

Musical Voices: Women's Music in Canada as "Situated Knowledges"

by Joanne Nonnekes

Music allows us to grieve together, to laugh together, to cry together, to grow together.

Heather Bishop

Music is one important cultural medium in which issues relevant to a particular time are explored. It is a popular medium which allows for exploration in a very personal and contextual way. This paper explores the music of five Canadian singer-songwriters from a socialist feminist perspective, as defined by Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding. I spent the summer of 1990 attending several folk festivals in Southern Ontario and one in Michigan, listening to the music of, and interviewing, five Canadian women singer-songwriters: Heather Bishop, Faith Nolan, Marie-Lynn Hammond, Connie Kaldor, and Susan Belyea.¹ My objectives included looking at the ways in which their music acted as a means for social change and looking at how the issues they dealt with reflected, described and created new kinds of knowledge based on their particular historical experiences. I use the theory of Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway to interpret these expressions of the lives of women because I think it sheds light on how women's music, as a cultural form, is different from traditional folk music, and creates an everyday knowledge of the experiences of women in Canadian society. Underlying this research is an exploration of the ways in which social change around relationships of domination are prevalent in a patriarchal society.

While I find ecofeminist literature very fascinating, and very important in critiques of Western relationships with the natural environment, I find some inherent flaws in the assumptions of the "natural" connection between women and nature. However, rather than delve into my critiques of ecofeminism, I wish to present the theories or critiques of ecofeminism that came more from the area of socialist feminist literature and critiques of science. Feminist critiques by Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway hold a creative and transforming vision of knowledge creation which involves localizing knowledge, speaking from an experiential rather than a scientific perspective, and embodying objectivity, where there is a relationship between knowing and being. This paper explores pieces of their work which elucidate the ways

in which social change might be possible in the relationship between human and non-human nature and other relationships of social domination. I use the concepts of "fractured identities" and "partial perspectives" as presented by these authors, to look at the ways in which women's music in Canada is a vehicle for social change around some of these issues. I attempt to show the ways in which I feel Canadian women singer-songwriters are reinventing the world. They speak out of their own experience and within a particular historical context, and challenge the assumptions in our society about gender, race, class, sexuality, and nature. Each woman addresses different issues depending on her particular experience of the world, speaking or 'seeing' from a particular perspective. In this way they expose and challenge assumptions, bring people together to share experiences, and create possibility for new realities.

Feminist postmodernism is one feminist epistemology that Sandra Harding elucidates in *The Science Question in Feminism*.² Along with "such intellectual movements as semiotics, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, structuralism, archaeology/genealogy, and nihilism"³ she says feminists are critical of universalizing claims "about the existence, nature, and powers of reason, progress, science, language and the subject/self."⁴ For Harding this approach involves rejecting appeals for a return to some kind of organic wholeness that ecofeminists may seek; instead she looks toward the many "fractured identities"⁵ of modern society (for example, black feminists, women of colour, socialist feminists). Her concern about this type of empiricism lies in whether or not we can

afford to give up the necessity of trying to provide "one, true, feminist story of reality" in the face of deep alliances between science and sexist, racist, classist and imperialist social projects.⁶

Harding is not seeking a solution to the dilemmas and tensions that are created by deconstructing science while at the same time attempting to create a successor science, or by the fractured identities that form the voice of feminism. Rather, she advocates using the tensions as a fruitful area for research. While this willingness to explore the tensions throws scientific objectivity out the

window, it allows for the possibility of creating a new definition for objectivity where

it is participatory values--antiracism, anticlassism, antisexism--that decrease the distortions and mystifications in our culture's explanations and understandings.

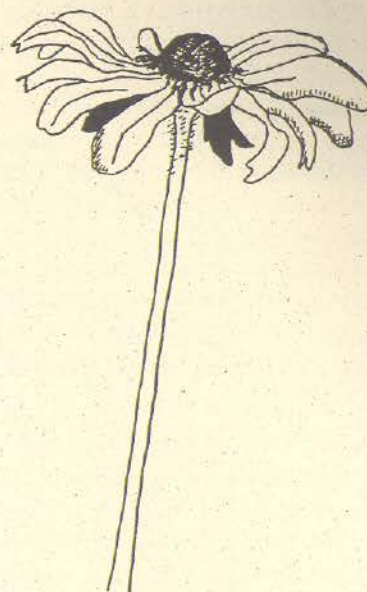
Similarly, in "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,"⁸ Donna Haraway talks about the struggles that feminists like herself have experienced in attempting to deconstruct the very powerful, androcentric, patriarchal science of our culture and advocates the need for a better account of the world. She agrees with Harding that the project involves more than just trying to show the bias in science and separating the bad science from the good, and it involves more than producing a feminist version of objectivity. We need:

simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.⁹

For both Harding and Haraway there is no one knowledge of how the world works; there is a multiplicity of knowledges which we should not attempt to reduce, while at the same time, there is a real world out there that is knowable. It is within these contradictions that feminists can find new metaphors to imagine the world; one medium for such imaging is taking place in the realm of women's music, explored later in this paper.

Haraway describes a feminist objectivity she calls 'situated knowledges.' For example, vision is a sensory system that is located within a body, or has a material and historical reality. Modern technology has produced a vast array of telescopes and microscopes and cameras where "all perspective gives way to infinitely mobile vision, which no longer seems just mythically about the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice."¹⁰ Insisting on the "embodiment" of all vision would allow the construction of a usable objectivity. This embodiment would involve locating our vision within mental and physical space and thus naming where we are.¹¹ Haraway calls this a 'partial perspective' which can lead to objective vision.

So, with many other feminists, I want to argue for a doctrine and practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing.¹²



What I find most exciting about Haraway's writing is that it provides the basis for knowledge creation which does not exclude or appropriate and which always involves a knower. In this sense it provides the possibility for a relationship between human and non-human nature which is not resource-based, nor necessarily based on a primal connection, but which can be explored and negotiated.

Both Harding and Haraway caution against looking for a unitary feminist politics. The scientific world view has attempted to universalize language and truth, preaching an objectivity and knowledge creation that is alienating and oppressive.

Yet there is another world hidden from the consciousness of science -- the world of emotions, feelings, political values; of the individual and collective unconscious; of social and historical particularity explored by novels, drama, poetry, music and art -- within which we all live most of our working and dreaming hours under constant threat of its increasing infusion by scientific rationality.¹³

In the next section I attempt to I explore one such world, the world of women's music in Canada. It is a world where the "emotions, feelings and political values" of each individual artist, within her own historical and material reality, are shared with the participating audience. I use the voices of the women, unaltered and for the most part unedited, in order to embody their perspective and give the reader a sense of who they are.

I interviewed Heather Bishop at the Home County Folk Festival in London, Ontario. Heather has been perform-

ing as a solo artist since 1976, singing folk and blues for adult audiences as well as telling stories and singing for children. She has produced five albums for adults and three for children. When I interviewed Heather Bishop, I was quite surprised at what a soft-spoken, gentle woman she was. On stage she is witty, exuberant, and can really belt out the blues with a strong voice. I was incredibly impressed with the care she took to answer all of my questions, and the thoughtful responses she gave. She obviously takes her work very seriously and yet also appears to have a lot of fun doing it.

Heather is a feminist who believes that music plays an important role in bringing women's issues into the public forum and in uplifting and supporting women working in the movement.

I'm a feminist because I'm a woman. It's from living my life that I became a feminist. It's from never having received equal pay for work of equal value. It's from seeing men get breaks that women didn't get...It's from watching friends get beaten by their husbands. It's from seeing men and women who have children not having daycare for them.¹⁴

Music for Heather is a way to talk about issues in public that otherwise might not get talked about. It's a way to challenge biases and assumptions and to energize people for the struggle of gaining equality for women:

I really think my music is an instrument for social change. I think what has been called women's music is very much an instrument for social change. Women's music is called women's music; it is the view of the world from women's eyes. When men sing about how they view the world through their eyes, it's not called men's music. And that's a political statement about what happens to us as women, our view of the world and how we think things should be done. I think that music is first of all very healing, secondly it's a way for us to address issues that are perhaps hard to talk about and hard to deal with, in a way that people can hear. Music allows us to grieve together, to laugh together, to cry together, to grow together. I know lots of people who have said to me how they take the music home and they play it over and over again when they're going through a hard time or they're trying to work through something. That says a lot to me about what that music can do for social change. Now if we could get the music on the radio, that would make a bigger difference.

Thus Heather's music gets used as a vehicle to identify and give expression to her audience's emotions and feelings.

Heather feels that as a feminist she must confront all issues of domination and oppression:

Well, I call myself a feminist. To me that means I confront racism, I confront sexism, I confront

homophobia, I confront environmental issues, I confront issues of class. It's a complete view of the world being a place based on equality among people. All people.

By confronting the issues in the "safe" environment of a concert, and doing so from a space of personal experience, Heather is helping to define new boundaries for what counts as knowledge. The audience can participate in the music by singing along, swaying to the melody, or identifying with a story of oppression, and through this participation, gain insight from an embodied perspective.

One of the issues Heather deals with is homophobia. She doesn't get on stage and preach at her audience, nor does she sing many songs about the prejudice in society against homosexuals. Rather, she sings songs which celebrate women's love for women. She can speak from this place because she is a lesbian and knows what it means. In her songs she attempts to help other people, people unfamiliar or uncomfortable with homosexuality, to see her love as being just as beautiful as that of heterosexuals. She also gives other lesbians the experience of celebrating their love, something they rarely have the opportunity to do. In an interview in *Hotwire* she points out a couple of ways in which she helps people face their prejudice. As she plays for very diverse audiences now, not just women's groups, she recognizes that not everyone attending the concert will be aware of her sexual preference. Rather than turning them off her music at the start because of their prejudice, she will wait until three quarters of the way through the show, when they have been completely charmed by her smooth blues and her wonderful entertainment style. Then she will sing a song like "I Found a Girl."

I decided that if by that time I had won their hearts and *then* did a song about being a lesbian and they all freaked out, then at least the problem would be theirs. They'd have to go home wondering how it could be that they really liked this person who was standing up there saying she was one of those horrible critters.¹⁵

Heather also feels that her children's music, which she loves to perform even to adult audiences, will eventually help heal the prejudice of homophobia. Children who listened to her music on the "Fred Penner Show" or who were treated to one of her children's concerts, and eventually find out she is a lesbian, may be more accepting, or at least question the prejudice against a woman they grew up listening to.¹⁶ She gives an embodied account of what it means to be a lesbian, taking responsibility for that knowledge and attacking the bias so prevalent in society against homosexuals.

One of the questions I asked Heather, and the other singer-songwriters, was whether they felt there was a difference between the music that was being written and performed by women in Canada, and the music that was

being written and sung by the larger folk community comprised mostly of men. I had perceived a difference myself and I wanted to see if Heather and the others also felt that they were representing a different voice.

The difference is that women's music represents the struggles of half of the population. And we're singing it to people who are a part of the other half, the half of the privileged, and it makes them uncomfortable. And they're also the half that are in power, and so they don't particularly want to want. For us to ask the male-run music industry from radio stations to record companies and down the line, to play music that challenges the privilege of the white male, they're going to laugh in our face. Unless it makes good dollar sense to them, that's the only time they change their mind. So it does put us in that position. But also, women's music is different because it comes from women. Women come from a lot more emotional, grounded, earth-centred, self-empowered place. And I think that's a place that I would hope that men could come from too. And I think that that's what men can learn from women's music: men have been so divorced from their emotional, self-empowered, grounded self that they need women's music just as much as we do. Because, you know, I have brothers that I love dearly, and I've watched what happened to them in their life, and I've seen them become divorced from the people that they are by a world that tries to make them into "men," which is a foreign concept that does not fit the human soul in my opinion. I think the healing that women represent and talk about is a universal healing.

I also appreciated Heather's recognition that the environmental crisis needs to be addressed quickly and more effectively than it is currently being addressed. Her recognition that it is the localized action of individuals that makes the most difference in the long run is consistent with the kind of politics Harding and Haraway explore. Although governments and multinationals need to change their policies towards, and abuses of, the natural environment, it is local political organizing around issues that affect people's daily lives that will create a willingness to acknowledge the natural environment as more than a resource for the appropriation of humans; the willingness to use the "vision" Haraway describes as "embodied" and to take responsibility for the relationship with the "other" that nature has become in Western culture in an attempt to change the relationship.

We've gotta move fast, we've gotta move far! I'm really happy to see it, you know, we've been talking about it for decades and now it's finally happening. The government of course, is dragging it's feet at a time when we can't afford to be dragging our feet at all. One of the things that makes me optimistic is that it's being put in the hands of children. I would like to take

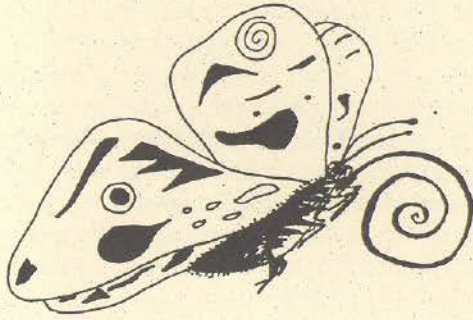
kids in the country and say "See this hole in the ground? This is a well. You drink that water. See this hole in the ground over here? That's where they pour all the waste and shit, and that comes out of the same ground that your drinking your water." Kids are not dumb. Give them the information that this earth feeds you. "See this seed, this is going to grow into corn and you're going to eat it." Give children the information and they're going to say "Hey wait a minute, I don't like the way this is being done." So that makes me feel optimistic that information is being turned over to the kids. I'm also optimistic that the environmental movement is growing in the way that it is. I'm also scared to death because I believe what people say, that there's only ten years to turn it around and that scares me to death.

Heather also lives her commitment to finding ways to live more relationally to the natural environment by building her own solar house complete with composting toilets. She and some women friends have built a small community near Woodmore, Manitoba.

I live with it by personally thinking about it in my life, what can I do? I think every single person makes a difference. So if I stop using styrofoam, if I recycle all my stuff. I live in a solar home that I built twelve years ago, I use a mulbank toilet in that home rather than a flush toilet, we have a compost bin, we recycle everything, we've done this for years. With the new environmental movement, I've learned some new things that I wasn't aware of that I could change. So every person has to do their part. People think, well what difference can I make? You make all the difference in the world. Each single person. And, as a person who has the privilege I do of speaking to many people. I have the ability then to reach a lot of people, year after year I just keep talking about Mother Earth; Mother Earth, she's our mother and she's dying. And if your biological mother was dying, you would go home to her, you would do everything you could to keep her alive. Well, our mother is dying, go home to her, and do everything you can to keep her alive.

Although Heather does have the tendency to essentialize, treat as natural or biological, the connection between women and nature by referring to the earth as "our mother," the imagery is nevertheless powerful and her politics on stage and her lifestyle, reflect the degree to which the human relationship to nature is socially influenced and constructed, and not only a natural connection. On stage she connects issues of domination from her life, and relates them to the bigger picture of social domination in a way which helps her audience to learn from her "partial perspective."

I also interviewed Faith Nolan at the Home County Folk Festival in London, Ontario. Faith hails from Nova Scotia and sings a variety of jazz, blues, folk and reggae



while playing slide guitar, harmonica and tambourine. She has produced three albums. Faith places an emphasis on history in her music, both in the sense that music has historically been an integral part of social movements in most cultures and in the telling of histories of those not always recognized by the dominant culture in order to keep the history alive and to encourage change.

I see myself as a cultural worker first. That's what I find most rewarding about music; the way it's able to influence culture to move forward. Growing up in the sixties during the civil rights movement, all those songs like "Old Freedom" and "We Shall Overcome" and "We Shall Not Be Moved", really influenced me in their meaning and to show that music had the power to be part of social change. In every culture, whether it's early English music, or whatever, it was always used as an instrument for social change. Only what's known as commercial music throughout the world now, which has become big business, isn't used for social change, it's used for maintaining the status quo. But I think any lasting form that comes out of the people, the workers, is always music for social change.

Faith sees herself as a social activist who is willing to take on any issue where she sees oppression taking place. As a woman of colour, her focus is more international than some of the other artists and she has worked with many different groups, seeking an end to racism, sexism and homophobia.

I've worked with every left wing cause you could name: Bangladesh, the PLO, South Africa, El Salvador, Chile, Uruguay, JLP Jamaican Labour Party; with Cuban solidarity groups; with progressive Chinese organizations; with the Canadian Congress of Chinese Women; Native Women's Resource Centre; I've played on different reserves. I do a lot of work around the black issue: Martin Luther King Day; I

raised money for Sophia Cook when she was shot by a policeman; I campaigned for Carolyn Wright who was the first black mayor to run in Toronto. I also deal with peace and environmental issues, and lesbian and gay issues. So I've been a social activist for a long time. But I see all the issues as being connected, towards making things better, to make society more humane and humanitarian.

Faith deals with a number of issues in her music, most of them centred around being black in a predominantly white society. One of the issues she addresses under this theme is the issue of the little known history of black people in Canada. She devotes an entire album, *Africville* to telling various parts of the histories of black people, especially women, in Canada. "*Africville*" is about the destruction of a black neighbourhood outside of Halifax in the '60s, and other songs deal with the underground railroad for black slaves from the South, the freedom of slaves in Canada, the double oppression of a black woman, and the celebration of black women who fought for justice. The possibility for social change exists here in the telling of stories to enable us to imagine what it would be like to see through the eyes of another; telling stories that create the possibility of building affinities between the experiences of different groups rather than creating a hierarchy of oppressions.

When I think of black women's music; I know Black music 'cause that's the culture that I grew up in and it's certainly had a big impact on my life and the way I view music. I mean the songs still make me want to cry, I feel so much comes from those.

At a workshop stage at the Mariposa Folk Festival, Faith confronted the issue of language head on. Another artist, Bobby Watts, sang a political song making fun of the Tories in which he referred to them as "silly cunts". Rather than let him get away with his use of language, Faith, who was performing on the workshop stage with him, talked about the importance of language by relating the pain and hurtful experiences of women both in her introduction and in song. She used music to try and show him the effect his language could have on people, and to encourage the people in the crowd to be brave and speak out against this kind of sexism. This was an incredibly gutsy thing to do as most of the people in the audience had laughed at Watt's cute song about the Tories. But she was successful in the sense that she energized much of the audience to speak out, and made us embarrassed that we had laughed rather than confronted the issue. She politicized us around the issue of sexist language in songs.

Faith, like Heather, is a lesbian and the experience of being an "out" lesbian is one of the themes of her music. One of her songs, "I Want the Freedom to Love" is especially powerful because it calls to mind experiences between lovers most people can relate to such as holding

hands while going for a walk or saying goodbye at the airport (or any other public place), and reminds us that it has not been acceptable for homosexuals to hold hands or kiss or in any way demonstrate affection, in public. Her cry for the freedom to love is a rallying cry for fellow homosexuals as well as a plea to be understood and accepted.

The early folk like "Leaping Lesbians" by Meg Christianson that music had a great impact because I think that they challenged the family which is sacred ground. They challenged the role of women as birthers and nurturers and this as being passive. A lot of women in non-traditional fields, well not so much now but it used to be that the non-traditional fields were generally lesbian camps.

That is a huge threat to maintaining the status quo or the inequality. So women's music has had that impact as a threat to society or the social structure of the family--it's been the biggest threat.

Faith also addressed a touchy issue in modern feminism: the problem the "women's movement" (which, until recently, had been defined in Canada by white, middle class women) has had in addressing the issue of race. Learning how to have the "affinity" Haraway talks about, between groups that have been oppressed and marginalized by Western society, rather than disagreeing about what ought to be the primary issues of concern for feminists, has been an ongoing struggle for feminism. Faith talks about how the dominant understanding of "women's music" is music produced and sung by white women. She challenges this assumption and encourages us to look at all cultural music as having an equal voice.¹⁷

I was reading once in Hotwire magazine, a lot of the earlier women's musicians like Meg Christianson, Holly Near, they all came from very good backgrounds you know. They were all middle class, they had a lot of money, their parents had a lot of money, friends of theirs had a lot of money to put into their making records on their own and being able to travel across the country and get their music out. Alix Dobkin--left her husband and had, I don't know, a couple hundred thousand dollars and so she put all of this--

these women come from having money so it was really middle class, actually upper middle class white women. Very much like the suffragette movement who had a lot of money. So even working class white women, you are hard pressed to find in the United States when you're looking at women's music. Women who just came from: father worked in a factory, mother worked in a factory, or whatever. Again, are the issues of working class women being brought out
it's that's just the way you work in the working class in the specifications of race and class.

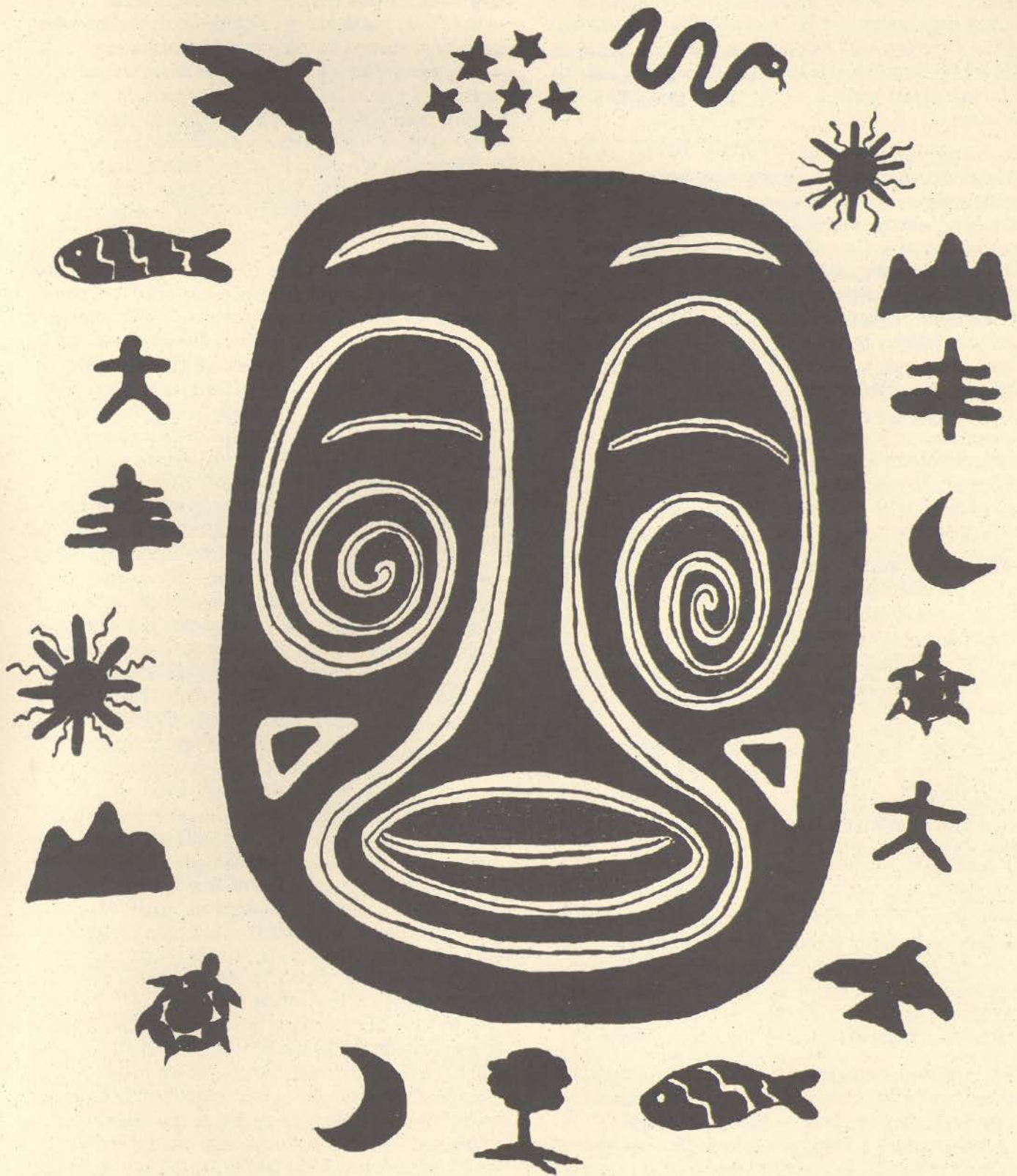
Faith's attention to issues of gender, race, class and sexuality, make her an excellent example of the "partial perspectives" that Haraway talks about. Being female, from a lower class background, black and lesbian has given her an experience of oppression and a lived knowledge of what it means. Her songs and stories are grounded in her own personal experience as well as the historical and material reality of those who have influenced her work. The power of this kind of situated knowledge for social change is evident at all of her performances in the responses of the audience.

Marie-Lynn Hammond has written two plays and hosts a CBC radio program as well as being a singer-songwriter. She performs and writes songs in both English and French and has produced two solo albums. She is one of the founding members of a Canadian musical group called Stringband, with whom she produced many albums. I interviewed Marie-Lynn at her home in Toronto in September, 1990, soon after the Wye Marsh Wildlife Festival where she performed.

Marie-Lynn Hammond is quite different from either Heather or Faith, not so much in the issues she deals with, as in her music. She uses humorous wit to expose our assumptions about anything from birth control to nuclear power. Whereas Heather excels at the blues, Marie-Lynn's style is more a mix of folk and cabaret styles. When I interviewed her, I found her full of energy and enthusiasm and very supportive of what I was trying to do.

Marie-Lynn sees her music as an art form which, through wit as well as musical form, conveys some kind





of social change message whether explicitly or more subtly:

When I'm feeling optimistic I see my music as an instrument of social change. It's not just that. I see it as some kind of expression of my creativity and, it sounds pretentious I know, but I also see it as art. Some songs are more instruments of social change than others. Some are written almost expressly for that purpose and I try to write them with wit and art as well, and others are more personal, and social change may be more subtle in them.

The most political of Marie-Lynn's songs are the ones dealing with feminist issues. Several of the audience members whom I interviewed, who had never heard her perform before, were quite pleasantly surprised by her music and recognized aspects of women's oppression they had never noticed, or rather never dealt with, before. She sings about the frustration of finding good birth control while very little research is being done in the area, about mothers teaching their sons to do housework, and about love and broken hearts. Sharing in the music not only causes us to laugh, to name issues of oppression, to be political, but also creates a possibility for change.

Marie-Lynn feels that the most common theme in her work is that of women's issues. Her writing about women is witty and very political in some songs and more of a story in others.

I'd say most of my songs that are vaguely political deal with women's issues. That's the most common thread, but they will also touch on issues of environment and peace, or the French/English issue along the way. When I say women's issues, that can cover everything from the kinds of power struggles that involve women to just women's daily lives and what they go through. When I'm writing about my grandmothers for example, sometimes the song is simply recounting their story, but there's always some sort of subtle messages built in. Like in the Elsie song it says that "maybe if you'd lived today all that drive and passion might have found a way;" recognizing that things are changing and have been worse.

Several of Marie-Lynn's songs are about the everyday lives of women, most notably the songs "Elsie" and "La chanson de Corinne," about her grandmothers. By telling the stories of these women she is not only describing their joys and hardships but also telling a history of women's experiences and exploring the differences between her French Canadian grandmother and her Anglo grandmother. We live the life of her grandmothers with them, feel their emotions. By helping us to "see" with the vision of these other women, she is creating a way for us to know differently.

When asked about the difference between "women's music" and traditional folk, Marie-Lynn talks about the

need for personal feeling or emotion in writing songs. She is critical of patriarchy in her music, but rather than making an overt statement, she tells a story and uses the kind of embodied objectivity that Sandra Harding talks about as a way for others to connect the music to their own lives.

Dominant culture—you mean male and white male culture, white anglo saxon culture? Oh yes, and I think that there's always, sometimes very overt criticisms in my songs. One song contains some sweeping generalizations which some men have been offended by, a song called "Eve gave Adam the apple" which basically is a critique of patriarchal religion. Especially as a woman whose mother is a French-Canadian, I've had an inside look at minority culture. It's different for me than for other minorities, being white. No one knows I'm half French so I pass as a WASP. I don't deal directly with issues of racism and say vis a vis people of colour because I don't believe that I have the right to write about that, not being a person of colour. If I was going to write a song it would have to be from the point of view of me as a white person. I tend to write on issues that spark me very directly. But I am critical especially of, I would say, the white male ethic.

The music that men have been writing in the folk resurgence, maybe since Woodie Guthrie, well there's a lot of political music in there and some of it is sensitive to women. I don't think until the women songwriters came down the line have we seen as much of an awareness of women's issues. I know Tom Paxton has written a very good song about battered women. A very sensitive song, I think that's good. I think I also want to hear songs by women writing about these issues. It might be a different perspective. I can't just write about an issue. I have to write out of an emotion, feeling as well. I think some women are writing simply because there is an issue that must be dealt with. And I think you're getting a lot of songs that are good politics but bad art. And that worries me, not worries me but I see that in the women's movement. A lot of songs are sloganeering, basically. And maybe it's good that they are out there but I have a more lofty view of the whole thing I suppose; I don't want to write a song that doesn't have some element of art. If I'm going to write about patriarchy, I want to do it with some level of wit and not just say "Oh its terrible, the male gods stomped all over us", it makes me cringe. But maybe it's important just that the issues be dealt with because I do see people listening to those songs and there's a level of appreciation that the issues are even being aired. I don't think people are as critical as I am about the level of art. That's my own personal thing. But I think more issues are being dealt

with in more detail by women than men could. Because they don't know, they haven't been there.

Marie-Lynn's songs about environmental issues, like "Radiation", are a call for political action as much as they are a naming of an issue. As a feminist and an activist she recognizes the need for organizing and demonstrating. And it is through such political action that people come together to create a different reality, such as nuclear-free power or pesticide-free vegetables or safe drinking water, or whatever the local issue may be.

I think that there are two levels going on in the environmental movement. I see a lot of good environmental work being done and then I see also, this corporate bandwagon, people like Loblaws. Coffee...no cholesterol, no phosphates. I think something like sustainable development is actually a contradiction in terms, but I don't know enough about the issues and the alternatives. How do you take a society that's developed in certain ways and just stop it in its tracks and say "We're not going to be consumer-based and wasting stuff, we're going to build things that last forever, and you'll only get a new coat every ten years?" How do you tell people that shop for their hobbies, whose passion in life is shopping, that it's all going to get turned around. You can't go back. Maybe all we can do is contain the damage at this point. So for me it's all kind of new in terms of really dealing with the politics of it and it's so tied in with power and money and who has the money and power and wants to hang on to it. Then you get into socialist issues and sharing and cooperation in place of competitiveness. As the eastern block countries are all going capitalist, you think well, that kind of socialism didn't work. So it gets really big. But I would think the lessons that environmentalism can learn from feminism are the lessons in general the world can learn from feminism, which has to do with cooperation and non-aggression. The whole issue of oppression and power is complicated. What do you do about fishermen. I think drift nets are bad but in general does this mean that we don't kill any animals or fish at all? I'm a vegetarian but I do eat fish once in a while. What do you do here? People's livelihood depends on fishing, hunting, slaughtering. So what does feminism propose to do about that? What are the solutions there? Is it all pie in the sky or do we actually have concrete alternatives for those people? People who live up north, do we relocate them all? No, we don't want them all down here, there's too many here already. I don't know that there ever is an easy solution. There will always be lots of compromises. Though we do know that if we took some of the money that's being used for military, and suddenly turned that into ecological-type jobs, there'd be more work there for people. So how do you turn that around?

The kind of capital which we have now which basically sees the environment as a commodity is the result of more male thinking. And I think Gloria Steinem said something very good recently: that feminism should no longer be about women becoming like men but about men becoming more like women. You know for the first while we were trying to achieve equality with them; let's be fighter pilots and v. p.'s of corporations, fine. But maybe it should have been the other way around: men should be trying to be more nurturing, more caring, less aggressive, less competitive.

I interviewed Connie Kaldor at the Michigan Women's Folk Festival in August of 1990. Connie is from the prairies, as many of her songs indicate, but now lives in Montreal. She has produced three albums. Connie is somewhat of a contradiction, in terms of what she says about her music and the response her music elicits. Connie's music and performance is indeed highly political. She has an incredible talent for songwriting. Her songs about women touch the experiences most women can relate to: "Wanderlust" is about the feeling of wanting to just pack your bags and go somewhere, have an adventure; "Bird on a Wing" is about a small town girl dreaming of getting out of the small town on the next bus; "Love Letters" is about the joy of a new relationship. She weaves stories about women's lives rather than preaching about social justice. Through her songs we feel the longing, the joy, the pain of the women she writes about. Whether she intends to be political or not, she brings forward personal experiences of the every-day lives of women that are indeed very political and help women share and organize around issues of oppression.

Connie stresses the entertainment value of music. She feels that it is important for all of us to be able to "get away" for a while and she provides this escape with a show full of jokes and one-liners, sentimental love songs and snappy bar tunes. You don't just go to a performance to hear Connie sing, you go to be entertained.

The ideal of course is to get the world to change. But as an entertainer, sometimes I think -- ah, if I could just take people out of their life for five minutes and make them laugh, or energize them or do whatever that is. I don't need to have everybody falling over and ranting and raving. In this society, to get a group of people feeling emotional in a room is a really important thing. If I could just do that, regardless of where I am, where I can feel that the audience is one. Because they feel it too; I feel it when I'm a part of an audience. If I come out of a great show, I'm happy, and everybody's laughing.

Besides her songs about women's lives, Connie also sings about the history of her home province, Saskatchewan, and the prairie provinces in general. In true folk style she recounts the experiences of people, towns and rivers in the prairies. In this way the history becomes

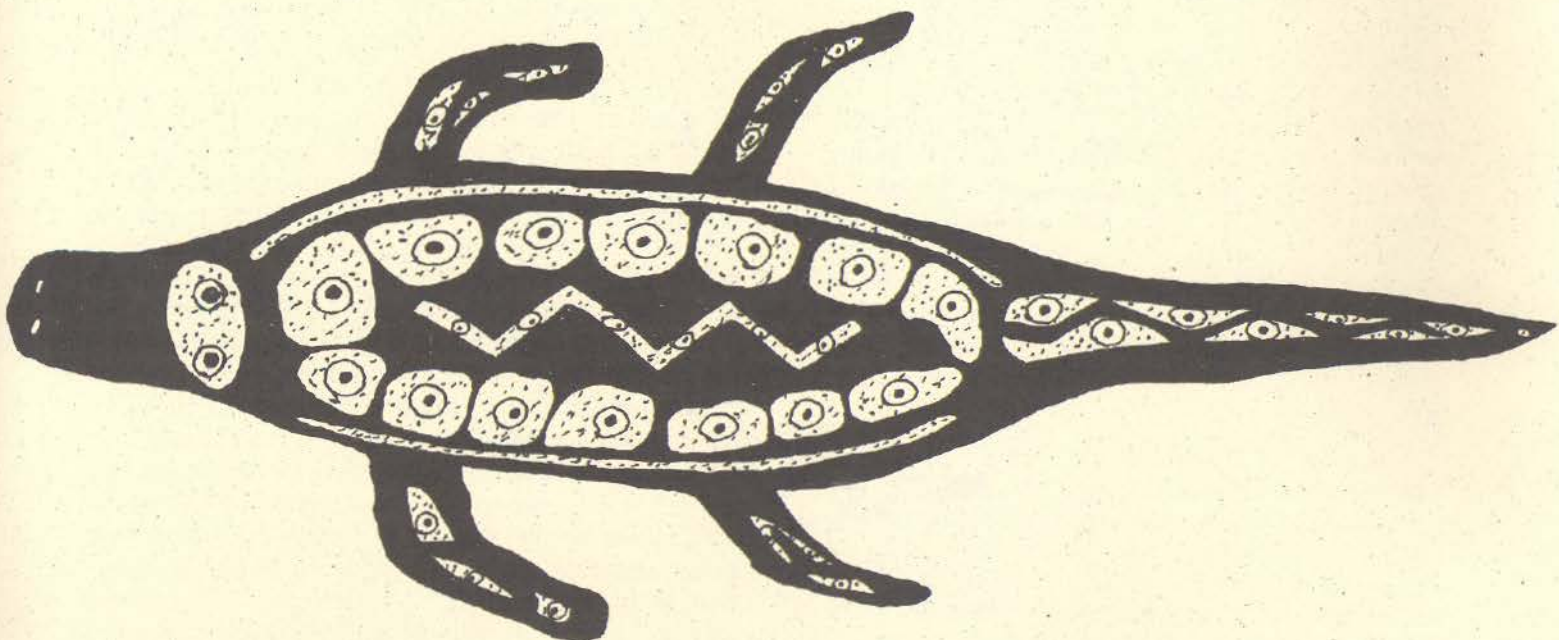
part of people's lives rather than something taught in school or read in a book, and she creates the history of small towns from the perspective of the people that live there, not from the perspective of an all-seeing analytical eye. Her song "The River Song" compares the damming, and therefore controlling, of a river to the confinement and control of native people, linking the life of the river to the life of a people. Without preaching about environmental issues or about native issues, she implies a relationship between the domination of both and suggests that neither can be contained forever but that something has been lost.

Connie's music comes out of her own experiences and the experiences of those close to her. She feels that if she can bring an issue across by telling a story that gets the listener emotionally involved in a song, she might inspire people to act. Connie does not really see herself as a social activist the way the other singer-songwriters do, but she has an incredible talent for writing and performing songs that touch the hearts of her listeners and in this way is much more political than she thinks.

I'm never really moved to do anything until I'm emotionally involved in it. That's just the way it is with me. The issue of AIDS is not as personal until a friend of yours has it. I don't think people do anything unless they are emotionally interested in something. You can talk about it until you are blue in the face, but the minute that somebody feels that tug of an issue, they'll look at it differently. I think you speak best from things that you feel inside of yourself and I guess that's why I work that way. Because I'm not up there to teach people, I'm not there to tell them what to do. But you can give your perspective. You always give

your perspective when you write and when you sing; people know where you stand on certain things. But I think that first of all you have to make people think, and then feel, and after that they will act because most people see what's right and what isn't, in a situation. Nobody, if they're looking from the point of view of a woman that's being hit, thinks it's a good idea. But it's also to respect that these things are difficult to deal with. I don't consciously write a tune for an issue. I try to do that and most of the time it's terrible. The tunes always come out sounding really stupid. After the first line the rest of the song just sort of sounds the same. Why not just say it in the intro and get on with something else. The music however, is working on many, many levels.

Connie is a very gifted performer who trained to be an actress and a musician and chose music over acting. Each show she puts on includes many of her talents in acting. She can be extremely funny, throwing out one-liners while playing the introductory chords to a song, helping people laugh at themselves and exposing assumptions that would be hard to bring out in any other form. Revealing the assumptions we have about who we are and how the world works, is a necessary part of social change. By helping us to expose the ways in which oppression occurs and the ways in which we contribute to it, Connie is creating an "embodied" shared knowledge about the issues she is close to. She deals with the issues she feels inside and gives her perspective. She is not trying to create one shared knowledge for all women, but rather a "partial perspective" of the issues she "knows" through experience.



Susan Belyea is a Toronto musician who, at the time of my research, played in a band called the Fly By Night Dyke Band, and who wrote a major paper theorizing women's music as part of her Masters in Environmental Studies. She is not currently a member of an organized band of musicians, but is instead concentrating on her art: glass-blowing. Susan has a real commitment to social change and was very helpful in the organization of my research and in formulating the relevant questions to ask of each of the other artists.

Susan talks about the importance of music as a vehicle for social change and political action. Although she and her band do perform some of the music that Marie-Lynn would criticize as being somewhat "sloganeering," Susan justifies this type of music as being a way of getting the issues "out there"; naming the problems so they can be dealt with in collective, community action. The Fly By Night Dyke Band is no longer together as a band, so the comments made by Susan and myself about the band, should be recognized as referring to a time prior to 1990. The band was organized around political action and played almost exclusively for various social functions related to social change such as International Women's Day, the YWCA women's shelter, women's crisis centres, etc. In this sense the band and its music serve the women's movement and its political action.

Susan sees music as a way to challenge existing social norms. She sees the music of their band as having been a way to challenge norms around sexual preference, regardless of whether the song is specifically talking about homosexuality or not.

The music that I write myself and the music that we write as a band, and other people's music that we take or appropriate for ourselves, and the whole reason we exist as a band, is to do social change music. A lot of our music doesn't have specific reference. Being the Fly By Night Dyke Band puts us in a particular position; it means that anytime we sing a love song, regardless of whether or not there are pronouns that indicate gender, having four self-identified lesbians, who are publicly lesbians, sing a love song, makes any love song a political song. We do songs that were written by men, they don't challenge anything, but because we sing it to a specific audience and we sing it as lesbians to an audience which is usually fifty percent lesbian anyways, it makes a love song into a political thing because it is a challenge to the existing system of oppression.

Susan and her band dealt with issues relevant to the political work they were doing at the time. Much of it focused on labour issues for women and on the issue of gay and lesbian rights.

We do songs about any issue that touches us. Right now we're learning a lot of labour music, most of it is historical stuff that comes out of various strikes and

struggles. We just wrote a song about the plant closing at Inglis, a lot of people lost their jobs, mostly women, and we wrote a song about it. We have some songs that are kind of all-purpose protest songs and we will sit down right before we go on stage and write the verse for the occasion. So if there's just been a plant closure, or the Tories have just introduced some horrible bill -- it happened a lot around free trade -- we sit down literally five minutes before we go on stage and write a verse to a song that we do. We have a few songs that we can stick verses in like that. So there is no musical integrity to the songs, they don't exist as unchanging songs. It's the tradition in folk music, right? We don't deal with things like copyright partly because we don't record so we don't have to worry about being tied up with any record company or anything that would insist on that. But also because we like to think that people will take our songs and sing them when and where appropriate. The lyrics and music are available to anyone who wants to ask for them.

Thus Susan's music is more overtly political as she and her band create a shared experience and a set of shared beliefs around particular issues. By politicizing their audience around issues of class, sexuality, gender, etc. they name the issues and create a living body of knowledge that can be used for action.

Susan, in her 1989 major paper submitted to the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, notes the following themes from talking to women about women's music:

- (1) the importance of feminist music in claiming and making our history;
- (2) music as entertainment;
- (3) music as celebration;
- (4) music as a means of community building;
- (5) music as a symbolic "voice";
- and (6) the sensual and emotional pleasure of participating in women's music.¹⁸

I would add that women's music, and other cultural art forms not dealt with in this paper, provide a potential "vision" or way of seeing the world that is not totalizing or appropriating. It does not seek unity, it seeks to explore relationships and thus create new possibilities for relationships. Thus art, in this case women's music, is a vehicle for social change and a possible means for creating a new reality for both women and nature that is not necessarily dependent on a biological connection between the two, but rather a different set of social relations for the "others" created by Western thought.

I believe the most significant aspect of this study, one which I was not expecting when I began it, is the way in which these women validate and express different ways of knowing from traditional Western, scientific, patriarchal, knowledge creation. I believe that each of these women is presenting/expressing/knowing a situated knowledge. Haraway speaks of situated knowledges as

being embodied; knowledge that comes from experience, from inside. Thus when Faith Nolan, a black Canadian woman, sings and speaks about the history of black Canadians, especially black Canadian women, she is creating a different way of knowing black Canadian culture. This is not a traditionally accepted knowledge creation in Western cultures. This is a woman socially constructing the life of a black people in Canada through her music. Similarly, Heather Bishop is creating acceptance and knowledge about lesbians and the love of women by singing as a lesbian. She is creating a situated knowledge by singing and writing from her experience as a lesbian. And when she sings and talks about the spiritual connection she feels between herself and mother earth, it is again a situated knowledge.

The fractured identities of this postmodern world are confusing and eclectic. These singer-songwriters provide avenues for social change and acceptance of different identities by creating embodied knowledges of individual or group identities. They are not seeking some kind of unified knowledge for all women, or all lesbians, or all black women, they are speaking from a space within. As both Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway point out, it is through this different (postmodern) way of knowing that we can perhaps envision a society where domination is not the only relationship that counts and nature is not simply a resource to be exploited.

Notes

1. Notes from these interviews are used frequently throughout the text of the paper and appear in italics with no indentation.
2. Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
8. Donna J. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
9. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 191-192.
13. Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, p. 245.

14. Ellen Schwartz, *Born A Woman: Seven Canadian Women Singer-Songwriters*, (Winlaw, B.C.: Polestar, 1988), p. 126.

15. Toni Armstrong Jr., "A Taste of the Canadian Prairies: Heather Bishop," an interview in *Hotwire: The Journal of Women's Music and Culture*, 6:2 (1990), p. 3.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

17. See Chapter One of Susan Belyea's "Theorizing Women's Music" (MES research paper, Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, 1989), for a more complete discussion of defining women's music.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Joanne is a recent graduate of the Masters programme in Environmental Studies. Her current research interests include critically exploring the common ground between environmental thought and feminist theory while her more playful interests remain natural history and music.

