been displaced by prose in university syllabi and academic research, Metelerkamp feels lyric poetry in particular has been most severely marginalised. In ‘Ruth Miller: Father’s Law or Mother’s Lore?’ Metelerkamp writes: ‘In the present political context, lyric poetry … has been marginalised for men as well as for women and the authority of the academy sees to it that more critical attention is given to other forms of writing than poetry’ (256). As South Africa has only recently become a democracy, after decades of brutal and dehumanising segregation and apartheid rule, the effects of which are still deeply ingrained in our nation, our country needs to come to terms with its history of violence and division. Therefore, many South African academics have adopted a postcolonial approach in their work, which enables them to engage with our war-torn and -tortured past. This theoretical approach also allows academics, after decades of isolation and exile from the world community, to forge international links which enable South African experiences to be understood in relation to those of other former colonies (especially in the rest of Africa, Asia and South America), and within a broader theoretical framework of domination and oppression. However, while postcolonial theory is therefore immensely useful at this juncture in South African history, there are aspects of human experience, and forms of literature that engage with

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9 In both 2005 and 2006, the poetry course was broken up in segments (of two or three poems each), which were squeezed, almost as an afterthought, into the end of each term, when students were generally too preoccupied with tests, exams and essay submissions to devote proper attention to the poetry. Students were also not formally tested on poetry. Thankfully, this situation was rectified in 2007: an entire term was devoted to poetry and students were required to write an essay on the material in this course.
these experiences, which are obscured when using a postcolonial approach. Metelerkamp thus argues that lyric poetry has been marginalised in ‘the present political context’ (256). I think that it is important to balance postcolonial theory with other theoretical frameworks, which are able to account for the realms of experience that postcolonial theory ignores. By writing this dissertation on a contemporary lyric poet, I thus aim to focus academic attention on lyric poetry, and work against its current marginalisation, as well as the marginalisation of poetry and women’s literature in general. Metelerkamp’s poetry is particularly apt in such an effort.

Joan Metelerkamp was born in Pretoria in 1956 and, as she tells interviewer Michelle McGrane, ‘grew up on a farm in the Lidgetton Valley of KwaZulu-Natal’ (2). Metelerkamp is the third of four children, and the only girl. Her father managed the farm on which they lived (McGrane 3), and her mother ‘was the librarian of the Hebron Haven Library in the Dargle’; from her Metelerkamp acquired her love of books and reading (McGrane 2). After a year of attending a local farm school, Metelerkamp attended

Epworth first as a day girl (catching buses across Maritzburg on my way home), and later as a weekly boarder, then as a full-time boarder, because the board of governors were not prepared to entertain my mother’s eloquent argument in favour of continued weekly boarding. By the time I left school I was ill. I’d done fine, up the hierarchy step by step to head girl, until all that collective consciousness became too hard to carry. Anyway, I got ill, and didn’t do very well in matric. I made up for it in English and Drama at [the] university [of Natal] because I loved them. (McGrane 3)

Metelerkamp wrote her first poem when she ‘was nine or so, about rhythm: about riding, and the pulsating hiss of the milking machines’ (McGrane 3). She continued to write poetry in high school, and ‘even got things into English Alive’ (McGrane 4). However, Metelerkamp states:

I didn’t really write poetry with any dedication or belief until I had already given up as an actress. I wrote quite a lot then, in my early twenties, and have unpublished stories from that time, but the first real poem I wrote was in 1984. It’s the one that opens my first collection: ‘Jeremy Cronin (from inside) calls’ …. By then I had moved house and city I don’t know how many times, was writing a [Masters] thesis [through the University of Natal] on Ruth Miller [Ruth Miller and a Poetry of Loss, completed in 1990], was aiming for an academic job (I did in fact teach for a bit [at the universities of Natal and the Western Cape]), got
married, and had two children. I got my first manuscript together when my second child, my son, was about 18 months old. It was only in 1993, when I began to write *Floating Islands*, that I began to openly acknowledge how important poetry was to me. (McGrane 4)

Metelerkamp’s first collection, *Towing the Line*, which won the Sanlam Literary Award, was published by Carrefour in 1992. Her second, *Stone No More*, was published by Gecko in 1995. Although the next collection Metelerkamp was working on was *Floating Islands*, which was published by Mokoro in 2001, her third published collection was *Into the day breaking* (Gecko 2000). After *Floating Islands* came *requiem* (Deep South 2003), and her most recent collection, *carrying the fire* (substancebooks 2005). This collection began its life in Switzerland at the Chateau de Lavigny in June 2002, where Metelerkamp was granted a writer’s residency. Other than teaching and writing poetry, Metelerkamp also worked as the editor of *New Coin* for four years (2000-2003).

As the predominant contemporary modes of analysing literature are far removed from earlier biographical approaches, the question of whether this biographical detail is in fact relevant arises. The answer is undoubtedly ‘yes’ and it is so for two important reasons. Firstly, Metelerkamp’s work can be read as confessional poetry. As Kobus Moolman points out, her poetry ‘arises … blatantly from autobiography’ (32). In a recent interview with McGrane, Metelerkamp acknowledges that ‘what is going on in my life, that’s the stuff of my poems’, yet seems to shy away from the (presently pejorative) label of ‘confessionalism’: 10 ‘A real poem is not a statement or a position or a dogma or a fact or even a confession…. [A] poem is something *made*, a work, art, the figures are never simple, never directly correspondent to actuality’ (10, emphasis in original).

While I agree that any form of art, even autobiography, is necessarily something constructed, Metelerkamp’s poetry posits a closer relationship between her ‘art’ and her ‘actuality’ than this statement suggests. This occurs on various explicit and implicit levels. In poems like ‘Ripped like the ragged piece of paper’ Metelerkamp explicitly

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10 Stephen Gray’s vitriolic review of Antjie Krog’s *Body Bereft* articulates an extreme version of this current censure of confessional poetry, when he states that ‘such private ache confessions in the English-language sphere went out when Sylvia Plath gassed herself’ (5).
asserts that the author of the poem is identical with its speaker, thereby proving the autobiographical nature of the poem:

Ripped like the ragged piece of paper
roughly hauled from the roll, rapidly
to scribble this note, this beginning,
I hope, of a poem, I find my-
self torn between the ambition to
be what they call someone, recognised,
named (poet or academic), and
the inverse desire to accept
the limits of anonymity, … (TL 115, ellipsis added).

Equally explicit is her repeated assertion, in *carrying the fire*, that the speaker’s name is ‘Joan’ (‘and you are crying / joanie joanie like I am the tenderest’ [87], ‘why is the moon,
/ asks my niece, where, Joan? She sits on my lap / … / where is the moon going Joan?’ [93]), and thus the author of the collection, specified on the cover as ‘Joan Metelerkamp’ is identical with its speaker.

Phillipe Lejeune argues that, other than these obvious methods, the ‘identity of name’ between author, narrator, and protagonist can be established … [i]mplicitly, at the level of author-narrator connection, in the case of the *autobiographical pact* (14, emphasis in original). According to Lejeune, this pact can be made either through ‘the use of titles leaving no doubt about the fact that the first person refers to the name of the author’ or through the inclusion of an ‘initial section of the text where the narrator enters into a contract vis-à-vis the reader by acting as if he were the author, in such a way that the reader has no doubt that the ‘I’ refers to the name shown on the cover, even though the name is not repeated in the text’ (14, emphasis in original). Although Metelerkamp does not preface her collections by creating such a pact, this pact is forged through repeated autobiographical references. For example, in *carrying the fire*, underneath the copyright details, the author, Joan Metelerkamp, thanks ‘the Swiss Arts Council, and the Ledig-Rowohlt Foundation committee, for their generous gift of a writer’s residency at the Chauteau de Lavigny in June 2002 where this work began’. In the first nine pages of the collection, Metelerkamp describes herself living in a Swiss village close to Lac Leman (where the Chateau de Lavigny is situated) in June, writing poetry and attending readings (CF 11-19). Concluding this first section, the speaker, or narrator-protagonist (to use
Lejeune’s termininology) thanks the ‘Chateau de Lavigny’, saying that it ‘ha[s] brought [her] a dream’ (CF 19). The reader is therefore encouraged to read the author and narrator-protagonist as identical. Similarly, in Stone No More, the author dedicates the first poem in the collection to ‘[her] grandmother who committed suicide in 1951’ (3), while the protagonist-narrator speaks ‘In memory of Joan / Rose-Innes Findlay’ (24) who ‘shot herself’ ‘a month after [the South African Communist Party’s] listing’ (28). Again, the connection between poet and speaker is forcefully asserted.

Metelerkamp’s poetry is threaded through with autobiographical references. In terms of her career, these include references to her MA thesis on Ruth Miller (TL 93, 120), her work as an academic (TL 97-100, SNM 6-8), and as a poet. The references to the speaker as poet occur in almost every poem. Particularly interesting amongst these is the speaker’s self-effacing comment, in carrying the fire, that only ‘eight people in the whole of Pretoria / come to the reading’ (85). The speaker-poet is thus commenting on the reception of her poetry, on her activity as a poet beyond the confines of her written collections. Similarly, in her interview with McGrane, Metelerkamp confesses that ‘there was a lot of opposition from all sorts of people [to her publication of carrying the fire]’ and that her ‘friends’ felt that she ‘should never have written it, let alone published it’ (7, emphasis in original). Her voice and the sentiment it expresses is here identical to that of the speaker in the final, prose section of carrying the fire, who confesses that her ‘friends’ were ‘shocked’ by her recent work and wanted her to ‘leave [this work] for posthumous [publication]’ (105). Through movements like these, Metelerkamp is actively linking the text and the world-beyond-the-text. The autobiographical nature of Metelerkamp’s poetry therefore shows the relevance of biographical details when reading her poetry.

Secondly, biographical details are relevant due to the embodied subjectivity which characterises Metelerkamp’s confessional poetic voice. Metelerkamp’s utilisation of an embodied perspective in her poetry, and the effects of this, are thoroughly discussed in the following chapter, which uses the insights of contemporary embodiment theory in order to analyse and discuss this aspect of her work. While embodiment theory is applied
most overtly in this chapter, an embodied perspective theoretically grounds this entire study. As the first chapter demonstrates, Metelerkamp’s poetry asserts that body and mind are entwined and indivisible. Therefore, rather than privileging the mind, Metelerkamp’s poetry focuses on the body and the manner in which the defining features of human subjectivity, ‘spirit and freedom’, are in fact ‘lodged in’ the body and are indivisible from our base materiality whereby we are linked to the ‘lower animals’ (SNM 25). Metelerkamp’s material, bodily existence as a woman and a poet should therefore not be abstracted from her poetic creations. Biographical information about her life experiences is thus relevant in a reading of her poetry.

This does not, however, mean that this thesis uses a primarily biographical approach in analysing Metelerkamp’s poetry, or attempts to use her poetry to construct a biography of Metelerkamp. Rather, biographical information is important because, due to the confessional, embodied perspective of Metelerkamp’s poetry, her own life experiences are woven into the poetry, and not tangential to it. These experiences are expressed by (different versions of) her own authorial voice. Nevertheless, this is a study of Metelerkamp’s poetry, and not her life story in the form of a biography. Rather than transposing biographical details onto her poetry, or reading her poetry for the biographical information it supplies, this thesis therefore seeks to read her poetry as poetry (that is, something that is constructed and not a pure reflection of the world-outside-the-text), but still remain mindful, and ethically-considerate, of the real woman whose actual experiences this poetry enacts and examines.

In order to do so, I have decided, whenever possible, to reject the abstract signifier ‘speaker’ in favour of the poet-speaker’s real name, Joan Metelerkamp. Due to the autobiographical nature of Metelerkamp’s poetry, and the embodied perspective employed, I feel that this usage is appropriate. Moreover, I think that disguising the confessional and embodied aspects of her poetry by using the coldly formal term ‘speaker’ would encourage not only a misreading of her poetry, but also of her poetic motivation ‘to ask the existential questions … to want the hidden, the solid, the truth to reveal itself’ (McGrane 3). In her poetry, Metelerkamp has written of the danger that the
‘polite / formality’ of ‘academic’ language will cause the researcher to be ‘cut off from something / out of sight, just / out of earshot’ (FI 24). I therefore feel that Metelerkamp would approve of my discarding the ‘polite / formality’ of the term ‘speaker’ in order to gain access to ‘the subtext, / the invisible, / underground verse’ and thereby reveal ‘the hidden, the solid, the truth’ in her poetry (FI 24).

I do, however, exercise caution in my use of ‘Metelerkamp’ instead of ‘the speaker’ when referring to Floating Islands and the prose section of carrying the fire, which is entitled ‘Changing line’. Floating Islands was originally envisioned as ‘a novel, or a novella; it has clear setting, characters, even a little plot’ (McGrane 11). The three primary characters in the collection – a mother, Maggie, and her émigré-artist daughter, Karen, and poet-academic daughter, Amanda – are explicitly designated as speakers of the poems, with the poems divided fairly evenly between them. As the author is not identical to the speaker, or the narrator-protagonist, the collection is not, according the Lejeune’s definition, autobiographical. However, each of these fictional characters nevertheless resembles different aspects of Metelerkamp: the life Amanda leads as a poet and an academic (working, like Metelerkamp, on Ruth Miller’s poetry) in Durban in the early nineties almost mirrors Metelerkamp’s; Karen’s struggles to create art and beauty from ‘the mundane’ and ‘quotidian’ aspects of her life as a mother and wife (FI 31) seem synonymous with Metelerkamp’s poetic concern, voiced in an interview with Ross Edwards, to examine ‘how desire [and the desire to create artistically] fits in with the quotidian and the domestic’ (60); Maggie’s evocations of nature and the burden of grief (‘how to hold dead life, / dragging, this place with a hole in it’ [FI 12]) echo Metelerkamp’s in her other collections. Despite the similarities of the themes and the quality of voice between this collection and Metelerkamp’s other five collections (which explicitly or implicitly assert their autobiographical nature, as argued above), my discussions of Floating Islands respect the divisions which Metelerkamp has drawn between poet and speaker in this collection, and therefore I use ‘Amanda’, ‘Karen’ and ‘Maggie’ where applicable.

In ‘Changing line’, Metelerkamp again names the narrator-protagonist ‘Amanda’. While
this does suggest a fictional, rather than autobiographical mode, the fact that this is an integrated section of a collection which has already created an autobiographical pact with the reader (explicitly, through the naming of the narrator-protagonist ‘Joan’ and, implicitly, through the poetic and authorial gratitude expressed to the Chateau de Lavigny) undermines this fictionalisation. This is further undermined by the autobiographical nature of the piece: Amanda’s erotic paintings which so shock her friends undoubtedly represent Metelerkamp’s erotic poems in *carrying the fire*, which, she tells McGrane, her ‘friends’ told her that she ‘should never have written … let alone published’ (7). The distance between this ‘Amanda’ (and the re-usage of this name is itself significant) and Metelerkamp is negligible, and, therefore, though I use ‘Amanda’ where it seems appropriate, sometimes the confluence between Metelerkamp and Amanda is acknowledged.

In an interview with Ross Edwards, Metelerkamp states that she views poetry as ‘a way of making connections’ (58). From the previous discussion, it is clear that her poetry connects speaker and poet, and the text with the world-outside-the-text. But her poetry also makes a myriad of other connections, which are explored thematically in the three chapters.

In the first chapter I explore the connections Metelerkamp’s poetry draws between language and the body, and between the self and the world she inhabits. As mentioned earlier, this chapter utilises embodiment theory in order to examine and discuss these connections. The theorists referred to include Maxine Sheets-Johnson, Colin Sample, Ian Burkitt and Gail Weiss. Recourse is also made, in this chapter, to Levinas’s ethical principle of the ‘face to face’ relationship and its intersection with embodiment theory. This chapter suggests that Metelerkamp views the self as an organic whole: body and mind are united and work together as a single entity. Through this embodied approach, Metelerkamp distances herself from traditional Cartesian dualism. By virtue of the significance she attaches to the body, Metelerkamp shows the self’s connection, through the body, to the natural and material world. Using an embodied subjectivity, Metelerkamp also demonstrates the connection between language and the body, asserting
that language is a product of the body and is in itself a material entity.

The second chapter examines the connections between Metelerkamp’s poetry and her literary, mythological, academic, sociological and familial inheritance which have collectively shaped her poetry. Metelerkamp’s poetry demonstrates a profound awareness of the traditions which have influenced it. This chapter traces her attempts to find a female literary tradition, discussing the reasons for this search, the obstacles which hampered it, and her specific methods of connecting and interacting with her literary mothers. The specific literary mothers whose connections with Metelerkamp are examined in this section include Adrienne Rich, Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Dickinson and the South African poets Ruth Miller and Ingrid de Kok. This chapter then moves from Metelerkamp’s literary to mythological mothers, focusing on her use of Arachne, Aphrodite, Philomela and Medusa. Next, the chapter explores the influence of Metelerkamp’s formal education on her poetry, tracing both the influence of canonical literature and of literary and artistic movements, particularly romanticism and modernism. The chapter then examines the manner in which Metelerkamp’s role as a mother, and the sociological expectations and demands attached to this role, have affected her poetry. The final section discusses how Metelerkamp’s specific familial legacy of matrilineal suicide has been expressed in, and influenced, her poetry. This chapter concludes by examining the troubling intersection between this personal legacy and her literary legacy of suicidal women writers. The theory used to support the arguments developed in this chapter are drawn from second wave Anglo-American feminism, from thinkers such as Adrienne Rich, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

The third chapter examines Metelerkamp’s poetry in the specific socio-historical context of its creation: South Africa as it undergoes the transition from the 1980s apartheid state to the democracy of the mid-1990s. Due to the focus on social and political location in this chapter, theoretical support comes from South African writers and public figures addressing the role of literature in our country over the past twenty years, and thus includes Njabulo Ndebele, Albie Sachs and Michael Chapman. This chapter examines the profound connection drawn in Metelerkamp’s poetry between the political and the
personal realms. While Metelerkamp does not produce overtly political writing, or create literature which can be used as a ‘weapon of the struggle’, Metelerkamp’s writing dramatically politicises the personal and personalises the political. Her poetry asserts that these are not two separate realms, but rather, are radically connected. This chapter then discusses Metelerkamp’s own artistic praxis, which is concentrated on the idea of the simultaneous transformation of the poet and her poetic material. Lastly, this chapter argues that, in her most recent collection, Metelerkamp allows the reader to be incorporated into the process of transformation, through a shifting of power in the relationship between reader and writer. Therefore, Metelerkamp’s artistic praxis, while being profoundly personal (it transforms the poet herself), is simultaneously political: it works towards transforming not only the world-beyond-the-text (her poetic material) but also the relationships of power between people.

The three chapters thus explore three different sets of connections established in Metelerkamp’s poetry. These chapters make recourse to three different theoretical fields: embodiment theory, second wave Anglo-American feminism, and contemporary South African literary theory. These theories are not mutually exclusive, but rather converge at many significant points: their focus on the body, the quotidian and the material reality of daily life as experienced by individuals. The use of heterogenous theories is entirely appropriate for an analysis of Metelerkamp’s poetry because her poetry is not a one-dimensional performance of the preoccupations of a single theory. Rather, different positions and concerns are explored simultaneously in her work. The first poem of her first collection, ‘Jeremy Cronin (from inside) calls’ is a clear example of this: the poem is firmly situated within a 1980s South African location and is concerned with specific historical and political events in this country (the imprisonment of political activists, the extensiveness of war in this country, white males’ compulsory national service), yet simultaneously it focuses on gender politics and women’s specific roles in the anti-apartheid struggle, and sees this struggle, and women’s roles therein, in embodied, material terms. In order to foreground these intensely interlinked themes and theoretical positions (which are the subjects of the following chapters) and to introduce
Metelkamp’s poetry and poetic concerns, I conclude this introduction by quoting this provocative poem in full:11

Jeremy Cronin (from inside) calls Olive Schreiner
ceaseless campaigner against all oppressors and war-mongers;
and Olive Schreiner, it is true, says somewhere in *Women and Labour*,
no-one who has borne a boy would spill his blood, no one woman would be a war-maker;

but no, no it is simply not true. All over South Africa, black and white women are spilling boys’ blood and holding buckets and watering-cans to catch it again with their falling tears to cultivate heroes.

“It is our intention to enter into the domain of war and to labour there till in the course of generations we have extinguished it”; and again, no: entering the domain at all like men admitting its insidious seed we give war our generation.

Jeremy Cronin quote Schreiner (from inside) “We are combined”. And yes! yes (Hecuba and Andromache had nothing on us, nor Helen!) we are entwined in this struggle, blood brothers, and till we blast this bloody combination sky high – till we fling back the tokens of war brought home, bits of limbs from our heroes, we will continue to be war-makers.

Loving them, women kindle what men have ignited, we bear it, support

11 Metelkamp describes this poem as ‘the first real poem [she] wrote’ (McGrane 4).
it, give it growth. But some time! This time! Now – when, god
knows
when will we labour to bring forth
this killing, still born?

(Listen, when there is bleeding
it means death,
where there is
bleeding
it means no life, know
that blood flowing is death.)
When will we pull it out by its bloody roots, this myth
planted in us (for Christ’s sake)
new life
coming through death.

Where does this come from? It comes from my brother, Davey,
near Oshakati; it comes from my fear; it comes from
umKhonto we Sizwe; it comes from not bearing the
pain (not any longer) of poems of imprisoned
people.

It goes to Davey near Oshakati, to
Nicholas leaving the country (not because
of the fighting but for what the fighting is for), to
my mother who taught me that there is no cause to kill
for killing is always for
death
(and held me tightly
by the hand in the veggie garden, when I was a
little girl, and the planes flew over in ‘V’s).

It goes
to Davey, my brother, north-east of Oshakati,
taught in your brows, slightly bow-legged, striding short, and
biting the bullet; it goes to you keeping your cool
in the shade of the two kameeldorings in the camp
on Caprivi (where are you? we may not know); it goes
to you (with a bit of luck) reading Conrad, perhaps
The Conference of Birds (I shall send it), it goes
to you paying your country’s fearful residence fee
(avoid killing);

It goes to my mother coping,
understanding, bearing
your being in some god-knows
what no man’s god-forsaken land,

(avoid killing).

It comes from knowing, appalled, women bear it, mother murder,
allowing war life still, still we do, we do not abort;
we keep our war coals burning, tight to our tummies,
like Kashmiries in the cold, covered; mothers
with stooped heads, backs bent, wives with fingers in righteousness
pressed white, lovers with lips puckered in rosettes pinched tight,
sisters holding arms on high, fists clenched,
all bearing pain, all ritually mourning, still, still we process; mothers, sisters, wives, lovers, all marching, in the course
of generations linked in love with this death. (TL 85-87)
CHAPTER ONE

LANGUAGE AND BODY, SELF AND WORLD:
FORGING THE CONNECTIONS

*To take the everyday*

tasks every day, like the
breakfast dishes, the cooing doves
I have pulled from the sky,
to take the mundane, daily, turn

the quotidian, daily, make
of it longing, appeased;
beat it like mud off a mat
into gold, motes of gold

catched in the door way
as they fall from the sun ....

(Joan Metelerkamp, ‘Icarus’, *Floating Islands* 31, ellipsis in original)

This first chapter discusses the connections Joan Metelerkamp draws between language, body, self and world. Her poetry connects these apparently disparate realms by articulating an embodied subjectivity. In a recent interview, Metelerkamp states that she feels an ‘impetus to ask the existential questions in [her] poems: to want the hidden, the solid, the truth, to reveal itself’ (McGrane 3). This shows a belief in the referential possibilities of language, the ability of language to ‘reveal’ something which is ‘hidden … solid … tru[e]’, and not merely circle back on itself endlessly. It evidences the priority of the ontological for Metelerkamp: things exist, which her poetry aims to disclose. It also demonstrates a drive towards materialism in her thought: the things which poetry should reveal are ‘solid’, concrete, real. This chapter therefore explores the connections which Metelerkamp’s embodied poetic perspective enables her to draw in her work.
Metelerkamp’s poetry is concerned with the material nature of existence. The body, as our primary material reality, is thus accorded central status in her poetry. In *carrying the fire*, Metelerkamp refers to aspects of the body as ‘essence’ (29):

my skin, my breasts, my hair
… shoulders, my skin, my scent
… my essence’ (37).

‘Beyond this’, she says, in a vague reference encompassing language, feeling and thought, there is ‘body, body’ (CF 65). Rather than following a Cartesian logic, which seeks to separate mind and body, Metelerkamp sees the body as the essence of the self, indivisible from the mind, or spirit, which is traditionally emphasised at the expense of its fleshy ‘casing’. Instead, Metelerkamp claims that ‘spirit and freedom … [are] lodged in the marrow of the self’ (SNM 25). The self is material, it has ‘marrow’, and those ‘profound abstracts’ like ‘spirit and freedom’, envisaged as human subjectivity’s defining features, are, in fact, ‘lodged in’, and indivisible from, our base materiality, through which we are linked to the ‘lower animals’ (SNM 25). This embodied view of subjectivity is pervasive in Metelerkamp’s poetry: the body is repeatedly prioritised in her work, and those abstract signifiers of humanity’s unique subjectivity, the mind and spirit, and even language itself, are lodged in the body. For Metelerkamp, ‘life’ itself is in the ‘bones’ of the body (IDB 13).

Metelerkamp’s presentation of herself in her poetry as a poet and academic, and as a curious and contemplative woman engaged with ‘cool riddles’ (IDB 104), appears to weigh the contemplative life of the mind over the realities of the body. Aware of this weighting in favour of the mind, Metelerkamp actively desires to be reminded of her existence as a body. In her ‘Song of marriage’, she thus tells her husband to

Catch up with me – catch me.
Take me from behind when I’m not looking
before I get a minute to slip away
to turn myself to a tree –
bring your message
burning

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1 Because of the traditional binary in which the body is female and the mind or spirit is male, Metelerkamp’s ontology is thus also gendered.
come running – slay
day after day
with the flies,
questioning, questioning – … (IDB 104, ellipsis added).

The metaphysical mind, with its ‘cool riddles’ and philosophical ‘questioning, questioning’ needs to be ‘slay[ed]’, by being urgently, animalistically ‘take[n] … from behind when [it’s/she’s] not looking’, as part of the process of re-embodiment which is so necessary in Metelerkamp’s poetry.

Theories of embodiment are only recently receiving attention and the terminology is still being developed, so a clarification of my use of ‘embodiment’ is required. What my usage entails is certainly not the facile assumption, which Maxine Sheets-Johnson criticises as still defining embodiment, that ‘the self is conceived as packaged in the flesh’ (14). Such a view, as Sheets-Johnson argues, still relies on a Cartesian point of departure (14). In contrast to this mere ‘grammatical union’ effected by (what Sheets-Johnson views as mainstream) embodiment theory, she proposes instead a theory of ‘Darwinian bodies’, which focuses on living bodies as ‘persistent wholes’, which insists on ‘the essential unity of individuals’ and which takes as its object of study ‘the lives of organisms’ (17). Drawing on Darwin to avoid Cartesian dualism, Sheets-Johnson maintains: ‘Thoughts and feelings are manifestly present in bodily comportments and behaviours. “The mental” is not hidden, but is palpably observable in the flesh’ (17, emphasis in original).

2 Sheets-Johnson uses this term, firstly, due to its nominal association with evolution. A Darwinian body, which for Sheets-Johnson denotes ‘intact living creatures in the throes, pleasures, industries, and curiosities of their everyday lives’, while ‘originally a product at the stage of natural selection, is viewed not as displaced in subsequent evolutionary stages but as having undergone transformation at the hands of further selective mechanisms, namely cultural and metacultural selection’ (14-15). Secondly, Sheets-Johnson adopts this term in order to show allegiance to Darwin’s method of ‘perspicacious and painstaking perceptions of creatures in the process of their everyday lives’, and thus demonstrates the importance of the empirical veracity of the organic unity of living organisms (15).

3 Sheets-Johnson asserts that ‘while Darwin clearly subscribes to a classificatory separation of mental and physical qualities – undoubtedly an unquestioned Cartesian legacy – he does not subscribe to their essential division. His meticulous and detailed analyses within those classifications notwithstanding, what he observes and what he is bent of rendering are “persistent wholes”, “the lives of organisms”, “the essential unity of individuals”’(16-17). This assertion is meticulously and persuasively supported in her article ‘Darwinian Bodies: Against Institutionalized Dualism’ (1996).
But while Sheets-Johnson locates her theory of ‘Darwinian bodies’ in opposition to that of conventional embodiment, other contemporary theorists define embodiment in a sense that is, in fact, compatible with her theory. These theorists include Michael O’Donovan, Colin Sample, Ian Burkitt, Gail Weiss, Mark L. Johnson and Thomas J. Csordas. Like Sheets-Johnson, these thinkers view mind and body as one organic unity, rather than as distinct categories, and thus focus on a ‘way of living or inhabiting the world’ as an organic whole (Weiss and Haber xiv, emphasis in original).

Under Cartesian principles, which follow on from Platonic distinctions, the mind is the primary, if not sole, epistemological tool. True knowledge comes from the proper use of reason, or logic; sensual input, where not misleading, is still only useful after it has been organised by the mind. The body is then largely irrelevant to epistemology. But this epistemological cold shoulder or blind eye (both expressions remind us of the grammatical traces of the body) is being challenged by theories of embodiment, which argue for a more integrated approach, one that gives greater consideration to the body in epistemological processes. As O’Donovan, following Evan Thompson, argues,

we might usefully understand our perception-organising/interpreting concepts or theories, not in terms of mental constructs working on sensual material to produce contentful representations, but rather in terms of compartmental potentials and practices whose epistemic value and activity cannot be so easily located in a “mind” considered separately from the body; this brings the body more fully into the epistemic picture than “perception” allows. The knowing self is not just the sensing mind, but the moving, intruding, fully embodied interactive self, a self which can access the world by means other than the epistemic text of interpreted sensation. (6)

In a similar vein, Johnson stresses that ‘[w]e conceptualise and reason the ways we do because of the kinds of bodies we have, the kinds of environments we inhabit, and the symbolic systems we inherit, which are themselves grounded in our embodiment’ (99).

Metelerkamp’s texts are consonant with these theorists’ understanding of the body’s role in epistemology. This is most eloquently addressed in carrying the fire, where she

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4 The mind is also, of course, the foundation of Cartesian ontology: I think, therefore I am.
emphasises that ‘the only way to know’ is ‘embodied, in your body’, and that the ‘truth is, we feel, we know what we want / really, bodily, known in the body’ (81).

This idea that knowledge comes not from the mind alone, but from a mind unified with its body, from the embodied wholeness of a Darwinian body, is also expressed in *Into the day breaking*:

> I have been hoping that if I gave the mind a bone,  
gave consciousness something to chew,  
gave it its marching orders, set it walking,  
set it thinking about sweat  
under the arms, in the pants, behind the knees,  
mind would not be willing,  
self would be free  
to hear, to see;  

...  

I have been walking, forgetting  
how this cool cloud  
turns muggy with the body’s working;  

I say to chattering consciousness:  
walk, take your body  
through pines on pale clay  
leave me  
to look up at the mountains,  
the bush, the blue –  

I say to the willing mind  
move over, move,  
let me be – … (15-16, ellipses added).

This poem does not speak of the typical conception of artistic creation: the solitary, isolated genius, sitting quietly at his (or her?) desk in front of the blank page creating poetry from the thoughts in his (or her?) ‘teeming brain’, to echo Keats’s phrase. Instead, body and mind combine in the effort to create: ‘chattering consciousness’ needs

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5 Keats’s sonnet ‘When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be’, which describes his fear that he may die ‘[b]efore [his] pen has glean’d [his] teeming brain’, articulates this romantic conception of poetic creation.
to be taken for a ‘walk’. It is through the body’s motion that the mind is ‘free’ to create: ‘bodies soothed by muscles worked / minds walked free’ (IDB 39). An example of this embodied mode of creation can be found in ‘The Gift’:

“like a passage of music” you said
out of the quiet, the clear of the evening,
as we rounded the lagoon,
close to the water,
the evening laid out like water
before us,
the corner, the light, the water, the bush over the bank and beyond
given before us
as a passage practiced and practiced
lifted by intuitive lilt
as if at long last
out of the ordinary day’s
driving and driving that repetitive road

as music
ecstatic, true. (IDB 88)

It is through the mind being ‘walked free’ around ‘the lagoon’ that the poetic vision, the ‘gift’ of the ‘the evening laid out like water / before us’, which, ‘like a passage of music’ is ‘ecstatic, true’, is captured.

While grounding the self in the body, Metelerkamp also grounds the body in nature, thereby maintaining her focus on the material. The body exists as a natural entity, belonging to nature and incorporated into the cycles of nature. In *Floating Islands*, Metelerkamp uses a fairly conventional image of a woman’s body as the sea: ‘strong / thighs smelling of sea salt, tide mark on the sheet’ (75). More unconventionally, in *Into the day breaking*, she describes the male body as part of nature, thereby inverting the typical male-mind, female-matter dichotomy:

the silk of their skins over
strength – the body of a man
like this hard earth
covered with silks of grass,

green-grey knots of bush, stubbles of black-jack and khaki-bos, koppies
of chins and knees – … (IDB 55-56, ellipsis added).
The human body, part of nature, is thus affected, like the sea and the land, by the waxing and waning cycles of nature: summer and winter, birth and death, ovulation and menstruation. The body does not only exist in linear, historical time, which develops in a straight line from birth to death, but, more profoundly for Metelerkamp, in cyclical time, where birth is just part of a endlessly repeating cycle that incorporates death and rebirth.

Due to this conviction that the body is ultimately grounded in nature, and therefore in cyclical time, Metelerkamp takes as her poetic subject the repetitive patterns of daily life which exist within this cycle: waking and eating and working and sleeping, doing work which continually has to be redone, like washing dishes which will be dirtied and washed again: ‘the tasks of everyday, / like the breakfast dishes’ (FI 31). In this way, Metelerkamp rejects humankind’s invented linear time, which is accorded such a privileged status in contemporary life, reaffirming instead the repetitive, bodily rhythms of cyclical time.

The form of Metelerkamp’s poetry reflects this commitment. Rather than a linear development of logic, or image, building to a climax, her poems are built on patterns and repetitions that allow them to double back endlessly on themselves. ‘A working holiday at the farm’, which uses the continuous tense and thereby resists linear, historical time, provides a good example of this patterning.

**A working holiday at the farm**

That holiday, every day breaking  
the day’s work, working on Miller’s work,  
writing, each evening by the fire,  
on the farm, with the farmers, in the  
sitting-room, sitting, knitting a fine  
free work, patterned on no pattern, look-  
ing up, holding up my knitting, I  
asked what they thought the pattern might be  
I was knitting, they replied “three cows’  
udders” and then “horses in a sea-  
green field”; and I seeing all the time  
four-fingered aloe candelabra
burning against the blue, making like
“crowns of fire like fingers sketching a
ruddy arabesque on the hard line.” (TL 93)

This poem makes extensive use of repetition: ‘[holi]day’, ‘work[ing]’, ‘farm[ers]’,
sitting’, ‘knitting’, ‘pattern[ed]’. It uses sound patterning: the internal rhyme of
sitting/knitting, the assonance of day/breaking, sea-/green, the alliteration of fine/free and
four-/fingered. The poem also uses patterning on a conceptual and thematic level:
Miller’s words, quoted in the last two lines of the poem, become a pattern from which
Metelerkamp creates a knitted item, a poem and an academic thesis (Metelerkamp wrote
her Masters thesis on Miller).

Another example of Metelerkamp’s use of patterning, even more extensive than that
found in ‘A working holiday at the farm’, is ‘Connection’ from Floating Islands. Due to
the pervasive nature of the patterning in this poem, the poem is quoted in full below.

“Hello? Mother? Thought you might be worried –
haven’t heard from you for so long – been missing
me? Dug into dreary essays – displaced –
put out – no time to think my own thoughts, dream
my own dreams, be my own me – the fearful
marks meeting – poor hard head aches with the strain…”

“Amanda? Is that you? Under a strain
myself – Steph’s sickness – (my good friend!) – worried
it can’t be long now. Stoic Steph! Fearful
of her God! My god! What does he want…! Missing
the point? What is the point? (How I dream, dream
of her …) And the news? All those displaced
people shacking up in formerly displaced
people’s places – Cato Manor – the strain
it puts on resources – can the city dream
up a way of dealing with it? worried…”
the opportunity, our fearful
lot, to right ourselves? Yes? If I’m fearful
it’s that ‘citizenship’ has been displaced
by ‘democracy’: make sure you’re not missing
out: grab what you can to the new tune, strain
of ‘defy! defy! defy! cock up to civility – worried
you can’t make it? Well take it!’ Pipe dream

the city’s rehabilitation, dream
of the haves, not of the have-nots; they’re fearful,
no doubt, for what they have…” “…I’m worried
about Karen – still not at home – displaced –
hear it through her letters – the strain
of keeping going – so chin up – missing

her…” “… move up now, move on…” “Snapper’s missing
her too…” “…her choice, Bristol…” “… she couldn’t dream
of staying! AWB, bombs, AIDS, new strain
of malaria; always furtive, fearful –
is that the dark reaper at the corner – displaced
with his sickle (his hammer) is that his worried

friend? What’s he got up his sleeve, an AK? Fearful
waste!” “OK, OK! No wonder she’s displaced –
running away from history… price to pay…” “I’m worried …

Worried about you, in fact. Have you quite lost
It? Running away from history!
Running away from threat, I’m afraid –
(but you’re not a mother – you wouldn’t know
this heavy-weight dread; how to hold dead life,
dragging, this place with a hole in it – be

free! safe houses! how I watch them, warn: be
careful! running out like bath water, out to sea, lost
like me, the heart with a hole in it, life
I can’t plug up, running out like history …”
“… dug herself up, for family love – you know
Mother, what can I say – I’m afraid

you don’t want to hear it; you’re so afraid
she’s gone the wrong way.” “Don’t be
moralistic with me! History!” “Morality! Know
what it is? Practicality. She’s lost
solid ground, shod feet tromping thin streets – history
everybody else’s…” “… adult! A life

of her own! Can’t she make a whole, new life?
Morality! You’ve forgotten, I’m afraid,
Bruce’s years of King Edward – that’s history –
and bloody Baragwanath, learning to be
a cynical surgeon, stitching up some poor lost
sod’s pipe wounds, shot wounds, god knows

what brutal unnecessary wounds – know
what that does to the soul? Bruce’s life
too, you know!” “And Karen hasn’t lost?
Cut off your African feet, don’t be afraid,
shove your wooden stumps into shoes, be
happy! Don’t worry! That’s all history!

You have a surgeon for a husband, history
won’t help you to get new soles, God knows,
but his careful sutures can?” … “Do you know, you can be
so…!” “Sorry. So sorry Mother. It’s her life…”
“I know. It’s just that I’m not sure, I’m afraid,
that ‘my country is the whole world’; I’ve lost

my eldest daughter and what’s life
without her children close – afraid
for them – what can I do – somehow lost…” (11-13 emphases and ellipses in original).

This poem consists of two sestinas. The words occurring at the end of the lines of each stanza are: worried, missing, displaced, dream, fearful and strain, in the first sestina; and lost, history, afraid, knows, life and be in the second. A deviation from the traditional sestina form is that, rather than using all six of the line-end words in the final three line stanza, only the words occurring in the first, third, and fifth lines of the first stanza are used: worried, displaced and fearful; and, at the end, lost, afraid, and life, respectively. In both cases, these words are ordered from the original fifth-line word, then the third, then the first. Another variation of the sestina, which endows the poem with an even more complex pattern, is that the last word in each stanza becomes the last word in the first line of the following stanza. Apart from the formal patterning, which clearly sets out the themes of the poem (worry, fear, displacement, history, and so on), the poem also contains more subtle internal repetitions; especially in the second sestina: ‘running away from history’, ‘Running away from history’, ‘Running away from the threat’, ‘running out like bath water, ‘running out like history’; ‘Dug into dreary essays’, ‘dug herself up’;
‘pipe dreams’, ‘pipe wounds’. Beyond these internal repetitions, the poem also echoes
some of Metelerkamp’s other poems. Maggie’s phrases ‘running out like bath water, out to the sea, lost / like me, the heart with a hole in it life / I can’t plug up, running out like history’, and ‘this heavy-weight dread; how to hold dead life, / dragging, this place with a hole in it’, are particularly resonant here, especially in reference to the suicides of Metelerkamp’s grandmother and mother. These words echo the previous poem in *Floating Island*, ‘Maternal axis’:

(Its death and its signs –  
weeping stigmata –  
you try to blot out, gaps  
you dare not plug up?) (10)

The image of blood running out, which one tries, but fails, to ‘plug up’, is echoed in *Stone No More*: ‘Stitch gently over the gaping flesh / cover the wound keeping the life blood in’ (32); ‘how go on, go on / leadenly threading the life-line, / seeming snapped now, of words like red / beans spilling like blood on the ground’ (26). The idea of death as both a physical hole and a weight that one carries with one are pervasive in Metelerkamp’s poetry. While these ideas recur in most of Metelerkamp’s collections, for example ‘the gap to be borne, stone-/ weight’ (SNM 24), ‘carry that weight’ (IDB 106), ‘carr[ying] [her grandmother] / close to [her] chest and again and again tr[ying] to get her off’ (IDB 60); they are most fully developed in *carrying the fire*, where she speaks about ‘dragging the weight of suicide women / dragging them up to the light’ (58), and evocatively states:

I was born, I told you, with a bit missing  
a child of love, but a bit missing –  
before I was born  
(before my mother was married)  
my grandmother shot a hole through her head  
right through my mother and into her unborn children – … (31, ellipsis added)

Not only do the repetition and patterns in ‘Connection’ gesture towards an affinity for cyclical time, but the very structure of *Floating Islands* in which ‘Connection’ appears reaffirms this. The poems are voiced by three different speakers: a mother, Maggie, and her two daughters, Amanda and Karen. However, rather than ordering the poems to develop each voice separately and tell their stories linearly, Metelerkamp intertwines the
voices, thereby forcing them into a patterned relationship with each other, a pattern in which they continually circle back on themselves. The poems should also be seen as part of a longer sequence, rather than as self-contained units. While these poems are ‘islands’ and therefore can appear isolated, they are ‘floating’ on the currents that flow through this textual seascape, and thus move together (and apart) of their own accord. They can, moreover, also be linked together when the reader finds and ‘pick[s] up the threads that bind them’ (FI 7). Through Metelerkamp’s repeated invocations of Dorothy Wordsworth and Ruth Miller in Floating Islands, who are experienced as being ‘alive and alive’ to Amanda (55), and not merely dead writers who have influenced her, she again disrupts linear time. While Metelerkamp’s poetry shows a definite affinity for cyclical time, her own familial legacy of matrilineal suicide has perhaps written Metelerkamp into a mode of cyclical time as much as she has consciously chosen this temporal mode for herself. Cyclical time controls the fatalistic sequence of death reingesting nurturing life which has been imprinted on Metelerkamp’s world view. Her employment of cyclical, rather than linear time, is also evident in the fact that her body of work, rather than showing a clear one-dimensional movement or progression, is throughout concerned with the same subjects (the everyday, being a woman-wife-mother-poet, the body, the body in nature, language), still uses the confessional style and free verse, and remains heavily dependent on mythology and nature for its imagery.

In amongst the verdancy of Metelerkamp’s natural imagery, the images that demonstrate a subjective and emotional identification with nature are particularly noteworthy. These identifications are strongest when associated with pivotal moments in the natural life cycle. Depictions of death, and the trauma of those trying to make sense of the death of their loved ones, are often expressed through deeply evocative, emotional identifications with natural beings (both plant and animal). In requiem, describing her impassioned, forlorn grief after her mother’s death, Metelerkamp identifies with ‘wild / white belladonna lilies / ripped limp from their rootings’ (16). Similarly, when responding to a

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6 Her writing has, of course, developed: her verse has become freer and less syllabic as her poetic voice has become freer and more self-assured, and the length of her poems has also increased, with long cycle poems starting to dominate – her last three collections, Floating Islands, requiem and carrying the fire are all sequence poems.
spate of deaths around her southern cape farm, Metelerkamp identifies with a cow whose mate has been shot:

wake to the thought of the black ox
felled like a slung stone at the feet
of the men from the bakkie
with their muffled revolver –

…

wake to him,
like a discontented cow,
nosing, nudging the grass
where his warmth lay

…

… nosing
the shape of something absent –
indent of damp – … (IDB 12; 14, ellipses added).

Rather than using metaphoric language for a poetic effect, the poem conveys Metelerkamp’s deep affinity with the ‘discontented cow’, the ‘angry cow / the horned mama’ who later, in the absence of her familiar partner, the black ox who has been ‘felled’ and whose warmth she misses, is mounted by ‘the young bull, huge-haunched’ (14).

This bovine identification recurs in carrying the fire, and is again evoked by feeling a loss. But here death is no longer the cause: it is instead the ending of a sexual relationship which Metelerkamp misses and desires to renew. She thus implores her absent lover to

smell me, nose in me
(man so far from me)
come with your cock like a farmer’s arm up a cow
feeling for what stirs in there (21).

While sexual longing, like death, belongs to the logic of natural cycles, the veterinary intrusion of the ‘farmer’s arm’ into this image disturbs its carnal complacency or conventionality. This intrusion seems to imply that both the separation of these two lovers, and Metelerkamp’s longing for her absent lover, are unnatural. While Metelerkamp superficially appears to be representing an image of a desired deep
penetration, there is an underlying sense of illness or imbalance. Metelerkamp positions herself as a passive and powerless ‘cow’ being coldly and clinically examined by her ‘farmer’ or owner. Her impassioned longing for the return of her lover thus seems oddly disturbing. Moreover, as this image is most likely derived from the practice of bovine artificial insemination, it reduces the desired intercourse to a merely reproductive function completely divorced from sexual pleasure. The idea that something ‘stirs’ inside Metelerkamp’s body, an image of pregnancy, attests to the life-giving power of this relationship and thus links this image back to the natural life cycle. However, as this has been an artificial insemination to which she has been passively subjected, the ‘naturalness’, and even the desirableness, of this procreation is questioned.

When describing the creation of poetry, Metelerkamp, like many poets, likens it to the creation of new life. But rather than using the image of giving birth to her own baby, Metelerkamp instead imagines herself as a field waiting for life-giving rain.

It’s more than I can do; this wait for rain;

I forget to hold myself
open as a field –
I am too closed with
driving and
washing and
feeding and
clothing,
too stunned by survival. (IDB 24-25)

The ‘rain’ which Metelerkamp is waiting for is, in the context of the poem, poetic inspiration, particularly, ‘a new way of speaking’ (27), or a ‘new language’ (20) which she can use to create poetry. This rain is her long-desired muse, from whose nurturance Metelerkamp can have ‘words sprouting like green hairs from [her] sides’ (IDB 58).

In another natural image describing the process of poetic creation, Metelerkamp imagines herself as a cheetah stalking her prey/poem:

Sit in the sun in the hope
something will come up:
sometimes body I lie
in this heat before noon
animal, empty,
waiting for something
to come by –

with the patience of a cat watching
like that cheetah, once,
waiting,
...
behind her, behind the cheetah,
at the small puddle of water
springbok drinking and four gemsbok
waiting;
sit in the sun in the absolute still
and wait;
ready now and flat
she waits;
but the gemsbok have seen her, sensed her
waiting, … (IDB 89, ellipses added).

Metelerkamp describes how the possibility of creating or catching a poem is lost. Paradoxically, though, this experience of failing to catch and claim the potential poem inspires a poem of its own. In this poem, poetic inspiration is again viewed as something life-giving, as food which is necessary to sustain life. While the creation of poetry seems removed from the natural sphere, by depicting it as the creation and sustenance of (plant and animal) life, Metelerkamp positions herself, as a poet, in the natural realm and identifies with natural beings.

Metelerkamp’s identification with nature can be understood through reference to embodiment principles, particularly those advocated by Sheets-Johnson. As an embodied being living in nature, Metelerkamp’s life is subject to the laws of nature, like any other natural being. As a material entity, subject to death and decay like any plant or animal, Metelerkamp acknowledges her kinship with the rest of the natural, material world. In her poetry, Metelerkamp focuses on her experience of life as a body which is unified with its mind, a ‘persistent whole’, and thus describes herself as a ‘Darwinian body’ (to use Sheets-Johnson’s terms). As such, Metelerkamp is a ‘body’ which is organically one with ‘its mind’ (these aspects of the organism can, of course, in this theoretical framework,
only be nominally separated), and a being which is an organic part of nature and natural life-systems. Metelerkamp’s assertion that her embeddedness, both in her body, and in nature (‘I have come out of that garden, / that bushveld’ [CF 23]) is thus a striking experiential rebuttal of Cartesian dualism. As Metelerkamp can be read as a confessional poet who is concerned with expressing her truth, the reality of her life as she experiences it, this rebuttal is particularly forceful: she is not merely discussing the ontological, epistemological or ethical merit of adopting an embodied approach, she is bearing incontestable witness to her experience of life as an embodied being.

Emmanuel Levinas draws a strong connection between embodiment and ethics. Levinas states that ‘the incarnation of human subjectivity guarantees its spirituality’ (Ethics 97) and thus argues, as Diehm paraphrases, ‘that embodiment is the very condition of ethics’ (55). For Levinas, ethics is dependent on one’s response to the Other. According to his theory of ethics, ‘the openness of the subject to the Other … is expressly positioned as sensible and corporeal’; thus the ‘body is the condition for the “susceptibility” to the Other and is at the root of the ethical relation (Lumsden 237). Levinas, as paraphrased by Diehm, maintains that it is the event of coming face to face with an Other that creates the possibility of an ethical relationship: ‘it is the face of the other that establishes this [ethical] order’ – an order characterised by ‘being-concerned-for-others’ instead of ‘being-for-itself’ (Diehm 51) – ‘a disordering of myself and a re-orientation towards the other’ (Diehm 51-52). But due to Levinas’s insistence that it is the body, the ‘incarnation of human subjectivity’ that ‘guarantees its spirituality’ or ethicality, Diehm finds adequate grounds to question Levinas’s usage of ‘face’. Levinas comments that ‘the whole human is in this sense more or less face’ (Ethics 97) and that ‘the whole body – a hand or curve of the shoulder can express as the face’ (Totality 262) and Diehm therefore argues that while

the phenomenal face is in some sense a privileged location for discovering the expressive powers of the face, it is not true that the power of ethical expression is found only in the face. Rather the expressiveness of the face is to be found “in the expressivity of the other person’s whole sensible being, even in the hand that one shakes” (‘On Intersubjectivity’ 102). It is important to come to grips with the radicality of this last statement. Levinas is not saying that we can, if we so desire,
regard the body as “like” the face. Instead it is the case that the expressiveness of the face is the expression of the body. (Diehm, emphasis in original 55)

Diehm discusses Levinas’s response to questions posed to him about whether non-humans can express as a face, observing: ‘it would seem that Levinas has decided against the non-human face, or at least against it being anything like the face of ethics’ (53). However, Diehm argues that ‘when Levinas says “face” what he really means is “body”’ (54). Furthermore, he explains that, for Levinas, ‘language is first and foremost an expressive capacity that cuts across formal-linguistic or physiological barriers’ (54). Therefore Diehm justifies his belief that, according to Levinas’s theoretical strictures, animals are certainly capable of bodily expression which can appeal to the (human) Other (54). If ethics is our response to the expression of the Other, then the ‘face’ of the non-human can certainly evoke such a response. Metelerkamp’s response in her poetry, to the perplexity of a cow whose mate has been slain, to the parched desperation of a dusty field, to a cheetah patiently stalking its prey, is thus fundamentally ethical.7

Her response and her strong identification with these Others in nature can also be seen as a form of empathy. Levinas views the Other as absolute alterity, the subject and the Other as ‘radically separated’, there is no connection between them (Lumsden 233). As Levinas states: ‘I, who have no common concept with the stranger, am, like him, without genus’ (Totality 39). He thus dismisses empathy as ‘simply another form of egocentrism that stresses my understanding of the Other, and as such undermines alterity. Rather than being a relation to the Other, empathy, as a reflective response to the Other, is self-relation and as such relates to the Other merely as a posit of consciousness’ (Lumsden 238, emphasis in original). However, as Lumsden argues

at the level of sensibility, Levinas still argues for something like an empathetic relation to the Other. We are summoned by the Other, but the response to this summons is not one which is mediated through an empathetic cognition of what it would be like for me to be that person, rather for Levinas the response occurs at the level of the body. (238)

7 While the animals in these poems could be read as metaphoric extensions of the self, they are also presented as Metelerkamp’s radical Others.
Due to this inconsistency, Levinas revises his position on the absolute alterity of the Other in *Otherwise than Being*, where he ‘much more explicitly presents the body as a site that has, at a non-cognitive level, a pre-existing and hence mediated relation to the Other which enables the body to respond to the plea of the Other’ (Lumsden 239). Metelerkamp’s empathetic, bodily identification with non-human Others can thus be understood within Levinas’s theory of ethics as grounded in the face to face encounter.

A tendency which is striking in Metelerkamp’s descriptions of nature is her extensive naming of plants, for example: ‘freesia, watsonia, clover, chincherinchee’ (IDB 49). This tendency is especially remarkable in *carrying the fire*: ‘leucodendron, erica, metalasia’ (103); ‘vlier, rooiels, essenhou’ (60), ‘combretem pod, bauhinia leaf, impala lily flower’ (21). Metelerkamp makes us aware of her grandfather’s love of gardens (CF 36) and her husband’s stepmother’s large collection of ‘botanical books, her obsessive naming. Claiming and cataloguing’, a knowledge she passed on to Metelerkamp’s children:

> From before they could read she was bending to point out oxalis, sutera, etcetera. *Surely they’re not at that stage yet –*  
> *Nonsense; they can speak can’t they –*  
> Didn’t need to ask why my kids needed the Latin names. The answer was simple: plants, like her three plum trees, her jam, her rusk recipe, her cottage in this field even if it doesn’t belong to her even if she’s only got a 100 year lease-hold. Of course they needed the names. She gave them. (109-110)

This naming does therefore appear to be, at least in part, due to familial influences. But there does seem to be something more symbolic about this practice. While Metelerkamp does criticise her stepmother-in-law for insisting on the proper Latin names to her young children, Metelerkamp herself displays a similar desire for ‘claiming and cataloguing’.

When on a writer’s residency in Switzerland, Metelerkamp wonders:

> Alders, chestnuts, are you, ash, beech?  
> wide European leaves and all the colours of green  
> I can’t find names for  
> coming from summers more bleached  

and is relieved when

> *prunus* and *holly* and at last I name you  
> *chestnut* and *beech*. (CF 13, emphases in original)
This near-obsessive naming (which includes colours: ‘amber, umber, burnt sienna’ [CF 117] and places: ‘Kei Cuttings, Idutywa, Gcumbu’ [CF 22]), though possibly natural in someone who lives by her words, also focuses our attention to systems of power operating within the act of naming. Mary Daly claims that ‘[w]omen have had the power of naming stolen from us’ (in Ostriker 318 emphasis in original), and, similarly, Adrienne Rich argues that ‘the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative’ (Lies 35).

The Bible, the central text of the patriarchal canon, clearly entrusts this power to men:

Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. (Genesis 2:19-20, New International Version)

Naming is manifestly a public and social act, but women have been cloistered in isolation in the private domain, with no authority to participate in public or social life. Naming is an act of power, while women have been powerless and at male mercy. It is thus clear that women have been prevented from naming. In this context, Metelerkamp’s frequent taxonomies show a strong participation in a feminist redistribution of power and authority. Metelerkamp asserts her own authority by naming objects in her world, and thus forcefully reclaims ‘the power of naming’ which was ‘stolen’ from women (Daly in Ostriker 318).

Metelerkamp’s conception of language, and of the relationship between language and the world, deserves detailed attention. As expressed in a request like that made to her husband in Into the day breaking, ‘take me beyond words’ (103), Metelerkamp clearly believes in the existence of a material world of objects beyond words, and the ontological priority of this world. This belief is in accordance with her focus on the body, and sets her understanding of the world apart from linguistically-orientated contemporary theories, like poststructuralism. Discussing text and voice, or what could be interpreted as language and body, in an interview, Metelerkamp states:

I must say the emphasis on text at the expense of voice in academe not only pisses me off, I find it philosophically scary. Its emphasis is on absence and loss and
substitution rather than on presence and possibility and reality (things as they are, not as metaphors). The metaphor of the text, of ‘reading’ everything, is a postmodern silliness at best and a sickness at worst; and I can only think it is colonial anxiety which has made it take with such power in South African academe (Cousins12).

Poststructuralism, which is ultimately a theory of ‘absence and loss’, endless chains of signifiers which are constantly shifting, so that nothing can ever be said to be stably ‘present’, a firm ‘reality’, is thus clearly rejected by Metelerkamp. In view of this, it is indeed curious that Sarah Frost, in her partial MA thesis on Metelerkamp and Ingrid de Kok, which is one of the very few sustained critical engagements with Metelerkamp’s poetry, chooses to use a poststructuralist approach in analysing Metelerkamp’s poetry:

I find feminist poststructuralism as articulated by Weedon especially useful in analysing the forms of gendered identity associated with Metelerkamp’s poetry, since “a poststructuralist position on subjectivity and consciousness relativises the individual’s sense of herself by making it an effect of discourse which is open to continuous redefinition and which is constantly slipping”. (75)

In her thesis, Frost refers to the interview in which Metelerkamp damns postmodernism (and presumably, poststructuralism, which incorporates postmodernism within its theoretical framework) (116). Frost’s inability to explain how a writer who derides the poststructuralist method of ‘reading’ everything and prefers to focus realistically on ‘things as they are, not as metaphors’, can want to relativise her ‘sense of herself by making it an effect of discourse which is open to continuous redefinition and which is constantly slipping’, therefore seriously undermines her academic project.

Metelerkamp, then, rather than rejecting the referential quality of language, clearly believes that there is a reality ‘beyond words’ which words refer to and which they can access (103):

… in these moments of sun shade who showed art’s ecstasy hot like truth lines falling like shade of the real thing give me some measure
in these lines
remind me –
like tenacity –
to look at what’s in front of me:

smoke from the Juffrou’s, rising. (IDB 100)

Rather than believing that the connection between a word and what it names is merely arbitrary (as structuralism and poststructuralism maintain), poetic lines of words are a ‘shade’ or shadow ‘of the real thing’. In a revision of Plato’s Story of the Cave, here the ‘real thing’ is ‘the real thing’, and language is its shadow. Far from being arbitrary, then, language is inherently tied to what it represents; the form of language is dependent on that which it shadows (or which shadows it). This belief in the mimetic nature of language, of words being a ‘polished-stone / looking glass’ (SNM 5), again links Metelerkamp’s poetic vision to embodiment theory. The embodiment theory of language is particularly well expressed by Colin Sample: not only is a child’s first, idiomorphic language mimetic, but

[w]ith the gradual transition from idiomorphic to conventional speech, some of these mimetic patterns are preserved, so that conventional speech retains a dimension of physiognomic depiction that can be creatively exploited (117).

In Sample’s view, rather than being a purely mental or conceptual system, that just happens to be produced and received by the body, language is an unequivocally sensual or physiognomic phenomenon. The body is an organic whole of which the mind is a part. It does not just execute the mind’s commands; thus, in embodiment theory, language belongs equally to the body and the mind. As Metelerkamp writes: ‘I have sent word to you, / words, speaking from my body’ (CF 33). And, as Sample argues, it is language’s embeddedness in the body that enables it to be so affective:

Th[e] ability to open a vista onto “an immense realm of kindred presentations” is something that language possesses by virtue of what I shall call its physiognomic dimension. It is at least partially because language is spoken by embodied, sensual human beings, because the human body is itself expressive, because human communication resonates with affective and dynamic nuances, that words can become windows onto sensual significance that far exceeds their conventional or determinate sense. The aesthetic use of language is closely related to the sensual and affective significance that we experience as living bodies in the world, to the indeterminate sense of which we are aware through our abilities for physiognomic
and affective perception and that we can express mimetically by making our own bodies – the qualities of the sounds that we produce or the posture and gestures we adopt – into symbolic vehicles. It is the sensual, essentially embodied dimension of language which brings into unmistakable focus the intertwining of sensuality and reason. (114)

Aesthetic language carries the web of felt associations expressed in mimetic communication over into the domain of verbal language, in such a way that words come to evoke the presentation of a range of physiognomic and affective correspondences. (122)

Metelerkamp is aware of the physiognomic dimension of language and seeks to enhance the affective quality of her language by intensifying its physiognomic aspects. This can, for example, be seen in the final stanza of the second section of carrying the fire, in which she is relinquishing her relationship with the Russian writer she met in Switzerland:

last night I was kissing you, last kiss, this dream
goodbye –
my dream unreeling filaments of menstrual bleeding
lines like frilling Cyrillic spilling strings of simple
signs bleeding goodbye. (46)

Here Metelerkamp uses phonetic devices to mimic the harmony of the relationship, but also its obsessiveness. These include assonance: / əi / (night, I, goodbye, my, lines, like, signs); / i / (dream, unreeling, bleeding); / i / (kissing, kiss, unreeling, bleeding, frilling, Cyrillic, spilling, strings); / i / (filaments, frilling, Cyrillic, spilling, simple); alliteration (s, l, r) and internal rhyme (goodbye – my, unreeling – bleeding, frilling – spilling). In this extract the four vowel sounds are repeated continuously with hardly an interruption, showing how each word or person echoes the other and how they are bonded together in rhyming pairs, all of which is shattered is the final ‘goodbye’, which is unpartnered, on its own line, signalling utter desolation, in whose mournful / əi / sound, the echo of ‘cry’, and ‘die’ are contained. The sensuality of her language here, as her words force the reader’s lips and tongue to repeat certain movements and produce certain sounds, is also enacted by her usage of ‘Cyrillic’. For a reader, Cyrillic can only be understood in its materiality, its symbolic reference cannot be accessed. Thus the materiality of the foreign
marks on the page, linked with the sensual movement of the reader’s mouth in its production of repeated sounds, together increase the affectivity of Metelerkamp’s language by focusing on language’s physiognomic aspects. Her words also affect the body through their evocation of the menstrual cycle: the abandoned relationship is linked to the abandoned lining of the uterus, the home prepared for new life, thereby intensifying the gravity of the loss, as well as locating the loss firmly in the body.

However, language is not merely sensual in its ability to affect the reader, or hearer. For Metelerkamp, words themselves are sensual. The sensuality of words allows her write that she has ‘[h]ands full of poems’ (IDB 87). As Adrienne Rich has noted, words are ‘real, tangible, sensual’ (Lies 247). And it is when rhapsodizing about the sensuality of Rich’s words that Metelerkamp first expresses this belief about language, in her poem ‘For Adrienne Rich’:

In the quiet of the house on my own
with your poems that dusk slowly taking
me your poems tender making love your
words bit by reaching bit caressed me touched
me gently your words addressed to me then.

Loving palpably black on white I love
the feel of your words. The common language
I could not have known I was dreaming of
gently you speak in language lovers use;

and as with love force me to face the lack
admitting longing to use this language
lovers use too to speak too to reach out

leaving gaping loss like love always leaves. (TL 90)

If words touch and caress a reader, if words, not ideas, or the things they represent, can be loved palpably, then the relationship between language and the world needs to be reconsidered. Words are not merely a means of accessing the real (‘beyond words’), of referring to things outside of themselves, but are themselves material, loving and objects of love. Rather than being tools fixed in a system of reference, words have their own lives:

this morning, in the shower,
running water running,
down the body, streaming,
streaming down, the body
bowed under the flowing
words, pouring words, in me
over me, out of me,
grandmother’s words come to me:

“O George if you had dancing in the blood
like I do …”

(in a letter, just before her marriage,
words to George hot with love, pouring delight,
beating, beating with love like a promise). (SNM 23)

Instead of linking words to a purely mental plane, Metelerkamp infuses language with the
body. Or rather, as embodiment theorists would argue, as language is already necessarily
fused with the body, Metelerkamp acknowledges this inherent sensuality of language,
thereby giving the body its due.

At times Metelerkamp’s poetry, still deeply sensual, seems so far from referential
language, so removed from any clear external reality, that her meaning becomes difficult
to decipher. Karen Press, commenting on this occasional quality, has noted that ‘[t]here is
also the danger that the poet’s struggle to express a truth manifests itself simply as an
unsuccessful (i.e. confused or unclear) bit of poetry, and in some poems I found myself
going ‘Huh?’ every couple of lines’ (13). An example of this ‘unclear’ poetry, for me,
can be found in the last two stanzas of ‘Lost fragments’:

I am adrift I
do not belong where is my mother
land my child like my tongue connecting ...
eroding my own source borne
away
I have buried my life-spring,
stone slabs lie over it
where it lies weeping…. (FI 35, ellipsis in original)

The phrase ‘where is my mother / land my child like my tongue connecting’,
unpunctuated as it is, could have four possible meanings, all permeated by a sense of
loss: the loss of a country, a mother, a child and a language (a ‘tongue’). These losses are all seen to be ‘connecting’ one to something (One’s country? One’s family? One’s world? One’s self?) but this something is left undetermined. These four supposedly ‘separate’ losses are, however, not clearly separate and rather flow into and echo each other. In the earlier poem ‘Banished’, leaving or losing one’s homeland is compared to losing a mother:

Home is left behind, forgotten, gone
(like a mother who dies of cancer when
you’re three, leaving you groundless like the dazed
child, a month after the funeral, hanging
on the banister with a jersey on,
though it was Durban, February, then,
forever and ever no-one to say
take it off now; listen, your mother is here.... ) (FI 26, ellipsis in original)

‘Lost fragments’, while written from Amanda’s perspective, nevertheless echoes Karen’s sentiments in ‘Banished’, and thus these two separate characters also flow into and echo each other. Similarly, the loss of a child seems most applicable to Maggie who, living in Knysna, with one daughter in Bristol, and the other uncommunicative in Durban, feels that she has lost her children. All three characters seem to experience a loss of language:

Amanda is searching for an academic and creative voice to express her discovery of the connection between Ruth Miller and Dorothy Wordsworth; Karen for an independent, artistic voice which can co-exist with the language of domesticity; and Maggie for a language in which she could express her reality of ageing alone, with her best friend dying of cancer and her daughters far away. Notably, more than a third of the poems in Floating Islands end with ellipses, which typically signify the inadequacy, failure or loss of language, and which thereby entrench this theme of the frustrated striving towards a suitable language.

The lines ‘I have buried my life-spring / stone slabs lie over it / where it lies weeping’ echo the earlier description of William and Dorothy Wordsworth’s house: ‘the cold stone of your kitchen floor laid / across the underground spring – the walls / damp in the cool room, seeping, weeping’ (33). Amanda is thus forging a connection between herself and Wordsworth. But the idea of the ‘life-spring’ which is ‘buried’ could also be evocative of
the loss of a mother (who gives one life, from whose living body one springs), a child
(who one gives life, who springs from one’s living body), a country (the motherland as
mother: the living land from which one springs) or a language (language as the medium,
if not the source, of life: we cannot but live through language and access our world
through it). The precise nature of the ‘life-spring’ which has been ‘erode[d]’ and ‘buried’,
cannot be clarified. Rather than using words to refer clearly to a specific experience, idea
or thing (the traditional function of language), Metelerkamp’s words here create an
ambiguous, polymorphous complex or node of ideas and experiences of loss and
displacement, of a lack of connection and a despair of ever being able to ‘cohere, to find
cohesion’ again (CF 103).

Metelerkamp’s language in this poem could thus be seen as so ambiguous that it escapes
the order of logic, defying rational, intelligible meaning. This difficulty in accessing the
poem’s meaning, especially when using conventional grammar as the primary tool of
comprehension, links Metelerkamp with the group of American Language poets. In other
ways, her style is incompatible with this movement. Much of Metelerkamp’s poetry does
‘[foreground] the materiality of the poem’ which was ‘Language poetry’s early
emphasis’, but it certainly does not ‘[foreground] its syntacticality’ which is the current
preoccupation of Language poetry, according to Izenberg (133). He also argues that
Language poets are ‘seriously and programmatically opposed to providing a general
account of what a language is’ (Izenberg 147, emphasis in original). Metelerkamp’s
poetry, with its repeated meditations on the nature of language, and the connections
between language, body and world, certainly does strive towards presenting an articulate
and coherent account of ‘what a language is’, which again places Metelerkamp in
opposition to conventional Language poets. The ‘dual imperative’ of Language poetry:
‘its theoretical emphasis on linguistic invention … and its institutional emphasis on
poetic multiplicity’, also seems far removed from Metelerkamp’s poetics (Izenberg 155).
Lastly, Language poetry’s ‘emphasis on poetic multiplicity’ and ‘linguistic invention’
leads to a creation of very lengthy, rambling poetry which ‘makes content always seem to
be punitive’ (148). This is antithetical to Metelerkamp’s project of poetic revelation, her
attempt to ‘reveal’ ‘the hidden, the solid, the truth’ in her poetry (McGrane 3).
Language poetry has been criticised as a ‘product of the non-sequitur or of nonsense’ which is written in ‘an obtuse, unreadable private language’, a criticism which seems to be at the root of Karen Press’s confused ‘Huh?’ in response to Metelerkamp’s poetry (Hinton 186). However, it is only when meaning is reduced to utterances clearly understood using referential language units neatly arranged according to the rules of grammar that this confusion arises. As Hinton argues:

“Meaning,” … is not a dirty word, that which the Language poet reviles. Rather, “meaning” is bound up with what Kristeva has termed the “semiotic,” which signifies through nongrammatical lexicons (pulse, body rhythms, nonsensical sounds), and which can never be separated from one’s total linguistic experience. (187)

Hinton focuses on the activity of many women writers within the Language poetry movement. She draws on Rae Armantrout’s theory that, as women were excluded ‘from patriarchal reference systems’, they ‘experience a “difficult access to the “symbolic order”’ and are therefore ‘natural allies’ of vanguard movements like Language poetry (Hinton 182). Due to Language poetry’s (dis)balancing of the symbolic order with the semiotic order, an order strongly associated with the mother’s body in French feminism, their predilection for Language poetry is clearly justifiable. One can see that the meaning of this poem (and others) drifts below the rational level of the symbolic and patriarchal order, and is instead swept along on the rhythms of a subterranean tide and current. This movement towards the semiotic in Metelerkamp’s language can be linked to Kristeva’s idea of maternal language, a language which develops out of the mother’s body as she communicates with her child. It is what Cixous classifies as the ‘amniotic flow of words that reiterates the contractual rhythms of labour’ (in Gubar 308). Referential, intelligible meaning is thus replaced by the body’s own rhythms as the object of the poem.

While most of Metelerkamp’s work is intelligible, it does contain a drive to discard ‘The Word’ tied, as it is, to patriarchal order and logos, in order to return to a more natural language, to truly be ‘speaking from [her] body’ (CF 33). This drive can also be seen in

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8 Metelerkamp’s uneasy relationship with ‘The Word’ will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.
the stanza from *carrying the fire* (‘last night I was kissing you…’) quoted above, where through an intricate, rhythmic use of sound patterning, the body itself is given a voice.

Metelkamp’s attempts to find a way to give her body a voice in her poetry can be seen as part of a greater project of tearing down the barriers between body and nature, and the mind and culture. While linking culture and the mind here might seem strange, Cartesian dualism is one of the foundational principles of our culture. As Cartesianism asserts that the mind is supreme and the body is merely a piece of faulty machinery which we would be better off without (the body is, perhaps, necessary as a tool to perform the mind’s instructions, but it clouds and confuses the mind), the body (and the natural world which it is a part of) has been, to a large extent, locked out of culture. Often, the body has only been allowed a place in culture insofar as it becomes acculturated, and its nature is curtailed and transformed. In terms of this discussion, the concepts of the grotesque body and abjection are useful.

Drawing on Bakhtin’s seminal work on Rabelais, Ian Burkitt argues that, with the advent of modernity and its concomitant Cartesian principles, the grotesque body of the middle ages was evicted from society and replaced with the ‘closed body’ (45-66). ‘In the grotesque image of the body’, Burkitt explains,

> emphasis is placed on orifices and protuberances, especially in the lower bodily strata – the bowels, buttocks and genitals – which are linked to the earth and its reproductive power. The earth swallows through the grave, but also gives birth in the form of new life, just as the human body consumes and excretes, takes in and gives life. Grotesque bodies are not closed, but open to the world, and emphasis is placed on the body parts that stretch out into it, such as the nose, pot belly, phallus, breasts, and those open to it, such as the mouth, genitals and anus, all of which connect us to the earth and to other people. (47)

While the grotesque body was not lived out in the daily lives of medieval people, and was primarily linked to the carnival,

> it was still possible to experience the body and its functions in their more earthy form. People could have an experience of the lived body that was more direct and unmediated –a sensuous involvement with the world where the boundaries between the inside and outside of the body, and the dividing line between the individual and the collective, were not as sharply drawn as they are today. This
was possible only in the strictly delimited time of the carnival, yet the sensuous body and its imagery still comprised a very present and real force (46).

Furthermore, as Burkitt argues, the grotesque body is a positive [body]; like the carnival itself, the body is not seen as a private possession, but a universal, lived phenomenon, represented in everyone. The material body of the individual is part of the collective, ancestral body of the people. Also, like the carnival, the body has regenerative power; it not only consumes and takes in from the earth, it also reproduces and gives birth. (46-47)

However, due to the changes of society and thought which Burkitt associates with the rise of modernity, in present western society ‘the emphasis on the lower bodily strata, the images of excrement and birth, of fertilizing and generating, appear vulgar or coarse and the complex meanings within them are lost’ (47).

Alongside this discussion of the medieval grotesque body, let us place a discussion of Kristeva’s concept of abjection. Grosz describes abjection as being that which involves the paradoxically necessary but impossible desire to transcend corporeality. It is a refusal of the defiling, impure, uncontrollable materiality of the subject’s embodied existence. It is a response to the various bodily cycles of incorporation, absorption, depletion, expulsion, the cycles of material rejuvenation and consumption necessary to sustain itself, yet incapable of social recognition and representation. (in Weiss 42)

The abject that Grosz is describing is thus precisely that which the medieval carnival celebrated (and represented, both in the language and activities of the carnival), in the grotesque body, which, as Grosz states, has now become ‘incapable of … recognition and representation’. While the grotesque body stresses our union with our bodies, with our fellow human beings and with nature itself, abjection works in the opposite direction to create boundaries. Some theorists claim that these boundaries are necessary:

For Kristeva, that which is “lost” or which resists incorporation into the body image is also precisely what makes the coherent body image possible because it marks the boundary between the body image and what it is not. There is a permanent danger that this boundary will be dissolved, however, since the boundary is only reinforced on one side, the Symbolic side. The “other side” is the unnameable, abject domain that continually threatens to overrun its carefully established borders. (Weiss 42)
However, as Weiss argues, ‘the price of [abjection] is far too high’:

the repudiation of what lies beyond the “fragile limit” that marks the border between the “I” and the “not-I” will give rise to its own body image distortions as certain bodily fluids, bodily activities, and body parts are disavowed and refused a legitimate place in the construction of corporeal identity. (46)

Specifically, for Kristeva, the abject should not be delegitimised as it contains ‘creative “juices” that flow from this abjected domain in the form of 1) the revolutionary possibilities of poetic language and 2) the maternal re-enactment of … the “original narcissistic crisis” through pregnancy and childbirth’ (Weiss 46).

In her poetry, Metelerkamp demonstrates a desire to embrace the grotesque body, and, as its Siamese twin, the abject. The abject material reminds the subject of its ‘necessary relation to death, to animality, and to materiality’ (Grosz in Weiss 44). As we have seen, Metelerkamp’s poetry, concerned as it is with her grandmother’s and mother’s suicides, demonstrates a profound awareness of her relation to death: she lives ‘dragging the weight of suicide women’ (CF 58), wondering if she is ‘accursed’ with suicide (R 10), as her daughter dreams (R 19). Secondly, Metelerkamp’s poetry insists on a continuity between humans and animals, our shared bodily existence, and often displays a deep empathy with animals, as her frequent identifications with animals indicate (for example, in poems from Into the day breaking, as earlier discussed). Thirdly, her poetry clearly insists on her materiality, describing her ‘skin’, ‘hair’, ‘shoulders’, ‘breasts’, as her ‘essence’ (CF 37). On all these counts, then, Metelerkamp rejects abjection, and allows the abject to enter and be recognised as a legitimate part of herself.

But beyond this, Metelerkamp also places a strong emphasis on the grotesque body in her work:

Keep coming up,  
_soul, love,_  
even though I know nothing about them  
even though I know the way of all poems :  
desire of the poet, the way of the poet’s  
_need, want_ :  
to make them matter, give them new matter,  
_body, flesh,_
like what holds us, essential,
now, here
forever and ever –
what matters, what essence:

like when I first sent word,
like a poem, fragment, scattered
like us, over thousands of kilometres:

(how body remembered yours
written in mine
in semen sweat skin ink
azure eyes
waking kept coming
come in come through come to)

and she asked, your estranged wife,
“is this the essence of your poems?”
barbed, bitter,
as if she had bitten the core
our secret
like a little freesia bulb dug up
from damp ground

and yes I answer her
silent as a freesia
stirred by an idiot wind
essence scent
skin hair skin
my god, essential, like
scimitar cock soft stomach

skin thin come
kiss like sun
waking and coming
and in and through and to
like mount
like Venus
like pubis vulva vagina
deeper way underground
cunt tunnel muscles and held
cervix and crux
yes and rising again
sweet salt essence (CF 29-30, emphases in original).
With the profusion of bodily ‘profanities’, this rhythmic chanting of the names of the abject, the improper, the impure, like the carnivalesque, grotesque body, Metelerkamp focuses entirely on the ‘lower bodily strata’ and its ‘orifices and protuberances’ (Burkitt 47). Simultaneously, as the members of the abject class have been listed as ‘flesh, blood, spit, mucus, faeces, vomit, urine, pus and other bodily fluids’ (Weiss 42), Metelerkamp’s ‘semen’, ‘sweat’, ‘come’ and ‘salt’ certainly also represent and give voice to the abject.

Her pulsing, repetitive words, both describing and mimicking sex as they do, thus also focus on the body’s openness, the lack of clear distinctions between its inside and outside, between one body and another, thus furthering her celebration of the grotesque body. In light of this, Metelerkamp’s poetic desire to

\[ \text{take back those words} \]
\[ \text{banished, punished :} \]
\[ \text{open then : undefile them :} \]
\[ \text{old words, old as the earth, for growth,} \]
\[ \text{fuck cock cunt (CF 17)} \]

can be seen as desire to reincorporate the grotesque and abject, into our individual body image, and into society’s way of thinking about the body and the self.

While Metelerkamp’s poetry, using its sensual, everyday language, seeks to describe, and sometimes celebrate, the everyday, at times the everyday seems to encompass poetry, becoming a poem in itself, so that one’s attempt to make a poem about it is unnecessary:

\[ \text{maybe as when} \]
\[ \text{you were children} \]
\[ \text{playing house under pines,} \]
\[ \text{piling up sweet needles for the walls,} \]
\[ \text{you’ll be silent, beside him} \]
\[ \text{no need for words} \]
\[ \text{but through the trees the wind} \]
\[ \text{like a poem in your ears. (IDB 59)} \]
Though one could argue that there is ‘no need for words’ as there is such a strong understanding and intimate bond between the brother and sister ‘playing house’ that a vocalisation of their shared thoughts is unnecessary, or that the fact that the wind is ‘like a poem in your ears’ is just coincidental; the juxtaposition of these two ideas does imply a logical link between them: because the wind is ‘like a poem in your ears’ there is ‘no need for words’, for poetry. The poetry already exists in the wind. Similarly, and less ambiguously, though Metelerkamp uses words to describe and reveal the body,

sometimes the pure presence of the body erases this poetic desire:

Shall I give up words, words being only body’s substitute?
Shall I give up words, when I want, have body? (CF 15)

This notion of words acting as merely a substitute for the body is not a novel one in Metelerkamp’s work, it appears in Stone No More, too (‘Words then; your word – body’s substitute’ [65]). Here language is subordinated to the world it represents, and when the desired aspects of the world are sufficiently present and exposed, then language itself, the poor substitute, becomes irrelevant.

However, this attitude towards the relationship between language and the world is not uniformly maintained.

Polished words strung across precisely weighted syllabic lines distilling the fury I’d felt for years to fierce stones – a string, I felt, glinting – like Granny’s necklace in the dark like the lights of Maritzburg below, seen for the first time through the mist from World’s View, as we drove through the night…. (SNM 5, ellipsis in original)

Here, rather than being just a poor substitute or unnecessary reflection of the real, language becomes the light. Through the ‘mist’ or the ‘night’, or the confusion of the real world, words are ‘lights’, either revealing the world (thereby implying that without language our world is in ‘night’ – all is indistinguishable in the darkness, the world is unfathomable chaos) or, at least, providing a comforting beacon which leads the way home (language as a comfort, a guide). In Into the day breaking, Metelerkamp again
proposes that language, and, in particular, the structure of poetic language, is more than merely a substitute for body or world, suggesting that, instead, poetic language allows us to understand our world:

Weighing what words
might best balance God
like work, wrought through the silence

what rhythms and lines
might bare for me,
what they might bear;

what they might teach me; … (IDB 17, emphasis in original, ellipsis added).

By using the homophones bare/bear, Metelerkamp insists that the rhythms and lines of poetry both reveal (‘bare’) meaning for the poet (and reader), but that they also carry meaning within themselves (‘bear’). Words are certainly not merely substitutes.

These contradictory conceptions of language seem irreconcilable, leaving the reader ‘in the depth of impasse’ (CF 81). Perhaps it is these contradictions which have resulted in readers like Frost using poststructuralism to analyse Metelerkamp’s poetry, thinking these contradictions are evidence of a postmodern playing with language, evidence of words’ multiplicity, their inability to be pinned down. However, as I have argued earlier, poststructuralism is an untenable position for Metelerkamp, and is, in fact, a position which her poetry resists.

As earlier mentioned, Metelerkamp classifies language into two types: the ‘Word’, which ‘recalls logos’ and is thus the language of Patriarchy, Authority, the Canon; and ‘words’ which are part of ‘ordinary language’. Rich makes a slightly different classification of language: ‘we use language, but language also uses us’ (Lies 247), language consists of ordinary words, which we can use, but it is also a system larger than the self that positions people in certain ways. Metelerkamp, who writes about ‘being the carrier, the conduit of a current’ (CF 106) and who wants to ‘become the medium, to become the messenger’ (CF 105), clearly accepts this systemic view of language. However, while Metelerkamp seems to want to carry language’s message, Rich sees this message as
dangerous for women to carry: ‘male contempt and loathing for women and for women’s bodies is embedded in language, art, folklore and legend’ (Lies 263). This language, which carries male contempt, could be seen as the Authoritative ‘Word’ of logos, which Metelerkamp wants poets to banish from their writing (‘We need to widen the gap between the Word and our words, reveling in quotidian poetic language’s difference from the Word’ [‘Ruth Miller’ 253]). In this case, the dead, unnecessary ‘substitute’ could be the ‘Word’, while the words that light and lead the way, that bear and bare meaning, are ‘our words’.

In *Floating Islands*, Metelerkamp asks:

> Is it language itself, then, or only love we fumble for, what we mean; this is what I mean this is what it means: “the eternal act of creation” the “infinite I Am”:

> I am this I am that, calling with the patter of plain words falling into pattern, configured on the template of common detail of common life mana not for magic but for home-grown I am, here, … (44, ellipsis added).

Again, language is viewed as a larger, underlying system which we ‘fumble for’, but, overturning the previous argument, this language, while at first bearing signs of the ‘Word’: ‘“the eternal act of / creation” the “infinite I Am”’, is then strongly associated with our common words: ‘I am this I am that, calling / with the patter on plain words …for home- / grown I am’. In this section, rather than the material world which more often seems to dominate, language itself is what is desired, love in comparison is only a thin top layer visible on the surface of language. While this formulation seems to assert a definite separation between language and the world, as if the two are caught together in a dualistic relationship where one term inevitably dominates the other, it is this dualism which Metelerkamp’s poetry seeks to undermine. For Metelerkamp, *language, like the world, is material*. To reconsider ‘For Adrienne Rich’ quoted earlier in the chapter: Metelerkamp ‘love[s] / the feel of [Adrienne Rich’s] words’, she ‘palpably’ loves these
words which ‘caressed’ and ‘touched’ her (TL 90). Or, to re-examine ‘Joan’:
Metelerkamp writes that her ‘body’ is ‘bowed under the flowing / words, pouring words, in me / over me, out of me’ (SNM 23). Language, like the objects of the world, is, for Metelerkamp, material, substantial, sensual. This rejection of dualism is exemplified in a poem from *carrying the fire*:

metaphor and reality are one
aren’t they don’t they come together like making them one  we make them like love like after-love seep like osmosis (CF 61).

Metelerkamp unequivocally connects ‘metaphor’ or language (in the sense that language is by definition metaphorical, since words are substitutes for their referents) – an abstract and material entity – and the world together. This coming together is viewed as a sexual union, with the boundaries between ‘metaphor and reality’ being unclear, perhaps porous, allowing for ‘seep like / osmosis’ between them. As befits a poet focused on the body, and specifically focused on the grotesque and abjected functions and organs of the body, a poet keen to reconnect humans and the natural world, Metelerkamp dialectically connects language and reality: ‘under the pressure of … contradictions, which are transformed into connections, words [like ‘reality’ and ‘language’] are forced to yield up new meanings’ (Rich, *Lies* 251). When Metelerkamp writes of words being ‘the seeds of love’, she shows how they are organically unified, the seeds that love bears are words, and these words, when planted again in poetry, give rise to love. For it is ‘quotidian poetic language’, existing as it does as part of our everyday lives, and unified with the body as it is, which has the power to effect these connections.

Metelerkamp sees poetry as ‘a way of making connections’ (Edwards 58), and therefore, in her poetry, seeks to connect language and world, ‘metaphor’ and ‘reality’. Similarly, in her poetry, she connects body and spirit (‘body found body where spirit is. Is’ [CF 23]); the grotesque and abject functions and organs of the body with those seem to be pure and ‘spiritual’ (‘heart in my hands / heart in my feet / heart in my cunt’ [CF 19]); the human
and the non-human (‘wake like a discontented cow, / nosing, nudging the grass / where his warmth lay’ (IDB 12). Metelerkamp’s poetics can thus be seen as driven by the desire to ‘feel the outrageous connection’, and through her poetry, she achieves this (CF 103): ‘metaphor and reality coming / together like two bodies coming / and coming’ (CF 62).
and she’ll be listening, writing, 
hearing other words, words 
scratching the paper through the nib 
soothing with its rhythm 
its bold trail of black ink

(Joan Metelerkamp, ““Tea with Janet Frame””, 
*Floating Islands* 94)

The previous chapter dealt with Metelerkamp’s strong drive to forge connections between language and world, and body and spirit. If Metelerkamp’s poetry forges connections, however, it also reflects on those connections that determine her subjectivity and that cannot be severed: her connection to her literary, mythological, academic, sociological and familial inheritance. By virtue of her particular family history, her sociological position as a wife, mother and poet, and her formal and informal education, Metelerkamp is unavoidably an heir to the specific patterns of existence which these legacies contain. Maggie, the mother-persona in *Floating Islands*, asserts that even when one wishes to deviate from a pattern, one always needs to have ‘a pattern, none the less, a pattern’ (FI 28). This suggests that while Metelerkamp rejects the deterministic notion that it is impossible to deviate from the templates that one inherits, her poetry also implies that one’s identity cannot be created out of nothing: one already has, and needs to work from, a pattern. Metelerkamp’s different inheritances have provided her with a set of patterns according to which her life can be woven. While most of these legacies have been openly passed on to Metelerkamp, there is one to which she is the rightful heir and yet which was hidden from her, and which she has had to find and claim: the legacy of her literary foremothers.

In the opening chapter of her book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Alice Walker explains the necessity of having a forerunner or model in order to write. Such models,
however, are not always easy to find. Her essay chronicles her search for an authentic and informative account ‘about the craft of voodoo, as practiced by Southern blacks in the nineteenth century’, the subject she was researching for her story, ‘The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff’, an account written by ‘black collectors of folklore … [or a] black anthropologist’ (Walker 11). Finally, via the tiny keyhole of a ‘footnote to the white voices of authority’, this search allowed her to find out about and meet her foremother, Zora Neale Hurston (Walker 11, emphasis in original).

Women writers, like black writers, have long struggled to find suitable models, and, as an extension of this, to find a literary tradition which is our own. This attempt to find, or create, a female literary tradition from which to draw models, was invigorated in the early twentieth century by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (first published in 1929). This groundbreaking text inspired later feminists to develop and revise this female literary tradition in works such as Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Gilbert and Gubar coined the term ‘anxiety of authorship’ to refer to ‘a radical fear that [a woman writer has that] she cannot create, that because she can never become a “precursor” the act of writing will isolate and destroy her’, due to ‘the effects of a socialisation which makes conflict with the will of her (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd, futile, or even … self-annihilating’ (49). A woman writer can only struggle against the effects of this socialisation ‘by actively seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed [as a male writer views his precursors according to Bloom’s ‘anxiety of influence’], proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible’ (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 49). The first section of this chapter will thus trace Metelerkamp’s attempt to find such a literary mother.

In a 1992 interview with Colleen Crawford Cousins, Metelerkamp describes her own attempt to find a female literary tradition. Discussing her education and the poetic tradition she encountered therein, Metelerkamp states:

> I went to Maritzburg University, which had a traditional kind of English Department and we read the great tradition in a kind of Leavisite way…. I read Chaucer, I read Eliot and Yeats, I read Shakespeare, Shelley, and Keats, Hopkins,
Hardy. I read all the men, which is all the tradition that we were exposed to.
(Cousins 9)

It was at this time, Metelerkamp states, that she realised ‘I’ve got to start reading women’ (Cousins 9). Metelerkamp thus goes on to describe her active self-education in a female literary tradition: ‘I started on the novelists. Then I read Emily Dickinson seriously, and then I went onto Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, of course Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, and then South African women poets, especially Ruth Miller…. And Adrienne Rich’ (Cousins 9). Metelerkamp thus clearly recognised a lack in the literary tradition which was being institutionally passed down to her, and sought to address this lack through a voracious reading of women’s writing. It is significant that Metelerkamp started searching for a female literary tradition directly after she decided to become a writer, as she explains in the interview with Cousins (9). Like Walker’s reading, Metelerkamp’s can thus be seen to be driven by a need to find a literary model.

Metelerkamp’s active reading of women writers engages in a practice fervently supported by second wave Anglo-American feminism (Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* and Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* could be seen as ‘canonical’ texts in this movement). In Adrienne Rich’s prose collection, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* she writes about this feminist practice and declares that it is ‘clear that a feminist renaissance is under way, [which has been born out of] … the struggle to discover women and our buried or misread history’ (126). Rich states that women working towards this feminist renaissance are ‘recovering lost sources of knowledge and of spiritual vitality’ (*Lies* 126). Metelerkamp can be seen as a participant in this feminist renaissance, as her self-education in the works of women writers who were ignored or buried by the patriarchal poetic canon affirms. However, while Metelerkamp’s reading of women novelists,¹ Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich clearly indicates a reading beyond the canon, it would be hard to argue that these ‘sources of knowledge and spiritual vitality’ were ‘lost’. While these authors and their texts have been marginalised and little-respected, which they certainly were

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¹ She doesn’t specify which, but Austen, Gaskell, the Brontës, Eliot and Woolf are probably safe assumptions.
until Metelerkamp was receiving her tertiary education in the 1970s, their works generally were in print and available to readers keen to look beyond the canon. A clearer example of Metelerkamp’s recovery of a ‘lost’ female voice can, however, be found in her profound engagement with Ruth Miller’s writing.²

Metelerkamp has described Ruth Miller as ‘probably South Africa’s best known English woman poet’ (‘Ruth Miller’ 241). However, despite this pre-eminent status, ‘the two volumes of her poetry published during her lifetime, *Floating Island* (1945) and *Selected Poems* (1968), have long been out of print’ (Metelerkamp, ‘Ruth Miller’ 241). To ‘many students of English, Miller is a little known poet’ (Metelerkamp, ‘Ruth Miller’ 241). Miller, out of print and forgotten, was unarguably a lost female voice, at least until 1990, when Metelerkamp completed her Masters dissertation on her work, which led to an article in *Current Writing* and a chapter in Margaret Daymond’s *South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory and Criticism, 1990-1994*. In the same year that Metelerkamp completed her dissertation, Carrefour republished a selection of Miller’s writing in *Ruth Miller: Poems Prose Plays*, edited by Lionel Abrahams. Metelerkamp’s work on Miller can be seen as participating in Rich’s ‘feminist renaissance’.

Following Metelerkamp’s intense academic interaction with Miller, Miller becomes an omnipresent figure in all of Metelerkamp’s creative writing, even where she is not consciously foregrounded. In *Floating Islands*, Metelerkamp’s fourth collection, she is most explicitly mentioned, but here she shares centre stage with another equally silenced and forgotten woman writer, Dorothy Wordsworth. While Wordsworth is typically seen as a keen diarist whose journal entries provided poetic inspiration for her brother William, and have subsequently been used by critics to provide biographical detail about William’s life and contextualise his poetry, Metelerkamp views her primarily as a poet. These typical and atypical views of Wordsworth are examined in ‘Her own lines’, which also describes the academic institution’s complicity in the marginalisation of women writers:

² As a fellow South African white woman poet, Miller is Metelerkamp’s literary foremother in ways which the Anglo-American poets named above cannot be.
why didn’t they [her teachers] say
she wrote poems,

his sister, Dorothy, why
didn’t they tell me,
my teachers?

They said she kept journals – notes
for William, as she kept
house for him

...

for her self, she pieced bit
by bit, day by day,
together,
to gather in her diary,
fragments: vivid snippets
all still here...

“They” didn’t know she wrote poems;
no hint of her song
drowned out by

William’s demanding voice, but here
for patient women
trawling lines

to haul it up, sound it out (FI 14-15, first ellipsis added).

Metelerkamp sees Wordsworth as a poet whose work has been lost in the shadow of
William’s more obvious literary success. One of the best known poems which she penned
is ‘Floating Island’.3 In the first poem in Metelerkamp’s collection Floating Islands,
Amanda (the Durban-based academic and poet persona who voices these poems),
discusses her intriguing discovery of two almost identically-titled poems, one by late-
eighteenth/early-nineteenth century English Dorothy Wordsworth and the other by mid-
twentieth century South African Ruth Miller:

3 In an interview with McGrane, Metelerkamp describes ‘Floating Island’ as the ‘most achieved’ of her
poems (4).
Covers folded back reveal sheets secreting copied pages; pressed beside the inside leaf: Ruth Miller’s “The Floating Island”; and slipped in by that, a second snippet waiting – below it in bold stand two letters “D.W.”; (buried beneath William’s mottled reams of dense “Poetical Works”, like his sister’s, Dorothy Wordsworth’s, poem taken like a dream up from the warm seas, figment wrested from the deep – “These lines are by the author of the Address to the Wind Etc.,” breath through a blow-hole – Leviathan-like surfacing: D.W.’s “Floating Island”; my find; my piece-work – pick up the pen – like needlework – pick up the threads that bind them. (FI 7, emphases in original)

Having made this discovery, Amanda thus wants to examine the poems and ‘pick up the threads that bind them’, one of the many attempts to forge a connection between fragmented and disparate things (or people) undertaken in this collection.

In this first poem from Floating Islands, Wordsworth’s status as a ‘lost’ female poet whose works have been forgotten is foregrounded. The ‘secre[cy]’, of Wordsworth’s and Miller’s poems is emphasised (the poems, rather than being well-known are Metelerkamp’s ‘find’, which gives her ‘a hidden frisson, rill under the skin’), signifying the forgotten nature of these works. Wordsworth’s poem, especially, is described as ‘buried beneath William’s mottled reams / of dense “Poetical Works”. Metelerkamp’s poem is also ironically titled ‘Poetical Works’. While William’s works, and the male literary canon which his poetry synecdochically represents, buried his sister’s poetry, Metelerkamp works to uncover her poem and to ‘[wrest]’Dorothy’s ‘figment … from the deep’. Wordsworth’s poem, which has been ‘buried’ in the ‘deep’ seas for most of its history, is now appearing like ‘breath through a blow-hold – Leviathan-like / surfacing … [a] “Floating Island”’. The smallness of the discovery Amanda has made is not erased, it is merely a ‘figment’, ‘breath through a blow-hole’, but simultaneously this figment could be the tip of a ‘Leviathan’, a ‘Floating Island’ of which only the upper surface is exposed. The underlying structure still needs to be investigated.
This can be seen as analogous to the way in which women writers search for a female literary tradition: as so many works by women have been individually submerged by patriarchy, to slowly disintegrate on a forgotten ocean floor, when a reader manages to ‘[wrest]’ one of these ‘figment[s] … from the deep’, it appears as a mere fragment, a tiny island floating on its own currents without any link to a literary mainland. As Adrienne Rich explains, ‘each feminist work has tended to be received as if it emerged from nowhere; as if each of us [women] had lived, thought, and worked without any historical past or contextual present. This is one of the ways in which women’s work and thinking has been made to seem sporadic, errant, orphaned of any tradition of its own’ (Lies 11).

But, as Rich and Metelerkamp maintain, despite efforts to prevent or fragment a female literary tradition, it does exist, and can be found by ‘patient women / trawling lines’ (FI 15): the surfacing figment is the tip of a Leviathan; the floating, fragmented islands can be roped together to form a ‘string’ of ‘archipelagoes, nosing out / to sea’ (FI 25).

In Metelerkamp’s article on Ruth Miller in Daymond’s South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory and Criticism: 1990-1994, she refers to female literary predecessors as ‘literary mother[s]’ (241). Metelerkamp’s self-conscious reading of women writers in order to find a female literary tradition is not only motivated by her desire to find maternal models or forerunners for her writing, but also to find motherly guidance, comfort and sustenance in other women’s writing. In thinking of literary predecessors as literary mothers, of a female literary tradition as a matrilineal legacy, and in thinking of women writers as sources of inspiration, guidance and comfort, Metelerkamp thus blurs the boundaries between the nature and function of biological and literary mothers. Similarly, she blurs the boundaries between the political and the personal. Her attempt to find or construct a female literary tradition, and her overt positioning of her work within this tradition, is clearly politically motivated, and demonstrates her engagement with the political project of second wave feminism. But, simultaneously, her poetry expresses a deeply personal desire to find maternal guidance and comfort. Her political and personal projects cannot be separated (a point which will be thoroughly examined in the following chapter).
Metelerkamp’s educational motivation for reading women writers can be seen in *Floating Islands*. In ‘Betrayal’, Metelerkamp quotes a letter from Miller to her mentor, Guy Butler, in which she attests to reading ‘Yeats, and Keats and Lawrence, and Auden’ (FI 84). Concerned by the complete dominance of male writing over her literary mother’s intellectual and creative life, Metelerkamp asks Miller, through the voice of Amanda: ‘But where are the women and what would they have shown you’ (FI 85). Metelerkamp thus clearly thinks that one’s literary mothers do have something valuable to teach one about the possibilities and realities of being a woman writer.

In Metelerkamp’s ‘Poem not a roof’, she writes about ‘seeking shelter’ in the ‘house of poems’ ‘built by the dead’ (IDB 55). Through Metelerkamp’s intensive reading of the works of her dead (like Dorothy Wordsworth and Ruth Miller), and still living (Adrienne Rich and Eavan Boland) literary mothers, she thus constructs a protective community or ‘house’ of ‘wise women’ whose words will guide and comfort her (IDB 57). While this idea of a single house of poems, collectively built and inhabited by women poets, is clearly a homogenising ideal which ignores differences in race, class, culture and nationality, Metelerkamp herself forecloses these differences in order to create for herself a nurturing community of women. Metelerkamp’s reading of women writers is an overwhelmingly practical activity: it enables her to shelter under a protective roof. She therefore writes that her reading of women poets gives her protection from the ‘torrents’ of everyday life (IDB 55).

One of the ‘torrents’ which Metelerkamp has weathered in her personal life, and against which she has evoked the protective power of poetry, was the suicide of her mother. In *requiem*, Metelerkamp’s elegy for her mother and maternal grandmother, her literary mothers are seen as a source of guidance and comfort. Metelerkamp’s poem ‘That day, the most bitter’ contains an epigraph from Adrienne Rich’s ‘An Atlas of the Difficult World’:

“I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn between bitterness and hope
turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.
I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else
In Metelerkamp’s poem, Rich’s poem is a ‘road map’ from which Metelerkamp tries to find out ‘where [she] should go’ (R 53):

I turn to her, this woman of words, this poet’s quiet conviction:
there is nothing left. (R 54)

While Rich’s ‘quiet conviction’ that ‘there is nothing left’, is not particularly cheering, Metelerkamp nevertheless ‘turn[s] to her’ when she is faced with a day which is ‘the most bitter’. In this poem Metelerkamp speaks directly to her biological mother, asking for her advice:

I don’t know where to turn,
I am so tired, Mother,

remind me:
what fields to walk, what earth, what for – … (R 56 ellipsis added).

It is significant that, when she is unsure of ‘where to turn’, she ‘turns to [Rich], this woman of words’. The extent to which this literary mother is viewed as a source of the guidance in lieu of a biological mother is thus clear, as is the blurring of the distinctions between Metelerkamp’s different mothers.

Metelerkamp’s literary mothers also give her the words with which to comprehend her loss. Through her meditation on Rich’s ‘Atlas’, as well as on the elegiac works of Anna Akhmatova, and the etchings of Kathe Kollwitz (R 55), Metelerkamp is able to ‘put it down / this dead weight’ (R 58). One could thus argue that it is with the help of her literary mothers that Metelerkamp is able to find some relief from, or, at least, find the strength needed to perform, her arduous task of ‘dragging the weight of suicide women / dragging them up to the light’ (CF 58). Metelerkamp is therefore able to find some light of her own, to find

the task at hand
what is left
what behoves us
what life asks of us. (R 58)

The construction of a ‘house of poems’ built by one’s literary mothers also provides a
source of advice. Seeking advice about marriage, Metelerkamp reads ‘through shifting
sheaves of poems’ looking for replies to her questions:

Thirsty for waves of responses,

... I turn to the poets I
know, seeking something which speaks of
marriage; longing for someone who
will sing of our joy’s circumscribed
conditions (TL 101).

The poets do reply, but Metelerkamp ‘discard[s]’ their response, which is:

by all means be with the
fellow with whom you like being
from time to time, who gives you strength,
with whom you feel you grow, like lithe
saplings responding, dipping to
each other in the wind, making
love articulate, making words
dance circles round your heads, keeping
you hoping, as you say, despite
the sound of sirens, the smell of
burning tyres; be with him with
all means if you like – but why tie
pink tatty legal contract frayed
bureaucratic ribbon through your
soul?

You will grow like a grafted
sapling, bound to the stiffened stalk
needing to depend on him; no
subsidy for housing, far more
tax, his figure your family’s
head, your children bearing his name. (TL 102–103)

According to this extract, the poets describe marriage as an institution which deforms that
which is natural. The supple vitality, reciprocity and autonomy of the two ‘lithe / saplings
responding, dipping to / each other in the wind’ is transformed to a tamed and tortured
‘grafted / sapling, bound to the stiffened stalk’. Instead of the freedom of choice to ‘be
with the / fellow with whom you like being, / from time to time, who gives you strength,/ with whom you feel you grow’ there is the compulsion of being ‘bound to the stiffened stalk / needing to depend on him’. Similarly, it is seen as inevitable that the man will be transformed from a ‘lithe / sapling’ to a ‘stiffened stalk’, which evokes not only arthritic old age and rigor mortis, but also, paradoxically, the man’s phallic power as the ‘family’s head’. While language itself is a gift of sensual creation for the unmarried couple ‘making / love articulate, making words / dance circles round [their] heads’, after marriage language becomes a sign of patriarchal possession and control with ‘[their] children bearing his name’. Even though she is therefore stung by the response she receives, Metelerkamp still does not reject the poets, but

flick[s] with impatient
insect fingers through pages for the panacea of poems
of the famous poets I know. (TL 103)

This response demonstrates how reliant she is on her literary mothers: even when the advice which they give her hurts her, she nevertheless returns to these mothers for comfort and relief from this pain. As Metelerkamp describes her literary mothers as ‘mosquitoes buzzing / circles round [her] head’ (TL 103), her allusion to her own ‘insect fingers’ also shows her deep identification with her literary mothers, even when she is not in conscious agreement with them (as can be seen in her decision to get married).

Similarly, in *Floating Islands*, Metelerkamp seeks advice from her literary mothers on writing. When Amanda finds two of her own abandoned ‘stories: ten years old’, she looks to Dorothy for help to continue writing:

...D. W; give me something back again –
what shall I do with them –
unfinished stories,
two of them. None of them published none of them
to my satisfaction (FI 68).

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4 Despite this overt criticism of marriage, grafting is also used, in horticulture, to strengthen a specific plant by inserting a scion of that plant into a slit of the root stock of another plant that has a stronger root structure, and that can therefore support it. This suggests a paradoxical covert endorsement of marriage.
Metelerkamp is therefore claiming her female literary inheritance because she wants to find models for her own writing, and because she wants to find comfort and guidance in women’s works. But while this process of claiming a literary legacy can be seen to occur on an academic level (Metelerkamp is reading women’s writing as she would read for any other university course), it also occurs on a deeper, empathetic level. Moving beyond the formal neutrality, passivity and objectivity traditionally encouraged in academic readings of texts, Metelerkamp adopts instead an active and intimate subjectivity more appropriate to a personal interaction than an academic elucidation. Metelerkamp again shows the connection between the personal and political realms: in order to achieve her political goal of claiming her matrilineal inheritance she needs to develop a personal connection to her literary mothers. Discussing the extent to which Dorothy Wordsworth’s poetry has been ‘buried beneath William’s mottled reams / of dense “Poetical Works”’, Amanda writes that

“They” [her teachers] didn’t know she wrote poems;
no hint of her song
drowned out by

William’s demanding voice, but here
for patient women
trawling lines

to haul it up, sound it out (FI 14-15).

While one could view this process of ‘patient[ly] … / trawling lines’ in order to dredge up Wordsworth’s poetry, as proper, thorough academic research, the idea of ‘sound[ing] … out’ Wordsworth’s ‘song’ seems to move away from this formal, objective realm. In fact, Metelerkamp actually juxtaposes the processes and results of critical research and writing, and that of strongly felt empathetic listening. In ‘And listen’, Metelerkamp quotes from Helen Darbishire’s introduction to Wordsworth’s journal as an epigraph to her poem: “‘She tried her hand at verse, encouraged by her brother, urged by her friends, but she could not accomplish it to her satisfaction…’”, which she then responds to in her poem:

Poor Helen;
corseted with quite politeormality,
nicely keeping you,
cool,
at bay,
keeping D. at arms length
keeping it quiet
keeping it all together
with academic
accomplishment –
“to her satisfaction…” (FI 24).

In contrast to the ‘quite polite / formality’ of academic, or critical writing, which keeps Wordsworth ‘quiet’, ‘cool’ and ‘at arms length’, Amanda wants to keep her ‘scraps of perception’ about Wordsworth’s poetry, as well as, by implication, Wordsworth herself, ‘warm’, which implies a physical and sensual nurturing of her at odds with traditional academic practice (FI 25). Amanda, and possibly Metelerkamp herself, chooses this uncritical stance, as she believes that it gives the reader, or listener, the ability to access

the subtext,
the invisible,
underground, verse (FI 24).

Darbishire’s cool, critical stance causes her to remain

cut off from something
out of sight, just
out of earshot (FI 24).

Amanda believes that her empathetic openness will enable her to hear Wordsworth’s authentic voice which has been silenced for so long that it is ‘out of earshot’. As the title informs one, it is a type of hyper-sensitive listening which Metelerkamp views as capable of accessing ‘the invisible, / underground verse’.

In ‘Her Own Lines’ Amanda speaks about her attempt to find the thread which connects Dorothy Wordsworth’s ‘Floating Island’ and Ruth Miller’s ‘The Floating Island’:

I do not know what to make
of them, no idea
what I think;

two floating islands sound
past each other out
to me – bring

them closer, strange echoes sounding –
resonance of dreams –
how to hear

them – how to rope them in – … (FI 14, ellipsis added).

Aural imagery again predominates in this poem. Amanda needs to ‘hear’ the ‘strange echoes’ in order to connect the two poems. It is only through an empathetic listening that she will be able to ‘pick up the threads that bind them’ (FI 7). However, the word ‘sound’ is ambiguous as it denotes both receptivity and expression: Amanda hears the ‘strange echoes sounding’ from the islands, but these islands also ‘sound / … each other out’.

While Metelerkamp feels summoned by the poems to ‘bring / them closer’ together, as there are ‘strange echoes sounding – / a resonance of dreams’ between the two poems, it seems likely that there has been some previous intimacy between these poems which could account for their echoing of each other. Metelerkamp imagines that, as the later poet, Miller was somehow able to hear Dorothy’s voice, which explains how their poems could echo each other, despite the historical and geographical distance between the poets.

what fine line

did Miller twine, what
intricate under-
water sounding

could she take, over the years,
...

her own voice

through the cracking of her walls
(her box-house) feeling
for out let,
for Dorothy’s tune humming
underground tapping
at the source,

what connection caught at it,
acute conduit
like channel
cable conducted it – what? (FI 15-16)

Amanda is here astounded by Miller’s ‘under-/water sounding’ which enabled her to hear
‘Dorothy’s tune humming / underground’, and especially by the fact that this ‘acute
conduit’ between the poets was forged through the barricades of

... iron-edged apartheid,
while Verwoerd harangued
from the wire-

less – veneered, polished, solid
as the Voortrekker
monument –

cracking the ossewa’s whip
crackling like static – ) (FI 15-16).

Despite the ‘total onslaught’ of the Apartheid state’s solipsism and isolationism, Miller
managed a delicate, empathetic, sonar technique which enabled her to connect with and
echo a silenced and forgotten female writer who is completely historically and
geographically apart from herself. Metelerkamp can thus be seen as rediscovering or
resurfacing a poet (Miller) who is herself resurfacing another poet (Wordsworth).
Metelerkamp’s rediscovery of Miller and (her connection with) Wordsworth is motivated
by a desire to find her literary mothers and claim her matrilineal literary legacy.

Through this work of listening through the silence to tap the hidden source, Amanda,
invoking a community of women engaged in this listening process, is thus able to affirm
to Wordsworth that, despite her song being drowned for many generations by William’s
demanding voice,

yes we hear you, see
you, see what you have made yourself,
receive you (FI 44).

This empathetic listening, which can be contrasted to ‘proper’ academic research, therefore enables women writers to find their buried literary mothers, and as they uncover these figures and their work, women writers are able to discover a female literary tradition and are thus able to claim their own position as heirs to this legacy.

In the penultimate poem of *Floating Islands*, ‘Tea with Janet Frame’, Metelerkamp develops her understanding of women’s writing as a form of listening:

and she’ll be listening, writing,
hearing other words, words
scratching the paper through the nib
soothing with its rhythm
its bold trail of black ink (FI 94).

In the previous poem, ‘Christmas’, we are told that Amanda’s husband gave her

the autobiography of Janet Frame:
three days she reads – three nights immersed,
beyond their [her family’s] reach;
but beached at last she sits down to write: … (FI 91, ellipsis added).

The poem which she sits down to write, and which appears on the following page, is ‘Tea with Janet Frame’. ‘Amanda’s’ poem is thus a product of her listening to, and her ‘immers[ion]’ in the world of, Janet Frame. The idea of writing as listening, as tapping into the underground song of women writers, is also expressed in the poem’s title: ‘Tea with Janet Frame’. ‘Amanda’s’ poem is a product of a sitting down and ‘drinking tea’ with her literary mother, Janet Frame; it is a product of a social, nurturing, feminine activity, where ideas and words are like food and drink which need to be ingested for (a writer’s creative) life to continue.

In this poem, by emphasising the connection between listening and writing, Metelerkamp is thus also emphasising the communal, reciprocal nature of writing. Writing is thus a sounding that both listens and speaks:
Writing is not described here as a solitary act of a romantic genius, but a tapping into a conversation, a conversation with the buried voices of silenced literary mothers.

Metelerkamp recently remarked that she is ‘in constant “conversation” with poems, hearing what they say and how they say it. I’m constantly internalising poems for my life’ (McGrane 5). Due to this ‘constant “conversation”’, it is very easy to pick up echoes of other poets and poems in Metelerkamp’s work. Superficially, this conversation can be seen in Metelerkamp’s frequent evocations of her literary mothers. These women poets, like Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, Ruth Miller, Adrienne Rich, Eavan Boland, Denise Levertov, Muriel Rukeyser, Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova and Ingrid de Kok, are named in Metelerkamp’s work, and lines of their poetry appear as epigraphs to her work or are incorporated into her poems. Three poems from *Towing the Line* show Metelerkamp to be thoroughly engaged in conversation with her literary mothers. In these poems, Metelerkamp practices her sounding technique: she listens, and speaks back, to her literary mothers.

In the first of these poems, ‘On Ingrid de Kok’s Familiar Ground’, Metelerkamp responds to De Kok’s first collection. From her listening to De Kok’s voice in this collection, she develops a clear image of De Kok:

Poised she may be,  
not invulnerable; not the  
monumental military equestrian lording  
it over Parliament Street;  
more like Dick King, ignored by  
the rush hour traffic on the Esplanade;  
her horse, from time  
to time, stumbles,  
reins lengthen,  
her hat flops over her face. (TL 113)
and of her poetry

Some things she tells, not close to the bone,
run deep as marrow –
the soft centre of home-
fires burning, and women and death. (TL 113)

This interaction with De Kok’s writing leads Metelerkamp to a meditation on women’s writing, and on the place of women writers. During this meditation she moves from De Kok to Adrienne Rich and Ruth Miller in seeking answers to her questions:

[‘I’d like to’] feel through the sensitive tips why the nexus of women’s perception of women’s vision’s blinkered with nostalgia and mourning;

why even Adrienne Rich would have us slip quietly into the kitchen, to quilt together, piece by piece, the fabric of our lives, away from the brilliance of men;

why Ruth Miller, spider-wise, Arachne-like, weaves a shroud for her words;

why even for the bravest poets children (and then men) carry the light and women, candles for the dead;

and what understanding can come from seaming blankets or poems at all? (TL 113-114)

The unusual topography on the poem visually demonstrates how women’s lives exist as separate ‘piece[s]’, or floating islands, which need to be ‘quilt[ed] together’. This needs to occur both in order to create coherent individual lives and to develop connections between women. Writing specifically about academia, but making an argument which is applicable to society as a whole, Rich explains how women have been isolated from each other due to patriarchy:

Each woman … is defined by her relationship to the men in power instead of to her relationship with other women…. [I]n accepting the premise that advancement and security – even the chance to do one’s best work – lie in propitiating and identifying with men who have some power, we have always
found ourselves in competition with each other and blinded to our common struggles. (*Lies* 137)

Even though the topography of Metelerkamp’s poem symbolises the gaps between women, the lines are nevertheless positioned in such a way as to show points of intersection, and thus create a pattern for ‘quilt[ing] together’ the ‘fabric of our lives’.

The second of these three ‘conversation poems’ develops the vision of Ruth Miller as the ‘spider-wise, / Arachne-like [poet who] weaves / a shroud for her words’. According to Greek mythology, in a story recorded by both Ovid and Virgil, Arachne became so conceited in her skill as a weaver that she claimed her own workmanship to be superior to that of Athena. Angered, a disguised Athena warned Arachne not to offend the gods, but when Arachne voiced her desire for a chance to prove her skill, Athena agreed to a contest. Arachne wove a tapestry illustrating the gods’ failures and infidelities, and though Athena could not find a flaw in her work, she was so incensed by Arachne’s choice of subject that she attacked Arachne, her tapestry and her loom. In shame, Arachne hung herself. In Ovid’s story, which Metelerkamp is clearly drawing on, Athena transforms Arachne into a spider, and she is thus doomed to spin a web forever. In this poem, ‘Ruth Miller’, Metelerkamp uses her intense engagement with Miller’s work to draw an intimate portrait of her original literary mother:

You were an ordinary woman,
I imagine,
crabby even.
(Who would not be?
The petit-bourgeois trappings –
vibracrete fencing your box-house in Yeoville,
I imagine,
and tidy lawn – drawing the lines,
keeping the crumbling façade
of your marriage clean.)

5 In *Towing the Line*, reflecting on her mother’s insistence that she take Latin at school, Metelerkamp describes how ‘over the years, up / from the depths, the myths / you read me first, as a little girl, / battled over, in / Ovid’s liquid Latin, the metamorphoses, become / the fluid base of my intellectual struggle, dream-like / shape given legitimation by the stamp of “Latin”, / surface; / so that I see them now / shaping my life again’ (126).
So deep you hid your baying heart,
tight you kennelled it nightly,
slipping fragments of desire
when the words came knocking on the architraves
of bone around the hard closed door,
prizing through to the nervous flesh,
let us out
(though your fingers fretted to the bone to keep them in);
such depth of sorrow you kept
encased, scarab-like,
unadmitted, unadmitted,
that readers, knocking on the hard case of metaphor, plead
let us in let us in.
god who gave such ordinary women
such grief such weight of pain
that Sysiphus-wise they must bear it
uphill each day!
I, being less exceptional,
an ordinary woman too, more blessed,
hearing my second baby’s babbling in the room below
am quite sure, now,
working again through the shroud of your words,
the death of children is as you show –
irredressible, absolute –
no elegy could ease its pain.
No wonder
the stone grew hard inside your arachnid heart
eating you inside out. (TL 120-1)

In this poem, Metelkamp is clearly echoing Miller’s ‘Self’ (‘Unkennelled it bays the moon’ [87]) and ‘Spider’:

I hold within my skull the word
Sealed and socketed; yet my hands
Fashion with artifice and ruse
Not wily web, but witless strands.

But when the poor cold corpse of words
Is laid upon its candled bier,
I, vindicate, will shed the tear
That falls like wax, and creep unheard
To weave in silence, grave and bowed,
The pure necessity—a shroud. (41)

By means of this echoing she creates an empathetic portrait of Miller which uses Miller’s own poetic vocabulary and patterns of images. Through Metelerkamp’s intense listening to Miller’s poetry, Metelerkamp can thus authentically echo Miller’s voice, and can also provide a sympathetic explanation of the despair so often demonstrated in her poetry.

Similarly, in the third of these poems, ‘For Adrienne Rich’, Metelerkamp uses the ‘common language’ which she and Rich share to show how her poetic conversations with Rich have affected her:

In the quiet of the house on my own
with your poems that dusk slowly taking
me your poems tender making love your
words bit by reaching bit caressed me touched
me gently your words addressed to me then.

Loving palpably black on white I love
the feel of your words. The common language
I could not have known I was dreaming of
gently you speak in language lovers use;

and as with love force me to face lack
admitting longing to use this language
lovers use too to speak too to reach out

leaving gaping loss like love always leaves. (90)

In the previous chapter, I examine this poem with regards to its depiction of the nature of language, arguing that the physical and sensual description of words in the poem suggests that Metelerkamp sees language as being material, and not merely a referential, conceptual tool. Through using an intricate pattern of internal repetitions, Metelerkamp draws attention to the materiality of language in this poem. The phrase ‘your poems’ is repeated in exactly the same place in two consecutive lines. Its synonym ‘your words’ is used three times in four and a half lines, as is the word ‘language’. The word ‘love’ and its derivatives (‘loving’, ‘lovers’), appear seven times in the thirteen lines of the poem. Further emphasising this, extensive alliteration of the letter ‘l’ is used, which strengthens from the second to the final stanza. In the last stanza ‘l’ is the first letter in all but two of
the words, and is only entirely absent in the second word ‘gaping’ (which is nevertheless strongly integrated in this alliterative line, through assonance with ‘always’). This final line is also remarkable in the perfect symmetry of its iambically stressed vowel sounds: leaving gaping loss like love always leaves.

Through this extensive use of alliteration, assonance, and the repetition of words and phrases, Metelerkamp focuses the readers’ attention on the poem’s visual, oral and aural (not conceptual) qualities, on the way the poem sounds and looks (instead of what it means), and thus on the materiality of language. These different categories (the material and the conceptual) can, of course, not be separated, and through Metelerkamp’s emphasis on the sensual aspects of the poem she is revising the conceptual bias in literary analysis, and demonstrating how the conceptual and the sensual are necessarily entwined. The poem is (conceptually) about ‘lack’ and ‘loss’ in ‘love’ and ‘language’, and the poem demonstrates the insidiousness and inevitability of this loss: ‘love’ and ‘language’ are alliteratively linked to ‘lack’ and ‘loss’; ‘love always leaves’, and the alliteration entrenches this inevitability. Furthermore, the structure of the poem, with the number of lines per stanza evenly decreasing (stanzas one, two and three there have five, four and three lines respectively) also demonstrates ‘gaping loss’ in the missing two-line stanza: the third and final line of stanza three concludes with the speaker wanting to ‘reach out’. However, rather than finding the ‘language lovers use’ which she is reaching for in the expected two-line stanza, there is only the isolated last line with its verbalisation of the ‘gaping loss’ visually enacted between the final two stanzas.

Rich’s words, for Metelerkamp, are not only material and sensual, but are also sexual and erotic: ‘your poems tender making love your / words bit by reaching bit caressed me touched / me gently’. By using sexual imagery Metelerkamp shows how her interaction with her literary mothers is reciprocal and interactive: she both listens to her mothers and talks back to them in a voice which is shaped by the listening process. This image also demonstrates the extent to which this process is an intimate, sensual process, and not merely a coldly critical and objective reading and responding to her literary predecessors. Furthermore, by identifying her conversation with her literary mothers with sex, the vital
nature of this conversation is emphasised: without this reciprocal relation there can be, for Metelerkamp, no (pro-)creativity. As Metelerkamp has explained to Ross Edwards, she views artistic creativity as intensely libidinal: ‘libido is intimately linked with sexuality, but it’s not just ‘sex’. If you’re not feeling sexual you’re probably not feeling very creative either’ (60). 

In these three poems from *Towing the Line*, we can see that the technique which Metelerkamp uses in ‘Ruth Miller’, ‘For Adrienne Rich’ and ‘On Ingrid de Kok’s Familiar Ground’ is the same technique which she ascribes to Miller in *Floating Islands*: the ‘intricate under- / water sounding’ (15) and ‘feeling … for Dorothy’s tune humming / underground tapping / at the source’ (16) which enabled Miller to hear and echo Wordsworth’s poem. In *Floating Islands*, Metelerkamp uses this technique of listening to and imbibing the voices of her literary mothers in order to reveal an authentic Dorothy Wordsworth in the poems ‘Lost fragments’ and ‘Head over heart’:

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walking, walking the hills – 
pressing back the grass 
finger tips, ears, eyes, sharp –

through your journals, Dorothy, you’re striding, driving
yourself with domestic diligence,
duty determining your delight –
your tune hummed to the rote of home work –

with your stove smoking, your pies baking
(the cold stone of your kitchen floor laid
across the underground spring – the walls
damp in the cool room, seeping, weeping …)(FI 33)

alive and alive she shadows
me all day I hear the faint
swish of her skirt skimming ghost-like grasses; see her baking pies,
breaking bread, folding linen,
reading Chaucer, quoting Shakespeare,
copying William’s poems shadow
of her own (FI 55).
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Like Antjie Krog’s *Lady Anne*, also a sequence of poems which adopts the first person voice of another woman writer or artist (Lady Anne Barnard), the poems about this female artist (Dorothy Wordsworth or Ruth Miller) are, as Van der Merwe has said of Krog’s sequence, ‘interwoven with poems about the life of the poet before and during the composition of the book. Occasionally the two strands come anachronistically together in a single poem’ (132). In weaving these different female voices together, the author blurs both temporal and psychological boundaries: in *Floating Islands*, late eighteenth century England and late twentieth century South Africa become increasingly indistinguishable as the lives, dreams and despairs of Amanda, Maggie and Karen, and Wordsworth and Miller start to echo each other to such an extent that one is not always entirely sure which character is foregrounded. This ambiguous blurring of the boundaries between the different subjects is most strongly emphasised in the second haiku in the collection, in which, as in the haiku on the previous page, no character is specified as the speaker of the poem.6

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can’t reach you, hold you,
rainy, rainy rattle stones
far across the sea (FI 63)
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This haiku could easily represent the voice of any of the three primary speakers Amanda, Maggie, Karen, or even that of Wordsworth or Miller.

This ambiguity is threaded throughout the collection. For example, after the evocation of Wordsworth’s daily life and her ‘kitchen floor laid / across the damp underground spring’, ‘Lost fragments’ concludes with Amanda’s admission that she has ‘buried [her] life-spring, / stone slabs lie over it / where it lies weeping ….’(FI 35). Amanda here becomes strikingly identified with Wordsworth, through the matching ‘stone slabs’ which lie ‘across [their] damp underground [“life-”]spring’. Significantly, this is a singular spring: Wordsworth’s spring *is* Amanda’s spring. Even more pervasively, the poem ‘Shifting’ juxtaposes Amanda’s experience of moving and ‘[u]npacking boxes, / hands smudged with the black ink of news-print’ with Wordsworth’s moves to Dove

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6 A speaker is specified for all the poems in the collection, except for the two haikus at the centre of the collection and for the final poem, ‘At last’.
Cottage and Rydall Mount, with her ‘unpacked caskets’. Amanda’s experience echoes Wordsworth’s completely. Amanda finds her own failed attempts at writing (‘stories; ten years old’) which then become completely indistinguishable from Wordsworth’s failed attempts. Metelerkamp ambiguously echoes Darbishire’s phrase, which Darbishire uses to describe Wordsworth’s cessation of writing in her introduction to Wordsworth’s journals (quoted above), when referring to these resurfacing failures:

Failed: tried your hand at ... forgetting; you too tried; tried your hand at ... forgetting you could not accomplish it.... (FI 68, ellipses in original)

In *Floating Islands*, Metelerkamp not only constructs an ‘acute conduit’ to access the voices of Miller and Wordsworth, but also that of another literary mother, Emily Dickinson. In ‘Betrayal’, Metelerkamp uses an epigram from Dickinson:

> “Each – its difficult ideal
> Must achieve – itself –
> Through the solitary prowess
> Of a silent Life” (FI 83)

...to which she replies in her poem:

> And this, Emily, has little to do with the claims of Literature,
> its Authority –

> Authority, as you know, doesn’t want you to write (FI 83).

In this poem, Metelerkamp adopts Dickinson’s practice of capitalising nouns, as well as her characteristic halting style, which is created primarily through her frequent use of dashes: the first twenty-four lines of this poem contain eleven dashes. She also evokes Rich through her echoing of her poem ‘Song’, in her evocation of ‘a poet, who knows what she is’ and who has “‘a gift for burning’” (FI 83).

There is a long-standing tradition in women’s writing, particularly poetry, of adopting the speaking ‘I’ of another woman historically removed from oneself. As ‘in linguistic terms “I” is a shifter reflecting the figure of enunciation only in the instant of enunciation and carrying no transcendental status’ (Brodzi 156), women writers are able to utilise this
shifting signifier to assert an empathetic identification with the voices of other women. This empathetic mode, indicates, but also produces, a commonality and communality between women. This vision of the solidarity and shared identity of women as a group, not forcefully divided along historical, racial and class lines, is a hallmark of second wave feminism. The insistence on communality and shared identity exists, for a feminist like Rich, in spite of the organisation of patriarchal society. Writing specifically about academia, but making an argument that is applicable to society as a whole, Rich writes:

Each woman … is defined by her relationship to the men in power instead of her relationship to other women…. [I]n accepting the premise that advancement and security – even the chance to do one’s best work – lie in propitiating and identifying with men who have some power, we have always found ourselves in competition with each other and blinded to our common struggles. (Lies 137)

Thus, the empathetic adoption of another woman’s voice, as in Margaret Atwood’s Journals of Susanna Moodie, Susan Howe’s My Emily Dickinson and Antjie Krog’s Lady Anne, can also be seen as politically motivated. Considering that all these female subjects are writers, or artists, these books are also part of the project of constructing a women’s literary tradition and insisting on one’s own place as an heir to this matrilineal legacy. Joan Metelerkamp’s adoption of the style, imagery, preoccupations and diction, of the voice, of Miller, Wordsworth and Dickinson fits neatly into this tradition.

Through this echoing interacting with the poetry of Dickinson, Miller, Wordsworth and Rich, Metelerkamp is also

... try[ing] out –

for [her] self
a conversation with a dead woman
about her poems – … (FI 83, ellipses added).

As stated earlier, Metelerkamp is not only keen to access and listen to the voices of her literary mothers, she also wants to talk back to them, to have a conversation with them. The ‘dead woman’ which Metelerkamp wants to have a conversation with in this poem refers obviously to Dickinson herself, but also to Miller (the last six lines of the first section of ‘Betrayal’ quote repeatedly from Miller’s poetry) and to Dorothy Wordsworth, whose ‘Floating Island’ poems Metelerkamp responds to throughout the collection. This
‘conversation with a dead woman’, or convocation of literary mothers, is central in
Floating Islands and much of Metelerkamp’s work.

The last three stanzas of Wordsworth’s ‘Floating Island’, which Metelerkamp quotes in
full in ‘Her own lines’, reads:

Buried beneath the glittering Lake,
It’s place no longer to be found;
Yet the lost fragments shall remain
To fertilise some other ground. (FI 17)

Earlier in ‘Her own lines’, Metelerkamp writes about the ‘fragments’ of Wordsworth’s
life and thoughts gathered in her journal, the ‘vivid snippets / all still here’ (FI 15).
Metelerkamp clearly reads Wordsworth’s ‘Floating Island’ as a poem about her creative
life. Even though only ‘fragments … remain’ of Wordsworth’s writing, her poem
indicates that these fragments have the power to ‘fertilise some other ground’ and thus
give rise to other poetry. Wordsworth

kept journals – notes
for William, as she kept
house for him (FI 14).

The fragments of Wordsworth’s creativity therefore ‘fertilise[d]’ William’s mind. The
best known example of this process of fertilisation is, of course, her notes about daffodils
(Thursday 15 April 1802 journal entry, quoted as an epigraph to Metelerkamp’s ‘Head
over heart’) which William reworked into ‘I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud’. This
fertilisation could be read as an extreme negation of Wordsworth: her ideas and images
are subsumed into, and buried beneath, the ‘glittering Lake’ of William’s dense ‘Poetical
Works’. In this light, her donation of her creativity and of her eloquently-described
observations in her journal is sardonically equated to her donation of time and energy to
keep William’s house (‘kept … notes / for William, as she kept / house for him’ [FI 14,
emphasis added]). However, Metelerkamp also indicates a more positive, and feminist,
fertilisation: Wordsworth’s ‘Floating Island’ fertilised (or gave rise to) Miller’s ‘The
Floating Island’, through Miller’s interception of Wordsworth’s tune. Again, evoking the
community of women who have heard and will receive Wordsworth, Metelerkamp urges her, in a parenthetical island floating at the end of part one of ‘Head over heart’:

(see where we grow, seeds, will you not take, break your bread, feast here, we are your stay, your keep, your own strong arms, the yeast for your Comforter’s Word, his two-edged sword, cut loose for the shore, swim, swim for the mainland, open the cage door, soar …) (FI 56).

Wordsworth’s writing, once it has been detected, raised to the surface and engaged with, is seen to inspire or fertilise the writing of an entire community of women. This community of women acknowledges, protects and comforts her, which then enables Wordsworth, the ‘Poor bird … hidden songster’ (FI 43), whose song has been buried, to ‘swim, swim for the mainland, open the cage door, soar’.

In ‘And listen’, Metelerkamp re-examines Wordsworth’s poem, ‘Floating Island’, and its assertion that ‘Nature’, which works with ‘Harmonious Power’ in agreement of ‘one duteous task’, ‘[w]ill take away’ the island of poetic creativity and ‘[b]ur[y] it ‘beneath the glittering Lake’ (FI 17). In this poem, Metelerkamp allows her persona, Amanda, to start questioning this poem’s superficial complacency about the natural destruction of this island of creativity:

But look how the poem opens –
the surface solidity – tight –
complacent, every syllable
placed, sound, rhyming right
to nature’s order – Her decree –

“Harmonious Powers with Nature work
On sky, earth, river, lake and sea;
Sunshine and cloud, whirlwind and breeze,
All in one duteous task agree.”

What holds the fluid, ephemeral,
shifting courses of thin air, vapour –
duteous task and harmony –
but look: as she reads these signs of synchrony,
imagines nature’s harmony, symbols
rise: deep vibrations of subjugate need,
inchoate desire loosed from hold –
look, even as she tells us “it’s all right,
nature makes a plan”
Thus while Wordsworth superficially accepts the justness of the destruction of her island, or of creativity’s ‘slip of earth’ where ‘berries ripen, flowerets bloom’ (Wordsworth’s ‘Floating Island’ in FI 17), Metelerkamp questions this: ‘nature’ is merely Wordsworth’s ‘decree’. Rather, as Metelerkamp states in her introduction to Wordsworth in ‘Her own lines’, Wordsworth’s island is not lost due to natural processes, but due to ‘lines cut, bonds severed’ (FI 16). (The question of who is responsible for cutting these lines is, tantalisingly, left unanswered.) Metelerkamp here again focuses on the subversion of the lost fragments’ fertilisation of ‘some other ground’. Wordsworth’s ideas are not only being usurped and reformulated by William, but the ‘deep vibrations of subjugate need’ within her buried poem are found by ‘patient women, trawling lines’, like Miller and Metelerkamp herself, and are used to inspire their creativity.

Through uncovering her matrilineal literary legacy, and listening to and conversing with her mothers, Metelerkamp seems to be developing an inspiring image of a female literary tradition which nurtures contemporary women poets and ensures the continuation of women’s writing. However, this positive image is not consistently upheld. Looking again at Floating Islands one can see how Metelerkamp feels that her literary mothers have, in fact, betrayed their own writing, and with it, undermined the construction, or survival of, a female literary tradition.

Even though Amanda, finding her own abandoned ‘stories: ten years old’, looks to Wordsworth for help to continue writing (‘D. W; give me something back again – / what shall I do with them [her ‘unfinished stories’]’ (FI 68), she acknowledges that Wordsworth did not even know how to help herself to continue writing, but instead ‘put down [her] pen … [and turned] away / from the page’ (FI 33). Similarly, Metelerkamp’s other literary mother, Miller, also has abandoned her writing:
“I did, whisper it not in Garth, write the inevitable novel once and felt it was a dismal failure. Plomer said it had very good and very bad writing in it. I thought it was almost all bad, on re-reading it, and it is now disintegrating somewhere on a top shelf with a suitcase” (Miller to [Guy] Butler 26.5.58) (epigraph to ‘Enough’, FI 90).

Amanda here indicates a tradition of women writing only ‘fragments, fragments’ (F90) and not complete texts which they are proud of and which can be used to inspire other women to write. Amanda thus feels that much women’s writing, like Miller’s forgotten novel, is ‘cold and betrayed’ (FI 90). Women have betrayed their own desire to write, and, as an effect of this, they have betrayed future women writers looking to their literary mothers for an assurance that ‘a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible’ (Gilbert and Gubar, Madwoman 49). As Metelerkamp asks in ‘Betrayal’:

\[
\text{Is it always so, is this our legacy, ladies,} \\
\text{dull loss underlining the failings –} \\
\text{Plath on her sheer edge} \\
\text{of classic perfection} \\
\text{(walk off into it like an Inuit} \\
\text{take away} \\
\text{your own warmth} \\
\text{from that cold we are out in)} \\
\text{walk away with your own} \\
\text{timely snuffing out your own} \\
\text{cold footed betrayal (FI 85).}
\]

This betrayal is not only a betrayal of oneself, one’s own desire, of one’s talent, one’s passion, but, by further entrenching this pattern of failed female attempts at writing, it betrays the daughters inheriting this legacy of failures and fragments. As a daughter who has inherited this legacy, Metelerkamp’s thus needs to seek out another form of inheritance which can counteract this betrayal.

If her literary mothers do not sufficiently provide suitable patterns for Metelerkamp, then perhaps her mythological mothers can remedy this deficit. Metelerkamp’s poetry is heavily influenced by Greek mythology and female mythological figures are frequently
evoked in her poetry. Arachne, Aphrodite, Philomela and Medusa are the most prominent amongst Metelerkamp’s mythological mothers.

In *Towing the Line*, Metelerkamp identifies Miller with Arachne: ‘Ruth Miller, spider-wise, / Arachne-like, weaves / a shroud for her words’ (114), and has an ‘arachnid heart’ (121). As argued earlier, Metelerkamp thereby continues an identification which Miller herself makes. However, in Metelerkamp’s second collection, *Stone No More*, this identification with Arachne is generalised to encompass other female poets writing against, and challenging, ‘Athena[’s] … patriarchal pen’ and its hegemonic ‘Authority’:

Unscrupulous Athena! marking with the patriarchal pen,
mastered so surely in your fine hands, mistress of Authority,
defender in the name of women’s rights the father’s legal rites,
decreeing what I write, my heart’s hard passion forming, “outrageous”,
“illegitimate”, “reductionist”, “wrong”: not quite so contemptible,
even you could not stoop so low; you have had your say, go batter
other Arachnes now whose weaving you fear might not (might) match yours. (SNM 4)

In this poem, a female critic’s rejection of her poetry as ““outrageous”, / “illegitimate”,
“reductionist”, “wrong”” is compared to Athena’s derision of Arachne’s woven artistry. Athena, who, according to myth, sprang fully-formed and -armed from her father Zeus’s head, is the Greek goddess of wisdom, war, the arts, industry, justice and skill. Though a female deity, she became the ultimate upholder of patriarchy, the ‘mistress of Authority / defender in the name of women’s rights the father’s legal rites’. As noted previous, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Athena transforms Arachne into a spider. However, in Metelerkamp’s revisionary poem, Arachne is instead transformed into an equally powerful figure: Aphrodite, goddess of love, sex and beauty. Because Metelerkamp views artistic creativity as intensely libidinal, Aphrodite is an apt representative of the poet.7 Drawing on the most widely accepted story of Aphrodite’s birth (from Hesiod), that she rose from the waves, Metelerkamp describes how, by being transformed into Aphrodite, the poet is able to defend herself against Athena:

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7 As quoted earlier, Metelerkamp notes in an interview that, for her, ‘libido is intimately linked with sexuality, but it’s not just “sex”. If you’re not feeling sexual you’re probably not feeling very creative either’ (Edwards 60).
Lady! you might not have reckoned on Aphrodite! Wait – I am rising out of my shell, and when my bleak anger has fallen off in scales around my feet – new-skinned, armourless – Athena, I shall greet you there, where you reflect the sun in hard-forged, brilliant shield raised toward the light, bravely defending your territory, I shall venture in… (SNM 4).

A specifically feminine pattern of protection, which will allow Aphrodite to successfully defend herself against Athena, is then elaborated on:

…I shall venture in unsolicited, insouciant, shameless in my home made shawl, home spun words, appliquéd with paisleys, diamonds, satin stitched with floribunda roses, such warp and weft of words, such drapes of greens, vermilions, falling round my naked form like hair like flax like gold, protecting me like women’s arms, waiting, on the shore, receiving me, wrapping me in the finest textures of their craft, patterns of women’s work, from sea to sea, from here to then, from knot to knot, no gleaming sword ripping through, no ink black spots struck across my words, nor even the distorted reflection in your shield will destroy. (SNM 4)

Aphrodite can fearlessly venture in ‘unsolicited, insouciant, shameless’ to confront the warlike Athena, whose ‘hard-forged, brilliant shield / [is] raised toward the light’, because she is protected by her ‘home / -made shawl’ made from ‘home spun words’. Using evocative imagery of needlework and textiles, Metelerkamp describes a protective, indestructible web of women’s work which stretches and holds strong (both geographically and temporally) ‘from sea to sea, from here to then, from knot to knot’. As earlier discussed, through Metelerkamp’s claiming of her literary mothers, she positions herself within a tradition of women’s writing. Similarly, through her claiming of her mythological mothers, and particularly the mythological weavers, she extends her matrilineal legacy beyond the parameters of literature, and, in doing so, constructs for herself an extensive, continuous tradition of women’s work, including the artistic and the domestic.

Rather than viewing mythological figures as being patriarchal constructs, Metelerkamp has a more archetypal understanding of her mythological mothers. In an interview with Cousins, Metelerkamp states that ‘amongst feminist academics the notion of female
archetypes is very unfashionable – because as soon as you start talking about “internal”
gender issues, feminine archetypes, the accusation is that you are falling into these
mythic traps: universalising, being non-specific in relation to material, political realities’
(11). Metelerkamp’s poetry is clearly concerned with “internal” gender issues’, however
‘unfashionable’ these concerns may be, and uses the ‘feminine archetypes’ contained in
myths to explore these issues. While Metelerkamp certainly does believe in the
importance, and influence, of ‘material, political realities’ (as will be thoroughly
discussed in the following chapter), this does not preclude a belief in the legitimacy of
more universal gender categories. Rather than producing an either/or dichotomy,
Metelerkamp’s poetry is dialogically concerned with both/and. Rather than examining or
privileging one sphere over the other, Metelerkamp thus explores the connection between
the universal and the specific, the way in which her universal legacies (contained in
mythology, literary theory and philosophy and the canon) and her specific legacies (her
familial history) connect and work together to influence her. Metelerkamp’s poetry does
thus display a universalising tendency, which can be demonstrated in her attempt to
create a nurturing community of women writers, symbolised by her ‘house of poems’
‘built by the dead’ (IDB 55), which, as earlier indicated, is clearly a homogenising ideal
that ignores differences in race, class, culture and nationality. This universalising
tendency can also be seen at work in her use of mythological figures. However,
twined with her belief in universal categories is a strong commitment to the local and
the specific.

Another mythological weaver Metelerkamp claims as a mother is Philomela. According
to Ovid, Tereus, husband of Philomela’s sister Procne, was charged with escorting
Philomela to visit her sister. Overcome by lust, he instead took her to an isolated cabin,
raped her, and then cut off her tongue when she threatened to tell of her violation.
Philomela wove a tapestry describing her ordeal which she sent to her sister. To revenge
herself on her husband, Procne killed their son Itys, after freeing Philomela, and served
him to Tereus, who unknowingly ate him. When he discovered what she had done, he
tried to kill both sisters, and all three were transformed, by the gods, into birds.
In ‘Loss’, Metelerkamp describes her despair at her inability to find her poetic ‘tongue’, and connects this process of language acquisition to the process of her child’s language acquisition:

All very well
Yelling “Up yours!”
patriarchal colonial
poetics;
like the terrible
twos, separation is only
the start; the gap must still be filled.

Our child’s voice, so recently
claiming thought through babble, drifts up to me:
“I haven’t got a reason, daddy” to
father’s cajoling sweet reasoning, o
daddy can you understand these forces
implacable to your control?

Then how
find my own tongue, controlled and controlling,
healing the wound your sweet sounds keep salting:

how, without turning to Philomel, cut,
quite cleanly, the tie of these terrible
symbiotic twos? (SNM 109-110)

In this poem, Metelerkamp can be seen to blame both her child and her husband for her inability to find her poetic voice. She writes that in order to ‘find [her] own tongue, controlled and controlling’ she needs to ‘[heal] the wound your sweet sounds keep salting’. As Metelerkamp describes her husband as having a ‘sweet reasoning’, and describes the sounds her child makes as ‘babbl[ing]’, both of them are positioned as responsible for ‘salting’ her ‘wound’ and preventing her from finding her poetic ‘tongue’. In this tongueless state, Metelerkamp could be identified with Philomela. In this poem, Metelerkamp collapses the distinction between Philomela and Procris. Wary of the legacy left to her by these mythological mothers, she writes of her fear of ‘turning to Philomel’, and revenging herself upon her husband and child for her imprisonment and amputation. Metelerkamp does not want to participate in this mythical narrative that only culminates in violence and vengeance, but feels that she has been woven into this story and does not know how to extricate herself. This evocation of Philomela and the undesired association
between Metelerkamp and Philomela is strengthened by Metelerkamp describing her poem as a tapestry which, like Philomela’s, tells its ‘unhappy story’ (Ovid in Murphy 643) with ‘stitch[es]’ and ‘strand[s]’ (SNM 110).

The use of needlework imagery to describe writing and poetry is pervasive in Metelerkamp’s poetry, and is a marked feature of all her collections. It is important to note that needlework has been one of the few forms of ‘self-writing’ (Murphy 646) and ‘showing and telling … [that] have been available to [women] as a means of expression’ (Buss in Murphy 646). For much of history, women have not received a formal education or learnt to read and write, and have instead been given domestic duties and occupations, such as needlework. It is in this sense that needlework, as Murphy argues in ‘The Theory and Practice of Counting Stitches as Stories’, can be regarded as a tool of self-expression. As Metelerkamp’s ‘Birth of Venus’ implies, needlework is a form of writing through which a tradition of women’s writing, or work, has been established, even when women have been barred from literal writing. Through her extensive use of needlework imagery, Metelerkamp thus reclaims women’s historically silenced voices, and the woven wisdom of her literary foremothers. While some critics see a need for women to remove themselves entirely from the domestic space, and like Michelle Rosaldo, argue that ‘the association of women with domestic space … [is] fundamental to the universal oppression of women (Cranny-Francis et al. 211), Metelerkamp’s sustained figurative use of needlework shows both how deeply women are woven into the domestic, and simultaneously, reclaims the domestic space for a more positive appropriation and evaluation by women.

Medusa, a central figure in many feminist revisions of myths, is also a pivotal figure in Metelerkamp’s poetry. According to Ovid, Medusa was a beautiful, mortal sister of the Gorgons, famed for her glorious hair. Poseidon, finding her worshipping in Athena’s temple, raped her. Angered by this desecration of her temple, Athena transformed Medusa’s hair into snakes, and gave her the destructive power to turn anyone who gazed directly at her to stone. ‘Birth of Venus’ makes two interesting references to Athena’s shield, which traditionally bears an imprint of Medusa’s head. Metelerkamp describes
Athena using a ‘hard-forged brilliant shield / raised against the light’ to ‘reflect the sun’ and ‘bravely [defend her] territory’ against Metelerkamp, the intruder. Describing the protective powers of women’s work in the final line of this section, Metelerkamp writes that ‘no[t] even the distorted reflection in your shield will destroy [the ‘patterns / of women’s work’]’. An intriguing idea is thus formed here that Metelerkamp sees herself ‘reflect[ed]’ in Athena’s shield: as this shield already bears the head of Medusa, Metelerkamp recognises her own face in that of the Medusa – the Medusa is a ‘distorted reflection’ of her self. In the poem, Metelerkamp thus allies herself with two female mortals, both destroyed by Athena, holder of the ‘patriarchal pen’. This identification is examined more closely in the second section of the poem, simply entitled ‘Medusa’.

There seems to be considerable slippage in the application of the name ‘Medusa’ in this section. The reference to Metelerkamp’s maternal grandmother (‘granny’s necklace’) sets her up as the ‘Lady’ and Medusa of the poem, and is supported by the statement that Metelerkamp ‘bear[s] [the Medusa’s] Word’, since Metelerkamp was named after her grandmother ‘Joan Rose-Innes Findlay’ (‘Joan 7’). Metelerkamp also writes that she bears the Medusa’s ‘lead, stone in the womb’, which could refer to genetic traits (from her grandmother) passed on through reproduction, but also to the bullet her grandmother used to shoot herself, which, in her most recent collection *carrying the fire*, is described as going ‘right through [her] mother and into her unborn child’ (31).

However, a more convincing argument could perhaps be made in favour of applying the term ‘Medusa’ to the derogatory critics described in ‘Birth of Venus’. This is supported by the repeated use of ‘Lady’ (‘Birth’ 8, ‘Medusa’ 6) and by the fact that, through writing poetry, Metelerkamp creates an ‘opaque polished-stone looking glass’, which, she states, enables her to ‘face you now critic’. The critic is thus the Medusa, who can only be ‘face[d]’ using a ‘looking glass’. However, this usage is rather incongruous, as in ‘Birth of Venus’ the critic was aligned with Athena, who was pivotal in Medusa’s transformation and death, while Metelerkamp herself is aligned with Medusa (in the ‘distorted reflection’ in the last line of ‘Birth of Venus’ as discussed).
This incongruity can best be addressed through attention to the title of the poem: ‘Self / Critic’, which shows slippage between the ‘self’ and the ‘critic’, resulting in the emergence of a single, though suitably ambiguous being, the self-critic. Thus, as in the ‘Birth of Venus’, Metelerkamp herself is the Medusa, or a ‘distorted reflection’ thereof, and facing her ‘critic’ using the ‘polished-stone / looking glass’ of her poem, Metelerkamp is able to see her own ‘familiar face’. The poem thus suggests that the critic is internalised. In interviews Metelerkamp states that ‘the pen is the male part of me, whereas the internal voice is female’ (Edwards 58), and that she ‘want[s] the male to be just the scribe, and the female voice to be the thing that … brings forth the fruit’, but that trying to achieve this is ‘a struggle, … an issue’ (Cousins 11). This struggle mirrors that between Athena, holder of the ‘patriarchal pen’ and Aphrodite dressed in her ‘home / made shawl, home spun words’ in ‘Birth of Venus’ (SNM 4). However, this struggle between Aphrodite and Athena, or the male and female parts of herself, as she tells Edwards, has almost ceased because she’s ‘no longer part of the male world’ of the academe, and is instead ‘at home with [her] identity as wife and mother’ (58-59). This inner critic is therefore clearly an internalisation of the ‘whet-stone of [patriarchal] judgement’ (SNM 5).

Metelerkamp has thus clearly been deeply influenced by mythology, and views the female mythological figures as part of her matrilineal legacy. Using her ‘template of myth’ (CF 83), Metelerkamp finds expression for herself and her struggles. In her mythological mothers, Metelerkamp finds protection, a model of women’s writing and a means of examining the ambiguities of the self. However, these stories also present evidence of female power and potential destroyed and a not-to-be-followed example of vengeful violence.

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8 This theme of recognising the Medusa as oneself is also explored in ‘For David’. Here Metelerkamp describes how a university friend, David, sculpted a ‘Greek Goddess’ ‘from the mould of [her] face’, and how she was unable to look at this sculpture of herself, as if the sculpture, and thus she herself, was the Medusa. This theme also finds an echo in May Sarton’s poem ‘The Muse as Medusa’, where Sarton writes: ‘I turn your [the Medusa’s] face around! It is my face.’ (1777)
Metelerkamp’s recourse to myth can be seen as an effort ‘to sanctify the female through symbols of female divinity, myths of female origin, metaphors of female creativity, and rituals of female power’ (Gubar 308).

However, as Alicia Ostriker reminds us, ‘myth belongs to “high” culture and is handed “down” through the ages by religious, literary, and educational authority’ (317). As such, myth is unavoidably patriarchal, part of the male canon. Even if the myths are being used to express ‘female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male knowledge (Ostriker 318), the recourse to these male myths nevertheless shows the inescapable influence of the great tradition.

It is not only Metelerkamp’s use of myth which indicates the influence of the canon on her. Rather, throughout her writing reference is made to canonical figures like Shakespeare, Keats and Auden. Of course, as Metelerkamp is an academic who has ‘read the great tradition … Chaucer … Eliot … Yeats … Shakespeare, Shelley and Keats, Hopkins, Hardy’ (Cousins 9), this influence is unavoidable. The central image of Stone No More is, for example, taken from Shakespeare’s Winter’s Tale, where Hermione, standing still as a statue in front of her husband who thinks she’s dead, is told to ‘be stone no more … bequeath to death your numbness’. Similarly, the central understanding of poetic creation in Metelerkamp’s work, both to be striven for, and to be challenged, is that of Keats: ‘If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree it had better not come at all’ (epigraph to ‘Leaves to a tree’, IDB 15). Thus even when Metelerkamp overtly chooses to follow her mothers, she is still aware of the extent to which she is influenced by her fathers, the extent to which she has incorporated their ideals, even when these are in conflict with her own.

Through her education, Metelerkamp was inundated by romantic and modernist theory. In Metelerkamp’s critical writing, she notes that the ‘idealism which is at the core of the father’s law of literary Modernism’ is ‘the aspiration to formal perfection and epiphanic unity’ (‘Ruth Miller’ 245). This idealism is also tied to the Platonic idealism of the romantics: ‘hankering for the lost Word’ (Metelerkamp, ‘Ruth Miller’ 253) or Plato’s
Perfect Forms, which will reveal themselves to the solitary creative genius, through his connection with nature. These ideas, or ideals, have certainly taken root in Metelerkamp:

I am waiting for something
like some Word
... to take me – … (IDB 17, ellipses added).

Here the capitalised ‘Word’ is clearly the same ‘lost Word’, Logos, God, Perfection sought by romanticism and modernism. Similarly, the idea of being possessed or ‘take[n]’ by this word of poetic revelation also adheres to romantic and modernist notions of inspiration naturally welling up, or sprouting like ‘leaves to a tree’, from the unconscious, as opposed to a theory of conscious, controlled creation.9 And for Metelerkamp, like the romantics, the epiphanic Word is revealed through the perfection of nature:

sitting in the grass in the sun,
sitting amongst the spikes of the watsonias,
the purple carpet of geranium incarnum,
colour incarnate,
laid out at your feet,
where, as if for the first time, going downhill,
just before the crossing,
over the blind rise, coming toward you:

green water
open lake
like the line of a poem
rising unawares. (IDB 44-45)

But despite this seeming agreement with Romantic and Modernist tenets, and Metelerkamp’s confessed desire to ‘write a romantic modernist metaphor’ (SNM 69), she in fact rejects both theoretical positions outright, as both her creative and critical writings make clear, arguing that women writers need to be wary of falling into [the] trap of hankering for the lost Word; we can relinquish a longing for the perfect form…. We need to widen the gap between the Word and our words, reveling in quotidian poetic language’s difference from the Word’ (‘Ruth Miller’ 253).

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9 This idea of being ‘take[n]’ by the ‘Word’ links the creation of poetry to a gendered presentation of the procreation act. Consequently, it emphasises the phallic nature of the ‘Word’: it belongs to patriarchy (as opposed to ordinary, everyday ‘words’, as I argue below).
This theoretical position is followed through in her poetry:

I have been thinking about words,
how they work
if they come at all,
like make,
do, in place of
epiphany – … (IDB 15, emphasis in original, ellipsis added).

Instead of finding and reuniting with ‘the lost Word’, Metelerkamp instead focuses on the quotidian, wants to reveal the small ‘striations of every day’ (IDB 18). Similarly, Metelerkamp’s inspiration is not from an idealised, universal nature, but a real, material nature, always specifically located. This is best demonstrated in Into the day breaking, which is a powerful evocation of a small, poor sawmill community in the southern cape: a place where life is ‘smaller, more remote, hard-pressed’ (21), ‘where the clay is so hard in the dry / you can hardly get your spade in’ (27), a place of

- blood poverty
- of oats and thatch grass
- eked out of stones (40).

However, despite Metelerkamp’s clear assertion that she wants to focus on the quotidian, everyday world and language of ‘make, / do in place of / epiphany’ and its difference from ‘the lost Word’, Metelerkamp still has to struggle against her academic inheritance:

I am waiting for something
like some Word,
some words, to take me – … (IDB 17, ellipsis added).

The ideal of ‘the Word’ still thrusts itself into Metelerkamp’s thoughts, but she forcefully rejects this ideal, and instead revises her desire to be for ‘some words’. Metelerkamp cannot completely destroy or forget her inheritance, as evidenced by her desire for the ‘Word’, despite her firm resolve to ‘widen the gap between the Word and our words’ and focus on the plurality of words, ‘reveling in quotidian poetic language’s difference from the “Word”’ (‘Ruth Miller’ 253). Metelerkamp has inherited the romantic and modernist pattern, and though it is a pattern she chooses not to follow, it is still ‘a pattern, none the less, a pattern’ (FI 28) against which she can refine her ideas about poetry, language and the world.
As well as the patterns Metelerkamp has acquired through her education and her intellectual and poetic inheritance, she has also inherited patterns of social behaviour attached to the roles of the western wife, mother and woman in the late twentieth century. In many senses, these roles are opposed to the other role Metelerkamp has chosen for herself: that of a poet. Metelerkamp’s inherited set of social norms and duties as a woman, and particularly as a mother, should thus be examined in their relationship with her identity as a poet.

In discussing this relationship between Metelerkamp’s identity as a woman and a poet, the hyphenated, uneasily conjoined term ‘woman-poet’ is useful, as it evokes the ambiguous status of the hyphen, and the myriad ways in which the hyphen ambiguously cleaves – binds together, but also splits apart – this hyphenated being: the woman-poet. While the woman-poet is unified by occasional resonances between the different aspects of her identity, unified in moments when her different roles enable and enhance each other; at other times these different identities and roles are so opposed that she feels herself to be ‘ripped apart like [a] ragged piece of paper’, to use Metelerkamp’s words,

```
  torn between the ambition to
  be what they call someone, recognised,
  named (poet or academic), and
  the inverse desire to accept
  the limits of anonymity
  ...
  to accept the rhythm of life-care with love (TL 115).
```

One of the most important aspects of writing as a woman involves, for Metelerkamp, negotiating her experience of motherhood in relation to her role as a poet. In ‘Birth poem’, Metelerkamp asks:

```
  why are there so few birth poems
  so few women writing poems of their
  children (TL 117).
```

She finds an answer in the idea that ‘the process’ of being a mother and caring for a child ‘keeps the mothers / from writing’, because the process keeps mothers ‘too tired to / work on anything more’. The physical, mental and emotional strain of bringing up a child
exhausts mothers (as Metelerkamp writes in ‘Dove’: the ‘quotidian demands of hard day’ transform her into a ‘[p]eripheral, exhausted, washed out’ figure with a ‘worn-out spirit’ [TL 122]), with the result that there are ‘few, few consolidated poems / of children and child-care and birth’ (TL 117). The fact that Metelerkamp herself writes that she ‘keep[s] thinking [she] will write a poem / for [her] children’ but has not managed to write it yet, and that even this poem which aims to be a ‘fine poem of [her] children’ doesn’t achieve this, beyond a ‘bobbing / crown of sun shining hair at the window’ demonstrates the difficulty in writing about one’s children (TL 117-118). In ‘Birth Poem’, then, the contradiction inherent to being a woman-poet is clearly illustrated, with the woman’s domestic role as mother and nurturer interfering with her ability to write poetry.

Motherhood is thus seen, in this poem, as an obstacle to poetry. But simultaneously, motherhood is the subject of the poem. Metelerkamp wants to ‘write a poem / for [her] children, song of their births, record / of their births’ (TL 117). This desire thus causes her to write the poem.\(^{10}\) Motherhood is thus contradictorily represented in this poem as both an obstacle to, and an instigator, or enabling factor, of poetry.

In ‘Birth poem’ a description is given of the (male) medical appropriation of birth, especially in the case of a caesarean birth:

\[
\text{but let them take it from you with their old}
\]
\[
\text{authoritarian, caesarian}
\]
\[
\text{decree, the work is theirs and relief and}
\]
\[
\text{rage and disappointment and fear and pain}
\]
\[
\text{flood through – all abstracts concretised during}
\]
\[
\text{the process of banal accident}
\]
\[
\ldots
\]
\[
\text{Twice I thought I would squeeze a child out}
\]
\[
\text{into the world; twice, at the last moment}
\]
\[
\text{the men did it for me: they were all there,}
\]
\[
\text{G.P., anaesthetist, obstetrician,}
\]
\[
\text{and paediatrician; and the women,}
\]
\[
\text{accomplices, there, holding the scalpel,}
\]
\[
\text{passing the swabs. (TL 118-119)}
\]

\(^{10}\) Through this desire Metelerkamp is far removed from those poets who see a more defined separation between ‘themselves’ and their roles or identities as mothers, like Adrienne Rich, for example, who writes that ‘poetry was where I existed as no-one’s mother, where I existed as myself’ and who thus ‘[didn’t] … ever write poems about [her] children’ (Of Woman Born 12).
In this extract from the poem, having a caesarian, although a medical necessity, robs a woman of her agency in the birth process: instead of ‘squeez[ing] a child out / into the world’, ‘the men did it for [her]’. Instead of achievement, Metelerkamp feels ‘rage and disappointment and fear and pain / flood through’. And rather than feeling ownership, or possession, over the birth process and her baby, Metelerkamp has to ‘let them take it from [her]’.

This use of ‘them’ when referring to the doctors is particularly evocative, as Tess Coslett explains: In the birth process, [t]hings are done to [the woman] by a faceless, all-powerful ‘They’: the third person plural removes the blame from any individuals, and attaches it to the institution as a whole, which is presented as an irresistible power’ (59). Coslett’s idea of ‘them’ as representing the medical, scientific and patriarchal institution, and not individual doctors, correlates well with Metelerkamp’s concept of ‘their old / authoritarian, caesarian / decree’ – the decree is old, embedded in the patriarchal institution. Furthermore, in her statement that ‘they were all there, / G.P., anaesthetist, obstetrician, / and paediatrician’,11 while ‘they’ does refer to these individuals, it also seems overdetermined, referring to a larger institution than its individual representatives present at the birth. This is especially so due to the use of the word ‘all’, which seems excessive to refer to four individuals.

Other than these four individual men, we are also told that there are ‘women, / accomplices, there’ during this medical procedure which marginalises Metelerkamp during the birth of her child. As ‘accomplices’ the women are clearly complicit, like Athena, in this process of female marginalisation, and yet their role is ambiguous: rather than being like ‘the men’ who overtly ‘d[o]’ something to Metelerkamp, the women are seen as passive assistants and mediators, who are ‘holding the scalpel, / passing the swabs’. As Metelerkamp tells Cousins in their interview, the women are ‘neither using [the scalpel] themselves, nor preventing it from being used’ (11), but through this silent and passive complicity, the women nevertheless serve as agents of patriarchal power. The

11 This description emphasises how women ‘are undermined and subverted … by the very manner in which we give birth in hospitals, surrounded by male experts’ (Rich, Of Woman Born 26).
medical and patriarchal interference in the birth process can thus be seen to appropriate or usurp Metelerkamp’s central role in the birth of her child. As Susan Gubar argues: ‘Our [Western] culture is steeped in myths of male primacy in theological, artistic and scientific creativity’ (293). Through these myths, man, like Ovid’s Pygmalion, is able to ‘[evade] the humiliation … of acknowledging that it is he who is really created out of and from the female body’ (Gubar 292, emphasis in original).

This poem can be seen as an attempt at re-appropriation. By writing ‘Birth poem’, a ‘song’ and ‘record’ of her children’s births, Metelerkamp reclaims their births and her (creative, productive) role in their births. While the medical institution marginalised and dispossessed her, taking her ‘work’ for itself, this poem, this ‘work’ is completely her own and cannot be taken from her. In this instance, one can also see the connection between being a mother and a poet. Being a poet enables Metelerkamp to be (more fully) a mother, to reclaim her central position as mother, which was denied to her at her children’s births. Motherhood is the (enabling) subject of her poetry, and poetry enables her to be a mother.

Metelerkamp has another legacy to carry, an awful legacy: the suicides of her mother and maternal grandmother.

I was born, I told you, with a bit missing:
a child a love, but a bit missing –
before I was born
(before my mother was married)
my grandmother shot a hole through her head
right through my mother and into her unborn children –

love forever blowing itself to scattered bits forever all over the place
like bits of a body, dismembered all over a house –

*how small the bit missing*
*how small a hole it leaves*
*when my mother shot herself –*
*how small a hole it needs –*

*she lay on her back on her bed to let what was coming*
*in*
silence
letting
all her life all her love all night
out like blood – … (CF 31-32 emphasis in original, ellipsis added).

Metelerkamp’s grandmother, ‘Joan Rose-Innes Findlay’ (SNM 31), ‘committed suicide in 1951’ (dedication to ‘At the centre you sit’ in SNM 3), and this act, even though it occurred five years before Metelerkamp was born, has had a profound influence on her life:

What can I say
I hover in the wings
you have centre stage sun

bright Rosalind brave Joan
shining on your daring
your sword;

for forty years

rooted in the shadow
of pre life

I have waited in the wake
of your act (SNM 2).

In this poem, Metelerkamp describes her dead grandmother’s ‘centrality’ in her life, and throughout this collection she is the central figure. ‘Joan’, the long cycle poem at the core of this collection, is written ‘[i]n memory of Joan / Rose-Innes Findlay’ and relives her death (‘A month after their listing [of the communist party, of which she was ‘the secretary’] she shot herself’ [SNM 28]), and the effect of it on her:12 Metelerkamp is left with

the gap to be borne, stone
weight,
mother
images
all borne with me, all
of my life nothing new
to discover (SNM 24).

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12 This poem demonstrates a powerful intersection between Metelerkamp’s personal trauma and political history of South Africa, which will be discussed in the depth in the following chapter.
In this collection, Metelerkamp asserts her desire to be *Stone No More*, and thus to step out of the gaze of the Medusa, and instead give voice and life to her pain and grief:

I will no longer hide
their pain.
...
I will not mother
loss.
I will not nurture
pain.
O Joan
Joan Rose-Innes Findlay
where are you now
where does your broken spirit lie? (SNM 30-31)

Tragically, despite Metelerkamp’s attempt to come to terms with her grandmother’s suicide as part of her matrilineal legacy, and to ‘go on / leadenly threading the life-line, / seeming snapped now’(SNM 26), she once again had her ‘life-line / … snapped’ when her mother also committed suicide, following her mother’s example down to the most macabre detail:

[you got] up
from the table, into
your room, to the dark
cupboard with its stinkwood, secret
drawer… (R 18, ellipsis in original)

from which she

took that little revolver,
the one that came round again to you (R 48).

Through this repetition an isolated event becomes a pattern, a fatal legacy to which Metelerkamp is the heir. In a title to one of her poems in *requiem*, Metelerkamp describes herself as ‘accursed’ (16). This curse of matrilineal suicide haunts Metelerkamp – and her daughter:

**Have Mercy**

*Miserere nobis*
I though it would stop with me,
thought I could never do it,
even in my wildest dreams,

what your mother did to you,
Mother, what you did to me –
but she dreams I shut the door

on her: my daughter. (R 19)

Not only has Metelerkamp been nurtured by death, as she is a ‘[w]oman who drank / death in, in the placenta –’ (CF 87), but she has traits binding her mother and grandmother: the ‘furrow / on [her grandmother’s] forehead’ is identical to the one ‘between my mother’s brows / between mine’ (SNM 2), and when looking at herself she acknowledges that

all lines, all the old threads
[bind] me to the face, that photo
of my mother (CF 45).

She even sees her body copying her mother’s body:

What happened to my body, Mother –
what happened to yours, what you did to yours,
I think this has happened to mine –
is happening to mine – … (R 51, ellipsis added).

The fact that Metelerkamp was named after her maternal grandmother entrenches her position in this suicide cycle. This is particularly evident in ‘Joan’ where her use of only their shared first name in the title allows the poem to be both an elegy for her grandmother and for herself. The fact that Metelerkamp never knew her grandmother further enables her grandmother to be undifferentiated from her, she who ‘bears [her grandmother’s] Word, lead, stone in the womb’ (SNM 5). Through these factors, this matrilineal legacy of suicide, a real legacy which is lived daily, becomes a heavily enveloping pattern, a pattern that Metelerkamp needs to disrupt and replace:

**From the accursed**

*confutatis*

They say
that now you have gone
the way your mother went

I must find my own – something – again –
  way – they say – something
  about a wound to the feminine,

toe the women’s line
  as if they knew
  something about it

some fairy-tale turn
  like line of doe’s blood dripped, dropped
  in the bush;

myths, they speak in riddles like
  words lost in the forest,
  as if there were something

to find, as if there were some
  presence;
  they swing their sentences like

  incense sweepers
  like celibate priests
  through the empty nave

but I – I am wild
  white belladonna lilies
  ripped limp from their rootings (R 16).

Metelerkamp raises the possibility of using other patterns from mythology, fairy-tales and religion, but she rejects these authorities who ‘speak in riddles’, who believe that there is ‘something / to find … some / presence’. For Metelerkamp, there is just an ‘empty nave’. These patterns cannot soothe her elemental rage, desolation and feelings of futility.

Once again, then, Metelerkamp turns to her faithful literary mothers, consulting Adrienne Rich’s ‘Atlas of the Difficult World’ like a map. But while, in this instance, Rich might have helped her to ‘put it down / this dead weight’ and focus on
  the task at hand
  what is left
  what behoves us
  what life asks of us’(R 58),
the patterns Metelerkamp’s literary mothers provide work to entrench the pattern of
Metelerkamp’s mother and grandmother’s suicide.

Metelerkamp herself is well versed in this tradition through her reading and study of
women’s writing. She is aware of the many self-destructed bodies strewn across the field
of women’s writing: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Virginia Woolf being the best known,
but by no means the only casualties (others are Ingrid Jonker, Sara Teasdale and
Charlotte Mew). As Rich states: ‘We have had enough suicidal women poets’ (Lies 122).
These suicidal women poets reappear in Metelerkamp’s poetry, as do her mother and
grandmother. Through imaginative recourse to these writers Metelerkamp is both trying
to feel her own way out of the pattern of ‘suicidal women poets’ and to come to an
understanding of mother’s and grandmother’s suicides. Her poetry thus makes an
imaginative identification between her grandmother and Virginia Woolf:

   not hanging on for dear life but like
   Virginia Woolf –
   slipping. Slipping with your slightly frowning
   profile away. (IDB 60-61)

This pattern of self-destruction, which is woven through Metelerkamp’s literary and
biological mothers, thereby threading Metelerkamp in from both sides, is nevertheless a
pattern that she discards. Examining Ruth Miller’s pattern of ‘self-crippling doubt’ and
‘heavy judgements … turned against herself, unproductively’ (‘Ruth Miller’ 249),
especially in reference to her deference, almost self-abasement, towards Guy Butler (FI
84), Metelerkamp asks ‘Is it always so, is this our legacy, ladies, / dull loss underlying the
failings’ (FI 85). Though Miller herself died of cancer, not suicide, her poetry expresses
an overwhelming ‘sense of despair and futility’ (Metelerkamp, ‘Ruth Miller’ 255). Much
of this can be seen to stem from her son’s accidental death by electrocution and her
unhappy marriage which ended in divorce. Due to this ‘despair and futility’ expressed in
her poetry, Metelerkamp names Miller’s poetics a ‘poetics of defeat’ (‘Ruth Miller’ 242).
Metelerkamp certainly viewed her as sufficiently part of this legacy of self-defeat as to be
likened to Sylvia Plath. After quoting from Miller’s letters to Guy Butler, in which she
discusses her own poetic ‘failings’ (FI 84), Amanda asks:

    Is this always our legacy, ladies,  
dull loss underlining the failings –

    Plath on her sheer edge  
of classic perfection  
(walk off into it like an Inuit  
take away  
your own warmth  
from that cold we are out in)

    walk away with your own  
timely snuffing out your own  
cold footed betrayal (FI 85).

The betrayal which Metelerkamp sees Plath as guilty of is not only a betrayal of her own
drive to live, to write, but it is also a betrayal of her literary sisters and daughters: through
Plath’s ‘taking away / [her] own warmth’, ‘that cold we [fellow women writers] are out
in’ becomes colder. With one less productive, surviving literary mother, there is less
encouragement, inspiration, less vital warmth for other women writers. This harsh view
of Plath’s suicide as a betrayal is not universally maintained. Rich, for instance, has
written:

    I think [the] passion for survival is the great theme of women’s poetry (How
interesting that male critics have focused on our suicidal poets, and on their
“self”-destructiveness rather than on their capacity for hard work and for staying
alive as long as they did ….). (Lies 256, ellipsis added)

She thus echoes Tillie Olsen in her declaration that ‘Every woman who writes is a
survivor’ (Lies 256). This focus on survival, rather than destruction, is especially relevant
in Plath’s case, where Ted Hughes’s re-ordering of her final collection possibly obscured
Plath’s vision, focusing fatally on her self-destruction, and not on her desire for
survival. As Gilbert and Gubar argue in their introduction to Plath’s poetry:

    Lately some feminists have worried that because this artist was not a “survivor”
she does not offer younger women who study her life a “positive role model.”

13 Robert Lowell, for example, has commented that Ariel is ‘playing Russian roulette with six cartridges in
the cylinder’ (in Gilbert and Gubar, ‘Sylvia Plath’, 2195).
Yet, as Plath’s own poems show, the works that would “make [her] name” were inspired by yearnings to endure and overcome the ice of circumstance. “Wintering”, the poem with which she herself had planned to end Ariel, concludes with a question and answer that express just such longing. “Will the hive survive, … / To enter another year?” the poet wonders, and replies to her own query with an affirmation of certainty: “The bees are flying. They taste the spring.” Sylvia Plath herself may not have lasted out her struggle to “taste” another spring, but her poems record her will to triumph. (‘Sylvia Plath’, 2195)

Although Metelerkamp doesn’t view Plath as a survivor, she accepts Plath’s pattern as a legacy that women writers need to amend. Metelerkamp thus agrees with Rich’s sentiment, expressed about Sexton, but also applicable to Plath, that her ‘poetry is a guide to the ruins, from which we learn what women have lived and what we must refuse to live any longer’ (Lies 123). While writing about Miller, but voicing an idea suitable to her reading of Plath, Metelerkamp is therefore adamant about the ‘need … to resist her poetics of defeat’ (‘Ruth Miller’ 243). The manner in which Metelerkamp aims to achieve this is to

write from the mother: instead of hankering for lost ideals, or feeling tossed about by irreconcilable polarities, to resolve some of our contradictions, to value our present material existence and to nurture metamorphosis – just as a mother provides for the needs of her growing children; it has to do with valuing material process and feeling our necessary links with each other. This would be like a mother who loves her children because they exist, recognising in them both historical links with others – her own mother, for example – and their own uniqueness, watching over their growth as she defines her own mothering practices in accordance with what she reads and feels and sees other mothers doing. In so doing one might be spared the sense of despair and futility which is so often visible in Miller’s [and other literary mothers’] work. (‘Ruth Miller’ 255)

This desire to write from the mother is affirmed in her poetry. In Into the Day Breaking Metelerkamp writes:

(Kindness handed Plath her children,
kindness whose gift she
spat out like a placebo –
kindness handed then no gauze,
no poultice for the blood-jet,
but mesh of lines soaked through –

morning after morning
hands me mine,
both day, every day
Metelerkamp has recently stated in an interview that she thinks it was Plath’s ‘inability to put up with less than “perfection”’ that … made life insupportable to her’ (McGrane 5), and one can see this perfectionism as responsible for the drive to keep ‘the blood-jet’ (which Plath declares ‘is poetry’ in her poem ‘Kindness’,) spurting strongly. Seeking poetic perfection, Plath, according to this poem, chose not to bandage ‘the blood-jet’, not to accept the daily ‘gift’ of her children, but rather ‘spat [them] out like a placebo’. In contrast, Metelerkamp values and nurtures quotidian life and writes poetry which seeks to resolve the apparent contradiction between ordinary, ‘every day’ life and perfect, extraordinary poetry. As argued earlier, Metelerkamp does thus by ‘widening the gap between the [lost, perfect] Word and our [everyday] words, reveling in quotidian poetic language’s difference from the Word’ (‘Ruth Miller’ 253), as can be clearly seen in the above-quoted poem, with its focus on the repetitious nature of ‘every day’ life.

Towards the end of carrying the fire, in the prose section ‘Changing Line’, Metelerkamp, through the voice of ‘Amanda’, asks: ‘How to be artist. How to be fucking woman let alone wife let alone mother let alone artist. No plot. No template’ (104). There certainly isn’t a single, perfect template, ready to be used as it is. But through her education, her reading of the male canon and study of theoretical movements like modernism and romanticism; through her reading of mythology; through her self-education and communication with her literary mothers; through her personal, weighted legacy of matrilineal suicide; and through her societal inheritance of norms attached to her role of woman, wife and mother; Metelerkamp has inherited a vast array of possible templates. The patterns of these legacies have knotted together in fascinating, frustrating forms. Out of this knot, Metelerkamp needs to unravel the various threads, and construct a new pattern for herself. This pattern will enable Metelerkamp to weave a life for herself as a woman-poet which is productive and fulfilling.
CHAPTER THREE

POLITICAL PRAXIS

and what understanding can come from seaming blankets or poems at all?
and does it depend on who stitches the blanket, under which circumstances, and how they make understanding come? And understanding never came from sewing or making poems alone;

and further

“the philosophers have only interpreted the world…”

(Joan Metelerkamp, ‘On Ingrid de Kok’s Familiar Ground’, Towing the Line 114, ellipsis in original)

In the previous chapter I discussed Metelerkamp’s location in a specific literary, academic and familial tradition. In this chapter, the focus shifts to her awareness, displayed in her poetry, of her locatedness in history, as belonging to a specific society and nation that is undergoing vast political changes. As Metelerkamp’s socio-political location mediates her poetic voice, this discussion examines her poetic praxis as a South African lyric poet in the late-apartheid and early post-apartheid years.

My discussion of Metelerkamp’s work thus far, particularly as it is seen to be inspired by a community of (predominantly European and American) literary mothers, seems to indicate a lack of historical rootedness (some of her mothers are mythic, her poets straddle the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries) and an absence of socio-political and national awareness. But this is certainly not the case. Her poems engage with various South African political and historical events. In Towing the Line, these include: Jeremy Cronin’s imprisonment and poetry ‘From Inside’, white males’ compulsory national service and the pervasiveness of war in 1980s South Africa (‘Jeremy Cronin (from inside) calls’), the 1985 Uitenhage shootings (‘Sunday night – on my own – after the Uitenhage shootings’), the youth uprisings (‘In my dreaming’); in Stone No More: the
listing of communist party members (‘Joan’), the refugees from Folweni (most likely after the massacre of twenty people attending a traditional ceremony in October 1992) (‘Space of the imagination’ and ‘Portrait’), the construction of Reconstruction and Development Project housing in Durban (‘Space of the imagination’), South Africa’s endemic armed violence, taxi-violence and hijackings (‘Portrait’); these forms of violence are focused on again, alongside domestic murders (‘Black Ox’) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings (‘Truth Commission’) in Into the Day Breaking; in Floating Islands: ‘AWB, bombs, AIDS’ (‘Connection’), 1960s Afrikaner nationalism and Verwoerd’s apartheid state (‘Her own lines’), interracial relationships at the close of apartheid (‘Cock and bull’ and ‘Hold on’), the murder of American student, Amy Biehl, in Guguletu (‘Death’s Door’) and Mangosuto ‘Buthelezi threatening / civil bloody war’ (‘Old fill’).

Despite this multitude of references to political events, Metelerkamp’s poetry is rarely overtly political. In carrying the fire Metelerkamp writes:

I don’t remember Sharpeville. I faintly remember the day Verwoerd died. I remember the Slatters. Sitting on the engine box in the cab of the truck waiting with my brothers and Lahksman telling me not to push the black knob because the engine wouldn’t start again – waiting at the crossroads for the Nairs and the Slatters and only Ayla and her news – after that, after the crash and their parents dead, I don’t remember the Slatters ever coming back – did they go live with their granny or cousins? I pushed the knob of course I started to cry. (114)

In this evocation, Metelerkamp does not depict the great national and political events as events which necessarily made a lasting impression on her. Rather, it is a personal event, unremarked upon in our history, which affects her.1 This event is remembered in association with her private actions and emotions. In a 1992 interview with Colleen Crawford Cousins, Metelerkamp discusses the predilection, among contemporary South African authors, for political writing:

Yes, I have a sense that there’s a lot of censorship, self-censorship in South African writing. There are legitimate and illegitimate themes. We can write about politics, we can write about art. But if you listen to your inner voices and write about what you care about, the politics is there. You don’t have to strive after it;

1 Metelerkamp does not give any further information about the Slatters, Nairs or Lahksman which could help the reader to better understand this story, and so it remains deeply personal.
you don’t have to write a poem about Boipatong to express the agony of this country. (9)

Rather than choosing to focus on a political event, like the Sharpeville shootings, as a ‘legitimate theme’, Metelerkamp prefers to ‘listen to [her] inner voices’ and write about her childlike inability to restrain herself from pushing ‘the black knob’ on the day her friends’ parents were killed. Instead of creating a political statement about the horrors of Sharpeville, Metelerkamp crafts a personal confession about her response to the death of the Slatters, a confession which is fully able, despite its lack of political clout, to ‘express the agony [or shame, or uncertainty] of this country’.

Metelerkamp thus sees the political and the personal as profoundly interconnected. Even while apparently expressing a creative preference for the personal (her ‘inner voices’) at the expense of the political in the interview, she asserts that these two realms are not separate: ‘if you listen to your inner voices … the politics is there’. This connection between the personal and the political is especially noteworthy in her reflection on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in her poem ‘Truth Commission’:

Move in, then, across the wet grass to the kitchen,  
switch on the news:

and when the truth comes  
brazen, searing  
across the airwaves,  
do you think I can face it –

the truth cuts me off again; this is  
the truth; black out,  
o black out the sight  
of the killers in their ill-fitting  
suits and shitty ties reeking  
of craven  
cowardice, crouched  
before the commission –

this is the truth: mothers who will not  
forgive, never  
forget, never
re-member the limbs they bore for murder;

o who can bring this stiff truth home to us who will breathe it into our warm kitchens – or are we out, out in the cold, alone?

(Goya lined them up for us, against the wall of his mind, the more clearly to see them; in all the detail their lives had made them before they were shot.)

From the radio I dare not hear from the TV I dare not look at where I stand, in my kitchen: the vaalpens Vlakplaas men drugged their men the more easily to shoot them.

O close my eyes – all night the mind feels for feels for – the cold comfort of a worry bead – turns over – the slump, slump of the bodies against the weak wall of the will. (IDB 80-82)

Metelerkamp focuses on the domestic setting of her reception of the TRC news: she walks ‘across the wet grass to the kitchen, / [to] switch on the news’, ‘this stiff truth is brought home to us / … into our warm kitchens’, she ‘stand[s], in [her] kitchen’ trying to avoid the sight of the ‘vaalpens / Vlakplaas men’ on the television. Metelerkamp thus underscores this political event’s insertion into and infiltration of the home, the personal space. Rather than being experienced as a remote socio-political event, ‘the slump, slump of the bodies’ of the men whom the ‘Vlakplaas men / drugged … the more easily to shoot’ is intensely personally, viscerally felt as an obsessive, repetitive turning ‘of a worry bead’. The bodies are felt in one’s hands, as one lies in one’s bed.
In a 1999 interview with Ross Edwards, Metelerkamp accuses Antjie Krog of needlessly ‘manufactur[ing] the truth about [her]self for the sake of a more “interesting”, or is it “consumable” narrative’ in the writing of her TRC narrative, *Country of My Skull*, adding that Krog ‘misses an opportunity to confront herself’ (61). While one could argue that Krog and Metelerkamp are actually quite similar in that they both read the political through the personal, or collapse the boundaries between these two classes of events and experiences, Metelerkamp’s specific criticism of Krog is that the personal realm which she is conflating with the political is a manufactured or fabricated realm, which is not true to her real, personal experiences. It is due to this artful fabrication that Metelerkamp maintains that Krog ‘misses an opportunity to confront herself’. Despite this possible difference between Krog and Metelerkamp, both writers show the connection between the personal and the political by examining their own personal beliefs through their literary investigations of political events. In ‘Truth Commission’, through her evocation of the TRC hearings, Metelerkamp raises questions about the nature of truth (‘I’m implying that there is such a thing as the truth’ [Edwards 61]), and our ability to ‘deal with the overwhelming truths, with the impossible hard truths’ (Edwards 61) – how truth ‘blinds’ us, ‘cuts [us] off’ and pushes us ‘out, out in the cold, alone’ (IDB 80-81). In Metelerkamp’s poem, truth, which is what the commission and its participants (and spectators) were meant to strive towards, paradoxically becomes that which we ‘dare not hear / … dare not look at’, but remains something that we cannot erase or exorcise. For Metelerkamp, this ‘impossible hard [truth]’ is only realised when it is sought in one’s personal space and not in the public space in which the hearings occurred. It is only when the ‘bodies’ of the victims are felt ‘slump[ing] …/ against the weak wall of the will’ that the full truth of these stories told to the TRC is understood.

The central poem of *Stone No More*, which discusses the suicide of Metelerkamp’s maternal grandmother, ‘Joan’, pivots around a similar entwining of the political and the personal:

She was the secretary

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2 While Metelerkamp does not specify how Krog ‘manufacture[s] the truth about [her]self’, she is most likely referring to the fictional affair Krog inserts into the text.
of the communist party.

... The atom bomb for freedom
Stalinism in Russia
Nationalism here;

and then their listing; blight of
the land we list you; blighted
to the root of your

mothering, blight bequeathed to
her children, inheritors
of her shattered world

a month after their listing she shot herself.

...

So who is responsible
comrades, let the blood spill
on the floor, spirit seeping?

...

Image of community severed at the core:
where were you espousing freedom community
solidarity, did you turn your backs to her
bleeding on the floor? where were you, Oupa George,
wrangling for justice, dreams failing, finding comfort
from another woman; ... (28-30, ellipses added).

Metelekamp is writing about a national struggle: the anti-apartheid resistance movement in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the apartheid government’s suppression of this resistance. The image of the ‘community severed at the core’ in this political context (‘blight of / the land we list you’), is thus an image of the resistance community without leaders. During this period the leaders of the resistance movement were forced underground or into exile with the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act. Yet, at the same time, the ‘community’ which is ‘blighted’ is Joan’s biological family: she is the core, the heart of the family, and it is her family who are the ‘inheritors / of her shattered

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3 As Metelekamp’s poem is about how her grandmother committed suicide ‘a month after [the communist party’s] listing’, this precludes reference to other repressive laws.
Metelerkamp does accuse ‘Oupa George’ directly of negligence and infidelity: ‘where were you, Oupa George, / wrangling for justice, dreams failing, finding comfort / from another woman’. However, the communist party ‘comrades’ are also held ‘responsible’ for letting the ‘blood [Joan’s, and the resistance movement’s] spill / on the floor’. The personal and political narratives are indivisible here, with both levels simultaneously present and powerful:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{... blight of} \\
\text{the land we list you, blighted} \\
\text{to the root of your} \\
\text{mothering, blight bequeathed to} \\
\text{her children, inheritors} \\
\text{of her shattered world (SNM 28).}
\end{align*}
\]

In this poem the country and its people, its children and future generations are blighted, but so too are Joan’s family, especially her daughter and unborn granddaughter, who inherit the shattered world and matrilineal legacy of suicide which her suicide ‘bequeath[s]’ them. This ‘blight bequeathed to / her children’ is evocatively, almost uncomfortably, expressed in *carrying the fire*, where, as previously quoted, Metelerkamp tells how ‘[her] grandmother shot a hole through her head / right through [her] mother and into her unborn children’ (CF 31).

Metelerkamp thus demonstrates the effect of both personal and political legacies in this poem, and shows how these legacies are interrelated: the poem does not make a clear distinction between the personal and the political, but rather shows how these spheres are coterminous. Therefore, the personal legacy of matrilineal suicide and the political legacy of the suppression of apartheid resistance are presented and experienced simultaneously in the poem as a single ‘blight’.

Twentieth century segregation and apartheid, maintained by repressive laws like the Suppression of Communism Act, caused a violent disjuncture between South Africa and the rest of the African continent. In *Floating Islands*, Metelerkamp transcribes Ruth Miller’s poem, ‘The Floating Island’, which examines this state of disjuncture:
Miller mourns the isolation which ‘iron-edged apartheid’ (FI 15) entrenched between South Africa and the rest of the continent, and sees this isolation as one entirely detrimental to South Africa: without the connection to our continent, our country will ‘blunder’ and ‘sink in ravelled floods’. The apartheid nationalist government, which was meant to be steering South Africa’s development and growth, is seen to ‘[lack] weather sense for guide’, and thus our ‘island’ is ‘uncharted’, and floats ‘blind-eyed’ to its destruction. While Metelerkamp does not share Miller’s fatalism, she does share Miller’s despondency at this long period of ‘blunder[ing]’ isolation. In a 1992 interview, she comments with both disparagement and relief that it was only in the early 1980s that ‘people [in the context – white academics, most likely guided by the growth of postcolonial theory] were recognising that we lived in Africa’ (Cousins 9). While it could be argued that many academics and writers at this time made a conscious identification with Africa, and expressed this identification in abstract and theoretical terms, Metelerkamp sees this attachment to Africa in highly vital and visceral terms. Her persona, Amanda, in Floating Islands, states that South Africans have ‘African feet’ which emigration (to the UK, as Amanda’s sister Karen does), would ‘cut off’, and which could only be replaced by useless ‘wooden stumps’. Never again would one have real ‘soles’, or as the homonym suggests, a true ‘soul’.

The concept of ‘African feet’ also implies that, for Metelerkamp, one does not choose to be an African, or identify oneself with Africa. Being an African is, for Metelerkamp, rather an intrinsic and inevitable part of her identity that is based on her geographical location. As the first chapter demonstrates, Metelerkamp is highly aware of her natural surroundings and feels a profound connection to the space she inhabits. By virtue of a life

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4 This whole question of who may call themselves an ‘African’ was sparked by Mbeki’s ‘I am an African’ speech of 1996. This issue has been much debated in the press during the past ten years. In 2006, the argument made by Frederick van Zyl Slabbert in his lecture entitled ‘I Am an African – If Not, Why Not?’, which was reported in the Mail and Guardian, can be seen as both a response to, and catalyst for further, polemical discussion of this issue in the media (Groenewald 24).
lived in Africa, Metelerkamp acknowledges that she has been formed by Africa: ‘I have come out of that garden / that bushveld’ (CF 23)\(^5\) and is therefore an African who has ‘African feet’.

However, writing in the last decade of apartheid and the first decade after its demise, Metelerkamp, a white South African whose whiteness signified her superiority to anyone ‘African’, faces difficulties in asserting her ‘Africanness’. Knowing this, Metelerkamp writes that South Africa is the place ‘where I dared not seek / reflection for my face – ’ (FI 57), but as her homeland, it is a place she should legitimately be able to claim as her own:

```
how we long for our legitimacy
... how ever we fumble for it, it is we,
we who must claim it –
to prize this country
open,
lean over the glass
of its dark waters
speak, say, this place
where I dared not seek
reflection for my face –
did not know whom to see there –
it is ours, here (FI 57).
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While Metelerkamp here strongly advocates an active claiming of legitimacy on the part of white South Africans, this is hampered by the fact that the ‘face’ whose reflection we seek is not unambiguously African, with all its features firmly rooted in Africa. In *Towing the Line* Metelerkamp writes that

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this myth of white South Africans
having no identity is a deadly one –
we do, only we don’t dare recognise the graft;
and many roots of the separately developed
identities bound together, metamorphosed
now, give growth to desire for Heaven on Earth. (95)
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\(^5\) ‘[G]arden’ and ‘bushveld’ are apparently disparate concepts: garden evokes regulated culture, while bushveld evoked untamed nature. However, in this poem, Metelerkamp breaks down this opposition: the ‘bushveld, / of branch embedded in branch, / trunk sloping to trunk’ is the ‘garden of Mozambique cobra’ (CF 23).
Metelerkamp’s choice of words – ‘separately developed / identities’ – evokes apartheid and its policies of separate development. It thus highlights how these identities which have, over time, been socially and sexually grafted together, have often been historically at war with each other. The horticultural image of the graft, which is also used to describe marriage in ‘In my dreaming’ (quoted in the previous chapter), suggests that this process of integration has not occurred naturally or painlessly, but that it nevertheless strengthens and invigorates life. These different identities have ‘metamorphosed’, creating a new being who can and must ‘prize this country / open’ and claim it as his/her own.

Metelerkamp discusses this issue with Cousins:

JM I suppose what I was struggling with [in ‘Perfection for me is shared passion fulfilled’] was … the problem of concretising it too much … my lovers are going to save me, I don’t have to do it myself. They’re going to give me another country, another place, the country of my heart.

CCC A different way which is the right way. Because our way here in South Africa is by definition the wrong way. We’ve carried such darkness for everybody else, right? We are the wrong way to do everything.

JM Exactly, exactly. Especially we who are white…

CCC So how do you come out of that? Tackle something else? How to live? Amongst the black folk? Amongst the women folk? Is that where all this nurturing, right living, is going on?

JM You decide that it’s just where you are, and you get on with it. The first bit is accepting where you are.

CCC Where are you?

JM In the suburbs, in the white suburbs. I am. Ja, I accept it. Mothering in the white suburbs. (Cousins, third ellipsis in original 14)

In this interview, Metelerkamp focuses on the difficulty of ‘we who are white’ seeking our reflection in South Africa and legitimately claiming this country as our home. For Metelerkamp, though, one cannot ignore the graft of one’s own identity in order to create a facile and uncomplicated identification with Africa. Rather, one must be honest about one’s location, and thus despite the lack of political credibility, Metelerkamp openly
declares that her life is ‘in the white suburbs’. As would be expected, her poetry is also as uncompromisingly candid about her location:

Morning. The woman moves about her house, opens the doors evenly, lets in the sun – aura of ease, this morning, plenitude, grace; here she is assured of her place.

Inside she knows her privilege well;

…

It is a warm November Saturday. The morning is here. She lets in the light. Chelmsford Road. She knows its contradictions well: towards the dip, thorny many-stemmed chatachme aristata; umkhuhlu; albizia; and, over the tended park, mango trees bearing stringy fruit the refugees have been wheeling away in orange pockets, in shopping trolleys, down the swept suburban street, residents safe as houses behind their walls. (SNM 42-43)

While openly acknowledging this privileged location, and writing from and about the safe, suburban, middle-class life it offers, Metelerkamp is also aware of how this privilege limits her voice. Through Karen, her émigré artist and mother persona in *Floating Islands*, Metelerkamp examines how racial and class privilege can be seen to disqualify one as an inappropriate discussant of certain hardships:

*Will they throw their guns into the sea?*  
*What courage would it take, at home, how sick of it all are they; war – at home with war…what do you know about war, you don’t come from the townships do you?*  
*No; no but I knew women who do.*  
*Shall I tell you a story, which one of Dumezile’s stories would you like?*  
*Which one of those she brought to our home on heavy shoulders across the scar where her husband beat her (before he broke her spine before the people’s court dismissed him) the one about her neighbour’s*

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6 This does, of course, change when Metelerkamp and her family abandon the comforts of suburban Durban and relocate to a farming community in the southern cape.
Is knowing a woman who has experienced ‘war’ enough ground for a privileged white woman to speak of it, or does her safe suburban existence as the employer of one of the victims of this ‘war’ undermine her ability to speak? In the following poem from *Floating Islands*, Metelerkamp continues to examine this issue through the persona, Amanda, in conversation with fellow academic/poet, her Muslim lover, Nadeem:

“it had occurred to me; but who are the cultural workers, their credentials proven through the struggle? And I’m white, aren’t I – showing my true colour? All very well for you; you may be a settler but you’re one of the ‘victims of apartheid’ – ‘two cultures’, Serote says, two cultures …[“]

… they [Serote, Kgotsitsile, Ndebele] don’t say ‘it is this that you must write, and this you may …’ simply say, what was white writing will atrophy – you know what will see to that: democracy – others are vocal now – write what you want to…” (FI 71, emphasis in original, second ellipsis added).

If there are only ‘two cultures’, then, by showing her ‘true colour’ as a white South African, Metelerkamp is viewed as one of the perpetrators of apartheid, one of the oppressors, on the strength only of her skin colour, regardless of her individual beliefs and actions. Furthermore, if one accepts this dichotomy, then, as a white writer at the close of apartheid, her writing seems unwanted, unwarranted. Metelerkamp should therefore include her poetry among the classification of ‘what was white writing’ and has been doomed to ‘atrophy’ by the ‘cultural workers’.

However, Metelerkamp’s poetry, with its drive to forge connections, resists the creation and maintenance of dichotomies. Rather than establishing, or even accepting, boundaries between different realms, Metelerkamp is actively ‘towing the line[s]’, as the title of her first collection suggests, blurring distinctions between different realms, asking if, in fact, these realms aren’t coterminous with each other. The very style of this poem demonstrates this resistance to dichotomies. While the poem is entitled ‘Dialogue’ and seems to present two dichotomous points of view, the two voices in this poem are so
entwined that it is difficult to separate them. The voices are stylistically similar: both frequently fade away on ellipses, both ask questions and both quote other writers. Furthermore, the form of the poem is opposed to neatly defined borders separating dichotomous entities: the poem is written as one stanza, it makes frequent use of enjambments, it does not use conventional dialogue typography to name and visually separate the two speakers (like ‘Portrait’ in *Stone No More*), but rather, in a third of the lines, both voices speak in the same line. While superficially presenting a dichotomy of ‘two cultures’, the style of the poem can be seen to undermine these distinctions, and thus questions their validity.

While the poem as a whole deconstructs and dismisses Amanda’s fear that there are ‘two cultures’ and that her culture is that of the ‘oppressor’, her related fear that her ‘white writing will atrophy’ is not as easily dismissed. An anxiety persists that the ‘democracy’ which is encouraging ‘others [to be] vocal now’ will discredit the soon-to-be atrophied white writing. While Nadeem’s ‘write what you want to’ can be read as an encouragement of freedom of expression, unrestrained by political imperatives (a reading which is reinforced by the final lines of the poem: ‘“Who cares about [the cultural workers’] sanction [against white writing] – no-one knows their place, / can’t you find it, can’t you make it, can’t you face it?”’), it can simultaneously be read as completely uninterested and unconcerned: we do not care what you write, your writing has no value. This anxiety that (as a white woman, which is related to her anxiety, discussed in chapter two that, as a white woman) one’s poetic output is unwanted and worthless persists in Metelerkamp’s poetry. It is most evocatively echoed in ‘Hands full of poems’:

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Leave, leave like that poet
    tied to his mother, leave,
    hope, as Salvatore Quasimodo
    with a handful of poems
    in your pocket –
    where will you go?
There is nowhere left to run –
    we have arrived
    at the end of the line,
    hands, poems,
    in their pockets –
    throw them to the wind,
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take them, throw them,
your country does not want them,
your people have no need. (IDB 87)

Gina Wisker writes that Ingrid de Kok’s poetry ‘touches on the sensitive difficulties of white South Africans of Afrikaner or European descent who are not the oppressors, and who find themselves marginalised and voiceless, their experience deemed irrelevant’ (151). Clearly, as ‘Hands full of poems’ demonstrates, Metelerkamp’s poetry can be seen as similar to De Kok’s in this respect.

Not only does South Africa not need a white woman’s poems, but, as Metelerkamp argues in her article on Ruth Miller, South Africa does not seem to need or value lyric poetry per se:

In the present political context, lyric poetry like Miller’s has been marginalised for men as well as for women and the authority of the academy sees to it that more critical attention is given to other forms of writing than to poetry. If those who are passionate about poetry are not to cripple themselves with doubt about their chosen medium of expression or field of critical enquiry they need to remind themselves that poetry is one legitimate means of making meanings, of generating and experiencing pleasure. Remembering Tony Bennett’s argument that “there are no forms of cultural practice which are intrinsically and forever either dominant or oppositional” (1979: 167) and remembering, further, Marianne Moore’s defence of poetry as being “useful”, perhaps lyric poetry is the most useful for the insights it gives us (as dreams do) into the grappling of individual, gendered, historical psyches with the complex struggles of experience:

I too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine.
Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a

high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful.

Taking a path suggested by Kuzwayo’s autobiography, this country’s poets and readers, especially women poets and readers, need to value lyric poetry as an area of self-transformation, “confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self” (Williams 1977: 212): doing so means that we would be seeing writing not only in
terms analogous to the nurturing as opposed to the critical parent but also in terms of a philosophy of praxis. (256)

This current devaluation of poetry in South Africa is also expounded upon in her poem ‘After the interview’, which describes how poems are marginalised in a university syllabus. Metelerkamp writes that, during a departmental meeting about the curriculum, she

shoved the good ground for poems
for their [‘the learned men’, her colleagues’] benefit into the corner of the syllabus – what place can poetry have –

... 
I couldn’t say, but I should have said, something about poetry in all its multiple convoluting manifold forms opening up against hegemonic popular texts

... 
I should have said something to do with thinking it a worthwhile organism of shifting meanings, contradicting, transforming, meanings – … (SNM 6-7, ellipses added).

The argument that Metelerkamp is (belatedly) making for poetry’s inclusion in an academic syllabus is the same as that she makes in her critical writing: that poetry, as Marianne Moore claims, is *useful*. Hands that are ‘full of poems’ are useful, capable hands. The uses of poetry, as Metelerkamp outlines them, are manifold: it is a ‘means of making meanings’ and it gives us ‘insights … into the grappling of individual, gendered, historical psyches with the complex struggles of experience’. As lyric poetry, specifically, is poetry of the self and the self’s experiences in its existence, it occupies an especially privileged status in this regard. In this sense, Metelerkamp’s long poem, *carrying the fire*, is a superlative example, in which, through the four sections of the poem, the speaker first describes her affair and the motives for this relationship; then examines her self after the affair has ended and she seeks to resume her life, letting go of this connection; then comes to a metaphoric understanding of her affair and its significance in her life; and is finally able, in the last section, to return to herself and her life, strengthened by the self-knowledge gained in this process. Poetry is useful here as it
can illuminatingly describe the struggles of the self, and, through the poem, increase one’s understanding of oneself and one’s existence.

But poetry also has a more active use, that of ‘opening / up … hegemonic popular texts’, of ‘shifting / meanings, contradicting, transforming, meanings’. In ‘After the interview’, Metelerkamp writes about poetry’s ability to ‘decolonise the mind or overturn / colonial history’ (SNM 7). Her *Floating Islands* sequence, or, as it was originally entitled, *Fragments*, in turn shows poetry as being politically active in the service of feminism. In particular, her emphasis on Dorothy Wordsworth’s writing *fragments* the received wisdom of William’s pre-eminence, inverting their statures so as to see William’s writing as only a ‘shadow of her [Dorothy’s] own’ (FI 55). In the opening poem of *Into the Day Breaking*, ‘Night Fire’, Metelerkamp’s closing assertion that

poems like
women and children
do not fight fires (11)

is provocative, perhaps even ironic, particularly as her previous poems have included references to children fighting political fires:

think
of what the kids are doing –
throwing stones at armoured casspirs
breaking the grown-up goliath
force of the law. (TL 102)

Although she has a more ambivalent opinion of women’s historical ability to successfully fight fires, they certainly are seen to have the capacity to do so. Therefore, ‘poems like / women and children / do … fight fires’ (emphasis added). That is one way in which poetry is useful: by fighting the fires of hegemony and, in doing so, ‘decolonis[ing] the mind or overturn[ing] / colonial history’ (SNM 9).

This dual nature of poetry as passively descriptive or active is evoked in ‘Medusa’:

Polished words strung along precisely weighted syllabic lines

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7 Through this phrase, Metelerkamp evokes Ngugi’s *[Decolonising the Mind]*, and thus shows the influence of African and anticolonial political philosophy on her work.
distilling the fury I’d felt for years to fierce stones – a string,
I felt, glinting – like granny’s necklace in the dark like the lights
of Maritzburg below, seen for the first time through the mist from
World’s View, as we drove through the night… (SNM 5, ellipsis in original).

Not only does poetry create something beautiful (under the gaze of the Medusa, or of
one’s own ‘Self/Critic’, words of poetry become like the ‘fierce stones’ of ‘granny’s
necklace’) and purify and enhance the essential quality of emotions (it ‘distill[s] the
fury’), it is also the welcoming ‘lights’ or beacons of home seen ‘through the mist’.
Poetry could here be, in its passive form, a description or reflection of one’s own earlier
realised understanding (one’s ability to see the ‘lights’ through ‘mist’ in the ‘night’); but
simultaneously, it is actively that which creates and emits light, and thereby practically
produces understanding. In this context, the ambiguity of ‘glinting’, meaning that which
gives out or reflects small flashes of light (OED), performs the ambiguity of these
simultaneously active and passive understandings of poetry. Significantly, it is ‘World’s
View’, a panoramic view of the world (an inner or outer world), that poetry describes, or
enables one to see. Poetry, due to its structure of ‘polished words strung along precisely
weighted syllabic lines’, reflects, or creates, a panorama which, if one subscribes to the
active principle of poetry, one cannot otherwise attain. But, as even the most purely
descriptive form of poetry retains the function of usefulness (as Metelerkamp and Moore
assert), this clear border between passive and active is broken down, with ‘passive’
poetry being as actively, pragmatically useful as overtly activist poetry.

In South Africa, roughly from 1950 until 1990, the predominant understanding of art was
that it is, and should be used as, a form of political activism. According to this view,
culture is ‘a weapon of the struggle’, and the specific role of literature is ‘to represent the
victimisation of the oppressed in realist form’ (Attridge and Jolly 2). In their introduction
to Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995, Attridge and
Jolly remind their readers of Benita Parry’s argument that ‘doctrinal directives’ (for
example, ‘that [artists’] artefacts will strive to meet the requirements of political
relevance and pedagogy’ [Parry 13]) produced by ‘the ANC and other anti-apartheid
organisations’ leads to ‘a separation of the aesthetic and the political or ethical’ (7). This
separation results in the “reification of a stark choice between solipsistic aestheticism and engaged art” (in Attridge and Jolly 7). Michael Chapman seems to accept this dichotomy in his 1990 paper ‘The Critic in a State of Emergency: Towards a Theory of Reconstruction (after February 2)’ (an article which Metelerkamp cites in *Floating Islands*), and uses this distinction between ‘solipsistic aestheticism and engaged art’ to evaluate literature produced in the 1980s:

… I concluded that the writers who counted [his article mentions Mzwakhe, Qabula and Matshoba] had tied themselves to the pragmatics of political change and should be judged according to their degree of accountability to progressive forces in the oppressed community. By contrast, the skilfully ‘artistic’ responses of acknowledged authors such as Gordimer, Fugard and Coetzee seemed remote from what was most urgently required in a state of emergency: namely, forms of participatory witness (3).

Chapman was ‘disturbed’ by Albie Sachs’s much publicised 1989 speech ‘Preparing Ourselves for Freedom’ and the debate which this paper sparked amongst South African writers and critics, as he felt that, for literary critics at least, the state of emergency had not yet passed (in 1990) (2). Sachs’s paper, presented at the ANC in-house seminar in Lusaka, Zambia, argues that the restricted view of art as ‘a weapon of the struggle’ resulted in ‘an impoverishment of our art’ (239), as the number of legitimate themes was reduced (239) and creative ambiguity and contradiction were eschewed (240). While some conservative critics read Sachs’s paper as a return to an apolitical aesthetics, as opposed to engaged art, this could only be a misreading, as Mary K. DeShazer asserts:

As a former supporter of the armed struggle, Sachs clearly views art as inseparable from politics; certainly his argument does not endorse the Eurocentric notion of art as politically unaffiliated, pure. Instead, he proposes that a rigid definition of art as a weapon of struggle has resulted in too narrow a range of themes and styles; such a definition does not allow contradiction or ambiguity, where he believes the power of art lies. (188)

Njabulo Ndebele’s 1984 essay ‘Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa’, like Sachs’s 1989 speech, asserts that ‘the convention of the spectacular

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*8 Many of the responses to Sachs’s paper have been collected in the volume *Spring is Rebellious*, edited by Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press.*
[which Ndebele sees as typifying protest literature] has run its course’ (42). Neither Ndebele nor Sachs argues that literature and politics are separate domains, but simply that the injunction that artists should produce art whose purpose is to ‘contribute dramatically to the struggle for liberation’ by inciting ‘strike action [and] demonstrations’ limits artists and impoverishes their art (Ndebele 66).

Metelerkamp can be seen to agree with Ndebele and Sachs. While her writing clearly asserts a strong connection between literature and politics, it is not motivated by a desire to document political oppression or to urge the oppressed to resist, but rather keenly embraces creatively powerful ambiguities and contradictions, and explores a myriad of themes beyond, or even excluding, that of the political spectacle. Like Ndebele, Metelerkamp seeks to ‘rediscover the ordinary’ and the manner in which the political is interwoven with our ordinary, personal lives. Ndebele’s interest in ‘how oppression affects people in their day to day lives, what it does to the fabric of family life, how it affects individual ambitions and aspirations’ finds a true reflection in Metelerkamp’s poetic project (175).

Linked to Metelerkamp’s idea of poetry as a form of activism, is her exhortation that poetry be regarded as a ‘philosophy of praxis’ (‘Ruth Miller’ 256). This idea recurs in her poetry, most noticeably in the prose section of carrying the fire, where a separate paragraph is dedicated to it:

Praxis. Artistic praxis – the artist transforming herself as she transforms her material. (102)

Metelerkamp’s belief in the power of poetry to transform runs throughout her poetic oeuvre:

make me new
words
make me new (IDB 27).

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9 As Ndebele’s essay was written and published in the midst of 1980s oppression, while Sachs’s 1989 speech was congruent with political changes, Ndebele’s cultural intervention is more courageous and remarkable than Sachs’s.
Poetry’s process of transformation can most clearly be seen in Metelerkamp’s sequence poems: *requiem* and *carrying the fire.* As noted earlier in this chapter, through its four parts, *carrying the fire* details the process of self-transformation that is set in motion by an affair. This affair becomes understood as a metaphoric yearning for connection to that which lies beneath consciousness and commonplace reality; an understanding, and connection, which transforms the speaker. In the final section, Amanda, Metelerkamp’s artist persona whose explicitly sexual paintings mirror the intensely sexual poetry in the three previous sections of *carrying the fire,* states that the creation of her art has nothing to do with art, painting, artifice, nothing to do with anything but what’s inside, finding a way to itself, to make a way out. More like a fairy-tale. More like to do with trying to grow my hands back. They’ve been missing for quite long, let’s face it. Grow them back. From the suicide veins. Grow back your hands. Grow your hands back. (111)

Through Metelerkamp’s artistic praxis in *carrying the fire* she rejuvenates herself, allows herself to regain and use a destroyed part of herself. Metelerkamp writes that her hands have been amputated, and need to grow back ‘from the suicide veins’, which links the advent of her incomplete, disjointed, unhanded state to her mother’s suicide, or perhaps, more profoundly, is indicative of her entire life as lived ‘in the wake / of [her maternal grandmother’s suicidal] act’ (SNM 2), indicative of her existence as a ‘woman who drank / death in, in the placenta’ (CF 87). In an interview, Metelerkamp evocatively describes how, when she was a child, ‘the shadow of death was always about’ (McGrane 3).

The collection which most directly deals with this omnipresent death and her maternal legacy of suicide is, of course, *requiem,* in which, like *carrying the fire,* Metelerkamp is engaged with the transformative process of artistic praxis. The poem ‘Judgement day’ shows this process at work:

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Something, of how it is without you
I wanted to say –
(as you always knew it would be:

nothing,
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10 The three characters of Metelerkamp’s third sequence, *Floating Islands,* with their separate yet interwoven stories, split Metelerkamp’s poetic voice, and while the book is certainly engaged with transformation (of the personae), that of the poet, while occurring, is not as sharply delineated.
finished, finished,
for we are the ordinary left living)

what to say – what is left
“I feel so …”
you said,

but before you had finished
I was up and away
thought I could get away

from that last sentence –

what is left – mist lifting,
trees standing,
cows in the field, cudding

legs cold with damp of grass, something,
something you wanted,
I want to say – (15).

Through the writing of this poem, Metelerkamp’s initial nihilistic belief that, with her mother’s death, ‘nothing’ remains, or has meaning, that everything of value in life is ‘finished, finished’, is transformed. By the end of the poem, this ‘mist’ of scepticism is ‘lifting’ and Metelerkamp can acknowledge that life continues:

what is left – mist lifting,
trees standing,
cows in the field, cudding

legs cold with damp of grass, (R15).

While not making an exaggerated about-face, the ‘nothing’ is now replaced, at least, by ‘something’. Similarly, while Metelerkamp has bemoaned her ‘freight / of nothing to lose, everyday’ (R 14), her unceasing task of ‘dragging the weight of suicide women / dragging them up to the light’ (CF 58), at the end of one of the closing poems of requiem she instructs herself to

put it down
this dead weight

the task at hand
what is left
what behoves us
what life asks of us. (58)

This process of transformation thus enables Metelerkamp to progress from her futile desire ‘to resurrect [her mother]’, to a desire for
new life, life again, body love
bring me back,
resurrect me.
Come back. (R 62)

It is Metelerkamp’s own severed hand which she wants to ‘come back’, to ‘grow back’, and she thus desires to resurrect herself. In, and from, this vein, Metelerkamp ends the collection with a life-affirming transformation:
her [Metelerkamp’s mother’s] breathing head
against my arm, her breathing
with the last breath leaving,
hearing love lasting,
her breathing, mine. (R 67)

This active principle of poetry affects not only the poet, but also the engaged reader. Metelerkamp’s relationship with and conception of the role of the reader has evolved over the years. In 1992 Metelerkamp stated that ‘If I start to think about an audience, the judging voices come in thick and fast, from every side, so I don’t. So at the moment the writing’s still for myself’ (Cousins 14). In a 1999 interview, Metelerkamp was still reserved about her audience: ‘lots of [my poems] have other people in them. But I can never know who I am writing for, if anyone will want to read it – how do I know if a poem is going to be of use to anyone else?’ (Edwards 62, emphasis in original). She does nevertheless, in the same interview, give credence to Muriel Rukeyser’s view that poetry is ‘a process, an energy, a current between poet and reader’ thus highlighting the necessary function of the reader (Edwards 62, emphasis added). In her 2005 collection carrying the fire, Metelerkamp addresses the reader directly for the first time in her work:
Listen. You have given me
secret audience you have listened as if you could do it again and again

clear my hysteria out of the air
like simply sweeping aside all the old fear like dead

words like need like love
like classics, syntax

I could give you more but I don’t know what you want –
don’t know how

you want it – how do you want it – tell me
whisper, this is what you want, I mean this is what I want

writing my self for you like with fingertips
piercing you, under your skin

here you are
leave the clothes on the floor here I am

paintings hanging like plants underwater strangling for air
when it’s dark, when it’s damp, take the mattress out on the grass –

like little noses lips whiskers fingers
intense as mice shrews

nips stripes hairs damp lips
in the dark in the neck on the lips

god, like a boomslang’s eyes close
in the grass dead-dangerous

push me open like a small frog unearthed legs pushed back
your whole body your need – (CF 93-94).

The relationship between poet and reader is analogous to a sexual relationship, an intense and intimate connection that holds the power of ‘new life’ (R 62). The relationship is reciprocal: while Metelerkamp is ‘piercing’ her reader with her ‘fingertips / … under [his/her] skin’ in the process of writing herself for the reader, so Metelerkamp exposes and opens herself to be pierced by the reader: ‘push me open like a small frog unearthed legs pushed back / your whole body your need’. The reader, pierced and piercing, is thus equally able to engage in the transformative process of Metelerkamp’s artistic praxis, to feel new life stirring within his or her own suicide veins.
This sexual relationship between poet and reader is also, at root, political, as it is governed by power, with reader and writer contesting ownership of the text. A delicate balancing of power occurs in the poem, with both parties having the power to act on, and enter into, the other. The artistic praxis which Metelerkamp is following, then, is not merely artistic, but also political. For Metelerkamp, the relationship that a poem establishes between speaker and reader mirrors relations of power at their most fundamental level. The poetic, formal problems that attend on this relationship as it is developed in poetry are directly connected to the real world of politics and power.

Therefore, although Metelerkamp doesn’t write overtly political poems about national subjects, and appears to be her most notably concerned with a personal ‘artistic praxis – the artist transforming herself as she transforms her material’ (CF 102), her poetry is radically and revealingly political. Rather than creating a connection between the personal and the political, Metelerkamp’s poetry reveals an awareness of the inherent interconnectedness of these supposedly disparate categories. Her political strategy, which is thus identical to her poetic praxis, is to enable and evoke a consciousness of the inseparability of these two realms.
CONCLUSION

To see through this clot, knot; to catch this thread, then that, to hold them apart, together, in imagination, clearly – love, sex, marriage, motherhood, art (to bring them all together) let alone money, other people, politics, propriety; let alone heaven and earth, futility, let alone life itself, death you know, and why or whether, let alone love, family, let alone the energy (to bring it together).

(Joan Metelerkamp, ‘Changing Line’, *carrying the fire* 113)

This thesis has examined the many interwoven ways in which Metelerkamp’s poetry can be understood as a poetics of connection. The first chapter analysed the connections drawn between language, body, self and world, arguing that, because of the embodied subjectivity adopted in her poetry, these supposedly disparate realms become entwined.

The second chapter examined the influences of Metelerkamp’s literary, academic, mythological, sociological and familial legacies on her poetry and the manner in which these legacies provided her with various patterns for existence. The third chapter focused on Metelerkamp’s socio-historical location and the profound connection between the personal and the political realms which her poetry reveals. One can thus conclude that Metelerkamp’s entire poetic oeuvre is underscored by a drive for connection.

This drive for connection is particularly noteworthy because of Metelerkamp’s resistance to poststructuralism. While poststructuralism demonstrates the linguistic connection between all signifiers, the vast web of interrelations that Metelerkamp’s poetry spins between language and self, and the material world and body, as well as those between the personal and the political, enable a much deeper connection to be formed. One would thus mistakenly expect that the radical and unusual nature of the connections created, and revealed, by Metelerkamp’s poetry would attract significant scholarly interest.

Metelerkamp’s poetry’s resistance to many of the tenets of poststructuralism and postmodernism is instead one reason for her critical isolation. Catherine Woeber emphasises this when comparing Metelerkamp’s *Stone No More* to John Mateer’s
Burning Swans (1994): ‘These two volumes, then, reflect a tension between the trendy postmodern emphasis on “text”, iconoclasm and fragmentation [Mateer], and the less fashionable neo-romantic or modernist recourse to an integrated prophetic “voice” [Metelerkamp]’ (132). This ‘[un]fashionab[ility]’ of Metelerkamp’s poetic vision and concerns is certainly a viable explanation for the academic silence which surrounds her work.

Metelerkamp’s poetry is more concerned with ‘voice’ than ‘text’, and this preference can be linked to an alignment with ‘neo-romantic[ism] and modernis[m]’. As chapter two argues, these two literary movements can be acknowledged as major influences on Metelerkamp’s poetics. However, as this chapter demonstrates, Metelerkamp also resists the artistic yearning for ‘the Word’ (or Logos, or God, or Perfection) which underpins these movements. Rather than viewing Metelerkamp’s writing as fundamentally informed by romantic and modernist principles, I would argue that it is instead the relatively new field of embodiment that can be seen as informing Metelerkamp’s poetics. Although embodiment theory is gaining increasing amounts of international academic interest, it is not yet a well-established theoretical framework for analysing literature. In South Africa, very little literary research is done from an embodiment perspective. Therefore, while Metelerkamp’s poetry engages with the central problems of up-and-coming embodiment theory, and is thus a very valuable body of work, since embodiment theory has not yet taken root in South African academia, her poetry is ignored.

Similarly, the form of feminism which Metelerkamp’s poetry intersects with is not that of increasingly popular poststructuralist and French feminism. As explained in the introduction, Metelerkamp’s poetry is more attuned to the concerns of the currently ‘less fashionable’ second wave Anglo-American feminism. Because Metelerkamp’s poetry is swimming against the current theoretical and artistic preoccupations, her work has not made great progress in terms of thorough critical attention.

Due to her uncomfortable relationship with contemporary literary concerns, Metelerkamp is not an easy poet to classify, which has, perhaps, only entrenched the scholarly silence
surrounding her work. Metelerkamp’s location in the South African poetry arena has also hampered attempts to categorise her poetry. Though a significant portion of her poetry was written during the final decade of apartheid, her lack of overtly political poetry shows her estrangement from the poet-activists writing protest poetry. But neither is Metelerkamp a purely post-apartheid writer. Her work does not engage intensely with national reconciliation, or with a supranational postmodern linguistic playfulness. Not belonging to any clearly defined group of poets, Metelerkamp’s work straddles the divide between apartheid and post-apartheid. She is a transitional poet: her poetry bridges these socio-historic periods, it belongs to neither, but asks questions of both.

The complex and nuanced nature of Metelerkamp’s poetry derives from her drive to bridge different socio-historic periods, literary styles and philosophic preoccupations. For this reason, though her poetry is transitional, it is definitely not transitory. While the lifespan of poetry which unilaterally performs the preoccupations of single historic period, literary style or theory is inevitably limited, as Metelerkamp’s poetry transcends these limits, and spins a wily web between these different periods, styles and theories, the longevity of her poetry’s potency and pertinency is assured. While this web of connectivity has thus far limited the academic appeal of Metelerkamp’s poetry, I feel confident that, with the right critical exposure, this same characteristic could interest future scholars.

In the writing of this thesis, I have repeatedly returned to the poem ‘And listen’ from which the epigraph of this thesis is taken. This poem, from Floating Islands, examines the academic (mal)treatment of a poet and her work:

And listen

“She tried her hand at verse, encouraged by her brother, urged by her friends, but she could not accomplish it to her satisfaction…”
(from Helen Darbishire’s introduction to Dorothy Wordsworth’s journal)

Poor Helen; corseted with quite polite formality,
nicely keeping you,
    cool,
    at bay,

keeping D. at arms length,
    keeping it quiet
    keeping it all together

with academic
    accomplishment –
    “to her satisfaction…”

cut off from something
    out of sight, just
    out of earshot,

the subtext,
    the invisible,
    underground, verse...

poor D. W. cut off –
    the surface of the paper crossed across
    un-dug depths –

lines of black
    across lines crossed-out
    lest lack,

like some lump
    in the throat,
    throb its way to surface.

I’ll keep them warm, my scraps
of perception, when I’ve dreamed
how to string them together, islands
linked like archipelagoes, nosing out
to sea,
when the plates have shifted,
to settle
contiguous to the mainland,
I’ll tell....

Crickets are calling. Dusk; dark now.
August evenings in Durban, cool;
put on a jersey and listen.  (FI 24-25, ellipses in original)
This poem has haunted me throughout the writing of this dissertation. It made me determined not to be ‘corseted with quite polite / formality’ to the extent that I am cut off from something out of sight, just out of earshot.

While wishing to retain the supporting framework of different theoretical schools and the common methods of literary analysis, I felt compelled by Metelerkamp (through the voice of Amanda) not to approach this project too coldly and from too great a remove. I was deeply aware of Metelerkamp’s pitying derision of Darbishire’s valiant attempt to keep Wordsworth ‘cool, / at bay, / … at arms length’. I knew that I could not do the same to Metelerkamp. I could not keep her ‘quiet’.

It has therefore been my aim to allow Metelerkamp a real voice in this thesis. I did not want ‘the surface of th[is] paper [to be] crossed across / un-dug depths – ’ with my ‘lines of black / …cross[ing] out’ Metelerkamp’s lines, her voice. I therefore decided to quote from Metelerkamp’s poems as frequently and fully as I dared without compromising the flow of my argument. I wanted to allow the ‘lump / in [Metelerkamp’s] throat / [to] throb its way to the surface’. I wanted the reader to be able to ‘listen’ to Metelerkamp’s poetry, and not merely to the argument I was making about her poetry. In order to do so, I found myself echoing Metelerkamp, listening to her poems and speaking back to them in the same tongue. Rather than keeping Metelerkamp ‘at arms length’, I have found myself embracing Metelerkamp as a literary mother, finding in her poems patterns for my life. When feeling anxious or uncertain about my ability to complete this thesis and find a way for myself into academia, it was Metelerkamp’s voice which offered me the firm, pragmatic encouragement I need:

there is only one way you enter:
enter, pick up the pen. (FI 94)

As Metelerkamp is a poet of connection, the connection between reader and writer is pivotal. My insistence on allowing Metelerkamp a ‘writerly’ voice in my ‘reading’ is thus a practical demonstration of my central thesis. As I conclude this dissertation, shaped as I
am by Metelerkamp’s principle of connectivity, I become aware that I, too, am a writer
awaiting my own reader. Therefore, preparing to put down the pen on this completed
work, I ask:

what spirit will carry this,
what vehicle transport
what body would, body should –
    let it not dissolve
    letter by letter like
this soft rain like ink running away all day all day
like our shared dream wept away – … (CF 35, ellipsis added).
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