

“WOMEN AND WIVES MUSTN’T GO NEAR IT”:
ACADEMIA, LANGUAGE AND GENDER
IN THE NOVELS OF ALISON LURIE

Susan Watkins
Leeds Metropolitan University

ABSTRACT

The novels of Alison Lurie are often dismissed as entertaining ‘campus fiction’, stirring the dying embers of the Anglo-American realist tradition. According to this reading they are merely concerned with the manners and mores of confined upper-middle class social spheres. Politically conservative, her texts are unaffected by the tendency to question the relationship between the textual and the material that characterises much of late twentieth-century fiction. However, this article will argue that the feminist critic can productively re-read Lurie’s fiction as a sustained exploration of the place of the feminine in academia. Her texts represent the world of academia in a way that resembles Jacques Lacan’s idea of the symbolic order, from which (according to Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous) women are excluded as other or admitted only on the same terms as men.

KEY WORDS: Alison Lurie, academia, Jacques Lacan, symbolic order, Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous.

RESUMEN

Las novelas de Alison Lurie son frecuentemente desechadas como entretenida “ficción de campus”, y acusadas de avivar las cenizas de la tradición realista angloamericana. Según esta lectura, simplemente tratan de las costumbres y modales de las clases sociales medias y altas. Políticamente conservadores, sus textos no han sido afectados por la tendencia a cuestionar la relación entre lo textual y lo material que caracteriza mucha de la ficción de la última parte del siglo XX. Sin embargo, este artículo sostiene que la crítica feminista puede re-leer productivamente la ficción de Lurie como una exploración continuada del lugar de lo femenino en la academia. Sus textos representan el mundo de la academia de manera similar a la idea Lacaniana del orden simbólico, del cual (según Luce Irigaray y Helene Cixous) las mujeres son excluidas como el Otro o admitidas solamente en los mismos términos que los hombres.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Alison Lurie, academia, Jacques Lacan, orden simbólico, Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous.



In her introduction to the only monograph on the work of Alison Lurie, Judie Newman describes the critical consensus about her writing as follows: “Lurie writes comedies about the three M’s —marriage, the middle classes and morality” (*Alison* 26). Her fiction is therefore commonly linked with the English and Anglo-American nineteenth-century realist tradition, with novelists like Jane Austen and Henry James, who write about the manners and mores of confined upper-middle class social spheres. Horst Kruse (1993), for example, sets her work firmly in the context of the “novel of manners” and notes the similarities between her writing and James’s (411). John Stark suggests that “her territory resembles Austen’s” in its narrow social range and use of satire (2).

Generally, then, Lurie’s work is perceived to be unaffected by the scepticism about the relationship between the textual and the material that characterises much of the fiction and philosophy of the later twentieth century. If present at all, consciousness of debate about this relationship seems to be generated merely by the fact that her work is set in academic contexts where the characters *discuss* these issues. In other words, what might broadly be termed poststructuralist insights (about the materiality of language and the textuality of the “real world”) appear to impact only at the most superficial level, as a consequence of the fact that Lurie is a “campus novelist” or practitioner of “academic” fiction. Newman argues that Lurie’s work is also frequently interpreted as that of “a campus novelist working within a narrow palette and a restricted range of character types” (*Alison* 26). Therefore, it might seem inevitable that, like many other male writers of university fiction, for example David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury, Lurie incorporates aspects of current literary theoretical/philosophical debate. As a Professor of English at Cornell, a “stronghold of structuralism and deconstruction” (Bradbury 6), this is hardly surprising. However, some have seen the interpolation of “theory” in this genre as an attempt to dress straightforward realism in borrowed clothes. Discussing David Lodge, Tom Shone writes:

Lodge has spent most of it [his career] putting off having to choose between two mutually exclusive modes of writing: safe but dull English realism and exciting but dangerous post-modern experimentation. His gloriously muddle-browed solution was the campus novel: in which, if you don’t have any of your post-modern experimentation as such, you still ship in characters who can talk about maybe one day getting down to a spot of post-modern experimentation, all things permitting, perhaps. (6)

Whether or not this is fair to Lodge, whose work does contain some characteristically postmodern elements, I want to argue that Lurie’s fiction certainly does ask searching questions about the “discursivity” or “textuality” of the world around us. Her fiction engages seriously with developments in philosophy and literary theory that can broadly be termed poststructuralist: Lurie is interested in the way that language appears to operate in terms of stable governing oppositions but always finally eludes fixed meanings. Her fiction establishes hierarchies of meaning only to invert, exceed or destabilise them. Her novels demonstrate the insights that language always *mediates* our perceptions and experiences and that power is

controlled and wielded discursively. Discussing her book *The Language of Clothes* Lurie commented:

The idea is the language of clothes: it will explain to you what your clothes mean. It's based on the premise that we are speaking to each other continually through what we wear and how our hair is done... As many people have pointed out before, clothing is a language. Well, if it is a language it must have a vocabulary and a grammar and the rules that apply to a language may apply to it. (Jackson 20-1)

Lurie's understanding of clothing as a language clearly suggests that it can be interpreted and read like a spoken or written text. In other words, Lurie understands clothing *discursively*, as a sign system that operates according to certain linguistic or "textual" practices. Newman also notes Lurie's interest in the interaction between art and life (*Alison* 6). She comments on her use of intertextuality and suggests that "her readers gain a sense of real life as being structured according to patterns familiar from literary culture, just as literary culture may be structured according to patterns from real life" (*Alison* 6).

In addition, however, this article will argue that, whereas most male writers of university fiction play with poststructuralist ideas to some degree, Lurie's texts interrogate these issues from a specifically gendered perspective. Throughout her fiction, it is her interest in the point of view of women characters, often contrasted to great effect with those of their academic male partners or other significant male characters, which allows her to compare clearly the different ways in which language and power intersect for men and women. Her texts foreground but also question the gendered assumptions that provide the basis for poststructuralist theories of language. In this respect some of the work of Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, which I have elsewhere characterised under the umbrella term "poststructuralist feminism" (Watkins 96-121) offers an analysis of femininity and its relation to language and power that resembles Lurie's fictional exploration of women's position in academia.

My analysis will be confined to three of Lurie's novels: *Love and Friendship* (1962), *The War Between the Tates* (1974), and *Foreign Affairs* (1984) This choice is the consequence of a number of factors: first, *Love and Friendship* and *The War Between the Tates* are campus novels whose action is explicitly centred on the world of academia; second, although a number of Lurie's novels concern academics placed in unfamiliar and alternative settings (*Nowhere City* (1965), *Imaginary Friends* (1967) and *Foreign Affairs*) *Foreign Affairs* retains the strongest connection with the world of academia through its device of having the central characters on sabbatical, researching in the UK. In addition, these three novels were published in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s respectively, providing an interesting overview of Lurie's development as a writer, and allowing comparison of the impact on her work of three crucial decades of twentieth-century American history. I will begin by demonstrating that, despite a clear focus on class, age and nationality respectively, the three novels here examined all share a common emphasis on gender as a key discourse in the construction of subjectivity and access to power. Lurie's texts represent the world



of academia as a Lacanian symbolic order from which women are excluded as other or admitted only on the same terms as men. However, in each novel serious challenges to this “double-bind” take place. I argue that these challenges strikingly resemble, in both their risks and their rewards, the interventions made by poststructuralist feminist writers such as Cixous and Irigaray.

THAT’S JUST THE WAY SHE TALKS?

Lurie’s novels demonstrate that differences of gender, class, age and nationality are mediated in language, or discursively produced. In her first, *Love and Friendship*, it is class differences that are initially most apparent. The heroine, Emily Stockwell Turner has married “beneath” her. Independently wealthy, privately educated, and privileged in every sense apart from her gender, Emily has, in the opinion of her socially inferior husband, Holman, acquired a “finishing school” voice. He has persuaded her to avoid certain expressions, but admits “he could do nothing about the tone” (12). Lurie cleverly suggests the impact of Emmy’s superior class position through the way the niceties of her particular linguistic habits affect her relationship with her husband and others around her. Lucy Green, a peripheral character struggling to exist on her husband’s junior academic salary, resents Emmy’s wealth and class and the advantages these can buy. This resentment is expressed in the form of critical comments about Emmy’s “stage English” accent and her expensive Saks Fifth Avenue coat (132). Lucy “reads” the language of Emmy’s clothes in the most basic way, by assessing their price, and she also interprets Emmy’s accent as indicative of her privileged background and patronising personality. Her husband Charley, however, resists the idea that language can be interpreted at all by saying “that’s just the way she talks” (132).

In *The War Between the Tates* language differences between the characters are less a consequence of class than of age. Erica Tate finds that her children no longer speak her language; indeed they often refuse to communicate with her at all. The opening scene of the novel shows her teenage son and daughter ignoring her remark about the beginning of Spring. Wendy Gahaghan, the graduate student with whom her husband Brian is having an affair, is defined by the language of seventies “alternative” youth culture. When discussing Brian’s book on American foreign policy with Erica, Wendy remarks:

‘if The Book is published in time, and the right people in Washington read it, it’s going to really zap them. And that could have a fantastic effect, you know? Like once they realise what happened before, they could reverse their strategy, and stop trashing the rest of the world’. (107)

Wendy’s discourse is cleverly juxtaposed with that of the “people in Washington”. The linguistic “age gap” in the novel is made concrete by the contrast between the university and the Krishna bookshop, where the book titles represent to Brian the recurrence of “lies, superstition, fear” (92). In contrast, Brian relies on rationality, logic and sequential rather than lateral thinking and argument.



In *Foreign Affairs* Lurie's focus shifts to the linguistic differences between American and English cultures. Her two central characters, Vinnie Miner and Fred Turner, whose intersected narratives occupy the novel, are American academics on sabbatical in London. Vinnie, the anglophile relishing the chance to spend time in England, encounters Chuck Mumpson, a florid middle-American sanitary engineer who dresses like a cowboy, on the plane. "Misled by her New England accent and academic intonation" (17) he (flatteringly in Vinnie's estimation) thinks she is English. This initial linguistic misjudgement, reluctantly corrected by Vinnie, prompts the conversation that begins their subsequent relationship. Vinnie's judgements of Chuck are based similarly on language use: hailed in Fortnum's by "a much less refined, —in fact, blaringly mid-American" voice (65), Vinnie terms Chuck "a person without inner resources who splits infinitives" (68). Clearly, the contrast between these two characters is established initially in terms of their superficial judgements about national characteristics as perceived in language: Chuck thinks Vinnie is typically English and she thinks he is typically American. It is not surprising that such judgements have to be reassessed as the novel progresses.

The other plot in the novel, concerning Fred Turner and his relationship with Lady Rosemary Radley, a television actress, confirms more conventional English and American stereotypes. Lady Rosemary's typically English appearance, television roles, and linguistic tics such as extravagant compliments and tinkling laughter are contrasted with Fred Turner's stolid American sincerity, reliability and straightforwardness, epitomised by the phrase "brave handsome yankee lad" (28), which a doctor used to describe him as a boy. Fred's opinion of England and London fluctuates, although at bottom it can be summarised in his comparison of the game of charades as it is played in England and America. The American version "rewards speed and individual achievement, and encourages frantic attempts to communicate with compatriots who literally or metaphorically don't speak your language"; the traditional English version "combines verbal ingenuity, in-group loyalty and cooperation, love of elaborate public performance, and private childishness" (93). What alters in the novel is Fred's relative estimation of these sets of qualities.

In these three novels, then, the most immediate way of identifying language differences shifts from class, to age, to nationality. This development constructs a particular version of the *Zeitgeist* of the specific decades in which the novels were written and published. Malcolm Bradbury remarks of her novels that they "collectively form a biting record of American social, moral and sexual mores from the early 1960s... to the present" (6). One obvious gap or absence is the issue of race, which suggests the ways in which the white and middle-class world represented in her texts has traditionally perceived itself as racially "unmarked". However, it can be clearly established that gender difference remains the most consistent factor in all three novels' discussion of the relationship between language and power. The academic world represents, for Lurie, what might be understood in Lacanian terms as a "symbolic order", which is hierarchical, competitive and most obviously patriarchal: "It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law" (67).



ESSENTIAL EXCLUSION

For Lacan, entering into the symbolic order is a necessity for the acquisition of subjectivity, language and the creation of desire.

No one is supposed to be ignorant of the law; this somewhat humorous formula taken direct from our Code of Justice nevertheless expresses the truth in which our experience is grounded, and which our experience confirms. No man is actually ignorant of it, since the law of man has been the law of language since the first words of recognition presided over the first gifts. (61)

Women do enter the symbolic order, but they do so only by losing their *différence* from men. In poststructuralist feminist terms women's difference is excluded from the symbolic order because their otherness is essential to its maintenance: in other words, the rejection of the (m)other is what allows the subject to assume his privileged place in the symbolic. As Cixous suggests: "writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy... this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never *her* turn to speak" (249).

What could be termed woman's "essential exclusion" (Watkins 99) is most apparent in academia in its specialist language. As Newman suggests, *Love and Friendship* "emphasizes the mythic substructures and archaic practices of the academic community, and by extension of society at large" (*Alison* 36). This is most apparent in Emmy's battle to understand the Humanities course that her husband teaches. John Stark, writing about this aspect of the novel, comments:

The third perspective on the action, a humanities course required of all freshman [sic] does not quite come off. It has something to do with dissolving preconceptions and forcing students to construct their own ethics, but its goals, and their relations to the novel's plots and themes, never become totally clear. (3)

I would argue that the Hum C course is clearly at the centre of the novel. When explained to the reader, it is described as "a course in semantics based on positivist and operationalist principles" (14). However, the narrator makes clear that the methods used when teaching the course are intended to obscure in order to distinguish and exclude. The Socratic method is termed "mean"; no one is allowed to tell students the basic principles of the course: "it was believed that the students had to learn the truth themselves in terms of their own experience" (14). Freshmen are "compelled" to take it; instructors "compelled" to teach it; their academic futures depending on "how quickly they caught on". Holman Turner enjoys teaching the course because it allows him to ask the questions instead of answering them. However, he is unable to discover the power politics operating around the Hum C course and the Literature division in which he works, which is indicative of the fact that the obfuscation operates at all levels. At a low point in the hierarchy himself, he takes the weekly Hum C assignments home for Emmy, thus reassuring himself that he is at least on the inside of the symbolic order with the possibility of progres-



sion, even if he is currently rather insignificant in it. Emmy is not, as Holman thinks, unable to understand the abstract ideas in the assignment, but instead *unwilling* to do so. She is reluctant to accept that all that the course consists of is a “stupid word game” (16). Holman’s definitions of femininity are reassured by the experience of teaching Emmy the Hum C course:

She would always want to see every idea from an emotional point of view, if possible, as an emotion; the class of things that had no connection with feeling did not interest her. He did not mind —women should be that way. (49)

Emmy’s exclusion from the academic world is also made apparent when she tries unsuccessfully to interfere in it. When a colleague of Holman’s, whose wife is a friend of Emmy’s, is in danger of losing his position, Emmy decides to ask her father, a college trustee, to intervene. She asks him to have a quiet word with the relevant person. Emmy is here using her class privileges to try and affect events. What she has not realised is that gender is in this instance a more important factor. Her father replies: “Convers College can take care of itself” and later “I let Charley King [the College president] run his business and he lets me run mine” (98). It is impossible for her father to intervene in college power politics for merely personal reasons. Emmy has failed to understand the point that it is crucial to the operation of the symbolic order that femininity be excluded from it. This is apparent to the reader when Emmy resists Holman’s attempt to prevent her from speaking to her father:

‘You want me to leave Convers alone, even if the Fenns’ life is ruined, because it all belongs to you, and women and wives mustn’t go near it, or know anything about it, they must just stay in their place outside.’ (91)

Emmy learns by bitter experience the truth and wider application of these remarks: even her father will not contravene this unwritten rule. Provoked by her incapacity to affect the world of academia, Emmy embarks on an affair. Clearly because she has no power to act as a woman within the symbolic order or public sphere she determines instead to act within the private sphere of emotion assigned to her. The affair thus provides the illusion of the power to act subversively when in fact it does little more than confirm Emmy’s position in the domestic and personal realm.

In *The War Between the Tates* Lurie focuses more closely on the ways in which the symbolic order functions and maintains itself at particular historical moments. She considers the question of the value and purpose of domestic labour, demonstrating that by operating in the domestic, feminised environment women actually maintain the fabric of the public sphere.¹ She traces Brian’s views about

¹ See the chapters in the section entitled “Towards Marxist Feminism” in Hamilton and Barrett, which all consider the domestic labour debate.



different “spheres of operation” for men and women back to nineteenth-century discourses about the sanctity of the feminised private sphere and its “angel in the house”,² which were derived, as Barrett argues, from distinctions between work in and outside the home that developed much earlier alongside capitalism and industrialisation (176-186). She also echoes the influential work of Betty Friedan (1963) in her demonstration of how these ideologies were being recapitulated in mid-twentieth-century US culture.³ Brian Tate believes in “the doctrine of separate spheres, both in national and domestic matters... he would not question her [Erica’s] management of the home, nor would she ever try to intervene in his professional life” (5). As in *Love and Friendship* Brian resists Erica’s involvement with the university. He discourages her from accepting a part-time research post by invoking the “honorific or divine title” of “The Children” and Erica’s responsibilities to them (63). Throughout the novel we see examples of the language of warfare between opposing “sides” or “areas” used to explain the way that Brian and Erica think of their relationship. To choose only the most striking examples, at one point their sex life is described in terms of Brian’s “invasion” and “occupation” of Erica, with the occasional “victory” for Erica when “she was able to hold back the invading troops for so long that...they discharged all their artillery at the frontier” (57). Elsewhere in the novel Brian draws an explicit and lengthy parallel between events in his own house and the Vietnam War (78-80). Judie Newman (1990 and 2000) has discussed the interpenetration in the novel of the marital conflict between Brian and Erica and the Vietnam War. Although such language is most frequently associated with Brian it is obvious that these warlike figures of speech have “rubbed off” on Erica. When Brian tells Erica that Wendy is not her concern she replies: “I don’t agree that it’s not my concern... That’s what the “Good Germans” said” (141).

THE LOGIC OF THE SAME

In *Foreign Affairs*, the heroine is no longer the wife of an academic but an academic herself. This is obviously an extremely significant development. Professor Vinnie Miner appears to be the first of Lurie’s heroines who is not excluded from academia. However, this assertion has to be qualified. As the narrator tells us:

the truth is that children’s literature is a poor relation in her department... a step-daughter grudgingly tolerated because, as in the old tales, her words are glittering jewels of a sort that attract large, if not equally brilliant masses of undergraduates. Within the departmental family she sits in the chimney-corner, while her idle, ugly siblings dine at the chairman’s table. (4)

² See Coventry Patmore’s 1854-62 poem of the same name.

³ See Watkins (31-54) for a consideration of *The War Between the Tates* in relation to Friedan’s work.

Vinnie is the Cinderella of her department. This is an appropriate metaphor for her specialism's lack of prestige, which arises from its association with women and children. In contrast, Fred's specialism is an advantage, because, as we are told "good candidates are scarce" in eighteenth-century literature (61). Fred's particular interest in the work of John Gay is also associated with patriarchal power. At one point he wonders if he could be compared with Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera*, who seduces and then deserts both his wife and mistress, but is finally saved by a happy ending (256). The "poor relation" metaphor for children's literature also suggests the elderly spinster of Jane Austen's novels who must be tolerated and endured and who never marries the handsome hero. Indeed, Vinnie's academic career is seen to be, to some degree, a compensatory one. Unattractive and unloved, Vinnie dreams of academic recognition in place of romance:

It annoys Vinnie that she is enough a woman of her generation to be rather ashamed of these imaginings when fully awake... But Vinnie has been brought up to believe that though a man may work for wealth or fame, a woman must labor for love —if not that of a husband or children, at least that of a profession. (111)

Vinnie's career must be a vocation if she has one at all. In these ways Lurie implies that Vinnie is only a part of academia on sufferance or as a substitute for more conventionally feminine pursuits.

Lurie's analysis of Vinnie's position suggests, therefore, that women have to occupy the symbolic order in ways that are patriarchally defined. In other words, if repudiation of the feminised "other" maintains the symbolic, women have to become the "same" as men to occupy the symbolic order at all. Her thinking here echoes Luce Irigaray's analysis of the "logic of the same." By positioning woman as the inferior copy or opposite of man she is actually constructed in the same terms: the same because always centred on the presence or absence of the phallus: "Listen: all round us, men and women sound just the same. The same discussions, the same arguments, the same scenes. The same attractions and separations. The same difficulties, the same impossibility of making connections. The same... Same... Always the same" (*This Sex* 205).

It is the extent of Vinnie's lack of "sameness" that is used to distinguish her from her male peers. Lurie clearly indicates the degree to which moves to discredit Vinnie's academic reputation are made in patriarchal language. On the plane to London, Vinnie reads in the *Atlantic* magazine "a scornful and disparaging reference to her life's work" asking "Do we really need a scholarly study of playground doggerel?" (3). The attack, by L.D. Zimmern (unknown to Vinnie but known to any reader of Lurie's novels) rejects the notion that there could be anything of value in the sayings of children. It is particularly disturbing to Vinnie because the *Atlantic* is one of her favourite magazines, where she has fantasised that her work will be lauded. She imagines (in a somewhat paranoid manner), the magazine and its negative review being read by friends and colleagues and designs a reply in her head which will never be sent because "in academic life it was considered weak and undignified to complain of your reviews" (6). However, Vinnie's research grant is

not renewed. In a letter from an acquaintance on the committee Vinnie hears that Zimmern was another member, and that “lots of people consider his remarks about you in the *Atlantic* most unfair” (152-3). While it may seem preposterous to imply that a review in a magazine like the *Atlantic* could affect the outcome of a research committee’s deliberations, Lurie makes the broader point that academic reputations can depend on reviews (usually in more scholarly contexts) and therefore, on patriarchal language.

IS THERE NOTHING OUTSIDE THE TEXT?

The three Lurie novels examined here, therefore all suggest the complex ways in which language and gender intersect to exclude women from the symbolic order, as it is embodied, in her fiction, by the Academy. The simultaneous “othering” and “saming” of woman is clearly seen to operate through language. This is apparent in the Hum C course in *Love and Friendship*, the language of warfare and separate spheres in *The War Between the Tates*, and the vitriolic review, circulating around the community of scholars in *Foreign Affairs*. Do Lurie’s novels therefore suggest, like Derrida, that “there is nothing outside the text” (163)? In *Love and Friendship* the basic principle of the Hum C course might *appear* to endorse this view: “The meaning of this word (or line) depends on the other words (or lines) which surround it at the time I use it” (14). Later Emmy summarises the course as follows: “After all, in Hum C terms, an experience or emotion which could not be communicated to anyone was meaningless” (209). Language constructs and shapes reality. The central tenets of the Hum C course, then, could be read as an endorsement of a Derridean principle of *differance*.

In *The War Between the Tates* Lurie also demonstrates clearly the textual or discursive construction of subjectivity. Erica experiences intense fluctuations in her conception of her own identity as a consequence of her discovery of Brian’s affair. When she initially finds the letter from Wendy and tackles Brian, he denies that the relationship meant anything, which is, to Erica, the “wrong excuse... the wife who is betrayed for a grand passion retains some of her dignity. Pale-faced and silent, or even storming and wailing as in classical drama, she has a tragic authority” (45). Instead of taking a place in the discourse of tragic drama queen, Erica is forced to occupy the comic role of “typical wife of a casually unfaithful husband: jealous and shrewish and unforgiving” (45). That both are merely roles, suggesting what Newman had termed “dramaturgical” concepts of identity (*Alison* 143) is underlined by the dramatic simile that follows: “It was like being on stage... the scenery alters behind the actors... the villagers have not moved, but now they appear awkward, small, and overdressed against the new backdrop of mountains and ruins” (45). Positioned by clichés about adultery, Erica realises that “identity is at the mercy of circumstances, of other people’s actions” (45), but it is also at the mercy of the discourses by which those actions are interpreted. This “reading” of Erica continues throughout the novel: she figures as a bad mother, a deserted wife, a woman who becomes sexually available to men because of this desertion. None of these discourses finally fits or



persists until the most enduring one —the wife of Brian— is restored. Other characters fluctuate similarly in the novel. Wendy coalesces into one figure after appearing to be three to Erica. Brian occupies the positions of radical supporter of women's causes and typical misogynist (in the pages of the *New York Times*) simultaneously.

Foreign Affairs equally appears to imply the inescapability of textuality. Vinnie and Fred initially interpret Chuck and Rosemary, the people with whom they become romantically involved intertextually, in terms of literary characters associated with their own research specialisms. It is Vinnie's interest in folklore that provokes her involvement with Chuck, who tells her the story of his ancestor, the Hermit of Southley. Vinnie advises him on how to research this figure, but Chuck's desire to uncover aristocratic relations to compete with his wife's waspish family background proves fruitless. Fred Turner's attraction to Rosemary Radley is also literary: specifically, she reminds him of the heroines of eighteenth-century novels as well as women in eighteenth-century paintings. Later she begins to seem like "one of James' beautiful, worldly, corrupt European villainesses" (194). Allusions to the novels of Henry James are important in establishing the transatlantic or "international" theme of the differences between American and English or European cultures. They also demonstrate the extent to which the two central characters are steeped in the language of their respective fields of study. Not only does this language affect their perceptions of the people around them and the relationships they form, it "scripts" them in patriarchal terms, suggesting, as Julia Kristeva would argue, the inevitability of the novel genre's (and the subject's) formation by multiple systems of pre-existing signs (*Revolution* 59-60; *Desire* 37).

TEXTUALITY IS MATERIAL: WRITING THE BODY

However, Lurie's texts resemble those of poststructuralist feminism more than poststructuralism per se. While she clearly suggests that materiality is textually or discursively constructed and uses deconstructive strategies to attack patriarchal discourses, her work also offers a *reconstructive* strategy, which moves beyond these insights. Like Cixous, Irigaray and, to a more qualified extent, Julia Kristeva, Lurie suggests the importance of the related (if opposed) insight that textuality is material. "Writing the body" is an important strategy for inscribing women's real difference into culture: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing... Woman must put herself into the text" (Cixous 244). Both Cixous and Irigaray use the risky strategy of deploying essentialist language about the female body in order to remind us of the physicality of language: "There is no need for blood shed, between us. No need for a wound to remind us that blood exists. It flows within us, from us. Blood is familiar, close. You are all red. And so very white. Both at once" (*This Sex* 206-7). They attempt to write a language of the female body that genuinely acknowledges female difference, even though they are aware of that project's near impossibility, given [to twist Dale Spender (1985)] the "man-made" nature of language in the symbolic order. The "utopian" aspects of this





project are referred to by Whitford in her discussion of Irigaray as valuable ways of discussing and diagnosing patriarchy (15-17). Similarly, Newman also situates Lurie in a partial, ironic relation to American utopianism (*Alison* 7-8).

In a number of key scenes involving women characters, Lurie allows the female body insistently and insidiously to attempt a rewriting of patriarchal language. In the first scene, from *Love and Friendship*, the male members of the Literature division debate the Hum C course and its principles at a party. While they get to grips with philosophical and theoretical issues, Lucy Green, the wife of one of the group, exhausted by her late pregnancy, demands to be taken home, interrupting the conversation by leaning her heavy stomach against her husband. In the second scene Emmy, who has just made love with Will, feels as if “No one knows about this but me, so maybe it isn’t really happening... like Hum C, if you don’t express it, does it exist?” (157). The discussion pauses temporarily while Emmy touches Will and remarks that he feels warm. They make love again. As Newman remarks, the novel “exposes the male language game, with its pretensions to privileged truth, and idealistic moral content, to experience – and finds it decidedly wanting” (*Alison* 35-6).

In *The War between the Tates* Brian’s affair with Wendy causes a blurring (albeit temporary) of the distinctions between their separate spheres. The affair directly impinges on both Brian’s professional and personal lives; in fact (in deconstructive terms) Wendy appears to be the “supplement” (Derrida 141-64), which causes the distinction between them to collapse. Brian is forced to move out of the family home temporarily and live with Wendy, becoming informal adviser to her friends and recommending courses of political protest and action against one of his own blatantly chauvinist colleagues that lead to the final debacle of the novel. It is certainly significant, in terms of a poststructuralist feminist analysis, that it is Wendy’s pregnancy with Brian’s child that threatens his marriage, when Erica decides to support and help Wendy in a gesture of female solidarity. In a lengthy extended metaphor, the frying eggs Erica cooks for Wendy become her unborn child: “the golden, nourishing domed yolks, quiver against each other and come to rest, surrounded by the thin, gluey, viscous whites, like semen” (124-5); “the eggs are swelling and congealing in the frying pan; Wendy is pregnant” (125). That there is something fundamental about pregnancy and maternity is suggested in the way that Erica joins with Wendy against Brian to protect the child. This is also apparent in Wendy’s understanding, later in the novel, that in comparison with a partner, she would never be able to desert her own child, because “I’ll always belong to him completely” (300). Cixous and Irigaray similarly prioritise the inscription of the maternal relation in the symbolic. As Cixous suggests: “a woman is never far from ‘mother’... There is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink” (251). Irigaray also insists:

We also need to find, rediscover, invent the words, the sentences that speak of the most ancient and most current relationship we know —the relationship to the mother’s body, to our body— sentences that translate the bond between our body, her body, the body of our daughter. We need to discover a language that is not a

substitute for the experience of *corps-a-corps* as the paternal language seeks to be, but which accompanies that bodily experience, clothing it in words that do not erase the body but speak the body. (*Sexes* 18-19)

In *Foreign Affairs* patriarchal discourse is interrogated in ways that echo Irigaray's work on the possibilities for re-imagining femininity occasioned by a new "ethics of sexual difference" (1993). As we have seen, to reimagine woman as more than man's lack, absence or (m)other entails for Irigaray an acknowledgement of woman in her own terms, as *different* rather than *other*. Recently she has become interested in the "wonder", rather than desire, that could be generated between men and women if their real difference from each other was celebrated rather than collapsed:

This feeling of surprise, astonishment, and wonder in the face of the unknowable ought to be returned to its locus: that of sexual difference. The passions have either been repressed, stifled, or reduced, or reserved for God. Sometimes a space for wonder is left to works of art. But it is never found to reside in this locus: *between man and woman*. Into this place came attraction, greed, possession, consummation, disgust, and so on. But not that wonder which beholds what it sees always as if for the first time, never taking hold of the other as its object. It does not try to seize, possess, or reduce this object, but leaves it subjective, still free. This has never existed between the sexes since wonder maintains their autonomy within their statutory difference, keeping a space of freedom and attraction between them, a possibility of separation and alliance. (*Ethics* 12-13)

It is love (though not sex as the narrator is at pains to point out) with which Vinnie is unfamiliar, and it is this she encounters in the novel. Vinnie's nascent love for Chuck (whom she originally found repulsive) arises from the acknowledgement of his real *difference*, which has life-changing effects on her own personality and ethical position: usually selfish Vinnie makes the generous effort to struggle up to Hampstead Heath at dead of night to give Fred Turner a message from his wife which has the effect of saving their marriage. As she says: "Something has changed... She isn't the same person she was: she has loved and been loved" (278). She asks: "Why shouldn't she imagine herself standing on the edge of some landscape as yet unmapped by literature: interested, even excited, ready to be surprised" (199). The suggestion of freedom from "overdetermination" by literary sources is equated with the "wondrous" freedoms occasioned by exploring previously uncharted territory.

CULTURE IS TEXTUALITY

What these key scenes suggest is that women characters resist patriarchal logic by asserting the value of the body, maternity, love and sensation. This may appear to endorse the association of women with the sensual and emotional spheres, to represent her as the "other" to the academic, logical, reasonable beliefs about the textuality of the material. However, it does so as an attempt, albeit a risky one, not

merely to *remind* the symbolic order of how it functions but also to instate female difference and *jouissance* within it. As in the key texts of Cixous and Irigaray, it is through pregnancy, maternity and sexual difference rather than otherness that such a rewriting possibly takes place. However, it is noteworthy that these interrogations are temporary: by the end of each novel they have failed to offer a lasting alternative to the patriarchal symbolic order of academia. The realist surface of Lurie's novel is, equally, never more than very superficially challenged by the linguistic and narrative experimentation that Cixous, for example, associates with 'écriture féminine'. Indeed, Cixous argues that novelists, unlike poets, are inevitably "allies of representationalism" (250), although she includes novelists Colette, Marguerite Duras and Jean Genet as examples of 'feminine' writing (248). As *Love and Friendship* moves towards its close Emmy feels that her relationship with Will might as well not have happened because no one else acknowledges or discusses it. She feels "as if big sections of her life were being crossed out and thrown away" (209). By the end of the novel Emmy and Holman are back together and the status quo has been reasserted. To all intents and purposes the temporary feminine "challenge" to Hum C logic has been thwarted and revealed to be mistaken. Equally, *The War between the Tates* concludes with the Tates' marriage reaching a *détente*. The solidarity Erica finds with Wendy and her friend Danielle, which was based on Wendy's pregnancy, turns out to be illusory when Danielle remarries and Wendy moves in with Brian, has an abortion, gets pregnant again by someone else, and leaves for a commune.

Foreign Affairs also demonstrates that Vinnie has a murkier personal ethics than her vivifying, if impermanent, relationship with Chuck implies. Vinnie's experience when recording playground chants has the potential to destroy her long-held theory about the differences between English and American rhymes. This theory is, in itself, an Anglophile one: "the British texts do tend to be older... they are also more literary. The American rhymes are newer, cruder, less lyrical and poetic" (102). Vinnie's thesis is contradicted by the crudity and vulgarity of the rhymes she is told by a little girl called Mary Maloney, who demands payment in return for them. Aware that "a few more of these and her theory... will be down the tube" (107-8), Vinnie decides not to record any more of Mary's rhymes. Although she tries to justify this decision to herself in various ways, it is obvious that Vinnie sacrifices objectivity when collecting research material to the demands of her preconceived theory. She twists language to make it construct a version of childhood that is amenable to her anglophile way of thinking. Chuck's reading of her as "a good woman" (174) is arguably temporary.

She is not alone in being self-interested, however. Fred reads Lady Rosemary as a typical English rose but discovers that she is simultaneously Mrs Harris, the cockney charlady. Rosemary, a "flagrantly fictional woman" (Glendinning 44), develops the personality of Mrs Harris from imagining the language of a "typical" Cockney cleaning woman: "Rosemary slides into stage Cockney — 'and 'er dawg's worms and 'er cat's fleas and 'er budgie's molt, ooh, the pore dear, 'e's losin' 'is feathers somethin' awful'" (114). It is Mrs Harris's choice sayings that define her, just as Rosemary's apparently "real" personality is eerily close to that of the role she plays on television. As Glendinning also comments: "The grotesque extent to which



Lady Rosemary herself is as much a “dramatic construct” as the roles she plays on TV comes as a shock to Fred—but not to this reader” (44). It is as if, as Newman suggests: “there can be no real return to nature, not to some primary state of child-like [or feminine] innocence of language and culture. Culture is textuality” (*Alison* 159). In other words, Lurie’s novels could be seen to offer a rather bleak critique of the idea that it is possible to challenge or rewrite patriarchal language. Like the work of Cixous and Irigaray, her fiction demonstrates the risks of an argument that constructs femininity as exterior to a monolithic and almost impervious symbolic order. For Lurie, writing and speaking means accepting the dominance of patriarchal law both conceptually and also creatively, in terms of her commitment to realism. *Foreign Affairs* therefore concludes with the success, professionally and romantically, of Fred, not Vinnie. He is described, resignedly, as “an example of Entitlement Psychology: he has been brought up to get, and think he deserves, all the good things of this world” (50). Fred is the son of Holman and Emily Turner in *Love and Friendship*, and certainly the same confidence, based on looks, money and class, is apparent in him as it was in his mother. Unlike her, however, he also has the advantage of being a man. Securely part of the symbolic order, Fred can have it all: a career, a wife, a mistress while he is in England, and never come unstuck. The only minor inconvenience he endures is the unwanted attentions of his lovestruck students.

THE SENSE OF AN ENDING?

The reader may well reach the end of the Lurie novels examined here with a sense of frustration at their seemingly inescapable pressure towards closure and the restoration of conservative norms. Feminist theorists and critics have expressed similar concerns about the most influential ideas of Cixous and Irigaray, which arguably position feminine identity and writing as no more than a utopian possibility.⁴ More recently, writers and critics have begun to see gender identity as a more flexible process or performance capable of disrupting patriarchal systems of power and language.⁵ Lurie’s stance is not, however, merely a consequence of the period in which the novels examined here were written and set. After a decade’s break, Lurie’s 1998 novel, *The Last Resort*, exactly resembles her earlier work in its final containment of challenges to convention. The novel’s heroine, Jenny Walker, stays with her elderly husband out of pity and begins to drift away from her female lover, Lee Weiss. Similarly, Irigaray’s latest book, *The Way of Love* (2002), like *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993) focuses on the differences between the sexes as fundamentally inescapable in the analysis of language.

⁴ See for example the chapters on Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray in Moi.

⁵ See for example the work of Judith Butler (*Gender and Bodies*).



Despite this rather negative conclusion, I would suggest that, to recast Frank Kermode (1967), the “sense of an ending” must be considered. If poststructuralist feminist theory tells us anything, it tells us to be suspicious of phallogocentric, or phallogocentric thinking: linear, or phallic readings are not the only ones. This would mean that, rather than focusing on the conclusions of Lurie’s novels, where challenges tend to be contained, we should instead read more *synchronically*. Such a reading against the grain, which this article has attempted, would pay attention to the significant parts of the novels where the primacy of patriarchal language in the symbolic is challenged by a writing of the female body into the text and the deployment of a new “ethics of eros” (Chanter). *The Last Resort* for example, concludes with an invocation to focus on the present moment and not the past or future: ‘Lee remembered something she had read once, that as you grow older and the future shrinks, you have only two choices: you can live in the fading past, or, like children do, in the bright full present’ (253). Instead of thinking about Jenny’s renewed loyalty to her husband, she imagines the moments when she will be with her at night as a sensuous epiphany fusing beautiful scenery with sexual exploration. If we pay careful attention to such moments and their implications it becomes clear that those critics who dismiss Lurie’s work as merely entertaining “campus fiction” or see it only as stirring the dying embers of the Anglo-American realist tradition are missing out. In fact, her work offers a sustained exploration of the place of the feminine in the symbolic order, as it is represented by academia. It also interrogates the tenets of poststructuralist theory from a gendered perspective, in order to inquire further into the relationship between the textual, the sexual and the material.

I would like to thank Mary Eagleton for her detailed comments on an earlier version of this article. It was also given as a paper in the Autumn 2002 Cultural Studies Seminar Series at Leeds Metropolitan University where it provoked extremely helpful comments from Louise Jackson, Tom Herron, Jago Morrison and Christine Bousfield. I would also like to thank Professor Merritt Moseley, of the University of North Carolina at Asheville for first interesting me in the work of Alison Lurie.



WORKS CITED

- BARRETT, Michele. *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist Feminist Encounter*. London: Verso, 1988.
- BRADBURY, Malcolm. "The Paleface Professor." *The Times* 19 (Jan.1985): 6.
- BUTLER, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* London: Routledge, 1993.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- CHANTER, Tina. *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- CIXOUS, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*. Ed. Elaine Marks & I. de Courtivron. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981.
- DERRIDA, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- GLENDINNING, Victoria. "In Love with London." *Sunday Times* 20 (Jan. 1985): 44.
- HAMILTON, Roberta & Michele BARRETT. *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1986.
- IRIGARAY, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. London: The Athlone, 1993
- . *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
- . *Sexes and Genealogies*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.
- . *The Way of Love*. London: Continuum, 2002.
- JACKSON, David. "An Interview with Alison Lurie." *Shenandoah: The Washington and Lee University Review* 31 (1980): 15-27.
- KERMODE, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending*. London: Oxford UP, 1967.
- KRISTEVA, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.
- . *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia UP, 1984.
- KRUSE, Horst. "Museums and Manners: The Novels of Alison Lurie." *Anglia: Zeitschrift für Englische Philologie* 3-4 (1993): 410-38.
- LACAN, Jacques. *Ecrits: A Selection*. London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1977.
- LURIE, Alison. *Foreign Affairs*. 1984. London: Abacus, 1993.
- . *The Last Resort*. 1998. London: Vintage, 1999.
- . *Love and Friendship*. 1962. London: Abacus, 1993.
- . *The War Between the Tates*. 1974. London: Abacus, 1993.
- MOI, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Routledge, 1985.



- NEWMAN, Judie. "Sexual and Civil Conflicts: *The War Between the Tates*." *University Fiction*. Ed. David Bevan. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990. 103-22.
- . *Alison Lurie: A Critical Study*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000.
- PATMORE, Coventry. *The Angel in the House*. Online. <<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=4099>>
- SHONE, Tom. "Textual Intercourse." *The Modern Review* (Oct.-Nov.1992): 6.
- SPENDER, Dale. *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge, 1985.
- STARK, John. "Alison Lurie's Career." *The Hollins Critic* 26 (1989): 1-8.
- WATKINS, Susan. *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists: Feminist Theory into Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.
- WHITFORD, Margaret. *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*. London: Routledge, 1991.

