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Visions and Re-Visions: Women and Time in Michèle Roberts' *In the Red Kitchen*

In her 1971 essay 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', Adrienne Rich offered a statement of affairs and followed it with a challenge which is still current within feminist writing. The statement was that 'Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival' (Rich 1980:35). That process of re-vision continues in much women's writing, including fiction, poetry and feminist literary and cultural theory. This project is not merely about rediscovering or excavating the history of women so that something called 'women's history' can be written - and courses can be taught at schools and universities on this 'specialist' subject - the project of re-vision as Rich describes it entails a radical shift in the way history, the past, and time itself, is conceived. More than a rewriting of histories, re-vision is a new way of looking at the present; at how the present has come to be and what futures it might produce. Re-vision is about changing the way we see the world, and the way others see it; an understanding of change that owes much to debates within Marxist and feminist circles of the sixties and seventies in North America and western Europe. That understanding of change - a concept of change that remains revolutionary - is made explicit in the challenge with which Rich followed her statement:

A change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order reassert itself in every new revolution. We need to know the

writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (1980:35)

That challenge, that conundrum, still haunts women's writing, as evidenced by the many novelists and poets who return to historical and mythical figures and re-imagine their experience in an attempt to shed fresh light on the present. It is also evident in the work of many feminist philosophers and theorists, including the work of Julia Kristeva. For both creative and academic writers the question is manifold: if 'a change in the concept of sexual identity is essential', what form should that change take? More importantly, how should our understanding of sexual identity change in order to avoid the old order reasserting itself? Kristeva's 'Women's Time' is an attempt to grapple with this conundrum, and does not provide an answer, possibly because there is no simple answer to this knotty problem. Michèle Roberts' fifth novel, *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) also wrestles with this challenge and, like 'Women's Time', does not offer simple solutions. These two works are thus in conversation with each other and this essay is an attempt to provide a reading of each which outlines the ways in which Roberts and Kristeva grapple with Adrienne Rich's challenge.

Michèle Roberts' writing has consistently revealed a fascination with women's histories - more precisely with the manner in which women's lives in the past and in the present offer commentaries on each other. Since her earliest work with the *Tales I Tell My Mother* writing group in the seventies, Roberts' fiction has been engaged in transforming and re-imagining history - with writing as re-vision, in Rich's terms.¹ Her novels, from *A Piece of the Night* (1978) to *The Mistressclass* (2003) have addressed private and public

histories, consistently worrying at who records such histories and who remembers them. Like many of her peers, Michele Roberts' writing describes a particular, gendered relation to history and its account of the humanist subject. In these narratives linear history is questioned; it is seen as both desirable and dangerous. History in all its forms - autobiographical, biographical, fiction and fact - is seen as partial, liable to be refracted in the light of other versions of the same story. The novels employ multiple narrative voices to indicate how historical truths can be hidden, erased, or revealed and also to show how the truth is ultimately various simply because of the range of women's experience. There is a progressively evident theme in these novels of battles between women for their particular versions of history, most clearly in *Daughters of the House* (1992), where two cousins wrestle with their memories of a post-war childhood in Normandy. Roberts' work thus engages with debates which remain current in feminism regarding women's place in society and history - in the past, present and future.

One of the most interesting moments in this debate within feminist praxis around gender, history and identity is Kristeva's essay 'Women's Time'. First published as 'Le Temps des femmes' in *34/44: Cahiers de recherche de sciences des textes et documents* (Winter 1979), and translated for *Signs* in 1981, this essay precedes Roberts' novel by a decade, yet the discussion about time and history follows a similar trajectory. Kristeva divides time up into 'the time of linear history, or *cursive* time ... and the time of another history, thus another time, *monumental time*' (1981:14). In this essay Kristeva attempts to imagine and describe this other time, and ascribes both 'cyclical' and 'monumental' temporalities to feminine subjectivity, working with psychoanalytic models of gendered

difference (1981:17). As Elizabeth Grosz has noted, working with this model of gendered identity means that female subjectivity is always a problem, always 'other' to the dominant Symbolic; within this frame, as she states, 'The symbolic is "erected" only on the basis of repression of the maternal' (Grosz 1989:49). Inevitably, in Kristeva's essay, this other time is set against the cursive temporality of an implicitly masculine history:

female subjectivity as it gives itself up to intuition becomes a problem with respect to a certain conception of time: time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival - in other words, the time of history. (Kristeva 1981:17)

This problem of female subjectivity in relation to the time of history is investigated in Michèle Roberts' novel *In the Red Kitchen*, where it becomes quite literally the problem of 'intuition', as one of the central characters is a medium at the turn of the century. This is a narrative which imagines intuitive communications between women across space and time. The novel is 'written' by five female narrators, each of whom have very different motives for wanting to assert their version of the past. The narrators are Flora Milk, a late nineteenth-century spiritualist medium closely based on the Victorian medium Florence Cook; Rosina Milk, Flora's sister, loosely based on one of Florence Cook's rival mediums; Minnie Preston, the middle-class wife of William Preston, Flora's patron and lover; Hattie, a contemporary cookery writer who buys the Milk's family home in Hackney and renovates it; and Hat, an ancient Egyptian pharaoh-king loosely based on Hatshepsut.² These five women tell the story from their own points of view; but at least four of the five are shown to have moments of intuition, moments of connection with a time outside their own, where

they are able to see, appear to, or even communicate with, each other. The novel thus offers the reader five different linear narratives with moments which sometimes break in upon each other - in *In the Red Kitchen* the synchronic breaks into the diachronic as linear time is momentarily broken, then reassembled. It is these strange moments that this paper is concerned with; are they simply the 'other' time of what Kristeva terms 'intuitive' female subjectivity?

One such communication takes place between Hat, the Egyptian princess who reinvents herself as a pharaoh-king, and who communicates with Flora, the Victorian medium, in order to retain her hold on linear time. Hat's outrage at being written out of history by her successors is translated into a demand for attention via ghostly appearances and ouija-board communications with Flora. Hat, one of the least sympathetic figures in the novel, is unapologetic in her identification with the masculine power embodied by her father. Her desire for such power is represented literally in her sexual relationship with, and marriage to, her father, and also in the political manouvring after his death, when she assumes his authority in defiance of tradition, rejecting and usurping the 'puny boy' which her courtiers produce as the male heir (Roberts 1990:100). On the one hand Hat's assumption of power is a daring move which defies precedent, but it is only achieved - and only temporarily maintained - through erasing the feminine in favour of the masculine symbolic:

On my head I wear the high double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt. In my hands I carry the sacred sceptre and flail. On my chin I wear the curled beard-wig that denotes kingship. I am no longer Queen Hat, consort to my dead father. The man

in me has come forth and must be recognized. I have done what no woman has dared to do before me: I have named myself Pharoah of Egypt. Power over all this land while I am on earth, sole power; I, only I; and life everlasting amongst the gods when I die. I am man, I am Pharoah, and I shall rule. (1990:100)

This strategy is thus not a challenge to the Symbolic order, but an endorsement of it. While Hat is alive she can only maintain her power by representing herself in masculine terms; when she is dead her legacy is erased and she is forced to resort to feminine tactics, namely feminine 'intuition', accessing the 'other' time, reaching out across the centuries to find a scribe who will record her achievements and reinscribe her power. Kristeva notes the limitations of such a strategy in her essay, commenting that 'The assumption by women of executive, industrial and cultural power has not, up to the present time, radically changed the nature of such power' (1981:26)

In this sense it is inevitable that Hat's legacy will be erased by her successors. They remove her name from the records and monuments, literally removing her from history, just as Hat removed all evidence of those who displeased her during her reign. Hat's erasure is depicted as a denial of her symbolic existence, pushing her back into castrated femininity:

I have been unwritten. Written out. Written off. Therefore I am not even dead. I never was. I am non-existent. There is no I.

I was a man and a pharoah and a king. I was mighty because I was male and bore the sacred sign of maleness and of kingship. Now that my name has been hacked

off the walls and columns of my tomb the sign of my kingship has been broken off me.

I am lacking. I am a lack. I am nothing but a poor dead body that lacks the sign of life: I am female. (Roberts 1990:133)

Hat's attempts to reassert her authority through communications with Flora, however, are not a simple process of reinscription: she is confounded by misinterpretation and confusion. Hat appears to be unable to communicate directly with Flora, and even the ouija-board messages which she sends are liable to be misread. Simple communication across time appears impossible: Hat can appear to Flora but she cannot guarantee how Flora will understand her. When Hat attempts to communicate with Flora through the ouija board the words are stuttered: first 'HA. HA. HA. HA! HA HA!' (1990:45), as if the language itself is gasping for breath, and later 'FARE. O! FARE' (1990:46), which Flora assumes is a reference to Hat's beauty. Hat's ouija board communications stammer across time, space and language in her desperate attempt to recruit Flora's help. Yet even when she spells out her final message; 'HATTIE. KING. HATTIE KING' (1990:46), Flora understands this as the name of her spirit guide, not as a reference to Hat's status. The communication also prefaces Flora's visual confusion of Hat and Hattie, so that time *and* identity are shown to be unstable and easily elided. Such communications may go beyond linear time in the novel but they are only experienced *within* it: this is a determinedly materialist account of visionary experiences.

In Kristeva's account of these different times, she offers a chronological map of women's relation to the time of history and to monumental/cyclical time, albeit with the

caveat that these relationships with different times may exist simultaneously. In opposition to alignment with the Symbolic, which is described as the strategy of the first generation of feminists, Kristeva describes post-1968 feminist rebellions against the 'socio-symbolic contract'; the setting up of alternative social orders:

this counter-society is imagined as harmonious, without prohibitions, free and fulfilling. In our modern societies which have no hereafter or, at least, which are caught up in a transcendence either reduced to this side of the world (protestantism) or crumbling (catholicism and its current challenges), the counter-society remains the only refuge for fulfilment since it is precisely an a-topia, a place outside the law, utopia's floodgate. (1981:27)

While the first generation privileges the masculine symbolic in the form of linear time, the second generation embraces the feminine as a space outside temporal linearity, a utopian otherness. Kristeva is deeply critical of such an approach and 'Women's Time' includes several pot-shots at *écriture féminine* and its adherents. Yet she is also aware of the radical potential which this approach gestures toward. If *In the Red Kitchen* were simply a demonstration of these opposite strategies, the meta-temporal communications between the protagonists in the novel would be represented as such 'a-topian' moments. Michèle Roberts' novel is not so partisan; as in Kristeva's work the other time of femininity is revealed not as a solution in itself, but an indication of potential. Consequently all five narratives depict these communications across time, space and language as desperately problematic; not least for the reasons mentioned above.

Firstly, it is clear in the novel that these 'feminine' communications are not singular or monotone: these messages across time are shown to take place in several different forms, as well as being interpreted in different ways by whoever receives them. Hattie, the contemporary writer, for example, has several sightings of Flora; has an epiphanic vision of a red kitchen which is never fully explained; experiences a mild telepathy with her artist lover, and also tells detailed childhood stories of a life in ancient Egypt, which seem to imply some intuitive connection with Hat. While such moments represent the potential for 'a-topian' experiences - and the red kitchen sequence may be seen as the purest form of this, if only in the sense that it is never clear where the vision comes from and why Hattie sees it - they are all momentary, confused and confusing. Flora, the professional medium, confuses Hat, the Egyptian pharaoh-queen, and Hattie, the late 20th-century writer. On one occasion when Flora sees Hattie she mistakes her decorating gear of white overalls and turban for an ancient costume - she mistakes Hattie for Hat. Time itself is out of step here; linear, cursive time is curved and distorted, but only for a moment, and the purpose of such moments is shown to be entirely questionable. Such moments are both liable to be misread - to become a form of miscommunication - and to be abused, as in the cynical attempts by Hat to reinscribe herself in symbolic terms. These moments of communication are thus literally moments out of time; out of time in the sense that they reach beyond the linear histories of each narrator, and in the sense that they are out of step with the historical moments which they reach into. Misreading, misinterpretation, miscommunication are rife. What, then, is the point of these phatic communications?

In her account of the two generations of feminist strategies, Kristeva acknowledges the political efficacy of feminist attempts to insert women into linear history. As she states, it is unnecessary to enumerate the benefits which this logic of identification and the ensuing struggle have achieved and continue to achieve for women (abortion, contraception, equal pay, professional recognition, etc.); these have already had or will soon have effects even more important than those of the Industrial Revolution. (1981:19)

She does not dismiss this strategy, therefore, and is critical of the 'exacerbated distrust' of such political tactics by the post-1968 generation and that generation's focus on what she calls 'intrasubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past' (1981:19). In 'Women's Time' neither approach is completely endorsed or denigrated; instead Kristeva proposes that a combination of the two strategies is most effective, and argues that it is already emerging - particularly in France and Italy. She thus proposes a way forward, a possible *third* time, or third generation of feminism, but also asks, if this is 'a new generation of women', 'What are its problems: its contributions as well as dangers?' (1981:20). This question goes beyond Adrienne Rich's challenge of breaking the hold of the past, and moves on to the question of consequences: what kind of future is entailed if concepts of sexual identity *are* radically changed? Kristeva's third generation is clearly not a solution in itself; it is merely a different strategy that will inevitably cause problems as well as contributing to a better future for women. In this sense 'Women's Time' may be regarded as a work of science fiction in its visionary account of a possible future for feminism. As Alice Jardine wrote in her introduction to the translated essay:

Julia Kristeva writes in a kind of 'future perfect' - a modality that implies neither that we are helpless before some inevitable destiny nor that we can somehow, given enough time and thought, engineer an ultimately perfect future. (Jardine 1981:5)

Kristeva gestures toward a 'future *imperfect*' in this essay, as her analysis of past and present elicits a possibly better future for women, but not one which is removed from human frailty and error. As a Marxist, Kristeva acknowledges the extent to which our futures are created from the imperfect present which, in turn, emerged from a flawed past; and that it is only by recognising those imperfections and flaws that the future has any chance of improving on them.

A similar debate underlies the difficult communications between the narrators in Roberts' novel. In its re-vision of historical sources *In the Red Kitchen* offers an exploration of the 'dangers' of re-visiting women's history - problems and limitations which are more than familiar to feminist historians - quite simply that we may not like what we find. Looking back for feminist foremothers is a difficult project, because, before the twentieth century, ideas about the rights of women and the strategies appropriate to attain them were rarely available in the same form. Calling an historical figure a feminist raises a whole range of questions about contemporary and historical understandings of the term. The narrators in *In the Red Kitchen*, with the possible exception of contemporary Hattie, are not feminist, or even women-centred. The novel is framed by betrayal. The opening and closing narrative voice is that of Rosina, Flora's jealous sister, who betrays Flora in revenge for Flora stealing her lover, George, and in order to snare a wealthy husband, Mr Redburn. Flora, likewise, betrays Rosina with George, just as she betrays Minnie in her

adulterous relationship with William Preston. Like Hat, Flora and Rosina privilege the men in their lives. As Flora states in her last narrative entry:

I always loved men more than women. It is hard to love women. They want far too much. They are so prickly, so demanding. I did love Rosina when we were children, but then I tried to stop her becoming a medium, and I took George. So Rosina and I stopped loving each other. I loved my father, then William, then George, then Jo. The men used me up, I hadn't anything left over for women.
(Roberts 1990:142)

Hattie, in her modern relationship with her unnamed male lover and the home she makes in the Milk family's old house, may represent a new generation which can see beyond the masculine symbolic or the feminine atopic, but she is an isolated figure. Hattie is an orphan: abandoned at her aunt's house, and then brought up by nuns, she grows up on the move and her life before she buys the house in Hackney is that of a privileged itinerant. She lives in squats and other people's rooms until, in her thirties, she buys the delapidated home which formerly housed Flora and Rosina. Yet even this refuge is depicted as a temporary respite rather than an escape from the struggles outside:

I bought this house just before the last boom in prices. It was reasonably cheap because it was, is, a wreck, and miles from the nearest tube. There is little housing now in London affordable by the homeless poor. Least of all is there housing for the single poor. The number of homeless people in London, I read in the newspaper recently, has doubled in the last ten years. I found myself a home just in

time. A barricade against the destitution and despair I see daily on the street, into which I could so easily have slipped. The people sleeping out in cardboard boxes under the railway bridge across from the shops; the young people begging outside the supermarket; the women hung about with children and pushchairs who beg at the bus stop opposite; the old man with all his possessions in a wire supermarket trolley which he pushes up and down the road; the old woman who sleeps at the entrance to the chemist; the man who wears a sack and a plastic carrier bag on his head like a chef's hat. I could so easily have been one of them.' (1990:13-14)

Nor is Hattie part of a brave new feminist future; perhaps because of her itinerant history, there is no supportive network of female friends. Hattie's loneliness bleeds through the pages of her narrative and her need for a home, for warmth, food and some vestige of security speak of a dystopian rather than a utopian present.

Clearly these three narrators from *In the Red Kitchen* may be mapped rather crudely in relation to Kristeva's three generations of feminism. Hat the pharaoh-king identifies with the linear teleology of her father's power which she temporarily inherits, offering an extreme example of 'first generation' strategies. Flora's career as a spiritualist medium plays upon the second generation's privileging of the 'other' time of femininity - an alignment which is made most explicit when Flora is taken to Paris by William Preston and performs as an hysteric for Charcot at the Salpêtrière. The contemporary narrator, Hattie, appears to combine both elements, living in the interstices of the masculine order, buying the house which Flora once inhabited and creating a new family for herself. Hattie's

characterization gestures towards a gendered identity which is freer, more open to performance and disguise, but it is not removed from the exigencies of economic reality. One of the ways in which she finances the purchase of the house is by going on the game. She drifts into prostitution, barely admitting to herself what she is doing, but finding that the men require her to perform roles at which she is adept: 'I discovered that I was a good actress: I could be the degraded angel, the ever-welcoming mother, the tart with the heart of gold, the severe nanny, whatever the men required. I knew how to please.' (Roberts 1990:14)

This is hardly an unequivocal vision of the potential for a new generation of women. In its examination of the potentialities and dangers of this new generation, the novel is equivocal about Hattie's future. While Hattie is about to have a child with her partner following an earlier miscarriage, this is not offered as a reinscription of the nuclear family, nor as a simple happy ending. Indeed, Hattie's closing entry in the novel is uncertain about the future:

I looked at the wall there that so badly needs re-plastering and re-painting. I thought: it can wait. I made a cup of tea and came in here to scribble, to put my feet up for half an hour, to clasp my hands gently over you, baby, dancer in your warm house of stretched skin. When you beat the drum of me I shall call back to you. Many weeks to wait before your birth. No way of knowing whether you'll stay inside me that long. (1990:138-9)

Rather than a sunny nuclear unit, Hattie's future has more in common with dystopian post-nuclear fictions. This new generation is depicted as embattled and struggling to maintain a

space in which to live. Like a set of Russian dolls, the baby lives in Hattie's body just as Hattie lives inside her house, but these are very much temporary shelters; nothing is certain. *In the Red Kitchen*, like Roberts' other work, does not present us with a happy closure. If Hattie offered the reader a more utopian vision of the future, she would perhaps have read Flora's diaries which are stored in the attic. Instead, one of Flora's male descendents arrives to collect this historical material, whisking them away before Hattie can get a good look: 'Family souvenirs. Mustn't touch. They're very precious.' (1990:138) Hattie never discovers that the ghostly child and young woman she sees in the house are all Flora Milk; the connection is never fully made.

The moments of communication between women across time and space in this novel represent a potential, and that may be construed as their purpose - not to convey transparent meaning but to suggest other times and places, and other interpretations. Such moments subvert time's linear trajectory but do not provide an answer or a destination in themselves. If Hattie is a depiction of Kristeva's third generation, she fully evinces the 'future (im)perfect' in which women now have to live. The novel leaves her on the frontier of a new life, possibly a better life, but filled with uncertainty about the future. As in 'Women's Time' there are no easy answers here, and each generation's strategy has its particular cost, but like Kristeva, Roberts seems to offer a hopeful prospect. Kristeva's three generations are envisioned as existing in parallel times:

My usage of the word 'generation' implies less a chronology than a *signifying space*, a both corporeal and desiring mental space. So it can be argued that as of now a third attitude is possible, thus a third generation, which does not exclude -

quite to the contrary - the *parallel* existence of all three in the same historical time, or even that they be interwoven one with the other. (1981:33)

Almost as if it were responding to this model, *In the Red Kitchen* offers its readers an interwoven narrative, crossing time and continents, but it does not erase identity and difference. Hattie needs Hat and Flora as predecessors, but she is not simply the result of their histories. She is her own woman, and represents the possibility of a different kind of future. The momentary communications between narrators indicate a potential for subversion that remains unfulfilled but still available. As Kristeva comments on ‘Lacan’s scandalous sentence “There is no such thing as Woman.”’:

Indeed, she does *not* exist with a capital “W”, possessor of some mythical unity - a supreme power, on which is based the terror of power and terrorism as the desire for power. But what an unbelievable force for subversion in the modern world! And, at the same time, what playing with fire! (1981:30)

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¹ Michèle Roberts' first novel was published following her involvement in a feminist writing collective. The collective also included Zoe Fairbairns, Sara Maitland, Valerie Miner and Michelene Wandor and, as a group, they published two collections of short stories: *Tales I Tell My Mother* (1978) and *More Tales I Tell My Mother* (1986). Roberts also published poetry with Wandor and Judith Kazantzis: *Touch Papers* (1982). In the late eighties Fairbairns, Maitland and Roberts contributed to two more collections of short stories by women writers: *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1988) and *The Seven Cardinal Virtues* (1990), both edited by Alison Fell. Sara Maitland wrote of the 1978 collection:

Tales I Tell My Mother which was a self-declared, overtly political work (i.e. not 'real literature' at all) received virtually no critical attention at all, but the two [first novels by Roberts and Maitland] (which are both literary in different ways) both got extensively reviewed and as literary artefacts, although little reference was made to their feminist arguments except as a put down, or with delight where the reviewer saw them as critical of the movement. (Maitland 1979:203)

² **Hatshepsut** (c.1540-1481 BC) The daughter of Thutmose I of Egypt. After the death of her half-brother and husband, Thutmose II, the young Thutmose III succeeded, but she soon replaced him as the effective ruler and reigned until her death twenty years later. As well as furthering her father's building programme at Karnak, she had a magnificent temple constructed at Deir Al-Bahri.' *Oxford World Encyclopedia* (Oxford University Press, 1998). I also understand, from a conversation with another delegate at the *Historical Fictions* conference, that Hatshepsut has been the subject of recent re-examination by

Egyptian feminists. It is interesting to note that while Roberts cites her sources for background on Flora Cook in the Author's note, she does not make any reference to Hatshepsut.