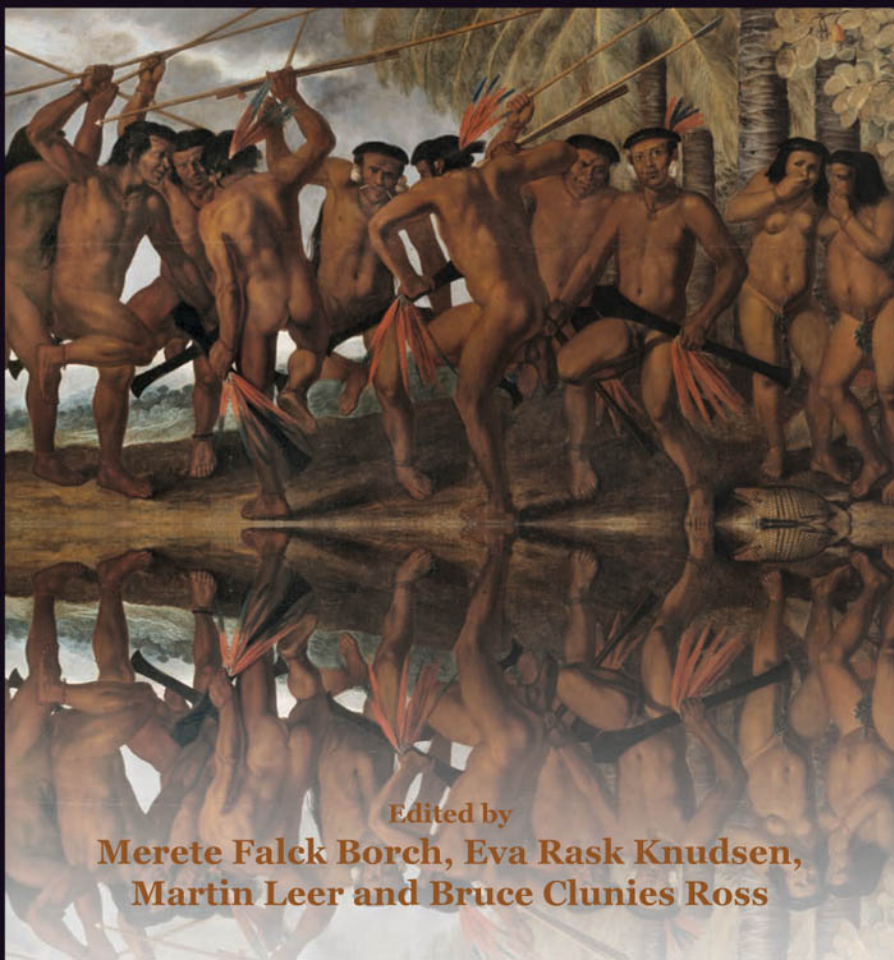


Cross/Cultures 94

Bodies and Voices

The Force-Field of Representation and Discourse
in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies



Edited by

**Merete Falck Borch, Eva Rask Knudsen,
Martin Leer and Bruce Clunies Ross**

Bodies and Voices

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IN MEMORIAM
ANNA RUTHERFORD
PRIMUM MOBILE

b. 27 November 1932, Mayfield, New South Wales
d. 21 February 2001, Newcastle, New South Wales

Preface

Remembering Anna Rutherford

I FIRST HEARD ABOUT ANNA RUTHERFORD in the fabulous summer of 1968, just before I went to Copenhagen to take up a position as *Engelsk lektor* at the university there. Anna was already in Denmark, having been appointed in 1966 to a position at the University of Aarhus by Professor Grethe Hjorth. That name, anglicized to Greta Hort, was dimly familiar. In another life, I had heard it on the lips of senior acquaintances who circulated in Melbourne's Bohemia in the age of Angry Penguins. Only much later did I discover that in the decade (1937–47) when she was Principal of Melbourne Women's College, Greta Hort was one of the city's leading intellectuals, accomplished in philosophy and biblical studies as well as literature. After a career which had taken her from Copenhagen to Cambridge, Melbourne and Prague, she had returned in 1957 to her homeland to take the chair of English at the University of Aarhus, where, along with cultivating her wide-ranging interests, she pioneered the study of Commonwealth and, particularly, Australian literature.

Her appointment of Anna Rutherford to a *lektorat* in Commonwealth literature was a fortunate and far-sighted decision. Following Grethe Hjorth's unexpected death in 1967, the task of developing the subject was bequeathed to Anna (as she put it in her contribution to *A Shaping of Connections*¹). She was, as Grethe Hjorth probably foresaw, exactly the right person at the right moment, when what was needed to advance the subject beyond the pioneering stage was someone with Anna's qualities; intellectual power, knock-down candour, and a generous feeling for literature, along with vision, superlative energy, and a confident belief in the project she was undertaking. At the time that was very rare, and I confess I did not share it until Anna showed me the

¹ "Why Aarhus?" in *A Shaping of Connections: Commonwealth Literature Studies – Then and Now*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Peterson & Anna Rutherford (Sydney & Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1989): 33.

light; an unforgettable experience, as others who have seen the light through Anna's ministrations can testify. In a career dedicated to developing the study of Commonwealth literature, she brought distinction to the English Institute at the University of Aarhus, and her presence there made it a leading centre for scholarship in the subject. It became a crossroads for writers and scholars from all corners of world, though informal meetings were more likely to take place in the signalman's house beside the railroad where Anna lived with Kirsten Holst Petersen. Anna, a generous host, assumed that its address and telephone number, with an invitation to stay, was posted on neon signs visible to all passengers departing to European destinations from Australian airports. Even when equipped with that information, however, only the most intrepid travellers were likely to find their way to the house without a guide, unless they took the risk of jumping off a speeding train.

It was in Aarhus that I eventually met Anna, when I went to the conference on Commonwealth Literature which she organized in 1971. Though she had put it together, with the help of friends and students, in a mere two or three months, she managed to bring to Aarhus a number of major Commonwealth writers, and most of the scholars who were beginning to investigate the complex development of writing in the English language in the world beyond Britain and America. They had come for no other reason than a love and enthusiasm for what they were doing, and this spirit pervaded formal and informal meetings, and even debates and disagreements. Among the participants I remember writers whose works were the subject of our discussions: Randolph Stow, Wilson Harris, Samuel Selvon, and Mordecai Richler, for example. Also present were the scholars who were pioneering the discipline, among them Hena Maes-Jelinek, whose scholarship on the work of Wilson Harris pointed the way to postcolonial studies, Gerald Moore, one of the first scholars of African literature, whom I remember for his learned interventions in a running controversy on the reputation of Karen Blixen, and Paul Edwards, whose recovery of the writings of Equiano and Sancho was revealing the subject's historical depth. The polyglot Welsh scholar Ned Thomas, one of the first to write about the poetry of Derek Walcott, surprised us with a paper on the Welsh writer Saunders Lewis which foreshadowed the linguistic, political and geographical complexities that only emerged much later, as postcolonial studies developed.

At the centre of it all was Anna, supported by friends and students waiting to do her bidding. She ran a conference like a great jazz musician; not a flashy, attention-seeking soloist, but like one of those rare leaders who give the ensemble direction, shape it, and hold the whole improvisation together on the fine, outer edge of coherence. The performance was obviously exhilarating, even if it was exhausting, and I imagine that it inspired Anna to follow it

up by founding *Commonwealth Newsletter*, which metamorphosed into *Kunapipi*, and publishing *Enigma of Values*, an introduction to the writing and ideas of Wilson Harris, which initiated her Dangaroo Press. *Kunapipi* and the Dangaroo Press list are a major part of Anna's legacy, but so is the distinctive style and spirit of the EACLALS conferences which followed the one she organized in 1971. Anna put her stamp on Commonwealth and postcolonial studies and fostered their development through the intellectual and practical support she gave to individual writers and scholars everywhere.

She astutely recognized the potential in others, sometimes before they were aware of it themselves, and encouraged them to pursue their ideas for essays in *Kunapipi* and Dangaroo publications. Young, and not so young, scholars from Europe and further afield got their start because Anna invited them to contribute to one of her publications. I was among the many who benefitted, and so were Martin Leer, Eva Rask Knudsen and Merete Borch – students who later became valued colleagues and friends. There would not have been a Copenhagen EACLALS conference without Anna's continuing support of its organizers, and her suggestion, at a major conference in Tübingen, that we undertake it. Anna's generosity extended around the world and connected writers, readers and scholars from every continent and many islands in a global network: "the Friends of Anna," a bond that survives, even between people remote from each other who have yet to meet. Yet the candour, openness to new ideas and curiosity about the way others were thinking that are the concomitants of such generosity were unusual qualities in Danish academic circles, where it is the custom to treat research in progress as a private matter, not to be enquired into or discussed, except on rare formal occasions when it cannot be avoided. The suspicion and mean-mindedness that this sometimes engenders were turned against Anna in the closing years of her career, and she retired from the English Institute at Aarhus University, of which she was the most illustrious member, in bitterness and sorrow.

Petty jealousies could not obscure or diminish her outstanding achievements. Anna made a huge success of the position at the University of Aarhus. It provided scope for her to cultivate her extensive talents and in the process have a formative influence, far beyond the borders of Denmark, on the development of a new branch of literary studies. She was an outstanding teacher, loved by a long succession of students who spread her teaching. Perhaps more than any of her contemporaries, she was alert to literary developments in distant reaches of the English-speaking world and wrote about them in pioneering essays informed by fine literary judgement. Her scholarship extended beyond local academic or national boundaries and was inspired by a vision of the way contemporary writing was connecting writers and readers across the world. She gave substance to this vision by bringing writers from Africa, the

Caribbean, Southern Asia, Australasia and Canada to Aarhus for extended periods, and, as I have indicated, by founding the periodical *Kunapipi* and Dangaroo Press. Both exemplified her strong belief that creative writing and scholarship were complementary. She was widely admired for this by the writers and researchers whose work she published, and by their readers, but it created financial problems, because some of the institutions on which she depended for grants generally refused to support publications which were not exclusively academic. Thus the quality that gave Anna's work its distinction, and benefitted Commonwealth and postcolonial literary studies, was a potential hindrance; but she never compromised, and where necessary funded her publications from her own pocket.

The foundation of Anna's many talents was her overwhelming vitality, the first thing that everyone who met her noticed, and never had reason to forget. In full flight she was irresistible. This, combined with a skill at improvising the impossible (which I fondly imagine is typically Australian), enabled her to undertake projects which had never been previously attempted because they were too daunting. Of course, when she did this she was often assisted by friends, colleagues and students who could not resist her; but this was part of her genius. Through sheer vitality, she inspired others to help her in accomplishing things they would never have tried without her.

Most memories of Anna are probably, like mine, of a figure in motion; a flash of bright, concentrated eyes, tousled fair hair with a ginger tinge, and a lurid shirt. Anna, of course, always wore trousers; generally nondescript jeans, but I had the privilege once of seeing her attired in a dress, or what we agreed at the time should properly be called a frock. She wore it to officiate as the faculty opponent at Karin Hansson's doctoral defence at the University of Lund in Sweden. Anna had been told by her Danish friends that Sweden was a strictly formal country, in contrast to Denmark, where dressing down is the sign of national identity – which suited Anna, of course. Not that she was indifferent to the charms of fashion. On the contrary, she was acutely observant of them, as I discovered when she and Hena Maes-Jelinek introduced me to the Faubourg St. Honoré and enticed me into a boutique while Anna tried on a *chapeau*. It looked dashing on her and detracted spectacularly from the jeans and sneakers. I had the impression she was prepared to pay a lot for it, but “Ye Gods and little fishes!” was all she could utter, loudly, when told the price, and we left without it.

Anna's frock (her only one, I was assured) was rarer and more inspired than anything to be found in the fashion houses of Paris. It had been made for her in Africa, as a gift, and was a classic example of the postcolonial art which Anna was already promoting on the covers of *Kunapipi* and in her books. Whether she was persuaded by her friends' stories of Swedish formal-

ity I do not know; I think she may have decided that an occasion where she would have to spend hours facing the public from behind a lectern was a good opportunity to give the frock its first airing. It was cut from material obviously hand-woven, and dyed a bright sky-blue; a colour which suited Anna. I have not the expertise to describe its pleated style, but it fitted perfectly. All over it were stitched small objects, mainly in black or white; beads, singly and in clusters, intricate knots of material, and what appeared to be shells or pieces of stone, spaced at a distance of about ten centimetres from each other. Although they looked random, I assumed they were emblems in a story relating to its creator and Anna, who wore it with the natural grace of someone accustomed to dressing in that way. Before very long, it was her incisive examination of Karin's excellent thesis, and not the frock, that held our attention.

The frock was a souvenir of a journey to Africa, but Anna travelled all over the world, and towards the end of her life reached Easter Island, which she had always wanted to visit. She had a natural talent for travel, the counterpart of her skill in improvising the impossible, as I know from the time she managed to get us both back to Lecce in the middle of the night after an alcoholic blackout far out in unknown Apulia. But this, to her, would have been a trivial incident in a life of adventures which were sometimes dangerous, though she claimed she had been scared only once, long ago in Baghdad, where she locked herself in her hotel room for more than a day to escape a persistent admirer who kept returning to bang on the door. I think she enjoyed the hazards of travel and of coping with the unforeseen, at which she was brilliant. It seems a pity that she never (as far as I know) wrote about her adventures, as she told marvellous stories about them, but we do have an oblique record of journeys, for travel was an essential aspect of her career. She met writers in Nigeria, Jamaica, Rajasthan, Sri Lanka, Ladakh, the Pacific Islands, South Australia, the Canadian Prairies and many other places, and came to appreciate their work 'on the ground' (as the journalists say). This extensive knowledge of literary developments *in situ* was one of the qualities that distinguished her work as a pioneer of Commonwealth and postcolonial literary studies.

My own travels with Anna were modest. Although we lived in the same small country, we generally met by accident at Kastrup airport en route to the same conference, so most of our conversations happened in places far from Aarhus and Copenhagen. I saw her last in Hobart, in the year 2000, where I was pleased to discover that little had changed (except for a bridge) since my previous visits in the 1950s. It was late winter, and we stood on the docks, admiring the dramatic evening sky and imagining the light fading over the Southern Ocean, slanting away towards Antarctica. My last trace is a photograph of her in the last year of her life, standing on the jetty at Penneshaw,

Kangaroo Island, where I had spent summer holidays during the war. What a pity I was not there! It was the only place in the world where I could have reversed the customary procedure, and shown Anna around.

The Copenhagen EACLALS Conference was the first without Anna, and the second in Denmark, after the famous one she organized in Aarhus, where it all started. We dedicated it to the memory of Anna, whose spirit pervaded it, as I hope it will continue to pervade future conferences. After all, she had enough vitality for several lifetimes.

BRUCE CLUNIES ROSS
JYSTRUP, DENMARK, 19 OCTOBER 2007

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Introduction

Bodies and Voices: The Force-Field of Representation and Discourse

WHEN THE ORGANIZERS of EACLALS 2002 at the University of Copenhagen agreed on the theme of “Bodies and Voices,” originally suggested by Tabish Khair, it was for some of us also with a degree of exasperation. Some lateral thinking seemed to be needed with regard to the power of ‘representation’: both the ‘representations’ which dominated and even increasingly dominate world politics – of the Orient, of Islam, of Africa, of the Third World, of migrants – and the concept of ‘representation’ within postcolonial studies. It is a fundamental concept of postcolonialism, at least since Edward Said, but with its roots in Frantz Fanon and even before. It is one of the most important contributions of the field and its associated theories, but it can also be stifling if we cannot get beyond its power. In Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Glass Palace*, the character Dinu expresses this well when he meets his cousin Arjun in the Burmese jungle at the end of World War II where Arjun is making a last stand against the Empire that had trained him as an officer:

“Did we ever have a hope?” [Arjun] said. “We rebelled against an Empire that has shaped everything in our lives, coloured everything in the world as we know it. It is a huge indelible stain which has tainted all of us. We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves. And that, I suppose, is where I am ...”

... This is the greatest danger, [Dinu] thought, this point at which Arjun has arrived – where, in resisting the powers that form us, we allow them to gain control of all meaning; this is their moment of victory; it is in this way that they inflict their final and most terrible defeat.¹

¹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (London: HarperCollins, 2000): 518–19.

Postcolonial studies, like other intellectual movements that lay claim to ‘resistance’, must face this inherent danger. And it seemed to some of us, in those innocent days before 9/11 when we were planning the conference, that postcolonialism in its Pyrrhic triumph, as we saw it then, was perhaps steering in this direction. On the one hand, there was a certain despair that even so basic a trait of postcolonialism as its critique of *representation* had achieved so limited an effect on social conceptions. A well-meaning government-funded group in Copenhagen, with whom we were hoping for some form of collaboration, was at that time expanding a long-running festival named *Images of Africa* into *Images of the World*. They might have benefitted from a class on representation by postcolonial scholars, we thought.

In the meantime, an election brought what is known in Danish history as a “system change” (which happens about once a century) around New Year 2001–2002. The conference lost some promised quasi-governmental funding, and a majority of the Danish electorate embarked enthusiastically down the path which was to lead to the affair about the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2005–2006. This, of course, was to be purely and in multiple ways a matter of representation – of the Prophet and of Muslims as people with bombs in their turbans – and of Denmark. A small country’s world image was to change over a few months from a byword of humanity and liberalism, based somewhat ambiguously both on the evacuation of the Danish Jews in 1942–44 and the liberalization of pornography in 1969, to one of stubborn xenophobia, though many Danes persisted in seeing themselves as the last defenders of free speech. In all this, postcolonialist critique of representation was doomed to fall silent, in awe at the forces of hatred released by the most primitive forms of racial and religious stereotyping.

Back in those innocent days, however, we thought at the same time that postcolonial theorists might do well to be reminded of some home truths. “We suffer,” as the literary theorist Wład Godzich, on a visit to Copenhagen around that time, remarked with some irony after a bout of illness, “in our bodies, not in representations of our bodies.” And some of us were losing our temper with simple-minded readings of Gayatri Spivak’s conundrum: “Can the subaltern speak?” and were heard hissing, “Of course they can speak, and have spoken countless times. The problem is whether anybody listens!” (This, of course, is not what Spivak’s essay is about at all; and “resistance to theory” is subject to the same inherent danger as other resistance theories.) And the problem can be turned on its head, as Marc Colavincenzo does in his essay towards the end of this collection: Is anyone listening to the postcolonial theorists?

“Bodies and Voices,” then, was a topic meant to bring to the fore *the underlying force-field of ‘representation’*. We wanted it to defuse some famil-

iar short-circuits and bring new energy to a field which, despite its success, despite the decisive turn from “Commonwealth to Postcolonial”² only just over a decade earlier, was felt by some critics to be already stagnating. The theme, we claimed in our “Call for Papers,” struck at the heart of many contemporary debates in colonial and postcolonial studies: debates about the colonized subject, colonization of the body and the mind, representations of the Other, subaltern agency, let alone the debates sparked by Spivak’s question. We further envisaged the topic opening up innumerable other areas of discussion and investigation at the intersection of classic concerns in Commonwealth and postcolonial literary and historical studies with completely new perspectives from within and outside the field. To mention a few: historical anatomies of the body and the voice; global English vs. local englishes and other debates on language; enslavement of bodies and voices; discourses of race and racism; the senses and histories of the senses; embodiment and incarnation; cargo cults and spirit possession; tattoos and accents; the survival of biological and cultural diversity in the 21st century; bodies of land, bodies of water; voices of air and fire; drama, performance and mime; indeed, “bodies” and “voices” of everything from colonial administration to postcolonial discourse.

Surprisingly many of these topics were covered, at the conference and in this collection. The organizers and some veteran participants were particularly pleased with the great number of graduate students present, which gave the conference a whiff of the future, which hopefully means that this volume, though much retarded, has not completely lost relevance. Especially the “Body” half of the topic met with interest from scholars around the world, though the cost of coming to Copenhagen was too great for many – such are still the economic divisions of the world for those working in the field of the humanities. There are still almost insurmountable barriers – economic but also in terms of visas – for scholars from Nigeria or Iran if they want to attend a conference in Copenhagen, confirming the inherent connection between the postcolonial, not yet ‘globalized’ world order, and ‘body studies’.

<•>

It seems to be commonly agreed that it was the 1980s that made ‘the body’ into a serious academic concern for the humanities and social sciences. The last volumes of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, Peter Brown’s work

² Allusion to Anna Rutherford, ed. *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial* (Mandelstrup & Sydney: Dangaroo, 1992), the Proceedings of the ACLALS Silver Jubilee Conference at the University of Kent at Canterbury in 1989.

on early Christian attitudes in *The Body and Society*, and Bryan Turner's work in sociology are often cited. Despite the extensive consideration of the body in social anthropology from Malinowski to Mary Douglas and in the French tradition of ethnography and philosophy from Marcel Mauss to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, it was only the relative decline of structuralist critiques of language and ideology, along with second- or third-generation feminism and gay studies, that launched the body into fashion all across the humanities and social sciences as a kind of ultimate frontier of interdisciplinarianism. In the Kantian university, theorizing the body had been left to medicine, which clearly was no longer to be entirely trusted: indeed, as Foucault and Georges Cangouilhem among others had begun to show, the history of medical theorizing of the body had overwhelming social, philosophical and cultural dimensions. But this development also coincided with obvious developments in Western culture, where a cult and culture of the body grew to almost parodic proportions, once consumerism had penetrated all classes in society. Sport became the real ideological foundation of postmodern capitalism – and the body increasingly a consumer object, something chosen, not given. What Foucault called “biopolitics” has never ceased to unfold into ever new and unpredictable dimensions. And ‘body studies’ has become almost mainstream, as witness such recent publications as Routledge’s wide-ranging *The Body: A Reader*, edited by Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco (2005) and Seuil’s magisterial-looking three-volume *Histoire du corps*, edited by Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine and Georges Vigarello (2005–2006).

Both works, however, also demonstrate the problems social and humanistic scholarship still have with theorizing the field of the body, problems that may in themselves be productive in opening new perspectives. Fraser and Greco capture this by beginning their introduction with a quotation from Alfred North Whitehead: “No one ever says, Here am I, and I have brought my body with me,” which, they say, “humorously captures some of the incongruity of conceiving of the ‘I’ and the ‘body’ in terms of two separate entities”:

The body, here, is akin to something like baggage, something that could potentially be left behind, or which might get lost. The body is something that we would have to remember not to forget. If we laugh, it is on account, to quote Michel Foucault, of ‘the stark impossibility of thinking *that*’ [...] And yet many analyses of the body begin by underscoring that it is precisely *that* – the ‘absence’ of the body – which has implicitly informed much of sociology and perhaps other related disciplines [...] For while the body and the organism have offered *metaphors* for the social world, they have not traditionally been considered relevant as subjects for sociological analysis in their own right.³

³ Mariam Fraser & Monica Greco, *The Body: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2005): 1.

The many brief excerpts in *The Body: A Reader* theorize, analyse and rethink the body from a number of different perspectives: how the body relates to social order or disorder, to questions of ‘identity’, ‘normality’ and ‘monstrosity’, to health and disease, consumer culture, technology and ethics. Many of these are covered in the present volume as well; even more were covered at the conference. What *The Body: A Reader* lacks, somewhat surprisingly, despite the presence of pieces by Anne McClintock (an excerpt from *Imperial Leather*) and Paul Gilroy (from the essay “Race Ends Here”), is a consideration of the cross-cultural and postcolonial aspects of ‘the body’, which in this context must take the plural form, despite the fact that Fraser and Greco argue convincingly for a sociology of *the body*, and not just of bodies. For surely some of the most intractable and controversial questioning of the body/bodies complex happens at the cross-cultural borders, which are more than just borders of race and gender. The most controversial plenary address at the Copenhagen conference was undoubtedly Chantal Zabus’s, reprinted here, which for all its sophistication in voicing a cross-cultural problem also embodied it. And perhaps the least controversial keynote address, Helen Tiffin’s on BSE/Creutzfeld–Jacobs disease and other diseases that cross the species boundary, was so positively received, partly because all minds⁴ present were ‘human’ and thus on the same side of that boundary (we shared the body and the worry, over-mediatized though it may be), but the paper gained theoretical weight precisely by questioning that boundary from a postcolonial perspective.

Gallo- and eurocentric though it is, *Histoire du corps* has to keep rather more focus on the cross-cultural and the question of representation, because a history of the body, even more than most history, confirms L.P. Hartley’s over-quoted dictum that “The past is a different country. They do things differently there.” The first volume begins at a point when ‘the body’ still meant predominantly the body of Christ, if also increasingly that of the King embodying society; when anatomical dissection was in its infancy, and sainthood a matter of often strikingly physical ways of denigrating the body, even if European painting and science of the Renaissance had begun to give mass and weight to earthly corporeality, at the same time as the voyages of discovery had begun the period of European global expansion. The last volume ends with the philosopher Yves Michaud’s despair faced with the near-impossibility of ‘thinking’ the contemporary body:

Michel Foucault wrote in 1976, at the end of *La Volonté de savoir*, that sex has become “the imaginary point through which everyone must pass in order to have access to their own intelligibility, to the totality of their body, to their

⁴ The Cartesian divide is introduced here out of respect for the scientific fact that a human body is only about 10% human, the other 90% largely bacterial.

identity.” Intelligibility, totality, identity, so many strangely humanist concepts for a thinker who wanted to be anti-humanist, but who still bears witness to a classical project of representation.

Almost thirty years have passed, and we are now directly confronted with the body and sex, with their enigmatic appearance, at once obsessional and frigid, brutal and familiar, nude and indifferent. An icy materialism prevails: where there was consciousness, souls, fantasies and desires, there is nothing but the body and its traces.

Facing the self has come to mean facing a body from which we can in no way distance ourselves. Foucault wrote in the same passage that “sex has become more important than our soul, almost more important than our lives.”

To describe the contemporary situation we need only replace “sex” with “body” and leave out the “almost”: the body has become more important than our soul – it has become more important than our lives.⁵

This is ‘a body’ unrepresentable because overrepresented – in an era where 1) the sports arena and the catwalk have become the highest fields of human endeavour, the truly mythic realms of a society somewhere between market democracy and mass spectacle; where 2) pornography is everywhere, from classic public spaces, where it seems to be the most fool-proof way of making us consume, to the Internet, where Google’s famous Zeitgeist lists of the year’s most searched-for terms filter out terms to do with sex, because if they were allowed, there would be no other Zeitgeist; and where, perhaps even more importantly, 3) every aspect of the interior workings of bodies – from cancers to pregnancies and brain activity, not forgetting the genome – have become visible and representable due to various “imaging techniques,” deceptive though some of them may be.

Perhaps one of the most striking contemporary developments traced in *Histoire du corps* is the growing ambiguity about the social conception of the body. On the one hand, the body came to be conceived after the Second World War as a humanist–legalistic inviolable sanctum of personal, individual identity – perhaps in response to the experience of the Camps, summed up in Primo Levi’s famous phrase, “My body was no longer my own.” On the other hand, there has emerged a more social and ‘biopolitical’ conception of the body, which Anne Marie Moulin, Frédéric Keck and Paul Rabinow see as having developed in response to the imaging techniques and to the Human Genome Project’s failure to do what it was supposed to: that is, localize individual diseases on individual genes – while instead it pushed genetics in the

⁵ Yves Michaud, “Visualisations: Le corps et les arts visuels,” in *Histoire du corps*, vol. 3: *Les mutations du regard: Le XX^{ème} siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2006): 435–36.

direction of population biology and capitalist patenting.⁶ But perhaps identity politics has played a part as well. It is noticeable in *The Body: A Reader* how close some contemporary ‘theorizing’ comes to a kind of personal–political paranoia: ‘my body’ seems to be more theoretically interesting as well as more at risk and more inviolable, because it is a (representative?) woman’s body, gay, queer, black, disabled, obese, not because it is individually irreplaceable.

In studying and theorizing the body, history and literature as well as sociology and philosophy are confounded by a situation summed up by Alain Corbin, where a “radical strangeness is allied to a total familiarity, which imposes the classical distinction between the body as object and the subjective body.” But is this tenable? It is surely more ambiguous than that:

The body occupies a place in space. It is itself a space which possesses its own coverings: the skin, the sonorous halo of its voice, the aura of its perspiration. This physical, material body may be touched, sensed, contemplated. It is this object which others see, scrutinize in their desire. It is used by time. It is the object of science. Scientists manipulate it and dissect it. They measure its mass, its density, its volume, its temperature. They analyse its movement. They work it over. But this body of the anatomists and the physiologists differs radically from the body which feels pleasure and pain [...] In the perspective of sensualism [...] the body is the place of sensations. The fact of feeling oneself to be there constitutes life, the origin of experience, time lived ...⁷

A history of the body must see both sides, but, as Corbin repeatedly complains, the representations tend to overwhelm; bodily practice, pleasure and pain leave only “evanescent traces.” Nevertheless, as knowledge and representation of the body as object grew in the twentieth century, European culture made the singularity of bodily experience ever more central to its definition of humanity. Anne Marie Moulin sums up:

The personalised experience of pain illustrates the “legitimate strangeness” (René Char) of the individual. Every human being knows a singular destiny and resembles no one else. The body participates in this adventure. It is not merely “the principle of individuation,” as the sociologist Émile Durkheim wrote, paraphrasing Aristotle. It is the unique means of expression, of action and pathos, of seduction and rejection, the fundamental vector of our being-in-the-world. Our soul is not lodged in the body like a captain in his ship, as Descartes saw it, but enters into an intimate relationship, which differentiates

⁶ Anne Marie Moulin, “Le corps face à la médecine,” and Frédéric Keck & Paul Rabinow, “Invention et mise en scène du corps génétique,” in *Histoire du corps*, vol. 3: 15–71, 71–93.

⁷ Alain Corbin, “Introduction” to *Histoire du corps*, vol. 2: *De la Révolution à la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Seuil, 2005): 7.

forever “my body” from that of the Other. In 1935, witness to the crisis in European thought, Husserl appealed for a rationality which understood the unity of body and thought and explored it in concrete operations. Contemporary phenomenologists have developed the notion of *le corps propre* (the subjective body) in opposition to the objectified and anonymous body of science. The ethnologist Maurice Leenhardt recounts in his book *Do Kamo* how, when interviewing an old Kanaka on the impact of Western values on his society, he received the sibylline answer: “What you have brought us, is the body.” Is the fact of singularising the body merely an inscription in an Occidental cultural logic?⁸



This, of course, is the point at which the present volume enters the fray, but it gives no simple, single or final answer. What we have is a sibylline voice of ‘the Other’ talking about the body. But what is he really saying? If you read him in the context of Carole Ferrier’s essay below, it has nothing to do with philosophical individualization of bodily experience; but with the objectification and reification that happened to Kanaka bodies when they were subjected to capitalist exploitation of the most gruesome kind.

Of the two terms of the title of this volume, “voice” clearly stands in the same relationship to “discourse” as “body” does to “representation”: an attempt to reveal the force-field operating on the discourses into which intellectual and academic discussion and analysis tend to order themselves. The voices of the ‘subaltern’ as well as the field of the ‘postcolonial’ have had a strong tendency to evade the theories that have tried to manage them. This, surely, is their enduring power, as expressions of subjectivity and objects of study.

Moreover, literature, which is the subject of the majority of the essays in the following, has certain advantages compared to sociology and history when dealing with bodies and voices. This might even be claimed to be shown by the two essays in this collection that are crossovers between sociology and literary studies (Emman Frank Idoko’s on drama used as socio-therapy in prisons in Germany and Nigeria, and Derren Joseph’s on education and social exclusion in Trinidad). Literature in its various genres offers different and sometimes alternative *voicings* and *embodiments*: think of drama vs. the novel vs. lyric poetry! And it is no coincidence that many of the essays in this volume, both because they are literary and because they deal with the postcolonial and the cross-cultural, should be concerned with these terms, in contradistinction to the two recent works on the sociology and history of the body

⁸ Anne Marie Moulin, “Le corps face à la médecine,” 44.

mentioned above. Dialogue, dialectic and negotiation begin when ‘body’ is joined by ‘embodiment’ and ‘voice’ by ‘voicing’.

In terms of *the voice*, the organizers were largely unreconstructed Aristotelians: we saw voice as the sound “of what has soul in it,” just as Aristotle defined it in *De anima*. And we were no doubt highly influenced by the fact that in Scandinavian languages, as in a number of others, *voice* and *vote* are the same word – so *voices*, like *bodies*, were a gesture towards participatory and performative democracy. But even a more ‘theorized’ voice, with a heavy dose of Freud, Saussure, Derrida, Lacan and Žižek, as in Mladen Dolar’s *A Voice and Nothing More*, connects language, body and soul in an intimate manner:

[The voice] is like a bodily missile which separates itself from the body and spreads around, but on the other hand it points to a bodily interior, an intimate partition of the body which cannot be disclosed – as if the voice were the very principle of division into interior and exterior. The voice, by being so ephemeral, transient, incorporeal, ethereal, presents for that very reason the body at its quintessential, the hidden bodily treasure beyond the visible envelope, the interior “real” body, unique and intimate, and at the same time it seems to present more than the mere body – in many languages there is an etymological connection between spirit and breath [...] [T]he voice carried by breath points to the soul irreducible to the body [...] The voice is the flesh of the soul, its ineradicable materiality, by which the soul can never be rid of the body; it depends on this inner object which is but the ineffable trace of externality and heterogeneity, but by virtue of which the body can also never quite simply be the body, it is a truncated body, a body cloven by the impossible rift between an interior and an exterior. The voice embodies the very impossibility of this division and acts as its operator.⁹

This embodied metaphysics of the voice places it “at the intersection of language and the body, but this intersection belongs to neither. *What language and the body have in common is the voice, but the voice is part of neither language nor of the body.* The voice stems from the body, but is not its part, and it upholds language, without belonging to it” (73). And the voice forms a similar bridge in ethics and politics:

By using one’s voice one is also “always-already” yielding power to the Other; the silent listener has the power to decide over the fate of the voice and its sender; the listener can rule over its meaning, or turn a deaf ear ...

The voice cuts both ways: as an authority over the Other and as an exposure to the Other, an appeal, a plea, an attempt to bend the Other. It cuts directly into

⁹ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006): 70–71.

the interior, so much so that the very status of the exterior becomes uncertain, and it directly discloses the interior, so much so that the very supposition of an interior depends on the voice. (80–81)

For Dolar, this makes the voice synonymous with the Freudian ‘drive’, but in this book it has a far more obvious cross-cultural and postcolonial resonance. Classically, anthropology has dealt with the very different ways in which various cultures have incorporated or ex-corporated the body: from fur-clad Inuit to naked Pacific islanders. But there are indications that perhaps the body is one of the areas, like international finance, that is becoming most consistently ‘globalized’: in food, clothes, pornography, hygiene, sports. In a way, this is one of the most terrifying aspects of ‘globalization’: that it happens at once at the most intimately and individually human level of everyday life – and where value is determined in the most inhumane way, but leaves behind all the linguistic and symbolic levels in between. This makes it so much more urgent to have it voiced from cross-cultural and postcolonial points of view; such globalization has, after all, only been possible due to Euro-American imperialism and colonialism.

Colonization separates spirit, mind and body of those colonized and, even when it does not enslave the bodies, turns them into objects. The constitutive problem of colonial discourse is the misrepresentation of ‘othered’ bodies deprived of voice. And all forms of ‘postcolonialism’, constructive and destructive – from Gandhi to Mugabe, from Fanon to Bhabha, from Spivak to Winnie Mandela, from Walcott to Marley – have been attempts to find ways out of this impasse. Mladen Dolar may well be right that there is always an eerie or *unheimlich* discrepancy between body and voice. But by not attending to both we are caught in the situation of the His Master’s Voice label Dolar analyses in such detail: an endlessly reproduced representation of doglike devotion to a gramophone, moving as that may be to the sentimentalist.

<*>

This book has been organized regionally, though the conference was not. This is to leave other organizing interpretations open to the reader, though in effect the essays as presented here do have an implicit, if highly polyphonic, argument, as the different authors find ways of negotiating the relationship between bodies and representation, voices and discourse – as well as discourse on bodies and the representation of voices.

The first section, on Africa, begins with an overview by André Viola (now sadly departed and much missed) of “martyred bodies and silenced voices” in South Africa under – but also after – apartheid. Apartheid South Africa constituted perhaps the most systematic colonial attempt at segregating, as Viola

puts it, “the corporeal envelopes of its inhabitants.” The essay studies two types of this bodily experience in fiction: a whole subgenre of stories about confiscated (dead) bodies and the traumas these bodies leave for the relatives, and the central form of apartheid narratives where martyred bodies function as substitutes for the silenced voice of the land. A last part deals with the continued centrality of the suffering body in post-apartheid South Africa: in the deliberations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and in fiction like Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.

Coetzee’s 1999 novel is taken up again by Georgina Horrell, who examines the figure of “the White Woman” it presents “in a particularly provocative and arguably illuminating way” in comparison with other (white) Southern African (women) writers such as Antjie Krog, Elleke Boehmer and Gillian Slovo. Sceptical of reading the novel as an allegory of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Horrell notes in it the restrictions and imprisoning grip of the past, where Lucy’s body, in both racial and gendered terms, functions as a site for the inscription of guilt: “only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory,” as Nietzsche said. Echoing Elizabeth Grosz’s critique of Foucault’s apparent assumption of a “natural body” (Western, white, male, if also homosexual?), Horrell highlights the different “inscriptive tools” required for sexually and racially different bodies: here, with some reversals, the “white, female, lesbian” body in postcolonial Africa. Here “collective whiteness” has come to be seen as a site of guilt – while at the same time “always, in anger and frustration, men use women’s bodies as a terrain for struggle,” as Thenjiwe Mhintso said in her opening words for the TRC’s special women’s hearings in Gauteng. Coetzee’s novel, as narrated from the point of view of Lucy’s father, a self-confessed sexual harasser of coloured women, takes not the way of bodily reconciliation in Boehmer’s *Bloodlines* but, rather, the renegotiation through the inscription of pain and ownership on white flesh, which comes out also in Krog’s *Country of My Skull*.

Coetzee’s novel, finally, is compared by Benaouda Lebdaï to the Algerian French writer Nina Baouraoui’s *Garçon manqué*. Starting from the assumption that “characters,” perhaps more than narrators, “structure the text,” Lebdaï looks at how literary corporeality is constructed in the two novels: gendered, specific and disturbing bodies seen in a particular historical dimension of colonialism. Reading *Disgrace* from the point of view of Lucy rather than her father gives a different perception of the rape scene and reconciliation, of white and black, and bodily and psychological pain, while Yasmina in Bouraoui’s novel uses autodiegetic narration to voice and reflect on the hybrid situation not just of her mind, but of her body, especially its gendered status.

In Chantal Zabus’s essay “From ‘Cutting Without Ritual’ to ‘Ritual Without Cutting’,” voicing bodily experience across cultures becomes acutely

problematic, even in terms of naming what now seems more or less, by educated consensus, to be termed “F.G.C.,” “female genital cutting,” but which is still popularly known as either “circumcision” (by false analogy with the male ritual) or “mutilation.” Zabuz gives an illuminating survey of the history of F.G.C. in Kenya since the 1930s, where it has had a strong relation to colonialism and the anticolonial struggle, and then compares it with the Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi’s struggles to speak from her private memory and escape bodily and religious surveillance. The present uneasy situation of the practice is introduced in a discussion of opposite developments: the ‘deritualization’ of this transitional puberty rite into just a matter of controlling women’s sexuality and attempts at introducing a ritual without cutting.

By contrast, the next essay, by Maya G. Vinuesa, celebrates Yvonne Vera’s ability to give new expression to women’s erotic desire in *Butterfly Burning*. Vera, according to Vinuesa, uses both the European tradition of representing men’s and women’s erotic desire through the tropes of water, air and fire – and the water–dryness continuum traditionally associated with fertility in African literature and culture. Placing Vera in relation to both the stream in African women’s writing which rejects the traditional ideological commitment to “the joys of motherhood” (as exemplified by Flora Nwapa), and the stream which attempts to deal more openly with women’s bodily desires (Ama Ata Aidoo), Vinuesa analyses the new metaphors and metonyms in Vera’s structured, poetic prose that give expression to women’s struggle for freedom or, in Vera’s words, “invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones.”

Rosa Figueiredo’s essay on the bodies and voices in ritual drama, exemplified by Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, emphasizes, by reference both to Foucault and to Helen Gilbert and Joanna Tompkins, the actor’s body as the major physical symbol in theatrical performance and the carrier of a “multifarious complex of meanings.” In postcolonial drama in particular, metamorphic bodies come to stand for regeneration. It seems that Yoruba ritual drama is one means of working against the excessive stability the culture abhors. *Death and the King’s Horseman* in this context expresses Soyinka’s vision of the redemptive power of tragedy, also across cultures: Olunde substitutes his own body for that of his father in ritual suicide, but Olunde’s previous ‘westernization’ has opened a symbolic field for transgression and metamorphosis between tradition and modernity. The *egungun*-mask procession mediates here not just between literary modes in Soyinka’s perception of drama, but between modes of staging and performance, and between English colonizers and Africans. Through movement and words, metaphor and transference of meaning, the body of Olunde in his father’s arms comes to stand for the voice.

Eleonora Chiavetta focuses on the important bodily symbolic function of clothes in the stories of Karen King–Aribisala, an Afro-Caribbean writer living in Nigeria, who writes about diaspora, dislocation and belonging. Her stories are narratives of everyday situations, but, as in many narratives about women travellers and settlers, clothes take on a very important metaphoric role as a mediator between the body, the inside and the external world, concealment and display. Simple acts of taking off clothes in the heat or keeping them on or packing them in suitcases become symbolic of dreams and reality, illusion and disappointment. But added to this are the differences between Western and African styles of dress – wedding outfits, widows’ dress, an Englishwoman trying to efface herself by dressing in excessively Nigerian style – which in King–Aribisala’s second collection, *Kicking Tongues*, her rewriting of *The Canterbury Tales* in a Nigerian setting, also raise questions of gender and social status, related to choice and symbolism of colours, purdah, and the contrast between masks and true identities.

Finally, Gregory Hacksley takes a look back at the colonial period in Southern Rhodesia and the English-born poet Noel Brettell and his struggle to find a form in verse equivalent to his new surroundings, “if still in the voice of a stranger” and “crucified between two countries.” Finding a voice to deal with Africa and Africans, he achieved, according to the Zimbabwean poet Museamura Zimunya, an almost ‘colour-free’ expression, representing Africans “with a human and not a chimpanzee mentality.” Hacksley shows how Brettell’s liberal-humanist ideals are kept alive through a constant self-questioning, a stoic attention to the contrast and confluence of cultures, whether dealing with the Madonna and Child in an African carving, teaching Shakespeare in Africa, or the arson of white farms, including his own.



The section on Asia opens with Aparajita Nanda’s essay “Of a ‘Voice’ and ‘Bodies’: A Postcolonial Critique of Meena Alexander’s *Nampally Road*.” Nanda shows how, in trying to find a voice for a psychologically restless protagonist’s attempt “to know herself, name herself, and tell her story,” Alexander has to create a polymorphic, multi-bodied voice. The returned expatriate protagonist is not enough; the novel also has to give voice to and embody other female experiences, like that of the obstetrician–gynaecologist Durgabai, who becomes the novel’s *Mother India*, and that of a gang-raped woman, in order to orchestrate its full metaphoric and metonymic questioning of the discourses of patriarchy and brahminhood.

Maria Sophia Pimentel Biscaia moves in similar territory with her analysis of Gita Hariharan’s appropriation and subversion of the figure of Shahrzad

(the correct Farsi name for Sheherezade of *The Arabian Nights*) as the epitome of the speaking and political woman in *When Dreams Travel*. The novel turns on the ambiguity of women's bodies in men's minds: as vessels of sexual subservience, but also as the source of speech and dreams. Shahrzad becomes in the novel a fiction of her sister Duniyazad, Dilshad (the slave), and the latter's friend Satyasara, "a myth that must be sought in many places, fleshed in different bodies." The figure of Satyasara, one of "the Eternals" (whose name means 'truth' + 'sky' in Sanskrit), has turned into a half-monkey, a performing freak, a joke of nature brought to the freaks' wing of Shahrzad's harem. Here she turns silent when the eunuch she has fallen in love with is executed. Combining Leslie Fiedler's Freudian interpretation of the eros of ugliness with a Bakhtinian carnivalesque twist, the essay reads the novel as a demonstration of how monstrosity, instead of remaining marginal, becomes a politically central figure of womanhood as such within the symbolic order. It even becomes the figure of life itself, breathing and moaning in Satyasara's final mutilation:

The thing twitched like a truncated lizard's tail. Sweat streamed down its bruised breasts, changed course at its navel, and dripped to the ground from its hips, or the stumps where its legs should have begun. No matter what they did, it kept to the same volume, the same pitch, and it remained a stranger to silence. As they heard the moan go on and on, a few Eternals mumbled that they had never heard anything so steady and rhythmic before – except the breathing of a living thing.¹⁰

This moaning, breathing monotone of the human (or woman's) body can only be mutated to understanding on the level of the fictional narrating voice of Shahrzad.

Going beyond Pimentel Biscaia's essay, one might be reminded here of Giorgio Agamben's *Homo sacer* and his idea that this legal fiction of "bare human life" undistinguished from animal life (the Greeks' *bios* and *zōē* merged – or Walter Benjamin's *bloßes Leben*), the man so devoid of dignity that he cannot even be sacrificed, has become the basis of contemporary bio- and geopolitics.¹¹ But one is also immediately reminded that, at least in the conventional optics of feminism and postcolonialism, the body of the woman and the subaltern are 'always already' sacrificed, though this may be one of

¹⁰ Gita Hariharan, *When Dreams Travel*, as quoted by Biscaia in her essay below.

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1998).

those aspects of their discourses that need revision, in a world where ‘liberal humanism’ may no longer be their worst enemy.¹²

Shanthini Pillai’s “Unpacking Imperial Crates of Subalternity” deals with representations of the Indian immigrant labourer in colonial Malaya. “Subalternity” cloaked the experience of the Indian migrant labour force in Malaya, who usually came from the lowest castes in India, and still have not emerged fully as speaking subjects in Malayan history. The narrativization and staging of their history in the records are seen as “crates” within an imperial history: from the deck-space allotted to them on the ships from India and the official regulations, where they are treated even discursively as cargo, their reception by colonial officials, and their living conditions on the estates. Indeed, the rubber estates seem to have been conceived in the form of Foucauldian synoptic prisons, if not work camps. Little about the motivation of the “coolies” for migration emerges from the records, but sometimes fractures and ruptures indicate riots, though these are always treated more as a threat than in actual detail.

Saidatul Normis Haji Mahali uses a more directly descriptive anthropological approach in analysing the changes in social function of the *Tingayyun*, a traditional dance and song among the Sama–Bajau, the most widespread of the original sea nomads of South East Asia. As they have become settled in villages on piles along the coast, the *Tingayyun* has continued to play a function as a cognitive expression of the fundamental structure of society. Among a marginal people, dance and song have evolved to constitute a way of making vows and maintaining obligations, in connection with marriages and family stability.

Christiane Schlote treats the Pakistani-British playwright, poet and novelist Rukhshana Ahmad’s “Critical Examination of Female Body Politics in Pakistan and Britain” with detailed reference to recent sociology, anthropology and geography emerging from gender studies. Within the emergent ‘body studies’, Schlote finds, the control of bodies is still exercised mainly as hegemony over female bodies, and even more so in postcolonial literatures, where bodies are racialized as well as gendered. Rukhshana Ahmad describes her own political awakening as having occurred when, after moving to Britain, she returned to a Pakistan under islamization and encountered the vocal women’s movements there. Despite Western discourses about them, Muslim women in both Britain and Pakistan are highly aware, perceptive and heterogeneous strategists in laying claim to their bodies – and they emerge as such

¹² As it is, disconcertingly, the enemy and whipping-boy of all ‘theory’ in John McLeod’s *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000), which still appears to be the book we all have to begin with to make our students grasp the basics.

in Ahmad's work. Her novel *The Hope Chest* and her plays deal with mother/daughter relationships, sexual awakening, anorexia, abortion, the commodification of women's bodies and violence against women, against a background of how in both Pakistan and Britain the traditional segregationist protection of women's bodies has broken down in the face of social and economic transformations. This comes out in Ahmad's novel as a physio-psychological disease that separates body and soul, the reintegration of which becomes a prolonged battle.

Finally in the Asia section, Hsiu-chen Jane Chang takes the concern with voice and the appropriation of voice into cognitive translation studies in a critique of Arthur Waley's translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, entitled *The Way and Its Power* (from 1934), especially the Preface, where the translator's attitude to the source language reveals itself in the most primitive of Orientalist dichotomies. "Civilization" is seen here to have begun in Western Europe after industrialization, and the Chinese language is seen as one big primitive system of lacks, and consistently "unscientific," a discourse which is insisted on even to the point of imputing to the text a concern with omens and superstitions which is demonstrably not there (a discourse which, one might add to Chang's account, seems very odd after modern physics and especially the Copenhagen model of quantum mechanics discovered such strong affinities with Taoism).



The section on the settler colonies begins with Carla Comellini's essay, bridging Asia, Europe and Canada, on "Bodies and Voices in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*." These two novels are seen as constructed around metaphors and symbols connected to body and voice, but also on antinomies such as corporeal solidity as opposed to disembodiment (ghostly voices and the decomposition of both dead and living bodies). Voices, too, come in opposites: real and insistent vs. silent or silenced. The question that drives both novels is one of identification and identity: who is "the English patient" with his almost decomposed body, burnt beyond recognition, but his imperious outer and inner voice and memory? And how to identify the disappeared victims of recent Sri Lankan history, where sometimes the smallest scar, as a bodily memory, may lead to identification. Inner memory, outer skin, touch, body and book interpenetrate in *The English Patient* – as does the intimate connection between living body and corpse, the archaeological layers of the distant and recent past, in *Anil's Ghost*. In both books, listening to the voices enhances the intimacy of reading, and the insistence on recording the stories of the dead, dying and disappeared seems

almost to become a postcolonial rewriting of the great colonial topos of medicine.

Marta Dvorak's essay "Blurring Borders/ Blurring Bodies: David Cronenberg Strikes Back" takes its point of departure in how contemporary body art takes the body "as a variable geometric medium of an identity that remains revocable." Its plasticity and malleability are stretched to the limits by the Australian body artist Stelarc. The Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg has been consistently concerned with a virtual or mutant body provided by engineering and medicine. Like other Canadian filmmakers such as Egoyan, Rozema and Stopkevich, he has chosen in-betweenness and deviation as a resistance to Hollywood norms. This amounts in Cronenberg's work to a re-invented Neoplatonic metaphysics, where a debate about the virtual and the real replaces the traditional debate between idealism and materialism. In this world, a games-console can become organically ill, the borders between body and gaze are blurred, as are those between self and other, and even traditional cinematographic visuality based on the dichotomy between in-shot and out-of-shot.

Carole Ferrier's essay "Never Forget that the Kanakas Are Men" places itself in the Australian context, where the hidden shame of the exploitation of land and bodies has emerged into public consciousness in recent years. The "Stolen Children" and white men's sexual relationships with black women have been relatively well documented. Not so the forty-year history of indentured labour of Kanakas (1860s–1900s), where most Australians seem unaware that slave labour was used to develop the Queensland sugar industry, nor, indeed, white women's sexual relationships with black men. Piecing together this history involves using all available narratives, including the historical fiction discussed in this essay, from Jean Devanny's *Cindy* (1949) to David Crookes' *Blackbird* (1996). Ferrier calls for doing historical homework before textual interpretation of such works, and for balancing oral history inspired accounts against textual evidence often narrated as highly racialized adventure stories of 'blackbirding' (the kidnapping of labourers from islands in the Pacific). There was also a change of perception over the forty-year period in large sections of the Australian population and labour movement, where the Kanakas moved from being a political and economic threat to Australian workers, to a sexual and social one. Bringing Kanakas into Australian history would serve to diversify the "black" presence in Australia – not all "blacks" are Aboriginals (there have been tensions in the past and the present), yet Kanaka descendants like Faith Bandler and Afro-American descendants like Mudrooroo have played important roles in the Aboriginal movement. White authors' record of the Kanaka presence differs from the small extant record by Kanakas (songs, memoirs) – and especially interracial bodily

contact, from touch to sex, is missing in much of the writing (except Bandler's and Devanny's). The essay warns against what Richard Sennett has referred to as the modern "narrowing" of "bodily contact" to sex, and deals with dirt, fear of disease and cannibalism as well as fear of rape (which gives the essay its title) and the sexualizing of the Kanakas' bodies on the part of both white women and men, along with the standard colonial worries about miscegenation.

Annalisa Oboe's essay "Metamorphic Bodies and Mongrel Subjectivities in Mudrooroo's *The Undying*" moves way beyond such worries. It begins with the injunction from Jangamuttuk, the old Aboriginal shaman in the novel, to his son, the book's narrator, "Speak more with your body than your mouth." Since in Australian Aboriginal culture one's identity is actually written on one's skin in initiation scars and body paint, body language and its grammar are as complicated as "mouth language." But for the narrator, living at the end of his "mob's" existence, it is, rather, language, the language of the colonizers, English, which shapes the body. As the volume in the *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* series that follows the "identity crisis" when Mudrooroo was "publicly exposed" as a non-Aboriginal, *The Undying* is deeply concerned with the politics of the body and textualization. It continues the generically gothic concern with bodily transformation that characterizes the whole series – and its *fin-de-siècle* "abhuman" mongrelization. The mentality of the Aboriginal *Dreaming* sees a continuity between human and animal, which in Mudrooroo's text becomes a series of totemic metamorphoses, where the voice of the narrator remains, but not the experience that transmutes from one animal body to the next. This defamiliarizes the human body, emphasizes its liminality and "abhuman" edge, its materiality, its thingness, which here has "an obsessive 'oral' quality, depending on tasting and biting, sucking, lapping, tearing ... " and a general concern with absorbent fluidity, vampirism and threats of contamination, as well as the monstrous and feminine (often at one in Mudrooroo's work). Embracing the abject and "abhuman," which politically is related to the vampire colonizers sucking Australia dry, the narrator tries to embrace the many possible alterities in a constant morphic flexibility, as a gothic answer to the problem of *survival*.

Werner Senn's essay "Voicing the Body: The Cancer Poems of Philip Hodgins" places itself in relation to the long and varied history of the representation of illness in Western art and literature described by Sander Gilman, especially "the need which societies and individuals seem to feel to project onto the world, onto an-Other the fear of collapse and sense of dissolution connected with disease." The artists' illness narrative, written at the margin between health and disease, meaning and meaninglessness, where the sense of self seems so often to be heightened, has become known as 'autopathogra-

phy'. A political reading of it sees it as a struggle against "narrative surrender" to the medical experts – and it has been assimilated to a postcolonial "demand to speak rather than be spoken for." But this does not, according to Senn, capture the poems written by the Australian poet Philip Hodgins (1959–1995) about his struggles with leukaemia. Hodgins' strategies instead are irony, humour and sarcastic wit, as in the poem "Haematopoietics," which puns on the medical term for the production of red blood cells and the production of poetry. In "Death Who," the illness is embodied as a conversation partner at a dinner party, "begins equitably enough," but gets out of hand, to become "aggressive," a "conversational bully." Often, indeed, the disease is not embodied, but is "overpowering linguistically rather than physically." Meditations on speech and silence, thematization of the fear of death, bodily deterioration and loss of the capacity to speak are interspersed with poems where the cancer invests the pastoral/antipastoral landscape that is so characteristic of Hodgins, but "in their uncompromising commitment to artistic rigour" Hodgins' poems are a "bracing and moving instance of poetry's ability to articulate suffering and cope with pain."

Ulla Ratheiser, in "A Voice of One's Own," sees the fiction of Patricia Grace in relation to the decolonizing of the English language and the history of language politics in New Zealand, the imposition of English and the erosion of Maori before the Maori Renaissance. Grace's fiction works by transporting "subversive and problematic meanings" into the colonizers' language. The essay identifies three ways in which this takes place: 1) in dialogue, where bits of Maori are left untranslated, but also in the underlying Maori rhythm and speech patterns; 2) in ruptures of consciousness and storytelling, where characters and narrators revert to patterns of Maori culture; and 3) in narrative technique, which moves, over the whole of Grace's writing career and within individual texts, from 'objectivized' to 'subjectivized' *voicing*. All three aspects are analysed in texts ranging from the short story "A Way of Talking" (1975) to the novels *Cousins* (1992) and *Baby No-Eyes* (1998).

Janet Wilson's essay "Suffering and Survival: Body and Voice in Recent Maori Writing" argues that the writers of the Maori Renaissance have been empowered by an engagement with the material body and its processes. This has often been seen in terms of the intense violence with which action is represented and outcomes achieved. In Keri Hulme's *the bone people* and in the works of Alan Duff, from *Once Were Warriors* to *Both Sides of the Moon*, the status of the body, whether vulnerable or inviolable, sentient or non-sentient, helps determine indigenous identity and, in political terms, the decolonizing consciousness. The scenes of domestic dysfunction, correlated mythically with the events of the past – colonial rape of the land, the mutilation of Maori culture – cumulatively constitute a revisionary counter-discourse, leading to a

rewriting of national myths. Physical violation and healing provide the metaphoric dimension that defines the *raison d'être* of the Maori Renaissance: representing allegorically the processes of cultural disintegration and recovery. In the writings of Patricia Grace, physical violence exists within a complex matrix of death and survival, due to connections she establishes between violation and incarnation. Stories in *The Sky People* (1994) endorse marginal voices, by attributing supernatural powers to the outcast and disadvantaged. The deformed body becomes a source of spiritual strength in *Potiki* (1986), while *Baby No-Eyes* (1998) adjudicates over violence, pain and suffering, reflecting them through a metaphysics of survival. Grace's cognition of Maori marginality and spirituality, therefore, which embraces the centrifugal presence of the body – whole and fragmented, alive and dead – invokes textuality as a determining agent.



The section on the Caribbean begins with Derren Joseph's essay on "Post-colonial Education and Afro-Trinidadian Social Exclusion." Joseph replaces the sociological and economic frameworks employed for the analysis of education and social exclusion in Trinidad with an historical one, enriched with reference to postcolonial literature and the decolonizing mentality which is needed. The history of slavery, race, religion, the conflict between denominational and non-denominational schools (especially on an island with a long Catholic history under Spanish rule and an influx of French-speaking migrants) and the later ethnic conflicts between Creole, Afro-Caribbean and Indian segments have all been determining forces in the history of education in Trinidad. After independence, the slogan "to educate is to emancipate" promised universal secondary-school education, but by the 1990s the government-run school system was perceived to have failed, especially in regard to Afro-Trinidadians. This is where writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, George Lamming and especially Erna Brodber, in both her fiction and her community-development work in Jamaica, are brought in to explain what is needed: not more socio-economic statistics, but 'myal' and 'groundation', "concept metaphors for healing [...] and conducting of image/spirit to earth."

Giselle Rampaul presents "Voice as a Carnavalesque Strategy in West Indian Literature: Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending*." Despite the importance of Carnival in the West Indies, the 'carnavalesque' as a theoretical concept has been little applied to West Indian literature to describe how themes associated with Carnival – subversion of authority, giving the common man a voice – are expressed in literary texts. The essay argues for seeing Sam Selvon's Moses novels as 'calypso narratives', and

finds numerous applications for this idea: the way the novels use voice to demystify power; the episodic nature of the narratives and their relationship to oral narrative; the way they parody British speech and submerge it in Caribbean rhythms and, overall, create ‘heteroglossia’ in the form of the ‘creole continuum’ of code-switching and polyphony, which opposes not only Caribbean dialect, as a forerunner of Kamau Brathwaite’s “nation language,” to Standard British, but also modern British with archaic English; and, finally, how the intensely sexual language is used as a form of male self-assertion (though only *Moses Ascending* manages to get all the swear-words in).

Núria Casado Gual analyses “The Representation of Oppressed (Corporeal)realities: Cripples, Dwarfs and Blind Men in the Plays of Edgar Nkosi White.” There exists a double coding of the acting body in postcolonial theatre, where the actors are often corporeal representations of oppressions endured. The works of the Afro-Caribbean playwright Edgar White enact Frantz Fanon’s statement that “there are times when the black man is locked into his body.” Cripples stage the brutal effects of oppression and racial stigmatization, while the non-crippled are often morally corrupt, though White also adheres to the masculinist viewpoint that “women wear pain better than men.” Dwarfs in White’s plays serve a similar purpose: “the distortion of the context in which oppression is exercised,” where what is “miniaturized on-stage becomes magnified at the level of reception.” Blindness plays with light and darkness: “the character who lives in darkness enlightens obscurantist misconceptions,” but the blind also embody on stage the constant feeling of uncertainty of the oppressed, and finally the blind are associated with alternative vision, with art. All these “deformities,” together with an interdiscursive and intertextual play with classic European drama – Shakespeare, Calderón, Beckett, Brecht and Góngora – create White’s version of a ‘third space’ of corporealities.



The section on Britain and Eire begins with Susanne Pichler’s “Between Aphasia and Articulateness: Alien-Nation and Belonging,” which writes itself into the growing awareness of boundaries between cultures, which work both to include and exclude. Diasporas and migrancy disrupt central themes of modernity like the nation and cultural homogeneity, leading to both greater awareness of cultural identity and difference and to greater insecurity about them. Drawing on a wide range of theory about culture and nation, the essay places the writings of Sam Selvon and Caryl Phillips in the cultural borderlands, where their immigrant characters from the Caribbean struggle both with what they must forget and with what they can articulate in terms of

(un)belonging to a nation that still sees itself as ‘British’ and thus ‘White’. Attempts at intercultural dialogue are thwarted by increasing ghettoization in Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*, which also shows that the better you mimic, the more alienated you get; while Phillips’ *The Final Passage* almost three decades later shows equal problems in constructing an ‘alter-nation’ that is not an ‘elsewhere’ or an ‘alien-nation’.

Carmen Zamorano Llena’s essay “(Re)membering the Disembodied Verse: Constructs of Identity in Contemporary Irish Women’s Poetry” begins with an epigraph from Brendan Kennelly about how “it is critics who talk of ‘an authentic voice’, but a poet [...] is riddled with different voices, many of them in vicious conflict.” This is used as a way into the question of ‘finding a voice’ that has been central to Irish women poets, beginning with Eavan Boland, who, in her essay “Lava Cameo,” has played with Seamus Heaney’s “Bog Queen” and the whole male Irish tradition that Heaney resurrected in the 1970s, writing: “My body would lead my poetry in one direction [...] my mind would take up the subtle permissions around me and write a disembodied verse.” The female Irish body was an objectified male trope, and the mind a “mimic muse.” Boland’s subsequent struggle in her verse to re-embody the Irish female voice is seen in the light of Foucault’s writings on power and Bhabha’s on the nation – and exemplified in collections from *In Her Own Image* through *The Journey* to *The Lost Land*. Other poets have followed Boland’s example of reappropriating male-dominated traditions from within: Eileán Ní Chuilleanáin in *The Magdalene Sermon*, where a mutilated, ornamental body is (re)membered and voiced like a harp, optimistic though tinged with doubt, while Paula Meehan’s collections *Pillow Talk* and *Dharmakaya* similarly try to reintegrate body and voice, “to spell a map that makes sense.”

Carla Rodríguez González, in “‘Scotland, Whit Like?’ Coloured Voices in Historical Territories,” considers the possibilities opened up by considering Scotland as postcolonial: “not postcolonial, but nationally postcolonial,” based on a multiple identity rather than the homogenization of traditional nationalism. The essay briefly considers Scotland in relation to imperial history: the historical assimilation of the Scottish intellectuals, the internal colonization, the massive flow of Scots into the British Army and colonial adventures. Kilted Scotsmen were largely an English colonial invention: at the same time excessively masculine and feminized. But masculinity was a determining factor in the attempt to define an ethnic nationalism and a “synthetic Scots” by Hugh MacDiarmid and his contemporaries, who were looking for a myth of ‘origins’, though Edwin Muir as a dissenting voice saw the importance of ‘transmission’. The recent prominence of women and black Scottish voices in literature thus opens up a new field of hybridity in the body of the nation,

ironically dealt with in the “black-bodied” and “Scots-voiced” poet Jackie Kay’s signal poem “So You Think I’m a Mule?” but equally raucous in Liz Lochhead’s Corbeau character and her resuscitation of a hybrid Mary Queen of Scots.



“Other Perspectives” include, first, José María de la Torre’s “The Smeared Metaphor: Viscosity and Fluidity in Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*.” This may seem to have little to do with the ‘postcolonial’, except through Bataille’s novella’s happy – and famously inconsequential – ending: “On the fourth day, at Gibraltar, the Englishman purchased a yacht, and we set sail towards new adventures with a crew of Negroes.” Yet the essay forms a critique of some of the major theoretical foundations for many of the other essays in this book: Julia Kristeva’s theory of ‘the abject’, ideas about the ‘Other’ and the body. ‘The abject’ is intimately linked with the repulsion produced by bodily fluids which Kristeva, following both Sartre and Mary Douglas, thinks is a consequence of “the fluids’ pliability and lack of form, which results in a fear of their inherent lack of order and their ability to slide through the barriers delimiting the body’s inside and outside.” Bataille’s story and the characters in it delight in precisely this state – but it still poses a challenge to theoreticians as recent as Kristeva and Deleuze and Guattari, in part because of its cultural dimensions, which are not without relevance to this volume.

In his study of “Confrontational and Sociometric Approaches to Reform Strategy in German and Nigerian Prisons: Convergences and Divergences,” Emman Frank Idoko compares the use of drama therapy in two very different cultural traditions and social backgrounds, in which prison systems have hit upon the idea of using theatre for redemptive purposes, changing perception and moulding consciousness. The use of both body and voice, role-play and role-reversal is central to both practices, but the ‘*Fahrer*’ approach in Germany uses a highly confrontational style of drama to try to curtail violent recidivism, while the Tandari programme bases its experiments on sociometry and sociodrama, where bodily contact is designed to lead to intimacy and ultimately to what Augusto Boal called the “drama of emancipation.”

Marc Colavincenzo, in “Can the Postcolonial Critic Speak – And, If So, Who Is Listening?,” begins by separating bodies and voices: solid, flesh-and-blood bodies, real in their post- or, more precisely, colonial situations – and the disembodied, hermetic, abstract, theoretical voices pronouncing upon these bodies. The turn in literary studies towards cultural studies has, Colavincenzo fears, left especially postcolonial literary critics in the ditch: “They write papers peppered with all sorts of words and phrases which sound polit-

ically engaged, such as 'sites of resistance', 'the subjected subject', 'moment of subversion' and 'the ambivalent gaze of the colonizer'." But this is precisely the moment when "the dissociation of postcolonial studies from the still-colonized world occurs." Postcolonial criticism should wake up from its own privileged word-games, which have a tendency to become a form of reverse colonialism, silencing the colonized subject. Here "the race for theory," as Barbara Christian has put it, "silences the writer." Spivak and Bhabha in particular, though constantly reverting to this very topic, write in obscure ways which "are irreconcilable with the supposed political engagement of postcolonial studies." What has caused this is both overestimation of the political influence of academics and "underestimation of the power of literature to tell us something about the world" – and to engage students, who may read about the Japanese experience in Canada and end up thinking about the Turkish experience in Germany.

Finally, Jesús Varela-Zapata, in "The Quest for Identity as a Pattern of Postcolonial Voices," deals with personal voice in the form of autobiography in the postcolonial world. A major postcolonial genre, it very often has a nationalist agenda, though this, of course, is highly ambivalent in the case of Varela-Zapata's first example, V.S. Naipaul, in whose work fiction and autobiographical writing intermingle generically and who is culturally somewhat more than "twice-born" (in Meenakshi Mukherjee's classic term for postcolonial Indian fiction in English). But this makes Naipaul, of course, so much more revealing of the postcolonial importance of finding a personal voice. Within postcolonial autobiographies, the search by women writers for the self is especially significant, as seen in examples as different as Doris Lessing, Jamaica Kincaid and Janet Frame. Frame's case is dealt with in detail, including the discussion of whether she can be seen as 'postcolonial', whether settler colonial women are doubly or only half-colonized. Frame's trilogy, however, surely fits any internal criteria for a postcolonial woman's quest for reintegration, arriving finally at "a land speaking for itself."

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So, too, this "pattern of voices" should be left to "speak for itself." Rather more, the editors hope, than a "mixed bag," its varied arguments, readings, approaches and methodologies should speak for the centrality of the theme – which is something more than just a theme – of "Bodies and Voices" within postcolonial studies, but also of the centrality of the postcolonial within body and voice studies.

AFRICA

Martyred Bodies and Silenced Voices in South African Literature Under Apartheid

ANDRÉ VIOLA

BEFORE THE RAINBOW NATION began to be an objective, according to which fair and equal treatment would be meted out to every/body, the South African apartheid regime had conducted large-scale social engineering in order to segregate the corporeal envelopes of its inhabitants. In literature, numerous voices arose to testify to the ruthlessly treated black body, and this opens an immense field of enquiry. Of necessity, the present study is limited to fiction and focuses on two particularly significant types of narrative: that of the confiscated body, and that of the martyred body functioning as a substitute for the silenced voice of the land. The last part examines a different approach to the suffering body in novels that, for the sake of convenience, could be labeled postmodern and post-apartheid.

“Life for a Life,” a short story Alan Paton published in the early 1960s, epitomizes, at the most elementary level, the confiscation of a body. A white man has been murdered on a farm in the Cape region, and, as the police cannot find the culprit – who must necessarily be among the “brown people,” as they are called in the text – they take away the head shepherd. He is never seen again, the police claiming later that he slipped, fell on his head and died. To the wife’s enquiries, they answer: “alas, they could not give her her husband’s body, it was buried already,”¹ and she eventually understands that she will never get her husband’s body back. In this blunt case of a body’s disappearance, the narrative voice leaves no doubt about the callousness of the police and adopts a tone of subdued compassion towards the oppressed. Nevertheless, the story ends on a surprising note of appeasement, with the

¹ Alan Paton, “Life for a Life” (1961), in *South African Short Stories*, ed. Denis Hirson (London: Heinemann, 1994): 224. Further page references are in the main text.

wife leaving for Cape Town, “where people lived [...] softer and sweeter lives” (226). Thus the story is manifestly inscribed in the context of the South African liberal approach, according to which a better future could be envisaged in spite of the current madness reigning in the land.

It is precisely the liberal position that receives ironical treatment in Nadine Gordimer’s “Six Feet of the Country” (1956). An unknown dead African has been found on a farm and he proves to be the brother of one of the farm labourers, Petrus. After the post-mortem, Petrus wants to get back the body, much to his master’s surprise, but when his wife tells him that the old father is already on his way for the funeral, the farmer accepts “the ridiculous responsibility” of phoning the health authorities.² His comment on the outcome betrays, beneath his alleged concern, his total lack of feeling: “Unfortunately, it was not impossible to get the body back” (184). At one moment during the funeral procession, the old father comes to suspect that the too-heavy corpse cannot be his son’s, a feeling that is corroborated when they open the coffin. At the end of a week’s wrangling with the administration, the farmer has to acknowledge that the right body will never be found, so that, as a compensation, the farmer’s wife gives the old father one of her own father’s old suits “and he went back home rather better off, for the winter, than he had come” (188). Thus the story denounces both the authorities, for whom one body is as good as another, and the limited compassion of the whites. But it remains an anecdote, in the sense that, except for the clear allusions to the precarious situation of the labourers, it does not give rise to any wider echoes, unlike Gordimer’s later novel, *The Conservationist*, which will be analysed further on.

Zoë Wicomb’s “In the Botanic Gardens” focuses on an old coloured lady, Mrs Brink, who has flown all the way to Glasgow after having been informed of her son’s disappearance there. The young man has apparently been involved in politics and may have been a victim of the South African Special Branch. Mrs Brink realizes fairly soon that the authorities are not particularly willing to elucidate the circumstances of her son’s death. Thus she tries at least to retrieve the body, pleading with an official: “It’s please, the body sir.”³ What hurts her most is to be faced with “an absence,” “a nothing” (489), so that what she calls “the missing person” (489) becomes the marker of a pain she would like to be mitigated by the concrete existence of a real corpse, but to no avail. In addition, the more she tries to pierce the mystery surrounding the body, the more she is distressed by the enigmatic codes of this strange

² Nadine Gordimer, “Six Feet of the Country” (1956), in *South African Short Stories*, ed. Denis Hirson (London: Heinemann, 1994): 183. Further page references are in the main text.

³ Zoë Wicomb, “In The Botanic Gardens,” *Landfall* 44.4 (1990): 487. Further page references are in the main text.

northern country, where an exotic-looking ten pound note shows David Livingstone, shackled slaves, an Arab on a camel and two palm-trees.⁴ Moreover, the message scribbled on the edge of the bank-note cannot but intensify her guilt and activate in her disturbing images of voracity: “If dat bastard Geldof don’t get ’ere soon I goes eat that camel” (490). Bastard is, properly speaking, the status of her son, born out of marriage, and Geldof, the name of the famous organizer of fund-raising concerts for South African victims, not only contains geld, money, but also the Germanic equivalent of the Latin ‘to castrate’. Thus “she knew Arthur had been swallowed by this big city” (492), and, under the strain and disorientation, she experiences a kind of hallucination about her son, collapses, and is flown back home.

In a story by Lindiwe Mabuza entitled “Wake,” there is a similar, so to speak naive, rendering of the death of children, since about half the story is conveyed through a young girl’s consciousness. Overall, the narration is complex, presenting, in non-chronological sequence, the comments of the anonymous narrative voice and the thoughts of several characters other than the young girl. Yet the events can be easily reconstructed. In 1976, in Soweto, the daughter and the son of a family have been killed during one of the marches, and the authorities are withholding permission to bury them. They fear too many funerals in one day would encourage disorder, so that the father cannot get the official slip with which he could retrieve the bodies from the mortuary. At home subsequently, there are only “two strips or ‘nests’ of unoccupied space representing the missing ones.”⁵ For her part, the younger daughter Thoko remembers how she witnessed a third death, that of her friend Lwazi, in passages that, on the whole, succeed in avoiding sentimentality and convey the stark horror of the situation through a literal and half-uncomprehending rendering of it:

Thoko had put her thumb in the wound. But Lwazi was dead. How could she be sure it was the blood or the brain she wanted to push back first into her playmate’s head? Her hand was overpowered and since no-one else noticed the bloody piece of steel drop on her lap, she quickly shoved it back into the entrance, or was it exit? (90)

Two days later, Thoko is still trying to come to grips with the notion of death: “Death, she thought, must be big like the bishop or someone very high up [...] Where did he live and what mansions did he possess to want to claim so many people, also so many people whom she knew, all at once?” (102) Thus,

⁴ These banknotes were actually in circulation until 1988.

⁵ Lindiwe Mabuza, “Wake...,” in *One Never Knows*, ed. Lindiwe Mabuza (Braamfontein: Skotaville, 1989): 93. Further page references are in the main text.

through a child's idiosyncratic reactions to a situation that might easily engender pathos, the author has steered clear of "the spectacular," of the "anticipated surfaces" denounced by Njabulo Ndebele. According to the South African critic, this approach would bring mere "recognition" and "recognition does not necessarily lead to transformation: it simply confirms."⁶

As it happens, Ndebele himself wrote a story about the confiscation of a child's body, "Death of a Son" (1987), focused on a mother whose baby has been killed by the police in an episode of random shooting. The father does not want to pay for the slip that would enable him to get the body back, but after a fortnight of unsuccessful dealings with the administration, the parents have to give in and pay. The story records the monologue of the mother over this fortnight, and the fifteen occurrences on the first two pages of the word "body," referring to the missing body of the child, clearly indicate what is preying on her mind. In the process, "Death of a Son" explores the reactions of the married couple, again in accordance with Ndebele's cautious rehabilitation of subjectivity, which he prefers to consider as "interiority concretely rendered."⁷ At first, the husband cuts a fairly poor figure, in the sense that he seems activated solely by what he calls "a fundamental principle,"⁸ uttering such infelicitous phrases as "over my dead body" (37), or declaring one day that the lawyers are now quite confident about the writ of "habeas corpus" (38). All these phrases reverberate back on him, in particular because the reader only gets to know him through his wife's reactions to what she calls his "words": "why had [he] spoken?" she complains at one stage (37). But the reader is invited to probe further, as the wife, being a professional journalist, also lives by words. On the afternoon before the death, she had been typing an article about the shooting by the police. But soon afterwards, what had merely been a "report," safely "filed" (36), became excruciating personal pain. She also remembers how they had both fallen victim to the mirage of a consumer society reflected in the "glossy magazines" (38).⁹ Therefore, the death of their child brings them ruthlessly back to the cruel realities of South African life, while the closure of the story suggests that the couple will be reunited by the birth of another child. In conclusion, Ndebele has thus carefully avoided the trap of the spectacular, since the child never becomes the object of insistent pathos, although it is always present through the gnawing grief it causes the mother.¹⁰

⁶ Njabulo Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1984; Johannesburg: COSA W, 1991): 27.

⁷ Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, 30.

⁸ Njabulo Ndebele, "Death of a Son," *TriQuarterly* 69 (special issue, Spring–Summer 1987): 33–34. Further page references are in the main text.

⁹ "Our minds were consumed by the things we saw and dreamed of owning" (38).

¹⁰ For instance, it is at one moment fleetingly alluded to as the "still bundle" (37).

Confiscated corpses can thus engender traumatic experiences, but bodies in fiction can also represent – through a process of metonymy – the whole of the South African land, and in a sense give it voice. In fact, the notion of voice has particular implications in South Africa, since not to be credited with a recognized voice has always been the plight of non-white people there.¹¹ In fiction, white characters evince various degrees of willingness to listen to black voices. An early instance would be Olive Schreiner's "The Story of an African Farm," where the protagonists pay little attention to the quasi-mute black servants unobtrusively ministering in the background. Nearer to us, in J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), the magistrate's deafness to the voice of the land no doubt represents only one aspect of this extremely rich novel, although it is a meaningful one. When he finds himself confronted with the body of the maimed barbarian girl, he experiences a double reaction of pity and lust. Out of pity he washes her, and strokes and oils her feet and legs again and again. Out of lust, he "hunts back and forth seeking entry,"¹² but he paradoxically reacts to her as if she were "only a surface [...] a dummy of straw and leather" (47). The fact that he often goes to sleep before achieving complete sexual union with her clearly signifies that he cannot enter into real communication with her, as the tortuous dialogue testifies. Thus the magistrate abruptly asks at one moment: "And why do I want you here?" The girl pretends not to hear, but after a short while, the answer comes, right on the mark: "It was a fork, a kind of fork with only two teeth" (41). The magistrate is taken aback, or pretends to be: "Is this the question I asked?" he wonders, seeming to doubt the girl's ability to follow the thread of the dialogue. In reality, she has deciphered the implicit meaning of his question as if she were applying the psychoanalytical hermeneutics of Jacques Lacan, who writes: "What I seek in speech is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question. In order to be recognized by the other, I utter what was only in view of what will be."¹³ And the game of loaded questions goes on: "What do I have to do to move you?" the magistrate wonders, again wanting to be recognized in Lacanian terms. The answer he gets sends a chill down his spine:

¹¹ Thus, in his famous opening to *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), Solomon Plaatje had noted that, with the promulgation of the 1913 Native Land Act, the African "awakening one morning [...] found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth" (London: Longman, 1996: 6); but even when the African's protesting voice had been conveyed to England by the Congress delegation of which Plaatje was a member, it carried very little weight.

¹² J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982): 43. Further page references are in the main text.

¹³ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (1966; tr. 1977; London: Routledge, 2001): 94.

with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me. (44)

At the end of the dialogue, the magistrate begins to realize what the girl has understood long ago: namely, that he is obscurely actuated by an unwholesome desire to feel he can impress himself on her as deeply and lastingly as her torturers did. Significantly, only when the magistrate leaves the protection of his fortress and finds himself under a tent in the middle of the desert – in a no man’s land – do they have a fully satisfying physical relationship. But the coming-together is ephemeral, because the object of the expedition is to bring her back definitively to her own people. At the moment of parting, when she speaks to some members of her tribe, he thinks all of a sudden: “I cannot make out a word. What a waste [...] she could have spent those long empty evenings teaching me her tongue! Too late now” (71–72). In spite of his professed good-will, he has thus neglected to learn the language of the land, just as he had only reacted with pity and lust to the girl’s martyred body.

In *Age of Iron*, there is a similar deafness in Mrs Curren, but only for a time. Her liberal positions lead her to try and protect two African schoolboys from the police, but at first she does not accept the language they speak. As a former lecturer in classical literature, she cannot but be shocked when she hears one of the boys ask her: “What is school for? It is to make us fit into the apartheid system. [...] What is more important, that apartheid must be destroyed or that I must go to school?”¹⁴ Or again, faced by a violence she does not understand, she condemns “comradeship” for being “a mystique of death, of killing and dying [...] It is just another of those icy, exclusive, death-driven male constructions” (137). Further on in the novel, she still shrinks from extreme positions, reflecting, for instance, “Freedom or death! shout Bheki and his friends. Whose words? Not their own. [...] I want to say: Save yourselves!” (149), but concurrently, some of her reactions already point to a changing attitude. For instance, looking at a family photograph taken in the garden, she reflects that those who actually tended the garden are kept out of the frame, a realization that suggests to her a possible reversion of roles: “Who are the ghosts, and who the presences?” and a questioning of the right of ownership: “whose was the garden rightfully?” (102). Consequently, the fact that she later associates John in her mind with the garden boys shows that she is beginning to understand his symbolic role: “Poor John [...] battling now for all the insulted and injured, the trampled, the ridiculed, for all the garden

¹⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1990): 62. Further page references are in the main text.

boys of South Africa!” (138). But the greatest shock is her visit to Guguletu, during which she is confronted with the bodies of the five children killed by the police. From then on she declares that she lives with a “dead weight [...] lying on top of [her]” (113), and this feeling triggers a string of haunting metaphors:

figures of pig-iron [...] bobbing just under the surface [...] black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. [...] waiting to be raised up again. Millions of figures of pig-iron floating under the skin of the earth. (114–15)

The suggestion is manifestly that the children’s trampled bodies carry such weight that they cannot be constrained, and will rise up again some day. Conversely, Mrs Curren, who all her life had depended on the authority of professorial speech, feels more and more marginalized: “who am I to have a voice at all? [...] what I say [...] has no weight” (149, 148).¹⁵ She realizes she had relied on an obsolete set of values, in the belief that, as she explains, “as long as I was ashamed, I knew I had not wandered into dishonour” (150). But now she can declare, “What times these are when to be a good person is not enough! [...] The times call for heroism” (150). The heroic stance is precisely the one adopted by the children of iron, so that Mrs Curren is ready to make a decisive imaginative leap. First she re-creates positively in her mind John’s “envisioning” his own death, “the moment of glory when he will arise, fully himself at last, erect, powerful, transfigured. When the fiery flower will unfold, when the pillar of smoke will rise” (137). Then, after he is killed by the police, she empathizes wholly with him, and, owning that “he is with me” (159), she conjures up what she considers his heroic death:

He is readying himself to raise the pistol in that instant and fire the one shot he will have time to fire into the heart of the light.

His eyes are unblinking, fixed on the door through which he is going to leave the world. His mouth is dry but he is not afraid. His heart beats steadily like a fist in his chest clenching and unclenching. (159–60)

The irrepressible surfacing of an obsessive body is also the main leitmotif in Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist*. An unknown African, found on a white man’s land, has been hastily buried by the police. From then on, the owner of the land, Mehring, is repeatedly plagued by nightmarish visions of the decaying corpse, until it is unearthed by torrential rains, a symbolic sur-

¹⁵ At one moment when she phones Mr. Thabane, he tells her: “Your voice is very tiny, very tiny and very far away” (136).

facing which accelerates Mehring's psychic disintegration.¹⁶ When the community of farm labourers organizes a proper burial ceremony, the victory of the unknown man over the rich but solitary industrialist is complete. And the novel ends on three lines that must have sounded extremely daring, especially as "Come Back Africa" was one of the ANC's slogans of the period:

There was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him.
They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession
of this earth, theirs; one of them. (267)

Undoubtedly, Gordimer offers in her novel a much more positive follow-up to her earlier story. Not only does she reinstate the excluded body in the social sphere, but, although it is voiceless, she entrusts it with what was a momentous message at the time.

Some novels are positioned differently, in the sense that, in postmodern fashion, they tend to make the body problematic or, alternatively, to re-interpret it from a post-apartheid perspective. In Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), for instance, Friday, the slave, has become voiceless after the confiscation of his tongue, which makes him a doubly emblematic character. Uncertainties abound in this decidedly postmodern version of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Friday may even have suffered other mutilations, as his mistress Susan discovers when his robes open, although she cannot tell for sure. This indeterminacy signals a gap between seeing and knowing, reality and the perception of it. However, Susan, who lives in an enlightened century, wants to teach him how to write. But Friday contents himself with writing "row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking eyes."¹⁷ In the original story, the shape of a foot on the sand was the cannibal imprint that made Robinson panic. Coupled with the eye as it is here, it sends back to Susan the destabilizing gaze of mimicry analysed by Homi Bhabha. In the colonial encounter, according to this critic, there are

strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power [...]. Through [a] process represented in its enigmatic, inappro-

¹⁶ Nadine Gordimer, *The Conservationist* (1974; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983). That Mehring made his wealth from pig-iron (42/69) is only one element in an uncanny intertext with *Age of Iron*, starting with Mrs Curren's repeated observation about the dead body of Bheki: "there was sand in his mouth." "sand already in his mouth, creeping in, claiming him"; see also: "Life is dust between the teeth. Life is biting the dust." Gordimer, *The Age of Iron*, 94, 99, 179. In *The Conservationist*, this is echoed by "there is sand on his lip" (41), "earth in his mouth" (47), "grit in the mouth, face down" (194). Further page references to *The Conservationist* are in the main text.

¹⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (1986; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987): 147. Further page references are in the main text.

priate signifiers [...] mimicry marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance.¹⁸

Friday's walking eyes are truly "inappropriate signifiers," resisting Susan's civilizing endeavours; indeed, she thinks she detects "a spark of mockery" in his eyes when, "instead of obeying [her]," he wipes the slate clean (146–47). Later, Susan notices Friday has covered two pages with the letter 'o', writing, as she says, "after a fashion" (152): that is to say, not hers, but Friday's fashion.¹⁹ What is more, in the cryptic last chapter of the book, Friday is given a significant role, since, among the numerous images of disaster and paralysis, he can yet deliver a dynamic message:

From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. (157)

No doubt this wordless message escapes our system of codification, which is to be expected in "a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday" (157). But it corresponds to the last lines of the book, so that, if we trust Foe's remark that "he has the last word who disposes over the greatest force" (124), Friday, in spite of his maimed body, is not exactly the "hole in the narrative," the Derridean aporia that Susan would make of him.²⁰ On the contrary, his powerful message transcends Crusoe's barren terraces or the oppressive South African laager, and reaches "to the ends of the earth."

Zoë Wicomb's novel *David's Story* (2000) emphasizes the quasi-impossibility of representing the body in pain.²¹ Two main voices can be heard, first that of a narrator who is persistently trying to extract David's story from him. Most of the time, however, David's answers seem beside the point as he tries to evade questioning, especially about a third, shadowy character, Dulcie. Dulcie thus functions as a site of conflict between David, an ANC cadre, and the narrator, who must content herself with "snippets," "disconnected

¹⁸ Homi Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 154, 162.

¹⁹ Significantly, *I Write What I Like* was the title chosen for Steve Biko's collection of writings (Oxford: Heinemann, 1987; 1979). As for the letter 'o', it is a probable echo of Crusoe's Friday, whose pet exclamations began with 'o': "O joy! [...] O glad!" and who explained that "All things say O to [the god Benamuckee]"; Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719; New York: Dell, 1971): 285, 276.

²⁰ As *Foe* generally conforms to a postmodern aesthetic, even if it is sometimes a parodied one, it met with a very cool reception in South Africa; but it delighted a section of the globalized critical world when the novel was discovered about ten years after its publication.

²¹ "O my body" is the epigraph taken from Frantz Fanon.

images,”²² and concludes: “I must invent” (80–82). What seems to transpire is that Dulcie, another ANC cadre, was tortured as a potential traitor to the cause in the notorious ANC Quatro camp in Angola, and probably used for sexual purposes by male comrades. But the text is characterized by constant ambiguities and uncertainties. For instance, at one moment, the anguish of David reminiscing about Dulcie is so intense that it passes on to the narrator as an hallucination, and she stares at her “screen full-bleed with Dulcie. Who? Is it you put it in my head? The terrible things happening to Dulcie? It’s here, in close-up – and he stumbles to his feet with a horrible cry, knocking me over as he charges out” (201). In other words, does David’s anguish reveal his own participation in Dulcie’s torture? And what is to be made of the fleeting, unexpected vision of Dulcie washing blood from her hands? Did she also participate in torturing? There seems to be no end to the cycle of violence and suspicion, so that the very allusiveness of the book suggests the difficulty there still is in reconstructing the garbled, painful history of South Africa. The reader who listens to the two voices debating what may have happened to Dulcie’s body comes out with more questions than certitudes, a destabilizing effect which is precisely the one intended by the author.

Zakes Mda’s novel *Ways of Dying* (1995) is a singular medley of genres that includes a vein of magical realism. On the one hand, bodies do obey the laws of nature and die when they are killed, a constant occurrence which prompts the main character to create for himself the full-time job of professional mourner. Conversely, prodigies are recorded, as when Vera’s son is born twice, each time after a fifteen-month pregnancy, having gone through a resurrection that does not seem to surprise anyone. Similarly, the tones adopted to present the body in pain are greatly varied, ranging from sympathetic concern to total detachment, or even burlesque irony in the episodes when a fortune is made on collapsible coffins. In short, *Ways of Dying* inscribes the body in modes of popular narration that might herald new “ways of writing” for South African literature.

In Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999), bodies appear in a post-apartheid configuration,²³ so that the way they reflect historical changes and, in particular, the new relationship of Lucy’s body to the land of the Eastern Cape, has to be investigated. History, indeed, has affected even those remote areas. Petrus, the former farm labourer, after becoming Lucy’s assistant, has now reached the status of “co-proprietor.”²⁴ Lucy’s position has been fairly clear from the start,

²² Zoë Wicomb, *David’s Story* (New York: Feminist Press, 2000): 80. Further page references are in the main text.

²³ In addition, the suffering bodies of animals play an important role in the novel.

²⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999): 62. Further page references are in the main text.

since she told her own father: “You shouldn’t be so unbending, David. It isn’t heroic to be unbending” (66). For his part, Petrus has rightly gauged her: “She is a forward-looking lady, not backward-looking” (136). Similarly, Bev Shaw tells David: “Lucy is adaptable. And she is young. She lives closer to the ground than you” (210). All these characteristics are not abstract ones, as, very early in the book, Lucy has been associated with the land by her father, who notices: “Lucy’s bare toes grip the red earth, leaving clear prints. A solid woman, embedded in her new life” (62). Yet for Lucy the land is no longer the object of a mystique, as in the traditional *plaasroman*, but is considered in a matter-of-fact way: “This is not a farm, it’s just a piece of land where I grow things” (200). After she has suffered the traumatic experience of rape, she goes through a painful recovery until she hesitatingly wonders: “What if ... what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on?” (158). Eventually, in spite of the horrified disbelief of her father, she decides to keep the child and to accept Petrus’ protection: “The farm is my dowry. [...] I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me, I am without protection, I am fair game” (203). At first her father considers her position as a degrading one, because for him it means “To start at ground level. With nothing. [...] no dignity.” “Like a dog,” Lucy suggests. “Yes, like a dog” (205). After a time, however, he comes to envisage the future in more positive terms as he watches her, “a young woman, *das ewig Weibliche*, lightly pregnant [...] She looks, suddenly, the picture of health” (217–18). Even the coming of the child is no longer a catastrophe for him, but completes Lucy’s association with the land: “His daughter is becoming a peasant,” he reflects, “here she is, solid in her existence,” so that “when he is dead [...] from within her will have issued another existence, that with luck will be just as solid” (218, 217). Thus, in spite of the grim and gloomy writing, *Disgrace* seems to point to some kind of future which is not necessarily apocalyptic. One of the possible implications is that, out of the suffering body of Lucy, a new being will come to life, for whom her father uses the significant phrase “a child of this earth” (216) and who will, inevitably, speak with a new voice.

In conclusion, the conjunction of the terms “bodies and voices” cannot but call to mind the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, since,

at the visual core of the TRC hearings were descriptions, representations and conflicts around bodies in various states of mutilation, dismemberment and internment within the terror of the past. Again and again, victims made claims in

respect of body parts and human remains, making their visibility, recovery and repossession a metaphor for the settlement of the pasts of apartheid.²⁵

Ingrid de Kok noted in 1998 that a section of the population hopefully considered the commission would function as “a grand concluding narrative,” and she added that “art too will become victim to the pressure to ‘forgive and forget’.”²⁶ The danger is thus to fix the past definitively, to yield to what Derrida calls “the violence of the archive.”²⁷ In that context, Ingrid de Kok considers that the imaginative, artistic approach has a positive role to play: “The imagination [...] providing a dialectic between language and the grieving mind [...] brings back into our presence the disappeared in a newly reconstituted form.”²⁸ Indeed, the texts we have examined supplement official reports and offer a more open, flexible approach, allowing participation by the reader. Thus the past may be revisited in artefacts which are not frozen once and for all but always provide new possibilities for reconsideration.

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²⁵ Ciraj Rassool, Leslie Witz & Gary Minkley, “Burying and Memorializing the Body of Truth: The TRC and National Heritage,” in *After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*, ed. Wilmot James & Linda Van De Vijver (Athens: Ohio UP, 2001): 125.

²⁶ Ingrid de Kok, “Cracked heirlooms: Memory on exhibition,” in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, ed. Sarah Nuttall & Carli Coetzee (1998; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000): 61.

²⁷ Quoted in Rassool, Witz & Minkley, “Burying and Memorializing the Body of Truth: The TRC and National Heritage,” 127.

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Postcolonial *Disgrace*

(White) Women and (White) Guilt
in the “New” South Africa¹

GEORGINA HORRELL

She would rather hide her face and he knows why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame [...] Not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for.²

WHAT IS THE WHITE WOMAN’S “PLACE” in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century, in South Africa? What is the significance of the marks of shame that are inscribed on the seemingly blank whiteness of her skin? In the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, J.M. Coetzee writes in his novel *Disgrace* of the “system” of guilt and shame, debt and retribution which operates throughout South African society. He and writers like Antjie Krog, Elleke Boehmer and Gillian Slovo tell stories which traverse and explore the paths tracked by society’s quest for healing and restitution, in the ‘New’ South Africa. White women, too, Coetzee’s protagonist muses, must have a place, a “niche” in the “system” of reparation.

This essay is an attempt to trace the figure of the white woman in a particularly provocative and arguably illuminating South African text, in order to ‘read’ the phrases of meaning that have been inscribed on her body in *Dis-*

¹ This essay was enabled by generous support from the Arts and Humanities Board (UK).

² J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (1999; London: Vintage, 2000): 115. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

grace. I shall refer, briefly, to a small number of other recent literary texts, in an attempt to indicate discursive tracks which are apparent in post-apartheid South African writing. My essay notes distinctive patternings within discourses of guilt and power, which find their cathexis in the form of the white woman. I would like to suggest a reading of these marks and ciphers which is not a denial of fluid, layered identity but which nonetheless argues that the corporeal figure of the white, postcolonial woman in these texts is indelibly etched textually with guilt, and that her “place” in the “system” would seem to be crucial to the effecting of reparation.

White South Africans should be confronted with (black) history [...] white South Africans must not be allowed to forget.³

At the heart of Grant Farred’s article “Bulletproof Settlers” lies an accusation levelled directly at J.M. Coetzee. Farred, relying on an oral report of a paper delivered at Yale University by Coetzee, asks some hard questions about the novelist’s stance, following his reported statement that he “could not take offence” at the political maxim “One Settler, One Bullet.” Reading this comment (not repeated in Coetzee’s book on the same subject as his Yale address⁴) as an offensive dismissal of the efficacy of the maxim – either as ideological or as political statement – Farred asks whether Coetzee is “trying to exceed or possibly even eliminate whiteness as a category of historical privilege and oppression.”⁵ This position is deplored by Farred, who asserts that “One Settler, One Bullet” is a necessary and desirable call for the “abolition of whiteness in South Africa,” a “pointed reminder that the white community’s origins are non-African.”⁶ Coetzee should take note – and remember.

In *Disgrace*, written after the publication of Farred’s critique, Coetzee explores the position of the white South African within the post-apartheid space, with less unfettered optimism and blithe disregard than Farred’s article would seem to suggest. To the contrary, it would seem that he is all too aware of the restrictions and the imprisoning grip that the past continues to have, even (and perhaps most especially) on ‘liberal’ whites. In an interview with David Atwell, Coetzee earlier declared that he regarded himself as “historically com-

³ Grant Farred, “Bulletproof Settlers: The Politics of Offence in the New South Africa,” in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mike Hill (New York & London: New York UP, 1997): 77.

⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1996).

⁵ Farred, “Bulletproof Settlers,” 70–71.

⁶ “Bulletproof Settlers,” 72.

plicit.”⁷ *Disgrace*, I would suggest, wrestles with the implications of culpability and the consequences of violent colonization, and asks how white South Africa may be compelled to ‘remember’.

In the aftermath of the violent crime that takes place on his daughter’s smallholding, a pivotal event in *Disgrace*, Professor David Lurie considers the meaning of this trauma. He struggles to comprehend it in the context of the broader state of affairs in post-apartheid, crime-plagued South Africa.

That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. Cars, shoes, women too. (98)

However, while the novel is written from Lurie’s perspective, it is Lucy – her body – who experiences the most crucial moment of violent inscription in the text. Lurie himself is forcibly absented from the crime that forms the epicentre of the events in the novel. It is on and through the body of Lurie’s daughter that the terms for white South Africa’s future ‘remembering’ are ultimately sketched.

That the body is a suitable site for the inscription of guilt, as well as an apt place for the exacting of penalty, is by no means an unwritten text. Writers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault have, of course, provided significant insights in this regard. Nietzsche is particularly helpful in the theorization of pain and punishment. He sees pain as the key means of inscribing what must be ‘remembered’ in society. The body becomes a tablet, a notepad for the texts, which must be obeyed, for debts that must be paid.

“If something is to be remembered it must be burnt in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory” – this is a main clause of the oldest (unhappily also the most enduring) psychology on earth [...] blood, torture, and sacrifices [...] all this has its origin in the instinct that realised that pain is the most powerful aid to mnemonics.⁸

Nietzsche understands social order to be founded not on exchange but on credit: the body is not so much exchanged as held to account, made to pay. For what must not be forgotten a corporeal note shall be made, so that even in the case of seeming bankruptcy, the debt is still retrievable from the body of the debtor.

⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Atwell (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard UP, 1992): 343.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo*, tr. Walter Kaufmann & Reginald John Hollingdale (*Ecce Homo*, 1889; New York: Vintage, 1969): 61.

An equivalent is provided by the creditor's receiving, in place of a literal compensation for an injury [...] a recompense in the form of a kind of pleasure, the pleasure of being allowed to vent his power freely on one who is powerless [...] the enjoyment of violation [...] In punishing the debtor, the creditor participates in a right of the masters [...]⁹

The debtor–creditor relationship and its accompanying lust for cruelty is, in Nietzsche's theory, the basis of all other social relations, moral values, and cultural production. Put another way, the concept that 'somebody' is guilty, that somebody 'owes me' and must be – can be – corporeally made 'to pay' is a foundational notion in society and discourse. The act of exacting that payment is simultaneously a source of pleasure (of "festival")¹⁰ and an enactment of power: exquisite dominance.

Foucault, too, offers provocative views of the control, manipulation and marking of bodies. What his critics have often objected to, however, is his implicit and seemingly unavoidable assumption of a 'natural' body (a white, Western male body?). In interrogating Foucault's 'tabula rasa' approach to the body, Elizabeth Grosz makes some apt observations:

[...] do sexually different bodies require different inscriptive tools to etch their different surfaces? Or rather, is it the inscription of power on bodies that produces bodies as sexually different? [...] one and the same message, inscribed on a male or female body, does not always or even usually mean the same thing or result in the same text [...] If the writing or inscription metaphor is to be of any use for feminism – and I believe that it can be extremely useful – the specific modes of materiality of the "page"/body must be taken into account.¹¹

Thus, while the notion of inscription of bodies may well be helpful and illuminating, the assumption of a blank and passive 'original' body is less so. The elision of the sexual and racial specificity of the surface inscribed may in fact effect an elision, a marginalization and silencing of those whose bodies remain apt sites for struggle and, apparently, fitting surfaces for the inscription of societal guilt. The body inscribed in Coetzee's text is not a 'tabula rasa': it is the body of a white woman. I therefore offer a reading which permits an investigation of whiteness and the embodied, gendered implications of *Disgrace*.

⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo*, 65.

¹⁰ *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo*, 67.

¹¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994): 156.

One Settler

When Lurie arrives at Lucy's small farm, it is as a refugee, fleeing the city and the implications of his own disgrace. He notes her development into capable countrywoman: "*boervrou*," a "sturdy young settler,"¹² with approval.

They walk back along an irrigation furrow. Lucy's bare toes grip the red earth, leaving clear prints. A solid woman, embedded in her new life. Good! If this is to be what he leaves behind – this daughter, this woman – then he does not have to be ashamed. (62)

Lucy is described in terms that initially inscribe her as a link to the colonial past of South Africa. She owns and cultivates land, leaving the print of her foot clearly on the soil.¹³ In addition, she is a woman who in many ways is well suited to "settler" life: at once capable and nurturing, independent yet undeniably 'feminine' in her ability to create homely order. She displays 'womanly',¹⁴ traits in her admitted affection for the place she has purchased; she says she had "fallen in love" (60) with it. Sensible to possible threat – deemed unlikely on account of the dogs – she keeps an unused gun. She seems to have the necessary strength to cope with life on the farm, demonstrating her love for and link to the land in the easy, relaxed manner of dress and the freedom of her bare feet. She is naturally "embedded," planted in her environment. An idyllic, pastoral picture is what Lurie paints of his "throw-back" daughter: a new kind of settler, repeating and yet rewriting "history."

A frontier farmer of the new breed. In the old days, cattle and maize. Today, dogs and daffodils [...] History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein. Perhaps history has learned a lesson. (62)

Not only does Lucy appear to have ameliorated the aggressive thrust of old-style colonial advance, but the land which she bought with the assistance of her father is no longer owned in the original way: she shares it with Petrus, her "co-proprietor" (62). It would indeed seem that "history has learned a lesson", that Lucy represents a new way for white people to live in Africa. She is

¹² Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 60, 61.

¹³ The image of footprints provides a textual reference to both Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Coetzee's earlier novel *Foe* (1986; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987). The allusion is certainly that of the colonist or "settler" who marks the land with a sign of his (her) dominance or ownership.

¹⁴ I use this adjective with a degree of irony: I am not assuming an essentialist ontology for women – rather, that Lucy appears to play the civilizing role expected of (white) women in colonial Africa. Cf. Dorothy Driver, "Women as Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise," *Journal of Literary Studies* 4 (1988): 3–20.

able to share her property (it was at first a commune) and appears to have constructed fair and just terms for co-ownership with Petrus, at least a part refutation of an accusation that she is complicit with “real hegemony: white property.”¹⁵ Lucy would seem to represent a *postcolonial*, to quote Memmi, a “dissenting coloniser, the coloniser who refuses,”¹⁶ in that she “refuses” to take up the burdens of the master–slave, owner–worker relationship, fashioning instead a partnership with the black man who is at first employed by her. At this point in the novel she may be read as a sign of white hope, apparently secure in her position on the land, while yet undoing the grasping arrogance of the past. Her identity as white woman is not irrelevant in this respect, as she not only fulfils the criteria dictated by history in her role as colonial go-between,¹⁷ but also exceeds and thereby refuses the structures of patriarchal colonialism: she is firmly inscribed in the margins of society as a lesbian woman, who has chosen to live alone, independent of male authority. Despite her father’s initial, financial help she has constructed a life entirely separate from him and his life-style; a denial not only of colonial values but also of the male hegemony implicit in what Adrienne Rich has termed “compulsory heterosexuality.”¹⁸

Lurie, on the other hand, has been deeply embroiled in the structures of modern patriarchy. He is twice divorced and actively heterosexual, with “light and fleeting” preferences in terms of relationships with women (5). His “disgrace” is that of a professor accused of taking advantage of one of his female students, of having a brief but damaging affair with her. It seems that Lurie has a taste for ‘exotic’ women, having moved on to Melanie after the unfortunate end of a convenient, “satisfactory” relationship with a prostitute, Soraya, who has a “honey-brown body, unmarked by the sun.”¹⁹ Melanie, too, is dark-skinned, and this narrative detail, together with the nature of his rela-

¹⁵ Farred, “Bulletproof Settlers,” 65.

¹⁶ Albert Memmi, quoted in Stephen Watson’s article “Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee,” in *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, ed. Graham Huggan & Stephen Watson (London: Macmillan, 1996): 13–14. Watson argues that Coetzee’s writing is that of a man who is himself a colonizer, but who is also an intellectual and “a coloniser who does not want to be a coloniser.” For this reason, he asserts, Coetzee’s protagonists are possessed of an “insatiable hunger [...] for ways of escaping from a role which condemns them as subjects to confront others as objects.” The pessimism of Coetzee’s novels, he says, lies in the fact that these characters beat against the “shackles of their historical position in vain” (35–36). This observation has added resonance with reference to *Disgrace*, a novel that grapples with postcolonial realities and possibilities.

¹⁷ Driver, “Women as Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise,” *Journal of Literary Studies* 4 (1988): 3–20.

¹⁸ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs* 5.4 (1980).

¹⁹ Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 5, 1 respectively.

tionship with her, is suggestive of the complex interrelation of colonial and patriarchal hegemony.

She does not resist. All she does is avert herself [...]
Not rape, not quite that but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. (25)

The body of the Other: fascinating, desirable and seemingly irrefutably different, becomes a site for the inscription of power. Coetzee's protagonist is not only a predator in terms of his relationships with women but his pursuit of both Soraya and Melanie's (black/coloured) bodies mark him as active imperialist. Melanie (Lurie calls her *Melanie* – dark one) is strangely compliant, devoid of will, in their encounter, despite Lurie's assertion that she is learning to 'exploit' him. The dominant, patriarchal nature of their 'affair' is reinforced by her age and his fatherly feelings towards her.

Lurie's almost incestuous appropriation of Melanie's body is a crime he cannot, ultimately, escape.²⁰ Melanie and her father lodge a formal complaint with the University and Lurie is called before a disciplinary committee. His grudging admission of formal guilt (of sexual harassment and of falsifying Melanie's academic record) is considered woefully inadequate by the committee, who demand a full confession, a publicly available document protesting contrition 'from the heart.' Lurie refuses to comply.

In the South African post-apartheid context, 'whiteness' has been reinscribed, no longer unproblematically as 'norm', or simply 'privilege', but as 'guilt'. In an article in which the writer repeatedly denies a personal sense of guilt, John Battersby claims that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission has effected little reconciliation because of the arrogance and cynicism of the "confessions" heard by the Commission. Despite his own, personal innocence, he argues that in a post-apartheid, postcolonial South Africa it is collective identity – collective 'whiteness' – that marks individuals as guilty. "I can deny (neither) my 'whiteness' – in a collective sense – or my collective responsibility for a system which was invented and upheld in my name at the cost of the onslaught on my fellow black South Africans."²¹ Skin colour (or, rather, lack thereof), as much as it has afforded privilege, declares complicity with the earlier evil social systems. As a result, Battersby urges "true" repentance, undeniably marked by open and contrite confession. This, he (perhaps naively) claims, "blacks will understand and accept." And whites

²⁰ The text suggests that Lurie would be considered at least twice guilty: for desiring (and 'having') a girl young enough to be his daughter, "no more than a child," and for stepping across the colour bar – a suggestion reminiscent of the restrictions of apartheid. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 20.

²¹ John Battersby, "Admitting White Guilt," *The World Today* (January 1997): 23.

will be “healed.” It would seem that a powerful and pervasive discourse – of guilt and redemption – is at work in the aftermath of institutional racism.

Jane Poyner reads *Disgrace* as an “allegory of the Truth Commission” in terms of which she understands Lurie’s “sense of guilt for his exploitative attitude towards women” as symbolically configuring a “sense of collective responsibility of oppressors generally – and of the white writer in particular – for a history of abuse.”²² I would argue, however, that Lurie’s position at this point in the narrative is more accurately a *denial* of public confession, a refusal to acknowledge either the validity or the efficacy of a (verbal) plea for forgiveness. He seems to reject rather than embrace a path to absolution through “repentance.” The “word” will not bring absolution.

Confessions, apologies: why this thirst for abasement? A hush falls. They circle around him like hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off. (56)

“I won’t do it. I appeared before an officially constituted tribunal, before a branch of the law. Before that secular tribunal I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse.” (58)

Lurie seeks refuge from the demand for the spectacle of public apology in the Eastern Cape, on his daughter’s farm. Driven, in a sense, into the wilderness, he carries with him his guilt, his “disgrace” (85). Lucy suggests that he has been made a scapegoat, but Lurie continues to deny the religious power that the image holds, insisting instead that he has simply been “purged” from a society ruled by censors, “watchers.”²³ It is immediately after this discussion around society’s apparent need for cleansing, for purgation of “sin”, however, that the attack takes place (91).

One Bullet

Coetzee’s protagonist describes his first experiences of the attack that takes place on the smallholding in apocalyptic terms: it is the “day of testing.” Will he be tried and found wanting? He perceives himself at the centre of events, at the focal point of the testing, but the text reveals that he is side-lined: locked in the lavatory,²⁴ while the real reckoning – the rape and impregnation of his

²² Jane Poyner, “Truth and Reconciliation in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” *Scrutiny* 2 5.2 (2000): 67.

²³ The Foucauldian perception of society as being under surveillance – even in, and perhaps particularly in, the ‘New South Africa’ – is unmistakable.

²⁴ Like the “three old ladies” of the derisory nursery rhyme.

daughter – is taking place. Lurie is impotent, unable to protect her, unable to ‘do’ anything. His calling for his daughter simply brings one of the thieves, who demands and forcibly obtains keys from him. Words, language will not “save” him in this moment of violent retribution – least of all a language of Europe.

He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. (95)

The events of that day are to become, “Lucy’s secret, his disgrace” (109).

In her book on the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, Antjie Krog notes Thenjiwe Mthintso’s opening words at the “special women’s hearings” held in Gauteng:

“Because always, always in anger and frustration men use women’s bodies as a terrain of struggle – as a battleground [...] behind every woman’s encounter with the Security Branch and the police lurked the possibility of sexual abuse and rape.”²⁵

But no one will utter an audible word about it [...] Women who have been raped know that if they talk about it now in public they will lose something again [...]²⁶

In the aftermath of apartheid, in the economic and ideological reconstitution of South Africa, Lucy’s body becomes a terrain of struggle. She is later able to verbalize her experience of this ‘struggle’ and its ‘anger’ to her father:

“It was so personal,” she says. “It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was...expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them.” (156)

However, Lucy is unwilling and unable to report her rape to the police and instead grapples, slowly, with the deciphering of what has been done to her. Lurie offers a reading by which he attempts to comfort Lucy and which outlines a Nietzschean perception of the underpinnings of society: Lucy, her body, has been inscribed with the guilt of “history.”²⁷ Her womanly flesh is the notepad on which the debt of colonists is written and payment exacted. Despite the intensity of her experience, the multiple rape is not “personal.”

²⁵ Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (1998; London: Vintage, 1999): 271.

²⁶ Krog, *Country of My Skull*, 277.

²⁷ Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1977) also deals with retributive rape: Magda is raped, apparently as revenge for her father’s sexually predatory behaviour towards an employee’s young wife.

“It was history speaking through them,” he offers at last. “A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn’t. It came down from the ancestors.”

“That doesn’t make it easier. The shock simply doesn’t go away. The shock of being hated I mean. In the act.” (156)

Her experience is, of course, intensely personal and Lucy carries the burden of the hate and its particular inscription of shame. It is this particularity that prevents her from reporting the crime, as she feels it to be, too closely, ‘her crime’.

[...] as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place, it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not [...] This place being South Africa.” (112)

It is Lucy’s identity – as a white woman, in post-apartheid South Africa – that renders her personally implicated, perhaps complicit, in the conditions which enabled the attack on her.

Elleke Boehmer’s central character in her recent novel *Bloodlines* (2000) appears to function within similar discursive patterns. Her boyfriend is killed in a bomb blast, but she feels compelled to seek out and create meaning within her acceptance of the event. This acceptance is negotiated not by means of political reasoning, or by personal declarations of complicity with a past regime, but by contact with the terrorist’s mother and family, a reconstitution of *their* past and a persistent corporeal exploration of the meanings and signification of her own white skin – in close, intimate and desirable proximity with black skins.

They were holding hands, watching their fingers, their own, the other’s, inter-linking. Not indistinguishable, Anthea thought, not like holding hands with Duncan [...] This stubborn fact of skin, skin difference, her skin lightening, Arthur’s darkening by contrast. Getting used to the fact of skin these past months had meant gradually getting closer in, to Dora, to Arthur, like this. Winding herself deeper in, Arthur’s fingers between her fingers, skin on skin. Knitting into him even while thinking, not thinking, Duncan’s skin. Duncan’s torn-up, fragile skin.²⁸

On a far more traumatic level, Lucy attempts to come to terms with the system that has claimed her participation.

“What if [...] what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see

²⁸ Elleke Boehmer, *Bloodlines* (Cape Town: David Phillip, 2000): 192.

me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying?"²⁹

Lucy's articulated perception reflects much of what her father has said: she is paying, with her body, through its violation, the debts of the white colonists/settlers. She is their "territory" and they will be back to ensure that whites remember "history." What differs in Lucy's account is a harrowing, fledgling acceptance of the terms. She suggests a completely new brand of "settler," one who acknowledges her debts and, rejecting the safety of white hegemony, will attempt to face the price. "Not slavery. Subjection. Subjugation" (159). In addition, Lucy is un-settled but not un-homed. She refuses her father's offer to send her abroad and prepares to restructure her life. This "sturdy young settler" is unable and unwilling to leave.

It is helpful at this point to note that the text indicates not only a reading of Lucy's rape as an inscription of white guilt but also as a perception that hate, blame and anger may play a role in 'universal'³⁰ heterosexual relations as well. Lucy's body has become not only a site for colonial struggle but, despite her own, earlier, alternative sexual choices, is also a page on which has been written a more basic discourse of blame and retribution.

"Hatred [...] When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me any more. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?" (158)

Lurie appears to regard himself as ultimately impotent in the process of reparation. His gesture of subjection expressed towards Melanie's mother and sister, his relinquishing of everything that has held meaning for him (even the lame dog in the closing pages of the novel) – all this counts for nothing in the face of the new "scheme of things" (216).

²⁹ Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 158. Emphasis in original.

³⁰ I use the term reservedly, with reference to Julia Kristeva's theories regarding the development of subjectivity. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, tr. Leon S. Roudiez (*Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection*, Paris: Seuil, 1980; New York: Columbia UP, 1982).

The ‘New’ South Africa

In one sense, in regard to Lucy’s position in the narrative, Coetzee’s narrative moves full circle. The last view of Lucy places her back in the fields, in an idyllic setting. Yet this is by no means the same picture. Lucy is now no longer a “settler” but a peasant, a *bywoner* on land owned by a black man. In addition, she is “lightly pregnant” (218), her body bearing the signature of patriarchy, the mark of her brutally defined place in the structures forming a future South Africa. Bleakly, Lurie asks,

What kind of child can seed like that give life to, seed driven into the woman not in love but in hatred, mixed chaotically, meant to soil her, to mark her, like a dog’s urine? (199)

Lucy understands the terms of her existence in South Africa. Despite her father’s pleas and offers of emigration, she accepts her “place in the scheme” (216), choosing to stay on the land on conditions which dictate a complete relinquishing of all property, all rights – even her unborn child will belong to her new master and “protector,” Petrus.

“Propose the following. Say I accept his protection [...] If he wants me to be known as his third wife, so be it. As his concubine, ditto. But then the child becomes his too. The child becomes part of his family. As for the land, say I will sign the land over to him as long as the house remains mine. I will become a tenant on his land.” (204)

It is her father who must present the conditions of her offer to Petrus,³¹ her new husband/father. This, too, is part of his humiliation, his disgrace.

“How humiliating,” he says finally. “Such high hopes, and to end like this.”
 “Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.”
 “Like a dog.”
 “Yes, like a dog.” (205)

The postcolonial implications for a white South Africa are spelled out by Coetzee, as Lurie is forced to accept the terms of ownership and the conditions for residence in the ‘new’ nation. These conditions are negotiated through the body of the white woman in the text, that of his daughter.

In Gillian Slovo’s novel *Red Dust* (2000), the body of the white woman in the text is also, to a certain extent, a site for the negotiation of white guilt and

³¹ It is probably significant in terms of the text that ‘Petrus’ – Peter – is understood to mean ‘rock’ or father-founder. Petrus signifies the founding of a ‘new’ order, a new nation.

reparation. As Alex Mpondo says, in an early attempt to seduce the main character, Sarah Barcant, “Nothing wrong with a bit of white guilt [...] not at the right moment.”³² Sarah is quick to note that she has out-grown the need for guilty self-abasement. Later in the narrative, however, Sarah’s body is offered as comfort for Alex’s agony over the torture in his past. What I am suggesting is not simply that the white women’s bodies in these texts are offered as textual scapegoats for past white sins but, rather, that the gendered white body also becomes a significant reparational cipher in attempts to construct the terms for object, yet hybrid, future white subjectivities.

In the light of these corporeal negotiations, in which words weigh light, I would argue, *contra* Poyner, that *Disgrace* is not an allegory for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – or, at least, it is not a witness to the efficacy of the Commission’s testimonies of confession and repentance. The power of words is not celebrated in Coetzee’s novel. Instead, the book may be read as a text which understands that the spoken language of repentance, the ‘sorry’ exacted from men who have engaged in torture and oppression, is desperately insufficient and largely unheard. Indeed, the specificity of South African space, of a land stained red by its history, demands a language that exceeds the archaic strictures of any European language: “More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa” (117). It is the transfer of ownership and the inscriptions of pain on white flesh that must eventually bring restitution – and, more importantly, keep memory brutally alive. In many ways, Coetzee’s writing finds distinct resonance in the writing of another ‘Afrikaner’, the journalist and poet Antjie Krog, on the realities and effects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission..

We of the white nation try to work out the conditions for our remaining here. We are here for better or worse. We want to be here, but we have to accept that we can no longer stay here on our terms. Therefore I prick up my ears and try to hear what the new conditions for my existence are. Taxes. Mbeki mentioned that – the transfer of resources. Is it that? Is he saying: your money will do, but please dear God, spare us your meagre little white souls? [...] And should one not also be willing to be available as a punchbag? Can that be part of the deal? Just shut your big mouths while we blame you – for this, after all, is the only bloody thing we ask while rebuilding ourselves, by ourselves.³³

Most interesting in terms of the enquiries of my essay is the pivotal role that Lucy plays in *Disgrace* and the novel’s ‘redemptive’ gestures towards a future, reconstituted South African society. It is on and through her flesh, it

³² Gillian Slovo, *Red Dust* (London: Virago, 2000): 109.

³³ Krog, *Country of My Skull*, 437–38.

would seem, that some of the conditions of the ‘New’ South Africa are written. Not only has she borne the burden of shame through rape but she will also bear a child whose flesh will bear witness to her moment of inscription. This is by no means to suggest that Coetzee’s novel suggests closure, a solution or conclusive redemption. Rather, there is a sense that, like Lurie’s opera (the European Love Story, diminished and shrunk to the thin wail of a single string on a child’s banjo), the text itself may dwindle and ‘fail’, announcing in its plaintive notes the limits of its own discourse. The crisis on the farm is not truly ‘resolved’. There is no tidy confession-to-redemption sequence, any more than there is a sense that if Lucy (and her kind) pay the dues demanded, all will be well. Struggle, a violent un-settling, ultimate subjugation and reversal of hegemony is all, it would seem, that is offered to Coetzee’s white nation.³⁴

Finally, in answer to Farred, I would argue that Coetzee’s novel is more indicative of a willingness to accommodate – or at least explore – collective guilt associated with “settler” whiteness in South Africa than it is testimony to an impervious arrogance. *Disgrace* spells out a narrative that may be read as an illustration of the maxim “One Settler, One Bullet” and its associated mnemonics. However, what I have attempted to suggest is that in *Disgrace* those mnemonics are most particularly written upon the body of a white woman; that an inscription of guilt is performed upon gendered flesh. The implications of this observation prompt further examination. As Grosz suggests, it is in the particular inscription of gendered bodies that corporeal texts are produced.³⁵ That women’s bodies are, in times of social conflict and disjuncture, sites of struggle,³⁶ or pages upon which the narrative of guilt may be written and the promise of reparation etched, should not be passed over without critical comment.

I wish to close by suggesting, echoing Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*,³⁷ that my deliberations over and around the site of the white woman’s body in the text “are not about a particular author’s attitude to race” – or to women. That is another matter. My interest is, rather, to trace a moment in white postcolonial writing that is attempting to negotiate the existential terms for a humiliating present and a dark, disrupted future.

³⁴ This unresolved conclusion echoes postmodern, metafictional strategies employed in Coetzee’s earlier novels, notably *Foe*.

³⁵ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 156.

³⁶ Krog, *Country of My Skull*, 271.

³⁷ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard UP, 1992): 90.

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Identity

Bodies and Voices in Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Bouraoui's *Garçon manqué*

BENAOUDA LEBDAI

PHILIPPE HAMON AND GÉRARD GENETTE believe that characters structure the text and the story and therefore deserve more critical attention.¹ If fictitious characters are defined as persons without bowels, they nevertheless represent reality. In general terms, readers look for fully-fledged, convincing and 'round' characters, with a name, a personality, a body. These ingredients are present in Lucy and Yasmina, two significant characters whom I propose to study. They play meaningful roles in the Booker Prize-winning novel *Disgrace* (1999) by the now Australia-resident South African J.M. Coetzee and *Garçon manqué* (2000) by the French/Algerian Nina Bouraoui. In this essay, I propose to investigate the implicit meanings of the way their bodies are depicted. This will involve a critical analysis of the depiction of their "corporeality,"² which, we shall see, enhances the complexity of their literary 'construction' as well as their political significance. Disclosing the way they are present in the text and exploring their perceptions of their own bodies will help locate the causality behind their creation as gendered characters. I will determine how their specific and disturbing bodies bear traces of historical events, thus addressing the question of why both novelists transform them into symbols of psycho-sociopolitical issues. I shall analyse their specific actions within the course of 'History', underlining precisely their physical reality. I hope to clarify the reasons why

¹ See Pierre Glaudes & Yves Reuter, *Le personnage* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998).

² Barbara Brooks, *Feminist Perspective on the Body* (Longman: London, 1999): 2.

their bodies become mirrors of their souls, and voices in a disturbed and difficult colonial and postcolonial world, where attitudes may provoke change and upset convictions, as Elizabeth Grosz notes in *Volatile Bodies*: “Bodies and minds are not two distinct substances or two kinds of attributes of a single substance but somewhere in between.”³ Ultimately, my focus is on the importance of their psychology, the basis of their perception, and their experience, of post-apartheid South Africa and of postcolonial Algerian/French relations. The stances taken by these characters are worth analysing in terms of personal solutions to wider issues.

These two novels have been chosen for study because of their fictive location. They take place in two countries with similar colonial experiences: a ‘populating colonization’, which has influenced the development of people’s relations, in negative and positive exchanges, in mutual rejection/attraction, and eventual reconciliation, which consequently gives them a stake in the fate of their homeland. Even though the two novels are written in different languages, the themes they address concern urgent, shared postcolonial debates such as the questions of hybridity and syncretism. Within this perspective, I hope to show that *Garçon manqué* can be read as a positive thematic continuation of *Disgrace*, in terms of characterization, significance and hope for fruitful understanding, thus enhancing one of the functions of fiction, which is to create possibilities through words.

The character of Lucy is not central to the main story line of *Disgrace*, which actually centres on the real-life crisis of her father, David Lurie. Lucy is a secondary character, but she moves psychologically from marginality to centrality as the narrative develops. She appears in the story after her father leaves Cape Town for the Eastern Cape, dismissed from his university after an affair he had with one of his students. Seeking refuge on his daughter’s farm, he encounters her world. Against this foreground, Lucy, half-way through the novel, begins to assume a more significant and pivotal role by virtue of her literary construction, her sociopolitical stance, and her dynamic personality. Her presence in the novel develops in line with the way the ‘History’ of South Africa should move. Coetzee creates a character who embodies the conscious urge to connect to South African roots, which are: the land and the whites’ black neighbours, represented by the peasant Petrus. In post-apartheid South Africa, land/ neighbour connections are vital; Lucy perceives this connection, which for her is a basic and essential means of regaining one’s country, in order to eliminate the existing dichotomy between whites and blacks. Within this psycho-sociopolitical scheme, Lucy and Petrus embody a

³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (St Leonard: Allen & Unwin, 1994): xii.

particularly intriguing white/black relation, one that is a meaningful expression of parameters now regulating the New South Africa, bearing in mind that both communities have to come to terms with the historical trauma of apartheid. The relationship between Lucy and Petrus has to grow and progress, through difficulty and pain. In such a context, it is significant that the character of Lucy is built upon powerful images of her body that relate expressively to rural life. The image she presents to her father, who has not seen her for a long time, is that of “a solid countrywoman, a *boervrou*,” who lives “from the kennels, and from selling flowers and garden produce,” with grubby fingernails.⁴ The reference to these parts of the body, and their state, contradicts the usual image of white South African women, who have clean white hands because they have black maids. The self-aware life-style of this daughter of intellectual and urban parents disturbs the horizon of expectation within post-apartheid South Africa. Besides, by rejecting a comfortable, artificial existence among urban whites, she must certainly fight for survival, in terms of the future and even in terms of everyday life, by selling “boxes of flowers, pockets of potatoes, onions, cabbage” (70) once a week at the market, along with her black neighbour Petrus – a partnership that is questioned by her father, who only with some difficulty acknowledges the newly acquired “independence” (89) of Lucy. Through heterodiegetic narration and short, powerful stretches of dialogue, Lucy’s discourse reveals a defence of solid convictions, a sense of realities and priorities, such as her will to stay where she belongs, in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The close link with the soil and with the people, whatever their skin colour and sex, appears essential to the ideological construction of Lucy, whose sexual inclinations are worth emphasizing, in view of the historical significance of such issues. As Lucy is interested solely in women, her sexuality is a sign of her total rejection of conventions, morality, and her father’s claim to authority: “The turn away from men [...] coming out of his shadow!” (89). Because of Lucy’s choices, David Lurie comes to question the post-apartheid development of a sense of guilt on the part of whites towards blacks. Even if he does not discuss her sexual inclinations, he asks himself where he has been at fault, thereby lending the whole issue a symbolic dimension that indicates the general state of South Africa, past and present.

Most critics have read the novel through David Lurie’s point of view, with the result that it offers up a bleak perspective. I prefer to emphasize Lucy’s character as a paradigm of hope, stressing Coetzee’s realistic narration of the relationships between whites and blacks, who observe one another and check

⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999): 60, 61. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

each another's movements in the process of deciding what to do and how to behave. David embodies the whites' hesitations and perceptions in post-apartheid South Africa. His doubts lead him towards pessimism, as he is convinced that the blacks are in a position today to claim their share of the land and the wealth they never possessed. For him, this indicates the end of white privilege. Contrary to his daughter's stand, he thinks that the blacks are becoming more and more of a danger to white farmers, as there are risks in owning "a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes" in today's South Africa, where there are "Too many people, too few things" (98). The novelist convincingly renders the anxiety of the whites, who express their fear through recurrent stereotypical perceptions of the blacks as betrayers. Lucy's neighbour, Petrus, embodies this role of betrayer/intriguer, even trickster, who evolves from the position of assistant through co-proprietor to husband, ready to seize opportunities without any soul-searching – in effect, to take over her land, as David Lurie predicts: "Lucy's land. Then he would like to have Ettinger's too" (117). The fear of being thrown out disturbs the whites, and Coetzee depicts this reality. As a consequence, the white characters like Ettinger, who never goes out "without his beretta" (100), adopt an aggressive, defensive attitude: an indication of the potentially violent relationship between whites and blacks. Lucy's neighbour, barricaded with his dogs, has made his farm "a fortress [...] with barbed wire and alarm systems" (113–14). In this atmosphere of suspicion, Lucy's attitude is more serene, and she is critical of such behaviour, which for her only encourages reclusion and separation. She is ironic towards her father, who thinks she had better be "an armed philosopher" (60) in this South African countryside, even suggesting to her that she leave the country and go to Holland, the way Ettinger's children went back to Germany. That was the reaction of the *pieds-noirs* who left Algeria, for fear of revenge, when the Evian Agreements based their attempts to build a new nation on their staying.⁵ Unlike Lucy, the character of Bev embodies those whites who ignore the suffering of black people and heal only the bodies of South African animals: "lightening the load of Africa's suffering beasts" (84), thus widening the gap. As a result of this failure of communication, both bodily communities remain captives of their prejudices. Coetzee conveys a vivid picture of the complete disarray of white intellectuals and white farmers, who have difficulties in facing the new historical reality, whereas, even though Lucy's body suffers because of a tragic rape, her attitude provides the story with a hopeful ending and a new beginning.

⁵ In the 'Evian Agreements', the *pieds-noirs* were supposed to stay in Algeria to create together "a new form of civilization," as stated by De Gaulle. See "Histoire secrète des accords d'Evian," *L'Histoire* 231 (April 1999): 52.

In order to stress Lucy's meaningful role in the diegesis, I would like to underline the gap that separates her from her father, by pointing to some connotations of some of the words used by David Lurie after the rape scene, in which Pollux embodies the role of a rapist. With a "dangerous gang of three" (95–199), Pollux rapes Lucy in silence in a violent encounter of bodies. The function of the rape scene is twofold: it signifies a deep unconscious stereotype where the black is always perceived as a potential sexual body, and it stands for the violence of the country's politics. By calling the rapists "savages" (95), and stating that the gang comes from "Darkest Africa" (95), Lucy's father echoes colonial prejudices, denounced by Fanon in his discussion of the depiction of blacks as "savages, brutes and illiterate."⁶ Indeed, Fanon demonstrates that blacks are often perceived by whites as bodies and potential rapists: "the negro symbolizes the biological [...] He is genital."⁷ But beyond these colonial stereotypes, the rape scene moves from what should be a mere criminal act to become a political issue. In contrast to her father's behaviour, Lucy's reaction to her rape carries a special significance in the political context of the narrative. Pregnant by "three fathers in one" (199), the new state of her body creates chaos in the mind of her father, who pleads for abortion. As a character, Lucy takes on a new dimension when she rejects that solution. She makes it clear that her body belongs to her, and as she does not see her future elsewhere than in South Africa, her body would serve its future. She decides to keep the child, justifying historically her stand in not reporting the rape to the police: "In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not" (112). Her decision to keep the baby enables the narrative to convey forgiveness and 'reconciliation', two key words in the construction of the New South Africa, as Nelson Mandela proposes. For Lucy, reconciliation must be a concrete act, not a point of view, even if her father tells her not to "make up for the wrongs of the past" (133), and not to develop a sense of guilt. But she argues that it is her responsibility to judge what is best for her life and for the future of her country. One of her rhetorical questions illuminates the issue: "Should I choose against the child because of who its father is?" (198). Her will to be "a good mother" (216) for the child to come is, in my view, highly significant. Her responsibility and her natural motherly decision to accept her fate become Coetzee's implicit message for the construction of a new "rainbow"⁸ South Africa, despite David Lurie's pessimism (which is probably, deep down, J.M. Coetzee's own attitude). Blacks and whites must meet and mix even if viol-

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952): 94. (my translation)

⁷ Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 135–53. (my translation)

⁸ The term 'rainbow' is used by Nelson Mandela in his political programme.

ence precedes the creation of the 'New State'. The violence of the rape certainly symbolizes the violence of apartheid, and Lucy embodies the paradigm of this historical passage, becoming pregnant through violence, without love, but proposing an open heart to the new child; at the close of the novel, her body is a "picture of health" (218). The white body accepts the black one within her through pain. A symbolic future is encapsulated in a powerful image, where she is portrayed as a real peasant, with a healthy body becoming part of the land: "Lucy straightens up, stretches, bends down again. Field labour; peasant tasks, immemorial" (217). The land of Petrus and Lucy, the child to be born of mixed blood, black and white, adopted by both protagonists – these work as significant metonyms for hope. The concept of hybridity⁹ is conspicuous in Coetzee's discourse. His essays in *Doubling the Point*, published in 1992, explicitly express such a view, echoing Nelson Mandela's political message: "The pool has no discernible ethnos, so one day I hope it will have no predominant color, as more 'people of color' drift into it. A pool, I would hope then, in which differences wash away."¹⁰ This visionary picture may look idealistic, but it projects a positive future for many.

Postcolonial literature, whether written in English or in French, reflects new issues and new realities in the postcolonial world, such as dual identities set in one body. Bouraoui's fictional autobiography, *Garçon manqué*, addresses this issue of hybridity through the protagonist Yasmina, born of mixed blood, with an Algerian father and a French mother: "our bodies make opposed lands meet."¹¹ Keeping in mind Lucy's coming child, I propose to look at the character of Yasmina as a paradigm. The inner self depicted in *Garçon manqué* sheds light on the consequences of biological and cultural hybridity. Yasmina's introspection and self-analysis enhance the difficulties and hopes involved in such a state, a consequence of an imposed history. The novel reveals, step by step, the way the autodiegetic character Yasmina is a construct of a living memory in the history of two peoples and two cultures. Yasmina lives in a postcolonial era, as Lucy's child will do; the same pattern of attraction/rejection between two nations applies: "I am in the war of Algeria. I carry the conflict" (33). In a tense and nervous style, Yasmina states the duality of her inner self with openness, sincerity and responsibility, because she accepts the nature of her existence, even if her will to understand favours the scars of the colonial period and its psychological conflicts. Yasmina's

⁹ Term used by critics of African literature like Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, instead of 'hybridization'.

¹⁰ J.M Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Atwell (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1992): 342.

¹¹ Nina Bouraoui, *Garçon manqué* (Paris: Stock, 2000): 10. Unless indicated, further page references are in the main text. (All quotations my translation)

strength lies in her thorough knowledge of her dual position, which demonstrates that in her everyday life, in her body and soul, she carries the weight and the burden of History:

I come from a controversial marriage. I bear the suffering of my Algerian family. I bear the refusal of my French family. I bear these transmissions. Violence does not leave me anymore. It dwells in me. It comes from me. It comes from the Algerian people who invade. It comes from the French people who reject. (34)

The harsh and direct narrative style conveys the thought-process of a character in search of an equilibrium which could not be reached without a complete understanding of the past and a full understanding of colonial discourse. Nina Bouraoui follows Albert Camus' statement: "to name despair is to transcend it."¹² So, in order to achieve a balanced personality, Yasmina has to absorb the contradictions of her body, her being, by reviewing key historical and psychological states, as Lucy's child will have to do.

The question of rejection of the 'Other' through language is obsessive and recurrent. Yasmina's double identity makes her a privileged witness to racist attitudes. Her French friends use racist terms, but when they remember her 'dual being' they blame alcohol and declare that their words are meaningless today: "It comes out naturally. It is a construction of words integrated into the language" (126). With irony and pain, Yasmina shows the dangers of racism when it reaches an unconscious stage in language that maintains differences, thus encouraging the survival of colonial modes of discourse. Yasmina's Algerian collective memory recalls racist terms: "Raton, (wog) [...] melon, (Arab wog) or *négro*, (Negro)" (126). Her introspective memory spans the time when her parents met during the "Algerian War," at the university of Rennes, in France. Their union was criticized and violently rejected: "You will not marry an Algerian" (33). That rejection has become part of her life; Yasmina realizes how her parents' love was perceived like the rape of a body. She puts into words the relation between sexuality and racism:

The French woman. The depraved one. Like those who date the Blacks. Yes, this rejection is sexual. Yes, racism is an illness. A vice. A shameful disease [...] Hating the other, it is imagining him against you. It is feeling possessed. Robbed. Penetrated. Racism is a fantasy. It is imagining the smell of his skin, the tension of his body, the strength of his sex. Racism is a disease. Leprosy. A necrosis. It is the body of my mother lying with the body of my father that disturbs. (151–52)

¹² Albert Camus, *L'Homme révolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951): 320. (My translation)

Intimacy is something inalienable and sacred, the body accordingly so. Yasmina progresses in her self-analysis, defending her mother's choice and liberty to go beyond prejudices, to build her new life in a new society. Her decision recalls Lucy's determination to establish solid ground for herself and her child-to-be, despite the violence of its conception. Racist rejections are also found in Algeria, where this time Yasmina is called the "Roumia," the daughter of the Frenchwoman – something that hurts her in exactly the same way, and that must be fought with equal determination. Past history must not be ignored if a firm future is to be built.

The literary construction of Yasmina strongly expresses a partly dysfunctional dual personality through a tormented body and a disturbed sexuality. Yasmina does not know whether she is a boy or a girl, as suggested in the title *Garçon manqué*, 'tomboy'. She asks herself repeatedly, "Who am I? A girl? A boy?" (145). This hybrid sexuality strangely recalls that of Lucy, who is a lesbian, emotionally torn by the psychological and physical violence of her experience as a rape-victim; as the narrator in *Disgrace* comments, "Raping a lesbian, worse than raping a virgin: more than a blow" (105). Lucy and Yasmina question the feminine part of their personality – their bodies become an expression of political and historical disturbances. Lucy dresses in "asexual clothes" (89) and Yasmina declares that she has "a body without a name [...]. She often disguises herself. she misrepresents her female body" (42–51; my emphases). These implicit fictional elements express a deeper despair connected to the span of a 'transitional' history in which people must learn to adapt. The two protagonists are paradigmatic of the impact of history on the psyche. The quest for sexual identity on the part of both characters both evokes their hybridity and encodes historical identity.

Despite their situations as 'bodies in between', they cherish hope as they succeed in steadily constructing authentic personalities out of violent experiences. Lucy accepts the child of a rape and Yasmina the child of two worlds, of what others consider to be rape, not love, integrating in her deeper soul both worlds, the Algerian and the French, through language and culture; a human link between two countries today facing a shared past.¹³ The way the character of Yasmina is handled indicates the future of Lucy's child. Born out of violence, Yasmina finds her 'way',¹⁴ which is to accept herself through a mixing of both countries, both cultures, both histories, both worlds:

¹³ Today, France and Algeria look back at their common history through a rewriting of that painful experience.

¹⁴ 'The way' is a term used by the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah to speak about the essence of African culture to be followed, in *Two Thousand Seasons* (London: Heinemann, 1973).

Who am I really? Here, I let myself go. Towards this French language. My mother tongue. Only. I dream in French. Only. I shall write in French; Only. Arabic is a sound, a song, a voice. Which I keep. Which I feel. But which I do not know. Arabic is an emotion. It is the other that I shelter [...] Algeria is not in my language. It is in my body. Algeria is not in my words. It is inside me [...] It is physical. In what I do not control [...] It is the force that sustains me. Algeria is in my crazy desire to be loved. (171)

We can say that this duality is expressed through the characters' psyche and through their bodies. Yasmina's deep desire to combat that duality in order to come to terms, not only with her personal story but also with 'History' is well rendered. Rejected on both sides of the Mediterranean, she yet represents the possibility of bridging reconciliation. She finds her way out of the chaos thanks to her desire to live her life to the full, expressing her personality through the French language while retaining her allegiance to her Algerian culture and sensibility. Her hybridity is assumed and expressed through this analogy: "In this joy to be found again. In this Algerian smell which miraculously comes back, in every French spring" (197). Inner equilibrium is found in the cultures she has acquired throughout her years of moving from one camp to another, learning from mistakes through communication and personal thoughts which help to absorb discrepancies, weaknesses and shortcomings. The character of Yasmina reveals the long quest for a serene, authentic identity, without rancour, in complete understanding of all the issues at stake and all the difficulties, but also all the positive aspects, in order that she may move towards normality, towards love, through her senses, and her body, which is ultimately her reality and hers alone.

Lucy is a secondary character who plays a key role in terms of positive symbolic representations, Yasmina an autodiegetic character who delves into her subconscious and her personal history in order to understand her body and move forward. Both women try to make sense of the reality of their lives and the violence that has inscribed itself on their bodies, like the bodies of those in society who are "solitaries, out of kilter with the broader community, pursuing their always uncompleted quest for values and full personality."¹⁵ The development of both narratives confirms the capacity of men and women to adapt to new worlds and, with hindsight, to escape psychological ghettos through integrated and, in the end, accepted bodies. *Disgrace* and *Garçon manqué* are fully representative of postcolonial discourse, addressing as they do questions of identity, hybridity, cultural affirmation and, ultimately, reconciliation.¹⁶

¹⁵ Pierre Glaudes & Yves Reuter, *Le personnage*, 107. My translation.

¹⁶ It is quite significant that, during the colonial period, hybrid characters always had a tragic end, as in *Le Fils d'Agatha* by Francis Bebey (Yaoundé: Édition CLE, 1967), *A Few*

Both narratives turn on ruptures and consequently belong among those post-colonial texts that are “symptomatic of the centrifugal pull of history [...] believed to demonstrate the fragility of ‘grand narratives’, the erosion of transcendent authority *and* the collapse of imperialistic explanations of the world.”¹⁷ Both novels move away from *Realpolitik* to create, in Lucy and Yasmina, characters who become shapers of a ‘new body-politics’¹⁸ capable of reconciliation with themselves and with the ‘Other’, capable of transforming difficult and insecure issues into positive ones. The symbolic valency of their bodies conveys the psychological misery and predicaments inflicted by historical events. Nevertheless, transformation is feasible in full awareness of realities. Coetzee and Bouraoui’s powerful storytelling, in beautifully crafted, powerful language, subtly mixing realism, metaphor and symbol, shows their capacity as novelists for “encapsulating the contradictory experiences of global development for some generations to come”¹⁹ in this postcolonial era. Both novels are postmodern in the vein of those works which are “obsessed with narratives of violence, violation, dismemberment – all relating to the body in its human, political and racial forms.”²⁰ Postcolonial literature possesses this artistic capacity to create bodies and voices that can, as it were, lend weight to the sufferings of psychological dislocation, but also to generate new desires and aspirations.

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¹⁷ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995): 244.

¹⁸ A term used by Mark Ledbetter in *Victims and the Postmodern Narrative or Doing Violence to the Body: An Ethic of Reading and Writing* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996): 113.

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From “Cutting Without Ritual” to “Ritual Without Cutting”

Voicing and Remembering the Excised Body
in African Texts and Contexts ¹

CHANTAL ZABUS

THERE IS NO MORE SUITABLE OBJECT for cultural analysis, and the voicing of the lived body in literature, than the ‘female circumcision’ ritual, which is both controversial and a matter of immediate urgency. “Cutting,” in my title, refers to what scholars and activists alike now refer to as “FGC,” or Female Genital Cutting, to avoid and move beyond various misnomers. Among these misnomers, we include ‘female circumcision’, which has been discarded because of its presupposed equivalency with ‘male circumcision’, and the more ‘activist’ phrase ‘Female Genital Mutilation’ (FGM), which dates back to the UN Decade for Women (1975–85) and endures but has since been thought to preempt moral judgement about such operations.² I here use ‘excision’ to refer to what was and still is a rite of passage performed on women, and mostly by women, in sub-Saharan Africa, some parts of the Mashreq (lands ranging east of Egypt as far as Iran, and the counterpart to the Maghreb) and various other countries. It is not restricted by

¹ Research on this article was made possible through funding of the umbrella project on “Autobiography and the Body: Focus on Excision” by Belgium’s FNRS Research Council, 1997–1999 and 2000–2002. The essay is loosely based on my book *Between Rites and Rights: Excision in Women’s Experiential Texts and Human Contexts*, in the Cultural Memory series edited by Hent de Vries and Mieke Bal.

² ‘Mutilation’ *per se* is also used by feminists to refer to, for instance, breast enlargement through silicone implants and self-harming. See Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (London: Doubleday, 1999): 95–97.

social rank or religious allegiance. It marks the initiation of the girl child, aged between four and fifteen, into adulthood. But it can also be performed on infants and on dead women.³ In other words, excision is, in some cases, no longer a “puberty rite,” but remains an initiation rite, especially in societies where symbolic puberty precedes physiological puberty.⁴

Before illustrating the shift towards deritualization, implicit in my title, I examine the excision rite in the Kenyan context, from the 1930s to the present day. I then contrast it with the Egyptian context to show how African women’s first-person accounts of their excision, or what I call experiential texts, wrestled with these various contexts in their attempt to speak from their private memory and to escape their culture’s bodily and religious surveillance.

The excision rite is often deemed to be coeval for both girls and boys. As a purification rite, excision posits an original hermaphroditism and aims at removing the allegedly vestigial masculinity of the clitoris, the way male circumcision removes the vestigial femininity of the glans (but this latter is seldom pushed to its logical conclusion: i.e. removal of men’s nipples). Both circumcision and excision signal the symbolic death of the other sex. Although dissymmetry between the two practices belongs to a much later, feminist and legal discourse, it appears that the Jewish operation of *periah*, male infibulation, and the Yemeni and Saudi practice of penile flaying match the severity of excision.⁵ But such cases are admittedly rare, as opposed to the

³ The fact that female infants undergo the operation indicates that the practice of excision is no longer linked to initiation into adulthood. See *Female Circumcision, Excision and Infibulation: The Facts and Proposals for Change*, ed. Scilla McLean & Stella Efua Graham (Minority Rights Group Report 47, 1983): 3.

⁴ On this point, see Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1960; London & New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁵ Sami Al-Deeb Abu-Sahlieh, “Muslims’ Genitalia in the Hands of the Clergy: Religious Arguments about Male and Female Circumcision,” in *Male and Female Circumcision: Medical, Legal, and Ethical Considerations in Pediatric Practice*, ed. George C. Denniston, Frederick Mansfield Hodges & Marilyn Fayre Milos (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 1999): 161. *Periah*, which involves the tearing and stripping back of “the remaining inner lining of the foreskin off the glans and, with a sharpened fingernail, [the removal of] the mucous tissue and excis[ing] the frenulum,” dates back to the second century AD. ‘Male infibulation’ could also be said to be coeval with ‘female infibulation’ (which was also used to prevent women from having extramarital intercourse), since a clasp or *fibula* was put through the foreskin, thus making it impossible for it to retract over the glans and rendering erection either painful or impossible, but this dates back to Roman times. ‘Penile flaying’, by which “all the skin of the penis and often the skin of the pubis as far up as the navel is stripped off;” is supported by relatively recent Yemeni and Saudi reports dating back to 1986. Its medical consequences, such as urethral fistula, sepsis and sometimes death, also duly feature among victims of ‘female circumcision’.

6,000 women and girls who undergo excision daily across the world.⁶ Notwithstanding lucid and articulate pleas for ‘symmetry’ between the male and the female practice, such as that of Sami Al-Deeb Abu-Sahlieh (Christian, Palestinian-born, and based in Switzerland), I am here concerned more with the statistical and emotional import of women’s experiential texts, unmatched by male accounts about the loss of the foreskin, although this dissymmetry has recently been challenged.⁷

Excision here refers to clitoridectomy: i.e. the removal of the clitoris, sometimes accompanied by labiadectomy: i.e. the removal of all or part of the labia minora and majora. The most severe form of excision, discussion of which lies beyond the scope of this essay, is infibulation.⁸ It involves “the removal of the clitoris and the whole of the labiae minora and majora, and the stitching together of the two sides of the vulva leaving a very small orifice to permit the flow of urine and menstrual discharge.”⁹ ‘Introcision’ or ‘introcism’ involves the cutting of the internal genitalia. The World Health Organization also distinguishes between hymenectomy, *zur-zur* cuts of the cervix to remedy obstructed labour, and *gishiri* (in Hausa) cuts: i.e. the cutting of the vaginal wall to remedy infertility and facilitate sexual penetration in communities where child marriage is widely practised. We could also add *chire haki* – the incision of the hymen when considered too thick, and ‘sealing’ in West Africa, which involves excision and the subsequent sealing of the vagina, not by stitching but by allowing blood to coagulate to form an artificial hymen of sorts.¹⁰

To complicate matters further, words like ‘excision’, ‘circumcision’, ‘infibulation’ are derived from Latin and do not exist in the societies where the practice is ritualistically performed. In those, the expressions range from ‘having a bath’ (*Isa aru* or *Iwu aru* in Igbo) to *bolokoli*, meaning ‘the washing of one’s hands’ in Bambara, on to *salinde*, connoting ‘cleansing in order to

⁶ For statistics and an impressive array of the medical consequences of ‘female circumcision’, including death, see Nahid Toubia, *FGM: A Call for Global Action* (New York: Women Ink, 1993): 13–15.

⁷ See Chantal Zabus, ed. *Fearful Symmetries: Essays and Testimonies on Excision and Circumcision, Matatu* (New York & Amsterdam: Rodopi, forthcoming 2008).

⁸ On infibulation, see Chantal Zabus, “Acquiring Body: Waris Dirie, Infibulation, and New African Female Self-Writing,” in *Africa and Its Significant Others*, ed. Isabel Hoving, Frans-Willem Korsten & Ernst van Alphen, special issue, *Thamyris/Intersecting Place, Sex, and Race* 11 (2003): 61–76.

⁹ Olayinka Koso-Thomas, *The Circumcision of Women: A Strategy for Eradication* (London: Zed, 1987): 16, and Hanny Lightfoot-Klein, *Prisoners of Rituals: An Odyssey into Female Genital Circumcision in Africa* (New York & London: Haworth, 1989): 33.

¹⁰ See *Female ‘Circumcision’ in Africa: Culture, Controversy, and Change*, ed. Bettina Shell-Duncan & Ylva Hermalund (Boulder CO & London: Lynne Rienner, 2000): 98.

access prayer' in Soninke and Sarakole. Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *The River Between* (1965) euphemistically speaks of "going to the river" to refer to the Kenyan, Kikuyu practice of *irua*.

Kenyatta and Reactance

In the Kenyan context of the 1930s, excision functioned as a purification rite known as the Kikuyu *irua* for both girls and boys. Whereas it involved removal of the prepuce of the glans for boys, it involved excision for the pubescent girl. Jomo Kenyatta, who became President of Kenya, championed the practice of *irua* in his anthropological study of the Kikuyu in *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), which he wrote in London under the aegis of Bronislaw Malinowski. Understandably, Kenyatta considered *irua* as a source of cultural and ethnic (e.g., Kikuyu) identity and a form of resistance to missionary societies in East Africa, aiming "to disintegrate [the Kikuyu] social order and thereby hasten their Europeanisation."¹¹ And he did not hesitate to argue for the perpetuation of *irua* in front of a bemused House of Commons in 1930. Kenyatta's views reinforce the idea of the body as a sociocultural artifact rather than as a manifestation or externalization of what is private, psychological, and 'deep' in the individual. His description of the Kikuyu body and of the demarcation of 'gender role' in the flesh matches contemporary theories of corporeality, such as Elizabeth Grosz's definition of the body "as a text to be marked, traced, written upon by various regimes of institutional power."¹² Yet the context in which Kenyatta wrote is not the postmodernism of Grosz but a quintessentially colonial one, in which the body is neither subject nor object and is therefore open to various cultural inscriptions. Kenyatta's response is what social psychologists have called 'reactance': "a motivational state directed toward the restoration of freedom. It has been shown that the greater the pressure to comply, the more one wants to defy, and the more important the freedom is, the greater the resistance."¹³ Kenyatta's reactance built on earlier controversies, such as the famous 1929–31 Controversy.

¹¹ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938; London: Heinemann, 1961): 135.

¹² Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994): 115–16. I here use 'gender role': i.e. the cultural expectations of one's behaviour as 'appropriate' for a female or a male, rather than 'gender identity', the sense of oneself as belonging to the female or male category.

¹³ See Gerry Mackie, "Female Genital Cutting: The Beginning of the End," in *Female 'Circumcision' in Africa*, ed. Shell-Duncan & Hernlund, 277.

Elsbeth Huxley and the 1929–31 Controversy

The controversy around Kikuyu excision, which had started as early as 1906, reached a crisis in 1929 when a Conference by the Alliance of Protestant Missions outlawed the practice. This led to what is known as the 1929–31 Controversy, which was further fuelled by the missionaries' pleas for dissymmetry. Whereas young male converts were encouraged to undergo circumcision in mission hospitals and dispensaries, *irua* for girls was considered "a brutal bodily mutilation." What is more, whereas in one CMS station (Kigari in Embu District) "there was an attempt to introduce a Christian circumcision ceremony, at the other (Kabore in the Kikuyu section), and at the same time, Christians were asked to openly disavow female circumcision on pain of excommunication."¹⁴ The female Kikuyu body was thereafter to become the site of conflict and liminality between various male factions, both European and African.

In Book III of *Red Strangers* (1939), which covers the aftermath of the First World War to the eve of the Second World War, the expatriate novelist Elspeth Huxley presents the reader with two factions. On the one hand, the "Men of God," invoking Christian tenets and the authority of King George, outlaw the excision ceremony on the grounds that it is "cruel and wicked."¹⁵ On the other hand, the adherents of a Nairobi-based revolutionary party, who believe in a European conspiracy to "destroy the Kikuyu people so that the Europeans could seize their land" (347), urge fathers "to refuse the missionaries' oath, but to take another, no less solemn, pledging themselves to have their daughters circumcised in the fullest and most thorough way" (349). The girls refused to go through the excision ceremony, which confirms that Christian indoctrination was strong enough to warrant the daughters' open defiance of their fathers, to whom they culturally belong "body and soul" (355). Although Huxley does not say so, legal evidence points to the female expatriate missionary Hilda Stumpf as the instigator of the girls' refusal. She was identified as *irugu* or 'uncircumcised woman' and, as a result, got "crudely circumcised in the Kikuyu fashion" (355) in the night, dying in her bed from the wounds. John Lonsdale reported to Carol Sicherman that Stumpf was "forcibly circumcised before being killed."¹⁶ Yet her excision was dismissed as "an

¹⁴ See Jocelyn Murray, "The Church Missionary Society and the 'Female Circumcision' Issue in Kenya, 1929–1932," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 8.2 (1976): 93.

¹⁵ Elspeth Huxley, *Red Strangers: a novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1939): 347. Further page references are in the main text.

¹⁶ Private information quoted in Carol Sicherman, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: The Making of a Rebel: A Source Book in Kenyan Literature and Resistance* (London: Hans Zell, 1990): 64.

unfounded European myth, based on hints in [the] inquest report.”¹⁷ The violent Kikuyu retaliation, however, serves as a powerful instance of the way colonialism perpetuated tradition as a means of resisting European cultural incursions and the denigration of African societies.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Death-by-Excision

Unlike, say, women writers from Egypt or Somalia,¹⁸ no Kenyan woman writer has recorded experientially her own excision. In men’s literature, such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between* (1965), the female body emerges as a site of contest, not between the Africans and the white men or “red Strangers” of Huxley’s novel, but between the new converts to Christianity and the conservative “tribalists.” The latter faction reminds us of the Kikuyu Central Association or KCA, of which Kenyatta was General Secretary and whose newspaper *Muigi Thania* (“The Unifier”) contained an article by Kenyatta’s brother, James Muigai, warning that “Christians seem intent on destroying Gikuyu history.”¹⁹

What is more, in *The River Between*, excision results from female agency, since the young Muthoni chooses “to be [...] a real woman” and go through with the excision ceremony, which is, however, discursively erased, unlike the male circumcision ceremony, which is lavishly described in graphic detail. Through her choice, Muthoni widens the breach between her father, a die-hard Presbyterian convert, for whom excision is the Beast slouching its way towards his parish, and the *thahu*-cleansers faithful to the purity of the tribe, *thahu* being the Kikuyu principle of ceremonial uncleanness. Muthoni dies of haemorrhage as a result of excision, but it is, tells us, the peaceful death of “a woman, beautiful in the manner of the tribe.”²⁰ The female “body in pain,” to use Elaine Scarry’s apt phrase,²¹ is often vacated by a premature death or by war, as in the Lebanese-born Evelyn Accad’s *The Excised* ([1982] 1994),

¹⁷ Tobe Levin, “Women as Scapegoats of Culture and Cult: An Activist’s View of Female Circumcision in Ngugi’s *The River Between*,” in *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies & Anne Adams Graves (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1986): 210.

¹⁸ For a survey and a typology, see my own article “Writing Women’s Rites: Excision in Experiential African Literature,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 24.3–4 (New York: Pergamon/Elsevier Science, 2001): 335–45.

¹⁹ Kevin Ward, “The Development of Protestant Christianity in Kenya, 1910–40” (doctoral dissertation, Cambridge University, 1976), in Sicherman, *Ngugi wa Thiong’o*, 64.

²⁰ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *The River Between* (London: Heinemann, 1965): 29, 53.

²¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985).

where the excised female body is metaphorically aligned with a feminized war-torn Beirut.²²

Muthoni's death, which is presented in a positive light (we have to wait until the 1990s to have negative descriptions of death-by-excision²³), leads to Reverend Livingstone's decree to ban excision in the Church. This echoes the real-life autocrat J.W. Arthur's campaign in 1929, requiring church members to forswear both excision and membership in the KCA. As a result, the Kiama (or Association) resolved to restore *irua* as the core of the social structure. In its motto – *Gikuyu Karinga [...] Tutikwenda Irigu*, which means “we do not want uncircumcised girls” – the Association calls for *Karing'a*, which means ‘pure, true’. This was also the motto of the activist organization founded in 1947 by Kikuyu veterans of World War II, the Anake Warriors wa Forty a.k.a. the Forty Group, on account of their circumcision in 1940, for whom *Karing'a* became equated with the “lack of contamination by European ways.” *Karinga* also applied to the independent schools founded in the wake of excised girls' expulsions from the missionary schools.²⁴

Back in the late 1930s, administrators in Meru, Central Kenya, arranged to have prepubescent girls rounded up and collectively excised, as a means to eradicate pre-initiation abortion. A lot of unexcised girls would become pregnant; so excision before puberty eliminated the possibility of “a girl being sexually mature but unexcised.”²⁵ More broadly, this was part of DC-headed local native councils' efforts to lower the age of female initiation and restrict the severity of excision. This compromise was a response to the vocal protests of Protestant missionaries who then enlisted London-based humanitarian and feminist groups in their campaign and gradually medicalized the practice.

Both cases – on the one hand, the Kiama [KCA]'s order to have all Christian girls forcibly excised and, on the other, British-induced efforts to enforce excision on younger girls – are *en-masse* demonstrations of coercion of the nubile female body.

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²² See my article “Bouches cousues: L'autobiographie de l'excisée,” in *L'animal autobiographique: Autour de Jacques Derrida*, ed. Louise Mallet (Paris: Galilée, 1999): 331–52.

²³ For a negative account of death-by-excision, see the Ivorian Fatou Keita's novel *Rebelle* (1998) and my own review essay in *Palabres: Femmes africaines en poésie, textes réunis et présentés par Irène Assiba d'Almeida*, *African Studies Review* (special issue, 2001): 251–54.

²⁴ See Sicherman, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, 208.

²⁵ Koso-Thomas, *The Circumcision of Women*, 133.

Daughter of Mumbi and Ngaitana

If excision is the site of conflict between various male factions in the Kenyan social context, Charity Waciuma's *Daughter of Mumbi* (1969), by contrast, dwells on excision by virtue of the fact that Waciuma herself is *irugu*: i.e. unexcised. In titling her 'autobiography' *Daughter of Mumbi*, Waciuma inscribes herself in a long lineage going back to her forefathers, Kikuyu and Mumbi. The ancestral couple also features prominently in the atavistic concerns of her male fellow-autobiographers such as Jomo Kenyatta, who had declared to a crowd in 1952 "I am leader of Mumbi."²⁶ Waciuma's novel is a Kenyatta-esque ethno-autobiography or 'auto-ethnography', in that "the autobiography of a Gikuyu individual (Mu-Gikuyu) is virtually coterminous with the 'autobiography' of the Gikuyu people (A-Gikuyu)."²⁷ In that sense, this Christian, unexcised "daughter of Mumbi" is an aberration – she cannot be 'born again' through initiation, neither as an individual Mu-Kikuyu nor as a member of the A-Kikuyu. As an *irugu* or unexcised woman, she is 'cut off', excised from lineal reincarnation, from the ancestral re-embodiment that she is claiming as hers. That the uncut will be 'cut off' is also, incidentally, the premise of the *berit milah* or Covenant of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 17:4–14).

Waciuma's tribulations are set against the Mau Mau Emergency of the 1950s. Waciuma recalls how "unclean" she was considered for not having "been to the river," and how she became the laughing-stock of both excised children and their parents: "It was believed that a girl who was uncircumcised [read: unexcised] would cause the death of a circumcised husband."²⁸ The clitoris is thought to be a threat to coitus, just as it was believed it "hampered a man in his business" in modern European medical accounts. (As we know, the clitoris has a long history of being long.²⁹) Waciuma's body is unmarked, but has been hypocoristically devalued as that of a "child" in the oppressive Kikuyu body economy. The terrible insult "*Irugu*" was thrown at her sisters (72) and "loyalists" chanted songs designating them as "immature, [...] like children [who] [...] say childish things" (62), much like Joseph Kang'ethe,

²⁶ George Delf, quoted in Jomo Kenyatta, *Towards Truth about 'the Light of Kenya'* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1961): 166.

²⁷ See James Olney, *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1973): 85.

²⁸ Charity Waciuma, *Daughter of Mumbi* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969): 61. Further page references are in the main text.

²⁹ See my article "From the Tribade to the Excised Woman: Representational Avatars of the Clitoris in Women's Texts and Male Contexts," in *Figure della Differenza*, ed. Elena Bonelli & Paula Piccioni (Documenti di Lavoro e Pre-Pubblicazioni 306–308; Urbino: September–November 2001): 34–49.

who, as president of the KCA, had earlier supported the view that “[the unexcised] little girl [can only be ...] an object of derision, indeed almost of disgust.”³⁰ An unexcised girl was therefore a loser both at the time of the Controversy and throughout the anti-missionary traditionalism in the 1930s and in the 1950s. Indeed, by 1956, “If you were not circumcised [excised], they [the Mau Mau fighters] came for you at night, you [we]re taken to the forest [and] circumcised, and you [we]re roasted for what you have circumcised [the clitoris] and you are told to eat it’.”³¹ The clitoris, once severed, often follows a most unusual micro-odyssey. The Somali camel girl-turned top model-cum-UN Ambassador against excision, Waris Dirie, goes to look for her lost genitals after they have been left to dry on a rock. In Egypt, as Nayra Atiya’s *Khul Khaal* testifies, an excised girl is told to sew the severed clitoris into the hem of her skirt; another keeps the dried-up memento mori and, a month later, throws it in the Nile, after it has fulfilled its role as enhancer of fertility. In the Guinean Kesso Barry’s autobiography, *Kesso, a Fulani Princess*, Kesso watches her own casually discarded clitoris tossed away for ants to feast on.³²

When the ban on excision was passed by the Njuri Ncheke (an officially sanctioned council of male leaders),³³ older Kenyan women protested the ban, using the catchy political ballad or dance-song Muthirigu, which was performed during the 1929–31 controversy.³⁴ They sang of the ban “as a govern-

³⁰ Quoted in Ward, “The Development of Protestant Christianity in Kenya, 1910–40,” 165, and Sicherman, *Ngugi wa Thiong’o*, 64. Kay Boulware-Miller, indeed, explains that “an un-excised, non-infibulated girl is often despised [and] ridiculed”; “Female Circumcision: Challenges to the Practice as a Human Rights Violation,” *Harvard Women’s Law Journal* 8 (1995): 166–67.

³¹ Quoted in Lynn Thomas, “‘*Ngaitana* (I Will Circumcise Myself): Lessons from Colonial Campaigns to Ban Excision in Meru, Kenya,” in *Female ‘Circumcision’ in Africa*, ed. Shell-Duncan & Hernlund, 141. Thomas has since expanded on her earlier work in *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction and the State in Kenya* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2003).

³² See Waris Dirie & Cathleen Miller, *Desert Flower: The Extraordinary Life of a Desert Nomad* (1988; London: Virago, 1999); Nayra Atiya, *Khul Khaal: Five Egyptian Women Tell Their Stories* (London: Virago, 1982); Kesso Barry, *Kesso, princesse peule* (Paris: Seghers, 1987).

³³ In Meru, Central Kenya, the District Commissioner J.A. Cumber first introduced the topic of a ban on excision in March 1956 and the Njuri Ncheke passed the ban in April 1956. Lynn Thomas remarks that “the Presbyterians maintained a more strident position than the Methodists, expelling all schoolgirls who underwent initiation” (“*Ngaitana* (I Will Circumcise Myself),” 135). See also Robert Macpherson, *The Presbyterian Church in Kenya* (Nairobi: Presbyterian Church, 1970), and Z.J. Nthamburi, *A History of the Methodist Church in Kenya* (Nairobi: Uzima, 1982).

³⁴ This is a Kikuyu adaptation of a Swahili song called *Mslego*, with many verses improvised to fit particular people and occasions. With improvisations focusing on missionaries and their African allies in the circumcision controversy, the song (and its accompany-

ment plot to make young women infertile, eliminate the 'Meru tribe', and steal their land,"³⁵ using the terminology Kenyatta had used in the 1930s. In a form of protest, adolescent girls bought razors in local shops, did away with the attendant celebrations, and excised each other or themselves in a collective "cutting without ritual."³⁶ "More than 2,400 girls, men, and women were charged in African courts with defying the Njuri's order."³⁷ These girls were given the Meru name of *Ngaitana* or "I will circumcise myself," a deed that situates them as central actors in the banning of excision, which the District Commissioner had sought to place within the exclusive control of men. Girls and women wanted excision as a "bargaining tool with which to negotiate subaltern status and enforce their complementarity with men,"³⁸ to "maintain the age-grade system" and "continue regarding the mothers of initiates as figures of authority."³⁹ However, most of the women were under peer pressure (unexcised girls or *nkenye* were called cowards) as well as pressure from young men, grandmothers and the women's councils or *kiama gia ntonye*. Also, they had not anticipated the physical severity of excision. The fate of *Ngaitana* girls is bitterly ironical, since the older age grades did not recognize their initiation as legitimate. They had not removed the clitoris, as professional *atani* would have done. As a result, they were excised a second time by the *mutani* (exciser) or the mother, who would do the finishing.

Closer to our time, Kenyatta's successor Daniel Arap Moi issued an administrative decree (rather than banned) the ritual surgery in 1982 when he learned that fourteen girls had died as a result of haemorrhage. But in 1990, the practice was resumed, "as people felt that 'girls' had become 'too independent and [we]re no longer submissive to the husbands or the in-laws'."⁴⁰ This justification is a far cry from the original purification rite. The patriarchal context here takes precedence over the female experiential text, which it ulti-

ing dance) appeared first in Kabete in October 1929 and was banned (to little avail) early in the following January"; Sicherman, "Linguistic Glossary," *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, 221.

³⁵ Interview, 6 December 1995, quoted in Thomas, "*Ngaitana* (I Will Circumcise Myself)," 149.

³⁶ Judith R. Harris, *The Nurture Assumption* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998): 183–217; and Mackie, "Female Genital Cutting," in *Female 'Circumcision' in Africa*, ed. Shell-Duncan & Hernlund, 264.

³⁷ Koso-Thomas, *The Circumcision of Women*, 129.

³⁸ Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989): 319. See also C. Bledsoe, "The Political Use of Sande Ideology and Symbolism," *American Ethnologist* 11 (1984): 455–72; and C. Robertson, "Grassroots in Kenya: Women, Genital Mutilation, and Collective Action, 1920–1990," *Signs* (Spring 1996): 615–42.

³⁹ Thomas, "*Ngaitana* (I Will Circumcise Myself)," 131.

⁴⁰ I. Imathiu, "Wives in Circumcision Ordeal," *Daily Nation* (16 September 1990): 3.

mately dwarfs, since *Daughter of Mumbi* is little known and had no impact. Conversely, in the Egyptian context, women's voices are systematically stifled because they pose a threat to the *doxa*, both governmental and religious. But Nawal El Saadawi's clamouring voice continues to resonate with poignancy and vitriolic impudence.

Nawal El Saadawi's "Mutilated Half": What the Body Remembers

The earliest autobiographical account of a girl's excision in the Egyptian context is Nawal El Saadawi's vignette "The Mutilated Half." It functions as a "framed episode"⁴¹ – as a piece of embedded and displaced autobiographical writing. It is, indeed, embedded in the academic safety of a sociological treatise, *The Hidden Face of Eve* ([1985] 1990), and thus helps locate El Saadawi's personal experience of excision in the more general context of women's oppression and the patriarchal marking of their bodies. But it is also a 'displaced' experience (because 'unclaimed') in *Woman at Point Zero* (1975). In this early novel, El Saadawi had not yet voiced her anger against her own excision and instead had her character Firdaus lash out in wrath against her pimp by slicing through his flesh as an exciser would.⁴² The experience of excision is therefore a trauma, from the Greek meaning 'wound' but here a 'double wound' inflicted on both the body and the mind. Taking her cue from Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1919), Cathy Caruth contends that

the wound in the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. [...] Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on.⁴³

⁴¹ Harold Rosen, *Speaking from Memory: The Study of Autobiographical Discourse; A Guide to Autobiographical Acts and Practice* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham, 1998): 56.

⁴² Françoise Lionnet calls this a "metaphoric lobotomy that mirrors genital excision"; Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithaca NY & London: Cornell UP, 1995): 136.

⁴³ Cathy Caruth, "Introduction: The Wound and the Voice," in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore MD & London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996): 3.

Autobiography here becomes the rendering of unassimilated or unclaimed memory into discourse; the voicing of the 'double wound'.

Writing from her episodic memory and her scarred body, El Saadawi contests the forcible and non-ritualistic inscription of excision in the early construction of her gender. This is how her self-narrative starts:

I was six years old that night when I lay in my bed, warm and peaceful in that pleasurable state which lies half way between wakefulness and sleep, with the rosy dreams of childhood flitting by, like gentle fairies in quiet succession. I felt something move under the blankets, something like a huge hand, cold and rough, fumbling over my body, as though looking for something. Almost simultaneously, another hand, as cold as rough and as big as the first one, was clapped over my mouth, to prevent me from screaming.

It is clear from this embedded autobiographical piece that there is no ritual, since the operation is forcibly performed in the bathroom in the middle of the night or the late evening, when the child, aged six, was already asleep or at least "lying between wakefulness and sleep."⁴⁴ This passage illustrates the abrupt transition from sound sleep to nocturnal alarm; from childhood to ; from the fairy-tale to the harsh reality of women's condition. The body of the girl-child is invaded by one lonely icy-cold hand and followed by a myriad of adult hands, which carry the girl's body to the bathroom. There is much of the 'object' à la Kristeva, since the assailants of her body are seen as disparate body-parts poring over her dismemberment. The reader is thus confronted with the adult Nawal's mnemonic rehearsal of the trauma: unknown voices; the mother's complicity in the gory ritual in an ironic comment on blood ties; and thus, the betrayal of the child by the 'anti-mom'.

The sound of the metal and the "rasping knife," an extension of the "steel fingers" that clamp her, conjure up, in the girl-child's mind, the sacrifice of the lamb before the Eid al Adha festival. But instead of "heading straight down towards [her] throat," the knife changes its trajectory: "the sharp metallic edge secured to drop between [her] thighs and there cut off a piece of flesh from [her] body." And the "sacrifice" is repeated when her sister is excised a few moments later, thereby initiating an aesthetic of repetition, which is also inherent in the process of remembering, for to remember an event is to experience it again:

They carried me to bed. I saw them catch hold of my sister, who was two years younger, in exactly the same way they had caught hold of me a few minutes

⁴⁴ Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, tr. from the 1980 Arabic text and ed. Sherif Hetata (London: Zed, 1995): 6–7. Further page references are in the main text.

earlier. I cried out with all my might; No! No! I could see my sister's face held between the big rough hands. It had a deathly pallor and her wide black eyes met mine for a split second, a glance of dark terror, which I can never forget. A moment later and she was gone, behind the door of the bathroom where I had just been. (7)

It is a serial excision, since her sister is excised a few moments later “in exactly the same way.” This seemingly innocuous phrase points to the immutability of the practice, which has lost its status as a rite, and to its inexorable passing on from sister to sister, from mother to daughter. El Saadawi's conclusion – “we were born of a special sex, the female sex. We are destined in advance to taste of misery, and to have a part of our body torn away by cold, unfeeling, cruel hands” (7) – reads as an appeal to other excised women. Speaking from her private memory, El Saadawi incites other “mutilated halves” to remember and rehearse this painful fragment of their history.

Early theorists conceptualized memory, following the development of technology, from photography (with its ‘flashbulb memories’) to the telephone switchboard, the pathway in computer science, and video technology. Recent research, Claudette Wassill–Grimm asserts, has shown that

memory is actually reconstructive. We remember merely the ‘gist’ of things in what scientists call memory traces, and when we need to review an event from the past our brain first receives a bare-bones image. The actual details have often been lost, so the brain creates a ‘probable scenario’ based on general knowledge or present related imagery borrowed from our surroundings, or movies, books, and personal accounts we have been exposed to since the event. We fill in the gaps with more recent memories.

What is more, as Wassill–Grimm further suggests, people do call up memories which are congruent with their present mood, so that “people do rewrite their personal history based on their mood at the time of recall.”⁴⁵

Indeed, in Nawal El Saadawi's autobiography *A Daughter of Isis* (1999), the ‘sacrifice’ of her body is rendered in Judaeo-Christian terms: “[they] pinned me down by the hands and feet, as though crucifying me like the Messiah by hammering nails through his hands, and feet.”⁴⁶ This description is doubly subversive, in that, on the one hand, the crucifixion of Christ is denied by the Qur'an (Sura 4A, 155–17). On the other, the body of Christ is

⁴⁵ Claudette Wassill–Grimm, *Diagnosis for Disaster* (Woodstock & New York: Overlook, 1995): 127, 128, 129.

⁴⁶ Nawal El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi*, tr. from the Arabic by Sherif Hetata (London: Zed, 1999): 63. Further page references are in the main text.

sacrilegiously superposed on the young girl's nubile body. Why this addition? Either this second rendition is the 'probable scenario' imposed on the somewhat anorexic, bare-bones image of the earlier account mediated by a murky memory, or the two renditions are both true stories of false memories. Or, possibly, they also reflect Saadawi's increasing catering to a Western, Judaeo-Christian readership. The pressure of the 'memory trace' fuses with other ideological or mercantile pressures, whereby she has agreed to commodify her own culture. Or it may be all of the above.

These two autobiographical vignettes in *The Hidden Face of Eve* and *A Daughter of Isis* illustrate the shift from 'I' to a sororal 'we'. Both certainly function as stories about identity, since excision, like cosmetic surgery to some extent, is an 'intervention in identity'. Such vignettes are indeed patterned like before-and-after life-stories in cosmetic or trans-gender surgery, because both are marked by an (auto)biographical and irreversible 'turning-point'.⁴⁷ Irreversibility, however, needs to be qualified, since an operation like re-infibulation or re-stitching (Arabic *adla* for 'tightening') is repeatable after a delivery or a divorce. Yet excision-related narratives differ from shame-to-pride narratives after cosmetic or trans-sexual operations, in that there is, with few exceptions, no decision-making process involved in excision, especially at such a young age.⁴⁸ The turning-point is a trauma, and the writing that flows from the double wound is decidedly post-traumatic.

This particular history, like El Saadawi's reconstructive remembrance of things past, is "not the physical past whose existence is abolished, not the epic past as it has become perfected in the work of memory, or the historic past in which [man] finds the guarantor of his future, but rather the past which manifests itself in an inverted form in repetition."⁴⁹ Extrapolating from Lacan's

⁴⁷ See Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (New York & London: Routledge, 1995): 113, on cosmetic surgery.

⁴⁸ See my own article "Between Rites and Rights: Excision on Trial in Women's Texts and Human Contexts," in *Towards a Transcultural Future: Literature and Human Rights in a 'Post'-Colonial World*, ed. Peter H. Marsden & Geoffrey V. Davis (Cross/Cultures 76, ASNEL Papers 8; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2004): 109–34. Stephen James agrees with Kay Boulware–Miller that "in contravention of international law, the operation is often performed on females too young to understand the significance of the event, and coercively, both in the sense of the use of actual force, and because of the prospect of degrading treatment if the girl does not undergo the operation"; James, "Reconciling International Human Rights and Cultural Relativism: The Case of Female Circumcision," *Bioethics* 8.1 (1994): 14–15; and Boulware–Miller, "Female Circumcision: Challenges to the Practice as a Human Rights Violation," 166–67.

⁴⁹ Jacques Lacan, "Function and Field of Speech and Language," draft translation by Bruce Fink (unpublished, MS: 83). Lacan arrives at this conclusion citing Heidegger's notion of death – "the possibility which is [the subject's] own most, unconditional, unsurpassable, certain and as such indeterminable" (Fink, MS: 76–77).

distinctions, Petar Ramadanovic reflects: “this is to say that traumatic history is lived, is present only in its return and that, in this case, [...] there is a repetition and, possibly, a ‘forgetting future’.”⁵⁰ Writing women’s rites as in El Saadawi’s “The Mutilated Half” is a balancing act between an ‘unclaimed’ experience or an ‘unassimilated’ past and a forgetting future – on the cutting edge of experience, as it were.

Another difference between the two vignettes discussed above is that, in *Daughter of Isis*, Saadawi writes the mother, the ‘anti-mom’, out of the story and describes the *daya* Um Muhammad as having “ a strange gleam in her eyes [...] As though deep down she gloated over her victim, felt a mixture of joy and revenge at what she did” (61, 11). There is much to say about the demonization of the matronly exciser,⁵¹ who, as far as I know, has not yet written her own autobiography. But, more to our purpose, the *daya* is a key figure in the religious debate around excision.

Many contemporary Muslim authors have interpreted the Qur’an’s silence on the issue of excision in the light of the inner-Qur’anic philosophy of the Perfection of Creation. Indeed, the word *khitan*, which is used indifferently for males and females, is not mentioned in the Qur’an⁵² but in the Ahadith: i.e. the recorded deeds and sayings of the Prophet, in which excision is recognized as belonging to pre-Islamic, “Jahiliyya” institutions. Circumcision is called *sunnah* in accordance with the tradition of Muhammad, or *mustahabb* (commendable) for males and *makrumah* (an honourable, noble deed) for females, which does not make it *wajib* (obligatory). In Hadith 5271, Muhammad told the *daya* Um Attiyah, who excised female slaves or *jawari*:

If you circumcise, take only a small part and refrain from cutting most of the clitoris off [do not overdo it; do not excise everything] [...] the woman will have a bright and happy face, and is more welcome to her husband, if her pleasure is complete.

Or: “*idha khadatti (khaffati), fa-‘ashimmi wa-la tannaki, fa- ‘innahu adwa’ li’l-wadjh wa-azha ‘indal-zawdj.*” Without dwelling too much on the varied exegetical prowess around this narrative and its variants,⁵³ it is worthwhile

⁵⁰ Petar Ramadanovic, *Forgetting Futures: On Memory, Trauma, and Identity* (Lanham MD: Lexington, 2001): 85.

⁵¹ See, for instance, Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (London: Vintage, 1992): 203. Walker portrays the exciser M’Lissa as a vengeful woman bent on crippling young women the way she was in her youth.

⁵² Entry on *khitan* in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, CD-ROM Edition vol. 1.0 (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 1999).

⁵³ Abu-Sahlieh, “Muslims’ Genitalia in the Hands of the Clergy: Religious Arguments about Male and Female Circumcision,” 143. He expands on this earlier argument in his

noting, along with Ellen Gruenbaum, that whereas “they quote the Prophet as opposed to deep excision, they leave people uncertain about whether he was actively encouraging some form of female circumcision or not.”⁵⁴ This indeed leaves much room for interpretation. But if the practice of excision is not found to be religiously sanctioned, its upholders can always fall back on the fact that it is culturally sanctioned.

In 1937, at the time of El Saadawi’s excision, no girl, by her own reckoning, “could escape having the clitoris amputated, irrespective of whether her family lived in a rural or an urban area,” but not necessarily regardless of class, as Leila Ahmed suggests.⁵⁵ Whereas a *fatwa* (a decision or judgment by religious authorities) of 1949 had declared that “abandoning female circumcision does not constitute a sin,” a *fatwa* issued two years later by the same Egyptian Fatwa Committee had deemed excision advisable “because it curbs nature.” Again, a later *fatwa* of 1981 adamantly opposed the giving up of excision. The right-wing Islamist Sheikh Youssef el-Badri took the Health Minister, Ibrahim Sallam, to court in 1996 for issuing the “un-Islamic” ban on excision. He therefore construed the Egyptian Court’s ruling to lift the ban in 1997 as “a return to Islam.” Human-rights activists argued that the court ruling “stems from a power struggle between opponents of female genital mutilation and doctors whose livelihood depends on performing the operations,”⁵⁶ thereby pointing to the economics behind the perpetuation of the rite but also raising the issue of the complicity of the medical establishment, which has ousted the traditionally trained *daya*. Admittedly, the cavalier attitude taken towards many *fatwas* over time leaves little room for alternative rites.

Alternative Rites

If the Egyptian *daya* looks like a relic from the past, the African exciser, outside of the Mashreq, is instrumental and unavoidable in helping promote rituals without cutting or even to eradicate the practice. In the Kenyan context, the alternative rite involves ‘excision through words’ or *Ntanira na Mugambo*. This phenomenon has been amply described by Malik Stan Reaves (1997),

monumental *Male and Female Circumcision: Among Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Warren Center PA: Shangri-La, 2001): 102–106.

⁵⁴ Ellen Gruenbaum, *The Female Circumcision Controversy: An Anthropological Perspective* (Philadelphia PA: U of Pennsylvania P, 2001): 64.

⁵⁵ El Saadawi, *Hidden Face of Eve*, 8. See Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America: A Woman’s Journey* (New York: Penguin, 1999): 47.

⁵⁶ In *The Guardian Weekly* (23 June 1996). About Egyptian *fatwas*, see Abu-Sahlieh, “Muslims’ Genitalia in the Hands of the Clergy: Religious Arguments about Male and Female Circumcision,” 159.

who records how the actual cutting is discontinued while daughters of the same-age group

spend a week in seclusion learning their traditions concerning women's roles as adults and as future parents, as well as being offered messages on personal health and hygiene, reproductive issues, communication skills, self-esteem and dealing with peer pressure. At the end of the week of seclusion, a community celebration of feasting, singing, and dancing affirms the girls' transition to their new status.⁵⁷

This phenomenon was implemented by the Kenyan National Women's group, Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization, but that group's efforts has been technically facilitated by a non-governmental organization for women's and children's health, based in Seattle and called PATH [the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health]. Unsurprisingly, the list of messages being taught to the uncut girls is tinged with a North American influence; references to such things as "self-esteem and dealing with peer pressure" could be recommendations straight out of Dr. Spock's books.

In Mali, it is reported that "women from the blacksmith caste were publicly honoured for their decision to cease cutting. In the Gambia, the circumcisers [excisers] participating in non-cutting rituals were symbolically honoured as if they had cut the girls."⁵⁸ Following all these associations' pledges, 'excision with words' is now a practice on the rise. In her second autobiography, *Desert Dawn* (2002), Waris Dirie senses change in Somalia when meeting Assia Adan, a midwife campaigning against infibulation, who, inspired by Saudi "alternative rites" among "modern women," teaches "mothers about Sunni circumcision [i.e. following the Sunnah],⁵⁹ which involves no actual cutting and sewing, and is instead just a ritual."

An instance of 'ritual without cutting' is embodied in the Ivorian Fatou Keita's novel *Rebelle* (1998). In *Rebelle*, Malimouna escapes excision through a ruse. Following an incident during which Malimouna is the unwitting observer of a scene involving the exciser who, despite her sanctified position, is having intercourse with a young hunter, Malimouna and the exciser draw a tacit pact whereby Malimouna is not excised and only gets a small incision in her thigh. Although rooted in deception, the incident hints at a potential complicity between exciser and excised. Later, in the Parisian scenes of the novel, the older Malimouna tries to dissuade her friend Fanta

⁵⁷ Quoted in Ellen Gruenbaum, *The Female Circumcision Controversy*, 195.

⁵⁸ Shell-Duncan & Hernlund, *Female 'Circumcision' in Africa*, 37.

⁵⁹ Waris Dirie (and Jeanne D'Haem), *Desert Dawn* (London: Virago, 2002): 223.

from having her daughter excised. But Fanta is caught in a “double trap,”⁶⁰ as her actions are determined by her husband and punished by French law under the 1993 revised Penal Code. If she does not have her daughter excised and is therefore innocent under French law, she and her children will be faced with the ignominy of a marital repudiation that in Paris would leave them penniless and without resources.

While excision is on trial in France and other countries, ‘rituals without cutting’ are growing as ‘alternative [alter-native] rites’, and the practice is increasingly medicalized. Theatre practice, especially in Burkina Faso and Nigeria, has also helped abolish the practice or resort to ‘alternative rites’. These include the work of the Burkinabe playwright Yao Lassana Justin⁶¹ and, in Nigeria, the American, Lagos-based theatre activist and founder of SISTERHELP Chuck Mike, whose excision-related video-documentary *Uncut* (2002) revolves around the making of his play *The Tale of Ikpiko: Sense of Belonging*, which was presented at the Commonwealth Art Festival in 2002. Of note also is the work of the Nigerian playwright Juliana Okoh, whose play *Edewede: The Dawn of a New Day* (2000) deals with the cooperation of excisers and excised women in gradually eradicating the practice in Nigeria, while her play *In the Fullness of Time* (performed at Earle Recital Hall, Smith College, in 2001) mentions Aramata Soko Keita, the Soninke exciser who was sentenced to prison in France in 1991, and denounces⁶² “obsolete customs and traditions which [...] turn women into cripples.”

Sub-Saharan African countries have now either abolished the practice or fully embraced alternative rites. Senegal witnessed in 1997 the first recorded, TOSTAN- and UNICEF-inspired collective and contagious abandonment by the Bambara people of Malicounda, Senegal, who revitalized the indigenous pledge technique and prompted the Senegalese government to decry excision. More mass declarations followed, and this gradually led to the ban on excision on 13 January 1999.⁶³ In Khartoum, Sudan, where the practice of in-

⁶⁰ See Bonnie Barthold, “Fatou Keita’s Mother-Rebel: Excision in the Crossfire,” *FLS: French Literature Series* 27 (2000: “The Mother In/And French Literature”): 223–33. The reference is to Fatou Keita, *Rebelle* (Abidjan: Nouvelles Éditions Ivoiriennes, 1998).

⁶¹ See the documentary based on his play performed by the Tériya Theatre Troupe in Banfora, Burkina Faso, in Carlyn Saltman’s *Pourquoi donc l’excision? Why Excision?* in the Dioula language (52 min.; visual synopsis: 10 min., 1995).

⁶² Juliana Okoh, *Edewede* (Owerri: Totan, 2000) and *In the Fullness of Time* (Owerri: Totan, 2000), back cover. Warm thanks go to Juliana Okoh, whom I met in Northampton, Massachusetts in 2000, for providing me with the original copies.

⁶³ Mackie, “Female Genital Cutting: the Beginning of the End,” 257. Note that *tostan* in Wolof means ‘breakthrough’.

fibulation was driven underground after the British declared it illegal in 1946, the Canadian anthropologist Janice Boddy reported already in 1982 that

many western-educated Sudanese are now having their daughters ‘pseudo-circumcised.’ In the latter operation, the girl is first given a sunnah excision (of the hood of the clitoris), and then loosely infibulated.

Apparently, Boddy reassures us, “the infibulation is reversible and is performed only so that the girl might save face before the traditionally circumcised cohorts at boarding school.”⁶⁴

Conversely, however, there is a resurgence of the practice of excision in some contexts. For instance, the Rendille women in Kenya reject “the idea of using anaesthesia while being excised and instead emphasize the importance of being able to withstand the pain of being cut”; of “buying maturity with pain.”⁶⁵ This ‘reactance’ or neo-traditionalism, already obvious in the earlier Kenyan context, is also palpable in an autobiographical vignette by Fuumbai Ahmadu, who describes her initiation by excision in 1991, while she was in her twenties, by the secret Bundu society of women in Sierra Leone. She made that decision, urged by relatives, in her final year at University in Washington, D.C., where she was born and spent most of her life. It was explained to her that the clitoris is a superfluous erotic or “dysfunctional organ,” which is in keeping with other African, e.g., Sudanese (and, incidentally eighteenth-century European) views that the clitoris is an “asocial” “organ of sterile pleasure.”⁶⁶ That she wished, through her initiation, to empower Kono women by enhancing their political leverage against men’s secret societies makes that type of female agency a dubious affair. What is more, the spectacular staging of the operation, complete with anesthetics, antibiotics and doctors on full alert makes the re-ritualization of the practice a cultural aporia. While some women fight to remain ‘whole women’ with intact genitalia, others fight for the right to become ‘whole’ through excision. Very often, women have to choose between a rock and a hard place.

Literature remains a privileged place where women’s voices are heard, all the more so in women’s experiential texts. ‘Voicing’ acquires its full dimension when the Western-illiterate or semi-educated teller recounts her

⁶⁴ Janice Boddy, “Womb as Oasis: the Symbolic Context of Pharaonic Circumcision in Rural Northern Sudan,” *American Ethnologist* 9.4 (1982): 686.

⁶⁵ Jean Davison, *Voices from Mutira: Change in the Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996): 60. See also the question of neo-traditionalism in Shell-Duncan & Hernlund, *Female ‘Circumcision’ in Africa*, 284ff.

⁶⁶ Fuumbai Ahmadu, “Rites and Wrongs: An Insider/Outsider Reflects on Power and Excision,” in *Female ‘Circumcision’ in Africa: Culture, Controversy, and Change*, ed. Shell-Duncan & Hernlund, 292–93.

experience of excision or infibulation to an amanuensis, that is, a person, often a Western woman, who transcribes from dictation. To wit, Waris Dirie to Cathleen Miller in *Desert Flower* (1998), to Jeanne D’Haem in *Desert Dawn* (2002), to Corinna Millborn in *Desert Children* (2005); the Senegalese Khady to Marie–Thérèse Cuny in *Mutilée* (2005), or the Somali Fadumo Korn to Sabine Eichhorst in *Born in the Big Rains* (2006). Examples abound. The label ‘voice’ is a familiar, oft-abused metaphor in feminist scholarship, but women’s ‘voicing’ in the texts and contexts under scrutiny still best represents what women really feel and know, as opposed to what they are supposed⁶⁷ to feel and know under the surveillance of patriarchal relations of power.

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⁶⁷ See Kathy Davis, “What’s in a Voice? Methods and Metaphors,” *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* 4.3 (1994): 353–61.

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A Woman's Body on Fire

Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*

MAYA G. VINUESA

IN THE FIRST LINES of the introduction to her anthology of contemporary African women's writing, Yvonne Vera makes a statement that defines her own writing as well: "A woman writer must have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones."¹ When I first came across *Butterfly Burning* (1998), I was astonished by Vera's metaphoric choices and by the intensity of colonial, racist and sexual violence suffered by her heroine, Phephelaphy. She is initially portrayed as a Venus rising from the waters of the Umguza river in Bulawayo, and later on as a butterfly trying to fly from flower to flower, but by the closing pages the reader is confronted with Phephelaphy's scarcely tolerable end, with her suicide through immolation. Vera's poetic prose is an imbricated and beautiful text leading a wholly absorbed reader to a final shock that I still find painful.

If Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) still quite manages to shock a white American readership with the death of a girl at her own mother's hands in order to impede her enslavement, Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*, with the heroine's abortions and final suicide, becomes an urgent call to confront the effects of white terror and colonialism in a society where women turn out to be the most vulnerable subjects of the apartheid regime. Readers of African novels written by women know that they might be very likely to find this degree of violence in contemporary texts, which do not exoticize the colonized woman's experience, nor do they offer any concession in terms of facile

¹ Yvonne Vera, ed. *Opening Spaces: An Anthology of Contemporary African Women's Writing* (Oxford: Heinemann & Harare: Baobab, 1999): 1.

hope for the future. Indeed, the heroines portrayed by Tsitsi Dangaremba, Ken Bugul and Amma Darko, to name but a few, live similar destinies in which some form of self-destruction or death constitutes the only possible space of freedom in colonial or in neocolonial societies.

She Was a Being Entirely From the Water

Water and fire metaphors differ in their meanings in different traditions: in Anglo-American literature they have been consistently used to represent erotic desire, particularly feminine sexual desire. In popular literature, erotic fiction for women is a prototypical genre where these tropes operate more profusely: “The erotic world constructed in the romance is a world of watery passion that throbs through its characters,” Patthey–Chavez et al. point out in their analysis of a North American corpus of romances.² A billion-dollar industry, romances reinforce certain dominant “cultural models” of female desire, to use Holland and Quinn’s terminology.³ However, in African oral and written literatures, where motherhood – and, in its absence, the longing for a child – is a central theme, water and its related opposite, dryness (rather than fire), have been associated with fertility. Jane Bryce–Okuonlola explores texts in which the preoccupation with having children has become a metaphor for creativity in contemporary African women’s writing:

The longing for a child [...] is a paradigm for feminine desire itself, the longing for what is absent from their lives. The writing of that desire by the author is a demonstration that, childless or husbandless, a woman can fulfil herself: through writing, the re-creation of her story in her own image, rather than that projected for her by her society.⁴

Beyond this statement that women are able to fulfil themselves whether they have children or not, in *Butterfly Burning* Vera suggests that women can only survive as human beings if they can explore and fulfil other areas of their desire. This fulfilment is a necessary precondition for mental balance and well-being, before an experience of motherhood (if motherhood is to be the result of a woman’s personal choice or desire, rather than mere conformity to

² Genevieve Patthey–Chavez, Lindsay Clare & Madeleine Youmans, “Watery Passion: The Struggle between Hegemony and Sexual Liberation in Erotic Fiction for Women,” *Discourse & Society* 7.1 (1996): 81.

³ *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*, ed. Dorothy Holland & Naomi Quinn (1987; Cambridge & New York: Cambridge UP, 1995).

⁴ Jane Bryce–Okuonlola, “Women’s Novels: Flora Nwapa, Rebeka Njau and Bessie Head,” in *Motherlands: Black Women’s Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, ed. Susheila Nasta (London: Women’s Press, 1991): 201.

social expectations). Conversely, neglect of one's legitimate aspirations to find a place in society in favour of motherhood may be conducive not only to frustration but also to self-destruction in the form of symbolic or material death. In the tradition of African women writers' subversion of prototypical tropes imagined for female experience, *Butterfly Burning* offers a particular grounding of these metaphors in the female body as the experiential locus of joy and suffering, freedom and oppression, love and death. In this novel, Vera makes little use of dialogue and episodic narrative, in favour of a poetic mode which opens new spaces, leading us into bodily landscapes of multiple oppressions. The female body is at the centre of the text, its scars telling the story of the heroines' lives; bodies surrounded by water, bodies in the air, or in fire. This focus on the body and its direct connection with experience might be one of the unique aspects of the stories created by contemporary African women writers and by Vera's in particular.

In *Butterfly Burning*, set in the Rhodesia of the 1940s, the young protagonist, Phephelaphi, emerges from a river at the beginning of the novel in a state of inexperience and hope, resembling a water goddess, an image that operates intertextually in the African female literary tradition. Florence Stratton has pointed out the recurrence of this trope in Nigerian novels.⁵ Indeed, *Butterfly Burning* looks back to Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966),⁶ where the main character identifies herself with the Igbo water-goddess Uhamiri, happy and independent in her childless marriage to Okita, the owner of a river. It also connects with Buchi Emecheta's Ngu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), whose ashes are ironically placed on an altar after a miserable life as a mother of a large family, and who, like Uhamiri, does not grant fertility to the women praying before her.⁷ Phephelaphi's leaving the waters behind in *Butterfly Burning* is taking a step away from this safe refuge sought by female characters in other African novels which play with the water-goddess myths. Flora Nwapa's heroine Efuru, tired and frustrated after a lifetime of suffering through three marriages, becomes aware of her spiritual connection with the water-goddess Uhamiri. Fragments of *Efuru* that refer to her identification with Uhamiri have been quoted by several critics – Stratton and Staedler,⁸ to name only two – who have highlighted the rejection by Nwapa and her fellow

⁵ Florence Stratton, *African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London: Routledge, 1994): 90–91.

⁶ Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* (London: Heinemann, 1966).

⁷ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (London: Allison & Busby, 1979).

⁸ Florence Stratton, *African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, 90, and Katharina Staedler, "Imágenes de mujeres en la literatura africana: Ejemplos de Malí y de Nigeria," in *Las mujeres en el África subsahariana*, ed. Aurelia Martín Casares, María Casilda Velasco Juez & Fernanda García Gil (Barcelona: Ediciones del Bronce, 2002): 151.

African women writers's of the 'joys of motherhood' ideology imposed on African women:

Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why did the women worship her?⁹

The Igbo deity Uhamiri has an equivalent in Yoruba mythology, the independent marine goddess Osun, who undergoes a significant transformation during the colonial period, when she was known as Mammiwata in pidgin English throughout Nigeria.¹⁰ This 'transformed' colonial goddess retains the traditional female myth's features of childlessness and economic independence, reinforced now by aspects of the colonial white woman who, also childless, since she does not have or does not bring her own children to the colonial enterprise, is concerned about her own beauty, and tries to 'mother' the local communities at large – thus cooperating with the 'civilizing mission' of mother Britain. Okonjo Ogunyemi explicitly mentions Mammiwata's association with beauty, her powerful representation of a biracial girl, with her golden skin and wavy hair.

At the beginning of *Butterfly Burning*, Fumbatha, the male protagonist, is stunned when he discovers Phephelaphi rising out of the Umguza river:

She was sunlight. Her beauty was more than this, not expressed in her appearance alone but in the strength that shone beneath each word, each motion of her body

[...] She was water and air.

[...] She was a being entirely from the water.¹¹

Water and air will be the symbolic spaces chosen for the portrait of Phephelaphi as a fragile being in search of her own personal freedom. In the air she has the possibility of flying away from whatever obstacles she finds: "she would be in flight like a bird, laden with the magnificent grace of her wings" (35).

However, the waters of the river Umguza are not only the space for lovers to meet, or a space for the joys of life. These waters also tell stories of death,

⁹ Nwapa, *Efuru*, 221.

¹⁰ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa WolMan Palava: The Nigerian Novel* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996): 31.

¹¹ Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning* (Harare: Baobab, 1998): 26–27. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

being a sort of cemetery, with mutilated dead bodies lying on the riverbed. One of those is Fumbatha's own father, hanged with sixteen other men some years before:

The drowned die in whispers. They die in infinite solitude. The air leaves their bodies in a liquid breeze. First they sink as far as the weight of their bodies will allow, then they float. They touch the surface with their faces, not their arms, with their lips (p. 10).

Death is as intimate as love. Fumbatha thinks of his father, who is one of the seventeen dead, a shadow in which he constantly searches. April 1896. Fumbatha was born the same year in which his father was hanged. Fumbatha – this is how a child is born, with fingers tight over an invisible truth. This is when birth is least different from death – where death and birth touch [...]. (13)

A suggestion of birth or re-birth taking place in Fumbatha's life by the river is made with the emergence of Phephelaphi in those instants: 'Here was a woman who made him notice that his feet were not on solid ground but on rapid and flowing water, and that this was a delight.' (29)

Phephelaphi abandons these safe waters of innocence to enter the common land of women, the arena of sexual relationships, the experience of living with a partner, decisions about motherhood, the struggle for economic independence and the search for a place of dignity in society. Vera seems to go a step further, emphasizing women's right to make choices. On the question of motherhood, she avoids the previous dichotomies between proposals depicting women's creative existence in almost complete separation from men and without the burden of children vs. an imposed ideology of motherhood.

She Was Nothing But a Shallow Substance

The heroine of *Butterfly Burning*, Phephelaphi, makes a free decision when she moves into her lover Fumbatha's house. At the beginning of their relationship, sexual experience proves to be satisfying, and the words of the lovers, "words with wings to touch the sky" (50), have the power of flying like birds, as do the lovers themselves. But female desire is not presented as exclusively erotic in its manifestations. Phephelaphi is described as "a woman who chose her own destination" when she is thrilled, walking on her own to her friend Deliwe's house. Deliwe represents for Phephelaphi an idealized type of woman who, like the Mammiwata, has unrestricted ties to men and no children of her own and enjoys economic independence, running an illegal bar in her own house, where drinks are sold and men meet every night: "She thought Deliwe was some kind of sun, and herself some kind of horizon" (63). A new metaphor is introduced here: the female body possessing wings, like a butter-

fly in search of different flowers: “She is wearing a flaring white skirt [...] A white butterfly, her waist a tight loop” (64).

The background music of popular love songs in Deliwe’s illegal nightclub, crowded with men drinking their worries away, has the power to make her aware of some of her unconscious desires, connected with autonomy and expressed again through water metaphors:

She is thoroughly unprepared. When the music tears into the room she almost falls to the floor with agony. It hits her like a hammer, a felled tree, even though the noise is far and low and way back beneath her eyes where it trickles like a stream. Stunned, wounded, she holds on to the door while she listens to the stream grow into a river and shift every boulder, every firm rock in her body. It leaves a tunnel, an empty tunnel she fills with a far-flung desire. A yearning. She can swim, but she prefers to sink deep down and touch the bottom of the river with her naked body and her stretching arms (66).

One of Phephelaphy’s desires is materialized in her application to the nursing school: “It is not being a nurse which matters, but the movement forward – the entrance into something new and untried” (71). Fumbatha’s fear that this will separate them is a source of strain for Phephelaphi, surprised at her lover’s reaction. Yet it does not stop her from sending her application to the school, having been told that, by the end of 1946, black applicants would be accepted. The recurrence of the water metaphor highlights the progressively defined awareness of her strong desire for autonomy, which includes the idea of *being somebody*, also in relation to society:

Finding herself, that was it. Phephelaphi wanted to be somebody [...] She could not stop the longing even though she heard the water lapping against the edges, against the rim, as though she was some kind of river and there were things like flooding which could take place inside her body. It was full desire because she liked the lapping on the rim and the liquid falling down from her arms, falling down to her knees. (76–77).

Phephelaphy’s desire is described more precisely in terms close to the language of a ‘passion’ that is “secret and undisclosed”:

She was nothing now. She was not anything that she could feel. She wanted to be something with an outline, and even though she was not sure what she meant, she wanted some respect, some dignity, some balance and power of her own. Finding herself. Her passion was secret and undisclosed (107).

The water metaphor serves to express Phephelaphy’s sudden desperation as a “current” of emotions, when she laments that her pregnancy will result in her expulsion from the nursing school:

Something raced toward her, an emotion with no shape that she recognized. It was a current of grief and regret larger than her own mind and stronger and more decided. The emptiness had decided all there was to decide about her insignificance and her lack of wisdom and she was nothing but a shallow substance. (110).

Bodies with this lack of wisdom, 'shallow substances', destroy themselves or destroy others in this text: Gertrude, Phephelaphi's step-mother, hangs herself after she has been abandoned by her lover. Phephelaphi's biological mother Zandile, on the other hand, burns the body of her husband's first wife with boiling oil; Zandile is perceived by Phephelaphi as "a spider who wants her caught in a web" (129); finally, Phephelaphi's closest friend, Deliwe, portrayed with eyes "which held scorpions," does not hesitate to take Fumbatha as her lover, even while aware of Phephelaphi's anguish after Fumbatha's reaction to discovering her decision to interrupt her pregnancy.

The women who surround Phephelaphi are depicted as women who have not been able to love their bodies enough, their bodies being a powerful metonym for their whole lives. Zandile represents the ultimate non-acceptance of her body, in her sexual and racial aspects. She cannot bear the sight of the scars and changes in her body brought about by Phephelaphi's birth, and, unable to bear the sight of her baby, gives it to her friend Gertrude. Zandile's rejection of her own black skin and her curly hair is another metonym for her rejection of her own body. She uses skin-lightening creams and earns a living by selling these products to other women. Unable to afford to buy enough creams for herself, only her face has a lighter texture – "soft yellow like egg yolk" (94) – than the rest of her body:

There was an acceptable division between the face and the body. A mask does not need to be worn on an entire self, not under the skin but above it, it rests between the eyes and lips, the height of the bone, the stillness of the brow, the shape of the eyes, the length of the neck, the slant of the forehead, the patterning of hair, the channel where joy and sorrow dance (95).

Ama Ata Aidoo has also been quite explicit about this self-hatred, related to the imposition of a Western canon of beauty stigmatizing the darker skins and curlier hair of African people, particularly of women. The female narrator in "Everything Counts" attends a contest for a "Miss Earth" title in her country and laments the new ideal of feminine beauty:

She just recalled later that all the contestants had worn wigs except one. The winner. The most light-skinned of them all. No, she didn't wear a wig. Her

hair, a mulatto's, quite simply, quite naturally, fell in a luxuriant mane on her shoulders [...].¹²

As if their bodies had not enough aggression to deal with, another imported source of anxiety is added to women's lives; the ultimate and perhaps most damaging enslaving mechanism from the colonial administration. The colonial legacy of keeping black bodies apart – or apartheid – also affects men, described in *Butterfly Burning* as walking shadows in the streets of Bulawayo, making an effort to remain invisible:

So the black people learn to move through the city with speed and due attention, to bow their heads down and slide past walls, to walk without making the shadow more pronounced than the body or the body clearer than the shadow (6).

African women novelists differ in the degree of direct attention they give to the multiple oppressions of the female body. Nwapa's subtly ironic depiction of Efuru's suffering during her mutilation, interestingly, avoids any reference to a specific part of her body: Efuru is shown as a newly married woman undergoing an annoying and painful custom, after which she is seen blooming and more beautiful than ever. In spite of Nwapa's indirect approach to the subject of genital mutilation – perhaps defensive because of voyeuristic Western readers – the fact of including this otherwise less recorded practice might be considered the beginning of a trend where other writers are much more radical. Ama Ata Aidoo and Yvonne Vera seem less afraid than Nwapa and other literary mothers to focus more openly and intensely on the female body's sensations of pleasure and pain. They are more concerned about their own contemporary issues as African women and writers, hoping to address mainly readers from their own communities, although not excluding European or American ones. Their novels could effectively disappoint a number of Western readers in search of 'exotic commodities' – to employ Graham Huggan's term, following his provocative analysis of the complex relationship between metropolitan modes of production and consumption and postcolonial tactics of resistance.¹³ In Vera's novel we find no descriptions of potentially 'exotic' images of Zimbabwean wilderness, no romantic episodes, nor dramatic scenes of catastrophe. Unlike Salman Rushdie or Arundhati Roy, who, as Huggan points out,¹⁴ actively use the expectations of their Western readers – indeed *only* to expose them afterwards – for their own benefit and many of

¹² Ama Ata Aidoo, "Everything counts," in *No Sweetness Here* (Longman African Writers, 1970; Harlow: Longman, 1994): 7.

¹³ Graham Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001): 264.

¹⁴ Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic*, 58–82.

their readers' delight, Vera shows a complete lack of interest in 'marketing' her production. The pictures of Bulawayo and the heroine's struggle may actually turn out to be quite unpalatable for a number of a readers eager to consume texts about female troubles in contemporary Zimbabwe.

She Is Fire and Flame

The description of Phephelaphi's abortion contains perhaps one of the most vivid and also most intense images one may find in literature about this experience. The perspective is entirely physical, the reader being guided not through the external male or female gaze, but through Phephelaphi's sensations and feelings during the process: "her body dissolves in the truest substance of pain" (117). Water is replaced by dryness in its extreme form, fire: "She is lightning, burning like it. She is fire and flame" (117). The water metaphors associated with desire disappear, leaving us only with a landscape where "the land is dry and the rain is too far, too long ago" (118), fused with Phephelaphi's own dryness: "She is at the bottom of the river but it is dry there" (120). Fire emerges as the metaphor for unstoppable physical and emotional pain, which has buried Phephelaphi in a "firmament of despair" (126).

Phephelaphi has little time to recover from her abortion, having to face Fumbatha's desertion and Deliwe's betrayal. Her emotions when she realizes that she is pregnant again are now expressed in terms of absolute dryness, and equated to bodily stasis. She feels she will not be able to have a second abortion, and knows she definitely will not be accepted in the nursing school:

All the water has dried. There is no water in the river. A woman who is alone stands on solid ground, on a dry riverbed. My own solid ground to match the voice which is no longer in my arms, whispering my name. Today I turn my arm and listen to all the silence in my bones. I hear something beautiful. I see myself die in a storm. (146)

The storm is an illusion, and the power of fire is asserted amidst so much dryness, the last image in the text being Phephelaphi's body in flames. Fire, as unbearable anguish, leads literally to death.

There is an elation in her death, though. Self-destruction and self-liberation are blended in the final image of the burning butterfly:

She has wings. She can fly. She turns her arms over and sees them burn and raises them higher above her head, easily, tossing and turning her arms up like a burning rope. She is a bird with wings spread. (150)

Perhaps we need to bear in mind that some butterflies are only allowed a brief existence. We are anaphorically warned at the beginning of the novel, when

Phephelaphi moves to Fumbatha's house and observes a scramble over some food in the street: "Beneath the balcony is a multitude of broken butterfly wings finely crushed" (46). Women possessed with the desire to fly, crushed by a poor socio-economic environment, are metaphorically represented as butterflies, some of the most fragile entities within the whole range of animal creatures, and this is another aspect that may explain the heroine's nearly predestined end. In our attempt to interpret the tragic final trope, we might see this as one of the keys to understanding the allegorical quality of the novel, conveying the author's belief that some minimal environmental (social, political) conditions are required for a woman to have any choices in her life. In the colonial Southern Rhodesia of 1948, as perhaps in the postcolonial Zimbabwe after 1980, young women without material means are unlikely to be allowed to find the way to 'being something'. Indeed, Zandile makes this quite clear to her daughter:

You are not a man, Phephelaphi. What are you going to do in Makokoba without being a man? Do you not know that a woman only has a moment in which to live her whole life? In it she must choose what belongs to her and what does not. No one can verify her claim except time. Makokoba is unkind to women like you who pretend to be butterflies that can land on any blossom they choose. (129)

Phephelaphi's rebellion is precisely to fly and look for the blossoms she likes, no matter what the result. The air and water metaphors of the text highlight this desire, with a particular emphasis on personal freedom. Vera has subverted the dominant uses of fire, air and water tropes in much contemporary Western and African fiction – the abundant female water myths of fertility or sacred virginity in some African mythologies, and of female sexual desire in Western texts – in order to represent a different facet of female desire in her novel. The metaphors' connotations of passion illuminate here a less highlighted area of feminine desire, which is similar to male desire, expressed in the words "to be something with an outline" – not necessarily the outline of a pregnancy. In my interpretation, Vera not only goes beyond criticism of the Western dissociation between self-realization and childbearing pointed out by African women critics, but she moves a step further than her predecessors, denouncing the "syndrome of obligatory motherhood" (in Okonjo Ogunyemi's terms).¹⁵ Vera seems to suggest that other desires might be prior to, and claim primacy over, women's desire for motherhood. "Banishing ineffectual gods," to use Vera's own metaphor for the creativity of women writers –

¹⁵ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996): 17.

which in turn 'banishes' the contemporary motherhood metaphor for women's literary production as advocated by other African women writers and critics – might require placing the theme of motherhood within a different paradigm of female desire, not only in a context of sufficient material and social conditions, but, more importantly, as a result of personal decision-making. Moreover, water, air and fire metaphors – particularly the poignant final image of the burning butterfly – shed light on other areas of female desire, effectively opening new spaces for African womanism.

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Ritual Theatre: Bodies and Voices

ROSA FIGUEIREDO

DRAMA IS THE MOST PRIMAL MODE of artistic expression. Mediated by no pigment, print, or lens, it communicates directly through the raw material of the pulsating human body; its rhythmic movement, sounds, and presence.¹ Besides Derek Wright's definition there is another worth quoting. Michel Foucault has argued that "the body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of substantial unity) and a volume of disintegration."² According to Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, however, Foucault's definition of the body omits a crucial performative fact: the body also moves.

In the theatre, the actor's body is the major physical symbol: it is distinguished from other such symbols by its capacity to offer a multifarious complex of meanings. [...] it interacts with all other stage signifiers – notably costume, set, and dialogue – and, crucially, with the audience. It is not surprising, then, that the body functions as one of the most charged sites of theatrical representation.³

Furthermore, in their full-length study of postcolonial drama, and with reference to metamorphic bodies, Gilbert and Tompkins state:

¹ Derek Wright, *Wole Soyinka Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1993): 23.

² Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1971), tr. Donald Bouchard & Sherry Simon, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1977): 148.

³ Helen Gilbert & Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996): 203.

The powerful presence of the theatricalised post-colonial body, despite (and sometimes even because of) its derogations, suggests that foregrounding corporeality can be a highly positive, active strategy for staging resistance to imperialism. Traditional enactments such as ritual and carnival demonstrate that the performing body can help to regenerate and unify communities despite the disabilities, disintegrations, and specific disconnections of the individual bodies involved.⁴

Let us concentrate on Yorubaland in southwest Nigeria. The general concept of transition is central to Yoruba life. Like many West African societies, Yoruba view excessive stability as undesirable because it induces stagnation and entropy; they have therefore devised checks to restrict power and keep anything from lasting too long.⁵ By these means, the Yoruba prevent the petrification that follows from the preservation of dead things and ensure a continuous flux of self-renewal. The assimilation of changeful and even alien influences has always been a principle of social life and aesthetics. In fact, Yoruba art and religion have long been famous for their capacity to accrete and absorb new forms and ideas without being subverted by them and for expanding identity beyond the point where most value-systems would have lost theirs.

In Wole Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman*, Olunde's substitution of himself for the father in the ritual suicide shows the deployment of Soyinka's concept of the redemptive potency of tragedy. By becoming the agent of the renewal of his people's spirituality, Olunde confounds both tradition and modernity. His training as a doctor in England had made it unlikely that he would return to take up his hereditary role as the eldest son of the king's horseman. However, that very experience has given Olunde a greater appreciation of his culture. What is interesting to note is that Olunde's access to Western culture has, in fact, erased the difference between it and his own, contrary to the expectations of the District Officer and his father. We are thus shown that transgression of cultural boundaries may not necessarily lead to the transformation of a subject's fundamental beliefs and that, if anything, it may in fact entrench them more deeply. Moreover, the play foregrounds the arbitrariness of cultural valorization within the colonial formation, while also representing the scene of modernity as equally appropriate for training future king's horsemen. So, when the dead body of the king's horseman in the shape of the medic Olunde is brought in, something more than the traditional ritual has been performed, for the union between modernity and tradition that has

⁴ Gilbert & Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, 231.

⁵ Dennis Duerden, *African Art and Literature: The Invisible Present* (London: Heinemann, 1975): 1–35.

been enacted here ensures that the practice is continued within the hybrid cultural formation of the postcolonial. Thus, in the transgression of the difference between the modern and the traditional, Olunde not only regenerates a particular community at a determinate moment, but also opens up the colonial moment to the dialectic of transformation, metonymically staging a deeper form of cultural nationalism and anticipating the postcolonial critique of the uncritical valorization of tradition in nationalist discourses of identity.⁶ In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka is, in fact, able to present tragedy as that structure of symbolic resources in which change and renewal can be re-imagined endlessly.

According to Derek Wright, Soyinka subscribes to an appropriately mobile and eclectic concept of traditional culture and has always distrusted talk of 'tradition' and 'authentic African values' because these are not inert bodies of value or retrievable cultural curiosities but dynamic, cumulative wisdoms still in flux and invigorated by new ideas.⁷ In an interview given to John Agetua in Accra, Ghana in 1974, Soyinka stresses: "we must not think that traditionalism means raffia skirts; in other words it's no longer possible for a purist literature for the simple reason that even our most traditional literature has never been purist."⁸ Oral poetry and ritual chants, aware that they are always being overtaken by time, are continually modified and created anew in performance. Art must therefore move with the current and be perpetually in transition, not become petrified in the past.

Likewise, in Yoruba cosmology, a constant input of transitional energy is required to regenerate the universe and prevent its precarious equilibrium from settling into a sterile and stagnant harmony. This energy, in Soyinka's visionary reading in "The Fourth Stage," is supplied by an unceasing, alternating cycle of disruption and reparation, a dialectic of infraction and restoration ruled by the principle of complementarity. In the humanistic symbiotics of Yoruba theology, the gods yearn for reunification with the humans and are tied to humanity by a common fallibility and reciprocal needs: to become complete, they need to re-experience the human in themselves – as man needs to recapture his divine essence – and they need human endorsement of their creative acts to maintain their spiritual status. Humanistic as well as anthropo-

⁶ Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, *Wole Soyinka* (Plymouth: Northcote House & British Council, 1998): 77.

⁷ Wright, *Wole Soyinka Revisited*, 13.

⁸ John Agetua, *When the Man Died* (Benin City, Nigeria: Bendel, 1975). A brief survey of responses to Soyinka's controversial prison autobiography, this contains an interview with Soyinka, who at the time was in Accra, Ghana, in 'exile' from the Gowon regime, which was still in power in Nigeria. See Agetua, "Interview with Wole Soyinka in Accra, Ghana, 1974."

morphic in their conception, the gods are error-prone and humanly accountable for their transgressions. Accordingly, they are given the opportunity to make amends to mankind for their hubristic infractions of nature, committed when at their most human, by means of the rituals that provide humans with access to their cosmic powers.⁹

If we are to encourage the slow, perplexed growth of a more adequate humanism, the ritual processes still at work in our own societies urgently need to be understood and revalued. Soyinka's theatre makes a formidable contribution to this understanding, through its cultural history, showing an indigenous theatre that has expressed itself for centuries in the form of the festivals and ceremonies that still punctuate Yoruba life. In ceremonial masques where personality transformations were conjured by costume, and vocal projections and distortions by masks, the effect was a powerful combination of the consecrated and the comic, involving both ecstatic possession and satiric entertainment, solemn and acrobatic dance. It is in one such masquerade, the *egungun* procession of the dead, that the roots of traditional Yoruba drama are conventionally located.¹⁰

It has been argued by Nigerian writers and critics that the *egungun* is the model, in its bifocal vision of festival dramaturgy, for the two kinds of drama in Soyinka's own theatre: the popular and the hermetic, satiric comedy and metaphysical tragedy, ritual as both a universal and an esoteric idiom.¹¹ But, most important of all, Soyinka is not so much for reading as for staging, for performance. His plays abound in bodies and voices, in spectacle and movement and colour; in multiple settings, flashbacks and dramatic re-enactments; in characters made exotic and compelling by their eloquence and laughter, their gift for improvisation and mimicry. Enhanced by the use of lighting and

⁹ Wright, *Wole Soyinka Revisited*, 13–14.

¹⁰ The following articles are useful sources of information about the two phases of the *egungun*: "Yoruba Theatre," in *Introduction to African Literature*, ed. Ulli Beier (London: Longman, rev. ed. 1979): 269–80; Oyin Ogunba, "Traditional African Festival Drama," in *Theatre in Africa*, ed. Oyin Ogunba & Abiola Irele (Ibadan: Ibadan UP, 1978): 3–26.

¹¹ The dramatist Femi Osofisan underlines Soyinka's kinship with traditional artists by tentatively dividing his plays into twin categories that have loose affinities with both the split-level performance of festival drama and the two stages of the *egungun*. The Marxist critic Biodun Jeyifo classifies contemporary Nigerian theatre according to the same figurative "cultic" and "popular" polarities: the university playwrights and their literary drama, performed before elite audiences of educated initiates far from the popular arena, constitute the new cult "priests" and practice; the indigenous folk theatres are the modern masquerade revealers, providing lighthearted entertainments in the Yoruba vernacular for the masses. In Jeyifo's opinion, Soyinka's work continues to express the ruling cosmology, theocratic ethos, and animist-panteism of Yoruba cult-drama. See Biodun Jeyifo, *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama* (London: New Beacon, 1985): 113–17.

sound effects, the presence of skilful singers and dancers, the lyrical power of language, Soyinka's plays cannot but be entrancing for an audience and, even more so, for actors.

In many cases, transformations of the postcolonial body are theatricalized through rhythmic movement such as dance, which brings into focus the performing body. For a description of dance as a culturally coded activity I am indebted to Gilbert and Tompkins:

Dance has a number of important functions in drama: not only does it concentrate the audience's gaze on the performing body/bodies, but it also draws attention to proxemic relations between characters, spectators, and features of the set. Splitting the focus from other sorts of proxemic and kinesic – and potentially, linguistic – codes, dance renegotiates dramatic action and dramatic activity, reinforcing the actor's corporeality, particularly when it is culturally laden. Dance is a form of spatial inscription and thus a productive way of illustrating – and countering – the territorial aspects of western imperialism. Dance's patterned movement also offers the opportunity to establish cultural context, particularly when the dance executed challenges the norms of the coloniser. In this way, dance recuperates post-colonial subjectivity by centralising traditional, non-verbal forms of self-representation.¹²

A play which highlights the fact that colonialism has not destroyed local pre-contact customs or traditions is Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. This play is described by Femi Osofisan as the one in which "Soyinka succeeds most in recreating the complete, credible world of African ritual [because] here the ritual form is not merely recast, but the playwright invests it with a dialectic, and his personal vision intervenes for a crucial interrogation of history."¹³ The play outlines the events leading up to a frustrated ritual suicide which involves Elesin, the guardian of the dead king's stables. The ritual suicide, enjoined upon the keeper of the king's stables a month after the king's death, is not only to give the king a companion into the realm of the ancestors, but is also a way of affirming a sense of cosmos for the culture in general. Elesin's failure to do so will result in the king cursing his people for the humiliation they have caused him. Thus, Elesin's duty to die is inextricably bound up with the continued health and viability of his community. When Praise-Singer affirms to Elesin that their world "was never wrenched from its true course,"¹⁴ he does so in the confidence that stability comes from

¹² Gilbert & Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, 239.

¹³ Femi Osofisan, "Ritual and the revolutionary ethos: The humanist dilemma in contemporary Nigerian Theatre," *Okike* 22 (1982): 77.

¹⁴ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (London: Methuen Drama, 1975): 10. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

attending to the rituals of the ancestors. This is made clear to Elesin to keep him in constant awareness of how important it is for him not to fail in the ritual suicide. The preparations for the ritual are both psychological and physical, and the music and drumming that follow Elesin on his every appearance are meant to groom him mentally for the ritual of transition. In the crucial dance at the end of scene III in which Elesin enters a trance-state, it is noticeable how images of passage dominate the exchanges between Praise-Singer, representing the voice of the dead king, and Elesin himself:

PRAISE-SINGER: If you cannot come, I said, swear
 You'll tell my favourite horse. I shall
 Ride on through the gates alone.
 ELESIN: Elesin's message will be read.
 Only when his loyal heart no longer beats
 PRAISE-SINGER: If you cannot come Elesin, tell my dog.
 I cannot stay the keeper too long.
 At the gate. (42)

As in music, the use of repetition, such as the phrase "If you cannot come," serves to create simultaneity of action. The transitional passage before which Elesin falters is inherent in all black musical forms. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Soyinka's dances are darkly lyrical, uniting with the music of the drums and songs of the chorus to usher the audience into a self-contained, hermetic world, an effected reality.¹⁵ Soyinka's greatest achievement is just this: the creation of a compelling world through language, in language and of language. But his mastery of spoken language is necessarily reinforced by mastery of a second language of music, and a third of dance. "Where it is possible to capture through movements what words are saying," he explains, "then I will use the movement instead of the words."¹⁶

A play, among all the verbal arts, is most obviously an act of language. Soyinka allows the metaphor-rich and tonal Yoruba language to inform his use of English. Long ago, the Yoruba defined metaphor as the "horse" of words: "If a word is lost, a metaphor or proverb is used to find it."¹⁷ The horse metaphor implies a transfer or carriage of meaning, through intention and extension. It is just this aspect of the Yoruba language on which Soyinka relies. The extended use of such densely metaphoric utterances, searching for the lost or hidden meanings of words and events, serves to suggest music, dance

¹⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Being, the Will, and the Semantics of Death," in *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, ed. Biodun Jeyifo (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001): 62–76.

¹⁶ Personal interview with Wole Soyinka by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 5 October 1979.

¹⁷ Old Yoruba saying.

and myth, all aspects of poesis long ago fragmented in Western tragic art. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, languages and act mesh fundamentally. A superb example of this is the Praise-Singer's speech near the climax of the play, in which he denounces, in the voice of his former king, Elesin Oba:

PRAISE-SINGER: Elesin Oba! I call you by that name only this last time. Remember when I said, if you cannot come, tell my horse. What? I cannot hear you, I said, if you cannot come, whisper in the ears of my horse. Is your tongue severed from the roots Elesin? I can hear no response. I said, if there are boulders you cannot climb, mount my horse's back; this spotless black stallion, he'll bring you over them. Elesin Oba, once you had a path to me. My memory fails me but I think you replied: My feet have found the path, Alaafin. I said at the last, if evil hands hold you back, just tell my horse there is weight on the hem of your smock. I dare not wait too long. [...] Oh my companion, if you had followed when you should, we would not say that the horse preceded its rider. If you had followed when it was time, he would not say the dog has raced beyond and left his master behind. If you had raised your will to cut the thread of life at the summons of the drums, we would not say your mere shadow fell across the gateway and took its owner's place at the banquet. But the hunter, laden with a slain buffalo, stayed to root in the cricket's hole with his toes. What now is left? If there is a dearth of bats, the pigeon must serve us for the offering. Speak the words over your shadow which must now serve in your place. (74–75)

In this stunning speech, the language of music and the music of language are one. In one sense, the music of the play gives it its force, the reciprocal displacement of the language of music with the music of language.

It is important to emphasize at this juncture the crucial weight Soyinka attaches to music as an indispensable vehicle of the ritual transition. In the "Author's note," he warns producers against reducing the play to a simple conflict of cultures, and he recommends that they instead face the "far more difficult and risky task of eliciting the play's threnodic essence." In fact, the dramatist argues, the play "can be fully realized only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition." The underlying assumption here is a mutually propelling relationship between poetry and music in tragic art. Soyinka takes particular care to distance himself from the Nietzschean conception of antagonistic separation of music and language (though his theory derives great inspiration from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*), for "the nature of

Yoruba music is intensively the nature of its language and poetry, highly charged, symbolic, myth-embryonic.” For the Yoruba, language does not threaten the consummate ubiquity of music; on the contrary, it is its “cohesive dimension and clarification,” which explains why language “reverts in religious rites to its pristine existence, eschewing the sterile limits of particularisation.”¹⁸

This will explain why, for instance, Soyinka goes to great lengths to make the poetic, sonorous–lacerating chants of the Praise-Singer and the pervasive intensive drumming (hear Pilkings, the white colonial district officer, to his wife, Jane: “I am getting rattled. Probably the effect of those bloody drums. Do you hear how they go on and on?” 27) mutually underscore one another in a powerful, affective evocation of a ritualistic theatrical space. The following description is of the moment building up to the decisive core of the ritual:

[Elesin’s] dance is one of solemn, regal motions, each gesture of the body is made with a solemn finality. The women join him, their steps a somewhat more fluid version of his. Elesin dances on, completely in a trance. The dirge wells up louder and stronger. Elesin’s dance does not lose its elasticity but his gestures become, if possible, even more weighty. (42, 45)

Soyinka outlines the contours of this ritualistic theatrical space in his *Myth, Literature and the African World*:

The so-called audience is itself an integral part of that arena of conflict; it contributes spiritual strength to the protagonist through its choric reality which must first be conjured up and established, defining and investing the arena through offerings and incantations. The drama would be non-existent except within and against this symbolic representation of earth and cosmos, except within this communal compact whose choric essence supplies the collective energy for the challenger of [...] chthonic realms.¹⁹

It is this culturally symbolically charged space that District Officer Pilkings violates to arrest Elesin before he can take the decisive plunge. By the time of the interruption of the ritual suicide by the white man, an overwhelming sense of doom has washed over the community. Elesin’s failure is a mark of the discomposure of cosmos for them, and part of this discomposure is captured in the filial inversions that attend the meeting between Olunde and his father:

¹⁸ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976): 147–48.

¹⁹ Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 38–39.

- ELESIN: Olunde? (*He moves his head inspecting him from side to side.*) Olunde! (*He collapses slowly at Olunde's feet.*) Oh son, don't let the sight of your father turn you blind!
- OLUNDE: (*He moves for the first time since he heard his voice, brings his head slowly down to look on him.*) I have no father, eater of leftovers. (60–61)

The father's bewilderment and the son's frozen shock are captured in their different reactions. The most important part of the scene is Elesin's collapse at the feet of his son, a gesture of involuntary prostration. In Yoruba culture, it is the young people who prostrate themselves to their elders and sons to fathers, not vice versa. For a father to prostrate himself, or fall before his son, is a mark of role-inversion, and deeply shocking. The implied inversions that Elesin's failure have unleashed are presumably halted when Olunde takes his father's place in sacrificing himself for the community. Olunde's ritual death, to correct his father's failed ritual, can, in fact, be read in many different ways: aesthetically, religiously, culturally and, more important, politically. David Moody regards this corrective action as a ritual recuperation of performative agency and, consequently, cultural power:

His [Olunde's] death, senseless from the logic of the colonizer's economy, is literally pure 'play': a bodily sign of a culture's refusal to die. From the Pilkings' point of view, Olunde's death is a great waste; [...] However, Olunde understands the importance of the sign; and performs, quite physically, the reappropriation of his society's rites, and rights of passage.²⁰

The ambiguities of the state of transition which reflect upon the consciousness of Elesin, and are also manifested in the need for supplementary ritual ideals, are paralleled by the historical sociopolitical realities within which the traditional culture is shown to be caught. One dimension of colonialism was that it placed colonized cultures in the curious position of having to mediate traditional verities while absorbing the values of a dominating Western culture. Soyinka's play itself is located at such a critical conjuncture. When the District Officer, Simon Pilkings, and his wife Jane appropriate confiscated *egun-gun* costumes, the sacred garb for a ritualistic death cult, in order to attend a masked ball, they show a gross representation of the fusion of various realities. By putting on the costumes, they reincarnate ancestral realities in the idiom of colonial power, thus extending the notion of the liminality of transition into the space of sociopolitical relations. The impatient 'civilizer', Simon Pilkings, shows no respect for the sacred costumes, because he can only read

²⁰ David Moody, "Marx Meets Masque: The Play of History in African Theatre," *World Literature Written in English* 31.1 (1991): 100.

the Yoruba rituals as primitive and regressive. The play suggests, however, that these rituals have survived the onslaught of colonialism to outweigh easily what are to some degree their British equivalents.

According to Gilbert and Tompkins, how and what the performing body signifies are closely related to the ways in which it is framed for the viewer's consumption. The most obvious framing, costume, is particularly resonant, since it can mis-identify race, gender, class and creed, and make visible the status associated with such markers of difference. The paradox of costume's simultaneous specificity and versatility makes it an unstable sign or site of power. In other words, items of clothing have quite specific connotations but these can be easily changed, extended, or inverted with a change in the wearer and or the situation. A deliberately politicized approach to costume recognizes that its apparent neutrality in fact conceals a rhetorical power, both as a semi-otic code and in its close relationship to the body. Perhaps more important in postcolonial theatre, costume enables subversions of colonial status.²¹ The presentation of a 'traditional' costume like the Yoruba *egungun*, like the use of ritual masks, confirms the validity of pre-contact performance modes. In the particular case of *Death and the King's Horseman*, dressing up in the other's clothing provides a central spectacular moment that can repoliticize costume, culture, and even bodies. When Simon and Jane Pilkings wear the clothes of the colonized without cultural sensitivity, their bodies are marked by their continued appropriation of otherness. Finally, costume actively addresses the definition of colonized corporeality and can be used to resist hegemonic locations of the body.

As we said before, *Death and the King's Horseman* is Soyinka's first creative engagement with the question of colonialism. In this play, however, the contact between the two cultures is shown to harbour problems for both of them in terms of the conceptually shifting historical terrain on which each stands. Although the British administration is clearly in control, there is an uneasy sense in which that control is itself a reflection of powerlessness. For, despite all his control over the means of force, Pilkings is constantly hedged in by the limitations of a lack of complete knowledge of the culture he is in charge of.

The ethical confrontation is crucial to Soyinka's construct of what he considers significant differences in the colonizing European and colonized African world-views, and he is very meticulous in presenting his case. In Pilkings' expressive axiological scheme, values are either "normal," "rational" – otherwise known as European – or "abnormal," "irrational" – thus non-European. Within a conception of ethics governed by such arrogant and simplistic her-

²¹ Gilbert & Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama*, 244.

meticism, difference appears as little more than deviance, deserving repression, violation, and extermination rather than understanding; the politics of expressive identity.²² Hence, for the Europeans, the revered ancestral masks of the Africans are no more than exotic costumes.

It is of significant interest that Pilkings attempts to divest himself of colonial authority by suggesting that his ultimate justification for arresting Elesin comes from the native culture itself:

PILKINGS: I have lived among you long enough to learn a saying or two. One came to mind tonight when I stepped into the market and saw what was going on. You were surrounded by those who egged you on with song and praises. I thought, "Are these not the same people who say: the elder grimly approaches heaven and you ask him to bear your greetings yonder; do you really think he makes the journey willingly?" After that, I did not hesitate. (64)

From this, we can see that Pilkings does indeed try to understand his natives. But, through no fault of his, the native culture remains fixed in a mire of ethical confusion. Pilkings deludes himself. The confusion is less in the native culture than in the unyielding binary mode of apprehension with which Pilkings attempts to understand it. His closed, superstitious notion of ethics cannot imagine a culture whose proverbs or aphorisms present themselves not as whole and eternally valid but as half-truths: always situational and contingent. Pilkings's stiff empiricist rationality simply cannot fathom that his "authoritative" saying – the proverb which he says authorizes his action – has been deconstructed several times in the text by other sayings that warn against abandonment of responsibility. The culture which says "the elder grimly approaches heaven" is also the culture which states:

ELESIN: What elder takes his tongue to his plate,
Licks it clean of every crumb? He will
Encounter
Silence when he calls on children to fulfil
The smallest errand! Life is honour.
It ends when honour ends. (15)

Pilkings may indeed have learned "a saying or two" of the local culture, but a saying or two do not a culture make and, if we remember the poet correctly, a little learning is a dangerous thing.... The appropriate response here comes

²² See Milton Fisk, *Ethics and Society: A Marxist Interpretation of Value* (New York: New York UP, 1980).

from Olunde, talking to Jane of his experiences in Britain: "I saw nothing, finally, that gave you the right to pass judgement on other peoples and their ways. Nothing at all" (54). Olunde's suicide in the affirmation of the indigenous culture is the concrete expression of this sanction and a deflation of the colonialists' pretensions to ethical superiority. And once more the body stood for the voice.

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The Clothing Metaphor as a Signifier of Alienation in the Fiction of Karen King–Aribisala

ELEONORA CHIAVETTA

KAREN KING–ARIBISALA is a West Indian writer who, after living in England, Barbados and Italy, has settled down in Nigeria, where she lives with her Yoruba husband. Her publications to date include a collection of short stories, *Our Wife and Other Stories* (1990), which won the Best First Book in the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Africa, and *Kicking Tongues* (1998), a rewriting of the *Canterbury Tales* in which she combines prose and verse to create a collection of stories held together by the theme of a pilgrimage to the new federal capital of Nigeria, Abuja. Almost all the stories in the first collection focus on female characters who are living through the experience of migration, while *Kicking Tongues* focuses on life in a corrupt, chaotic Nigeria.

The theme of diaspora is the thread running through the stories of *Our Wife*. The newcomer tries to settle down in the adopted country, which is the land of her ancestors when the protagonist happens to be West Indian, or just an exotic place, if the character is British. The protagonists are generally West Indian, like the writer herself, but sometimes they are Englishwomen who move to Nigeria out of love. In both cases, the main characters, often coinciding with the narrative voices, are seen as *oyinbo*: i.e. foreigners, regardless of the lighter or darker colour of their skin.

All the stories in *Our Wife* confront questions of dislocation and belonging, central issues in expatriate writing and expatriate life. These issues can be found throughout postcolonial literature dealing with migrancy; as Paul White stresses, "Migration is generally about dislocation and the potential alienation of the individual from both old norms and new contexts. It is about change

and [...] identity.”¹ It has also been noted how the question of belonging “acquires an additional edge of urgency and poignancy in the case of female migrants, because, for them, the issue of self-definition can hardly be isolated from larger questions of gender.”² C. Vijayasree refers here to Indian women writers settled in the West, but the comment can easily be applied to King–Aribisala’s life and writing, as her fiction narrates a quest for identity both as woman and as expatriate. As a matter of fact, the focus of her second fictional work is more on the gender issue than on expatriation.

The stories of *Our Wife* focus on everyday situations, trivial episodes which mark the slow and difficult process of familiarization with a foreign culture, showing a variety of reactions – from indifference to amazement, refusal and, finally, acceptance. Such a complex mix of feelings expresses an ambivalent attitude towards the ‘host’ society, which is an attitude common to many migrants.³ Every little episode testifies to the tensions resulting from the ambiguous position of an outsider who is also an insider. Because the writer is more interested in the inner feelings of her characters than in the facts as such, her fiction combines a realistic approach with a psychological twist and is enriched by a wide range of metaphoric elements. Describing, as she does, a woman’s world, King–Aribisala pays close attention to details of housing, housework, food, family life, and physical appearance. Nearly every story introduces details referring to what people, especially women, wear. This is probably due to the fact that clothes have a traditional role as markers of femininity as well as class and are important elements of self-presentation. It has been noted by Dorothy Jones that many narratives by and about women settlers and travellers pay attention to clothing, which becomes “an important indicator of social identity and difference,” as it mediates “between the body (associated with what is private and personal) and the external world, which simultaneously requires decent concealment and display.”⁴ Clothes are one of King–Aribisala’s favourite metaphors, which she uses to highlight the cultural differences between the main characters and the world they are living in, as well as the process of cultural negotiation or renegotiation. Depending on the story, clothes may be read as a metaphor for the imposition of a cultural

¹ “Geography, Literature and Migration,” in *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, ed. Russell King, John Connell & Paul White (London: Routledge, 1995): 6.

² C. Vijayasree, “Alter-Nativity, Migration, Marginality and Narration: The case of Indian women writers settled in the West,” in *Shifting Continents/Colliding Cultures: Diaspora Writing of the Indian Subcontinent*, ed. Ralph J. Crane & Radhika Mohanram (Cross/Cultures 42; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 2000): 124.

³ White, “Geography, Literature and Migration,” 3.

⁴ Dorothy Jones, “Defining Self and Others through Textile and Text,” *Women’s Writing* 8.3 (2001): 378.

model, or for hybridity, or for the acceptance and reworking of a cultural model. In some cases they symbolize a choice, in others they indicate the path taken when no choice is perceived. Moreover, as every story deals with the characters' feelings and reactions to the Nigerian setting, the references to clothes become vehicles through which the writer conveys contrasting feelings, from frustration and curiosity to anger and loneliness.

The contrast between the Western world and Africa is based upon various differences – above all in people's behaviour patterns. Clothes play a role in separating the two groups visibly. This is stressed in stories concerning departure from the West and arrival in Nigeria. In the London tube taking her to the airport, the protagonist of "External Affairs" observes people around her and distinguishes two groups: on the one hand, there are the 'whites' with "no blood beating in their veins" and "shrouded in winter coats,"⁵ not to mention the stereotype of the businessman whom King–Aribisala defines as "the complete archetype, umbrella-clutching, bowler-hat-topped" (37), on the other, there are the Africans "dressed in white gowns which sprout mushroom-like in billowing folds" (38), who, even at the airport, are bare-footed. In between the two sets of people and clothes, the narrative voice declares herself in favour of the second group, and distances herself from the frozen order and lack of vitality of the British, albeit with a passing sense of foreboding that there will be difficulties for her in going to the land of her ancestors. The gesture that symbolizes her total adherence to the African group is her taking off her coat and sweater once she arrives in Nigeria, as even indoors the sun speaks to her skin (39). By undressing thus, she is discarding her layers of Britishness to get nearer to the core of her origins.

However, the story will demonstrate that wishing to belong to a culture, to go back to one's roots, is not enough. Referring to a Western fairy-tale, the writer compares the desire of the protagonist to help her black brothers in Ethiopia to the wish of the girl who wanted, via a spell, to help her seven brothers turned into seven swans.⁶ In the tale, the only way the girl can free her brothers is "by sewing seven shirts before the sunset" (41) and throwing a shirt over each brother. King–Aribisala creates a comparable situation in which the protagonist irons her shirts: i.e. gets ready for the trip to Ethiopia as a delegate of the Ministry of External Affairs, but is prevented from reaching her destination because her suitcase of shirts and warm clothing looks sus-

⁵ Karen King–Aribisala, *Our Wife & Other Stories* (Ikeja: Malthouse, 1990): 37. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

⁶ King–Aribisala, *Our Wife & Other Stories*, 40. King–Aribisala is alluding to the fairy-tale by Hans Christian Andersen, "The Wild Swans," where the little princess has really eleven brothers and not seven. See H.C. Andersen, *The Complete Illustrated Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*, tr. H.W. Dulcken (London: Chancellor, 2001): 560–72.

picious to the officials in charge. She obviously looks too foreign, hence dangerous; she is considered an alien, and her ancestry is not recognized. Before boarding the plane, as she is not allowed to carry her suitcase she has to wrap her shirts in newspapers that unfortunately soil her clothes. The plane, however, never leaves, and the character does not succeed in reaching her brothers. It seems, then, that what works in a Western fairy-tale cannot work in a real African setting, despite one's good-will. The protagonist's shirts may represent her own cultural background, which has to be transformed, even 'ruined', if she really wants to be an insider in her adopted country and not a visiting outsider. Clothes become a metaphor of both the attempt to be actively involved in African social reality and of a frustrated need to belong. The contrast between dreams and reality, illusion and disappointment, is stressed by other metaphors, with clothes as tenors, when the narrative voice defines the Ethiopian situation as a "Naked diaspora clothed in dreams but naked to the touch" and sees herself as "The West Indian helping her African brother clothe his dreams" (41).

In "The Carpet Engagement," the West Indian fiancée has been taught how to behave during the ceremony which will celebrate her engagement to her Nigerian lover. She knows what words she has to pronounce, what gestures she has to perform. The whole thing is seen as a masquerade by the two young people and the girl's family. However, neither the girl nor the boy can avoid it, and they are both helpless in the face of a ritual that is meaningless to both of them. The opposition between the two families, which represent two countries and two cultures, is indicated by what they wear: Nigerian finery versus Western clothes (1). There is no description of what they are wearing, and the vague terms show how the focus is not on what they wear (jeans versus *agbada*, for example) but on what the clothes themselves represent. Clothes are a way to externalize the internalized conflict of the families, and later on they will express the internalized exile of the character.

As a matter of fact, although the climax of the story is reached at the end when the girl's beautiful new carpet is ruined by one of the Nigerian guests, who pours wine all over it while praying, thus symbolically indicating the submission of one culture (the West Indian) to the other (the African), the turning-point of the story is a gesture which is not emphatically underlined, but performed silently by the girl, who, during the inevitable speeches, slips upstairs "to be dressed in traditional Yoruba wear" (3). Her changing out of the Western clothes into African ones makes visibly explicit her shift of status (from single to married), but above all her transfer from one family and one country to the other, from her own native culture to the newly adopted one. The change of clothes marks the fact that she has turned her back on her past and is welcoming her future; it also marks the fact that she now belongs to her

husband's family, and the use of the passive ("to be dressed") stresses how she yields to the ritual, somehow giving up her own identity.

The traditional Yoruba costume plays a more dramatic role in the short story "Our Wife," where the narrative voice and protagonist, a newly married girl, is taking part in a funeral ceremony. Yoruba words are now used to describe the clothes she is wearing – *asoke* (a traditional woven material that women wrap around their bodies), *buba* (a blouse-like garment), and *gele* (a head-tie). The author stresses the beauty of her *asoke* ("thickly braided, with its [...] elaborate embroidery"; 13), of the lacy material of her *buba* and of the crisp silk of her *gele*. However, despite their beauty, two of these garments may become "vicious weapons" (14), as the protagonist may be hit in the eye by a neighbour's head-tie, while her own *asoke* is compared to a sword, as its heavy material cuts into the "unaccustomed" flesh of the girl (13). In this way, clothes signify the imposition of a cultural model and the protagonist is seen as a potential victim. Significantly, the clothing metaphor is associated with another metaphor based on the image of the little mermaid, "who changed her fishes' tail for human legs" (13), which derives from the eponymous fairy-tale by Andersen. The clothes the character is wearing disguise her, covering not only her body but also her own personal thoughts, her judgement on the ceremony, which she considers "a macabre, gruesome drama" (15), and her refusal of the "celebration of death" (15) she is witnessing. The importance of the outfit was only hinted at in the engagement story, but now clothes become central elements in communicating the protagonist's sense of alienation. Clothes here have a dual meaning: on the one hand, they represent the official adherence of the newcomer to the new community values; on the other, they underline her detached attitude and her divergence, as she wears her clothes in a very uncomfortable, self-conscious way, without the nonchalant air of the other women, who wear their outfits as if they were familiar uniforms. The weight of the *gele* on her head and the cuts in her heels are vivid, physical evidence of a metaphorical estrangement, of her displacement in a cultural context which is violently imposing its own values and forms.

Interestingly enough, it is the widow's clothes that touch the foreign girl's heart and give her a first real contact with the African setting. The bereaved woman is wearing the same items as the protagonist, but her garments express her individual feelings: namely, grief. They are not weapons, but a protective shield. The *asoke*, the *buba* and the *gele* of the widow are not a mask as in the case of the young *oyinbo*, but an extension of her body, and as such are also an expression of her soul, indicating as they do her attitude to life now that she has lost her husband. Clothes become alive and the related metaphors become humanizing, as the wrapper talks of an "indescribable tiredness," while the *buba* blinks "with glossy unshed tears" and the "wicked gele seemed to be

in mourning” (16). The empathy of the newly married girl towards the widow is immediate and is a result of her understanding the language of clothes. No longer an empty husk, superimposed on the body and will, clothes are seen now as expressions of a female world with recognizable feelings that cross cultural borders. The dance the girl performs at the end of the story is, then, an homage to the memory of the deceased and to the unhappy lot of the widow, but it is also the first sign of a possible real contact between the two cultures, in the name of empathy.

In the story “Aso Ebi,” whose title means ‘group dressing’, the protagonist is another widow, an Englishwoman who has been married to a Nigerian man for fifty years. Once again the author introduces a funeral ritual in which the women of the man’s family take care of all the arrangements for the ceremony. The main theme of the story is the different ways of expressing grief and mourning, and the possibility or impossibility of reaching mutual understanding across cultures. The English widow wants to be left alone and vehemently refuses what she perceives as false tears, hypocrisy, a mere show to satisfy tradition. The women of the man’s family, on the other hand, want to follow every customary step, including the *aso ebi* communion, where all the closest members of the family are dressed in the same clothing, with the same colour and design. The long discussions on the cost of the material, from which factory buy it, are interrupted by the angry widow, who feels the urge to break as many taboos as possible, as she feels her husband is being taken away from her “in the service of traditionalism” (116). However, she loses her battle against the *aso-ebi*. Only later do they explain to her that wearing the same clothes is meant to signify both caring for the deceased and those left behind and sharing the widow’s sad feelings. Only at the end does the Englishwoman realize that the ‘group dressing’ was meant to show her belonging to the husband’s group and their support. Clothes in this case are a visible expression of family ties, even of affection and protection towards an *oyinbo*.

Clothes also represent a powerful means of identification with the target culture. King–Aribisala’s stories portray characters who try to mirror Western culture by adopting its clothing habits. In these cases of ‘forced’ identification through clothing, the writer uses the weapon of irony against those who pretend to be westernized. This is the case of the girl who is ridiculed because she wears stockings under a native wrapper, furnishing her own version of hybridity (68). She is the lover of a married man, Mr Ulu, an academic. The incidents in this story are described in a humorous way; when Mrs Ulu finds out about her husband’s misconduct, she beats the rival away and starts wearing stockings with her wrapper, too. She wears stockings with her rubber sandals “so that her feet seemed divided into two pseudo-podia the one trying to make contact with the other around the stem of rubber in-between” (70). The com-

bination of traditional garments and Western finery is used by the writer whenever she introduces prostitutes, in tight pants of a shiny material or a froth of Parisian knickers, who seduce traditionally dressed Lagos men (24, 25).

The same may be said about British women who come to live in Africa and adopt the traditional Nigerian outfit, so strong is their wish to identify with the country. This is the case of the Englishwoman who marries a Nigerian man and is ready to sacrifice herself for the sake of her love. The way in which her body is covered in a Nigerian style dress made out of a material printed with the face of Azikiwe, the former President of Nigeria (84), is a first sign of the annihilation of her personality. In time she will accept a lazy husband, her role as wife number two, and also his extramarital love affairs. She will turn her back on her language, her education, her family, and even her own English name, as she allows her identity to be annulled by accepting the title of Mama Titilola, conferred on her by her husband.

Neither attitude is positive, in the writer's opinion, as both stem from the determination to give up one's own heritage and tradition and deny an aspect of one's personality that cannot be abandoned but must be taken into consideration for the sake of integrity. It does not matter whether clothes are imposed by an external authority (that is, the husband) or by an internal voice; it is still a question of masquerading. The risk hinted at by choosing African clothes for the sake of mimicry is that one may, in the wake of the clothes, also accept alien values and customs – polygamy, for example – as an inevitable consequence of 'Africanness'. This is the case of the girl from the USA who tries to camouflage her *Oyinbo dudu* or olive-brown skin of a black European, by dressing in the most traditional way to "magick herself into African woman" (96). Pride in her own identity is smothered by the bright orange *ankara* material wrapped around her body, the huge, rigid head-tie, the slippers made from animal skin. In a dialogue with the West Indian "sister," she desperately wants to be considered African, while the narrative voice talking about her own clothes stresses how what she wears was bought in Trinidad, and her African-looking beads were bought in Argentina. The choice to wear Nigerian or Western clothes depends on how she feels, because, as she says, she does not identify with either of the two cultures or their clothes. In a multicultural context, the author seems to be suggesting, the only way to construct and maintain one's identity is to find a centre in oneself, and decide accordingly what is right or wrong, good or bad. As she refuses labels, the West Indian protagonist of the story declares she is "from the kingdom of Karen. A Karenesse" (98). We may trace in this statement Homi Bhabha's concept of a "third space" in between identities.⁷

⁷ Bhabha, "Between Identities: Homi Bhabha interviewed by Paul Thompson," in *Migration and Identity*, ed. Rina Benmayor & Andor Skotnes (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994): 190.

In *Kicking Tongues*, by contrast, clothes become a metaphor for the conflict between social status (poor versus rich) or gender (women versus men) more than for the contrast between *oyinbos* and natives. This depends on the greater integration with the Nigerian setting that the characters have reached in this second collection. Now that the protagonists have settled down in Nigeria, their aim is no longer to find a point of contact between two or more cultures, but to develop their own personality within Nigerian society.

The subjection of women to men's will, and to traditions, is stressed in the story "Colours" by the choice of pink clothes which the narrator is in fact obliged to wear, despite her abhorrence of such a wishy-washy colour ("a watering-down of the violence of the red"⁸). She is now always dressed in pink, because her husband thinks this colour suits her, and while she preferred European to Nigerian dress before the wedding, she is now obliged to wear the *geles*, the *bubas* and the wrappers that her husband favours. This is intended to make her never neglect her roots or, rather, the tradition that reinforces the husband's power over his wives: his senior wife – he says – has never objected to the cream colour he chose for her. To support his behaviour he quotes traditional proverbs such as "A husband's house is a woman's true school" (16). Her pink Yoruba clothes are a visible reminder of her subjection, of her lack of power and decision, of the imprisonment of her wishes, of the impossibility of voicing her own opinions even within her own family. The pink clothes conceal a thinking mind – she is, after all, an educated girl and a painter, well able to judge what is wrong in the tradition – even if she has not the strength of character to express her thoughts openly. Her dresses make her invisible: beneath her pink disguise her "unseen red blood" beats in her body "with another life" (17). The dresses cover the contradictions of a culture that lets women study and find their own way – until they marry. The dress covers and reveals at the same time a split self that would be whole, given the chance. There is no difference between the bride in her pink traditional outfit and the female goat tied to a stake with a pink ribbon around its neck and a "pink chiffon-like material draped around its waist" (18). The grotesque image of the dressed-up goat reminds the woman that her condition is no different from, or barely superior to, that of an imprisoned domestic animal.

It seems that King–Aribisala is particularly interested in the representation of women's subjugation through their clothes. In an article she wrote about Doris Lessing's novel *The Grass Is Singing*, for example, she underlines how Lessing emphasizes the clothing motif to comment on the subduing of Mary by society as a whole, and points out how the character links clothing with her

⁸ Karen King–Aribisala, *Kicking Tongues* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1998): 14. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

own identity.⁹ The theme of purdah, which is introduced in “Colours,” is more overtly focused on in the story “The Tale of the Woman in Purdah: Under Cover.” Clothes here are used to underline the difference between religions – “Christian women are allowed more clothing freedom”¹⁰ than Muslim ones. The veil a woman is obliged to wear in public is a symbol of hypocrisy, as it accuses women of a sin – lust – which is really that of men afraid of being tempted by the woman’s body. Purdah is a shroud suffocating a woman’s life, as is stressed by the metaphor “I am a walking mummy. And as dead” (62). Once again the imposition of the garment is only the most visible aspect of the lack of independence of women, who are not allowed to meet people, to work (unless married), to exchange ideas. Purdah reinforces the power of the husband, who is the only one who can allow his wife to remove the veil, as happens any time they go abroad:

On the plane I am free. The moment the plane stretches its wings into neutral skies, owned by God I am allowed to breathe. I can take off these robes and show my legs, my arms, my face – they can breathe deep as my porous skin. (63)

The husband has the power to save her from this “cocooning death” (63) and the power not to do so. The whole story reveals how disturbing wearing purdah can be, as it denies a woman’s integrity and physicality. A life ‘under cover’ is like having no life: this explains why the narrative voice admits that she tried to kill herself and is still toying with the idea of suicide. Following an ironical turn in the plot, the husband is obliged to disguise himself as a woman to escape Mafia bandits and to wear purdah as well.

Clothes may also reveal the meanness of a person, as in the case of the rich Lady Chief Awolaju in the story “Darlings at Dinner.” Nigerian dress, in her case, is a demonstration of patriotism, as she would normally be dressed in suits by Chanel and Yves St Laurent. She has decided to wear kaftans to “encourage the downtrodden Nigerian woman in rural areas towards a rosy future” (181). She therefore considers herself very democratic for wearing the common women’s type of garments, even if, of course, the material of her dress is “studded with precious stones” (813). During a meal she has democratically and generously offered to the rural women, she is very disappointed to discover that a common woman is wearing the colours of the Nigerian flag – green white green – like herself. Her attitude is not very different from that of upper-class women colonialists during the days of the British Empire who, as

⁹ Karen King–Aribisala, “Woman, Geography and Ideas in Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing*,” in *Routes of the Roots: Geography and Literature in the English-Speaking Countries*, ed. Isabella Maria Zoppi (Rome: Bulzoni, 1998): 528.

¹⁰ King–Aribisala, *Kicking Tongues*, 62.

Dorothy Jones points out, would express dismay “over lower-class women’s pretensions to style.”¹¹ The Lady Chief’s reaction to the discovery is violent: she yells at the woman, beats her, and sends her away from the banquet.

When the wrapper she is wearing falls down onto the carpet, it seems that this piece of garment has a will of its own, showing its disapproval of the woman’s behaviour. Its falling reveals, moreover, that under the costly dress the woman is wearing dirty pants full of holes. A shining outside covers a faulty inside and the pants are a metaphor of the real meanness of feeling in the woman beneath her ostensibly generous disposition. Once again, clothes have a multiple function: that of conveying a message in a visible way (here patriotism and generosity feelings), of concealing secret thoughts, and, finally, of disclosing them. In this story, the metaphoric use of the clothing motif has wider implications which go beyond the themes of migrancy and diaspora to encompass the universal contrast between masks and true identities.

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¹¹ Jones, “Defining Self and Others Through Textile and Text,” 381.

Representations of Africa and Black Africans in the Poetry of Noel Brettell

GREGORY HACKSLEY

NOEL HARRY BRETTELL was born in Lye, Worcestershire in 1908 and went to Zimbabwe, or Southern Rhodesia as it was then called, in September 1930 as a schoolteacher. Brettell was then 22, and while he had written some poetry while a student at Birmingham University none of it was of real substance. It was only once he had lived in Rhodesia for several years and as a direct result of his experience of that country, coupled with his English background and classical literary education, that he developed into one of the finest poets of Southern Africa. While Africa and its imagery was strange and new to the young Brettell, it was also immediately and compellingly attractive. However, it took Brettell a number of years before he was able to make poetic sense of his surroundings and translate his attraction to Africa and its people into poems on the page.

Forever conscious of his English origins, yet scorched and watered under an African sky, Brettell the poet was driven by the feeling of being “crucified between two countries.”¹ He felt simultaneously alienated and at home in a land that was very different from the one he had previously called home. For, as he once noted,

I have chiefly attempted to resolve in my verse the contradictions and dilemmas of a man born and bred in England, but whose life has been spent in Africa, and to whom nostalgia for one country has sharpened awareness of the significance of another.²

¹ Colin Style, “Noel Brettell,” *New Contrast* 20.4 (1992): 45.

² Style, “Noel Brettell,” 43.

This assertion is, however, an inadequate description of his poetry, for while it “defines the mainspring of [his] poetic impulse” it “omits even sketching what the sharpened awareness achieves.”³ Through the merging of English and African landscapes in his poetry, Brettell fuses his contradictory feelings of alienation and belonging. English imagery, allusions, and Western culture are integrated with African equivalents. The result is English poetry with a distinctly African flavour.

Brettell, like Thomas Pringle and Roy Campbell before him, and his contemporary Guy Butler, was fully aware of the difficulty of finding new words and forms for new times, places, and experiences. He does not attempt to give his poems a superficial ‘African’ flavour by simply inserting words that are linguistically and/or culturally specific to Africa. While he uses local dialectal expressions perfectly naturally, the essence of his difficulty lies deeper. “Form,” he once said,

[...] and hesitation about form, was one of the obstacles. New times, new land, new language: I baulked before the obstacle like a reluctant horse before a fence. My acquaintance with the past was too ingrained to abandon.⁴

Assimilation to his adopted country was also a process that took time.

The high veld of Mashonaland was a kind enough soil to foster an English transplant; but exotic birds and beasts, nameless flowers and trees with an alien name, a people aloof and inscrutable, a climate bland but fickle and sometimes cruel – all this needed the years of waiting and expectancy.⁵

However, by the age of 45, Brettell had found his way, albeit (in his words) “tardily and diffidently,” to a poetic diction that satisfied him. While it was “founded on the past and enlivened by the random reading of isolation,”⁶ Brettell did not identify himself with any particular school of poetry. “I have kept myself on the edge of things,” he noted,⁷ while teaching in “as remote a part as I can find.”⁸

Probably the most obvious thematic concern running through Brettell’s poetry is his treatment of nature and the natural environment. Both the English and the African countryside feature prominently, as do the animals and

³ Style, “Noel Brettell,” 43.

⁴ Noel H. Brettell, *Side-Gate and Stile* (Bulawayo: Books of Zimbabwe, 1981): 130.

⁵ Brettell, *Side-Gate and Stile*, 130.

⁶ *Side-Gate and Stile*, 112.

⁷ “Noel Brettell,” in *Contemporary Poets of the English Language*, ed. Rosalie Murphy & James Vinson (London: St James, 1970): 132.

⁸ Guy Butler, ed. *A Book of South African Verse* (London: Oxford UP, 1959): 212.

birds of these two different worlds. Brettell contemplates the life and landscape of Africa through the eyes of an Englishman in love with, but not uncritical of, its harsh contradictions. In transplanting slips nurtured in England into Africa and setting African plants in English, Brettell cultivates a poetic landscape that is uniquely his, neither wholly English nor completely African. Guy Butler once noted that nature for a poet has to be “tamed – not cultivated, but understood.”⁹ Brettell makes no attempt to tame the African environment with neat English borders, nor does he try to cultivate a completely new environment. What he does attempt is to understand – and to interpret in his poetry – the environment he finds himself in, and how he fits into it. He approaches the unfamiliar on its own terms and, in his best poems, achieves so thorough a reconciliation of the European and the African that something altogether new results. He was aware of the duality in his work and, while acknowledging his debt to the English poetic tradition, he felt the need to give expression to his own unique vision in its own, new terms:

Remote from the cliques and coteries, I evolved for myself a style that, founded, I hope, on the traditions I love and honour, had its own adaptations to meet a new timeless challenge. A phrase, an image, an idea will simmer in my mind sometimes for years before it assumes a coherent form; and when, if ever, it reaches the printed page, it reads curiously like the voice of a stranger.¹⁰

Brettell repeatedly recognizes that he is not indigenous to Africa. Poems like “Harvest at Horsebridge” and “The Cabbage Seller” poignantly depict the haunting ambivalence of a love for a land that is not one’s own.¹¹ At the same time, the poet/speaker continually reaches out to the alien but deeply loved unknown that surrounds him in an attempt to understand it and himself in relation to it. His poetry could thus be regarded as a fusion of known and unknown landscapes. Brettell never speculates or philosophizes abstractly. Always he returns to the question of me – where do I fit in, how does this affect me – and, as Borrell remarks, “the honesty of such a mind, searching for himself and us, is a powerful comfort even when the poet is close to despair.”¹²

A recurrent theme in Brettell’s poetry is the position of the indigenous African in colonial Africa. In an article published in the *Rhodesia Herald* in 1972, Neil Tully noted that “Noel Brettell does not slide away from awkward

⁹ Noel H. Brettell, *Side-Gate and Stile*, 131.

¹⁰ Anon., “Profile of a Poet,” *Illustrated Life of Rhodesia* (24 August 1972): 3.

¹¹ Noel H. Brettell, “Harvest at Horsebridge” and “The Cabbage Seller” in *Season and Pretext* (Rhodesia: Mambo, 1977): 12–14 and 22–23 respectively.

¹² Brettell, *Side-Gate and Stile*, xxi.

problems; he meets them head on,”¹³ and without doubt the most obvious of these awkward problems is the question of race relations.

Unlike the stance adopted by many South African poets during apartheid, Brettell does not rant against the colonial system. Nor does he side with it. Instead, in his own controlled and compassionate way, he tackles the issue on a personal level. The African people who feature in his poems are actual people, not merely part of a background landscape. They are encountered as individuals with a dignity of their own. As the Zimbabwean poet Musaemura Zimunya notes, “Brettell’s Africans have a human and not a chimpanzee personality”. They are “less strange than other pens would contrive to make them.” Brettell, in Zimunya’s eyes, also avoids the trap that so many Rhodesian poets fell into in the lead-up to the formation of Zimbabwe. Zimunya notes:

even when the writing was on the wall, white poets who managed to comment on the likely holocaust would only complement the Rhodesia Front’s paranoid propaganda about barbarism and the return to the darkest ages.¹⁴

Twenty-two years earlier (15 March 1967), in a letter to his poet friends Hugh and Betty Finn, Brettell made a similar statement:

Look back at the Rhodesian poetry booklets: it’s only about 1961 that you get any hint that we haven’t been living in an arcadia of jacaranda and sunshine – surely an index of the frightful insensitivity that has landed us where we are.¹⁵

Zimunya exempts Brettell from his general condemnation of white Rhodesian poets. He notes, in an article in the *Zimbabwe Herald* in January 2000 (nine years after Brettell’s death), that Brettell’s poetry “exudes a generous empathy with any subject he may choose, without being unduly facile or sentimental.” Brettell’s liberal-humanistic views on race or the “native question” may also, in part, have been influenced or reinforced by his close friendship with the blind mystic poet Arthur Shearly Cripps, who believed strongly in the cause of Africa for black Africans. Cripps (1869–1952) was a radical who had come out to Africa in 1907 as a missionary to fight against what he believed to be the flagrant injustices that were being visited upon black people by the British

¹³ Neil Tully, “N.H. Brettell – The poet of question marks,” *Rhodesia Herald* (4 August 1972): 17.

¹⁴ Musaemura Zimunya, “Zimbabwean Poet Reviews – Rhodesian Poets – Part 1,” *The Herald* (Zimbabwe; 12 January 2000): 8.

¹⁵ Noel H. Brettell, unpublished personal correspondence with Betty and Hugh Finn, held in the archives of the National English Literary Museum (henceforth NELM Archives) Document 96.19.72.

colonists. There is a saying that a man is known by the company he keeps; this, plus the great admiration Brettell had for Cripps, is telling.

Brettell's poetry is not openly critical of other whites or of colonial policy, but he is keenly aware of himself and his position in Africa. He noted in 1972:

I still consider myself an Englishman who happens to be living south of the Zambezi [...] I feel that I am wandering around on the fringe trying to deal with symbols I don't understand. [...] Behind it all, the African has something we will never fathom.¹⁶

Brettell seems "driven by a desire to understand and relate to Africa, its people, land and animals."¹⁷ In his poem "Mother and Child," subtitled "For Job Kekana, wood-carver," Brettell "comes clos[er] to a race-free sensibility than any poet, black or white, has ever done in this country."¹⁸ The poem is inspired by the work of the black sculptor to whom the poem is dedicated.

He knew that haloes never grow from mukwa
Nor wings sprout from any upflung timber.
This is a plain girl, sprung from the stubborn earth,
Up from the splayed discarded roots, the pliant lines
Follow the living grain through bend of shoulder,
Falling through fold of doek [...]¹⁹

In Zimunya's words, Brettell sees two of Kekana's carvings as a "local perception of the Madonna and Child" and of the Crucified: "Till wood and flesh and god are one" (24). Without reference to race or skin colour, this madonna and her son share in all mankind. The Christian mystery of the Incarnation is made symbolically accessible by the skill of African hands through carvings in native African hardwoods that become timeless and universal Christian symbols. So, in the different medium of poetry, does the poet's description of them. Without irreverence, one might say that in Brettell's "Mother and Child" both the Word and the wood became flesh and dwell among us.

In "African Student (Shakespeare for A-level)," the figure of a young African is the focus of the English teacher's poetic eye. Helping a young student prepare for his A-level examinations (something which Brettell himself did for years, without remuneration, as a practical means of assisting in the advancement of young Africans), the man and boy pore over *Twelfth Night*

¹⁶ Tully, "N.H. Brettell – The poet of question marks," 17.

¹⁷ Zimunya, "Zimbabwean Poet Reviews – Rhodesian Poets – Part 1," 8.

¹⁸ "Zimbabwean Poet Reviews – Rhodesian Poets – Part 1," 8.

¹⁹ Noel H. Brettell, "Mother and Child," in *Season and Pretext*, 57, ll. 1–6. Further line references are in the main text.

while “the pressure lamp hisses into silence.”²⁰ Throughout the poem, images and phrases from that play recur, forming the matrix for the primary focus on innocence under threat of corruption, and freedom in the face of mindless, possibly malevolent, convention.

Brettell watches the young man studying and observes his efforts to comprehend and interpret the text before him. As he engages with Shakespeare, the specifics of time, setting and even language become irrelevant: Illyria, Arcadia, Elizabethan England and Rhodesia merge by the magic of poetic art into a reflection on the human condition itself. Nevertheless, the poem can also be read as questioning the specific condition of colonial Rhodesia. Brettell contemplates both the young African’s and his own position in Rhodesia, and their possible roles in a future postcolonial dispensation.

Black scholar intent, impassive still, you have no place
 In time or language: as, pages rapidly flicking,
 You turn from text to gloss to commentary,
 Or now, as one listening to music might
 Stare through the face of a friend,
 You with poised pencil point look up, question the night,
 Midnight, Twelfth Night, or what you will.
 Or what you will: Illyria or Arcady,
 The polity that never was but could be now (ll. 5–13)

Brettell now introduces the idea of the pastoral ideal, and wonders if what has never existed anywhere could exist in a postcolonial Rhodesia. With the end of colonialism and the exit of the “wit weary courtiers” that upheld the status quo, will the young man before him be able to “Sort out the faceless fragments into place” (18) and on the darkness print

[...] your project’s clean impress
 With ridge and furrow the uncouth landscape combing,
 To every Hodge his acre, every Jack his mistress (ll. 19–21)?

The pastoral and egalitarian ideal envisaged for Rhodesia/Zimbabwe is further contemplated in the third stanza, where the student is encouraged by the silent speaker to “keep your wild hills for roaming” and to find solace and contentment in nature. For, as Brettell notes,

The land is innocent still: so, keep innocency,
 Keep the half-naked thing you were
 When that you were and a little tiny boy. (ll. 31–33)

²⁰ Noel H. Brettell, “African Student (Shakespeare for A-level),” in *Season and Pretext*, 24, l. 1. Further line references are in the main text.

The archaic injunction “keep innocence,” associated unmistakably with the traditional Anglican service of confirmation, has a profound poignancy in this context. This verse from the Book of Common Prayer was customarily given to confirmands in the form, “Keep innocence, and take heed unto the thing that is right, for that shall bring a man peace at the last.” Used here, in the context of looming political upheaval and all the temptations open to educated and upwardly mobile young Africans in a postcolonial dispensation, the phrase is imbued with increased significance. As Brettell has seen, the promises of politicians have a habit of leading, not to “peace at the last,” but to war. Poet and student (“Boy now no longer”) stare together, “eye for eye,” “Into the dark that tilts towards some dawn” (35). A new postcolonial era may be dawning, but the poet questions whether he and the student can accept

[...] these half-surmised replies,
That benign irony that still could make
Its chorus of the necessary clown,
Strolling aloof through knot-garden and gallery,
Accosting duke and dunce indifferently (ll. 36–40)

– whether they can accept “the final self-withdrawn surrender” (41) of the colonial establishment, the “god-like hands that jerked the puppet strings,” (43) and whether in all honesty they could endure the “golden franchise” by which Shakespeare’s mind

[...] embraced them all –
The knave, the gull, the Jew, the blackamoor? (ll. 45–46)

The question of whether either of them has Shakespeare’s capacity for tolerance – what today in South Africa might be termed *ubuntu* (the African philosophy of humanism which emphasizes the link between the individual and the collective) – is left unanswered, but the implied answer seems negative. While Brettell here ponders the pastoral ideal and the dream of equality among men, a dream that had seemed almost within grasp, he does not seem convinced that either is any more likely in a postcolonial Rhodesia than elsewhere in the world.

The poem is carefully crafted, with the final word or phrase of each stanza being used to begin the next (thus subtly emphasizing continuity), while the words and images of *Twelfth Night* form the embedding matrix for the ideas being expressed. The political and natural landscapes of modern Africa merge with the political and cultural landscapes of sixteenth-century England. Through this fusion, Brettell tries to comprehend what the future holds in store for Rhodesia.

In “Arson,” Brettell questions the blithe assumptions of white Rhodesians about maintaining peace and ‘civilization’ in the face of violence. The opening scene depicted describes the aftermath of an arson attack on a house, and in its attention to detail and its description of the helplessness of the observers, it is chillingly accurate.

Before the black still fuming ruin
 The molten panes dripping hot icicles,
 The scorched wisteria draping
 Forlorn festoon of purple in the morning,
 We stand, guns useless under the armpit;
 Like mimic shots, the msasa pods split and burst²¹

The bursting msasa pods draw the poet’s attention to his surroundings as day breaks. The “green light” seeps “through the pines,” the garden brook “runs on its muted murmur.” In the concrete pond, Tennysonian goldfish swim. In direct contrast to the violated house, all is peaceful, and among the “sworded iris” the unperturbed

[...] fatuous plaster gnome
 Still trails his useless angle in the water
 Lay figure of a tragedy unrehearsed
 Now in the chill pool of epilogue immersed. (ll. 11–14)

This striking contrast – the Wordsworthian tranquillity of the natural world and the helplessness of the observers in the aftermath of human-inflicted violence – leads Brettell to reflect on other, historical acts of arson and to draw parallels between the past and the present.

And did they stand, the angry legionaries
 Before some blackened steading outside Uricon,
 The slim pilasters shattered, the cracked arch
 Dropped in the scorched gullet of the hypocaust,
 And by the marble font
 A bronze nymph smiled her image in the fountain –
 Signifier and centurion with spears reversed
 When the barbarian had done his worst? (ll. 15–22)

As with the gnome, the bronze nymph now becomes the focus of the poem. Both were created in times of peace as ornaments for aesthetic pleasure. Both are symbolic of tranquillity and a peaceful cultured life-style. However, both,

²¹ Noel H. Brettell, “Arson,” in *Side-Gate and Stile*, 217, ll. 1–6. Further line references are in the main text.

as the poem makes obvious, are eventually destroyed by the passage of time, a process accelerated by the marauding “barbarian.”

Naiad or gnome: which can we comprehend –
Portly or slender, both reduced by time,
The painted plaster flaking, verdigris
Dimming the slim profile of the dream; (ll. 23–26)

In this instance, the dream is one of peaceful coexistence where art and gracious culture can live and grow in harmony. It is important, though, to examine the parallel created between the “barbarian” in line 22 and the attackers. Brettell is not implying that black people *per se* are barbarians. Instead, he is saying that those who threatened the political stability essential for the survival and growth of sophisticated civilization and art fall into this category. Brettell is conscious of the violence that brought about the collapse of the Roman Empire, violence that plunged Europe into the period known as the ‘Dark Ages’, where very little enduring art or humane culture was able to flourish (“fond projects by reality dispersed”; 30), and fears that that history could repeat itself. The poem is aware of a possible parallel between the late-Roman world and a decolonized Zimbabwe, but the poet’s concern is not for the survival of the old political system. Whether the system of government for ensuring peace is just or unjust is ignored. That is not Brettell’s primary concern. What is, is the survival of humane values and a culture of tolerance in the face of violence. A letter that Brettell wrote six years earlier (11 June 1973) to Betty and Hugh Finn includes the following observation:

It is very gloomy – and none the better for being the future we’ve earned and which I’ve seen for the last twenty years. It was, I think, just about twenty years ago that I put it into words, more or less, in my poem “Harvest at Horsebridge” [...] I’ve been haunted ever since, and especially now, by the thought of how like we are to Roman Britain – that close and elegant sophistication with the barbarians just beyond the wall and the sea. What perplexes me more than anything is the way the whole culture vanished – absolutely nothing left except scraps of mosaic and broken masonry. Don’t you think it’s extraordinary that no literature is left out of it – those four centuries of solid and elegant country villas and all the ease and grace that must have gone with it. With the Augustan tradition behind it, there must have been an immense amount of poetry written and yet just nothing has survived. Very much like us, isn’t it – and all our vain scribblings will probably go the same way into sheer oblivion. And what is our interlude of seventy years beside their four centuries! [...] Of course, it flowered again in the works of Christendom and there

was always Gaul to become France. But Roman Britain no: nothing beyond the Channel. Perhaps with us it may be beyond the Zambezi or the Limpopo.²²

However, in “Arson” it is not the gloom expressed above which comes to the fore. Here Brettell attempts to draw hope from remembering that Wilfred Owen faced much worse acts of violence, and transformed them into enduring poetry, and that Virgil contemplated a far larger ruin in Troy than Brettell does in the smoking house. It is with thoughts such as these that he comforts himself. So, while the poem challenges his belief in the survival of humane values, it also reinforces it, and the last line even contains an element of humour where Virgil and Owen’s musings are compared to those of the observer:

[...] such easy hopes we nursed:
But not, like theirs, in noble numbers versed. (ll. 38–39)

Brettell’s tone in this poem is neither hysterical nor paranoid. By focusing on human values such as tranquillity, peace, culture and civilized society rather than on the image of the “still fuming ruin,” Brettell reminds one of the continuance of such things, even in times of crisis. By reflecting on the survival of the works of Owen and Virgil, Brettell finds hope for a humane future in Rhodesia. Those who would accuse him of racist arrogance or white supremacist thinking need to read the poem more closely. Neither in his autobiography nor in personal letters that follow a guerrilla rocket attack on his home in Inyanga in 1979, which destroyed the house he had built with his own hands, does Brettell express any bitterness. Rather, his mood is one of stoic acceptance. While his fears about a return to the dark ages may have been unjustified, they are nevertheless understandable. It is characteristic of Brettell that through the shifting scenes and changing moods of his poetry he continually attempts to understand his surroundings, only to be continually confronted by imponderables. As he once noted,

We in Rhodesia are surrounded by question marks. There is so much in Africa that we cannot explain. And part of the trouble is that people are not facing up to the real questions. At the moment, the poet’s role is to face the facts and ask the questions honestly. It is not our business to find the answers; we must first ask the questions.²³

However, by asking the right questions, Brettell does, as Tully notes, find “some of the right answers.” Though he considers himself an intruder, “nos-

²² Brettell, unpublished personal correspondence with Betty and Hugh Finn, NELM Archives, Document 96.19.134.

²³ Tully, “N.H. Brettell – The poet of question marks,” 17.

talgia for one sort of country” sharpened “his awareness of the significance of another,” and it is this awareness of the significance of the Other and of his own intrusiveness that keeps Brettell’s poetry sane, rational and critical of what is happening around him. His perspective is always informed by sensitivity, warmth and compassion.

No-one can be regarded as wholly free of bias, so it is possible (though in my view inaccurate) to interpret some of Brettell’s poetry as reflecting superior Western attitudes. It should be remembered that, far from acquiescing in UDI, and despite his age, Brettell worked consistently against the white supremacist party. It is a matter of record that he actively opposed the Rhodesian Front and worked for the rival Centre Party. His reasons for so doing were, again, humane ones. “There is,” he wrote on 25 November 1967, “something stultifying in the thought that one is being governed unworthily – the feeling, I suppose, of Wordsworth’s ‘fear of stagnant waters’.”²⁴ Consequently, as personal letters of the time make clear, he and his wife, Eva, threw their weight into the campaign against the 1969 Referendum, after which the Smith regime proclaimed Rhodesia a republic.²⁵ Later one finds Brettell working to promote the political interests of black Zimbabweans, as a letter dated 10 March 1970 shows: “We are putting up candidates in a rather forlorn hope in Umtali [...] We have a good African candidate, probably our best bet.”²⁶

In “Outside Kimberley,” Brettell comments on the combination of menace and serenity that is often the conventional white perception of Africa. The poem moves from a railway siding outside Kimberley to the surrounding plains as the train pulls out of the station. The speaker and his travelling companion(s) are in stark contrast to the urchins on the platform and the squalor of the shanty town. Then a solitary springbok spied from the window of the moving train becomes for the speaker an image or symbol of humanity. The poem is disturbing because the images it employs epitomize the human condition so aptly. The “Battered tin roofs and corrugated shacks” of the “infamous slums” with their “leering doors,” where a

[...] scrap of sack discloses
The fetid doss-rooms and the stinking kitchens²⁷

²⁴ Brettell, unpublished personal correspondence with Betty and Hugh Finn, NELM Archives, Document 96.19.82.

²⁵ Brettell, unpublished personal correspondence with Betty and Hugh Finn, NELM Archives, June 1, 1969, Document 96.19.92.

²⁶ Brettell, unpublished personal correspondence with Betty and Hugh Finn, NELM Archives, March 10, 1970, Document 96.19.96.

²⁷ Noel H. Brettell, “Outside Kimberley,” in *Side-Gate and Stile*, 200, ll. 15–16. Further line references are in the main text.

is an accurate portrayal of abject poverty, while the “indignant” attitude of those on the train at

[...] such things behind our backs,
Behind our backs, under our delicate noses (ll. 21–22)

is biting critical of the attitude of the privileged – “we happy holiday ones” – among whom the speaker finds himself. It is a relief to the poet that the train moves out onto the “empty desecrated plain,” away from the human squalor of the informal settlement. It is significant that the springbok is alone, and is described as “lost.” The speaker feels drawn to the buck and expresses a kinship and sympathy for it not felt for either his “indignant” fellow travellers with their “delicate noses” nor for the “cunning” urchins on the platform outside Kimberley, nor for those living in the surrounding slums. The plain is “empty” and “desecrated” through the agency of man and human evil, and Brettell’s distress is profound when he addresses the springbok as his:

Lovely lonely cousin,
Lonely survivor of the lovely herd
That once in white and chestnut multitude
In centuries and thousands fed and frolicked
And kicked the dust from off a million acres. (ll. 32–36)

Brettell reaches out to the unknown, to something different from himself, to try and explain to himself his own position in life. Confronted by the conflicting landscapes of poverty and disdainful pride, Brettell, in the lost springbok, finds a resolution. The lone springbok is perhaps symbolic both of the oppressed people at the station, in the freedom that it and its kind once had, and of himself, a foreigner, feeling alone in a strange land. To be alone is to be vulnerable, and as the springbok makes its solitary way across the plains, the poet in the train is doing likewise. The last line is a comparison between animal and man, “Now going sad and elegant, like us, doomed family” (37), and is disturbing because it seems prophetic. Impending doom seems to await both the springbok and the speaker, and in this they are “family”; but the nature of the danger is unspecified. Given the racial tensions in both South Africa and Rhodesia, it is plausible that the danger might be political and that the speaker’s fear may refer to white Africans sharing the same fate as the herds of springbok that once roamed the plains. At another level, maybe, it is humanity itself that is doomed, given the attitudes of those at the station. Brettell’s “message for Africa” is expressed in terms of “showing this self-conscious continent that ideas and situations in Man and nature have parallels and

duplications outside time and place.”²⁸ Brettell, in his poetry, gives his adopted country a wealth of imagery, but this is not randomly applied. Rather, it is adapted to fit the fresh context and respond to new problems.²⁹ As Colin Style notes, “it is a tribute to his skill that whilst he maintains the serenity and richness of English pastoral poetry, he introduces the menace so that the two harmoniously co-exist, by way of antithesis.”³⁰

On Brettell’s death, in 1991, Douglas Livingstone wrote the following tribute and in so doing provided a brilliant summation of his genius:

It is arguable which star shines brightest in the poetic diadem: felicitous language, contact with the essential pulses of the good earth, insight into man’s and therefore history’s foibles, generosity of spirit or precision of imagery. Brettell has the constellation and this [is] ever apparent in his poetry.³¹

It is my view that his honesty of contemplation, his poetic skill, his broad-mindedness, his attention to detail and his disciplined writing make Noel Brettell one of the finest poets that Southern Africa has produced, and it is particularly in his wise and compassionate engagement with Africa and African people that these qualities emerge.

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²⁸ Colin Style, “Rhodesian Poets in Profile – No. 2, N.H. Brettell (1908–),” *Chimero* 17 (1968): 4.

²⁹ Style, “Rhodesian Poets in Profile – No. 2, N.H. Brettell (1908–),” 5.

³⁰ Style, “Rhodesian Poets in Profile – No. 2, N.H. Brettell (1908–),” 5.

³¹ Douglas Livingstone, “Noel Brettell: A Modern Master,” *Sunday Tribune* (December 13, 1981): 6.

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ASIA

Of a ‘Voice’ and ‘Bodies’

A Postcolonial Critique
of Meena Alexander’s *Nampally Road*

APARAJITA NANDA

MEENA ALEXANDER’S *Nampally Road* may be termed a socio-cultural narrative of ‘crossing-over’, to establish zones with new ‘centralities’ that ultimately challenge dominant centres of identity and culture. The interesting point is that Alexander’s protagonist, Mira Kannadical, returns. She comes home to India to teach and write; ‘to stitch it all together’ – her birth, her colonial education, her rebellion against an arranged marriage and her research in England. A psychic restlessness both instigates and inhibits her efforts to know herself, name herself and tell her story. She is propelled to write her own history – a differentiated history – and to forge a neo-literary construct.

With the implosion of the canonical and the generic in postmodern literature, marginal multi-narratives of the oppressed, the colonized and the female have been given a ‘voice’. Mira lays claim to private and public space – cultural, psychic and linguistic – as she pulls the ‘voice’ together, a voice “tangled up [...] with [...] Wordsworth, and Husserl and English education.”¹ The novel opens with Mira Kannadical seated at a table in New Mysore Café on Nampally Road in Hyderabad. The re-location brings her back to India, an India where a state of emergency has been declared. But *Nampally Road* is not an historical narrative; it is a symbolic one which, in its networking, makes use of Indian history, contemporary reality, myth, fiction, personal and family anecdotes that build up a literary space. Her text visualizes ‘space’ as a

¹ Meena Alexander, *Nampally Road* (San Francisco CA: Mercury House, 1991): 33. Further page references are in the main text.

trope for multiple conflicts, a space that is neither a void nor a physical object but a lived and socially created site.² Alexander goes a step further and embarks on a process of ‘activating differences,’ thereby challenging the holistic notion of the East.

The narrative draws on the many ‘bodies’ and their memories – Durgabai, Raniamma, Laura, Maitreyi, Rameeza Be – to build up a matrix of polyphonic narratives that reverberate through the text and lend efficacy to the (auto)biography of Mira. Conspicuous in the narrative is Durgabai, “obstetrician and gynecologist and pediatrician all rolled into one” (16). She represents Mother India, hard-working, honest, upright and kind, staying in a run-down building, charging practically nothing in her “clinic with a tin roof in one of the poorest parts of the town” (17). She is appropriately named Little Mother. All the female ‘bodies’ of the novel are inextricably linked with her – they seem to emanate from her, refer back to her, and finally merge with her. The peepal tree that looms large near her gate metaphorically represents her rootedness in the Indian culture. Even as the shadow of the “great-shouldered peepul tree” (18) cools the apothecary’s shop, it also shields the “small thin boys” who sleep on the pavement “from the harsh glare of the street lamp” (19). It/She provides shelter to the lovers, Ramu and Mira, as the tree’s topmost branches curve downward to make a canopy of green over the corner of the terrace. “The leaves were packed close enough to ward off the sun,” Mira says, “or even a light drizzle. We sat there under the cool stars hidden by the shelter of the green night leaves” (35). Rameeza Be, a woman who has been gang-raped by the police and whose husband has been murdered, is also compared to “a lovely tree, a guava with its pale skin, filled with angry wounds” (80).

What starts off as a “small shake, a twitch, a whisper, a cry that came out of her throat,” (80) surfaces as “the eyes of the unknown Rameeza, black as the deepest pools in our river, filling [Mira], sucking [her] down into a world from which there was no escape” (40). This is followed by the final condemnation: “I saw her pupils dilate as they carried her out, irises rimmed with night so black, whole cities might have plunged in them and remained intact, flooded by ruin on the other side of hell” (58).

From the fictional level we move on to the metaphoric and to the metonymic, to consider the scene as a trope of condemnation, a cosmic symbol of Rameeza Be’s retaliation that traverses the social, cultural and political scena-

² See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (*La production de l'espace*, 1974; Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1991). One should also take into consideration Michel Foucault’s article “Of Other Spaces” (1967/1984), tr. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* (Spring 1986): 22–27, where Foucault summarizes his commitment to a spatialized history: “A whole history remains to be written of spaces which would at the same time be the history of powers.”

rios of the text. It clearly shows how gender, class, race and ideological perspectives have an impact on the form and content of various cultural representations. The dynamics of gender make the trope a more contested, self-reflexive and politically engaged category. It also brings out the author's strategically activated cultural disruption and historical reconstruction of gender positioning. Rameeza Be becomes the vehicle of reprisal against patriarchal ideology. The author takes her up as a tool to contest "the ultimate truth [...] the Brahminhood. That huge system of hierarchies, [that] chokes out life" (85–86). Mira is compelled to turn the conversation back to Maitreyi and Rameeza. "Sometimes," she says, "one has to speak, lest the space be filled with falsity" (85). Here we seem to move from severely limited 'space' to a critique within postcolonial literary discourse capable of exposing oppressive ideologies, of deconstructing violent hierarchies and of bringing about paradigm shifts. Symbolically, Mira wants to become Little Mother herself, so that she can be in a position to create a woman's version of history long forbidden by traditional patriarchy. Thus Alexander says

Gesturing to the swamiji to sit down, [Little Mother] pulled up [a] chair [...] and set it by the window. Only now she faced the dining room. It was as if her voice and the deep past it awoke in her needed a space in which to be. The fever had cast her voice loose, and now it sped on at a momentum that could not be easily restrained. (83)

The 'voice' emanating from the 'body' provides a release from contemporary reality; "her voice was cool, lyrical, as if her sickness, the frenzy of my dreams, or the violence around us had never been" (66). It holds "all at once, the terror and the poise" (67) of reality, even as it draws strength from ancestral 'bodies'. Mira says "[Little Mother] was thinking of her mother. As if she sensed the loneliness in me, she wanted me to know her mother" (67). From the firebrand Chandrika, convinced "that the capitalist systems were falling apart, that Hyderabad was the flashpoint for revolution" (64), we move on to Maitreyi Amma, who saves Rameeza Be from captivity and nurses her back to health. The 'bodies' continue: Rosamma, the revolutionary, who cries out "overcome oppression, down with chains" (89) and who speaks of "knives and bombs, of a great cleansing that was necessary" (89). She reminds Mira:

I know your mother's family. Your grandmother was a great woman. You must not be afraid to use knives. How else should we reach the new world? [...] From one woman's body into another. From this Mira that you know into Little Mother, into Rameeza, into Rosamma, into that woman in the truck on the way to the Public Gardens. A severed head, a heart, a nostril with a breathing hole, a breast, and a bloodied womb. 'What are we?' (90–93)

In her attempt to define herself the author also harks back to native tongues:

Broken syllables dashed from her mouth. I thought I heard bits and pieces of languages, all the tongues it seemed the world had ever held. At odd moments the vowels flashed by me. They were so pure they could only have been released by intense pain, or that ecstasy most of us know just once in a lifetime. (60)

Language is crucial to the novel, for the identity of the protagonist often depends on a loss and recovery of language, a language made of indigenous structures of perception in Indian folklore and myth. In fact, the myth of Krishna runs beneath Alexander's narrative, surfacing once with complex ramifications. Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, descended to earth when the goddess Earth asked Vishnu to free her from the many demons that were oppressing her. Vishnu decided to appear in the form of the avatar Krishna. Indian mythological tradition has faithfully preserved Krishna's historicity while transforming him into a universal protector. It is this role of Krishna's that Little Mother refers to – in the narrator's words, “[black money ...] to Durgabai [...] was a kind of poison that was fouling up the land much like the poison in the hoods of Kaliya, the mythic serpent.” “I am waiting for Lord Krishna,” Little Mother says, “He must press his tiny feet on Kaliya serpent, subduing it. How else can all this poison be spilled out?” (18). Krishna, however, has another role ascribed to him – he is the universal lover. Ramu, Mira's lover, holds within himself this dual potential. He obviously sees himself as Krishna. “‘Be warned,’ he whispered, ‘this is my last existence. I shall not come again’” (91). His amorous dallying in the Hotel Brindavan with Mira³ makes him comment, “Lord Krishna's kingdom. It's time to make love” (97). Ramu also refers back to Krishna, the avatar and the destroyer of evil. “Think of Krishna coming to the battlefield,” he says, “when Arjun saw him, his hair stood on end. All the worlds rolled into his great mouth, flaming. Time was no more” (97).

The ‘voice’ that speaks also refers back to ancestral history. In Mira's effort to “make up a self that had some continuity with what I was” (30), memory plays a vital role, re-membering a forgotten past. Memory provides the continuity which pulls the voice together – a voice “so tangled up inside with all that Wordsworth & Husserl and English education” (33). Mira fails to write, for “the old model held me in its grip, and I was stuck as a writer. When I managed a sentence or two, my words made no sense that could hold together. The lines sucked in chunks of the world, then collapsed in on themselves” (32). “Our streets,” she goes on,

³ Mira, incidentally, is the name of one of the foremost devotees of Krishna, who imagined herself married to him.

were too crowded, there was too much poverty and misery. The British had subdued us for too long and now they had left, the unrest in rock and root, in the souls of men and women, was too visible, too turbulent already to permit the kinds of writing I had once learned to value. (32)

Mira the subaltern naturally seems to share the excruciating fate of the universe of simulacra. Assailed by the fluidity, instability, even illegitimacy of claims to social and personal space, Mira seems to have been denied a 'voice', which is equivalent to being rendered historically inarticulate or even invisible. Writing their history, their experiences, is the only way for the marginalized to contest their absence within the monologic master narrative of Western imperialist discourse. Writing thus functions at the extreme reaches of authorial mediation: "the Wordsworth poem [...] all those words on a page were so far away. What did he know of our world," Mira says, "our pain?" (41). Alexander's new narrative paradigms grow out of the intersection between cultural and political coordinates.⁴ Her narrative mode eschews representation *per se* to embrace generic boundaries, and privileges the symbolic over the realistic and the expository. In mirroring the reality of multi-polar subaltern experience in terms of the text, she empowers her community by siting it within a new referential perspective embracing not only language but also history.

It is through the writing of this differential history that "a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced & explored."⁵ By citing violence within the historical narrative (a violence which is not digested in the narrative but emerges as factual newscasts in the text), the author confronts the reader with an extratextual appeal to lived experiences. It does not allow complacent reading. It rules out the domestication and comfort of a metaphor. By making history a "whole way of struggle,"⁶ we are brought to a pluralized and dialogic conception of cultures of dissonance, difference and diversity. But as a treatise it is above all a feminist one. Alexander presents history as a serpentine circle rather than a linear narrative. This 'restructuring' of history not only includes the telling of the writer's personal story but also includes the artist's cultural history. Alexander releases history into a postmodern social

⁴ Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) makes an interesting reading supplement to Alexander.

⁵ Raymond Williams, *Culture* (Cambridge: Fontana, 1981): 13.

⁶ E.P. Thompson, "Review of *The Long Revolution*," *New Left Review* 9 (1961): 24–33.

‘space’ without temporal constraints.⁷ From the here and now, she picks up the image of a “river” and makes it into a trope of eternity:

The river had been there for a thousand, two thousand years. Kingdoms had risen and fallen about those banks [...] In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the water was thick with silver sails [...] Then a hundred years passed, two hundred, shorter spans of time [...] Then the British barges floated down the river [...] Eyes that had gazed at daffodils and dilated in Derbyshire fogs narrowed now in the harsh sun of Hyderabad. Time slipped. A knot in a river’s throat [...] It was the freedom struggle [...] Stubby fingers, sweaty arms delved under sacking [...] reaching for cool metal [...] held in readiness for use against the British. (96)

All sense of authenticity is cast in doubt as Alexander exposes the inadequacy of the Gandhian ideology, along with any absolute interpretative discourse:

Father of the nation [...] stared into a future that had disowned him. What would he have made of us, our lives fractured into the tiny bits and pieces of a new India? Our thoughts were filmed over with so many images that the real no longer mattered [...] and someone who like me could stand in front of a class with a book [Wordsworth’s text] open, mouthing unreal words? (47)

By denying the adequacy of the nineteenth-century ideology of ‘objectivity’, she refuses to accept the claim of political culture to transparency. By a mock appropriation of the framework of power by “Limca Gowda, Chief Minister of Hyderabad,” “Father of Hyderabad” (50), Alexander undermines the discourse of power; activating the differences the narrative takes on an oppositional stance by deconstructing the existing social reality and then perceiving it afresh. In its ideological critique it is at once epistemological (in its counter-hegemonic reprisal of history) and ontological (in the recuperation of selfhood and production of meaning).

By ‘voicing’ a history and a language ensconced in the female ‘bodies’ of Little Mother, Rameeza, Maitreyi, Rosamma and others, Alexander creates the multi-layered personality of Mira Kannadical. Drawing on ideas of simultaneity (of multiple identities) and the hybridization of metaphor, she creates Mira, whose identity is in constant flux. Religion, nation, language, political ideology, cultural expression – all play important roles in this consciously delimited ‘identity’. As Henrietta Moore remarks, “the assertion of the non-uni-

⁷ Particularly relevant here would be Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 1991): 16, where he writes that “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time.”

versal status of the category 'woman' is by now almost a commonplace."⁸ This critique recognizes the overlapping and inconsistent alignment of additional factors of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age and so on that contribute to the creation of a fluid personal, ethnic, linguistic identity. History, memory, language and storytelling become vital factors, drawing on the multi-layered 'body' and giving it a 'voice' that constitutes identity.

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⁸ Henrietta Moore, "Divided we stand: sex, gender and sexual difference," in *Identity and Difference*, ed. Kathryn Woodward (London: Sage, 1997): 60.

Can Women Speak? Can the Female Body Talk?

Speech and Anatomical Discourse
in Githa Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel*

MARIA SOFIA PIMENTEL BISCAIA

Martyrdom will be her oasis in this desert of silence

If this seed is watered, even with blood, it may sprout knowledge and power. Does the child hold the seed or not?¹

THE EPITOME of the speaking and political woman is Shahrzad (Sheherazade) whose symbolism is appropriated and subverted by Githa Hariharan in her novel *When Dreams Travel*. She is not present as a character, but her mysterious absence is invested with a dynamic force. It leaves a space for other women to emerge into the limelight to receive and reproduce their stories. In the novel, Shahrzad becomes a fiction of her sister Dunyazad, Dilshad (the slave), and of the latter's friend Satyasama: "She is now a myth that must be sought in many places, fleshed in different bodies" (25). After Shahryar, the virgin-killer and Shahrzad's husband, is deposed by his son Umar, Dunyazad and Dilshad spend seven days and seven nights telling their own stories. But their stories are never definite; each tells the same story over and over again, almost but not quite the same.

Dunyazad and Dilshad travel, re-inventing their lives and bodies and, in the process, mirroring and distorting the reality created by Shahrzad, so that the past and the future are reconstructed by the sheer determination of wishes, dreams and the memories of those dreams. Dilshad's obsession is Satyasama.

¹ Githa Hariharan, *When Dreams Travel* (London: Picador, 1999): 128, 174. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

From the beginning she is presented in a context of freakishness. She is acquired for Shahryar's harem, where women are mute sex-acrobats, "freaks who are only half-women" (90). But Hariharan's female characters are empowered by dreams: they are talking, dreaming women, says the narrator. The dichotomy of silence and sexual subservience vis-à-vis speech and dream pervades the novel and is indicated by in the ambiguity of women's bodies, such as Satyasama's. Even her name is double: Satya (truth) and Sama (sky). In fact, Satyasama had become known for her almost naive commitment to truthfulness. Satyasama was born in Eternal City, where her parents lived. Soon, though, impelled by feelings of shame, fear and almost necessity, they abandon their child. Her face had become disgustingly furry and acquired a strange simian appearance. Estranged from her family and social group, she gains the reputation of a fool: she does things not permitted to any other girl, such as running about and climbing trees. Re-named Monkey-Face by the uncaring population, she dedicates herself to exploring every single tree in the city until she chooses as her home an old peepal. From its top she studies the city and the sky (hence her name) as if to embrace its entire meaning, a meaning to which no one else seems to pay any attention. One night, while she is engaged as usual in moon-gazing, her peepal is struck by lightning. No longer will the wise men sit under it; but Monkey-Face is determined not to leave her home. The event also marks another change in the girl's changing body and identity. Her right eye is blinded, and she develops a power of reasoning and system of values different from those of the city:

Her fur was entirely ungroomed on the right side. Her rump was a matted mess of flattened hair and a torn tuft or two. More important, she suspected it didn't matter. In her bones she felt her beauty had nothing to do with fur or face. All she knew was that it was the moon-gazing, the tree she had chosen which lightning would then choose, and the subsequent one-eyedness which had something to do with it. (139)

She is now a totally alienated being, both physically and intellectually. It is at this point, when the narrator appropriately acknowledges her adulthood (her location and role in a social and spatial sphere), that she takes to singing. At first only the monkeys feel attracted to the spectacle and participate in it. They sit listening to her voice, dance about, and collect the money left by incurious passers-by. Some appreciate the simplicity of her singing; others regard her as a monkey-woman running a public freak-show. Still others choose to hear a subversive undertone in the songs. The city itself, fractured and doubled, is divided into the eastwallas and the westwallas, who worship respectively the

rising and the setting sun.² Some among them believed she was suggesting something utterly unthinkable: that they were one and the same. Ever since a casual encounter with a mysterious rani, Satyasama's left eye had gained magical powers and she no longer saw the city from the left side, but as a "huge circular wonder with a million strands and textures and grand designs" (143). Thenceforth her double vision encompasses the city as a whole, and the content of her songs changes. Alarmed, the Departments of Shame, Fear and Loneliness are called to step in.

Satyasama comprehends two intimately related aspects: that of woman as a freak, specifically a beastly personification, and that of woman as poet and entertainer. She embodies the Aristotelian idea of freaks as *lusus naturae* and, as jokes of nature, degraded beings, fit to provide amusement in side-shows or in the private homes of the affluent. Satyasama comes to know both; at the top of the broken peepal, she sings to those whose faces resemble hers and who, paradoxically, seem to be more humanly sensitive to her singing than the Eternals. They regard her with the condescension shown to freaks throughout the ages: "All the world loves a simple fool, especially a performing simple fool" (124). Nevertheless, Satyasama never exhibits her body, or allows herself to be viewed as a frightful, hairy beast. She does not exploit her beastly appearance as a mere curiosity and a show-business opportunity, to satisfy to the Eternals' view of it as an oddity. On the contrary, her freakishness gains meaning and comes to be associated with womanliness in opulent circumstances: she is bought by Shahryar and taken to the freaks' wing of his harem. This does not break the connection between freakishness and performance. She still only seems to be alive as long as she acts out some sort of spectacle. When she is deprived of the attention of the sultan (whose interest in her prophetic visions gradually fades away) and no longer has an audience for her public performances, she slowly withers – her fur falls out – and dies. Satyasama is deprived of her final possibility of performing when the eunuch she falls in love with, and who inspires her poetically as nothing or anyone before, is executed. She becomes a silent woman and an exhausted spectacle. It is not,

² This conflict brings to mind the war between the Guppees and the Chupwallas in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (London: Granta/Penguin, 1990) and the senseless battle between elements that belongs together: 'Gup' means 'gossip' and 'nonsense' – referring us to speech – and 'Chupwalla' can be translated as 'quiet fellow' – referring us to silence. The confrontation of light and darkness is a pervasive theme as well, the former associated with Gup City and the latter with the Land of Chup. There is also some similarity in the tone adopted: the voice of a storyteller ostensibly telling an innocent tale in an easy-going manner which, on the contrary, insinuates a serious political message; *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* was written in the aftermath of the *fatwa* and dedicated to Rushdie's son Zafar, from whom he was forced to separate; hence its construction as a story for children. Satyasama's story, in its turn, is a powerful tale of female resistance.

however, the sort of silence Leslie Fiedler refers to in *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, expressed in distant and bored eyes that refuse to look back at those looking at them. Their unmasked hostility is a result of the gaze that peels the surface of wonder away only to reveal their banal reality.³ Nor is it the silence the freaks seem to have imposed on themselves, leaving us “with no satisfactory clue to what it is like to be a performer of one’s own anomalous and inescapable fate.”⁴ Satyasama’s silence is that of someone from whom the power of speech has been removed but there is no revelation of “banal reality.” Satyasama is not for a moment dispossessed of an aura of immateriality, or even of magical realism (some say her mother was a jinni).

In the chapter Fiedler dedicates to the eros of ugliness, he writes:

All freaks are perceived to one degree or another as erotic. Indeed, abnormality arouses in some ‘normal’ beholders a temptation to go beyond looking to *knowing* in the full carnal sense the ultimate other. That desire is itself felt as freaky, however, since it implies not only a longing for degradation but a dream of breaching the last taboo against miscegenation.⁵

In this sense, Satyasama’s attractiveness both for the sultan and for the eunuch is invested with a sexual undertone which remains underdeveloped in the novel. Even so, there is a clear suggestion of lesbian love in the encounter with the unnamed rani. Satyasama thus might be read as a double freak: a corporeal one and a social or cultural one, with a unconventional sexual orientation that combines involuntary and willed freakishness. Moreover, desire in relation to a freak leads to degradation, which is not regenerative (if we think in Bakhtinian terms), but probably more directed at the abject satisfaction in polluting oneself with a freakish body. Miscegenation, the ultimate abject desire, represents the realization of the communion of the subject with that part of herself or himself that threatens selfhood within a recognizable system of values. Satyasama’s furriness contributes to the construction of the image of an animal-woman, and thus to her debasing objectification, which permits sexual slavery and points to the sexual maturity that is commonly represented in the appearance of pubic hair. When that is extended to the rest of the body, it suggests sexual difference, whose allure is described above by Fiedler.

The reading of Satyasama as a freak within the framework of *When Dreams Travel* represents, in itself, a subversive approach to physical monstrosity, for usually the visibility of freaks is such that it annuls the natural

³ See Leslie A. Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (Harmondsworth & New York: Penguin, 1978): 283.

⁴ Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, 273.

⁵ *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, 137. Emphasis in the original.

complexities of human ontology. But Satyasama is free to a degree even other Eternals are not. She is culturally and socially dissociated both because she arouses no curiosity in people to whom, in a magical-realist way, she is no more than a hideous banality, and by self-alienation. Traditionally, insofar as freaks remain in the realm of otherness they pose no problem to the system. Performances, in themselves, aim to guarantee the distance. Satyasama's singing, however, contrary to the Eternals' opinion, does not deface her as a performing fool but is part of her political engagement. In a carnivalistic twist, she becomes more than just a mere *lusus natura* and combines her entertaining aspect with a serious one, which is eventually seen as dangerous, since she refuses to accept its exclusively seasonal character: i.e. refuses to stop singing. Thus, her transformation into a grotesque being is not something immanent but, rather, a response to society which imposed the attribute of grotesqueness on her; quite simply, it was triggered by fear. Hariharan manipulates the historical experience of freaks, who have invariably been invested with horror. Satyasama, in accordance with the author's intention of emphasizing grotesqueness as a social phenomenon, only becomes a freak-grotesque character in the course of events and as part of a process of manipulating communal opinion, and later as a result of the cruel and direct intervention of the community. It suggests that the true nature of the grotesque lies not in the body but in those who define the idea of grotesqueness and subjects or objects that embody it.

Part of that process is rendering the freak infantile. Satyasama, on arriving at the palace, is presented thus:

Once a slave-buyer brought a rare and entertaining catch to the palace. The woman was obviously a foreigner. She knew so little Shahabadi that her answers to the sultan's questions were *laughably childish*.⁶

As a slave she enjoys the status of a rare animal, but she is also referred to as 'woman', as if any or all women were somehow represented in that particular one. Shahryar "has not only collected women, but gems, arches, kingdoms, calligraphers, stallions, automatons, wise words and many other curiosities" (153). Satyasama, as a woman in Shahryar's collection, is an avatar of his idea of Woman, of all women, in their turn made freakish when referred to as "curiosities," one of the most popular epithets for the freak in the side-show. It points to the denial of individuality, which the sultan refuses to all women. In his mind, all women are alike: i.e. morally feeble, as the memory of the sinful dead queen whispers in Shahryar's ear: "We are all like this, we women" (216). As such, her foreignness is that of all women who remain outside the symbolic order, in the sense that they never become producers of signs within

⁶ Hariharan, *When Dreams Travel*, 91. My emphasis.

the system but remain constructions of the male word. In this sense, women come to be associated with children: powerless and hopefully obedient to the Father. This stereotyped view is clearly challenged by women in *When Dreams Travel*, in particular by Satyasama, who, by being a poet and living up to her name, challenges the exclusive male right to speech. Her speech baffles the sultan's court, who are unable to realize that it is not Satyasama who is alien to their language, but they who are alien to hers. Indeed, it had been the alienation of her speech and the fear arising out of the inability to comprehend it that resulted in the sentence of the Eternals' court of justice to death by hanging, which she only survived thanks to the mercy of the executioner, but not without fatally damaging her throat and *voice*. But that did not mean she was left silent. As she lies on her death-bed, Satyasama gives Dilshad a kiss, thereby leaving an inheritance symbolized by a furry mark: the realization of the shifting power of speech. This interpretation is supported by the scene in which Dilshad, before telling Shahryar a tale (one of Satyasama's, in fact), caresses that mark and confesses she received a magical gift from the poet.

At the same time that the text makes use of the idea of woman as child, it deconstructs the very same idea by presenting that of woman as poet. Prompted by the sultan to recite one of her poems, Satyasama stands "silent, stupid and hairy" (91) and rushes to the window to look at the sky, mouth hanging open. Even as she acts as an odd, retarded child, and seems to conform to ancient beliefs that regarded the birth of freaks as ill or favourable omens and the individuals themselves as beings of magical and prophetic powers, Satyasama silences the room with her visionary words. It is her in-betweenness, marked by her animalesque figure and inexplicable abilities – her existence somehow somewhere else – that leads to Dilshad's tale of the nine jewels, a eulogy of resistance and story of contempt for cruel ignorance. It begins with the end:

Once, in the land called Eternal City, a one-eyed monkey-woman was chopped, limb by limb, till all that was left of her was a misshapen trunk. This thing of matted fur and blood refused to die. It lay in the shade of the treetop that had been its home, moaning eerily at passers-by. Once in a while, a compassionate inhabitant of the land would stop and consider the thing: what act of mercy would heal and revive it? Or let it die at last into a blessed silence? (134)

The portrayal is that of an utterly grotesque being, the *constructed* grotesque remains of a body, dismembered beyond repair. Moreover, her ambiguous identity, perhaps better described as ambivalent, is now, because of a social inability to incorporate that very ambivalence, converted into a misshapen

pulp. This externally motivated metamorphosis is inevitably reflected in the way people assimilate her in their own language.

We have seen that very few in the city considered Satyasama a woman. It was not just her gender that was in danger of being lost. Living high up on the city's fringes, she was also liable to have her name suddenly taken away from her; to be given another in its place; lose that in turn. (140)

Her name is excluded from any participation in the changes her selfhood is submitted to, and symbolized by the marginal place she makes her home; it is appropriated and altered at will: Satyasama, then Monkey-Face, and later One-eyed Monkey-Face. But it is only when she starts singing and openly resisting, the deed that establishes Satyasama as an individual inserted in an actual world, that the decline begins. In response to her non-authorized action, she is reduced to One-eyed monkey-woman (the capitals are removed). Finally, she is divested of any name; she is a bleeding monster, no more than a thing. Yet, despite these radical manoeuvres, intended to deprive her of her body and identity, she obstinately stays alive and with her moaning, the only language now available to her, continues to perform some sort of resistance. Notice that it is not that she happens not to die but, rather, that she refuses to. It is at this point that she reaches the peak of the freak's awe, not because of her unnatural non-dying condition, but because of what underlies it – its motivation, which the moaning only perpetuates. As she hangs from the tree, all sorts of women, children and men come to molest the 'thing', hitting 'it' with sticks, kicking 'it', and spitting at 'it' to demonstrate their rejection of 'its' very existence and their fury at not understanding 'it', as if by moaning louder 'it' became more accessible. The grotesqueness of the body is a sign of its sublimation through martyrdom (another theme neither Dilshad nor Dunyazad is able to discard); a moral category diametrically opposed to grotesqueness, which these families (with their lack of tenderness, love and understanding) adapt for themselves. The metaphor that is used to justify the Eternals' anomalous behaviour is that of the heat-wave making "their grotesque, sunstroke brains [work] away on a crusade to spread madness" (145) that ends up in the creation of the Departments of Shame, Fear and Loneliness and eventually in Satyasama's mutilation. It is intentionally constructed as a feeble metaphor to reveal the irrational grounds of violence. But Satyasama-the-thing, a grotesque product, is the very same being who seems to embody the essence of life itself:

The thing twitched like a truncated lizard's tail. Sweat streamed down its bruised breasts, changed course at its navel, and dripped to the ground from its hips, or the stumps where its legs should have begun. It did not stop

moaning. No matter what they did, it kept to the same volume; the same pitch; and it remained a stranger to silence. As they heard the moan go on and on, a few Eternals mumbled that they had never heard anything so steady and rhythmic before – except the breathing of a living thing. [...]

The thing that used to be a one-eyed monkey-woman lay there – whether they came and went, whether it was day or night. The woman, or what was left of her, moaned.⁷

Physical regeneration is impossible; a compassionate onlooker must come to terms with the defeat of silence. The first time Satyasama was arrested, before her “unreasonable refusal” (147) to stop singing, she was locked away in an underground cell with scarcely enough air to breathe. A year later, when she emerged, she had become a subterranean creature: her eye had become misty and her fur was covered in fungus. The experience seems only to have strengthened her resolve, for if her physical degradation was well advanced, the earth nourished Satyasama’s spirit. Since only “complete silence would earn her the right to be a free citizen of Eternal City” (148), she does away with that final and merely nominal tie. As soon as she is released she goes back to the top of the peepal tree and, at the bewitching hour of midnight, when in the city it is neither day or night, she gives her most ardent concert and draws the attention of the authorities again. The hacking-down of the peepal augurs her own fall:

They hacked at the tree so that she had to clamber down before it was all gone. Then first they chopped her limbs: one, two, three, four. Next the left eye, the blind and gifted one, was gouged out; then the right so that blindness would be perfect and complete. The tongue, that word-dripping treacherous tongue, was pulled out and thrown into a purifying fire. It seemed a pity to leave the head. After all that was the ultimate traitor, the ringleader who had thought and imagined all those lying fantasies into existence. So off went One-Eye’s head. (149)

The goriness and dispassionate tone of the descriptions do not contribute to Satyasama’s grotesqueness but solely to the abjectification of the aggressors. Indeed, the body parts removed are like gems, and the trunk, where the ninth gem, the heart, remains, survives through Dilshad, whose name means ‘happy heart’. The moaning of the trunk makes the Eternals, who go to pick up the already rotting chopped parts, “wish they were deaf, or that they could go into exile somewhere to hide their fear and self-loathing” (149). From a more generative point of view, however, the thing is “the unrelenting moaning voice of the city” (149); the relationship with Shahrzad thus comes full circle,

⁷ Hariharan, *When Dreams Travel*, 135–36. My emphasis.

for her name means nothing other than ‘born of the city’. Yet these voices of the body of the city may succumb; Dilshad’s closing tale intimates (for this is ‘only’ a tale) that Shahrzad is, after all, just a forgotten madwoman in an attic somewhere and Satyasama will remain alive only so long as her chosen neophyte persists in the mission of performing resistance. A mad old crone (at one point the rani was said to be one) tells Dilshad the secret of the survival of the mutilated:

“She will resist succumbing to the relief of silence, its escape from pain and hatred, as long as that moan continues. As long as it is there, that ninth and last little jewel of life, Satyasama will still be alive. But only just, I think, only just.” (149)

The text thus constructs femininity within parameters of sacrifice and, in addition, insists that the only self-authorizing action available for women is martyrdom. However, this action is an extremely fragile one.

In terms of women’s relation to language, the figure of Satyasama corroborates Deborah Cameron’s idea in *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* that a politically transformative language of resistance has to go beyond strictly linguistic issues and consider the problem of power relations as well.⁸ Thus, it is significant that whereas Satyasama the “muted poet”⁹ aims to evoke a distinctly female language which is misapprehended by any group except a few reactionary women, and results in the poet’s own demise, Shahrzad’s use of language is wholly successful in effecting the translation necessary to make it ‘understandable’. Moreover, it appears to be far more efficient, both in social and political terms, as it is the means by which Shahrzad saves herself and the few remaining virgins of Shahabad, putting an end to the age of terror and allowing the country to find the necessary economic stability.

Although *When Dreams Travel* suggests other possible fates for Shahrzad after the ‘happy ever after’ moment of the traditional tale – she might have been put to death by the sultan or just locked away – the gruesome corpse of her father’s visions brings home to us graphically that she fails. She starts by being progressively removed from her position of powerful storyteller until she is ruled out by the one-sided discourse that she herself reproduces. After all, for one thousand and one nights she was no different from any sex-slave, Satyasama included. Although she submitted voluntarily, it was still repeated rape; the reason for this lies in the idea, conveyed through a male-oriented language, of female sacrifice. It seems that women either invest in a communicative alternative of their own, like Satyasama, and are subsequently

⁸ Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1985).

⁹ Hariharan, *When Dreams Travel*, 115.

silenced or alienated, or they try to deconstruct male language from the inside, like Shahrzad, and are made martyrs or imprisoned. Either way, it seems the outcome does not differ substantially. However, it is significant that Satyasama leaves a legacy of love and of speech to Dilshad: “as long as a slave-girl carries her kiss around like a tattoo on her face, the poet’s soul – Satyasama’s hardy beast of a soul – will manage to stay alive” (94).

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Unpacking Imperial Crates of Subalternity

The Indian Immigrant Labourer of Colonial Malaya

SHANTHINI PILLAI

THIS ESSAY PROPOSES TO INVESTIGATE the representation of a particular subaltern community in Malaysia's history, the Indian immigrants of her colonial past, by tracing their presence on the circumference of colonial narrativization and the representational discourse that has dominated the record of that presence. The decision to recruit Indians as labourers in the sugar and coffee plantations of colonial Malaya was made at a time when the colonial government was anxious for a supply of labour that could be easily controlled. Conscious of the fact that the southern region of India was one of the most impoverished there, they were confident that a strategic plan emphasizing the chance of a better life in a new land would attract the Indian villagers. It was their subaltern condition that became the imperial lodestone. Such a condition marked them as members of the peasant population of India (they were mainly from the lower ranks of the caste system). It was manipulated by the imperialists in their bid to secure a labour force, and relentlessly accentuated in colonial discursive articulations of their presence in Malaya; vestiges of its garb still cloak contemporary Malaysia's perception of them.

The question of history is so much a part of postcolonial investigation that the narratives that historicize the experience of colonialism itself cannot be extricated from its circle. As Linda Hutcheon writes, "history, the individual self, the relation of language to its referents and of texts to other texts – these are some of the notions which at various moments, have appeared as 'natural'

or unproblematically common-sensical. And these are what get interrogated.”¹ The history of the Malayan Indian coolie experience is pinned to the narrativization of that experience, and it is in the pages of their narratives that we find the long trail of the condition of subalternity, as it followed fast on the heels of these peasant migrants, where, ultimately, their own footprints disappeared beneath the weight of the heavier, hence more pronounced, imperial impressions. These impressions are part of a network of coreferential representations; they are made up of a criss-crossing of various texts that cannot be extricated fully from the very process of interrogation. The reason for this lies in the fact that the discourse that emanates from a vast number of them has been disseminated throughout the ages and has invariably come to be accepted as the authentic representation of the Malayan Indian coolie experience, never having been seen as anything other than commonsense to the Malaysian nation. It is, to use Edward Said’s phrase, a “completely repetitive and inclusive tautology,” serving to elucidate nineteenth-century Europe’s representation of what lay beyond its metropolitan boundaries, which was a consistent and conspicuous confirmation of “European power [...] an impressive circularity [...]: we are dominant because we have the power, (industrial, technological, military, moral) and they don’t, because of which they are not dominant.”² This is the tautology that drowns out the voices of the Malayan Indian labourers; a constant establishment of power that served to scuff out whatever footprints they could have made to imprint themselves on the scroll of history.

This condition of muteness, however, is not necessarily a foregone result of the irrecoverable silence of the coolie. Rather, I argue that although the space allocated to them reverberated with the imperial voice that almost always drowned out their own voices, it is this very space that becomes the only possible means of locating them as subjects of (Malayan) history. This can be accomplished through interrogations of the tones and inflections of that very imperial voice that articulated the Malayan Indian coolie experience. These tones and inflections conveyed a sense of confidence in the imperial enterprise, and consequently the imperial self, and it is precisely such self-assuredness that has accounted for the acceptance of these various texts as ‘common-sensical’ in the Malaysian nation’s imagination. Tautologously dispersed over the centuries, they are seen as authentic representations of the Indian immigrant story. My concern lies with the various tones and inflections of the

¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988): xiii.

² Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993): 127.

colonial voice as it articulated that very story, of the intricacies of the entire system of reference that it subsequently put into play.

There is a significant emphasis on the term 'play' here, because, in many senses, the historical records that document the subject of Indian immigration to Malaya do so in a form that closely resembles that of a staged play. They are the scripts of empire that stage the drama of the encounter between imperial control and its subordinate labour force. Within their pages one finds a cast of characters that have very clearly defined roles, the lead actors being the colonialists (mainly members of the colonial governing body and the plantocracy), with the labourers taking the minor parts, subalterns who can only enter the limelight through the dominating dialogue of empire. This cast was assembled to one end, the elevation of the imperialist project; its theatre, the plantation world. Framed within the sub-plot of empire, the labourers were constantly hedged in by prescriptions of subalternity; domains that chalked out their characters in images accentuating their meekness and malleability to colonial manipulation. These are the domains that I envisage as 'crates' of subalternity, frameworks assembled by the imperialists to keep the Indian labourer of colonial Malaya conscripted well within hushed casings. This image of the crate is one that is highly significant; being a term that denotes any large case used mainly for the packing and transporting of goods, I use it here specifically to draw attention to this very aspect, which I see as inextricably linked to the whole process of narrativizing the Malayan Indian immigrant experience.

It was an imperial enterprise that arranged for the transportation of Indian peasants in a manner similar to that of merchandise shipped as an essential element in the colonial capitalist enterprise. They were ferried across the Bay of Bengal to Malaya aboard the decks of steam-ships that were really nothing more than large crates for transportation. A colonial report, one among the many scripts of empire alluded to at the outset, discloses that

the provision of deck space allowance per adult of 8 superficial feet during fair weather season and 10 superficial feet during foul weather season, enable the shipping of more emigrants frequently resulting in congestion of the deck accommodation [...] feeding and other arrangements [...] are supervised by the travelling immigration inspectors of the labour department of Malaya.³

Within its domain, the etchings of subalternity are worked well into the frame; not only are they packed into the hulls of the steam-ships like merchandise of empire in precisely measured-out space, but the terms of identification in the

³ Annual Report of the Government of India in British Malaya, 1926 (National Archives of Malaysia): 7.

passage above resemble those used for trading commodities. Take the term “feeding,” for example, which in its employment above is more applicable to livestock than to human passengers. It effectively places them in a dependent mode; they do not eat, they are fed. The description dispossesses them of agency within a structured frame of imperial control that is already set in motion on board the steamers. It establishes the symbol of paternalism and of the power of the hand that feeds the helpless subjects of empire. These are also the hands that purposefully shape the figure of the Indian immigrant into a tool of production, rather than allowing him to determine his part on that stage of empire, as an individual offering his service for the transactions of the imperial capitalist ventures in Malaya. The experience on board these ships became the determining threshold into what was to be a long journey into the recesses of other subaltern encasements, as patterns of domination and subordination followed in its wake.

I wish now to unpack a selection of imperialist articulations of the Malayan Indian coolie experience that have stowed it firmly within crates of subalternity, and consequently to dislodge its located malleability, by looking at ways in which the coolies themselves burst the bounds of its fixed signage of docility.

According to Robert Young,

Colonial-discourse analysis can [...] look at the variety of the texts of colonialism as something more than mere documentation and also emphasize the ways in which colonialism involved not just a military or economic activity, but permeated forms of knowledge which, if unchallenged, may continue to be the very ones through which we try to understand colonialism itself.⁴

Colonial texts that record the encounter with the Malayan Indian immigrants have to be looked at within the context that Young speaks of. They do not merely document the information on the immigrants; they put into play a pattern of signification assembled with the presumptions and predications of a discourse in which one party (the colonialist) remained the predominant designer of information. The principles of such identifications have never really been fully disputed by the people of Malaysia generally. The image of the Indian immigrant labour experience in postcolonial Malaysia thus continues to be dominated by colonialist inscriptions. These are configurations that are ostensibly legitimized, as they are always already inextricably attached to the figure of the Malayan Indian immigrant, and they are fixtures that must be

⁴ Robert J.C. Young, “Colonialism and the Desiring Machine” (1995), in *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology*, ed. Gregory Castle (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001): 77.

interrogated so that what is infused in the nation's understanding of these subjects of their history can be reconstructed along a more contestable axis.

The most appropriate point of embarkation on a journey of interrogations such as this should be what was also the very point of embarkation for the Indian immigrants, a journey galvanized by a host of texts that articulated an urgent need for their presence in the Straits Settlements. Colonial documentation of the onset of Indian immigration to Malaya illustrates the ways in which the inscription of the figure of the coolie is manipulated by various governing officials in their bid to ensure that it fits into their scheme of things. The ensuing section, my reading of an archival document, will investigate the nuances of such orchestrations of empire.

Scripts of Indenture: Initial Encounters of the Coolie

The initial pages of the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the State of Labour in the Straits Settlements and the Protected Native States of the year 1890 (hereafter RCL 1890) record an excerpt of a letter from the Secretary to the Government of India to the Secretary of Madras, which states that the immigration of Indian peasants to the Straits Settlement “was a purely voluntary movement on the part of the people, stimulated by their own interests and wishes; it was not assisted by any law, neither was it impeded by any law till the year 1857 [...]”⁵ It is interesting that the introduction to the coolies in the document points to issues of mobility and agency on the part of the prospective workers – of active involvement in the act of migration. Early migration appeared to have offered the coolie some degree of freedom of choice. Yet their subalternity within Indian society becomes a tool of manipulation, for it is recorded that certain unscrupulous parties were kidnapping a number of Indian peasants and shipping them to the Malay Peninsula.⁶ What little freedom the immigrant had is lost at that point, for measures are taken by the colonial authorities to regulate immigration procedure. The experience of immigration to, and settlement in, Malaya from that point on for the Indian labourer is overtaken by defined and exacting measures that mirror Foucauldian notions of surveillance and power, as the scribes of empire etch out the subaltern role that the labourer will play in their staging of the various scenes of the plantation world.

The following passage puts in motion the formal advent of the coolie into the scripts of empire, being the Indian government's stipulation to recruiting agents to

⁵ RCL 1890 (National Archives of Malaysia): 36.

⁶ RCL 1890 (National Archives of Malaysia): 36.

bring coolies intending to proceed to the Straits before Magistrate, at Nagapatnam, and state all particulars as to repayments of cost of passage, money-advances, diet during voyage, wages in Straits Settlements, nature of work, duration of engagement, return passage. Magistrate will enter these particulars in a register, copy of which will be sent to the Colonial Secretary to be reduced in individual case into a contract on arrival. Magistrate will ascertain that coolies go willingly and with full knowledge of condition. Magistrate will protect natives from crimping, and prevent desertion of families.⁷

The gaze of the imperialist records the terms of engagement in an exacting measure. It is with this that the agreement or contract, formally binding the coolie to the labour enterprise, is conceived. This notion of the measuring gaze resembles what Foucault calls the method of “hierarchical observation”:

In the perfect camp all power would be exercised solely through exact observation; each gaze would form a part of the overall functioning of power [...] the geometry of the paths, the number and distribution of files and ranks were exactly defined; the network of gazes that supervised one another was laid down.⁸

The immigration depot is that camp within which the intending Indian immigrants were rigorously observed; every gaze that fell on every one of them put in motion the wheels of the power-process that was to dominate their lives from then on. The path they were to walk would be hemmed in by the shaping force of the imperial vision. The question that needs to be asked, however, is whether these immigrants were themselves ever really fully aware of the *exact* conditions of that very path as it is laid down in the paragraph from the RCL of 1890. I argue that this is problematic matter, for there could have been no ‘full knowledge’ of the conditions they were to encounter in the Straits Settlements, an argument that is clearly substantiated by the following passage from the same report:

This contract is practically the only means open to the immigrant of authentically ascertaining the terms of his engagement. He can ask questions of the depot superintendent or the Indian Immigration agent, but few men will do this, and if they do the answers cannot well embody the contents of the twenty-four printed pages of the Ordinance. His only other means of informing himself is to enquire of the recruiter, or to read the placards of the recruiting agent. Although a Tamil translation of the Ordinance was made some years ago it has

⁷ RCL 1890 (National Archives of Malaysia): 37.

⁸ Michel Foucault, “The Means of Correct Training” (1971), in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984): 189.

not been published, and the conditions of service do not therefore exist in any document to which a scholar among immigrants can refer.⁹

The whole process of immigration was one that left the Indian coolies exposed to various manipulations of their very condition of subalternity. Perhaps because they were eager to escape the clutches of subalternity in their own villages by migrating, the labourers do not question the veracity of the conditions of employment that were conveyed to them. Coupled with this is also the fact that, being mostly illiterate, there was no way that they could ascertain for themselves the actual terms and conditions that they were binding themselves to. The script thus remains persistently within the grasp of the imperial scribes.

Every movement of the Indian labourers from their villages in rural South India to the plantations in the Straits Settlements was undertaken under the controlling vision of various colonial persons connected to the agents of colonial power (the latter being mainly Indian recruiters, known as *kanganies*, hired by colonial planters). At every stage of their migration, they are laid bare to the watchful gaze that ascertains their ultimate usefulness to the various imperial enterprises in the Straits Settlements. Boundaries were constantly being drawn and precisely fixed. We saw this earlier in the arrangement of deck space for their transportation, we have seen it above, and we continue to see it enacted time and again in the many reports produced by the Immigration Committee of Malaya, as every mode of supervising the coolies is laid down in specific terms.

Their arrival at the ports of the Straits Settlement brings them to yet another portal of control that serves to reinforce their subaltern status:

On arrival in Penang, the ship is boarded by the Indian immigrant agent or his Assistant who inspects the coolies and sees that all the deck passengers [...] are at once landed and sent to the depot [...] The contract coolies are detained in the government depot until they sign the contracts and are handed over to the agents of the employers for transit to the estates where they are to work. A separate contract is signed for every man and transmitted to the employer for custody. A duplicate in the Tamil language is given to the cooly and the office Register serves as the Immigration Agent's record of the transaction.¹⁰

Once again, they are subjected to the controlling gaze of colonial officials, which sets them down in penal codification. Note that they are restrained like criminals within the depot until the contracts are signed, and when that is accomplished, it (the original copy) is kept in the control of the planter. It was

⁹ RCL 1890 (National Archives of Malaysia): 54.

¹⁰ RCL 1890 (National Archives of Malaysia): 41.

thus one of the scripts of power that encrypted the early Indian immigrant experience, with the all-knowing gaze of the imperialist scrutinizing every exacting measure within it, while the labourer's unlettered gaze never truly engages with it. The depot is also a crate that encases them like packed goods until they are deemed ready to take their place at the production belt of the plantations that they are to be transported to.

Life on the plantations confined the labourer within set boundaries, constantly exposed to the ever-watchful and controlling gaze of the European planters and their supervisory staff. A significant example is the muster or roll-call that is called every morning at 6 am and subsequently throughout the day, where the labourers are made to file up in the field in order for their presence to be recorded and to ensure that tasks are, and have been, fulfilled.¹¹ Such an exercise subjects the labourers, yet again, to the controlling gaze of the dominant party. It ought to be stated here that the supervisory staff involved were senior labourers appointed to facilitate the operation of control. The weight of subalternity is thus rendered even more indomitable by the fact that it is members of their own community who are the unrelenting sentries at the outpost of the enclosed space, aiding and abetting the colonial telescopic vision, as every movement is charted to ensure the smooth running of the colonial enterprise. Foucault's notion of "the body as object of power and control" is very much in evidence here. The encounter between body and the power of domination over that body is seen in terms of the encounter between a machinery (power) that "explores it [the body], breaks it down and re-arranges it." It was a mechanism that

defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines [...] produc[ing] subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies.¹²

Power breaks down the body into commandable parts, each seen as a tool for the further extension of the perimeter of its control, each moulded for a precise effect. The regimen of the plantation system operated along such lines. The muster re-enacted every day is a ritual that serves to consolidate the planocracy's command over the labourers, as they marked them down in registers, filed them according to their categories (the tapping gang, the weeding gang etc.) and recorded the results of their labour at the end of the day. The following words of a planter recorded in RCL 1890 exhibit the domination of the mechanism of power:

¹¹ RCL 1890 (National Archives of Malaysia): evid. 74.

¹² Michel Foucault, "Docile Bodies" (1975), in *The Foucault Reader*, 182.

A roll call is called daily at 6 a.m., in my presence, by the Tyndals, and there are other calls at 10, 1 and 4 o'clock.

At the morning call everyone on the estate is present: the later roll calls in the field are supervised by the Overseers.

I determine myself the amount of task work to be done.¹³

The colonial eye explores the bodies lined up before him and marks every one of them, each mark a sign of domination on the subaltern body. The register is yet another script of subalternity, for the coolie's livelihood depended on his being marked down as present within its pages. It is, yet again, a marking of the encounter between subjected bodies and the mechanism of domination, illustrating the hold that the planters have over the demarcation of roles in that play of power that they direct.

Living conditions within the estates were practically like crates that had little space and virtually no ventilation. Known as coolie "lines" because they were long rows of houses partitioned into numerous cubicles, they were often overcrowded; sometimes as many as ten or more coolies were packed into their frames. As an excerpt from the RCL 1890 records,

on one estate the building is divided into a number of rooms about 10 feet square, in which six people are usually put. Other rooms in the same building are 20 feet by 14 feet, and in one of these eighteen people were living, men and women indiscriminately. Sometimes three married couples in one small room; in other cases one or two couples, as well as several single men.¹⁴

These were apparently the *only* lines that the coolie had within the inscriptions of the plantation world.

The conditions highlighted above were only a fraction of those that boarded up the Indian immigrant experience within encasements of subalternity that were assembled by the various figures of authority making up the plantocracy, intent only on extracting as much profit as possible from the labourers. The plantation system was thus run very much along the lines of a factory, with the labourers commandeered to labour meticulously and productively. An advertisement (Figure 1 below), entitled "The Rubber Estate of the Future," placed by the Imperial Chemical Industries company in *Tolong Lagi*, a magazine of the Planter's Association, aptly illustrates what the ideal set-up of a plantation was thought to be. The depiction of the coolies strategically placed around the conveyor belt emphasizes the factory setting, and the

¹³ RCL 1890 (National Archives of Malaysia): evid. 74.

¹⁴ RCL 1890 (National Archives of Malaysia): 48.

mechanism of control. Each labouring body is assigned to his or her own station around the encircled rubber tree, emphasizing the boundary of control.

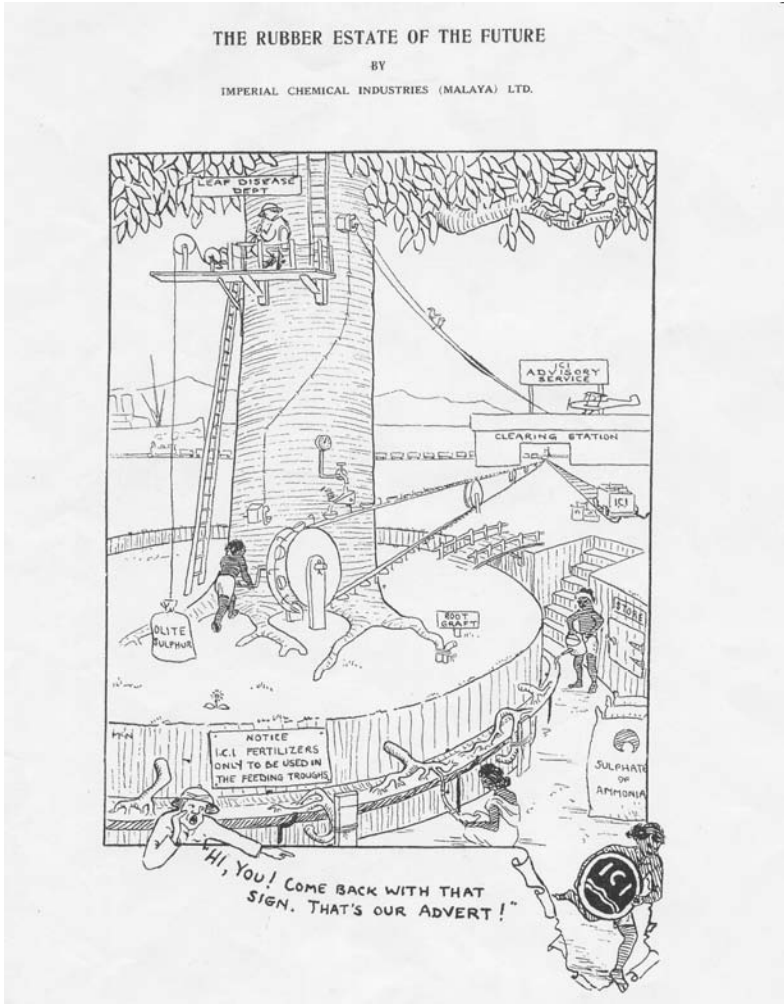


Figure 1
“The Rubber Estate of the Future,” from *Tolong Lagi* (1933)

The two colonial officials in the frame are icons of colonial control, always already within any frame that encloses the Indian coolies.¹⁵ They symbolize, too, the dual aspects of control or systematization which Mary Louise Pratt sees as the “ordering eye” that was the mechanism of colonial control, of both the scientist who ordered the world of nature and the colonial commercialist who ordered plantation labour.¹⁶ The figure elevated on a wooden structure above the tree apparently cataloguing the condition of its leaves emphasizes the controlling scientific eye, ordering the agronomics of the rubber enterprise, whereas the other (rather irate) figure, *ordering* the fourth coolie (who is literally tearing out of the frame with the sign of the advertising company in his hands) to get back into the frame, is the controlling commercial eye, whose task it is to see that labour was well-ordered within the colonial frame of control. Yet we see that, while the main frame of the advertisement creates an impression of orderliness, the figure of the coolie escaping with the sign of the company and breaking out of the general frame of control works to disrupt this very sequence. What we have here is the subaltern escaping with a sign that the imperialist assumed was exclusively his, illustrating that the hold on the labourers was not an invincible one. The colonial figure’s irate exclamation, “Hi you. Come back with our sign,” significantly accentuates this. While the whole plantation experience placed the labourers within crates of subalternity, there were times when they escaped the framework of imperial control, disrupting what was assumed to be a fixed signage of docility. Just as the absconding coolie is placed at the margins of the frame, so, too, are inscriptions of insurrection against colonial control inserted at the margins of official reports. These are what Foucault describes as follows:

subjugated knowledges [...] historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systemization [...] [which] allow us to rediscover the ruptural effects of conflict and struggle that the order imposed by functionalist or systematizing thought is designed to mask [...] and that criticism has been able to reveal.¹⁷

This masking or subjugation is necessary for the ruling order to keep up the appearance of its authority and maintain its supremacy in relation to the subordinated subject. By breaking into this setting and re-amassing the little rup-

¹⁵ “The Rubber Estate of the Future,” *Tolong Lagi: Published in Aid of the Planter’s Benevolent Fund of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: C. Ward Jackson, 1933): 56.

¹⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992): 30–31.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures” (1976), in *A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley & Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1994): 203.

tures to the imperial stronghold that have been recorded but left on the margins, one is able to reassemble set perceptions of that very past.

Fractures in the imperial stronghold were already evident in the early stages of the immigrant experience. One of the ways in which the coolie evaded the frame of subalternity that was placed around him was through acts of desertion. Every immigration report documents a fair number of coolies absconding from the ports of disembarkation in the Straits as well as the plantations. For example, it is recorded that a number of newly arrived coolies at the government depot at Negapatnam who find themselves “engaged on less favourable terms become aware that better can be had, and ultimately refuse to sign contracts unless on better terms, so that those offering lower terms cannot get as many as they want.”¹⁸ What this shows is that the coolie was not merely a malleable stage-hand, obedient to every direction issued by the imperial stage managers. The success of the plantation depended on the complicity of the labourer within the schemata of that very world. Desertions by coolies proved to be a constant enigma for the planters, for if the coolies found out that better wages could be had elsewhere, many tried their luck at bolting to those other plantations. While the terms of the contract were used to bind the coolie to the plantation, many fled despite being aware of the heavy penalties. The contract was safeguarded by the employer, as it was a significant text that controlled the labourer’s movements:

without some stronger hold, such as can only be obtained by a legal contract, it is probable that Kanganies and coolies would frequently transfer themselves to what they thought the best market rather than to their legitimate employer.¹⁹

Yet it becomes the point of conflict for the labourer who, discontented with its terms and conditions, ruptures the order of the plantocracy’s systematizing discourse of control through acts of desertion. It illustrates the fact that the preservation of that very order is dependent on the coolie’s collaboration with it, much along the lines of what Ranajit Guha sees as the “the contingency of power relations” that operates on an axis determined by interaction between coercion and persuasion in the dominant and collaboration and resistance in the subordinate.²⁰ Power was never wholly in the grasp of the planter, for he had constantly to resort to coercive methods to keep the labourer within the boundaries of his plantation. Absconding was already a conscious choice on the part of the labourer, and many took it upon themselves to exercise that

¹⁸ RCL 1890 (National Archives of Malaysia): evid. 73.

¹⁹ RCL 1890 (National Archives of Malaysia): 55.

²⁰ Ranajit Singh Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1997): 21.

right of choice, indicating agency in a body that was assumed to be wholly under the mechanism of colonial control. Malleability in the labourer was thus not an invariable trait but, rather, one that had to be manoeuvred; and when labourers were not in agreement, colonial control found itself fractured.

Another form of coercion that the planter used to ensure a stable labour force was through the building of temples of worship. In the pages of a report by a commission looking into factors of Indian immigration we can read the following advice:

any increase in the facilities offered for the observation of religious functions must benefit the cause of immigration, because natives will naturally prefer to proceed to a country where they have reason to believe that opportunities for observances exist in a form similar to that of which they have been accustomed to in their native land.²¹

The labourer had to be coerced into remaining on the plantation, and the temple, the material link to his cultural and religious culture, becomes such a tool. Yet, as seen before, the collaboration of the coolie in this scheme is imperative, and often it is this very tool that works to disrupt the order of the plantation. For example, the Annual Report of the Agent of the Government of India in British Malaya records numerous incidents of insubordination by labourers when the boundaries of their cultures are seen to be intruded upon, in terms similar to those of the following excerpt:

Ten labourers of Parit Perak estate were charged for rioting and assault on the Assistant Manager, who annoyed at the beat of drums, had interfered unnecessarily with a marriage celebration conducted on the estate [...].²²

These instances of disruptions to the plantation hierarchy work to dislodge the image of the meek and docile South Indian coolie. The docile body was not so docile when seen as an agent of its own cultural identity; something the coolies possessed which could not be manipulated by colonial control. Agency in this sense works to transmute the mechanism of power. An excerpt from Leopold Ainsworth's *The Confessions of a Planter in Malaya* (1933) depicting the scene at a religious celebration of the coolie community illustrates succinctly the coolie's permutation of the configuration of the sign of docility that frames him:

²¹ Indian Immigration to the Federated Malay States: Resolutions and Recommendations of a Commission appointed by the Acting Resident General FMS, 1900 (National Archives of Malaysia): 5.

²² Annual Report of the Agent of the Government of India in British Malaya, 1930 (India Office Records, British Library): 24.

All the world seemed to have gone mad, and the usual humble and downcast Tamil had become a different being: with new cloths, hair and body oiled, he stood for once in a truculent attitude, shouting at the various vendors and enemies; whilst the women, also dressed in their fineries, seemed to be new beings as they stood around in the half-light, casting amorous glances at all the men-folk, regardless of race [...] I found myself suddenly and unaccountably drawn towards these glamorous and voluptuous beings that in the course of the ordinary's day work were no more than drab, musty-smelling, human weeding machines.²³

The docile labourer that the planter encounters in the course of the day is transported into a realm that he, the planter, cannot recognize, or has trouble recognizing because his 'production machine' has stepped out of the frame of control. Often, it is within the realm of religion and culture, ironically encouraged by the plantocracy itself, that the grip of imperial control is disabled. The planter has no place within the labourer's religious sphere; in a sense, it is the one place where he is the Other. Time and again, like the colonial official in the advertisement, he finds the coolies running away with the sign that he assumed was unquestionably his to inscribe; along with this goes the discovery that aspects of inscription can in fact be altered by the coolie. It points to the fact that, although imperial control was framed by a rigid structure, its grip was never totally secure. The colonialist's intent in mapping out signposts of his authority is constantly disabled at the far margins by subalterns who haul them out of the frame and assemble imprints of their own.

It ought to be remembered, too, that the coolies were individuals who had consciously overstepped cultural boundaries when they left the shores of their motherland. Crossing the dark waters that were to wash away all vestiges of one's caste was already an act of insurgency. It is thus not surprising that other acts of insurgency peek out from the pages of colonial representations. While they may not be in abundance, for no colonial document ever elaborates acts of insubordination in detail, signs of fractured control do indeed exist, as seen in the excerpts selected above. This essay has been an attempt to shift the position of the force of imperialist articulations of the Malayan Indian coolies; their bodies mired for so long in grounds of subalternity. As Foucault puts it,

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent [considerations of race or social type] is thus situated within the arti-

²³ Leopold Ainsworth, *The Confessions of a Planter in Malaya: A Chronicle of Life and Adventure in the Jungle* (London: H.F. & G. Witherby, 1933): 83.

culturation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body.²⁴

The body of the Indian immigrant has thus far been traced by a language that has accentuated an identification of docility. Almost all other aspects were dissolved under the weight of such markings, and these are the images that have been stored away in the warehouse of history; theirs is a memory that lies almost totally disintegrated within the national consciousness. Genealogical expositions of the imprints on the historical body of the Indian labourer of colonial Malaya are highly necessary, for such a process will not only dislodge these firmly packed contents but, more importantly, in the momentary spaces that are opened up by such displacements, other colonial presences that have been edged out of the historical vision can finally claim proper occupancy. This essay has attempted as much by unpacking and consequently dislodging the imperial crates of subalternity that have encased Malaya's Indian immigrants, in order to reinstate the coolie in the chronicle of the nation.

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²⁴ Foucault, "Docile Bodies," 183.

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Tinggayun

Implications of Dance and Song in Bajau Society

SAIDATUL NORNIS HAJI MAHALI

Introduction

THE SOUTHEAST ASIA SEA-NOMADS are divided geographically, culturally and linguistically into three major groups, each the product of an apparently independent history of adaptation. The first of these groupings comprise the Moken and Moklen of the Mergui archipelago of Burma, with extensions southward into the islands of southwestern Thailand.¹ The second is represented by a congery of variously named groups, collectively referred to as *orang laut* (sea people), who inhabit the islands and estuaries of the Riau–Lingga archipelagoes, the Bantam archipelago, and the coasts and offshore islands of eastern Sumatra, Singapore and southern Johor.² A northern subgroup of *orang laut*, the Urak Lawoi, occupies the offshore islands from Phuket to the Adang island group. Finally, the third and largest group are the Sama–Bajau, most of them maritime or stand-oriented communities, which also includes small numbers of boat nomads, who together form what is probably the most widely dispersed ethnolinguistic group indigenous to the islands of Southeast Asia, living over an area of some one-and-a-quarter million square miles, from the south-central Philippines, East-

¹ David Hogan, "Men of the sea: Coastal tribes of south Thailand's west coast," *Journal of the Siam Society* 60 (1972): 205–35.

² Leonard Andaya, *The Kingdom of Johor 1641–1728* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1975); David Edward Sopher, *The Sea Nomads: A study based on the literature of the maritime boat people of Southeast Asia* (Singapore: National Museum, 1965).

ern Borneo and Sulawesi, south and eastward to the islands of Eastern Indonesia to Flores and the southern Moluccas.³

In general, this essay examines the perception of the Bajau ethnic group with a particular focus on aspects of their ritual and ceremonies such as the *tinggayun*. This concept has been selected in order to examine their perception of symbols and meanings which may reveal the fundamental structure of their society and their cognitive expression of it.

The Sama–Bajau Peoples

In Malaysia and Indonesia, variants of the terms Bajau and Bajo (for example, Badjaw, Badjao, Bajao, Bajo) are used in reference by outsiders to both nomadic and sedentary Sama speakers, including land-based agricultural communities, some of them, such as those of western Sabah, without an apparent history of past seafaring. In the southern Philippines, the term Bajau (and its variants) is reserved exclusively for boat-nomads and formerly nomadic groups, while more sedentary Sama speakers, particularly those living in the Sulu archipelago, are generally known to outsiders as ‘Samal’, an ethnonym applied to them by the neighbouring Tausug, but also used widely by Christian Filipinos and others.⁴ In eastern Indonesia, Sama speakers are called Bajo by the Bugis, Bayo and Turijene (people of the water) by the Makassarese. In Borneo, they are termed Bajau by the Brunei Malays and by other coastal Malay-speaking groups.⁵ At present, the name Bajau has gained wide currency among all groups in Sabah, including Sama speakers themselves.

Most Sama–Bajau speakers, with the principal exception of the Yakan and Jama Mapun, refer to themselves as Sama or as Sinama, particularly in central Sulu. The term Sama (or *a’a* Sama, ‘Sama people’) appears to be the most widely used eponym, employed in self-reference throughout the entire area of the Sama–Bajaus. According to Pallesen, the term is also reconstructable as the proto-form of the eponym by which Sama–Bajau speakers have referred to themselves in the present millennium.⁶

³ Arlo H. Nimmo, *The Sea People of Sulu* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1972); Clifford Sather, “Bajau,” in *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, ed. Davis Levinson, vol. 5 (New Haven CT: Human Relations Area Files, 1993)

⁴ Thomas M. Kiefer, *The Tausug: Violence and Law in a Philippine Moslem Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972); Clifford Sather, “Samal,” in *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, ed. Levinson.

⁵ I.H.N. Evans, “Notes on the Bajaus and Other Coastal Tribes of North Borneo,” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 25 (1952): 48–55.

⁶ A. Kemp Pallesen, *Culture Contact and Language Convergence: Linguistic Society of the Philippines* (Monographs Series No. 24; Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines, 1985): 134.

When used as an ethnic label, in self-reference, the term *sama* is normally coupled with a toponymic modifier. These modifiers indicate the speaker's geographical and/or dialect affiliation.⁷ For example, *sama Sibaut* refers to the settled *sama* speakers who inhabit or trace their origins to Sibaut Island, near Siasi, in the Tapul Island groups of Sulu Island. In Sabah and southern Sulu, boat-dwelling groups and those with a recent history of boat-nomadism commonly identify themselves as *sama dilaut* or *sama mandelaut*, names that mean, literally, the *sea* (laut) or *maritime* Bajau; or as the *sama to'ongan*, the *real* or *true* Bajau.⁸ They also call themselves *a'a dilaut*, 'sea people', in contrast to *a'a déa*, 'land people', by which they refer to all shore- and land-dwelling groups living around them. In Sulu and east Sabah, sea-nomads and formerly nomadic groups are generally known to other Sama speakers as *sama Pala'au* or *Pala'u*, or *Luwa'an*, and to the neighbouring Tausug as *samal Luwa'an*.⁹ Both names have pejorative connotations, reflecting the pariah status generally ascribed to the Bajau *laut* by those living ashore.

Curiously enough, the Bajau of Sabah never refer to themselves as Bajau. Neither do they have a word or name which bears a phonetic resemblance to the word *Bajau* for their own group. Rather, they call themselves Sama. Be it Bajau or Sama, these people have a way of explaining the origin of these terms through their oral traditions. According to their stories, when the Bajaus met again after a long separation, they instantly recognized one another, and so the word they exchanged was *sama* ('same'), with reference to the same ethnic group. Fate had separated them across distant islands; hence emerged the word Bajau, evolving from the verbal prefix 'ber-' in Malay; to 'ba' in the Sabah Malay dialect, and the root-word 'jau' ('far'), meaning 'living far away from one another.' However, the origin of the words Sama and Bajau mentioned here is believed to be mythical. The linking of the Bajaus of Sabah to the *orang* Badjo of Sulawesi, and to a place by the name of Badjoe near Bone,¹⁰ seems more likely. This is in accordance with the well-known fact that the people of the Malay archipelago acquired their group labels from the names of places (inclusive of rivers and hills) where they settled.

The Sama-Bajaus are coastal people. They are noted for their close association with the sea and are given the appellation of 'sea-gypsies' or 'water-gypsies' (also sea-gypsies) of Singapore and Johor. The Bajaus are known for being a seafaring people and are warlike in nature. Evans had described them

⁷ Sather, "Samal."

⁸ Sather, "Bajau," and Charles O. Frake, "The Genesis of the Kinds of People in the Sulu Archipelago," in *Language and Cultural Description: Essays by Charles O. Frake*, ed. Anwar S. Dil (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1980): 30.

⁹ Kiefer, *The Tausug: Violence and Law in a Philippine Moslem Society*.

¹⁰ Nimmo, *The Sea People of Sulu*.

as an essentially maritime Proto-Malayan people. Evans had also recorded earlier in the century that there were still Bajau sea-gypsies and wanderers “who are born, live and die in their boats.”¹¹ They do not feel comfortable staying on land or living in houses. Nowadays, there are few of these wanderers left. However, the tradition of living in houses built on water with high stilts to support them lives on to this day.

In Malaysia (Sabah), the Bajaus are present along both the east and west coastal plains, from Kuala Penyu to Tawau in the east. In east Indonesia the largest numbers are found on the islands and in coastal districts of Sulawesi. Here, widely scattered communities, most of them pile-house settlements, are found near Menado, Ambogaya and Kendari; in the Banggai, Sula and Togian island groups; along the straits of Tioro; in the gulf of Bone; and along the Makassar coast. Elsewhere settlements are present near Balikpapan in east Kalimantan, on Maratua, Pulau Laut and Kakaban and in the Balambangan islands off the east Borneo coast. Others are reported, widely scattered, from Halmahera through the southern Moluccas, along both sides of Sape straits dividing Flores and Sumbawa; on Lombok, Lembata, Pantar, Adonara, Sumba, Ndao and Roti; and near Sulamu in west Timor. In Sabah, boat-nomads and former Bajau *lauts* are present in the southeastern Semporna district, while Sulu-related groups are found in the Philippines in small numbers from Zamboanga through the Tapul (west of Tawi-tawi) and Sibutu Island groups, with major concentrations in the Bilatan Islands, near Bongao, Sanga-sanga and Sitangkai.

The *Tinggayun*

Traditional songs of the people have largely become extinct. The question of their origins and the accuracy of surviving examples is almost impossible to define. Therefore, the only assumption that I can make about the traditional songs of the Bajaus is that they existed when the Bajaus were animists, which is before Islam was embraced by the majority of the people. These traditional songs, occasionally sung to accompany the celebration of festivals and marriages, have become synonymous with the poetic genre of classical literature.

These traditional songs have been passed down from generation to generation. But because of waning interest, especially among younger people, the songs are mainly sung to an audience of older Bajaus in *kampungs* (village) in the interior of Sabah. It is difficult to observe a presentation of these traditional songs, as they are played in accompaniment to celebrations that involve

¹¹ Evans, “Notes on the Bajaus and Other Coastal Tribes of North Borneo,” 48.

the whole village, such as marriages, and also during the holy months in the Islamic calendar.

Among the many types of traditional songs sung by the Bajaus to this day are *isun-isun*, *runsai*, *najat*, *syair*, *nasid*, *bua-bua anak* and *tinggayun*. For the purpose of this essay, I will focus on the *tinggayun* songs, which are unique in their role within, and connection to, the Bajau people.

The following are translated verses of a *tinggayun* song which I was privileged to have witnessed and heard:

Verse I

<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>	<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>
<i>Angkat betis dembilak</i>	Lift up one leg
<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>	<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>
<i>Me tak pulo tiga</i>	In Tiga island
<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>	<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>
<i>betis ninda? Entipo</i>	Legs step on the <i>mengkuang</i> mat
<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>	<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>
<i>Terimo pina roto</i>	Accepted equally
<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>	<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>
<i>Betis ninda? Embidai</i>	Legs step on the rattan mat
<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>	<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>
<i>Terima pina juntai</i>	Accepted with an open heart

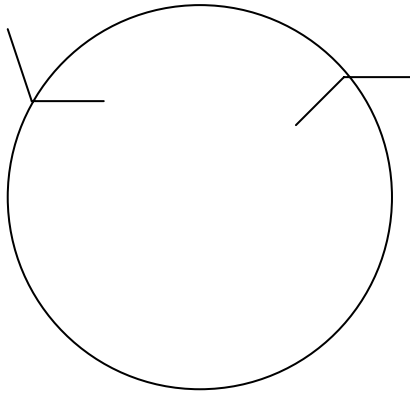
Verse II

<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>	<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>
<i>Angkat betis dembilak</i>	Lift up one leg
<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>	<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>
<i>ngalun tak pulo tiga</i>	Face the Tiga island
<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>	<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>
<i>Engkatun do? betis nu</i>	Lift up your legs
<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>	<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>
<i>Enda? Ku do? manis nu</i>	I want to see your beauty
<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>	<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>
<i>Patut sinsim kalembang</i>	Like the <i>Kalembang</i> ring
<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>	<i>Tinggayun; tinggayun</i>
<i>Di? kuli? diang-diang</i>	Sister/brother whom I love

Movement Across the Floor of the *Tinggayun*

The dance and *tinggayun* song that I happen to have witnessed is one that was sung and danced during the celebration following a marriage ceremony. It began with the bridegroom taking the lead in song and dance followed by the

bride. Other family members are encouraged to join the dance and sing the *tinggayun* behind the pair of newly weds. The dance will either proceed for three or seven rounds never ending before or after the third and seventh round. The dance and *tinggayun* song can only be performed after the blessings (*ijab qabul*) by the Imam (holy man), have taken place.



Discussion

The cultural and world-view of the Bajaus revealed through the performance of *tinggayun* adds to our understanding of the Bajau social system. Although the *tinggayun* is sung at celebrations and festivals, like most of the traditional songs, its unique feature lies in the fact that it is sung only if there is a need for its performance in a family. The 'need' is dictated by an avowal taken by an ancestor of a particular family to perform the *tinggayun* song and dance in any family celebration in exchange for something in return. The vow is usually an avenue for those who feel a desperate need for something that can only be fulfilled through supernatural intervention. When the vow is made and wishes have been fulfilled, the family must swear to ensure that the *tinggayun* is performed by every member of the family at a specified celebration. It is believed that an undesirable occurrence will befall a member of the family who fails to fulfil the vow taken or who only partly adheres to the requirements of the vow. This suggests that the *tinggayun* has become an 'heirloom' of sorts for a small number of families who have preserved, through their observation of the *tinggayun* in family celebrations, a means of avoiding mishaps. It has in fact become a part of their traditions.

The way in which the *tinggayun* has evolved from a song and dance to become a part of the social rules that govern a small number of the Bajaus serves as evidence of the ever-changing dynamics of a society. To ensure that there are rules to govern the interaction within this community, traditions become the sources of that which is created, expanded, developed and changed to suit the needs of the society. The presence of the *tinggayun* is testimony of a society that has wisely considered, negotiated and adopted a system of rewards and punishments, as part of its norms and traditions. The tradition gave rise to social rules and the system of government; the apparent agreement among the people in adopting these rules and system evolved from the *tinggayun* as a fundamental guide to behaviour and to sanctions based on the fear of punishments that would follow, depending on the nature of the offense against the rule or system.

With the *tinggayun* tradition, the society is seen to have created social constraints that are respected and observed from one generation to another. Under such constraints, the individuals of the younger generation are forced to adhere to the demands of their culture, as in marriage ceremonies, which not only ensure that aspects of the culture will remain but will also continue throughout the generations to come. Broadly speaking, the *tinggayun* can be perceived as a tool that evokes the Bajau world-view. The *tinggayun* ensures that the family institution is stable and consistent, with its promise of rewards and punishments for future generations. The marriage ceremony of this small group of Bajaus, for instance, will always have a common element in the performance of the *tinggayun* after the blessing rites.

Among the afflictions that are believed to befall any member of the family who chooses to ignore the avowal of a *tinggayun* performance in a marriage ceremony is the begetting of a child without ears, or being stricken by a condition called 'tuar', which is identified by an extraordinary bulge (in the shape of a turtle egg) on the head. If the next generation chooses to keep stubbornly ignoring the avowal taken or inherited through successive generations, these afflictions will persist. Although it is not openly acknowledged, the *tinggayun* tradition appears to be a social instrument for preserving old traditions for future generations in the face of pollution and erosion through modernity. To ensure that traditions like *tinggayun* will be passed down from one generation to the next, the society has to create a fearful belief or confidence that generational afflictions will befall those who do not maintain the traditions of their clan. In other words, the role of the *tinggayun* can be understood in the following terms:

- i) A socializing instrument that aims to promote unity among the Bajaus, 'siratulahim' (closer ties between members of the family and friends). After the blessing rites of a marriage where a *tinggayun* has been performed, the

rest of the wedding guests await their turn to dance and sing the *tinggayun* together in a long train. In this way, a sense of togetherness is forged not only between family members but also between the family and the entire village.

ii) To preserve the spirit of mutual cooperation, especially during celebrations which are normally attended by all the family members. When a ceremony such as a marriage is to be held in the village by a particular family, all its members, from in-laws to cousins, are invited to help in the preparation of the event. The invitation is issued in the hope that, with so many helping hands together, the family can ensure that the event will be a success.

iii) To preserve the social system with reverence for the older generation. The practice of the *tinggayun* which has become synonymous with the tradition of Bajaus is an excellent example of how a social system is created in the Bajau community. Tradition that are closely guarded by the older generation will be passed down to the younger generation without much protest. For instance, the *tinggayun* and its compulsory performance at certain family gatherings and weddings make it more a tradition rather than a rule to be obeyed, which might evoke ill-feelings from the younger generation. It also promotes a kind of respect for the older generation, which is looked upon as having unquestionable wisdom where traditions are concerned. This enables the social system to be passed on to future generations as well.

Conclusion

This limited study reveals the manner in which the Bajau community constructs its social structure by way of symbolic indicators within their ceremonial and ritualistic systems of interaction. Marriage can be regarded as a form of human interaction or exchange which plays a significant role in the lives of the Bajaus. Through these activities, the social structure is enacted and reaffirmed as a continuously functioning framework of human interactions and interrelationships. The performance of celebrations such as marriage in this context preserves order among the members of Bajau society.

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“Keeping Body and Soul Together”

Rukhsana Ahmad’s Critical Examinations
of Female Body Politics in Pakistan and Britain

CHRISTIANE SCHLOTE

EVEN THOUGH STILL OVERSHADOWED by the immense popularity of Indian British literature, fiction by British writers of Pakistani descent has also been affected by the transformation of ethnicity and the consumption of the Other, into what Graham Huggan calls “global commodification of cultural difference.”¹ Rukhsana Ahmad can be seen as part of the heterogeneous group of expatriate Pakistani writers also including, for example, Tariq Ali, Zulfikar Ghose, and Bapsi Sidhwa. Apart from their individual migration histories, these writers also clearly differ along gender, religious, and class lines. Ahmad sees herself as a “British-based South Asian writer or a writer of Pakistani origin living in London.”² In her work in various genres she is particularly concerned with issues of feminism, racism, class divisions, and patriarchy, which link her with such different international women writers as Meena Alexander, Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Arundhati Roy. Since 1986 she has been working as a novelist, playwright, screenwriter

¹ Graham Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001): vii. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Berliner Programm zur Förderung der Chancengleichheit für Frauen in Forschung und Lehre. This essay is based on my talk at the Triennial Conference “Bodies and Voices” of the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies at the University of Copenhagen in March 2002. For a more detailed analysis of Rukhsana Ahmad’s work (including her translations), see Christiane Schlotte, “Confrontational Sites: Cultural Conflicts, Social Inequality, and Sexual Politics in the Work of Rukhsana Ahmad,” in *Contemporary British Women Writers*, ed. Emma Parker (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004).

² Personal interview with Rukhsana Ahmad, London, April 1999.

and translator. Her work as a playwright is of particular interest, since, as Muneeza Shamsie observes, Pakistani English drama has not been an important traditional art-form and has, furthermore, been strongly affected by censorship. Thus, Pakistani English playwrights such as Ahmad, Hanif Kureishi and Tariq Ali have mainly worked in Britain.³ In 1990, Ahmad, together with Rita Wolf, founded the aptly named Kali Theatre Company to promote new writings by Asian women. Their first production was Ahmad's play *Song for a Sanctuary*, which toured nationally; its radio version was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 1993. Ahmad has also edited and translated a collection of feminist Urdu poetry called *We Sinful Women* (1991), and her short stories appear in various collections. Her first novel, *The Hope Chest*, was published in 1996.

In general, Ahmad's explorations of the condition of women in Pakistan and Britain are situated in their respective social and political contexts, as illustrated both in the *The Hope Chest* and in *Song for a Sanctuary*. Proceeding from these two texts, I will analyse Ahmad's portrayal of Pakistani womens' bodies with special regard to the way they are marked by racial and class differences. This kind of reading is analogous to developments in critical approaches to postcolonial literature; as John McLeod points out,

one of the fundamental differences that many postcolonial critics today have from their Commonwealth predecessors is their insistence that historical, geographical and cultural specifics are *vital* to both the writing and the reading of a text, and cannot be so easily bracketed as secondary colouring or background.⁴

Furthermore, I will examine how Ahmad explores younger women's negotiations of gender roles within the discourse on gendered spaces.

In a recent talk, Terry Eagleton remarked sardonically that you can hardly publish a book nowadays without the word 'body' in it. In fact, over the last few years, social, economic, and cultural transformations, such as reconceptualizations of work and leisure, the centrality of consumption, and the creation of transnational spaces, have fostered an enormous increase of mainly social-science literature on the body. According to Linda McDowell, gender and cultural studies discourses on the cult of the body, its vulnerability to AIDS, and on body politics, conceived metaphorically, in line with early Western political theory, or as formulated by feminist movements as a woman's right to control her own body, have positioned the body as "a central

³ Muneeza Shamsie, *At the New Threshold* (2001). <http://www.dawn.com/events/century/cul7.htm>

⁴ John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000): 15. McLeod's emphasis.

object of personal concern, as well as a key social issue.”⁵ But even though efforts have been made to deconstruct binary notions of sexuality and ‘male’ and ‘female’, women’s bodies continue to be seen as inferior, due to their biological and anatomical attributes. The feminist geographer Doreen Massey concedes that “if there is one thing which has most certainly demonstrated its flexibility in an age which as a whole is frequently accorded that epithet, it is sexism.”⁶ And since, as Bryan Turner points out, the control of bodies is still exercised mainly as the control of female bodies, any analysis of the body must also address issues of patriarchy and gerontocracy.⁷

In the postcolonial context, analyses of the corporeal representations of female protagonists in literature are further complicated by the fact that in many countries women writers have encountered great difficulties when trying to address issues of sexuality, gender oppression and inequality.⁸ Various critics have pointed to the different positioning and significance of the female body in a colonial and postcolonial context. Françoise Lionnet declares:

in postcolonial literature the gendered and racialized body of the female protagonist is consistently overdetermined; it is a partial object on which are written various cultural scripts and their death-dealing blows.⁹

In the West, this has partly led to very one-dimensional images of Indian and Pakistani women, particularly of Muslim women, who have been mainly constructed as submissive, dependent and oppressed victims.¹⁰ According to Alison Shaw, South Asian women residing in Britain have even been described as “doubly oppressed, subordinate to men at home and the victims of racism in the wider society.”¹¹

⁵ Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999): 36.

⁶ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994): 212.

⁷ Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (1984; London: Sage, 1996): 233.

⁸ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998): 229.

⁹ Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1995): 87.

¹⁰ Sabra Bano, “Women, Class, and Islam in Karachi,” in *Family and Gender in Pakistan: Domestic Organization in a Muslim Society*, ed. Hastings Donnan & Frits Selier (New Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1997): 189–207; Claire Dwyer, “Contested Identities: Challenging Dominant Representations of Young British Muslim Women,” in *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*, ed. Tracey Skelton & Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1998): 50–65.

¹¹ Alison Shaw, “Women, the Household and Family Ties: Pakistani Migrants in Britain,” in *Family and Gender in Pakistan: Domestic Organization in a Muslim Society*, ed. Hastings Donnan & Frits Selier (New Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1997): 132.

But although, in the process of Pakistan's islamization, the state, under General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–88) and in conjunction with Islamic fundamentalists, has clearly used religion as a means of control over women and passed laws which reduced women's status, Pakistani women have not remained silent in the face of these discriminations. In 1981, for instance, the Women's Action Forum (WAF) was formed; this was made up of several women's organizations and individuals.¹² The WAF addressed legal as well as social issues, such as the enforced segregation of women, stricter dress codes and new laws regarding adultery, rape and prostitution. At the same time, Ania Loomba's warning to homogenize neither 'First-World' nor 'Third-World' women but to bear in mind the fact that women's movements have been divided by differences in class, religious, sexual or political affiliations and concerns, remains important, the WAF being a case in point. Since its activists came mainly from an upper-middle class of professional women, whose mothers and grandmothers had already been active in the pioneering post-independence women's organization All Pakistan Women's Association (APWF), the WAF has been criticized for failing to include more women from lower classes and rural backgrounds.¹³ After having moved from Pakistan to England in her early twenties, Ahmad describes her own 'political awakening' as follows:

I started looking for opportunities to write and at the same time [...] the Islamisation [in Pakistan] began and this caused me great distress. So I decided I would try to do a book about the status of women in Pakistan [...]. And with this I think what happened was that it really politicised me quite a lot. I started reading about religion and thinking about it more deeply. [...] And I went home [to Pakistan] [...] what I did was that I started a series of articles about women's issues and I started getting published in Asian magazines.¹⁴

Shaw's recent research on South Asian women in Britain shows that their situation has been improving steadily. Her material proves that women have gained more control within as well as beyond their households and that increased female education and employment among South Asian British women reflects Western values as well as changes within Pakistani society itself.¹⁵ In this context, Noshin Ahmad challenges one of the most persistent and most contested issues in Western discourses on Muslim women:

¹² *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?*, ed. Khawar Mumtaz & Farida Shaheed (London: Zed, 1987).

¹³ Bano, "Women, Class, and Islam in Karachi," 205.

¹⁴ Personal interview with Rukhsana Ahmad, London, April 1999.

¹⁵ Shaw, "Women, the Household and Family Ties: Pakistani Migrants in Britain."

There is concern that the veil inhibits women from expressing their sexuality. [...] The Muslim woman is aware, perceptive, and critically engages with the veil, her body, and her environment, as she sees fit. Women negotiate and use different strategies to lay claim to their bodies.¹⁶

The condition of women in Pakistan and Britain, their negotiations and protests, and the racialized representations of Pakistani women in the West, thus form the pillars of the framework in which Ahmad's work can be located. Ahmad's female protagonists, both in *The Hope Chest* and in *Song for a Sanctuary*, are vivid and, more importantly, heterogeneous examples of the different ways young Pakistani and British women form their identities and claim their bodies. In contrast to the dominant images of Pakistani families in Western research and literary and media representations as mainly rural and Muslim, Ahmad's characters live in a highly stratified society. As anthropological research in Pakistan has shown, no single form of family could be identified.¹⁷ Ahmad herself comments on this as follows: “I suppose I'm always preoccupied by that subject of divisions between people. I mean, *The Hope Chest* is about that how you know the context that you are born into completely separates you from all other people and all other experiences.”¹⁸

In *The Hope Chest*, Ahmad depicts the lives of the young women Rani, Reshma and Ruth and their journey from girlhood to womanhood. Though very different in terms of social, socio-economic and cultural background, all three are determined by their gendered bodies as main sites in the search for identity, whether illustrated by their experiences of sexual awakening, resistance and subjection, or physical and psychological illness. These experiences are closely connected with, and are reflected in, their relationships with their mothers, who are portrayed as rather strong women. Rani and Reshma are both Pakistani, Rani coming from a wealthy upper-class family in Lahore and Reshma the daughter of the gardener employed by Rani's family. When Rani is sent to a posh hospital in London for the treatment of her supposed anorexia, she befriends the Londoner Ruth, who is also being treated at the clinic. While Rani and Ruth struggle with their psychological problems, Reshma's indigent family forces her at the age of thirteen to marry a widower twice her age who also has two small children already. The second part of the novel is concerned with its female protagonists five years later. Rani, who has started

¹⁶ Noshin Ahmad, “Hijabs in Our Midst,” in *Young Britain: Politics, Pleasures and Predicaments*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998): 80.

¹⁷ Hastings Donnan, “Family and Household in Pakistan,” in *Family and Gender in Pakistan: Domestic Organization in a Muslim Society*, ed. Hastings Donnan & Frits Selier (New Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1997): 1–24.

¹⁸ Personal interview with Rukhsana Ahmad, London, April 1999.

studying art, has to return to the London clinic after an unhappy marriage to a man who was chosen for her by her mother. Again, she meets Ruth, who now has a little daughter and who has also had to return to the clinic. The person whose life has changed most radically is Reshma. After the birth of her three children, she becomes pregnant again and decides not to have the fourth child. With the help of her best friend, Rani's younger sister Shehzadi, by now a medical student, she has an abortion as well as sterilization. When she finally tells her husband, he throws her out of the house and she has to return to her own parents, but without her children. In her play *Song for a Sanctuary*, Ahmad also foregrounds the relationship between a mother (Rajinder) and her daughter (Savita). The play is set inside a woman's refuge in London to which Rajinder and Savita have escaped because of the husband's violence towards his wife and sexual abuse of their daughter. According to Ahmad, it was "sparked off by the murder of a woman [the Sikh woman Balwant Kaur] who was living in a refuge, by her own husband [...] actually very close to where I used to live."¹⁹

In the novel as well as in the play, the women's lives are seemingly determined and confined by restrictive spaces from which there is hardly any escape. In *The Hope Chest*, the characters mainly move between hospital rooms in Pakistan and London, their parents' houses, and, later on, those of their spouses' families. Anthropologists have pointed out the manifestation of privacy and with it the attempt to protect the family's or, even more precisely, its female members' honour, in the physical spaces of Pakistani households – high walls, concealed doorways, or the practice of purdah: i.e. the spatial separation of women and men who are not closely related.²⁰ The strict dichotomy between the female's 'domestic' and the male's 'public' sphere, however, cannot be upheld in the face of social and economic transformations, such as labour migration and urban growth, which have resulted in redefinitions of gender roles as well as greater economic stratification,²¹ as is also reflected in the novel: "All the young men and boys seemed to have gone away to places like Saudi Arabia and Dubai. Only the women were left behind, to make trips to the post office, mostly waiting for money orders."²² At one point Reshma asks her mother why they had come to live in places "where people don't understand our customs, appreciate our ways, speak our language or love and want us," only to find out that her father, Ajaib Khan, "had moved

¹⁹ Personal interview with Rukhsana Ahmad, London, April 1999.

²⁰ Donnan, "Family and Household in Pakistan"; Shaw, "Women, the Household and Family Ties: Pakistani Migrants in Britain."

²¹ Donnan, "Family and Household in Pakistan."

²² Rukhsana Ahmad, *The Hope Chest* (London: Virago, 1996): 40–41. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

South in search for a better job” (84). Nevertheless, traditional gender roles remain decisive factors, particularly in the life of women such as Reshma, who come from poorer families and who have not had access to education.

The settings for *Song for a Sanctuary* consist of the claustrophobic and overcrowded refuge, an excursion to Rajinder, and Savita’s former home, now haunted by the memory of Pradeep’s physical abuse and violence. Finally, their bodies can be seen as the ultimate spaces of confinement, marked by the way they are appropriated, predominantly by men but also by their own families. Throughout history, women have been seen as restricted to their bodies, whereas men have been associated with the disembodied mind.²³ Thus, after having been banished from her husband’s home after her abortion, Reshma’s own mother curses her with the words “You should have died before you had a chance to disgrace us like this.”²⁴ Reshma’s thought following this outburst is emblematic of her own condition as well as that of the other female characters: “Whatever she had sought had involved only her own body. She had innocently assumed that that, at least, was her own” (274). From a geographer’s perspective, Massey emphasizes that

[T]he home may be as much a place of conflict as of repose. [...] Many women have had to leave home precisely in order to forge their own version of their identities [...]. Moreover, in certain cultural quarters, the mobility of women does indeed seem to pose a threat to a settled patriarchal order. [...] That place called home was never an unmediated experience.²⁵

This ambiguity of spaces such as ‘home’ and ‘body’ as sites of repression but also of resistance is reflected in each character’s story. The novel’s first few sentences already indicate the limitations and possibilities available to its female protagonists. During an appendectomy, the following surreal incident takes place:

Rani’s soul escaped and floated close to the ceiling directly above the operation table. It was a little outraged at the casual disregard with which her inert body was being treated. The scene below was alarming. Seemingly indifferent to the blood and gore stemming from the incision across her belly, the group of medics around the table were animatedly discussing whether Benazir Bhutto had had her nose ‘done’ or not. (3)

As if to indicate that issues such as a disembodied woman and patriarchal concepts of beauty are too complicated to be dealt with in realist terms, Ah-

²³ McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place*.

²⁴ Ahmad, *The Hope Chest*, 272.

²⁵ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 11, 164.

mad resorts to a form of magical realism. The medics' "casual regard" eventually results in their leaving an instrument for cauterizing internal tissue on Rani's thigh for too long and thereby burning a little patch on it. Significantly, a young nurse called Meena notices the accident first. The ensuing commotion introduces two of the novel's dominant and interlinked themes: the increasing social stratification of Pakistani society, and the commodification of womens' bodies in particular. Significantly, Dr Samad, the male senior surgeon, is less concerned about Rani's injury than about his reputation among future wealthy patients. He "looked dismayed as though he had been cheated out of winning a sizeable lottery by a single digit" (5). While he is mainly eager to find somebody from his team to blame, Meena keeps on calling for some immediate action: "she was the only one, Rani's soul decided, with some gratitude, who appeared to have any concern for the body" (6). Although Rani recovers from the appendectomy, the operation has long-term effects on her personality, symbolized by her dwindling appetite caused by the memory of the smell of her own burning flesh:

No sooner would she take a morsel of food to her mouth than the retching would begin as the taste of all food changed to that foul stink of burning fat. [...] that unforgettable odour chased every mouthful and began to haunt her every waking moment. (7)

Eventually, her condition is diagnosed as anorexia nervosa and her parents take her to an exclusive clinic in London. The motives of her parents, and especially those of Shahana, her mother, in bringing her to London, are ambiguous and reflect the balancing-act of negotiating traditions and changes within Pakistani society. On the one hand, Shahana's vision of a woman's life is thoroughly traditional and reflects a dominant motif in South Asian British literature in general: "What's a woman's life without marriage and children [...] *haan*? Nothing if you ask me. Worth less than bits of straw blown about in the wind, much less!" (246). Consequently, her greatest ambition is to acquire "two wonderful sons-in-law" (7) for her two daughters. Anything potentially threatening to her plans, particularly a psychological illness, has to be resisted accordingly. Just as Karim Amir, Hanif Kureishi's Pakistani-British hero in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, declares that "in my family nervous breakdowns were as exotic as New Orleans,"²⁶ Shahana "raised the issue of the relevance of Western medicine for the treatment of what everyone in the East had known and understood for years as a malady which affected young women, and which something as simple as marriage could cure" (18). At the same time, Shahana's decisions are also dictated by an increasingly stratified Paki-

²⁶ Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991): 11.

stani society. Sabra Bano explains that the transformation of Pakistani cities (for example, Karachi) into consumer societies also resulted in greater competition for consumer goods and the prestige attached to them.²⁷ Thus, when faced with Rani’s sudden appendectomy, Shahana’s main concern goes beyond worries for her daughter:

If it had not been an emergency, as they were advised it was, they would have taken her abroad for surgery. Money was not a problem for Shahana and Saeed. The bigger problem would be explaining to all their friends why poor Rani should have been subjected to the dangers of major surgery at a government hospital in Lahore. (3)

In reaction to her mother’s traditional demands for a suitable marriage, Rani instrumentalizes her own body. Turner points out that

the fact that there are social and collective practices operating on the body of the anorexic should not detract from its political feature of anorexia as a domestic rebellion. [...] each condenses and expresses a contest between the individual and some other person or persons in his environment over the control of the individual’s body.²⁸

In this respect, Rani exemplifies many Pakistani upper-middle-class women who, according to Hastings Donnan, display an often “outright hostility towards idealized female domestic roles.”²⁹ Rani suffers from a relapse of her anorexia in the second part of the novel. Although she does marry the man chosen for her by her mother, she is acutely aware of her body’s instrumentalization by others. Thus, on her wedding night she recalls her mother-in-law’s eyes upon first meeting her:

A strangely cold, assessing look had sized her face, her body, her person, for what it was worth, swiftly but accurately [...]. It was the professional match-maker’s look. (183)

And again, Rani reacts to the commodification of her body by attempting to destroy it. As anorexia also has negative effects on a woman’s ability to conceive, Rani remains childless and eventually separates from her husband. Although both marriages, Rani’s and Reshma’s, fail (with Reshma losing her children and her home), Rani’s economic position allows her to ask her unfaithful husband to leave the house, so that in her case, unlike Reshma’s, it is the man who has to return to his mother. As Rani herself concedes, “This

²⁷ Bano, “Women, Class, and Islam in Karachi,” 197.

²⁸ Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*, 194.

²⁹ Donnan, “Family and Household in Pakistan,” 15.

should be easy for me, easier than it is for any of them [...] at least I have a place of my own where I might begin to find myself” (306).

Reshma is not privileged in any way and is forced to develop her own survival strategies. Not only does she come from a poverty-stricken family, but she and her family are also not Punjabi and thus are treated as outsiders in Lahore. When, at age twenty-one, she faces the addition of another child to a household with five children already, she also claims control over her own body by asking for help from her childhood friend Shehzadi, who, again because of her parents' wealth, can afford to be trained as a doctor:

“Will you do something for me, Shehzadi? [...] I want to get that thing done, the operation [...] they stitch up the womb? You know what I mean? So I don't have any more children! [...] I must ... get rid of it ... this new ... one.” (209)

Thus, even though the Pakistani women's movement from the early 1980s “was initially led by middle to upper class urban women, it quickly resulted in a country-wide gender consciousness at all levels of society.”³⁰

Ruth, Rani's friend from the London clinic, is not affected by poverty, nor does her mother, Sophie, expect her to marry early and become a traditional wife and mother. Still, her mother plays a decisive role in her life. In the clinic, Ruth is being treated for amnesia and an identity-crisis which is partly expressed through her very problematic relationship with the highly critical Sophie: “Every time she caught the cold scepticism, the censure in Sophie's eyes, it twisted her cruelly like a jagged sliver of old shrapnel” (23). In deliberately becoming a mother even under her strained circumstances, Ruth also uses her body in a way that counters her modern mother's aspirations. All three women engage in physical rebellion against the expectations of their environment, most poignantly symbolized in the metaphor of the ‘hope chest’, which Rani experiences as follows: “A palpable image of the trunk ballooned in her imagination, gripped her senses and weighed her down. [...] It was ... as if ... someone had locked her inside that silver trunk and thrown away the key” (247).

True to Susan Bardo's claim that “women engage in self-destructive behaviour in order to compensate for their lack of social power,”³¹ all three women in *The Hope Chest* partly succeed in rejecting traditional gender roles through bodily resistance and subversion. The novel ends with Rani becoming a painter, Reshma training as a midwife, and Ruth occupied with caring for her daughter, tellingly named Faith. In view of the fact that all three women have also attempted to commit suicide, however, any strategies of bodily re-

³⁰ Bano, “Women, Class, and Islam in Karachi,” 9.

³¹ Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity*, 95.

sistance should by no means be over-emphasized. As Ahmad so painfully illustrates in *Song for a Sanctuary*, female bodies are still being controlled, injured and destroyed by male power without any opportunity for resistance. Even though Rajinder and her daughter left their old home for the refuge, a space they do not feel comfortable in but believe to be safe, Rajinder’s husband Pradeep manages to enter the refuge. The play ends with him stabbing his wife while his daughter stands next to her, and with the words: “This is not murder, it is a death sentence, her punishment for taking away what was mine. [...] She can’t leave me, she’s my wife.”³² The novel’s epigraph, “Why do women keep their jewels locked in trunks? To whom will they bequeath their legacy of grief?,” is taken from one of the poems (*ghazals*) written by the Urdu poet Ishrat Aafreen, about whom Ahmad writes: “She identifies how that which is upheld as heroic, pure and virtuous womanhood actually destroys and consumes women.”³³ What remains is Rani’s realization at the end of *The Hope Chest* that “it would still be a prolonged battle for her to find herself and to hang on to what she valued most. ‘Keeping body and soul together’, was a struggle which had acquired for her a rather special significance, a disturbing nuance” (307).

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³² Rukhsana Ahmad, “Song for a Sanctuary,” in *Six Plays by Black and Asian Women Writers*, ed. Kadija George (London: Aurora Metro, 1993): 186.

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Arthur Waley's *The Way and Its Power*

Representation of 'the Other'

HSIU-CHEN JANE CHANG

ARTHUR WALEY (1889–1966), a well-known British sinologist, was educated at Cambridge and received the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature at Oxford. He was awarded the Order of Companion of the British Empire in 1952. During his lifetime, he published about forty books and some eighty-two articles. Half of his published books were translations.¹

The Chinese classic *Tao Te Ching*² has had a significant influence on Chinese culture. Since the eighteenth century, there has been a strong interest in the West in translating and interpreting this Taoist text. A great many English versions of this influential Chinese classic are available. The reason for choosing Waley's translation, *The Way and Its Power*, for investigation is mainly that his book was selected for the Chinese Translation Series of UNESCO. It has been taken to be one of the most authoritative Western interpretations of the *Tao Te Ching*. I shall examine the attitude of the translator towards the source language and culture he was translating. I shall also demonstrate that, through constant dichotomies such as civilized and barbaric, scientific and superstitious, a negative image of Chinese culture is constructed. Then I shall

¹ These include: *Chinese Poems* (London: Lowe Bros., 1916); *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1917); *More Translations from the Chinese* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1919); *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao t'ê Ching and its Place in Chinese Thought* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1934); *The Book of Songs* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1937); *The Analects of Confucius* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938); *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1939).

² Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, tr. D.C. Lau (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).

look back to examine the relationship between China and the West. By doing so, I intend to redefine the so-called Orientalism proposed by Edward Said.

Translating with an Attitude

I must apologize for the fact that the introduction is longer than the translation itself. I can only say that I see no way of making the text fully intelligible without showing how the ideas which it embodies came into existence. The introduction together with the translation and notes are intended for those who have no professional interest in Chinese studies.³

Ideally, translation is supposed to be a faithful representation of the source language and culture. In translation studies, a common research method is to compare the original text in the source language and the translation in the target language, so that we may judge how successful the translation is. The preface and introduction to the translation are often considered to be less important, and may even be ignored. In reality, however, for English readers who are not familiar with Chinese Taoist thinking it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate this Chinese classic, even with all the translator's notes. Therefore, very often we find that translated English texts have a long preface and introduction to help the reader understand the foreign culture – in other words, to put them in perspective.

The preface and introduction of Waley's translation are, all together, 126 pages in length, which is, as Waley notes, longer than the translated text of the *Tao Te Ching* itself (102 pages). The original *Tao Te Ching* contains only about 5,000 Chinese characters. It is short but difficult. Deciphering this ancient text itself can be a great challenge to the translator. After the transformation of language and culture, it would not be surprising if an English reader found the translation itself beyond comprehension. The function of the preface and introduction is to provide the readers with a perspective; to give them a map to find the treasure the translator promises. From time to time, we may find that English readers do not understand the difficult main texts, but remember vividly what the translator says in the preface and introduction about Chinese culture. The importance of the preface and introduction, therefore, should not be overlooked. In the following section, I shall investigate the pre-conceptions and the motivation of the sinologist when he starts the translation project.

For hundreds of millennia Man was what we call 'primitive.' He has attempted to be civilized only (as regards Europe) in the last few centuries. During an

³ Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, 14.

overwhelmingly great proportion of his history he has sacrificed, been engrossed in omens, attempted to control the wind and rain by magic [...]. And Man must be studied as a whole. Despite the lead given by unofficial historians there is still an idea that the Chinese are or at any rate were in the past so cut off from the common lot of mankind that they be regarded almost as though they belonged to another planet, that sinology is in fact something not much less remote than astronomy and cannot, whatever independent interest or value it may have, possibly throw light on the problems of our own past. Nothing could be more false. It becomes apparent, as Chinese studies progress, that in numerous instances ancient China show in a complete and intelligible form what in the West is known to us only through examples that are scattered, fragmentary and obscure.⁴

At the beginning of the preface, Arthur Waley maintains that “Man must be studied as a whole.” He dichotomizes human history as primitive and civilized, and implies that civilization started only in the last few centuries: i.e. after the Industrial Revolution in Europe. By doing so, the reader will get the message that it is impossible that the Chinese had real civilization in Lao Tzu’s time, in the sixth century BC. He then emphasizes that not only scholars but also general readers should pay attention to Chinese studies, because “ancient China shows in a complete and intelligible form what in the West is known to us only through examples that are scattered, fragmentary and obscure.”⁵ Waley’s statement shows a culturally conditioned cognition of human civilization. Anglo-Saxons have taught their people that real civilization started in Europe after the Industrial Revolution. It is dangerous to ignore the spiritual civilization of human beings and it is even more dangerous to equate the development of machinery with the development of human civilization. This kind of teaching may have led both European scholars and the general public to the preconception that it would be impossible for China to produce any real civilization and literature of high value in ancient times. Such prejudices and preconceptions may lead scholars and general readers alike to discriminate against unfamiliar foreign cultures they are about to encounter, and lead to a search for evidence of the primitive/civilized theory even before they start to read the ancient Chinese classics.

Constructing an Image of Chinese Culture and People

In the preface and introduction, Waley describes Chinese religion, ritual, belief, history, philosophy, literature, and language in detail for English readers.

⁴ Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, 11–12.

⁵ *The Way and Its Power*, 11–12.

After reading these, an English reader may have the following impressions about Chinese culture and people:

A. *Superstitious and Backward*

The *Tao Te Ching* is a Chinese classic of ancient philosophy of nature and human life. It embodies Chinese wisdom and intelligence and has nothing superstitious or primitive in it. However, with his eurocentric attitude, Waley tries to create a primitive and superstitious image of Chinese culture, which he considers necessary for readers to understand this Chinese classic.

Except in chapter sixty, the whole book contains nothing about ghosts or spirits. Waley translates chapter sixty of the *Tao Te Ching* as follows:

Ruling a large kingdom is indeed like cooking small fish. They who by Tao ruled all that is under heaven did not let an evil spirit within them display its powers. Nay, it was not only that the evil spirit did not display its powers; neither was the Sage's good spirit used to the hurt of other men. Nor was it only that his good spirit was not used to harm other men, the Sage himself was thus saved from harm. And so, each being saved from harm, their 'powers' could converge towards a common.⁶

The idea of evil spirits exists in almost all languages and cultures. However, the ancient Chinese intellectuals, not only Confucius but also Lao Tzu, did not spend time elaborating on the subject. To my surprise, Waley devotes quite a large part of his introduction to emphasizing the idea of evil spirits in ancient Chinese culture. For example, he talks about "the shaman being possessed by spirits"⁷ and

the early Chinese, then, were accustomed to the idea of spirits entering into human beings, and in the moralistic period the idea began to grow up that such spirits, if their new abode were made sufficiently attractive, might be induced to stay in it permanently, or at least during periods other than those of sacrificial ritual.⁸

In addition to discussing evil spirits, Waley devotes much space to elaborating on omens and magical rituals. For example, in the introduction he writes:

⁶ D.C. Lau's translation in my opinion is closer to the original text: "When the empire is ruled in accordance with the way, the spirits lose their potencies. Or rather, it is not that they lose their potencies, but that, though they have their potencies, they do not harm the people, the sage, also does not harm the people. As neither does any harm, each attributes the merit to the other." Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 121.

⁷ Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, 26.

⁸ Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, 27.

The world of omens and magic ritual to which the Honan oracle-bones and the *Book of Changes* introduce us is one with which we are already familiar in Babylonia. Things that happen are divided into two classes: the things that man does on purpose and the things that 'happen of themselves.' All the latter class of thing (not only in ancient but also in modern China, among the peasants, as indeed among the remoter rural populations all over the world) is ominous.⁹

We know that in the *Tao Te Ching* there is nothing about omens and magic rituals. The above information offered by Waley is not necessary background knowledge for the English readers to understand this classic. Instead, it could be misleading. Moreover, Waley's comments about the *Book of Change* are also a little bit biased. According to Kerson Huang (professor of physics at MIT), the *Book of Change* shows that "the Zhou people knew the deepest secret of the universe, that Yin and Yang are at the root of things, that they continually change into each other, giving motion to the world. They expressed this in their oracle, the *I Ching*, the *Canon of Change*."¹⁰ From this perspective, the *Book of Change* is a product of wisdom and advanced civilization. It is misleading to describe it as superstitious and associate it with the peasants in China.

B. *Language Crisis*

Waley, in his introduction, discusses the Chinese language extensively. For example, he says

Two horses are horses (i.e. belong to the category 'horse') was expressed by 'Two horse, horse indeed.' It appears then that in the world of language one horse is identical with 2 horses; we know that in the world of fact this is not so. But not only did Chinese nouns lack number; Chinese verbs lacked tense. This creates another barrier between language and reality.¹¹

Each language has its unique system of syntax, phonology, and semantics. From the Chinese perspective, we think the number two in the phrase 'two horse' has made it clear that it is plural. To add 's' would be like gilding the lily, or adding legs to a snake. Waley recognizes the difference between the Chinese and the English languages, but criticizes the Chinese language for lacking 'logic,' (the logic of the English world, of course). He even cites this as evidence of a language crisis. It is again a biased interpretation of the Chinese language: one culture prescribes the grammar rules; if other languages do not share or follow the same rules, they are then 'incorrect'. Moreover, Waley

⁹ Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, 22.

¹⁰ Kerson Huang, *I Ching* (Taipei: Bookman, 1991), "Preface": i.

¹¹ Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, 64.

adds a few more negative descriptions of the origin of some Chinese characters. For example, he writes “the word now written ‘heart’ plus ‘blood’ originally meant to draw blood from a sacrificial animal. If it bled freely, this meant that the ancestors accepted the sacrifice.”¹² This kind of information is absolutely unnecessary for the comprehension of the *Tao Te Ching*, and actually serves to create a negative image of Chinese culture.

C. *Chinese as Unscientific People*

Modern Western society worships science with the same kind of passion that it worships God. Waley works very hard in his introduction to create a picture of Chinese culture as ‘unscientific’. For example, when he talks about the methods of dating Chinese texts, he writes:

The first we may call the bibliographical. This consists in searching literature for references to the text we are examining. We may find them in a special book-catalogues or in original literature. Or again, we may find quotations from the text in question in books of known date, and thus get a clue as to its period. This method has been extensively used in China since the 18th century. In itself it is a scientific method; but only so long as it is used in a scientific way. In China it has frequently been used in a very unscientific way.¹³

He further comments:

All commentaries, from Wang Pi’s onwards down to the eighteenth century, are ‘scriptural’; that is to say that each commentator reinterprets the text according to his own particular tenets, without any intention or desire to discover what it meant originally. From my point of view they are therefore useless.¹⁴

There have been tens of thousands of books written on the *Tao Te Ching* by Chinese scholars. Due to the Great Fire, there is quite a lot of controversy and debate about the authorship, dates, and content of this Chinese classic. Waley criticizes the work of Chinese scholars as either useless or unscientific. As a non-Chinese, he declares that he is the one to show Chinese scholars the original meaning of the classic: an ambitious task that in his opinion no Chinese scholar has managed to accomplish. Arthur Waley’s overconfidence made him underestimate the difficulty and oversimplify the complexity of translating the *Tao Te Ching*.

¹² Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, 23.

¹³ *The Way and Its Power*, 121.

¹⁴ *The Way and Its Power*, 121.

Orientalism and Human Cognition

Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.¹⁵

The year 1978 saw the publication of Edward Said's influential book *Orientalism*. The book stimulated interest in Orientalism in postcolonial studies as a new field of academic research. Arthur Waley never set foot in China and was only self-taught in the Chinese language. Considering Waley's bold statements and unfavourable representation of Chinese culture, many people might call it 'orientalism' or 'racism'. I, however, would like to view this case from a different perspective.

If we reflect on world history, we have to admit that ethnocentrism, cultural bias, and prejudice do not exist solely in the West. Take Chinese culture as an example; since the Chou dynasty (1111 BC) the Chinese have referred to the neighbouring cultures and peoples as barbarians – this kind of ethnocentrism lasted for over three millennia until the end of the Ch'ing Dynasty.

In both the Occident and the Orient, cultural bias is nothing rare. Instead of using the term 'Orientalism', I tentatively propose a Strong Mode of Cross-Cultural Communication to explain the Western attitude towards Chinese culture since the nineteenth century. China had been relatively strong and powerful before the Opium War, and for a long time had viewed her neighbours and Westerners as 'barbarians'. Before the Industrial Revolution, politically and economically, the West was not 'superior' to China. That is why China had been a model for the West to emulate. However, things changed completely after the Western Industrial Revolution. By World War I, Western imperial powers occupied nine-tenths of the territory of the earth and the British Empire governed one fifth of the globe and a quarter of its population.

This Strong Mode of Cross-Cultural Communication entails a marked sense of superiority on the part of people from 'advanced' cultures. In other words, people with political, economic, military, or technological superiority might view people with fewer such powers or advantages as inferior, backward, or even barbarous. We know that there is no 'perfect' culture in the world. Each culture has its strengths and weaknesses. The cognitive process of people from a stronger culture is characterized by selective attention and biased interpretation of weaker cultures. The beauty and uniqueness of the

¹⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1994): 3.

disadvantaged cultures are often overlooked or ignored. Sometimes the biased interpretation is due to ignorance, and sometimes it is made intentionally in order to achieve certain political goals or interests.

Language and Human Cognition

If now we examine the present condition of the Chinese mind, what do we see? The first and normal manifestation of a sound organ is its reactions to movement and activity: this is the necessary condition of regular functioning. It is desirable in the first place to consider how far the Chinaman possesses the most important of all forms of activity – the creative faculty. The answer can be given in a few words: he has created nothing for 2,000 years, and more than that he seems incapable of bringing any industry whatever to perfection. Do we find in the physical state of the Chinaman any evidence of lack of cerebral activity? Yes; the Chinaman will pass from waking to sleeping with extraordinary ease; as soon as he ceases active occupation, his organs enter into physiological repose – he falls asleep. His senses have not the same acuteness as those of the European; his sight and his hearing have not the same fineness or rapidity of perception; his sense of smell is very imperfect; one can affirm as a general rule without fear of error that the functioning powers of the different organs in the yellow man are inferior to those of the white. This commonplace is confirmed by physiological and pathological observation, I will cite only the fact that the blood circulates more slowly, and renders the organism less apt to defensive reaction.¹⁶

In history, we have seen Chinese in the East view their neighbours as uncivilized; likewise, some sinologists and Chinese experts in the West create primitive, superstitious, unscientific, backward Chinese images in contrast to the civilized, scientific, and advanced Western self-images of Western readers. In the twenty-first century, one of the most important things for peoples of different cultures in our global village is to learn to cooperate rather than to compete, to share rather than to dominate. To achieve this goal, a new language, or at least a new habit of using language, should be developed by new generations.

We may conclude from the above discussion that language consists of combinations and patterns of symbols used to express and communicate thoughts and feelings. There is a myriad of things in our world. Generally speaking, the way we organize and construct our world is by differentiation and discrimination. Father is different from mother. Apples are not the same as pears. Another thing our language enables or leads us to do is to differen-

¹⁶ A.F. Legendre, *Modern Chinese Civilization* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929): 167.

tiate things, such as good as opposed to bad, new as opposed to old, primitive as opposed to advanced, barbarous as opposed to civilized, right as opposed to wrong.

Our experience and interpretations are very largely preconditioned by the language-habits, value-system, and intellectual horizon of the historical time and space we find ourselves in. Our self-image and the way we view others, especially people from other cultures, is formed in this way. When this thinking becomes a habit, language can turn into a prison in which we have little freedom for different modes of thinking and behaviour. Language is a value-loaded system. As it says in the *Tao Te Ching*, "When everyone knows beauty is beauty, this is bad. When everyone knows good is good; this is not good."¹⁷ People with a shared history or set of traditions may interpret things very differently from people in other cultures. Our language and culture often give us preconceptions, leading us to interpret, experience, and organize things in a culturally conditioned way.

Since we observe that values differ from culture to culture, at each cross-cultural encounter we may find that misinterpretation and miscommunication occur from time to time. Knowing the problems of our old language-habits, we should probably try to refrain from following them thus in the twenty-first century. In this way, it is to be hoped that East and West might achieve a deeper mutual understanding and better cross-cultural communication.

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¹⁷ Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 2.

THE SETTLER COLONIES

Bodies and Voices in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost*

CARLA COMELLINI

IF THE FICTIVE STRATEGIES found throughout Michael Ondaatje's work are based on the use of bodies and voices as literary themes and devices, this is particularly manifest in his novels *The English Patient* (1992) and *Anil's Ghost* (2000). Both novels are built on metaphors and symbols connected not only to the body but also to the antinomies created by opposites, such as corporeal solidity and consistency as opposed to their disembodiment. The latter is also alluded to as a ghost, or ectoplasm, thus referring to the unconscious world, or to the world of the spirits. By contrast, the physical world, or the world of reality, is expressed through imagery connected with the body, from live and healthy to sick, and then dead, or as a corpse going through a process of decomposition leading to complete organic dissolution.

Thanks to antinomies such as body opposed to ghost and body opposed to corpse, the metaphor created by the body is enriched and multiplied by other antinomies built on opposites, such as voice opposed to silence, together with all their correlated meanings. If real voices are flanked by silent voices – those of dreams, memories, emotions and inner feelings – some remain unexpressed, as they are only silenced voices. One example is the fourth skeleton found by Anil in the novel *Anil's Ghost*: this skeleton represents thousands of lost bodies and consequently lost and silenced people who are the *desparecidos* of Sri Lanka. Even the parents and the relatives of the lost people, who are paralyzed by the fear of becoming the next victims, are consequently silenced. It must be added that the subsequent investigation, which is strictly connected to the discovery of identities, is the main theme of both novels.

Thanks to the word “ghost” in the title, the novel *Anil's Ghost* seems, from the very beginning, to deal with the disappearance, rather than decomposition,

of the body, as the ghost in the title allusively suggests. But Ondaatje multiplies meanings by connecting the body's insubstantiality not only with the notorious lack of flesh and weight that characterizes ghosts, but also with the disappearances of bodies and the subsequent difficulty of identifying those eventually found. Consequently, this kind of imagery allusively suggests both the denial of individual identities and voices and the image of a society which has been silenced, thus indirectly indicating the terrible political conditions of the island.

Thanks to the word "patient" in the title, *The English Patient* suggests, right from the very beginning, the image of the suffering, sick body of the main character; the patient is a "burned pilot" – more precisely, as the novel relates, an "unrecognizable" man "with no identification," a "man, burned beyond recognition."¹ In addition – as is again indicated in the novel – "The burned pilot was one more enigma," (95) a "mystery" (253) reinforced by the possible identification of the patient with a spy who was known as "the English spy" (165) in Cairo.

Because of the injuries to his body, he cannot be identified and, therefore, he is taken to be an English patient. This mistaken national identification is connected to the impossibility of identifying his body. His burned body is a physical presence similar to a corpse, because it lacks almost all the vital corporeal functions. In fact, in the novel the patient's body is compared to "a mystery, a vacuum on their [German] charts" (253). He and his body seem to 'exist' only thanks to his memories,² which are transcribed in the novel and, thus, elusively voiced. It is worth noting here that, despite the incommensurable differences between the novel and the eponymous film, Minghella's movie brilliantly succeeds in expressing the patient's inner voice and all the other voices which, by belonging only to the patient's memories, resound solely in his mind in the novel.

Anil's Ghost is linked to *The English Patient* by the imagery of these 'unrecognizable' bodies. They have no identities, no substance or weight, and have already become corpses, or can become invisible and be transformed into ghosts. One could even say that *Anil's Ghost* is somehow the continuation of *The English Patient*. Despite all the differences which distinguish the two novels, they have in common not only the investigation of identities but also the goal of transmitting a precise message to the reader, embodied in books

¹ Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992): 95, 165. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

² Carla Comellini, "Explorations of Identity in Contemporary Canadian Literature," in *Canada 2000 – Identity and Transformations / Identité et Transformation: Central European Perspectives on Canada / Le Canada vu à partir de l'Europe Centrale*, ed. Klaus-Dieter Ertler & Martin Loschnigg (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000): 71–80.

which endlessly transcribe on the page feelings, notions, legends, traditions and voices that cannot be silenced – at least, not for ever.

In the novel, the English patient's poor physical condition is described in detail, from the worst burns "beyond purple" and bones to "the chest where he is less burned" (3–4). Moreover, the novel describes how the English patient even has to be nourished by the nurse: "She unskins the plum with her teeth, withdraws the stone and passes the flesh of the fruit into his mouth" (4). Under these conditions, the patient's body may look like a corpse, although the patient is not dead, and keeps dreaming and recollecting his past experiences. His dreams and memories are transcribed in the book via his delirious and fragmented reconstruction of his past experiences. Thus, his body, although sick, becomes a container full of his memories, dreams, feelings, emotions, reactions and wishes, just as a book does. And – as the novel relates – the patient's own commonplace book is the "1890 edition of Herodotus' *Histories* [enriched with] other fragments – maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books. All that is missing is his own name" (96).

In *The English Patient*, a connection between body and spirit, and a subsequent communion with the cosmos – a 'touch' – is created by the patient's last gesture: it connects the patient's book with his chest: "His hand reaches out slowly and touches his book and returns to his dark chest" (298). Thanks to this gesture, his book becomes the visible and tangible container of his deepest emotions, dreams and memories. Thus, his memories, which are transcribed in continuous modulations in time and in place, are scattered throughout the novel with both the strength of a vision and the thrilling presence of ectoplasm. And the patient's memories are, as well, interwoven both with those of the other characters and with the insertions of maps, notes on geographical expeditions, and passages from history, literature and art. Some of these insertions are the patient's notes and the patient's maps written and drawn on the pages of his copy of the English translation of Herodotus' *Histories*.³

As a result of this intertextuality, Herodotus' book becomes the patient's book and, consequently, Ondaatje's novel. In fact, *The English Patient* is similarly built on an intertexture created by the insertion of passages from his-

³ Carla Comellini, "Geography and History as Literary Themes and Devices at Work in M. Ondaatje's *The English Patient*," in *Routes of the Roots: Geography and Literature in The English-Speaking Countries*, ed. Isabella Maria Zoppi (Rome: Bulzoni, 1998): 345–54.

tory, literature and art, of maps, notes on expeditions and metaphorical allusions to medicine, diseases and so on.⁴

To stress even more the connections between the patient's body and his novel, Ondaatje brilliantly makes a comparison between his patient's body and a book. It is the patient himself who wonders, "Or am I just a book? Something to be read, some creature to be tempted out of a loch and shot full of morphine, full of corridors, lies, loose vegetation, pockets of stones" (253). Moreover, in *The English Patient* Ondaatje succeeds in showing the involvement of the reader with the story: i.e. with the emotions felt on entering and being immersed in a story or in "the lives of others" (12). This involvement is so deep that it transforms the reader into a "body full of sentences." In *The English Patient*, Hana, the nurse, is the reader whose body becomes "full of sentences" as if it were a book. For Hana, to open a book is like entering a life and sharing experiences seen as plots or, as Ondaatje writes:

She opened the book. [...] She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others, in plots that stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments, as if awaking from sleep with a heaviness caused by unremembered dreams. (12)

Again, in his typical way, Ondaatje connects life through metaphor to literature, a body to a book, reality to fiction, ambiguously associating individual experiences with collective records. If the English patient's story and existence become part of the collective memory, thanks to Ondaatje's book, Anil's voice, or her Ghost, will survive as well, thanks to Ondaatje's novel.

In *The English Patient*, this survival, linked to the idea of eternity through literature and books, is somehow indirectly suggested by the paradox that arises when the aeroplane crashes in the desert: while the patient's body is burnt almost to death, the patient's book is unscathed. This unusual and unreal fact indirectly means that it is impossible to silence the artist's voice, or to cancel his or her message, which is physically transmitted through his or her literary creation; the book. By being the present and tangible container of feelings, emotions, notions, memories and experiences, this book assumes the role of the human body – for instance, that of the patient. Similarly, the patient's body is the visible and tangible container of those aspects related to the unconscious sphere, and which usually – without any transcription in a book – remain invisible, unreal and somehow untouchable.

⁴ Carla Comellini, "Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*: Why a Patient and a Nurse?" in *Re-Constructing the Fragments of Michael Ondaatje's Works*, ed. Jean-Michel Lacroix (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1999): 153–68.

A similar idea of the body as a container “of argument [and] opinion”⁵ is expressed in *Anil’s Ghost*, though in reverse; in this case the body, Sarath’s, is already a corpse, and consequently “no longer a counter of argument, no longer an opinion that Gamini refused to accept.”⁶ Even the connection between the body and the possible individual identification is reinforced in *Anil’s Ghost* through the idea of what a corpse can evoke or reveal. Signs, such as a scar and some stitches, make that anonymous corpse recognizable:

The gash of scar on the side of your elbow you got crashing a bike on Kandy Hill. This scar I gave you hitting you with a cricket stump. [...] if I had been a doctor then, I could have sewn the stiches up more carefully than Dr. Piachaud. (287–88)

Thus, thanks to these signs the body becomes something to decipher, like an archaeological inscription, which, of course, is made up of words, as a book is. Brilliantly, Ondaatje plays with the comparison between bodies and books, a comparison that can be reversed, as it is in the following line from *Anil’s Ghost*: “To study history as if it were a body” (193).

In *The English Patient*, the image of a body metaphorically connected to a corpse is evoked not only by the patient’s supine “burned body” (10) but also by Katharine’s injured body. Because of this injury, she is left to lie and die in the caves of Swimmers. She reminds us of the ancestral fears of being buried alive – an experience which somehow metaphorically corresponds to the fact of having been silenced. When the patient goes back, he cannot save her, because she has already died and her body has become a corpse. All this seems to suggest the metaphoric connection with people who are only apparently alive, because they were forced to become mute and deaf and consequently silenced. In *Anil’s Ghost*, the theme is reinforced, as a result of the references to the prehistoric human remains which were found in caves. It is worth noting the similarity between the two novels: these corpses in caves in *Anil’s Ghost* are reminiscent of Katharine’s body lying similarly in a cave.

In *Anil’s Ghost*, these four prehistoric human remains, found in caves, are described in detail in the following passage:

In 1911, prehistoric remains were discovered in the Bandarawela region and hundreds of caves and rock shelters began to be explored. Remains of cranial and dental fragments were found as old as any in India.

It was here, within a government-protected archaeological preserve, that skeletons had once again been found, outside one of the Bandarawela caves.

⁵ Ondaatje, *Anil’s Ghost*, 289.

⁶ Michael Ondaatje, *Anil’s Ghost* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000): 289. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

During their first few days there, Sarath and Anil recorded and removed [...] bone fragments of birds, [...] even fish bones [...]

Three almost complete skeletons had been found. But a few days later, [...] Anil discovered a fourth skeleton, whose bones were still held together by dried ligaments, partially burned. Something not prehistoric. (50)

Among these remains, one was “not prehistoric,” and that means the discovery of one of Sri Lanka’s innumerable lost bodies and silenced voices.

Other similarities between *The English Patient* and *Anil’s Ghost* are to be found in the insistence on records and on the act of recording. The English patient’s body works metaphorically not only as a book, as has been said, but also as a sort of tape which records the patient’s silent memories; they can be voiced again only when they are transcribed in the novel and registered by readers in a sort of re-echoing. For instance, when the patient remembers his love story with Katharine, he also recalls that they could “hear the gramophone songs in the distance from the Music for All cinema, its windows open for the heat” (157). Moreover, when he dreams of his old walks with Katharine along the streets of Cairo – almost re-smelling the same old odours – he can also hear again: “The beautiful songs of faith enter the air like arrows, one minaret answering another, as if passing on a rumour of the two of them as they walk through the cold morning air” (154).

In *Anil’s Ghost*, bodies – which are the main theme – indirectly suggest several symbolic meanings, such as disappearances, anonymity and consequently voices which were and are silenced. But these voices can be heard again thanks to words recorded on a tape or in a story, or a novel. In this case, the novel is *Anil’s Ghost*, a novel told by a woman, a forensic anthropologist, who has returned to her native island – Sri Lanka – after many years of absence. Chosen by the Geneva Association for Human Rights, she is assigned to work with an archaeologist, Sarath Diyasena. Sarath’s brother, Gamini, is a doctor and another important character in the novel. Gamini and the other doctors and nurses in the novel – and in Sri Lanka – are forced daily to cope with bodies that are often already corpses when they visit them; these doctors and nurses have to face the horror of some missing corpses that have suddenly been found, and are more or less impossible to identify. In a way, in this paradoxical situation where hospitals are only places of death and doctors can only testify to the death of people instead of healing them, Ondaatje seems to imply that even doctors are unable to bring salvation. If Doctor Gamini is the only one alive at the end of the novel, this is because he stands for the possible salvation of humanity, which can only be spiritually nourished and saved by literature, or by a book like *Anil’s Ghost*.

It must be underlined here again that in *Anil’s Ghost*, as in *The English Patient*, the theme of medicine, of mutilation and disease, and of doctors and

nurses – a colonial topic – is pervasively present, albeit subverted by the post-colonial author, Ondaatje, who wants allusively to point out that only words, hence stories, can hope to change our society and revitalize it with the prospect of a better future. It does not matter if these words or stories, or messages, or human experiences, are transmitted orally – meaning that they are simply told or voiced – or if they are transcribed in books or even on tape, because what matters is that they are not silenced or cancelled or burnt. Consequently, it does not matter if Anil's evidence disappears, or if she herself disappears, or if she is dead, because it is Anil's ghost that matters. Even Sarath Diyasena's ghost will not disappear – as the novel relates, “Anil would always carry the Ghost of Sarath Diyasena” (305), a ghost which will become part of Anil's experience and tape; in fact, it is Sarath's voice whispering on Anil's tape. Anil's tape, which records not only Sarath's voice but also Anil's entire experience, can be seen as her ghost; it will not really disappear, because it is symbolically transcribed in Ondaatje's book, which will last forever, as he and we hope.

It is worth adding here that the entire novel is imbued with references to voices and songs recorded on a tape:

She [...] touched the tape recorder that was there, not believing this now, not yet, until she pressed the button and voices began filling the room around her. She had the information on tape. [...] His voice came on [...] He must have held the recorder close to his mouth as he whispered. (284)

It is Sarath Diyasena's voice that is recorded on the tape; a voice which testifies that the fourth skeleton they had found was evidence of the disappearances of bodies. He is terrified, and gives clear orders to Anil: “Erase this tape. Erase my words here” (284). In fact, he will shortly be murdered, or perhaps has already been killed before we hear his voice on the tape; but, as if he were alive, his voice will resound again and again from the tape recorder and, subsequently, from Ondaatje's novel. Although Sarath Diyasena's fear for his own life forces him to order the silencing of his voice and the obliteration of his evidence, his voice remains recorded on the tape, and faithfully transcribed in the novel.

All these recorded voices – which are also heard on the tape – and the act of listening itself, create connections with individual experience, or the narrative of experience, or the story told and recorded, with implicit references to memory and to the process of memorizing (that is, moving between the present and one's own past). This is clearly revealed by the passage of the novel where Ondaatje writes: “Anil made the tape roll back on the rewind. [...] listening to his voice again. Listening to everything again” (284). But a story can be perpetuated not only as recorded on a tape but also as transcribed in a

book – the implicit connection with the act of writing becomes manifest, as is clarified by the following passage:

“A guy I know fell in love with me because of my laugh. We hadn’t even met or been in the same room, he’d heard me on a tape.”

“And?”

“Oh, he swooned over me like a married man, made me fall in love with him. You’ve heard the story. [...] Perhaps it was the habit of my voice. I think he’d listened to the tape two or three times. He was a writer. A writer. They have time to get into trouble. [...]”

Their first adventure together [...] It was just a few months after Cullis had heard her on the tape. (261–68)

In fact, thanks to Ondaatje’s book, Anil’s and Sarath’s voice, which had been previously recorded on a tape, will not be silenced, nor will her and his experiences, because they are constantly transmitted to the reader and perpetuated and renewed by both.

Thus, what matters is the message that literature, as well as art, transmits; it can transform society, as Ondaatje suggests in the final chapter of *Anil’s Ghost*. In the novel, a local artist’s sculpture has the same inventiveness as a story, and they both share the same reality of “birds [...] between the trees,” of a “current of wind,” of a “shadow created by cloud,” of “a girl moving in the forest,” of “a layer of rock [...] exfoliated in heat,” of “the boy’s concerned hand on his” (307). In Ondaatje’s writing, the real and the fictional constitute the whole or, as he says in the last words of *Anil’s Ghost*, the “sweet touch from the world” (307). It is the same touch that connects body and spirit in the last gesture of the English patient, whose hand “touches his book and returns to his dark chest” (298). Perhaps, as an echo that only Ondaatje’s readers can hear, this touch is reintroduced in *Anil’s Ghost*, in the passage where Anil, “unable to sing,” “whispers” the words or “the lines” of the song – faithfully transcribed in the novel; while Anil is whispering, her “head [is] down, to her own chest” (299).

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Blurring Bodies/Blurring Borders

David Cronenberg Strikes Back

MARTA DVORAK

IN POST-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES, the plasticity of the body as well as the malleability of the self, according to the sociologist and anthropologist David Le Breton,¹ are becoming commonplaces. In the fields of science, medicine, literature, the visual arts, and cinema, anatomy is no longer seen as being consubstantial with destiny: it is an accessory of presence, raw material to fashion and redefine, a site on which to stage special effects. The body art of the end of the 1960s which interrogated the role of the body through provocative, violent performances in which pain was meant to implicate and purify the passive spectator nonetheless did not yet dissociate the body from the subject. Contemporary body art, however, posits the body as a variable geometric medium of an identity that remains revocable.

Aziz' and Cucher's collaborative photographs of faces without eyes or mouths, resembling funeral masks or wax dolls, signal a troubling disability in their sensorial register.² Similarly, their 1992 series "Faith, Honor, & Beauty" presents nudes with no genitals. As Le Breton suggests, sex and face have been erased, or transformed into options in a post-human body – a mere object reconstructed by genetics, information technology, or morphing.³ The German artists Lawick and Müller transform the face into a hybrid landscape that effaces the individual subject by morphing portraits taken separately in

¹ David Le Breton, "Obsolescence du corps," in *Le Corps mutant*, ed. Enrico Navarro & Jacques Ranc (Paris: Galerie Enrico Navarro, 2000): 11.

² The Peruvian Sammy Cucher and the American Anthony Aziz have been collaborating since 1990.

³ Le Breton, "Obsolescence du corps," 12.

automatic photomaton, so that they metamorphose into the other. For the French artist Orlan, the body is a readymade oscillating between disfiguration and refiguration – plastic surgery allowing her to doff flesh or put it on in a vestimentary manner, in performances relayed by video that turn the body into a living collage and blur medical act into spectacle. In his “Suspensions” series, the Australian plastic artist Stelarc suspends himself in space using hooks embedded in the flesh and skin, requiring a 40-minute operation and 14 to 18 insertion points. By piercing and attaching his body to cables in a variety of situations (from “City Suspension” to “Seaside Suspension”), Stelarc reduces it to landscape, an object in an environment, pure material, and signals its obsolescence, along with the obsolescence of the conditions of subjectivity. His most recent performances revolve around a post-humanity rectified by prostheses and connected to computers, positing the technological colonization and mutation of the body.

The Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg began his career during the early 1970s, when underground cinema as well as performance art and art video, interrogating traditional aesthetics, gender roles, and essentialism in the domain of representation, were becoming increasingly recognized. Like the plastic artists I have been discussing, he, too, has always been fascinated by the body to come, a virtual body that engineering and medicine have already begun to provide, transforming at the same time our sensations and our representation of the world. The bodies he has invented overlap either with the beast or with the machine, ranging from the human fly and the body-parasite to the typewriter-body, car-accident body, video-recorder body, and games-console body.

Cronenberg’s monstrous or mutant bodies epitomize a contemporary current in anglophone Canadian cinema, working within the fantastic or grotesque modes. Filmmakers such as Atom Egoyan, Patricia Rozema and Lynn Stopkewich are interrogating ‘normality’ by addressing the issues of necrophilia, incest, and homosexuality in a highly stylized fashion. Along with Cronenberg, whose adaptation of William Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* (1991) blends hallucinations, delirium, fantasy, and madness with ‘objective’ reality, they are producing a cinema of resistance, even deviation, with respect to – in general – the axiological norms of the geographically congruent neocolonial hyperpower engulfing the globe and homogenizing all cultural production, and – more particularly – with respect to the aesthetic norms of the gigantic Hollywood film industry that considers Canada part of its domestic market and controls its distribution network.

Aware that his films are fraught with the tension of the dialectic between centre and periphery, Cronenberg claims a paradoxical place both for his work and for his country. Canada is fundamentally in between. This site

where the anglophone and francophone worlds collide, and where the political and historical influence of Great Britain crosses and overlaps with the economic and cultural domination of the USA, cannot but generate the paradox of Canadian cinema, which has forged an international reputation of excellence in the genres of documentary, the short feature, and animation – precisely those fields which do not bring them into competition with American studios. Cronenberg stresses this liminality in an interview with the French critic Serge Grünberg, in which he quotes a critic from San Diego who told him:

You know, for an American your films are like some sort of strange dream. Because your streets are like American streets but they're not. And the people are like Americans but they're not. And the way they speak is like American speech but it's not.⁴

The tension of the in-between subtends Cronenberg's oeuvre, as does the aesthetic of the hidden, the strange, and the pathological that also characterizes Egoyan, Rozema, and Stopkewich. Underlying the taste for order and stability informing Canadian society since its origins, beneath a culture systematically advocating and practising moderation and consensus, there has always been, Douglas Cooper argues, "an extremely coherent subversive streak," a sort of "Northern grotesque," which he attributes to the peripheral position Canada has always occupied with respect to the centres of power:

As an educated culture on the margins of empire, we really have something to contribute, because we can gaze at the brutality of empire with a cold eye.⁵

According to the French film critic Samuel Blumenfeld, Cronenberg is torn between two extremities: the sublime and the abject, science and aesthetics, the soul and the body, the real and the virtual, America and Europe.⁶ This breach or, rather, aporia is staged through the omnipresent leitmotif of corporeal mutilation or deformation: the organic or technological mutation that both announces and blurs the borders between Self and Other. His first film, *They Came Within* (1974), stages the invasion of the human body by parasites, and explores the twilight of animality. In the films that follow, a human is transformed into an insect (*The Fly*) or a clairvoyant (*Dead Zone*, the adaptation of a novel by Stephen King), and new forms of sexuality are invented (in *eXistenZ*, a hole is bored in the spine for pleasurable thrills). Transformed into

⁴ Serge Grünberg, interview with David Cronenberg in the film documentary by André S. Labarthe, *David Cronenberg: I Have To Make the Word Be Flesh* (Série Cinéma de notre temps, 1999; 68 min.).

⁵ Patricia Pearson, "The Sweet Here and Now," *Saturday Night* 113 (April 1998): 72.

⁶ Samuel Blumenfeld, "Obsessions," *Le Monde* (13 May 1999): ix.

objects of desire we find: internal organs (*Dead Ringers*), television screens (*Videodrome*, 1982), aeroplanes, cars (especially after a crash), or bodies that have been mutilated, ripped apart, or equipped with prostheses, which testify to a fusion between human and machine. *Crash* (1996), the film adapted from the novel by J.G. Ballard, and which produced on screen scenes of horror verging on gore with a pure, even icy, aestheticism, was successful with critics and audiences alike. Yet its plastic beauty did not stop it from running into difficulties with censorship. The Westminster Council called for the film to be banned on British screens, claiming that it verged on necrophilia. In the USA, Ted Turner tried first to block its distribution, then to ban it from being shown on television, allegedly for fear that adolescents might imitate the protagonists and provoke car accidents for purposes of erotic titillation.

I argue that Cronenberg's oeuvre represents a modern, extremely simplified version of neoplatonic metaphysics corresponding to the tenor of the times. His films replace the old debate between idealism and materialism with the confrontation between the virtual and the real. The cerebral approach of a film like *eXistenZ*, which received the Silver Bear at the 1999 Berlin Film Festival, contrasts with the essentially physical impact of the homologous American film *The Matrix*, the biggest box-office hit of the year in France. Yet, interestingly enough, the accessories of the virtual, the objects that produce the parallel world which does not exist but which rivals reality, are eminently physical, even strangely organic. Often of a tactile nature, they range from a primitive hardness – a jaw transformed into a gun, the molars into ammunition, the whole lot concealed in a thick fish soup – to the viscosity, even liquefaction, of decomposing organs. The games-console which becomes ill, for instance, and requires an "operation," is linked by a sort of umbilical cord to the spine, and resembles a cross between breasts, buttocks, and offal. In this world of cybernauts, technology is nevertheless flesh – metaphor, and meta-flesh.

The film *eXistenZ*, about a games designer who becomes the target of a *fatwa*, was inspired by an interview that Salman Rushdie granted Cronenberg in 1995 for an article in *Shift*. In the interview that he in turn granted Blumenfeld, Cronenberg declared, in what almost amounts to a truism, that his metamorphoses were metaphors of disease and death. What is more interesting, because more revelatory of the self-reflexive process of his films, is his affirmation that his protagonists are metaphors of the status of the artist. *eXistenZ* is, in fact, essentially a reflection on art. Can a game become a new form of art, a form that is – to borrow Cronenberg's own term – radically democratic?⁷ Simultaneously, the film is self-reflexive, for the games industry

⁷ Brian Johnson, "Virtual Director," *Maclean's* (26 April 1999): 63.

functions as a satirical metonym for the movie industry and its strategies of marketing and distribution.

Through the characters who mutate under our gaze, as well as through the stylization of the acting, the filmmaker deviates from the convention according to which the characters are a figuration of the real. The director admittedly uses the optical techniques of the realist current, notably the short focal length and restricted aperture that produce depth of field and a totally sharp frame. He also admittedly practises a montage produced in the mode of transparency imposed by a powerful American cinema manufacturing seamless mimetic productions. Nevertheless, Cronenberg transgresses the temporal and spatial linearity of the realist aesthetic and enters a certain domain of abstraction, subverting the traditional oppositions between in-shot and out-of-shot, between shot and reaction-shot, and blurring the borders between body and gaze, spectator and spectacle. The viewer never knows the duration of diegetic time, or the relationship between story time and real time, the time it takes to view the sequence. Moreover, the stories take place in a succession of apparently arbitrary places which are identifiable and yet anonymous, both somewhere and nowhere: high-rises, parking lots, highways, gas stations, hospital corridors, or warehouses. And Cronenberg revels in signalling the power of the author, of the creator, by blurring the borders between event and representation, between the factual and the fictional, demonstrating that even a 'realist' film is but virtual reality.⁸

The blurring is generated through an oscillation between original, copy, repetition and re-showing, reproduction, and representation. To take but one example, the ending of *Videodrome* (1982) is a double one. The spectator watches the hero, Max Renn, who is watching a videocassette that is showing or staging his own death. This presentation or representation of his suicide is meant to guide him, and is followed by the faithful re-showing, 'live', of every shot, every frame, every gesture of the 'original'; is it a case of simulation or prolepsis, production or re-production? Max Renn, the man whose body metamorphoses into a videotape recorder, as, all the while, television sets and other types of video equipment become organic, live, breath, bleed, and die, is a syncretic, aporetic figure, fusing neoplatonic ideas with a vulgarized version of Marshall McLuhan's media pronouncements (such as positing that the cathode tube is an extension of our nervous system). The pre-recorded image of Professor O'Blivion, distanced threefold because perceived inside the second frame of a filmed television set, and imagined by the real film spectator through the eyes of the virtual viewer, allegedly watching the TV programme, is further distanced when we learn that the recording, which pre-

⁸ Johnson, "Virtual Director," 63.

dates the professor's death, is intended to confer upon him an electronic after-life. The professor's declaration seems to be the manifesto of Cronenberg's film, even entire oeuvre: "there is nothing real outside our perception of reality."

The very foundations of cinema rest on the formal construction inscribed in the dichotomy between in-shot and out-of-shot, which assigns a respective position to those who see and those who are seen, and which, in a parallel fashion, separates the spectator from the spectacle. Cronenberg, like Egoyan, Rozema, and Stopkewich, questions these foundations, and effaces, displaces, or blurs the border between body and gaze. We are constantly reminded that the film can neither describe nor signify the real, but only the processes of perception, conception, and representation.

These directors choose to explore the relationship between reality and representation through the uncontrolled domains of sexuality and desire, staging 'deviant' or 'pathological' forms of social behaviour, the better to erase the boundaries between nature and culture, biology and technology, life and death, or Eros and Thanatos, or even to blur the distinctions between the beautiful and the ugly.

This is exactly what the young Vancouver director Lynne Stopkewich does in *Kissed* (1997), her first long feature, combining corpses and sex, based on the short story "We So Seldom Look On Love" by Barbara Gowdy,⁹ a Canadian writer renowned for her grotesque, neo-gothic works swarming with monstrous protagonists on the margins of community. In a voice-over, Stopkewich's protagonist presents necrophilia as an act of communication with the afterlife, a sort of "crossing over," "like looking into the sun without going blind," or "like diving into a lake, silent and cold." The director takes up the stylistic challenge of representing such a difficult subject by over-dramatizing, notably using long focal distances to crush and flatten the picture. The flattened perspective allows her to highlight certain elements through the blur that surrounds them. But the absence of depth of field also signals an aesthetic choice: the shift from a representation of the 'real' (corresponding to depth of field) in the direction of a construction that foregrounds its own composition, and signs its own artifice. The systematic recourse to zoom shots, an optical mode of tracking-in – artificial, in that the axis of the camera remains the same – further underlines the artifice of the composition. To all this, we can add the use of expressionist lighting meant to subvert diegetic verisimilitude and to divert any emotion that would accompany the natural or spontaneous. Stopkewich works with chiaroscuro, employing a range of violent whites exploding with luminosity. The 'love' scenes between the lovely young heroine

⁹ Barbara Gowdy, *We So Seldom Look On Love* (Toronto: Somerville House, 1992).

Sandra and her freshly dead men thus avoid obscenity, thanks to the multiple strategies of distancing: bluish lighting, lenses producing 'soft' pictures, double exposure, dissolving and fading to white, or even interaction between the protagonist and the audience, and among the members of the audience themselves. When Sandra achieves orgasm, she looks straight at the camera, and thus looks the spectator right in the eye. At this moment, the background is flooded with white light, the film theatre is lit up, and the viewers can look around them and watch the others' reactions. The subject of the gaze becomes an object among others, and any process of identification that may have been initiated is broken.

Desire erases the distinction that convention sets up between life and death, and grave humour tends towards social satire. Among the memorable scenes of *Kissed* are the lessons the funeral-parlour owner gives Sandra. Rooted in a North American society that abhors death and dissimulates all traces of its passage, he teaches her to wield a trocar (a sword-like device designed to evacuate the bodily fluids), to vacuum the cavities, and to plug the orifices. Sandra learns to embalm the corpses she has emptied and to reinject them with a liquid preservative, just as the taxidermist prepares and stuffs his animals. In the manner of Francis Bacon and his recurrent abattoir motif, the human body is only meat. Like Cronenberg's oeuvre, *Kissed* is grounded in Romantic philosophy with its belief that the grotesque and the monstrous are liberating, associated with transgression, resistance, bursting the shackles of convention.

We have seen how filmmakers like Cronenberg and Stopkewich problematize our notions of subjectivity and objectivity, and underscore the processes of identification set up by modes of distancing. They explore the split between desire and identification. One desires the Other, but how far can one advance into alterity? Up to what point can one manage to dispense with the mirror and the accompanying process of sympathy? Can one cross the gap between human and non-human, organic and inorganic? Can one evacuate every particle of identification, and desire dismembered bodies (mere meat), human flies (chromosomes shared with the animal realm), or machines, which, although they are mineral and inanimate, are nevertheless artefacts, and thus retain the imprint of their human creators?

Stemming from a diametrically opposite but symmetrical stance, other Canadian directors, such as Egoyan, Rozema and Léa Pool, explore the ways in which narcissism can resolve the gap between desire and identification, reminiscent of the Romantics' defiance of the taboos of incest and homosexuality. Incestuous love transgresses the rules of the dominant ideological order and defies the divine laws which, since the dawn of time, have forbidden to mortals the privilege reserved for gods, while all the time it epitomizes the

perfect form of absolute love, in that it encapsulates and fuses all variants: filial, parental, sibling, and passionate love – all coexist. Egoyan's staging of incest in *The Sweet Hereafter* is particularly troubling because of an in-habitual erotic ambiguity, showing as it does, in the director's own terms, "not the obvious exercise of violent power, but this *blurring* of love"¹⁰ reminiscent of Ovid's "Iste, ego sum" – the Other is myself. In my brief discussion of a few selected films, I have attempted to demonstrate how these Canadian filmmakers transgress the totalizing forms of the Hollywood model to create discrete cultural combinations through syncreticity and hybridity, notably by meditating on the relationship between corporeal reality and representation, and by carrying out their exploration essentially through sexuality and desire; the sphere of the uncontrolled.

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¹⁰ Brian Johnson, "Atom's Journey," *Maclean's* (13 September 1999): 56.

“Never Forget that the Kanakas Are Men”

Fictional Representations of the Enslaved Black Body

CAROLE FERRIER

ESSAYS OF THIS SORT are generally motivated by desire to reveal unfamiliar aspects of the history of race relations in Australia. Contact between whites and indigenous people, in particular the relationships of white men with black women, is comparatively well documented. The hidden shame of this exploitation of land and bodies has emerged into public consciousness and has been named, most recently, as the matter of the stolen children. The forty years of a type of slavery,¹ the exploitation of the labouring non-white body, from the early 1860s to the early 1900s is another unfinished chapter. Not much attention has been given to the South Sea Islanders, called Kanakas;² their consciousness of being a diasporic population and their sense of identity; the new lives some of them made or tried to make in “Australia” (as it began to be called around the turn of the twentieth century when the end of indentured labour and the deportation of the Kanakas became government policy); or the impact upon individuals of their time away and

¹ This is part of a much larger and longer history, documented by, among others, David Northrup, who defines imperialism as “both economic and territorial expansion by industrial (and capitalist) nations”; usage varies in terms of whether they are described as slaves, but “political manipulation was an essential part of the differentiating process.” David Northrup, *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism 1834–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995): 15, 8.

² The name Kanaka in Sandwich Islands dialect signified the general concept of ‘man’, but it soon acquired the same derogatory overtones as the whiteman’s designations of ‘nigger’ and ‘boy’. They were often kidnapped from their islands. Sixty percent were from the New Hebrides (modern Vanuatu) and nearly thirty percent from the Solomons. The practice was widely known as blackbirding – although the planters disliked the term.

return. Most of the available material, especially earlier, is largely focused through the eyes of whites, classically orientalist in Edward Said's term³ – set apart from the sea of natives by the colour of their skin, but acknowledging a long tradition of responsibility towards the 'coloured races'. One significant part of the story of the Kanakas is white women's sexual relationships with black men; this is still largely a silence in dominant discourses, but fragmentarily present in historical sources.

This essay focuses on several novels written in Australia. Jean Devanny's *Cindie* (1949), Nancy Cato's *Brown Sugar* (1974), and Faith Bandler's *Wacvie* (1977) and *Welou, My Brother* (1984) all depict forms of slavery and resistance in Australia, while David Crookes has more recently revisited the topic with *Blackbird* (1996), a 'light' novel that nonetheless in some respects is an advance on the earlier works. The fiction I discuss covers the forty-odd years of Kanaka indenture in what became the nation of "Australia" in 1901.⁴ Three chapters of Noel Fatnowna's 1989 *Fragments of a Lost Heritage* also bear interesting comparison to the novels. The fiction that offers sustained representations of Kanakas all draws heavily on historical accounts of various attempts to adopt a view more or less from the other side to that of the dominant narratives. In this, the issue of the play of imagination and imaginative sympathy that is a key feature of fiction interacts with an implied desire to produce truth effects in reading, in the depiction of an historically silenced and marginalized group. As might be expected, Bandler and Fatnowna, the two writers with Kanaka ancestors, do much more with the notion of diasporic consciousness.

Piecing together pictures of what the lives of the Kanakas would have been like at this time involves recourse to a range of available narratives. The 'fictional' ones that this essay discusses drew on stories available to their authors; in some of the same ways in which I re-read and re-write now, they had to grapple with issues of reliability and interpretation. For all of us, writers and readers then and now, a range of genres were and are available – fiction, biography and autobiography, oral history, journalism, documentary, history; notionally on a continuum from most to least fictionalized. It is habitually assumed that history is the least fictionalized form of narrative, but the positioning, the perspective, and the ideological orientation of the writer – in both individual and contextual ways – always plays a crucial role. H.E. Maude,

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

⁴ Federation occurred in 1901, when the name "Australia" was taken. It was intended that the mass deportation of Kanakas be completed by 1905. This nation did not propose to include them; along with 'Asians', they were excluded; the White Australia Policy projected a population that was "Australia for the White Man," as the *Bulletin* motto urged between 1908 and 1960.

author of a foreword to William Wawn's blackbirding sea-captain's story re-issued in the 1970s, required an assessment of Wawn himself to see how far his account could "be relied upon as evidence of fact rather than fiction."⁵ He mentions the fact that Peter Corris, its editor, also considered it necessary for his interpretation of Wawn to obtain oral history accounts from old Kanakas.⁶ Particularly important in recent work of textual interpretation is the experience of living in a particular racially defined and gendered body; this follows on to some extent from the feminist emphasis on the 'authority of experience' in the theoretical thinking of the 1970s.

When fictional and historical texts are juxtaposed, differences of emphasis at the least, and often contradictions, can be identified. The texts under discussion could loosely be described as historical novels. In relation to reading such texts, Robert Dixon calls for "an elaboration or thickening of the kinds of contexts and evidence brought to bear in examining the work of colonial representation" when refining the relationship between rhetorical and historical disciplinary methods. Dixon describes himself as "increasingly troubled by the status of theoretically driven textual interpretation in itself as historical evidence."⁷ He seems to be referring largely to interpretative approaches that have done insufficient homework in the historical sources.

Noel Fatnowna's writing is based largely on oral history – with which Faith Bandler expresses some dissatisfaction in relation to her own attempts to reconstruct her personal history when she visited the New Hebrides, her family's place of origin.⁸ Islander authors also, of course, express their difficulties with the dominant (even if alternative) sources: "Even the academics' books," Fatnowna writes, "tell us about the terrible things that happened on those early voyages, when men like my grandfather got tricked or kidnapped, just thrown down in the holds."⁹ He asks:

⁵ H.E. Maude, "Foreword" to William T. Wawn, *The South Sea Islanders and the Queensland Labour Trade: A Record of Voyages and Experiences in the Western Pacific, from 1875 to 1891*, ed. & intro. Peter Corris (1893; Canberra: ANU Press, 1973): x.

⁶ Maud, "Foreword," x.

⁷ Robert Dixon, *Prosthetic Gods: Travel, Representation and Colonial Governance* (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2001): 2–3. On the other hand, he wants to speak from present theoretical understandings in arguing that "in the novels of Eleanor Dark, for example, "the body is strongly classed and gendered, but it does not know itself as white and racialised" (46).

⁸ When Bandler returned to Ambrym she found that there were many conflicting stories, "and I guess the lesson I learnt was to be awfully careful about what you're told, particularly by your own relatives"; Faith Bandler, "The Role of Research," in *Aboriginal Writing Today*, ed. Jack Davis & Bob Hodge (Canberra: AIAS, 1985): 59. She found the same contradictory reports when she went to north Queensland.

⁹ Noel Fatnowna, *Fragments of a Lost Heritage* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1989): 90.

Was it slavery? In one way the islanders who were kidnapped in the early years were slaves, since they didn't have a choice about coming in the first place, or about working. It was like a kind of slavery but legally it wasn't.¹⁰

The fictional production I discuss is closely based on available historical accounts. (Edward Wybergh Docker's *The Blackbirders* is an assemblage of most of the stories that the fictional texts re-tell.¹¹) Many of the earlier fictions were tales of adventure by such writers as Will Lawson, Louis Becke and Jack London; they often derive from actual historical incidents. Maude's foreword to Wawn's story tells how he first found the book in a shop on Charing Cross Road and "read it then as an exciting adventure book; which it is." He saw it also, in 1973, as "the main primary source on the Queensland labour trade."¹² These seafaring narratives were sometimes published as history, as was Palmer's "Narrative of a three months' cruise of HM Ship Rosario." Texts like Wawn's lay claim to truth in giving the most accurate version of, for example, "massacres" by whites, mis-reported, he asserts, in sources such as the *Brisbane Courier*. Wawn claims to know what actually happened because he was there, and that the trade was good for everybody. In *Sinners and Sandalwood*, Fred Short writes of experiences in the "Old Pacific," on Espiritu Santo, around the end of the First World War; a white and racialized body relates to the bodies of black women but does not know how to speak to them or, especially, communicate any kind of emotional complexity. In the final piece, "The Beachcomber's Story," a cannibalistic carnival is too much for the white man Stephen Aisles (differentiated from the narrator, who meets him in 1925 and hears his tale), who has 'gone native' and become emotionally involved with a black woman.¹³

In the interplay of race relations in the period from 1860 (Queensland separated from New South Wales in 1859) to 1905, when the Queensland sugar industry was built on the indentured labour of Kanakas, it is often in the playing-out of physical encounters that racial difference becomes most foregrounded, with the bodies of whites and, in certain situations, white women, in the forefront of consciousness. Physical violence, such as that which occurred with the "Mackay riots," as well as sexual relationships, potential or actual, are particularly indicative instances of the interaction of bodies; emotionally charged conjunctures at which a sharper sense of the Other emerges. Cor-

¹⁰ Fatnowna, *Fragments of a Lost Heritage*, 123.

¹¹ Edward Wybergh Docker, *The Blackbirders: A Brutal Story of the Kanaka Slave Trade* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1970).

¹² Maude, "Foreword," x.

¹³ Fred G. Short, *Sinners and Sandalwood: Tales of the Old Pacific* (North Leura: Jamaru, 1997).

ris mentions that in 1876 a vigilante committee under the name of the “White League” was formed to disarm islanders in the Mackay district,¹⁴ but such groups have not made it into the novels I am discussing. White-supremacist ideology was nevertheless strong, including in sections of the labour movement. Kay Saunders suggests that, in journalism, “a different and more vicious stereotype predominated during the last phase of indenture,” when “later working-class authors had changed the racial emphasis from that of a predominantly political and economic threat to a sexual and social one.”¹⁵

One dominant current in some recent approaches to interpreting the story of race relations is to foreground the situation of various non-white groups other than the indigenous people. Faith Bandler, Roberta Sykes and Mudrooroo, all significant black intellectuals in Australia, have been perceived as ‘Aboriginal’ and have played an important role in indigenous racial politics. Bandler spent much time organising for FCAATSI,¹⁶ Sykes and Mudrooroo (Colin Johnson), both of African-American descent, have had their literary and critical writing discussed as part of the indigenous black culture. Cassandra Pybus recently noted that the “first bushranger was a six-foot African man known as Black Caesar who arrived with the First Fleet in 1788.”¹⁷ One of twelve Africans on that passage, he was thought to have been from Madagascar.¹⁸ A liaison with a white convict woman, Ann Poore, at the penal settlement on Norfolk Island led to a child with her.¹⁹ In the 1860s, several African-American men were convicted of bushranging in Victoria. Devanny’s and Bandler’s books do not include violent deaths, rapes or hangings, nor the white men’s relationships with Aboriginal women that preoccupied Vance Palmer (in *Men Are Human*) and Xavier Herbert, or black men’s interaction with white women, as in Thomas Keneally’s *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* later.

¹⁴ Peter Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation: A History of Solomon Islands Labour Migration 1870–1914* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1973): 91; his references are *Mackay Mercury*, 26 May 1876 and 1 December 1877, and *Worker*, 19 January 1895.

¹⁵ Ray Evans, Kay Saunders & Kathryn Cronin, *Exploitation and Extermination: Race Relations in Colonial Queensland* (Sydney: ANZ Book Co, 1975): 221.

¹⁶ See Marilyn Lake, *Faith: The Life of Faith Bandler* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002).

¹⁷ Cassandra Pybus, “Black Caesar: our first bushranger was a six-foot African man who arrived on the first fleet. What does his life tell us about the quest for identity in contemporary Australia?” *Arena Magazine* 57 (February–March 2002): 31.

¹⁸ The Johnson family of coastal North Carolina had been free since 1640. Prior to the American Civil War, Thomas Johnson left and arrived in Australia, where he married a white woman and had a son in Sydney with a white Irish woman in 1874. This son married Elizabeth Barron, the daughter of a well-to-do pastoral family, but their five children were left destitute when he died in 1937: Elizabeth’s youngest son, who was Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo), was put in care at the Clontarf boys home (Pybus, “Black Caesar,” 33).

¹⁹ Pybus, “Black Caesar,” 32.

Britain had officially withdrawn from the slave trade in 1806 and, following the Civil War, the 1860s saw the removal of slavery in the USA.²⁰ Faith Bandler, in her preface to *Wacvie*, commented in 1977: “most Australians do not believe that slave labour was used to develop the sugar cane industry.”²¹ On the much-debated issue of whether it was slavery, this was certainly the terminology used in government documents. In 1872, a “Despatch on Kidnapping in South Sea Islands” referred to

putting an end to this abominable traffic [...] instructing their commanding officers [of four ships outfitted for the purpose] to act temperately but firmly in taking all lawful measures for the suppression of illegal proceedings of the nature of Slave Trade.²²

Unfree labour was not used only in the sugar industry – and not only used in the Deep North. Faith Bandler mentions Ben Boyd, who imported labour in 1849 to the Riverina, which led to “great wars [...] between the Island people who were brought in and the Aboriginal people.”²³ Myra Willard documents the earlier indenture of Indian and Chinese workers in New South Wales, the latter introduced by Robert Towns, a Sydney businessman and MLC, the first importer of Kanaka workers (this for cotton-growing) in 1863. After December 1890 no more South Sea Islanders were taken to the Colony and, when the White Australia Policy was introduced in 1901, almost all were to be repatriated by 1906, with what the Kanakas called the “closing” of Queensland.²⁴

So, forty-odd years of Kanaka labour in Queensland began in the 1860s. There were three periods: first, that of private enterprise recruiting; then, State control by Queensland with the 1868 Act; and, after that, the situation that prevailed following the 1872 Polynesian Protection Act. Towns employed

²⁰ Nonetheless, there were many South Sea Islander indentured labourers in Fiji, which was a British colony for nearly a hundred years from 1874. “After the Civil War the Anti-Peonage Act of 1867 extended the prohibition of ‘voluntary or involuntary servitude’ to all states and territories of the United States.” The Indian government “made a decision to end the indentured labour trade from India as of March 1916.” 1922 is the “expiration of the last batch of Indian contracts in the Caribbean colonies”; Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism 1834–1922*, 142, 145, 14. Northrup also offers another statistic: “More than half of all European migrants to British colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries are estimated to have been indentured [...] the new largely Asian indentured migrants began to arrive in the 1830s”; Northrup, *Indentured Labor*, 4.

²¹ Faith Bandler, *Wacvie* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1977).

²² Circular Despatch Presented to Parliament, Secretary of State to the Officer Commanding the Government of New South Wales, July 24, 1872. John Oxley Library, State library of Queensland.

²³ Bandler, “The Role of Research,” 55.

²⁴ Corris, Passage, *Port and Plantation*, 131.

Ross Lewin to obtain the first workers for Townsville estate, about 40 miles from Brisbane; in 1864, James Hope acquired 54 Islanders for sugar growing near Cleveland. By 1867, the missionaries (rivals for the bodies – or maybe more – of the Islanders) were denouncing the “traffic in human beings” as “injurious to the social, moral and spiritual interests of the natives, as demoralising and degrading to the white men engaged in it, as in short a revival of the slave trade.”²⁵

Opposition to “the Kanaka trade” in Australia arose from competing and conflicting sets of interests. United in supporting the eventual repatriation were rednecks who wanted a White Australia, and a labour movement that opposed having Kanakas work for low wages (but for mixed reasons, including a strong unavowed white-supremacist current that did not defend their right to have that work). Kanakas were legally prevented from consolidating any workplace or industrial strength. “In 1880 Pacific Islanders were restricted to work in the sugarcane industry, in 1884 they were excluded from all skilled positions, and in 1892 excluded from all jobs in sugar mills.”²⁶ Despite the laws, some managed to establish themselves; Corris mentions a community at north Rockhampton which petitioned the Governor-General of Australia in 1903 to remain – and how an early ‘Pacific solution’ was found for some of them in 1906 when the Governor of Fiji offered to engage 200 Kanakas, as well as providing 50 free passages for small cultivators.²⁷ Willard estimates their numbers over these 40 years at 47,000. In 1891, 9,362 officially remained in Queensland. In 1906 about 4,000 were deported, while 691 were exempted on various grounds. The total deported from states other than Queensland was 3,642.

Many in earlier times had not been returned to their own former communities, but “left to be killed and eaten far from their homeland,”²⁸ and Corris also gives many examples of how many returning Kanakas were not welcomed (some indeed had been in situations where it was opportune to leave in the first place). A song collected by a missionary is reproduced in Corris:

Hehenoro came back
He went to Queensland and came back

²⁵ Quoted in Myra Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920* (1927; New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1968): 145. Bishop Patteson was killed in 1870, by which time Agents were required to be placed on ships. By 1880, the Islanders were beginning to retaliate, sometimes with arms purchased from white Australians

²⁶ Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism 1834–1922*, 147.

²⁷ Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation*, 126, 132.

²⁸ Fatnowna, *Fragments of a Lost Heritage*, 101.

To his own village
To stay with his fellow black men.

He possessed many things,
Tobacco, scissors, shirts and trousers
He could not wear them,
He bought himself some shell armllets.

And plenty of money he had
Plenty plenty of money
He couldn't buy anything for it,
And he only got hungry.

He knew many things,
Read and write
He couldn't keep quiet,
He spoke only nonsense.²⁹

Devanny, Cato and Crookes (although all adopt a 'progressive' authorial narrative stance and Devanny, in particular, habitually organized, wrote and spoke about racial discrimination³⁰), write from a particular historical position; their fiction is marked as the work of white authors. Bandler is differently placed; she draws on the stories of her own ancestors and has a half-century-long history of activist involvement in relation to issues of race; she is nonetheless influenced in particular ways by being born in Australia and by her white historical sources. Fatnowna's grandfather was kidnapped and then returned for a planned second visit that became permanent when they were shipwrecked on their second voyage home and returned to Queensland, where Fatnowna was born and grew up.

Key elements of the dominant 'Australian' ideology of the second half of the nineteenth century were white supremacy, racial separation (especially in relation to sexuality), and the desirability of building capitalism in the "Colony" through the use of low-paid black labour. Bodily contact, whether via eyes, voices or touch, is a nexus at which aspects of racialized relationships crystallize. Differences of viewpoint, differences of verbal communication in speech or song, through to physical sexual encounters and physical violence, express interactions with the Other that challenge the property laws of the white Fathers. The perspectives of the Islanders (insofar as they find articulation in fiction, including their interactions with othered groups, especially

²⁹ Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation*, 145. The song was collected by Fr. Geertz, who was in the Ari Ari district between 1947 and 1967.

³⁰ Carole Ferrer, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1999): passim.

Chinese and Japanese and the indigenous people) and the role of white women (in particular their sexual relationships with the Islanders, which were hidden from history) are only depicted in any detail at all in Bandler's writing.

In Devanny's earlier Australian novels, Aborigines are barely visible, becoming important, along with Kanakas, in *Cindie*, although they are never "men." No white sexual relations with "our Aborigines" are depicted in *Cindie*, but there are other cross-race sexual relations: Blanche and Melatonga, Willis Fraser and the Chinese former sex-worker Blossom, and relationships between Kanakas and Aborigines. Devanny's later, still-unpublished *The Pearlery*, set on Thursday Island, depicts a society with much interracial mixing, including a pearler with a white wife and a Torres Strait Islander mistress, Buck Rose, who recalls Katharine Susannah Prichard's Sam Geary in *Coonardoo*. He has two sons, Favid and Lonce, one with an Islander woman, Ama Solomon, and one with his white wife, Mabel. The latter laments "the state of things on the island: men with wife number one and wife number two! And chasing after the black women into the bargain."³¹

Richard Sennett refers to "deepseated problems in Western civilisation imagining spaces for the human body which might make human bodies aware of one another" – the stretched-out geography of the modern city and modern technology intensify this, but he argues that there is no "profound divide" from earlier centuries.³²

If liberating the body from Victorian sexual constraint was a great event in modern culture, this liberation also entailed the narrowing of physical sensibility to sexual desire.³³

Class and economics are key determinants in the separation of bodies – their *distance* from each other which is bridged or crossed at various times and points. Sexuality is a particularly indicative locus where the politics of racially defined bodies are played out.

Jean Devanny's *Cindie* (1949) is set in the period from 1896 to 1907. To some extent it is an idealized picture of progressively minded white settlers; it does not mention the outbreaks of disease encouraged by poor diet and sanitation, and by the prevalence of mosquitoes in the creeks that were used for irrigation. In the popular press, the ideologies of dirt discussed by Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather* were often linked pejoratively with the Melanesians;

³¹ This novel exists in three typescript versions in the Devanny papers at James Cook University. This passage is from "The Divers, the Devil and Pan," 28.

³² Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilisation* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994): 21.

³³ Sennett, *Flesh and Stone*, 26.

the *Bulletin* for 13 March 1901 invoked “the indescribable vileness that festers in the North” where, in the outlying plantations, “the lowest whites, the aborigines, the islanders of both sexes freely intermingle,” while the *Worker* of 1898 warned: “Our advice to the people of Australia is to take no risk with the filthy Asiatic and South Sea aliens who bring with them many disgusting vices and habits.”³⁴ Peter Corris suggests that, in the 1880s, one reason for enlisting was an expectation of being cured of disease; quite prevalent in the South Sea Islanders was a scaly skin disease, a type of ringworm. Venereal disease might have been another, although Corris also quotes Codrington and others in the late nineteenth century who considered that venereal disease was only brought back to the islands by returnees, with the exception of San Cristobal, which had already been infected by whalers. Diseases such as leprosy and contagious lung and venereal ailments were supposed to be cured before Kanaka workers were returned, but this did not always happen.³⁵

In the historical context, dread of miscegenation was harnessed to facilitate the control and later deportation of the Kanakas: it operated in more complex ways in Aboriginal policy as attempted extermination gave way to “assimilation” with the “breeding out of colour”; in the case of the Chinese, racist ideologies were mobilized to hold back their establishing themselves economically. Since the 1850s, Chinese who had come to Australia originally to work on the goldfields, and later moved into agriculture, were seen by many Europeans as competition, but by many Aborigines and Kanakas as fairer employers. Racist campaigns also aimed to produce their deportation. Cindie is initially subject to unthinking racism; when Biddow tells her that the Chinese cook, Lo How’s, “feelings might be hurt if I didn’t eat the breakfast he will have prepared for me,” she asks: “Does that matter?”³⁶

When, in a scene in *Cindie*, the Kanakas are leaving from the wharf during the compulsory repatriation, Tirwana gives an oration in response to a speech about how race affects the Kanakas, pointing out that class and other political issues also need to be thought about: “the *waiting* in the hearts of the people who can’t talk, how they wait on him who can talk, who can read their hearts and talk about it to the world” (320). Tirwana is in the tradition of Devanny’s wise and reliable black men who are helpers and confidantes for the heroine (153), though he is desexualized.³⁷ He is also an elder among his countrymen

³⁴ Quoted in Evans, Saunders & Cronin, *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination*, 215, 218.

³⁵ Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation*, 58, 116, 115.

³⁶ Jean Devanny, *Cindie* (1949; London: Virago, 1996): 43. Further references in the text.

³⁷ Unlike the rather similar character in Devanny’s first published novel, *The Butcher Shop* (Duckworth: London, 1926), the Maori shepherd Jimmy, who has a liaison with the heroine’s white cousin, Miette.

– and Fatnowna comments on their role in keeping order, as the most important factor (111). When Cindie first sets out to work in the fields, and Blanche asks whether it is “proper” for her to “go over there with all those men” Cindie responds, “as for the Kanakas – they’re not *men*’.” Mary Callaghan, their neighbour planter’s wife, corrects her: “Our women, Cindie, never forget that the Kanakas are men” (35). Tirwana later advises Cindie: “when one day he sees her going into the forest alone and unarmed, not to under-estimate the powerful impulses of primitive souls frustrated and possessed of entirely different moral standards to her own” (93). Hearing someone coming up her steps at night, Cindie gets her gun, while feeling confident that “no Kanaka would dare. Not under such condition” (312). Biddow’s wife Blanche has a one-night stand with a Kanaka named Melatonka; in the world of white respectability constructed by Devanny, this might have caused some problems, but it is possible that only Cindie and Tirwana know about it. White women’s bodies were seen as property and, in the historical context, constructed fears about black men as a sexual threat to white women were exploited to facilitate a persistent disempowerment of both Aborigines and Kanakas. The fears of Melatonka that lead him to disappear after Blanche succumbs to him are well-founded; if what happened had been discovered, he would have faced being hanged for rape.

Florence Young, founder of the Queensland Kanaka Mission in 1886 near Bundaberg, suggested: “these were men, not children. Men with fierce passions, who came from lands where savage murders and cannibalism were freely practised.”³⁸ Organized religion operated in complex ways through its various institutions; Saunders suggests that after 1890 it had a restraining influence overall on black resistance. Reverend Frederick Richmond reported that some christianized Kanakas brought religion from the islands and would “meet daily for prayers and the singing of hymns until the station hands to whom devoutness was bad form, jeered them out of it.”³⁹ Sometimes doctrines of equality might give them confidence to complain to local inspectors (“until they are persuaded to become Christians they are an orderly, contented and industrious race”⁴⁰) – but, by and large, in Saunders’ estimation, religious institutions did not empower and often, as in the USA, “legitimised the oppression of those in servitude.”⁴¹

³⁸ Florence Young, *Pearls from the Pacific* (London & Edinburgh: Marshall Bros., 1925): 39.

³⁹ Quoted in Evans, Saunders & Cronin, *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination*, 201.

⁴⁰ Finch Hatton, quoted in Evans, Saunders & Cronin, *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination*, 202.

⁴¹ Evans, Saunders & Cronin, *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination*, 202.

Faith Bandler's *Wacvie* deals with the life of her father, who, after being taken in 1883 to Mackay, escaped in 1897 to New South Wales and died in 1924 – “this is the story of my father. All other characters are composites of real people but the main events are true.”⁴² Eyes and voices are represented as having central importance in the consciousness of *Wacvie*, and it is a black perspective that dominates through much of the narration. The eyes of the white men give away their intentions; *Wacvie*

recalled the tone in the strangers' voices and the look in their eyes, which were puzzling to him. Now he remembered that note in their voices and saw that the expression in their eyes had been impatience, hatred and anger. (16)

The elders recall the missionary who also brought deception, carrying a book “black on the outside white on the inside” (8). The blacks remain on the fringes of the comfort and prosperity of the “plantation house, white and dominating the whole scene” (25) that *Wacvie* observed earlier; Emcon from the kitchen smiles at “the small hungry faces of the children who had come with their mothers to collect the scraps” (83). Economic imperatives are foregrounded in the attitude of whites and the importance of black domestic labour to the pioneering project. Fox considers women “far too valuable in the house” and Maggie is more concerned about the loss of her efficient and well-trained servant than about her corruption by Fox – or, indeed, about the sexual rivalry between them. The book ends with World War I, in relation to which *Wacvie* reflects: “I thought they fought us because they wanted us to work as their slaves. But they fight with each other also” (146). Fatnowna's own experience is post-repatriation (he was born in 1929). He comments on how, at school in the 1930s,

white women or white girls, at that time, were taboo. We weren't allowed even to touch them. If one would ask me to go down and play tennis or even walk with her down the street, or something like that, I knew I couldn't do that: our parents had told us it was forbidden. The white man was the boss and we couldn't go near them.⁴³

Generally invisible in the history of race relations in Australia is consensual sexual interaction between white women and Kanaka men. But in 1895 a three-stanza poem, clearly written by a white man, appeared in the *Bulletin*. It opens:

⁴² Bandler, *Wacvie*, “Preface.” Unless otherwise indicated, page references are in the main text.

⁴³ Fatnowna, *Fragments of a Lost Heritage*, 35.

I love your strong and brawny arm
 Your glossy hide of ebon;
 Your pretty little freehold farm,
 Your purse, the dress, the ribbon.
 I can endure your charming smell,
 For you are still a man a
 Lady may admire right well,
 My darling Tommy Tanna.

It is prefaced by the statement:

In Gingin and Isis districts (Queensland) are many Kanaka farmers and small planters legally married to white women, who appear quite proud of the alliance, and unashamed of their mud-colored, mongrel offspring. Many other women have deserted white husbands to become the concubines of the lusty niggers.⁴⁴

Other occurrences of white women “going off with the blacks” (of various races) have been comparatively undocumented, although it is likely that this was more widespread than even current historical research is able to show.⁴⁵ As *Wacvie* progresses, it is gradually revealed that every character is aware of Maggie Cameron’s covert liaisons with many of the workers. One of the Ambrym men, John Mully, “had been told that white women liked black men to be in the house with them when their husbands were away” (24). Her husband, Russell, recognizes a belt on his wife’s bedroom floor as “a black man’s” (52). Later on, Russell thinks that Maggie has been more cheerful:

(More likely she’d been satisfied in the afternoon – by one of the boys. Maggie was not one to captivate or allure any of the white men around the plantation and, he believed, had to bribe the black boys to lie with her). (125)

The black women in the kitchen understand that “it would be better for all of them if the missus had pleasure with her favourite ‘boy’ before she emerged again” (62). Maggie Cameron is physically very large (55), and is seen as a sexualized object through the gaze of various black workers:

Even if the piles of red flesh, flabby thighs and blue veins were repulsive, it was free and he was usually rewarded with some of Russell’s tobacco or a bottle of his rum. (53)

⁴⁴ *Bulletin* 16.819 (26 October 1895): 27.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Carole Ferrier, “White Girl ‘Gone Off With the Blacks’,” *Hecate* 28.1 (2002): 9–22, and Carolyn Hughes’ forthcoming M.Phil. thesis (English, University of Queensland) and Victoria Haskins’ project on this topic.

Few Islander women were taken to Australia (and Wacvie meditates on how it is “a bad thing” that they are separated from their own women”; 32). Meanwhile, back in the Islands many “half-caste” children are being born from the incursions of the white man. Maggie herself, when she begins to have designs on Fox (who prefers Emcon), thinks of “the previous day but one, when she had last opened her legs for her favourite ‘boy.’ Now, she told herself, his blackness repulsed her. Never again would a black ‘boy’ touch her!” (81).

In Nancy Cato’s *Brown Sugar* (1974), set in the early days of indenture, the former missionary Andrew Duguid is concerned about his daughter Emily’s plans to marry a black man, one of his former flock:

Where would her children fit into this fragmented society, of white bosses and depressed black labour, of colour prejudice which if anything was even stronger against the part-coloured than the full native?⁴⁶

Emily later worries about her daughter in particular – they were all “attractive children, but they were all unmistakably a Kanaka’s children” (181); when she takes David to hospital, the staff wonder: “how could she bring herself to marry a black man?” (197). Much more familiar (thanks to historical research since the 1960s) is a scenario of sexual encounters between white bosses and black women, and *Brown Sugar* is no exception. One result is that Estelle has a “yeller-feller” baby, and her husband Tombua takes her away to Yeppoon (166). Dougal, the cause, meditates:

Black velvet! He had heard of fellows in the Islands, and on outback stations, who became so addicted to it that when they settled down to marry a white girl they had to use a burnt cork on their wedding night to make the bride seem desirable. (171)

Cato draws extensively on historical sources, featuring at the dinner-table a passenger who had been on an actual ship, the *Bobtail Nag*,⁴⁷ and shocks but interests the white daughter of the house with some of his stories.

In Noel Fatnowna’s *Fragments of a Lost Heritage*, the “Kwailiu,” “Home and Return” and “Deportation” chapters reconstruct the story of Fatnowna’s grandfather and uncle, Karai, when they were seized in 1878 and sent on the

⁴⁶ Nancy Cato, *Brown Sugar* (London: Heinemann, 1974): 155. Further page references are in the main text.

⁴⁷ This was taken over by Wawn in 1878 and wrecked in the same year, Wawn mentions that while he was captain of it the owner got 8 pounds for a recruit and 3 pounds for a return; Wawn, *The South Sea Islanders and the Queensland Labour Trade*.

five- or six-week passage from Malaita to Mackay. When he went there for the first time, his thoughts were focused on history:

I thought of the thousands of people who travelled in the holds of ships down from the Solomons to Australia. I thought of my grandfather and grandmother as they rode in the hold of a ship.⁴⁸

Fatnowna's story of Kwailiu has them kidnapped the first time and put in chains, and then Kwailiu choosing to return a second time, with a wife, Urarani, to gain access to the tools and knowledge of the white man. On the second trip, which extends to the end of the century, he becomes a '*finistaem*' (113) after three years and can move about, and consult and organize with the other Islanders. He tries to return with his family of four children, but they are shipwrecked and have to jettison all their belongings, laboriously accumulated. (Islander currency was teeth and shells in the 1880s, and steel tools – and guns, although officially banned from 1884, were much valued.⁴⁹) After the family is taken back to Queensland, Kwailiu dies in 1906. Fatnowna's narrative of his grandfather gives him thoughts of the women on the first voyage:

were they still here or had they been taken back? Where did they go. He'd seen them ill-treated, seen one of the younger girls being bullied and dragged upstairs into one of the seamen's rooms. Were they working somewhere? Were they married? Did they have children? [...] the masters succeeded in seducing, or forcing, these girls some of the time. (110, 124)

The Islanders also used to visit the Aboriginal camps and “steal a lubra and take her back and hide her” after taking down bottles of rum, “what they used to call wine, and getting the Aboriginal men drunk” (125). There were also other kinds of encounter:

There was a very respectable planter, a pillar of society (up at Innisfail I think it was), who in the early days used to give his kanakas [...] Sunday off to go and hunt Aboriginals. They hunted them and ate them. (125)

The editor of Fatnowna's original oral-history material, the anthropologist Roger Keesing, finds it necessary to footnote some of Fatnowna's matter-of-fact references to unmotivated killings as produced and endorsed by their cultures; to the Yasserie brothers, for example, who would “knock anything that stood in front of them, mainly white men” (42).

⁴⁸ Fatnowna, *Fragments of a Lost Heritage*, 57. Further page references are in the main text.

⁴⁹ Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation*, 103.

The cover blurb for David Crookes' recent work of semi-popular fiction, *Blackbird*, describes the time dealt with in the novel (to 1893) as "this little known period of Australia's past."⁵⁰ It is clumsily written in places, but improves on the material of the earlier texts discussed above in some significant ways. The hero, Ben Luk, is "son of a Celestial father and a long dead European mother" (13); his father was killed by Aborigines, and he was adopted by Ah Sing, a Chinese gold-panner who had arrived in 1875. Ben Luk takes as his partner a Kanaka woman named Kiri, who escapes from the sex-work into which she has been forced. Crookes' heroine, Kiri, is kidnapped from one of the "offshore islands of New Guinea" (4); briefly saved by Ben Luk on arrival, she ends up in Madam Jane's brothel at The Gables, and is kept for the exclusive use of Alexander Stonehouse, whose 'daughter' Catherine (it emerges at the end of the text that she is not) is a type of feminist heroine – although her ambitions to be a powerful businesswoman are not depicted sympathetically. Catherine is unimpressed with her half-caste half-brother called Sky, and arranges for Kiri to be returned to the islands. A happy ending for Kiri and Ben Luk has them living together in Brisbane and making bricks forever. Luk's mother is the only European woman that Crookes' text mentions as being involved in a cross-racial sexual relationship. Dominant attitudes to the Chinese in 1883 were recorded in "The Yellow Agony" in *The Figaro*:

Shoals of pigtails, almond-eyed,
 Flooding all the country side,
 Skimmed off as their country's scum,
 Odorous of opium.
 Yellow rascals, cunning, knavish,
 Bowed in foul vice-bondage slavish.⁵¹

Ray Evans discusses colonial attitudes to interracial sexuality as meaning that "any European prostitute" found "cohabiting with Chinese" or ministering to "the carnal lust of the niggers" was logically defined as being "of the very lowest class." Queensland's regulations in relation to Kanaka women were that they could only be recruited with their husbands;⁵² Corris estimates the percentage of women as 6.2% in 1881 (3,373) and 8.7% (826) in 1891.⁵³ In 1897, a hundred Japanese women were involved in sex-work in Childers, Innisfail and Cairns alone; in 1899, there were six Japanese brothels at Mackay

⁵⁰ David Crookes, *Blackbird* (1996; Sydney: Hodder Headline, 2000). Further page references are in the main text.

⁵¹ Quoted in Evans, Saunders & Cronin, *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination*, 235.

⁵² Evans, Saunders & Cronin, *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination*, 235.

⁵³ Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation*, 46.

and six at Bundaberg, and others on Thursday Island. The Commissioner of Police, W.E. Parry–Okeden, argued in February 1899:

Social evil exists and flourishes nearly everywhere in districts where large numbers of coloured aliens are located [...] The supply of Japanese women for the Kanaka demand is less revolting and degrading than would be the case were it met by white women.⁵⁴

Corris suggests that “stories about the prostitutes, especially the European women, were listened to with appreciation back in the islands to the distress of missionaries and employers.”⁵⁵ Devanny’s picture of Blossom, the Chinese sexworker, was drawn with some sympathy, but she is also the basis of a leprosy subplot – she is found to be afflicted with it, and her husband, Willis Fraser, has been having an affair with Blanche. We get no information, however, about how Blossom entered sex-work. Prichard also featured this with the forcing of Coonardoo into sex-work on pearling luggers, and with Sally’s fact-finding visits to brothels in the Goldfields trilogy.

Crookes’ novel is the only one of those discussed here to show Kanaka women pushed into sex-work, and to show premeditated physical attacks by whites on the Chinese (in the destruction of Ben Luk’s brickworks and the lynching there of Ho Lim, Ah Sing’s former head brickmaker). Crookes’ novel is interesting in showing some of the silences in the Devanny, Cato and Bandler texts, although he does not deal seriously with the politics of the representation of black women’s sexuality. But, as has often been the case with novelists, these creative writers have engaged with material that was not centrally visible in the general consciousness or even deliberately suppressed in the dominant ideology and history.

The story of indentured labour in Australia is an aspect of the formation of this culture that we would do well to know more about and write more visibly into its history, since its economic and ideological effects have been part of, and persist, in current conjunctures of racial ideologies and practices of race relations. The introduction to *Aboriginal Writing Today* quotes the words of Kevin Gilbert:

⁵⁴ All these comments are quoted in Ray Evans, “‘Soiled Doves’: Prostitution and Society in Colonial Queensland,” *Hecate* 1.2 (July 1975): 13.

⁵⁵ Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation*, 86. Corris’s references are *Maryborough Chronicle* (3 January 1885; 25 May 1895); *Worker* (19 February 1895); *QVP* 2 (1889): 244; Forster to J.M. Knox (CSR’s general manager) October 25, 1901 (CSRCA) B204/7; *Mackay Mercury* 12.19. (26 May 1876); *Bundaberg Star* (8 June 1877); *Port Denison Times* (12 January 1884), Brenan to Under Secretary, 24 March 1900 (and encs.), QCSO 4418/1900.

Yet, cut off a man's leg, kill his mother, rape his land, psychologically attack and keep him in a powerless position each day – does it not fire on in the mind of the victim? Does it not continue to scar and affect his thinking? Deny it, but it still exists.⁵⁶

He is referring to Aboriginal experience and the history of indigenous–white relations; but it applies also to the history of the Kanakas and of African Americans in Australia; to all imperialisms, colonialisms and slave societies.

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Metamorphic Bodies and Mongrel Subjectivities in Mudrooroo's *The Undying*

ANNALISA OBOE

Metamorphosis, that thickens our speech, dulls our feelings,
turns us into beasts.¹

SPEAK MORE WITH YOUR BODY than with your mouth," says Jangamuttuk, the old Aboriginal shaman, to young George, his supposed son and the narrator in Mudrooroo's *The Undying*.² In the first chapter of the novel, the father is concerned with the education of his quickly growing boy, and his teachings mostly deal with how to use one's body in hunting, dances, ceremonies, and for communication. He says: "I'll teach you the whole grammar by and by. Body language is as complicated as mouth language. What you speak, I can gesture" (16). The body as sign is thus foregrounded, and emphasis is placed on the usefulness of being able to interpret, and express oneself through, 'body language'. In the Aboriginal tradition a person's identity is actually written on one's skin through scars and painted designs (24), so that the body can be exhibited as a text proclaiming who one is, where one comes from, what one's place in the community or allegiances are. For Jangamuttuk, the body is a repository of identity and ancient wisdom, an instrument of survival and a means of exchange, as is clear from the mime scene he performs during the first encounter with a group of Australian Aborigines, soon after landing on the continent from Tasmania (25).

¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (New York: Random House, 1990): 103.

² Mudrooroo, *The Undying* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1998): 13. Unless otherwise indicated all further references in the text.

The reader can but pay attention to this insistence on body language, as if Mudrooroo himself were offering a key for the novel as a whole: an invitation to focus on the body as a source of knowledge; a reference-point for interpretation. This is to some extent a useful suggestion, but only insofar as it leads to an appreciation of those aspects of the characters' non-verbal behaviour which throw into relief, as it were, the materiality of the text, its being concerned with, actually obsessed by, bodies and body matters. The body *is* a central marker in the narration, but certainly not in Jangamuttuk's terms, as right from the beginning the old shaman's discourse is framed by the sometimes nostalgic and more often ironic voice of the narrator, which provides an alternative position:

Our people, my mob, are gone and there is no one left to talk to in those ancient words [...] the land ends, as my people, my language, ends. Now I must use the language of the [whites] and let it *shape my lips*. (3, my emphasis)

In George's view, it is language that gives shape to the body, rather than the body being language in itself, exhibiting its own special code – a perspective which is quite appropriate to a half-living, half-dead *narrator*, a kind of Australian Ancient Mariner, whose only pleasure or consolation is to tell the story of how Aboriginal people – their bodies and souls – were actually captured, imprisoned and consumed by the physical and textual *corpora* of European colonialism.³ The debate on language and the body as a field of inscriptions of sociocultural codes is accompanied, in *The Undying* and in the *Master* series as a whole,⁴ by a postmodern stress on the dangers implicit in trusting language itself, which prepares us for a scenario of instability that in the course of the narrative will involve and actually explode any strictly biological notion concerning the body – as material surface, mirror of racial and cultural belonging, and, above all, site of identity construction.

In his 1997 essay “‘Tell them you're Indian’,” which precedes the publication of *The Undying* and follows the ‘identity crisis’ debate of 1996, Mudrooroo discusses the link between a politics of the body and textualization. When you write the body, you put it on paper, you turn it into a sign that demands interpretation as a term in a discourse, which has the power to authenticate what it contains. In the *Master* series, Mudrooroo is clearly taking his own

³ That the death of the Aborigines came as much from genocidal killing as from vampiristically including them in white missionary books is made clear by George himself: “Fada [the missionary G.A. Robinson] ate at our souls and, when he had finished eating, he abandoned us [...] he ruled over us on that island, ever imprisoning us in the words he drew on paper. He scribbled and sketched while we died and died” (*The Undying*, 2–4).

⁴ Mudrooroo's *Master* series includes *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991), *The Undying* (1998), *Underground* (1999), and *The Promised Land* (2000).

liberties with authenticating discourses of identity predicated on the readability of body features (discourses such as – you've got olive-coloured skin so you are Aboriginal – as happened to him in conversation with Mary Durack back in the 1960s).⁵ In a way, Jangamuttuk's injunction – the body speaks, read the body – remains useful.⁶ But what language in the *Master* series *shapes* is a magical world of shape-shifting beings, who survive in a nightmarish scenario of violent invasion, predations, penetrations that leave bodies in ruins. We are left with bodies that are undecidable in nature, unreadable, and, perhaps ultimately, non-identifiable.



The question, then, is how are we to read the bodies in the text, the body of the text?

Mudrooroo's *Master* series has been acknowledged as typically gothic,⁷ and it is a recognized feature that in works belonging to this genre human bodies undergo, or are made to suffer, transformations of all kinds. In her study of late-Victorian gothic, Kelly Hurley stresses that, in place of a stable and integral human body, the gothic usually offers "the spectacle of a body metamorphic and undifferentiated; [...] in place of a unitary and securely bounded human subjectivity, one that is both fragmented and permeable."⁸ The gothic is a typically instrumental genre, one of those modes of writing "re-emerging cyclically, at periods of cultural stress," and at the turn of the last century it actually contributed – alongside Darwinian evolutionism, crimi-

⁵ See Mudrooroo's "'Tell them you're Indian': An Afterword," in *Race Matters: Indigenous Australians and 'Our' Society*, ed. Gillian Cowlishaw & Barry Morris (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1997): 259–68, and Mary Durack's "Foreword" to Mudrooroo's *Wild Cat Falling* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1965), which appears also in all subsequent editions of the book.

⁶ To say it with Judith Butler, "bodies matter", they are valuable, they constitute a link between materiality and its signification; Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993).

⁷ A number of articles have recently appeared that deal with the way in which Mudrooroo endorses the gothic and at the same time deconstructs it, or how he uses the gothic for its deconstructive potential in terms of what it can do to dismantle the typical Western notion of the stable, contained, impermeable, rational subject. See, in particular, the contributions by Gerry Turcotte ("Remastering the Ghosts: Mudrooroo and Gothic Refigurations," 129–51); and Wendy Pearson ("'I, the Undying': The Vampire of Subjectivity and the Aboriginal 'I,'" 185–202) in *Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, ed. Annalisa Oboe (Cross/Cultures 64; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003): 129–51 and 185–202 respectively.

⁸ Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body. Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996): 3.

nal anthropology, degeneration theory, pre-Freudian psychology – to articulating new models of the human as “bodily ambiguated or otherwise discontinuous in identity.”⁹ Within the gothic, Hurley argues, we may witness the “ruination” of the ‘human’ and the unfolding of the “abhuman,” a term that she derives from the supernaturalist author William Hope Hodgson: the abhuman is a “not-quite-human subject,” characterized by morphic variability and continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming Other.¹⁰

This is interesting from my viewpoint, for at least two related reasons: end-of-century gothic seems to have explored the parameters of “abhuman” subjectivities in terms surprisingly compatible with those of many theorists closer to our own *fin-de-siècle* – I am thinking, for example, of Donna Haraway’s “post-human” cyborg model, the notion of “mongrelization” in Rushdie, or “hybridity” in Bhabha – and compatible also with Mudrooroo’s works of the 1990s (that is, the end of the century that is closer to us), which tried to negotiate a moment of crisis related to a contestation of biological, personal, and historical identity.

Mudrooroo’s *The Undying* grafts the gothic on to the magical-realist design of the first novel of the quartet, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, which introduces Aboriginal beings with strange magical powers, who ride totemic animals, and interact with their Dreaming ancestors. It is clear that in the 1991 novel the writer has already jettisoned realism to explore different types of embodied subjectivities that move through coterminous worlds: his attack on the stable body, its language, and its relationship with identity has already begun.

But while, in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, Jangamuttuk, Ludjee and Wadawaka (Mudrooroo’s re-invention of the historical characters of Wooredy and Trugernanna + their African friend) *rode* their Dreaming animals, in *The Undying* they *turn into* them; they actually become Goanna, Manta Ray and Leopard. As Jangamuttuk/Goanna says: “Goanna was a friend and now he is part of me as I am part of him, but before we supplemented each other and I could hold my crystal weapon and play my clapsticks. Now I have only legs” (57). The human being becomes an animal, albeit a magical one, undergoing a metamorphosis that surprises even the oldest and most experienced shaman: Jangamuttuk moves from ‘controlling’ other forms of being to embracing them, becoming something else through a rather worrying dispersal of human coordinates.

Here Mudrooroo pushes against the physical borders of the body by drawing on the pre-logical, magical mentality of the *Dreaming*, which acknowl-

⁹ Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 5.

¹⁰ *The Gothic Body*, 3.

edges a continuity between animate and inanimate, man and animal, a universe in which the outer margins of individual forms are neither fixed nor well-drawn, but ambiguous, shifting and out of focus. As a Western reader, I am led to notice how similar this universe is to that of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.¹¹ In the metamorphic world of the Latin poet, everyone/everything is someone/something else; all includes and hides alterity. In metamorphosis, logic is replaced by associative mental processes, and any coincidence between what one is and what one appears to be is excluded. In other words, the principle of identity is unequivocally revoked.

The Ovidian world of *The Undying* offers first-hand knowledge of what it is like for a man to straddle different worlds, to be transformed into an animal, and provides a glimpse of the parallel process of re-negotiation of subjectivity that accompanies the transformation. The longest and most detailed description concerns the first metamorphosis of George into Dingo, his totemic animal, after his initiation ceremony:

I felt a wrenching at my stomach as if my intestines were seeking to escape through my mouth. I was still paralysed, but my body writhed internally. I tried to call out, but my throat was numb. Specks of light floated from the walls and descended over my face. I breathed them in. Sharp pains racked my chest. I wanted to gulp in great volumes of air, I wanted to vomit out what was twisting inside me. I could do neither [...] Movement returned to my body, but without my control. I twisted and writhed on the cave floor. My insides sought to push out through my skin and my skin was seething with disquiet. Then my bones began to melt and reform. My face broke apart and came together again, but not as it had been. I opened my mouth wide to scream out my terror and a tongue flopped out. I tried to leap to my feet to escape the agony, but could not. I tried to pull myself up with my hands, but I had none – only paws. I gazed down to find that I had a hairy animal body. I gave a yelp of terror. (56–58)

The terror of the human already expresses itself in/through the voice of the animal, and it is only when rationality stops interfering with the workings of the animal body that terror disappears and a new life sets in – a life in which his 'senses', rather than his mind, are in charge:

I found that if I let this new body of mine operate on its own, it managed better than under the direction of my mind. And I discovered that I had other things to marvel about rather than concentrating on walking on four legs. My sight extended at both sides [...] My hearing was acute and better suited to

¹¹ Ovid (43 BC – 17 or 18 AD), *Metamorphoses*. Ovid began to write his *Metamorphoses* in the year 3 BC; they consist of 246 fables in elegant hexameters which deal with all sorts of transformations, from Chaos into Cosmos, to Caesar into a constellation.

the night than my eyes. It detected the slightest rustle, identifying the different animals from the sounds they made. I felt the urge to hunt and imagined tearing apart my prey. My nostrils quivered as they separated out the animals' odours. (59–60)

George's consciousness is still there, to register the animal experience, although not to control it: he has become another body – a new body that reveals the morphic compatibility of his human form with the world of animal life, a contiguity/continuity that he did not think possible.

By magically endowing his Aboriginal characters with transmorphic border bodies, Mudrooroo starts a process of defamiliarization of the human subject, which prepares us for the savage and violent encounter with the abhumans from Europe, who are out to appropriate, consume and destroy whatever lives on Australian soil. *The Undying*, in fact, invites further questioning of bodies and the subjectivities they sustain by introducing, alongside the metamorphic beings we have just encountered, European vampires and *werebears*, which transform the epic history of colonization into a truly horrific tale.

Real gothic horror is brought into the story by the arrival of the vampire, which possesses the exemplary abhuman body – liminal, admixed, nauseating, abominable, existing at the interstices of oppositional categories. The vampire, in the form of Amelia Fraser, elicits the disgust that comes from indifferentiation, from existing across multiple states of being and conforming cleanly to none of them. Amelia is an Undead: i.e. “simultaneously human and animal, living and not living, [shifting] from one sexed identity to another”¹² – and, as such, she explodes the crucial binarisms that lie at the foundations of human identity.

The beautiful woman, whose siren-like body is a trap for men and women alike, is a creature driven purely by appetite, and she presents a spectacle of corporeality at its most fearsome: her sexual desires, and her lust for blood in particular, call attention to the embodiedness of her being abhuman, disrupted by drives and desires that testify to the tenuousness of a ‘civilized’ human identity.

Far from being protected by its putative racial superiority, in Mudrooroo's gothic quartet the European body is irreverently presented as corporeal and protean, capable at any moment of becoming a monstrous Other, as happens with violent Captain Torrens – another European abhuman – who turns into a werebear at every full moon. All the barbarity and the primitiveness that the West attributes to its ‘Others’ are here performed by the savage behaviour of these ‘white’ abhumans. The horror they cause comes as much from the viol-

¹² Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 24–25.

ent rending and hacking-up of bodies by a lustful soldier, who should bring order and civilization and is instead the emissary of chaos and death, and from the sadistic sexual practices of a perverse female subject who is a literal monster. Here Mudrooroo – whose misogyny has often been noticed – appears to endorse without problems the gothic *topos* of the monstrous female body as the ultimate locus of perversion. Femaleness, as Hurley observes, is one of the markers of the abhuman in the gothic, alongside morphic fluidity and variable sexuality.¹³

The body language of both these characters reveals a fixation on suction, incorporation, contamination, consumption. The language associated with Amelia's behaviour, in particular, has an obsessive 'oral' quality, depending on tasting and biting, sucking, lapping, tearing and wrenching with mouth and teeth. For the vampire, other bodies are simply food; in becoming her prey, humans are turned into 'things', raw matter indistinguishable from other raw matter, as they are rent, fragmented and absorbed into the body of the predator. This materiality – this thing-ness – of the human body is metonymically illustrated by blood, red-hot and wet, which drips from every page of the novel. Like other slimy substances – sexual fluids, saliva, mucus – blood seeps from the borders of the body, calling attention to its basic materiality.

It is through the exchange of blood and body fluids that abhumanness spreads like a virus to the aboriginals, and contamination becomes the central metaphor of *The Undying*.¹⁴

The scene we are presented with is a sickening one: Mudrooroo does not use traditionally gothic textual euphemism, elision, or indirection in representing perverse sexuality or sensational cannibalism. The gothic's disgust for the ruination of the human subject, its nostalgia for a fully human identity, have vanished from the picture. Abhumanness is actually exhibited *shamelessly* to make the critique of Western 'civilization' and colonialism quite plain to the reader.

The iconic result of this scenario of general infection is George, who is one of the contaminated beings; through the meeting of George/Dingo with Amelia/vampire/bat, a further mixture of bodily states and modes of being is created. George is "neither human, nor non-human" (67); he is the abhuman/vampire/native who can turn into a flying dog, and is also (as we discover later) a racial hybrid, being the son of an Aboriginal woman and a European missionary. Through him, Mudrooroo indicates that there are no limits to the

¹³ Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 125.

¹⁴ See Pearson, "'I, the Undying,'" 185–202; and Turcotte, "Remastering the Ghosts," 129–51.

plasticity of form: any morphic trait can be mixed with any other, any body can be re-shaped, or distorted, or transformed.



What are the implications of this ‘trans-morphism’ for the notion of subjectivity?

It has been noticed that the prefix ‘ab’, as in the term ‘abhuman’, signals a movement away from a site or condition, and thus a loss. But a movement *away* is also a movement *towards* a site or condition as yet unspecified, and thus “entails both a threat and a promise.”¹⁵ I would suggest that by observing the workings of abhumanness in Mudrooroo’s novel we can begin to see what threats and what promises are in store for his ‘not-quite-human subjects’ and their metamorphic bodies.

The *threat* essentially coincides with the diffusion of *abjection*, a notion that already resonates in the word ‘abhuman’, and has been theoretically formulated by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* and taken up by Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter*.¹⁶ Kristeva and Butler develop a notion of abjection that has been useful in diagnosing the dynamics of oppression. Literally meaning ‘cast away’ or ‘cast under, abased’,¹⁷ ‘abjection’ describes a psychic operation through which subjective and group identities are constituted by excluding anything that threatens one’s own (or one’s own group’s) borders. Within the terms of sociality, the condition of *abjection* presupposes and produces the *exclusion* of the Other, who forms the outside of the domain of the subject and is essential to its constitution just because he is the subject’s defining limit. In this way, certain abject zones are created, constituting areas of uninhabitability, which are nevertheless *densely populated* by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject – like the liminal, unliveable ones inhabited by the colonized. It seems to me that Mudrooroo, in *The Undying*, is signalling exactly this process; the image is one in which a bloated and satisfied European abhuman – replenished with the vitality of strong blood nicely tasting of eucalyptus – drops the consumed body she (or he) has ‘vampirically’ sucked dry, casting it into an abjected state of indifferentiation and eventual death.

This, in *The Undying*, is the trashy space occupied by “Renfiel,” the savagely mutilated and cripple “man of many names” (uncannily recalling the

¹⁵ Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, 3–4.

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, tr. Leon S. Roudiez (*Pouvoirs de l’horreur: Essai sur l’abjection*, Paris: Seuil, 1980; New York: Columbia UP, 1982); Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

¹⁷ From the Latin *ab-jicere*, to cast off, away, or out.

long string of names the author himself has moved through in his life), who becomes servant to the vampire and traitor to his people. Renfiel is the infected body and the abject human, the meaningless, ridiculous and dangerous product of colonial vampirism, whose servitude helps to spread abjection among his fellow beings, thus becoming instrumental to the further enlargement of the abject zone, and to the imperial project of Europe.

But this is also the zone inhabited by George, the narrator and artist-figure of the novel, who *embraces* abjection and, despite everything, survives. With a pale body that cannot stand the sun, he survives to tell the story of how Australia has been tragically exploited and transformed, and possibly also the story of how many *different* 'Australias' were inscribed, even before the arrival of the abhumans, on bodies that were not just liable to abhuman becoming, but were already a strange compilation of morphic traits, fractured across multiple species-boundaries.

The encounter with the teeth of the vampire gives George "dreams that were not [his] dreams" (2): not only, therefore, a composite abhuman body, but also the psychic gift of double vision, of inhabiting the other's mind, of speaking with the many voices that are all part of him, as we see him do in *The Undying*, where he controls the narration, telling in his own way both the story of Aboriginal Australia and the European colonial story, plying and mixing ancient oral myths from the Dreamtime and written narratives from the West. Sometimes the voice of Amelia surfaces from his horrific tale; in five chapters out of sixteen we actually hear her violently erotic tone, which signals the persistent, chaotic fluidity of the narrator's psychic state.

But it is useful to remember that to *embrace* abjection (as George does) is to experience what Kristeva calls *jouissance*, the pleasure of abundance, the intoxication of instability and multiplicity; it is to welcome the prospect of the terrible and thrilling reconfigurations of subjectivity and meaning that may emerge from the vortex of indifferentiation. The *promise* implicit in gothic *abhumanness*, Mudrooroo seems to say, is the *abdication/abjuration* of the coherent body and the authentic subject in favour of an *absorption* – a vampiric contamination and incorporation – of multiple forms and identifications. Butler has defined 'identification' as an ambiguous and unsettling "cross-corporeal cohabitation," which registers "the structuring presence of alterity in the very formulation of the 'I'."¹⁸ I would like to suggest that this kind of "cross-corporeal cohabitation" is what Mudrooroo figuratively implies or gestures towards in his novel, if we are prepared to read 'vampirism' as a strategic metaphor for a more diffuse notion of subjectivity and, also, since George/the Undying is an artist, for Mudrooroo's narrative method of

¹⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 105.

incorporative intertextuality. Vampirism, then, rather than an icon of universal parasitism, can be seen as an image of acts of appropriation which give authority and strength, while at the same time producing a recognition of the powerful immanence of alterity(s).¹⁹

Through George we are thus introduced to a subjectivity predicated on co-existing, stratified identifications which somehow turn the body into a virtual palimpsest – a problematic and unstable document, difficult to read, on which many records have been made or stories told, one story imperfectly erased to make room for the next, or one that keeps coming up through gaps and fissures. Seen in this way, as a palimpsest, the human being can no longer be the prototype of ideal form in its unity, integrity, perfection. It becomes a mongrel body with a mongrel mind, where mongrelization stands for “impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs.”²⁰

What is interesting is that any layer, or part, or trait within the palimpsestic body may be seen as an available narrative possibility, which one can seize upon and develop. The body of George in *The Undying* works exactly like the body of the text; both are incorporative performances, which desire, consume and transform other bodies or other texts. In fact, the whole *Master* quartet is involved in this reductive incorporation of narratives: tales from the Dreamtime, classical Greek and Latin myths, colonial diaries and chronicles, the Eliza Fraser myth, Western gothic, the American and Australian novel, and so on. All these texts are included, re-contextualized, and made to interact in the spectacular representation of the (provisional) process of George’s narration.

It is important to underline the fact that this position does not coincide with a new essentialism (the substitution of the unstable for the stable, of the admixed for the pure ...): the framework is promising *and* threatening at the same time, and Mudrooroo is performative rather than prescriptive in his narrative and theoretical pursuit of this shadow-vision of a contaminated world. He leaves his endings open, so that indefiniteness, or suspension, is the ultimate condition of the quartet. Despite their incredible potentialities, his characters

¹⁹ See Clare Archer-Lean’s doctoral dissertation, “Blurring Representation: The Writings of Thomas King and Mudrooroo” (School of Humanities and Social Sciences – Centre for Community and Cross-Cultural Studies, Queensland University of Technology, 2003).

²⁰ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London: Penguin/Granta, 1992): 394. Or perhaps he is simply a chaotic and polluted ‘posthuman’ subject, similar to the model articulated by Donna Haraway in “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991): 149–81. A cyborg or admixed bodily identity, she argues, is not only more politically practicable, but also more pleasurable than an integral, fully human one.

remain abject and alienating presences who seem to suggest, in a way that recalls the collusion between Victorian gothic and Darwinian evolutionism, that the most successful species, those that continue to live and prosper, are the most variable ones; in other words, morphic flexibility is Mudrooroo's gothic answer – biological, literary, personal and cultural – to the problem of *survival*.

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Voicing the Body

The Cancer Poems of Philip Hodgins

In memory of Max

WERNER SENN

THE REPRESENTATION OF ILLNESS in Western art and literature has had a long and varied history.¹ In his study of these phenomena in the modern period, Sander L. Gilman has argued the need which societies and individuals seem to feel to project onto the world, onto an-Other, the fear of collapse and sense of dissolution connected with disease: “The construction of the image of the patient is thus always a playing out of this desire for a demarcation between ourselves and the chaos represented in culture by disease.”² The notion of a radical divide between health and illness is widely current in the contemporary illness discourses. David B. Morris even speaks of a “counterworld that opens up whenever we cross over from health to illness.”³ Gilman also poses the question of what happens “when our sense of ourselves as ‘the patient,’ of ourselves as existing on the wrong side of the margin between the healthy and the diseased, becomes salient to our definition of self?”⁴ It is a pertinent question in all illness narratives, but especially so for the artist or writer who becomes a patient and faces the need to cope with the recognition of being an-Other, on the wrong side of the demarcation.

¹ For a brief overview, see Philip Sandblom, *Creativity and Disease: How Illness Affects Literature, Art and Music* (London: Marion Boyars, rev. ed. 1997).

² Sander L. Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1988): 4.

³ David B. Morris, *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000): 22.

⁴ Gilman, *Disease and Representation*, 4–5.

The relationship between bodily dysfunction and personal narrative, as Thomas Couser maintains, is a complex one, but whatever form it takes, “bodily dysfunction tends to heighten consciousness of self and of contingency.”⁵

The intersection between self and art, a problematic issue at best, is probably even more difficult to define in the case of an *artist–patient’s* narrative. The question of intentionality acquires an extra dimension in what has come to be called “autopathography”:⁶ i.e. that genre of writing which explores and expresses the subject’s own private emotions and experiences of suffering from, and struggling with, illness. To make visible and sharable what is hidden and invisible, as Elaine Scarry has put it, is to give language to mere sentience, to make it social and human.⁷ To articulate pain, moreover, is in a sense to deny the illness absolute power over the body.⁸ And since the illness is often experienced as meaningless, meaning can be constituted through, and reside in, the fact of speaking as much as in what is actually being said. Autopathography, however, can be given an even more political reading. The patient’s experience of having to submit his/her body not only to pain but to tests and therapy and to invasions of his/her privacy, may call forth a wide range of reactions of resistance, not least to the authority of the experts. Modern medicine may be said to have begun when physicians asserted their authority by imposing specialized language on their patients’ experiences. Arthur W. Frank therefore understands the obligation to seek medical care as “a narrative surrender” which marks it as “the central moment in modernist illness experience.”⁹ To write about one’s illness is thus in a sense not only inescapable but also a deliberate attempt to wrest authority for such narratives away from the experts, away from the power of scientific discourse. Frank has even gone so far as to call such an impulse a ‘postcolonial’ one, since for him “postcolonialism in its most generalized form is the demand to speak rather than being spoken for and to represent oneself rather than being represented.”¹⁰

Although it may seem tempting to use cancer disease as a trope for colonialism, the cancer poetry of the Australian writer Philip Hodgins, which is the subject of the following reflections, would not benefit from such an approach.

⁵ Thomas G. Couser, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability and Life Writing* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1997): 5.

⁶ Couser, *Recovering Bodies*, 7.

⁷ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985): 170.

⁸ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 14.

⁹ Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995): 6.

¹⁰ Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 13.

Yet it is obvious that several of the concerns touched upon above, such as resisting the power of scientific discourse, of giving voice and making visible what is hidden, telling one's own story, inform the texts written by Hodgins about his experience with that particularly insidious form of cancer, leukaemia. As a non-tumorous cancer, leukemia is arguably even more elusive and invisible than other varieties. Finding a voice to express these concerns thus becomes one of the primary objectives in the poet's struggle with his condition.

Susan Sontag, in her contrastive analysis of nineteenth- and twentieth-century representations of tuberculosis and cancer, writes that "the person dying of cancer is portrayed as robbed of all capacities of self-transcendence, humiliated by fear and agony."¹¹ While these characteristics are not entirely absent from Hodgins's texts, it is not generally true that fear and agony dominate his writing to the extent of robbing their subject of his capacity for self-transcendence. For one thing, the work he produced before and during his illness encompasses far more than this single experience: travel, art, sports, family and especially country life are also among his themes.¹² And even in the poems on his illness we note a continuous, if not always successful, effort not only to cope with the apparent hopelessness of his condition but to transcend it.

In November 1983, aged 24, Hodgins began treatment for leukaemia and was given only three years to live.¹³ But he struggled with his condition until 1995, and the work he produced in those twelve years received critical acclaim and won him a number of literary prizes. It may bear out Harold Schweizer's point that "the desire for the aesthetic seems to have its motivation in the patient's fundamental need to counteract his dismemberment with at least a symbolic form of presence – even if that presence can only be language."¹⁴ Several elegies written on him by fellow poets testify to the poet's success. One of these refers to him as "our Adonais" but also as one who "resisted [death] with the nerve of a partisan" and who faced his fate with humour.¹⁵ It is the various poetic forms and strategies of Hodgins's resistance,

¹¹ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978): 17.

¹² For the latter, see especially Brendan Ryan, "Vulnerable Landscapes: Pastoral in the Poetry of Philip Hodgins," *Antipodes* 15.1 (June 2001): 26–30.

¹³ See Janet Chimonyo, "'Now the Thought of Never Growing Old ...': A Conversation with Philip Hodgins," *Antipodes* 8.2 (June 1994): 63.

¹⁴ Harold Schweizer, *Suffering and the Remedy of Art* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1997): 52.

¹⁵ Jamie Grant, "The Invisible, i.m. Philip Hodgins 1959–1995, our Adonais," in Grant, *Relativity and Other Poems* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1998): 27, 29. For contemporary Australian elegies on poets, see Werner Senn, "'To Fresh Woods and Pastures New'?"

and of assertion of self over bodily dysfunction and dismemberment, that constitute the object of my investigation here.

Wit and humour are dominant strategies in Hodgins's texts. They appear in flashes in many instances and enable the writer to keep self-pity and despair at bay – though not necessarily, perhaps, enabling self-transcendence.¹⁶ The poem "The Needle" works with what we might call a metaphysical conceit: the needle used for the drip is figured as a resourcefully operating criminal who is said to "come and go / at an angle," to have "a sharp / nose for blood", "a head / full of drugs" and a habit of working alone.¹⁷

A similar kind of sarcastic wit is at work in "Spleen," a title that evokes not only an organ in the body but also a long medical and poetic tradition. The speaker denounces his dysfunctional organ with increasing comical vehemence: "Unbalancer of my blood / and purse of spent white cells," "lousy," "nasty," "abysmal little spleen" – only to realize that "you're as elusive as / a fish":

You kept me up all night looking
for a voice
to condemn you in

What use was that?

You only listen to chemotherapy
You listen and then you don't. ("Spleen," 33)

Irony, as critics have noted, is Hodgins's "major trope."¹⁸ It is pervasive, glinting even in titles such as "Up on All Fours," "Wordy Wordy Numb Numb," or "Haematopoietics." The term *haematopoietics* is a current medical term, but with its pun on *poiesis*, this title turns into a witty but also scarifying conceit: in the poem, black ink, the poet's medium for the production of text, is said to be changing into the patient's much-needed red blood-cells (the process called 'haematopoietics') and thus to turn the agent (of words) into a patient. The analogy is developed in a starkly ironical tone: the writer's desk has been replaced by a bed, the fountain-pen by a syringe and a needle, the

Modern Australian Elegy and Literary Tradition," in *Departures: How Australia Reinvents Itself*, ed. Xavier Pons (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2002): 127–36.

¹⁶ As his poem "Self-pity" indicates, Hodgins was well aware of the danger of falling a prey to self-pity.

¹⁷ Philip Hodgins, *New Selected Poems* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2000): 26. All quotations are from this edition and will hereafter be indicated in the text.

¹⁸ Paul Kane, "The last lines," review of Philip Hodgins, *Selected Poems* (1997), *Antipodes* 12.1 (June 1998): 55.

“sheet of ruled paper before me / has turned into an unwritten surface / of sweating skin,” and the black ink “has / thickened to red” (216). In the end, however, irony is overlaid by restrained anxiety:

And what is happening to me now?
Is this dot halfway up my arm
the full stop

at the end of a death sentence,
or is it the only sign of something
never written down,

something too painful even to say? (“Haematopoietics,” 216)

Illness written in and on the body, objectified as text, is to some extent exteriorized and thus ironically kept under (however precarious) control.

Ironically, too, a dominant poetic strategy is that of personifying the illness to give it body and voice, turn it into a subject with verbal agency. The speaker’s linguistic power will then allow him to assert his individual autonomy even against this overbearing antagonist, at least on the linguistic level, if not on the physical. “Death Who” demonstrates this wittily by evoking the mood of a somewhat stiff dinner party:

The conversation with cancer
begins equitably enough.
You and he are summing each other up,
trading ripostes and bons mots
before the soup.
Everything seems ordinary.
[...]
You get each other’s measure
and the conversation settles,
subjects divide and increase like cells. (“Death Who,” 29)

But in the course of the evening cancer is “getting aggressive,” becomes a “conversational bully,” a tireless “raconteur like something out of Proust.” And when the other guests have left, verbal aggression turns into physical violence:

cancer’s got you like conviction
and he’s kneeling on your chest,
glaring over you,
pushing a cushion into your face,
talking quietly and automatically,
the words not clear.

He's got you and he's really pushing,
 pushing you to death. ("Death Who," 30)

To locate the antagonism on the level of language, to figure the disease as a suffocation of voice, seems to give the poet some chance, or the illusion of a chance, of being able to answer back at least for a time: wit and playfulness, and an exceptional linguistic awareness and power serve Hodgins's purpose well here. In thus performing a shift from body to language, his texts also move from the private to the public arena, make the suffering visible, audible, and communicable. But in doing so the writer takes a calculated risk, since he knows, of course – as the conclusion of "Death Who" suggests – that the move is only temporary and at best metaphorical, that the real threat is and remains one not only against his poetic voice but against his own body.

The beginning of Hodgins's "conversation with cancer" ("Death Who," 29) is precisely recorded in two early poems (in the first collection, *Blood and Bone*, 1986), both entitled "Room 1 Ward 10 West" and both exactly dated: 12 and 23 November 1983. Ward 10 West, as we learn from a later poem ("The Shoot," 42), is the cancer ward where Hodgins was given the diagnosis of his illness. The shock is deep, and the verdict "incurable" is registered with profound but restrained emotion: "and only now I understood / what one uncommon word had done / to human gestures never made. / Tonight the dying has begun" (4). After this first shock, language will be a central issue, the experience of suffering will be verbalized.

The invisibility of the disease has its own disturbing and unnerving effects and provokes repeated and prolonged mental anxiety, if not downright obsession and despair. For the young poet, his condition also means an incisive restriction of his poetic potential, in that it seems to reduce him to one predominant subject, his illness, and he is fully and critically aware, even resentful, of this agonizing and delimiting preoccupation:

My bad luck is to write the same poem every time.
 A sort of postcard poem
 from the rookery. Timor mortis conturbat me.
 I never wanted this. ("From County Down," 43)

To admit, as here, one's own preoccupation in the form of a Latin quotation, a culturally loaded sign, is another attempt to distance and contain the fear of collapse or, in Gilman's terms, to project it onto an-Other. This manifests itself in a recurrent strategy of figuring the corporeal as verbal, the disease as overpowering linguistically rather than physically: "There are too many words for my disease. / I know death is nothing after this" ("Prognosis," 215).

Communicating the experience becomes both more urgent and at the same time more problematic, even with friends who visit him in hospital:

They have time
to choose the words
they would
like me to hear
[...]
I have time
to choose the words
I am
likely to need

At twenty-four
there are many words
and this one
death. ("Room 1 Ward 10 West 23/11/83," 7)

Indeed, the fear of death is a prominent topic. The word "death" with which this early poem ends is the one that opens a late poem, "Wordy Wordy Numb Numb," which, despite the child-language of its title, is one of Hodgins's most striking meditations on language and silence. The speaker recalls the time before it all began, when the "many words" were all still available, in that time of "the arrogance of health":

those numb days
when nothing can touch you,
when death is just one

of the familiar short words:
sun, moon, tree, bread, wine, house, love . . .
you know them,

each one worn smooth
as a river stone
with the flow of language

and death the odd one out,
not so much worn smooth
as numb. ("Wordy Wordy Numb Numb," 224)

Despite the strong and often moving sense of defiance, the texts powerfully convey the author's preoccupation with dying. Thus the speaker finds it impossible "to match / death's vocabulary" since "death had shown / a way with words beyond the usual sophistry" ("Leaving Hospital," 9). Or he sees him-

self cast as the only actor “in cancer’s scripted dialogue,” an obviously impossible situation: “I’ve been rehearsing death each night, / and still I haven’t got it right” (“The Birds,” 31). The assumption of a dialogic situation is here revealed, or perceived, to be deluded, since his part is scripted by another and the speaker has no control over voice or text.

The nerve-racking anxiety about the process of deterioration, about the moment of change from a chronic to an acute phase, is confronted in “The Change,” where the fear of pain for once outweighs the fear of death. Linguistic agency, figured here in the German poet Rilke – himself a famous victim of leukaemia – is seen as threatened by pain that becomes unbearable. Physical pain, as Elaine Scarry has said, destroys language and communication.¹⁹ This fear that body will eventually prevail over voice haunts many other texts as well.

The poet’s need to address this subject in his writing is repeatedly thematized. His fear of pain, and of losing the capacity to speak, forces the speaker to engage with this one topic in full awareness of the reality it implies: “I will find out how much pain is in this body / and I will not behave myself” (“Ich Bin Allein,” 37). Another poem, “Apologies,” seems to imply that one way to aestheticize the condition is to write about it with a firm sense of style. As long as he is able to do this, to maintain this control over form, the poet can keep up his resistance. The affirmation of language in the presence of pain might then be “the affirmation of the human in the very dehumanizing corporeality of suffering.”²⁰ Yet the speaker knows that the reality of bodily suffering will eventually annihilate any self-conscious attempt at original poetic style: “when the end is really nigh / there won’t be any standing back / to write like no-one else” (“Apologies,” 41). The brave fiction that voice can struggle successfully with the sick body must clearly be abandoned. Pain itself, as Scarry puts it, “ensures [its] unsharability through its resistance to language.”²¹ But Hodgins’s texts achieve very powerful effects not only in expressing a fighting spirit but also in speaking with a calm poise and resignation. A striking instance of this is the beautiful sonnet “Walking through the Crop,” which combines the poet’s acute perception of the natural habitat with his by now enduring preoccupation. It is a brilliant example of Hodgins’s pastoral poetry at its best, in which, as Brendan Ryan maintains, the writer “manages to invest [the] rural world with some of the unnameable terror that inhabits his cancer poems”.²²

¹⁹ Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 4.

²⁰ Schweizer, *Suffering and the Remedy of Art*, 19.

²¹ Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 4.

²² Ryan, “Vulnerable Landscapes: Pastoral in the Poetry of Philip Hodgins,” 29.

It doesn't matter any more
the way the wheat is shivering
on such a beautiful hot day
late in the afternoon, in Spring.

I couldn't care about the sound
of insects frying in the heat
or how a flock of cockatoos
has gone up in a brilliant sheet.

I had a list I tried to keep.
Sometimes I even wrote it down.
It had all sorts of private things
like images, sensations, sounds. . .

There's nothing in these dying days.
I've given everything away. ("Walking through the Crop," 34)

In its muted bitterness, this text from the first collection, *Blood and Bone* (1986), contrasts rather sharply with the almost Keatsian exuberance at the thought of death expressed in "The Garden" (in *Up on All Fours*, 1993): "There'll never be a better time to die, / not with the garden looking so alive" (174). Instead of a nightingale, flowers are here "crying out," putting forth their own equivalent of Keats's "high requiem," "a visual call / that ranges from a whisper to a shout" (174) and which leave the speaker, much like Keats's in "Ode to a Nightingale," with a sense that "now more than ever seems it rich to die" (l. 35):

The beds will never be like that again:
long moments of excess not knowing how
the crumbling dirt is going to sustain
you any more. The dying time is now. ("The Garden," 174)

But the moment of death is elusive; by contrast, the impulse to narrativize what has been leading up to it becomes as inescapable as the physical condition itself. It also leads the speaker to reconsider his earlier life and experiences in the light of his current predicament, not so much in order to establish a causal chain as to find in past experiences that have nothing whatever to do with the present condition a voice, a metaphoric discourse in which to communicate and share the unknown, the incommunicable. Thus, for example, the leeches he remembers seeing on the udders of cows coming out of the water-hole serve as the vehicle of several metaphors in the poem "Leeches." Self-consciously, this text registers the compulsion to tell, to try and make his condition sharable by putting it into words:

“Leeches”
 Swim like sunken ripples.
 Bloody-minded
 they come home to what they know –
 the single fact of blood.
 [...]

 I can see them in the channel still.
 They cling to my imagination
 in soft black lines of thought. (“Leeches,” 58)

The leech becomes an obvious metaphor for leukaemia because, when sucking, blood it “gets big and ugly / like the final stages / of the cancer cell” (59). As the speaker notes, the comparison is actually too self-evident, no longer a proof of discursive power in the “conversation with cancer.” The weakness and conventionality of the leech image is self-consciously acknowledged, but the end of the poem succeeds in picking up and revitalizing its metaphoric possibilities with a truly chilling effect:

And though this
 sticking words like leeches
 to the page
 will make no difference
 to what the cancer knows or does,
 I had to tell you anyway.
 The soft uncertainties
 are gathering
 round the smell of blood,
 coming home to what they know. (“Leeches,” 59)

Despite the recognition that voice is ultimately powerless against body, many of Hodgins’s late texts demonstrate his determination to resist as long as possible pain’s resistance to language (to use Scarry’s phrase once more). At the same time, they also seem to acknowledge that without body there is no voice. The intimate connection between body and voice, illness and language, is inescapable. Several texts work with the conceit of ink turning into blood, and the recognition that the flow of words is related to the flow of the blood. The equation of text and body is literalized in “The Sick Poem,” which makes the identification explicit in its very first line: “The poem has cancer” (217). This equation is explored with what can only be called grim wit, which allows the illness to be verbalized and the extreme privacy of the experience, in a sense, to be shared:²³

²³ Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 170.

It began as a minor complaint
 and spread to be an obsession.
 They say it has something
 to do with words
 but no-one really understands
 how it works.
 A well-paid team of experts
 is looking through it,
 a sample has been taken
 and, yes, words were there.
 But what does that tell you? ("The Sick Poem," 217)

The analogy between the disease of the blood and the failure of words is developed at some length, and the disease itself is figured in the text as "a failure of communication, / an inability to form / the right words / at the appropriate time" (217). In talking about text rather than body, the speaker once again pretends to deal rationally with a problem that is supposedly amenable to such a rational approach. It is to create for him that sense of being in control which Gilman has described as the subject's attempt to project onto the world his sense of dissolution in order to localize it outside the self and thus to "domesticate" it, so that it can be controlled by "being made visible."²⁴ The ending seems to bear out this reading:

Perhaps the problem
 is one of bad manners:
 those clapped-out poeticisms
 struggling across the page
 through a damaged form.
 I'm telling you straight:
 to use a metaphor
 at a time like this
 would be obscene. ("The Sick Poem," 218)

To compare the problem of the terminal illness to one of poetic manners, ultimately to figure the body as a text, is of course a particularly striking way of speaking metaphorically. With the final (and "straight") condemnation of metaphor as obscene, the text thus seems to acknowledge the impossibility of its own project. In a late sonnet with the punning title "Home Is Where the Hurt Is," this insight into the futility of the metaphoric strategy is central and explicit:

These days I take my dying seriously,
 after having tried, and failed, to make it into a joke.

²⁴ Gilman, *Disease and Representation*, 3.

The silence was what doomed me ultimately:
all those nervous attempts to provoke

a set response, anything to keep the flights
of fancy going no matter how insincere.
I was like an actor blinded by the footlights,
not sure if an audience is really there.

Now I'm living the whole thing in my mind.
Not death itself, the overwhelming fact
of our existence, but that moment when we find
a link between our life and death, the final act.

Each connexion is lived through, then undone.
Happy. Sad. Sacred. Scared. Every day a different one. (220)

Illness, as David B. Morris reminds us,

threatens to undo our sense of who we are. Its darkest power lies in showing us a picture of ourselves – false, damaged, unreliable, and inescapably mortal – that we desperately do not want to see. A serious and protracted illness constitutes an immersion in an alien reality where almost everything changes. At its most dire, it can wreck the body, unstring the mind, and paralyze the emotions.²⁵

For years Philip Hodgins was suffering all the worst and most devastating effects of terminal illness and yet – in adhering to “the rigid forms of art”²⁶ – succeeded in demonstrating an exemplary sanity, emotional balance and poetic control. In their uncompromising commitment to artistic rigour, Hodgins’s texts achieve a poise and poignancy that may well make them a particularly bracing and moving instance of poetry’s ability to articulate suffering and cope with pain.²⁷

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²⁵ Morris, *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age*, 22.

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A Voice of One's Own

Language as Central Element of Resistance, Reintegration and Reconstruction of Identity in the Fiction of Patricia Grace

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I will never speak English again. By the time I die I hope to be again
who I was born to be.¹

Introductory Remarks

IN THE COURSE OF COLONIZATION as well as in the process of decolonization, language and its appropriation are, and have been, of vital importance. As Bill Ashcroft et al. point out, language, with the help of institutionalized education, plays a central role in the instalment and perpetuation of imperial oppression and hierarchical power, through which the metropolitan language becomes the norm and all other variants are marginalized. This established power, however, is “rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice.”²

The medium for these new forms of expression may either be the vernacular language, or, in many cases, English. Salman Rushdie describes the effectiveness of postcolonial voices in reshaping English:

What seems to me to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, [...]

¹ Kura, in Patricia Grace, *Baby No-Eyes* (London: Women's Press, 1999): 66.

² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New Accents; London: Routledge, 1989): 7.

assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers.³

Authors frequently delineate these linguistic territories, adapting them to their own cultural background, by using their own variety of English, heavily influenced by the vernacular language.⁴ One of these postcolonial voices is that of the New Zealand author Patricia Grace. This essay aims to demonstrate how far the language she uses in her fiction (for narrative as well as dialogue) constitutes a form of resistance to the superimposed culture of the Pakeha, and also the role of language in her characters' redefinition of themselves as Maori. It will conclude with an analysis of the way language is used to reflect the female characters' development of their personal identities, and discovery of their own voices.

Patricia Grace not only shows the linguistic emancipation of her characters on the narrative level, she also places it in the larger context of New Zealand's language politics, against which her characters begin to revolt. As language politics still proves to be a highly sensitive topic, incorporating it in narratives concerned with regaining identity stresses the 'precious' status of language and its significance in the process of emancipation. Accordingly, language politics in New Zealand and current reactions to it will be briefly outlined, in an attempt to account comprehensively for the process of resistance leading to the regaining of a new (or old) identity.

Language Politics in New Zealand and the Maori Renaissance

In the history of British colonization, and especially its language politics, New Zealand stands out in various ways. The majority of New Zealanders are of non-indigenous or mixed descent, and thus mostly English-speaking – only about 12 per cent of the population are of Maori origin⁵ – and the effectiveness with which the indigenous languages were replaced by English was unequalled. "New Zealand is one of the world's most monolingual nations. English is the first language of 95 per cent of the 3.4 million population – and the only language of 90 per cent, most of whom are of British descent."⁶

³ Salman Rushdie, "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist" (1983), in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London: Penguin/Granta, 1991): 64.

⁴ On these New Englishes, see, for example, David Crystal, *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997): 133–34.

⁵ See Ian Pool & Nicholas Pole, *Maori Population to 2011: Demographic Change and Its Implications* (Wellington: New Zealand Demographic Society, 1987): 1.

⁶ Alan Bell & Janet Holmes, "New Zealand," in *English Around the World: Sociolinguistic Perspectives*, ed. Jenny Cheshire (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991): 153.

One of the means of replacing indigenous languages was the early establishment of state education for Maori children. This was generally welcomed, but in the beginning the teaching was left in the hands of the Maori, who soon outnumbered the British conquerors in literacy.⁷ However, the “extension of compulsory schooling to Maori children in the 1890s, and the breakdown of Maori resistance to this by the 1920s, coupled with the deliberate provision of teachers who could speak only English,” ensured the thorough replacement of the Maori language by English. Schoolchildren were not allowed to speak their mother-tongue and were punished if they did.⁸ Accordingly, on her first day at school one of Patricia Grace’s characters is instructed as follows:

“You have to say, ‘Please may I leave the room,’ if you want a mimi,” Makareta said. “Don’t say mimi at school.”
 “Why because?” you asked.
 “It’s a rule.”
 “And any kids talk Maori to you,” Manny said coming, going, turning himself, “you got to run away. Headmaster hit you with a big strap.”⁹

The general movement to the cities, away from ancestral lands, was an additional factor in the decline of the indigenous language. It is hardly surprising, when everything is taken into account, that the Maori language declined and was slowly but surely replaced by English as the first language among Maori. The cultural shift that accompanied this change of language is obvious. Ngugi wa Thiong’o stresses the importance of language as culture. As a means of representation, it enables us to relate to experience and ultimately to reality itself. It defines our conception of ourselves as individuals or as part of a larger unit, and thus “mediat[es] between [us] and [our] own sel[ves]; between [our] own sel[ves] and other selves; between [us] and nature.”¹⁰ With the slow erosion of Maori as a language of social and cultural transaction, this linking function was lost, with the result that Maori culture was driven into the background and partly erased. Such a loss of language and culture inevitably results in a crisis of cultural identity.¹¹

⁷ See Richard Benton, “The History and Development of the Maori Language,” in *Dirty Silence: Aspects of Language and Literature in New Zealand*, ed. Graham McGregor & Mark Williams (Auckland: Oxford UP, 1991): 12.

⁸ Benton, “The History and Development of the Maori Language,” 14.

⁹ Patricia Grace, *Cousins* (London: Women’s Press, 1993): 160. Further page references are in the main text.

¹⁰ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “The Language of African Literature” (1986), in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (1993; London & New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994): 441.

¹¹ See Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*, 9.

The Maori Renaissance that New Zealand art has experienced since the 1960s¹² focuses on this drifting-part of cultural identity and cultural reality, and attempts to bridge the gap between the two. It incorporates the Maori heritage in art to provide access to it, to assess it critically, and eventually to provide a new cultural perspective. This reintegration of Maori culture into the arts has been accompanied by a new linguistic awareness, even if, in many cases, the language used is English, which is not surprising, bearing in mind the statistics cited above. The English language, however, is adjusted to the new requirements by including Maori expressions, integrating Maori speech patterns and stories, and by raising awareness of the precarious linguistic and cultural position of the (Maori) protagonists. This is consistent with the claim of Radhika Mohanram and Gita Rajan that the effective appropriation of the colonizers' language depends on transporting "subversive and problematic meanings,"¹³ which indigenous writers, according to Ralph Crane, use with clear political intentions.¹⁴ Thus the writing of Maori authors today is not so much a writing back to the imperial centre as a writing back to the dominant settler culture¹⁵ and, eventually, a writing forward to its own roots.

Language and Identity in Patricia Grace's Fiction

One of the most prominent woman writers of the Maori Renaissance is Patricia Grace, the first Maori woman to publish fiction (with her short-story collection *Waiariki* in 1975).¹⁶ Despite her emphasis on Maori culture and tradition, Patricia Grace writes in English and admits to not being a fluent speaker of Maori herself.¹⁷ As it turns out, when looking into her fiction, this factor does not prevent her from making Maoridom concrete for her largely Pakeha audience. Among the ways she achieves this is by marking the language of her narrative and dialogue as Maori in the way indicated above, and thus clearly setting it off against the language of the Pakeha in the stories. Not only

¹² See Powhiri Wharemarama Rika-Heke, "Margin or Center? 'Let me tell you! In the Land of my Ancestors I am in the Center': Indigenous Writing in Aotearoa," in *English Postcoloniality: Literatures from Around the World*, ed. Radhika Mohanram & Gita Rajan (Contributions to the Study of World Literature 66; Westport CT: Greenwood, 1996): 152.

¹³ Radhika Mohanram & Gita Rajan, "Introduction: The Concept of English Postcoloniality," in *English Postcoloniality*, ed. Mohanram & Rajan, 4.

¹⁴ See Ralph J. Crane, "Out of the Center: Thoughts on Post-Colonial Literatures of Australia and New Zealand," in *English Postcoloniality*, ed. Mohanram & Rajan, 28.

¹⁵ See Crane, "Out of the Center," 26.

¹⁶ See Kathleen Wheeler, *A Guide to Twentieth-Century Women Novelists* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997): 260.

¹⁷ See Liz DeLoughrey & Susan Hall, "Beginning from a centre," *New Zealand Books* 9.1 (1999): 13.

is Patricia Grace's narrative, particularly the dialogue of her characters, interspersed with Maori expressions and occasionally whole passages which are left untranslated, its rhythm and speech patterns have been likened to that of the Maori language.¹⁸ As Patricia Grace herself states,

I've grown up with different registers of English, one register being that in which Maori words are used in English sentences. I do that in [my writing] only when it is a natural thing to do, because I want the dialogues to be reflective of true speech.¹⁹

Modifying language in this way inevitably results in a modification of reality. As we construct reality by means of language, it can also prove to be a viable tool in constructing "difference, separation, and absence from the metropolitan norm."²⁰

This act of creating an alternative reality results in the possibility of approaching identity in a new way. The speech act in fiction, in the narrative as well as the dialogue of the characters, initiates an act of resistance against superimposed culture. It will become clear that identity in Patricia Grace's fiction, be it personal or cultural (both seen as mutually dependent here), is not something fixed once it is gained, but bound to undergo changes, a fact that enables her characters to redirect and relocate their identities at some point of their lives. Her stories illustrate what Stuart Hall has described in the following way:

We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities [...] Cultural identity, [...], is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past. [...] Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.²¹

The alternative reality created by Patricia Grace's language not only incorporates her characters' breaking out of Western standardization and coming to

¹⁸ See, for example, Peter Dickinson, "Orality in Literacy: Listening to Indigenous Writing," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 14.2 (1994): 320–35, or Jacqueline Bardolph, "'A Way of Talking': A Way of Seeing: The Short Stories of Patricia Grace," *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 12.2 (1990): 31.

¹⁹ DeLoughrey, "Beginning from a centre," 13.

²⁰ Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*, 44.

²¹ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia (London: Arnold, 1997): 112.

terms with their history and their present, but also functions as a foil for the other structural elements of resistance and regaining a voice. These processes take place on three linguistic levels.

The first level has already been introduced and will be mentioned only briefly here: through her employment of untranslated Maori expressions, syntactical patterns and myths, Patricia Grace rejects the established norms of literary expression and enables her characters and narrators to express their own cultural and social reality. Their experience is reflected in their own idiom.

The second aspect is mostly manifest in the voices of the female characters who are usually at the centre of Patricia Grace's stories, and whose storytelling is a central constituent of their own lives and those of their families. Her characters typically experience a shift in perspective at some point, which is reflected in their attitudes to their language. This will be demonstrated with the help of three texts from different periods, which help to show how central this issue is for Grace. The process of reconstructing identity and resisting imposed norms that results from this changed perspective will then be analysed.

The third level can be traced in the narrative technique itself. In Patricia Grace's stories, the narrative voice and narrative perspective often shift to match the experiences of the characters. They move from 'objectivized' to 'subjectivized' narration, with the narrators becoming their own narrative subject. This shift on the level of narrative voice eventually merges with the female characters' shift of perspective, to form their own new voices.

The first text to be analysed is the opening story in Patricia Grace's earliest collection, *Wairiki* (1975), and it bears the programmatic title:

"A Way of Talking" (1975)

It is the story of two sisters: Hera, who has stayed at home in her Maori environment and who is about to be married, and Rose, who has gone away to university. The story opens with Rose's return home for her sister's wedding. The next day, the two sisters go to a fitting for Rose's wedding-dress. The dressmaker, a Pakeha friend of Hera's, offends Rose by talking about "the Maoris" without being able to refer to them by their names. Rose cannot tolerate this, and speaks her mind quite freely. Hera, though offended herself, is shocked and embarrassed by her sister's behaviour, and only later comes to understand and accept the change her sister has undergone.

The "way of talking" here refers to the speech-modes of different people and how these modes and their changes are perceived. The most obvious focus is on Rose, who is at the centre of Hera's narration, and has already

been introduced with “She’s just the same as ever Rose. Talks all the time flat out and makes us laugh with her way of talking.”²² Only later in the story can Hera accept that her perception of Rose as having stayed the same as ever has to be modified. Her way of talking has changed after all – rather, it no longer differentiates between different addressees, be they Maori or Pakeha, friends of Hera, or Hera herself.

The second interesting voice is that of Hera, who, despite presenting herself as the less articulate (14), is the narrator of the story. She and the rest of her family have always relied on Rose to do the talking for them, “all of us too scared to make known when we had been hurt or slighted” (14). Thus Hera finds it difficult to tell Rose how embarrassed she felt when the latter took offence at Jane’s thoughtless behaviour: “I couldn’t think what to say. Instead I felt an awful big sulk coming on. It has always been my trouble, sulking” (13).

What becomes clear from this brief outline is the fact that language not only keeps Pakeha and Maori apart, but has also created a rift between the two sisters which is only overcome towards the end. Rose has found her personal identity, rooted in her being a modern Maori. This is expressed in her self-assured way of talking and in her willingness to defend herself and her people against all objectivization. What is important in our context is that Rose is aware that language such as that used by the dressmaker expresses notions that need to be overcome in order to make it possible for Maori and Pakeha to perceive each other as individuals. Consequently, when Hera points out that Maori also talk about Pakeha the way Pakeha do, Rose completes the argument by pointing out:

“Except that we talk like this to each other only. It’s not so much what is said, but when and where and in whose presence. Besides, you and I don’t speak in this way now, not since we were little. It’s the older ones.” (14)

The price Rose has to pay for “resisting the strategies of linguistic colonization,” as Roger Robinson puts it,²³ is loneliness; a separation from her family and its tradition. Hera recognizes this and feels sorry: “What she said made all my anger go away and I felt very sad because it is not our way of talking to each other. [...] It made me realise too that underneath her jolly and forthright ways Rose is very hurt” (14).

²² Patricia Grace, “A Way of Talking,” *Collected Stories* (Auckland: Penguin, 1994): 11. Unless otherwise indicated, page references are in the main text.

²³ Roger Robinson, “‘The Strands of Life and Self’: The Oral Prose of Patricia Grace,” *CRNLE* 1 (1993): 14.

Hera, the narrator, is slow to realize this. At the beginning, when she remembers Rose's habit of speaking her mind, she is afraid of its effects, as Rose often says the "wrong thing without knowing" (12). Her sister's use of language seems like an uncontrollable weapon, directed against anything in her way. Only later does Hera come to see that there is method behind it. Roger Robinson confirms this: "Rose, verbally versatile, shows how language can wrest power from the privileged, inflict discomfiture, and restore identity and purpose to the repressed."²⁴ It is not that Hera fails to perceive Jane's rudeness, it is that she does not want to admit it. Rose, the outsider, has moved away from the tradition and found her identity. She is the one who sets out to survive as a Maori individual rather than as part of a social group defined by the Pakeha. This is what Hera grasps in the end; she sees that language can and must be used to defend this individuality. While the incident at Jane's reduces Hera to silence which "seemed to bang around in my head" (13), she comes to understand that communication, even when it is unpleasant, is necessary for both sides, Pakeha and Maori: "And how can the likes of Jane know when we go round pretending all is well? How can Jane know us?" (14). Hera realizes that she needs her own voice to be accepted as an individual. She still has problems in voicing her new belief, at least to Rose, but her change in perspective and awareness of the primary importance of language is acknowledged:

I'll find some way of letting Rose know I understand and I know it will be difficult for me because I'm not so clever the way she is. I can't say things the same and I've never learnt to stick up for myself. But my sister won't have to be alone again. I'll let her know that. (16)

Thus it is not Rose's perspective that changes, but Hera's. At the beginning of the story she sees herself from the outside, from the Pakeha point of view, as a well-behaved, conforming Maori, whose "infantile inadequacies of [...] expression as narrator demonstrate the disempowerment inflicted by this lack of any 'way of talking' of their own."²⁵ Later, however, she is ready to participate as an individual, prepared to defend her rights, along with the rights of her people to be perceived as individuals, and to do this by opposing received ways of talking about others. In this early story by Grace, the shift of perspective is only apparent in the character; in her awakening sensitivity to language and declaration of resistance to received norms.

²⁴ Robinson, "The Strands of Life and Self," 14.

²⁵ "The Strands of Life and Self," 14.

Cousins (1992)

The second text in which language plays a central role in the female characters' emancipation is Grace's third novel, *Cousins*, which tells the stories of three cousins who have all been brought up in contrasting environments. Mata grows up in an orphanage, where she was left by her Pakeha father. Her upbringing has followed Western norms, but her attempts to conform to these prove futile. She feels betrayed, and is betrayed throughout her life. The other cousin is Makareta, who has been brought up in the bosom of the family. As the chosen one, she is destined to be married to a comparably well-brought-up young man from another family, an alliance which is meant to guarantee both families a culturally and socially secure survival. When Makareta realizes that her twentieth-birthday celebration is actually supposed to coincide with her engagement to a man who is a total stranger to her, she leaves home. She moves to the city where she eventually uses her knowledge of both worlds and both traditions to further the Maori cause. The third cousin is Missy. She grows up in a Maori environment, but because of her parents' cruel poverty she mainly experiences the harshness of modern Maori life, without the comfort of a supportive cultural background, and is fascinated by, and idealizes, Western popular culture. When Makarata flees from the role destined for her by leaving her birthday (and engagement) party, Missy steps in: she decides to be the chosen one, and marries the man from the other family. She remains on the family land, and also assumes the role of a preserver.

These rather straightforward plot-lines are split into six chapters, two for each cousin, with Mata's story framing the narrative. As the temporal perspective constantly shifts, moving back to Mata's childhood experiences, the day of the engagement, and all three women's experiences later in life, the reconstruction of the women's individual identities in the Maori tradition and Maori/Pakeha society develops on the level of content and in each of their stories, and this is reflected in the language.

In the case of Mata, who "has no relative to speak for her,"²⁶ the first part of her story is rendered in figural narration, closely following her emotions and development. The early part reflects not only Mata's childlike attitudes, but also demonstrates the clash of cultures she experiences during her one holiday with her mother's family: "She hadn't heard of eating eel but it must be all right because they all liked it, picking at it with their fingers because they didn't know their manners, wiping sticky hands on the newspaper tablecloth" (21). There she learns for the first time that her actual name is Mata and not May, that she has another history besides the one experienced in the

²⁶ Elisabeth Köster, "Oral and Literacy Patterns in the Novels of Patricia Grace," *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 10 (1993): 100.

orphanage, and that other standards exist besides those she has been taught so far. All this scares her, and she is afraid of losing the little that has made up her identity so far: “She seemed to be changing into someone else, not being herself anymore, forgetting things” (45). But Mata, curious to learn more about her mother and her past, also feels that she does not belong here either. This feeling of not belonging clings to Mata throughout her life. However, the foundation for her new, Maori-based, identity is laid during that holiday and gains prominence towards the end of the first part: “My name is Mata Pairama. I have a name, Mata Pairama, Mata Pairama, a name of my own” (61). As Patricia Grace briefly interrupts the strand of figural narration to let Mata utter these words, we (and Mata herself) hear her voice, which foreshadows the narrative technique of the last chapter, where she gains a new identity.

In the last part of the novel, Mata ends up where the story of the three cousins began: her wandering alone through the deserted streets of the city. The change of register is most striking here: whereas the opening pages of the novel convey Mata’s loneliness and apathy in such passages as “Middle of the road, not moving. One foot placing itself in front of the other. Hands not paddling – this side, that side – helping her forward. Eyes not looking out but looking down instead, at two feet” (11), the beginning of the last chapter exemplifies the change Mata has undergone:

I don’t know why I had chosen to walk the middle of the road, but perhaps it was something to do with words that were going through my head – ‘middle of the road, middle of the night, middle of nowhere’. I had picked up the beat of them, needing words churning through me that would keep thinking away. (241)

Although these two passages are not separated by much time in the story, the narrative and the reader have gained new perspectives in the time it has taken to unfold, through almost the whole novel. Mata’s breaking away from Western norms is illustrated by the series of stories which, in turn, have an effect on her current situation. It seems to be the stories themselves that change lives,²⁷ which is demonstrated by Mata’s assuming the narration of her own story. The transformation is profound: Mata is controlling her life now and no longer being controlled. She is subject and not object anymore – in the grammatical as well as the social sense. The emancipation process Mata has begun is then completed by a real discovery of her roots and by turning back to them, through Makareta and through Makareta’s death, as Mata becomes aware for the first time of her ancestors and then returns to her homeland. For

²⁷ In this respect, see also Jane McRae, “Patricia Grace and Complete Communication,” *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 10 (1993): 71.

the first time she experiences her people's ceremonies, hearing a language she does not understand but feeling safe, instinctively aware that she has come home, in a physical as well as in a metaphorical way.

Makareta's story, too, is first told by her mother Polly, who does not live with her. She relates parts of her own story as well as that of Makareta's upbringing, from a distance. It becomes clear that Polly was exploited by her dead husband's family, just as Makareta was brought up to serve the family by preserving its tradition. However, "the weight of tradition in fact threatens the very heritage it hopes to pass on."²⁸ By stepping out of this plan at the end of the first chapter dedicated to her, Makareta takes not only her life but also her story into her own hands. Although her voice gains prominence towards the end of her first chapter through the letters she writes to her mother, she alone relates the second part of her story about her life away from home. She has given up the role of preserving tradition in the family in order to preserve an even larger family – the Maori people. In the role she has chosen for herself in the larger culture, she finds fulfilment – and also her own voice.

Missy's gaining of a new identity parallels that of Makarata's and fills the gap the latter has opened. By choosing to follow her own free will and getting her family to accept this, Missy discovers a completely new side to her personality, and a new identity:

The woman in me knew that I could be the one, knew I could be who the people wanted me to be. If they sang for me, I belonged to them. If they sat me down, I was free to go to the world and the stars. (222)

Maoridom is no longer something that has just happened to her, comparable to any other mishap, entailing poverty and reduced opportunities in life, but something she chooses deliberately. This shift is reflected in the narrative technique: until this decisive moment, Missy's life is told by her (unborn) twin brother, who speaks as if he was addressing Missy directly. With her decision to be more than just the daughter of the less 'eligible' part of the family, she gains a voice and finishes her story on her own, by relating the details of her life after the marriage, at the same time completing Mata's and Makareta's story by giving an external version of their return home to their ancestors' land.

While the process of reclaiming one's identity is the overt and also linguistically central topic of *Cousins*, the regaining of one's identity by means of language is treated in a subtler way in the next text to be discussed.

²⁸ Köster, "Oral and Literacy Patterns in the Novels of Patricia Grace," 99.

Baby No-Eyes (1998)

This recent (but not latest) novel by Patricia Grace²⁹ relates the history of an extended Maori family, one of whose most prominent member is a stillborn baby, as it comes to terms with its past and present. Te Paania's first child was killed in a car crash before she was born, but has returned as a ghost to comfort her mother and, later on, to be a sister to Te Paania's second child, Tawera. The novel is not organized chronologically, but consists of the various stories told by the main characters. Tawera, Kura (who is Te Paania's grandmother-in-law), and Te Paania talk in turn about events related to the accident, current problems (one of Te Paania's friends is reclaiming a sacred site for his family), and forgotten stories and injuries in the past (mostly on Kura's part). The circumstances relating to the accident and the subsequent events in the hospital form a sort of axis around which the plot revolves.

Kura's narratives are of special importance, as they connect the present situation of Maori society with events in the past. Central for our purposes are her stories about New Zealand's language politics, where it becomes clear how generations of Maori were bereft of their language and their culture. For nearly all her life, Kura has accepted this, even though she has been traumatized by earlier experiences, most crucially the death her cousin Riripeti, who died because she could not adapt to school. The little girl was unable to fit into a system which required her to forget everything that she had been taught before she went to school and accept a different name. Because the Maori language was disregarded, she was left with no real way of expressing herself. Far from revolting against the system, Riripeti was overpowered by it, was silenced – and died. In her story, the loss of a voice is taken to its most extreme and cruel consequence. Kura is aware that this death affects, and stands for, her whole people. But even though she cannot forget this, she cannot talk about it either. She was silenced as well:

My heart broke for [my cousin]. Oh I cried. She was mine, she was me, she was all of us. She was the one who had died but we were the ones affected, our shame taking generations to become our anger and our madness. [...] So we children never spoke of what had happened to Riripeti. It became our secret and our shame. It's a story that has never had words, not until today. Today the words were jolted from my stomach by Shane, where they have been sitting for sixty years. [...] We keep our stories secret because we love our children, we disguise ourselves and hide our hearts because we love our children. We choose names because we love our children.³⁰

²⁹ She has since published *Dogside Story* (Auckland: Penguin, 2001) and *Tu* (Auckland: Penguin, 2004).

³⁰ Grace, *Baby No-Eyes*, 38–39. Further page references are in the main text.

Remarkably, Kura gains a voice through her decision to break the silence that began when she was a child and to return to her own language. Shane, her grandson, asked for the stories but was not granted them. Only the events connected with his death cause Kura to speak, and in the process of speaking she recovers her voice and thus her cultural identity.

[Shane] wanted his stories and I have these to give. I speak to you now in the language that I haven't used since the time of Riripeti. I will never speak English again. By the time I die I hope to be again who I was born to be. (66)

When she feels that she has fulfilled her tasks, she dies.

As in the texts previously discussed, the function of storytelling itself forms an act of emancipation, both in the text and in the narrative structure. Even though Kura's stories, rendered in first-person narrative, are in English, her breaking-free from and rejection of the superimposed British colonial culture does not lose any of its consequence. Patricia Grace explained how she handled this special narrative problem:

I would usually have someone like her speaking her kind of English: this time I have had to find a way of representing Maori language in English. I decided to use a balance between a reasonably standard kind of English, and an idiomatic English. I thought that this was the kind of Maori that she would speak – standard/idiomatic. I have tried not to use Maori words because she is speaking Maori all the time.³¹

What seems to matter here is that the stories are eventually told and that Kura chooses to speak Maori (as her own statements make explicit) in order to recover her own identity. The impression is created that we are given a translated version, a familiar experience for most readers who do not restrict themselves to books originally written in the few languages they command. This does not affect the account of Kura's regaining a Maori voice.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of these three texts has demonstrated that the language of the narrative and dialogue is central to the way Patricia Grace's fiction illustrates and initiates resistance to superimposed norms, leading to re-integration into society and a reconstruction of – in our case – female identities. Whereas "A Way of Talking" focuses on a very young girl who has to reconsider received norms and patterns of thought in order to secure her right as an individual in

³¹ Liz DeLoughrey & Susan Hall, "Beginning from a centre," *New Zealand Books* 9.1 (1999): 13.

society, *Cousins* traces the process of gaining a voice through the lives of three women, who find their place and destiny in a modern New Zealand environment. Finally, in the third text, *Baby No-Eyes*, a very old woman regains her voice by going back to who she was as a little girl and relinquishing what she had come to believe about Pakeha–Maori relationships. These changes in identity and position in society are mirrored and, to some extent, also caused by the narrative situations. In “A Way of Talking,” the first-person narrative of the central character is maintained throughout; what changes is that the internal perspective begins to parallel the changed outward situation. Hera’s narrative reflects her newly achieved linguistic sensitivity and her declaration of resistance to received norms.

In the second text, *Cousins*, the linguistic changes which accompany and impel the formation of new identities are the most profound. Whereas none of the three cousins commands a voice of her own in the first part of the novel, the moment they find their selves and their position in society, they are also given voices and the narrative situation shifts from third to first person.

In *Baby No-Eyes*, the female character discussed here is one of the central storytellers of the novel and thus has a voice from the beginning. The transformation she undergoes in her cultural identity, however, is marked by her decision no longer to use any language but Maori. Late in her life, Kura becomes aware that what she had to relinquish linguistically as a child has led to the loss of central constituents of her self. Although her Maori culture has always given her roots, her adjustment to Western norms prevented her from perceiving herself as part of a tradition and as part of a story, which she only becomes by taking the stories into her own hands and thus acquiring a voice.

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Suffering and Survival

Body and Voice in Recent Maori Writing ¹

JANET WILSON

Introduction

THE MAORI TODAY LIVE between two cultures, the Polynesian and the European. Contemporary Maori literature is about realignment. Positioned between English and Maori languages, between the rural, pre-contact past and the urban, bicultural present, between the spiritual realm of traditional Maoritanga and the global world of corporate capitalism, the writers of the Maori Renaissance inscribe some of the values of biculturalism – two peoples, one nation – in a way that Pakeha literature, inevitably more monocultural and eurocentric, does not. Speaking from this in-between place, their voices proclaim marginality as a contested position. The political consciousness of such writing, in foregrounding ethnic marginality, relies on a celebration of the corporeality of the body to affirm the interconnectedness between members of the community and the common identity between the individual, whanau and the land. This is central to Maori identity as *tangata whenua* (people of the land).

In the more politically energized climate of New Zealand from the late 1970s through to the present, writers such as Patricia Grace, Keri Hulme and Witi Ihimaera abandoned earlier, pastoral representations of Maori society in favour of a revisionary framework of self-representation. This period can be described in terms used of the shift in race relations in Britain in the 1980s:

¹ An earlier version of this article appeared under the same title in *New Windows on a Woman's World: Essays for Jocelyn Harris*, ed. Colin Gibson & Lisa Marr (Otago Studies in English 9; Dunedin: Department of English, University of Otago, 2005), vol. 2: 425–38.

from “a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself.”² The radical revision of race relations in New Zealand/Aotearoa which the disputes over land rights and issues such as education, language and economic survival introduced is reflected in the more polemical spirit of Maori Renaissance writing. As “bodies partly constitute the symbolic system of thought, movements and actions within the network of social relations,”³ a bodily presence when it becomes a contested site can force an intervention in the dominant discourse; such presences interrupt the symbolic order, thus contributing to a politics of resistance and pointing to survival and renewal. This is equally true of Maori as of other indigenous writers who aim to reposition their cultures in relation to the mainstream. Of particular interest is the thematic convergence between Patricia Grace’s *Baby No-Eyes* (1998) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), both of which introduce a ghostly child, a dislocating yet sometimes comforting presence; this might, in Freudian terms, represent the uncanny return of the repressed, or, in allegorical terms, those voices which became invisible during slavery and colonialism. The gifted yet unpredictable child is one of the key figures of the Maori Renaissance; through the child’s corporeal presence, recuperative energies are harnessed and released.

The importance of “material bodies” to the project of contemporary Maori writing reflects the agenda of much Third-World writing today, to rewrite colonial and precontact indigenous histories by drawing on lost or forgotten cultural resources. In the case of the Maori these include memory, oral stories, Polynesian mythology and spirituality. As Toni Morrison says, the aim is “To bear witness to a history that is unrecorded, untaught, in mainstream education, and to enlighten our people.”⁴ This includes critiquing those nineteenth-century imperialist discourses that draw on stereotypes of the native as Other, as primitive, a savage, or a child – as epitomized in Kipling’s poem “White Man’s Burden”: “your new caught, fallen peoples / half devil and half child” – by introducing more complex, empowering images of indigeneity. Recent Maori writing continues to redefine the image of the nation of Aotearoa/New Zealand. By making visible the suppressed history of their culture under colonialism and in repositioning the dominant language of English with the alternative Polynesian linguistic system – superimposing on English the rhythms,

² Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley & Kuan-Hsing Chen (London & New York: Routledge, 1996): 442.

³ Ian Burkitt, *Bodies of Thought: Embodiment, Identity and Modernity* (London: Sage, 1999): 106.

⁴ Toni Morrison, quoted in Gina Wisker, “‘Disremembered and Unaccounted For’: Reading Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar*,” in *Black Women’s Writing*, ed. Wisker (London: Macmillan, 1993): 80.

inflections and grammatical constructions of Maori or by hybridizing words and phrases to provide a new eclectic mix – it both represents and challenges biculturalism. Yet the emergence of the figure of the child as a significant medium in its revisionist agenda shows parallels with the preoccupation with childhood for which modernist Pakeha writing is also known: in this respect, Maori writing intersects with and indirectly critiques the canonical values of earlier, provincial and colonial New Zealand literature. I will focus on the unusually powerful but wounded children of Keri Hulme's *The bone people* (1983), Patricia Grace's *Potiki* (1986) and *Baby No-Eyes* (1998), and Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors* (1990), and consider both gendered and ethnic bodies, in order to argue that writing of the Maori Renaissance demonstrates continuity with the Pakeha literary tradition. The dominant motifs of the child and childhood, common to both, collectively represent a 'new-world' culture which seeks to blend its Polynesian and European inheritances in order to understand its historical past, and to renew itself in the present.

Powerful Women: The Situated Body

In Patricia Grace's work, the most powerful body is that of the pregnant woman: active, whole, and fertile, she functions as a natural principle of unity because her body is anchored within a space and time continuum. The mythical, elemental mother of the short story "Between Earth and Sky," on the point of giving birth, not only occupies her own domain but metaphorically links the earth to the sky. In *Potiki*, the maternal, productive, nurturing body is associated with Roimata, the mother of the Tamahina family, and in *Baby No-Eyes*, with the heroine, Te Paania, in particular when the birth of her second child, Tawera, is described.

Grace's powerful women figures can be identified with other images of indigenous women whose bodies are strongly situated within their environments and whose consciousness is represented as an extension of the body. These concepts of the body contrast to Western and eurocentric depictions of white middle-class women in which the mind dominates the body or, alternatively, exists without a body.⁵ They can be approached through phenomenological theories which deny the Cartesian dualism of mind and body and focus on bodily sentience, the body's being in the world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for whom consciousness is always situated in a particular location, posits that the development of conscious awareness and knowledge is grounded in the primordial coexistence between the body and the world. He argues that the

⁵ Gabriel Griffin, "'Writing the Body': Reading Joan Riley, Grace Nichols and Ntozake Shange," in *Black Women's Writing*, ed. Wisker, 25.

relational unity between the body, space, time and consciousness – or being in the world – is the context for human thought and knowledge: “I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them.”⁶ For the pregnant woman of “Between Earth and Sky,” enmeshed in a living relationship with the world because grounded in her body, time stands still.

I walked out of the house this morning, and stretched my arms out wide. [...] And at that moment when I stepped from my house, there was no sound. No sound at all. [...] As though the moment had been held quiet for me only, as I stepped out into the morning.⁷

The body is most completely situated when it is enclosed in the mother’s womb. In the Prologue to *Baby No-Eyes*, the unborn infant, Tawera, reproduces the rhythmic pulsations of his mother’s walk:

The first thing I knew I was bumping along, the sound of my mother’s feet going lap, lap, and breath coming and going fast in and out of her nose. Lap, lap over a hard smooth surface, such as a road.⁸

Swimming in the amniotic fluid, he reproduces baby talk:

[My mother ...] went to sleep while I went slow, slow swimming, hi-aa, hei-aa, hi-aa, hei-aa, then curled myself and went to sleep too, karm, karm, all the way, all the day in the bus. (9–10)

The infant’s immersion in the mother’s body is represented stylistically in ways which resemble the Kristevan semiotic space, the prelinguistic *chora*. Grace reproduces a pre-verbal language of the unconscious which takes its rhythms, sensations and inflections from the movements of the mother’s body.⁹

⁶ Quoted in Burkitt, *Bodies of Thought*, 74–75.

⁷ Patricia Grace, “Between Earth and Sky” (1974), in *Some Other Country: New Zealand’s Best Short Stories*, ed. Bill Manhire & Marion McLeod (Wellington: Port Nicholson, 2nd ed. 1992): 171–73.

⁸ Patricia Grace, *Baby No-Eyes* (1998; London: Women’s Press, 1999): 7. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

⁹ For a Kristevan reading of the semiotic in *Baby No-Eyes*, see Michelle Keown, “‘Sister Seen’: Art, Mythology and the Semiotic in Patricia Grace’s *Baby No-Eyes*,” *New Literatures Review* 38 (Winter 2002): 87–100. Keown identifies the womb with the Maori concept of Te Kore, the *kora* (a nurturing space in which life begins but which is also a death-trap) and links Tawera with Hine-nui-te-po. On the importance of Te Kore as the metaphor of promise in *the bone people*, see Eva Rask Knudsen, *The Circle and the Spiral: A Study of*

In *Potiki*, such extensions of the individual's material body into a space-time continuum are elaborated into the metaphoric concept of "the centred being," a 'bodily' image of the existence in the present moment of the oral, storytelling tradition. Through the voice of Roimata, Grace expounds a non-linear concept of time, focussing on the motif of "the spiral of cyclical being" to define the way stories mesh and overlap with successive retellings, becoming relevant to the lives of contemporary tellers.¹⁰

It was a new discovery to find that these stories were, after all, about our own lives, that there was no past or future, that all time is now time, *centred in the being*. It was a new realisation that *the centred being* in this now-time simply reaches out in any direction toward the outer circles, these outer circles being named "past" and "future" only for our convenience. The being reaches out to grasp those adornments that become part of the self.¹¹

The image of the centred, strong mother also emerges in the figure of the *kuia* or *koroua*, the grandmother, a source of wisdom and ancestral lore in Maori fiction. Notable in Grace's fiction are Granny Tamahina in *Potiki* and Kura, grandmother of the deceased Shane in *Baby No-Eyes*. Powerful mythic mothers and grandmothers who are repositories of knowledge, who collect and hoard memories in order to foster ancestral links with the precolonial past, feature in other works by indigenous women writers. In *Baby No-Eyes*, Grace creates an unbroken link with the past through Te Paania, who survives a fatal car crash in which her husband Shane and their unborn, unnamed baby girl die; and Kura, Shane's grandmother; this chain of being is completed by the deceased baby herself, who returns to haunt the family – Kura, Ta Paania and Tawera (her brother, born four years later) – as a liminal, ghostly presence. Together they create an unbroken link with the past, drawing on spiritual forces in order to unlock its traumas. Toni Morrison in *Beloved* also presents the maternal domain of power stretching over three generations connected by kinship and marriage. Female solidarity emerges from the grandmother, Baby Suggs, her daughter, Sethe, and Sethe's surviving daughter, Denver, whose relationships the ghost of *Beloved*, the dead child, disturbs.

As Lorraine Bethel comments, "Women have defied the dominant sexist society by developing a type of folk culture and oral literature based on the use of gender solidarity and female bonding as self affirming rituals."¹² Such

Australian Aboriginal and New Zealand Maori Literature (Cross/Cultures 68; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2004).

¹⁰ Knudsen, *The Circle and the Spiral*, 199.

¹¹ Patricia Grace, *Potiki* (Auckland & Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986): 39. My emphasis.

¹² Lorraine Bethel, "'This Infinity of Conscious Pain': Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition," in *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Bar-

writing also insists on its otherness by introducing elements of magic, myth, and the supernatural, and by using disjunctive, non-linear narratives which are nevertheless grounded in the historical past. The supernatural interventions in the strongly realized real worlds of Grace's and Morrison's novels are presented in ways that demand acceptance of both modes, so that neither takes precedence over the other. In the polyphonic narrative structure of *Potiki* and *Baby No-Eyes*, Grace conveys the collective response of the community to events, implying that what is experienced by one is shared by all. As in Morrison's *Beloved*, the process of recuperation, founded in a contemporary politics of resistance, depends on another domestic image, that of the broken and maimed body. Through the image of wounding, the spiritual forces which the wise, intuitive but maimed child embodies, are able to intervene in the symbolic sphere.

Violence and the Body as Site of Subjugation

Otto Heim observes that violence features powerfully in the structures of narrativization in contemporary Maori writing;¹³ and the use of ethnic bodies as sources of oppression or sites of subjugation is commonplace in the fiction of the 1980s and 1990s. Whether originating in the public or the private sphere, acts of assault and physical violation creating dismemberment, fragmentation, severance, crippling or maiming, and leading to death or near-death states, dominate. In Keri Hulme's *the bone people*, the semiotics of violence comprise the working-out of the fates of all three characters: in Simon's beatings at the hands of his stepfather, Joe Gillaley, culminating in an assault that leaves him nearly dead, Joe's broken arm upon his release from prison and his archetypal characterization according to the *kaumatua* as "the broken man," suggestive of emotional and psychic fragmentation; the virulent tumour that invades Kerewin's body. In Grace's fiction, by contrast, as Patrice Wilson notes, violence usually occurs off-stage, and its effects are reflected in the characters' actions and attitudes.¹⁴ Grace assimilates the apocalyptic event to a pattern of destiny which encompasses past, present and future, and which is structurally projected by different narrative voices woven together. In *Potiki*, the birth of the deformed child Toko (the Potiki) is anticipated by the anonymous master-carver who, in the novel's opening, begins to carve a statue of himself which is incomplete at his death because the events in the future that

bara Smith, Gloria Hull & Patricia Bell Scott (London: Feminist Press, 1982): 176–89.

¹³ Otto Heim, *Writing Along Broken Lines: Violence and Ethnicity in Contemporary Maori Fiction* (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1998).

¹⁴ Patrice Wilson, "Patricia Grace's *Potiki*: Diminished Violence," *World Literature Written in English* 36.2 (1997): 120.

it refers to, including the birth of him who will give it meaning, have not yet occurred. This premonition of disaster is fulfilled when Toko dies from a Pakeha fire-bomb, bringing to a climax the conflict between Maori and Pakeha over land ownership; only after his death can James, son of Roimata and Hemi, complete the carving, now the story of the Potiki. As Toko has predicted further violence in his “post-death narration,” this final carving of the figure on the *poupou* also completes a pattern of significance for the *whanau*.¹⁵ By such interweaving, and by stressing the importance of traditional Maori crafts of weaving and carving as analogies for the writer, Grace makes *Potiki* emblematic of the aesthetic that Roimata adumbrates: that all stories are “centred in the being” in the “now-time.”¹⁶

In *Baby No-Eyes*, violence emanates from the deaths in a car accident of Shane and Baby (unborn, as her mother Te Paania who survives, was pregnant at the time), and extends to the subsequent violation by Pakeha medical staff of Baby’s body in the hospital. The family discover to their horror that Baby’s body has been thrown out with the rubbish, and then, when it is found, that the eyes have been removed: they are finally returned in a plastic shopping bag:

The eyes were brought to us in a container inside a plastic supermarket bag. Our baby’s eyes had become food. They were pies, lollies, pickles, plums pleas. It was the swallowing of chiefly eyes. (64)

This mistake grotesquely re-enacts the bodily dismemberment and ritualistic eating of the opponents’ body parts, especially the eyes, to demoralize the enemy and to confer additional mana on the victor: this dominated the ceremony of violent death. Kura explains the ethos of revenge that justified such cannibalism:

It meant death, especially of chiefly people, victors giving insult to the living by cooking and eating the flesh of their chiefly dead. It meant cutting the heads off of heads to destroy tapu, the eating of the heart to demean, the swallowing of chiefly eyes – revenge turning on revenge.... (110)

This official insensitivity towards the ‘Other’s’ dead is compounded by the suspicion that the hospital was using Baby’s body for genetic material. Bio-prospecting – seeking for the genetic bits of endangered peoples – is seen by Te Paania, and Makahi, an activist lawyer, as a potential threat to their autonomy and dignity (187–88).

¹⁵ Keown, “‘Sister Seen’: Art, Mythology and the Semiotic in Patricia Grace’s *Baby No-Eyes*,” 89.

¹⁶ Patricia Grace, *Potiki*, 39.

The violence which prevails in contemporary Maori fiction can arguably be traced back to the collective memory of an essentialized Maori past, as the scenes of cannibalism in *Behind the Tattooed Face* by Heretaunga Baker (1990) and in Alan Duff's fourth novel, *Both Sides of the Moon* (1998), suggest. In fact, Duff's portrayal of the Maori's relation to their tribal past as genetically coded, ignoring the impact of colonization, virtually makes redundant the need to present a culturally specific contemporary Maoridom. Despite this, all contemporary Maori writing represents the Maori as hybrid or composite subject, acknowledging that the original essence of pre-contact Maori has now disappeared. Kura explains that the loss of the death customs of eating the body parts, which occurred with the advent of the musket, is metonymic of the loss of tribal autonomy. Colonization with its superior technology created overwhelming loss:

Too many dead for the ovens and stomachs of the avengers. The all-important genealogies were being affected, whole families were disappearing, lands and food sources were being abandoned, negotiations were not able to take place, liaisons were not able to be made according to tradition. The world had changed forever. (110)

In Frantz Fanon's writing, where "every scene of violence oscillates between two discursive attractors: the instrumental and absolute,"¹⁷ violence becomes instrumental when the colonized rises up against the colonizer to challenge oppression, to "wreck the colonial world."¹⁸ Fanon provides a framework for identifying the different uses of violence in postcolonial Maori fiction. As Patrice Wilson argues, it reaffirms a claim to a residual identity, as a symbolic act of repossession, "recreated because that identity was under threat of destruction from an imposing colonial culture."¹⁹ But in Alan Duff's fiction violence is fetishized, becoming an end unto itself, and to that extent a greatly reduced act of repossession. Violent behaviour is ritualized in his first novel, *Once Were Warriors* (1990), and choreographed in the pub and gangland scenes in the film version, creating an atmosphere of power and menace. Parallel to this is the novel's domestic violence, the rape of Jake and Beth Heke's daughter Grace, which leads to Grace's suicide, the reformation of Beth and the break-up of her marriage to Jake. Duff's essentialist representations of the Maori as violent, racially degenerate, a caste that has lost its warrior-status and sunk

¹⁷ Samira Kawash, "Terrorists and vampires: Fanon's spectral violence of decolonization," in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Anthony C. Alessandrini (London: Routledge, 1999): 235.

¹⁸ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, tr. Constance Farrington (*Les damnés de la terre*, 1961, tr. 1965; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990): 31.

¹⁹ Patrice Wilson, "Patricia Grace's *Potiki*: Diminished Violence," 120.

into an insensate state, is a crude reduction of contemporary realities. This negativity about the diminished mana or status of the present-day Maori extends to the possibilities for recuperation that the other writers offer and implies that assimilation into Pakeha society is the logical solution.²⁰ From this perspective, the violent death of Grace Heke with its sacrificial logic – reuniting the community through a self-corrective model – does not fit any of the postcolonial paradigms of resistance to, or renegotiation with, the Pakeha that Grace, Hulme or Witi Ihimaera use.²¹

Alongside instrumental violence, and perhaps unleashed by it, Fanon presents the absolute violence of decolonization which destroys both colonizer and colonized and makes way for a new beginning. This model is closer to the violence in *the bone people*, which occurs within a structure of healing, redemption, and reconciliation, and whose outcome involves some synthesis between Maori and Pakeha epistemologies and cultural values. It can also be applied to Grace's agenda.²² The abused, battered bodies of the children at the centre of *the bone people*, *Potiki* and *Baby No-Eyes* can, on the one hand, be interpreted as metonymic of the disintegration of the essential, indigenous tribal body under colonial rule. On the other hand, desecration of the body's autonomy calls for recuperation: physical healing and psychic amendment. In suggesting the need for a new order, a change in the social sphere, these bodies appear as potential spiritual sources of agency. Simon's lacerated body can be symbolically aligned with the neglect and devastation of Aotearoa/New Zealand at the hands of both Maori and Pakeha. Simon's perception that the new unity between himself, Kerewin and Joe, which is neither love nor *aroha* but something in between, creates "the heart and muscles and mind of something perilous and new," is one way of overcoming the negative legacy of the past.²³ As a symbol of his society's potential, he can only activate his vision through an encounter with Maori spirituality on the part of the adults, Joe, and Kerewin. The broken bodies of these "Love's wounded beings" – based on corporeal stereotypes such as powerful, maternal women, violent men, sexually ambiguous artists/narrators – require cultural renewal within the sociosphere before their own personal regeneration can begin.²⁴ This outcome can be aligned with Fanon's "world-shattering violence of decoloniza-

²⁰ Janet Wilson, "Alan Duff: Brown Man's Burden?" *Brief* 31 (2004): 96–105.

²¹ Heim, *Writing Along Broken Lines*, 50–51.

²² Rod Edmond, "No Country for Towers: Reconsidering *the bone people*," *Landfall* 183 (1993): 278–79.

²³ Keri Hulme, *the bone people* (1983; London: Hodder & Stoughton 1985): 4.

²⁴ Anna Smith, "Keri Hulme and 'Love's Wounded Beings,'" in *Opening the Book: New Essays on New Zealand Writing*, ed. Mark Williams & Michele Leggott (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1995): 140.

tion,”²⁵ because Simon represents “a new language and a new humanity,”²⁶ which will rise up in the wake of the decolonized and decolonizer relationship. In Grace’s *Potiki* and *Baby No-Eyes*, by contrast, the new beginning stems more from the Maori need for survival through recuperation of the past than from Maori–Pakeha reconciliation.

Baby No-Eyes: The Dematerialized/Ghostly Body

In *Baby No-Eyes*, Grace’s interest in marginal and liminal states, evident in her focus on the broken child Toko in *Potiki* and other traumatized or physically diminished characters in the stories in *The Sky People* (1994), extends to a concern for the dead, dismembered child. Grace ‘reincarnates’ this figure as a spiritual presence to construct a pattern of survival which involves realigning the Maori past with the present.

The ghost of Baby No-Eyes appears to haunt her family soon after her burial, and because Baby lacks a name which might fix her into an identity she becomes a mobile spirit-figure, attaching herself to different characters, and comforting her mother, Te Paania, until she gives birth to Tawera. It is Baby’s intimate relationship with Tawera, her four-years-younger half-brother, that has the greatest potential for the family’s future. Together they combine to construct an “elephant” human; Baby has “stomach eyes,” for, as Te Paania realizes when she sticks the eyes back on to either side of her navel before the burial, “It’s true, isn’t it that our stomachs give us sight. It’s true that it’s through our insides that we know what we know” (73). As a ghost, her arms on her hips make ears, while he provides the trunk (his “raho” or penis, which can squirt water): this physical recombination of half-brother and -sister into a new, complete body anticipates Tawera’s recovery of Baby’s spiritual meaning and presence in artistic form.

Granny Kura undergoes a different process of transformation. The shock of discovering that Baby’s eyes have been lost at the hospital jolts her into recovering her grasp of Maori and, simultaneously, her memories of the colonial past. Through word-play – sliding the signifier on baby/body and Shane/shame – Grace effects a textual metamorphosis of the dead into living memory (60, 65). Kura’s deceased grandson Shane comes to symbolize the power to overcome her shame and liberate “the wildness, like hidden treasure, trapped within” (107). On her death-bed, Kura asks Tawera to let the ghost accompany her, and he realizes that his sister belongs more to his great grandmother than to himself because Kura, honouring Shane’s wish to tell the old

²⁵ Kawash, “Terrorists and vampires: Fanon’s spectral violence of decolonization,” 235.

²⁶ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 28.

stories, has begun to speak Maori again in an attempt to recover some lost essence, stating “By the time I die I hope to be again who I was born to be” (66). Baby’s dismemberment and odd ghostly reconstruction with Tawera into a new type of elephant–human with her eyes strapped to her stomach symbolically embodies the repressed past that Granny Kura must disinter, the dislocated and fragmented culture of the tribal society that she then pieces back together. Baby’s transience refers to the evanescence of memories and oral history, for her return to the mortal world implies that these fragments can momentarily be recovered. On the other hand, Baby’s relationship with Tawera means that she transcends both her death and that of her great-grandmother; for, at the novel’s conclusion, Tawera, now an artist, captures her on canvas. In her ghostliness he discovers a transcendent aesthetic principle: a means of representing the void, the vacuum which existed before life began, represented as “Spaze. Te Kore, the nothing” (293); this is evident in gaps in his art, in his half-sister’s mutilation, his loneliness after her departure, and by association with the womb of Hine-Nui-Te-Po, the dagger-toothed goddess of death; Michelle Keown convincingly demonstrates that Grace completes her symbolic structure by this means.²⁷ Baby can be compared to Simon’s symbolic role in *the bone people*; according to Eva Rask Knudsen:

As silence (Simon) he symbolizes the beginning, ‘Te Kore’, and as light (Clare [his given name]) he symbolizes the inchoate mythic tension between unity and separation which beings about the end of darkness and the beginning of the new dawn into which present-day Maori must merge.²⁸

She comes to represent those lost figures who were rendered invisible during colonization, but who are now summoned up through the artist’s act of will. Tawera makes explicit his mission in the epilogue: to give substance to those who have been washed out of history, while becoming ghostly himself in doing so:

“O I know I’ve been given my incantation – to make visible who was invisible. Sister unseen [...] And I’ll become the invisible one, opposite, with a hand reaching forward. I’ll be unseen – except that now and again, I’ll step in to meet her. We’ll go roller blading together in a place where she will be my eyes.” (294)

²⁷ Keown, “‘Sister Seen’: Art, Mythology and the Semiotic in Patricia Grace’s *Baby No-Eyes*,” 89–94.

²⁸ Knudsen, *The Circle and the Spiral*, 174.

Conclusion

In contemporary Maori writing, the state of the disordered, neglected or wounded child, who is paradoxically enabling, is a privileged site of investigation, although childhood as a state of existence is not specifically revalued. Simon in *the bone people*, Toko in *Potiki*, or those who have just reached adolescence like Grace in *Once Were Warriors* or are not yet born like Baby in *Baby No-Eyes* enable the most radical interventions in the colonial and/or postcolonial spheres of representation. In colonial ideology, the child was also a privileged concept. But according to Jo–Ann Wallace there is some slippage between constructions of ‘the child’ as “pre-literate, pre-writing, prehistoric” and “the native Other under imperialism,” for “‘an idea of the child – of the not yet fully evolved or consequential subject – made thinkable the colonial apparatus officially dedicated to, in Macaulay’s words, ‘the improvement of the colonised peoples’.”²⁹ The image of childishness which these paternalistic structures fostered was one in which many Maori were complicit, even to the point of mimicry, as stereotypical representations of the indigene in Jane Campion’s 1994 film *The Piano* illustrate.

In the course of the last thirty years, during which radical Maori have advocated Maori sovereignty and a separatist system of governance, such inherited, eurocentric paradigms have come under renewed scrutiny. Ambiguous nineteenth-century discourses of the child as a figure of sentimentalized wisdom which nevertheless also embodies “national human capital, responsive to careful husbanding and investment,” values which imperialism consolidated – these are open to reinterpretation.³⁰ Postcolonial Maori writing, returning to the Wordsworthian axiom that “the child is father of the man,” appropriates this figure to its revisionist agenda. The simplistic colonial stereotype is re-configured in the wild but intuitively wise children of Grace’s and Hulme’s writing, who, although they elude the authority and control of their parents, elders and communities, are blessed with visionary powers and have destinies of consequence for their societies. These children do not require special nurturing; rather, their superior consciousness and intuitive resources seek to transcend their childish limitations, to contradict official discourses and to offer the nation new potential. Simon, mute, with a special understanding of the need for a new partnership and unity, seems to be providentially guided; Toko, deformed from birth, is also endowed with “a special knowing,” for he sees spiritual realities, and can predict the future; as a ‘culture hero’, a type of

²⁹ Jo–Ann Wallace, “De-Scribing *The Water-Babies*: ‘The Child’ in Post-Colonial Theory,” in *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*, ed. Chris Tiffin & Alan Lawson (London: Routledge, 1993): 175–76.

³⁰ Wallace, “De-Scribing *The Water-Babies*,” 176.

Maui, the Polynesian demi-god, and as an incarnation of Toko, his grandfather, he links the present with the historical and mythological pasts;³¹ in *Baby No-Eyes*, the nameless child who reappears as a ghost is finally respected as “the wild” strain, which the Maori collectively lost through the cultural amnesia following their pacification under colonialism. In *Once Were Warriors*, Grace Heke, with her unusual mental and emotional faculties and a name which acquires an explicitly sacrificial overtone after her death, making her an enabling symbol for her family, also has affinities with these children.

In emphasizing the figure of the child and, by implication, the state of childhood as heightened entity, the fiction of Grace and Hulme reconnects with one of the great themes of New Zealand literature from the colonial period to the 1960s. In Katherine Mansfield’s short stories and in Janet Frame’s *The Lagoon: Stories* (1951) and novel *Owls Do Cry* (1957), childhood is represented as a privileged state. These and other writers identify aspects of their own marginality in a largely philistine society, their sense of social alienation and powerlessness, yet also their intuitive grasp of an invisible truth. Allen Curnow, by contrast, acclaims the child in a way that anticipates the Maori handling of this motif. In a sonnet from the 1940s, “The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch,” the child represents the hope that future generations will fully occupy the land: “Not I, but some child born in a wonderful year / Will learn the trick of standing upright here.”³² Unlike both the adult and the now-extinct moa, the child represents adaptation to the different conditions of the new nation.

The innately knowing, powerfully instinctive child-figures of recent Maori writing synthesize both these views, but unlike earlier, modernist writers such as Frame and Mansfield, Grace and Hulme do not explore the states of childhood and adulthood so much as use the child as a tool to recuperate their cultural heritage. In foregrounding this necessary survival-process for their community, they seemingly have more in common with other black women’s writing than with their Pakeha forebears. Toni Morrison writes:

The novels may focus on individuals [...] but the salvation of individuals is not the point. Rather, these individuals, struggling to reclaim or redefine themselves, are portrayed as epiphenomenal to community and culture; and it is the strength and continuity of the black cultural heritage as a whole which is at stake and being tested.³³

³¹ Knudsen, *The Circle and the Spiral*, 208.

³² Allen Curnow, *Early Days Yet: New and Collected Poems 1941–1997* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997): 220.

³³ Toni Morrison, quoted in Gina Wisker, ““Disremembered and Unaccounted For”: Reading Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar*,” 87.

But marginalization has always been a preoccupation of the New Zealand writers who formed the literary mainstream, writers as diverse as Mansfield, Sargeson and Frame, and it dominates their explorations of subjectivity. To that extent, New Zealand literature in its infancy was out of sympathy with the imaginary body of the nation, which “comprises the body images established in a culture as they relate to each individual body through experience.”³⁴ In New Zealand colonial society, this is the corporeal image which was most suited to govern, that of the closed, aesthetically perfect, masculine body. Unexpectedly, then, contemporary Maori writing shows empathy with a major concern of early Pakeha writing which foregrounds the suffering and anxieties of a new, settler society. Both representations of the unruly child as subject-in-formation, and in need of discipline, challenge the patriarchal colonial image, The wounded but wise and knowing child of Maori fiction, stemming from Maoritanga’s mission of cultural recovery, continues to redefine this earlier image of the child in ways that intersect with the contemporary agenda of biculturalism, thus suggesting one path to a more hopeful future.

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³⁴ Burkitt, *Bodies of Thought*, 101–102.

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THE CARIBBEAN

Postcolonial Education and Afro-Trinidadian Social Exclusion

DERREN JOSEPH

Trinidad (& Tobago): A Product of ‘Colonialism’

To think that colonialism can end abruptly, dictated by independence’s inception, is naïve. Colonialism – which brings new values, new beliefs, foreign languages, alien traditions – cannot be shed like the skin of a snake and then tossed away and forgotten. It will always leave something behind, some form of colonial residue.¹

TRINIDAD IS ONE ISLAND in a republic dominated by the two largest islands – Trinidad and Tobago. The twin-island republic is just over 5,100 square kilometres in area, and has a population of 1.2 million. Ethnically, 39.5% is Afro-Trinidadian, 40.3% is Indo-Trinidadian, 18.4% mixed race, 1.8% others (including Chinese, whites etc.).²

Trinidad evolved differently from Tobago and, as such, is socially distinct. Different immigrant groups also experienced different histories – thereby making generalizations about the country as a whole difficult if not impossible. In this essay, only Trinidad will be examined, and the experience of the Afro-Trinidadian emphasized. Granted independence in 1962 and becoming a republic in 1976, Trinidad can be described as a postcolonial society.

‘Postcolonialism’, like other ‘post-isms’ does not signal a closing-off of that which it contains (colonial) but, rather, an opening of a field of inquiry and understanding following a period of relative closure. In his work, Terry

¹ Alaka Holla, *Post-Colonial Residue* (1997). www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/poldiscourse/holla4.html [23/05/02]

² CIA, *The World Fact Book 2001*. www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html [23/05/02]

DeHay defines postcolonialism as the social, political, economic, and cultural practices that arise in response and resistance to colonialism.³

It is against this background of response and resistance to (primarily) British colonialism that we find contemporary Trinidad, and the education system described here.

Education: Reflection and Perpetuation of the Social Order

The great hurdle T&T must now clear is a deficiency in both public and elite education tantamount to illiteracy. Particularly the educated, the top 20% of the school system goes all out to graduate with flying colours and at the expense of all the others, have almost no idea what their place is all about.⁴

When the British took control of agricultural Trinidad, ethnicity and property were the major determinants of social status. Today, education is arguably the major determinant. Yet the education system does not allow equality of opportunity or equality of outcomes. Members of the educated elite sometimes lend their voice to criticism of the education system. Few among them have been as vociferous as Dr Eric Williams (first Prime Minister) and Dr Lloyd Best (university lecturer, former politician and newspaper columnist).

Social Exclusion

To assume that because a man comes from a certain country or belongs to a specific ethnic group, or has benefited from a certain type of education, this automatically makes him superior to another is what I term cultural arrogance [...]

Such a person walks into a community situation not only with the calm assurance that he has a lot to offer, but with the absolute certainty that he can help. Were anyone to ask him whether he thought that he might be helped in the encounter, the answer would very probably be a puzzled look and a polite: 'I beg your pardon?' [...]

Cultural arrogance is eliminated only when both sides recognise that that they have as much to receive as to give and if, the longer the dialogue continues, each begins to feel guilty at having benefited far more from the encounter than the other.⁵

³ Terry DeHay, *A Postcolonial Perspective (Work in progress by Terry DeHay)*, 1998. www.sou.edu/English/IDTC/Issues/postcol/Resources/Terry/dehay.htm

⁴ Lloyd Best, "Senseless stalemate as logical sequence," *Internet Express: News from Trinidad & Tobago and the Caribbean Region* (22 December 2001). <http://www.trinidadexpress.com> [22/12/2001]

⁵ Gerard Pantin, *The mobilization of grassroots communities: The experience of SERVOL. Aids to programming UNICEF assistance to education. Extracted from the key*

Youth Social Exclusion in the Caribbean

Some conclusions can be drawn from studies (such as those cited by the ILO⁶) on the problems faced by youth in terms of access to the labour market and youth training and employment. The typical characteristics of such youth at risk are that

- they are predominantly male, 15–19/21;
- they come from dysfunctional family and community backgrounds;
- they have some secondary education (incomplete) or little formal education; and
- they belong to subcultures marked by substance abuse and criminal activity.

Young males are usually highlighted as being more ‘at risk’ than females, not just in the Caribbean but in many other national discourses on social exclusion. Jeanette Morris, referring to Connell’s work (which tends to focus on Australia), argues that

[...] middle-class boys construct their masculinities through an emphasis on rationality and responsibility, and that they are rewarded by a social power that gives them access to higher education and entry to the professions. The failed boys, on the other hand, tend to claim other sources of power and definitions of masculinity such as sporting prowess, physical aggression and sexual conquest. Social exclusion and academic rejection often lead the boys who have failed to embrace a compensatory anti-school culture.⁷

From here, there is the need to focus on issues unique to Trinidad.

Youth Social Exclusion in Trinidad & Tobago

The Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) United Nations National Human Development Report for 2000 was entitled “Youth at Risk.” Hans Geiser, the UNDP resident representative based in Trinidad, is puzzled that, while the energy-based economy is sound,

note address to the 4th international community education association conference in Dublin, Ireland, 8–12 August 1983 (UNESCO, 1984): 5. (Fr Pantin is the founder of a community development NGO in Trinidad.)

⁶ International Labour Organisation, *The Challenge of Youth Unemployment in the Caribbean: the Role of Youth Employment Training Programmes*, 1998. http://www.ilocarib.org.tt/infosources/youth_employment/youthcont.htm [23/05/2002]

⁷ Jeanette Morris, “Schools need male role model,” *Internet Express: News from Trinidad & Tobago and the Caribbean Region* May 14, 2002. <http://www.trinidadexpress.com> [14/05/2002]

increasing numbers of people, and young people in particular, are left out, marginalised, disenchanted and do not participate in or benefit from the expanding opportunities.⁸

The point must be made that before oil-based wealth, there was wealth from sugar – which existed alongside marginalized groups – peasants, slaves, and indentured servants. So the honourable representative is noting a phenomena that has always existed.

In Trinidad & Tobago, about 36% of the population are thought to be living under the poverty line of US\$ 100 per month. Further, 11% of the population could be classified as extremely poor or unable to afford the cost of a minimum food basket. Major sub-groups among the poor include unemployed youths, urban-dwellers and female-headed households.⁹

The government of T&T now sees poverty as part of a larger pattern of ‘exclusion’ that faces them. Social exclusion has, since 2000, become part of the debate in T&T. The principal exclusionary factors, in 2000, were considered to be

- restricted access to the secondary school system which only caters for two-thirds of the school age population;
- the 30% unemployment among the 15 to 19 age group (vs. 14% for the rest of the population);
- poverty, reduced family care, exposure to youth protective services and the judicial system which pose developmental risks that contribute to negative outcomes such as youth involvement in crime and drug culture, early sexual activity and pregnancy.¹⁰

But does this shift represent growth in understanding the processes that the term ‘social exclusion’ denotes, or simply a shift in political rhetoric?

Scarlette Gillings describes social exclusion as the deprivation of access to important social interactions and benefits – an inadequate level of participa-

⁸ Hans Geiser, UNDP resident representative for Trinidad and Tobago (2000): quoted from interview with Peter Richards, *Trinidad and Tobago: UNDP Report Tells of Neglect and Despair among Youth*, 2001. http://www.oneworld.org/ips2/apr01/13_43_023.html [23/05/2002]

⁹ UNDP, *Poverty Programme outline for Trinidad & Tobago* (1998). <http://www.undp.org.tt/poverty/tpovout.htm> [23/05/2002]

¹⁰ World Bank, *Trinidad & Tobago Youth and Social Development: An Integrated Approach for Social Inclusion* (Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development Sector Management Unit; Caribbean Country Management Unit; Latin America and The Caribbean Region; Report no. 20088-TR, 2000): 9. http://www.wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDS_Ibank_Servlet?pcnt=details&eid=000094946_00080105305242 [23/05/2002]

tion in society.¹¹ This may be reflected in economic, social or political dimensions, and its elements may include particular manifestations of deprivation as well as the institutional mechanisms, relationships and behaviours that cause deprivation. Yet state responses point to an unwillingness to appreciate the wider implications of discourse on ‘social exclusion’. It must go beyond materialistic definitions of ‘poverty’.

The UNDP National Human Development Report 2000 echoes the aforementioned World Bank report, and is quoted as noting:

The system of education in Trinidad and Tobago starts with an input of some 93 percent of the five-year-old population. By the time students have reached secondary level, less than 50 percent are still there. By the end of the sixth form, the percentage is eight to ten percent and at the tertiary level, less than six percent.

It goes on to say that

Any system with such diminishing returns in efficiency, especially one aimed at human development, can hardly deny that ‘every child’ does not have ‘an inalienable right to an education, which facilitates the achievement of personal goals.’¹²

These reports highlight issues in the school system, as responsible for the lack of educational opportunities and consequent social exclusion of youth. So it is to the education system that we now turn.

Education in Addressing Social Exclusion

Historically, Trinidad and Tobago has had a high literacy rate and a concomitant obsession with education.¹³

In the context of Trinidad and Tobago, there seems to be consensus (among government agencies, funding bodies, and many civil society institutions) that increasing opportunities for education and training are among the key solutions to social exclusion facing young people. Assuming a causal relationship

¹¹ Scarlett Gillings, “Social funds and social inclusion: Jamaica social investment fund,” in *World Bank/WBI Conference. Social Protection in Latin America: Strategies for Policy Enhancement, Washington, D.C. June 8–9 1999*, ed. World Bank (1999): 2. <http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/LAC/LACInfoClient.nsf/d29684951174975c85256735007fef12/8e8a26f81bf e3edf852567fa007b755b?OpenDocument> [23/05/2002]

¹² Richards, *Trinidad and Tobago: UNDP Report Tells of Neglect and Despair Among Youth*.

¹³ Diana Mahabir, *SERVOL pre-school and adolescent training programmes in Trinidad and Tobago* (Monograph IIEP Research and Study Programme, 10, XY/N-1; Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning, 1993): 2.

between levels of education and training, and employment rates, there is a particular focus on the Afro-Trinidadian young people, who are viewed as particularly vulnerable.¹⁴

The World Bank noted that the socially excluded lacked ‘voice’ within the wider society.¹⁵ The education system in Trinidad and Tobago presents problems of access, quality and equity.¹⁶

The UNDP National Human Development Report for 2000 notes an interesting contradiction:

Research and analysis scrutinising the social groups and individuals the school system is processing also reveal very baffling outcomes, since some social groups and individuals appear more at risk of being funnelled out and or emerging with feelings of greater disempowerment than they had on entry.¹⁷

This report disclosed nothing new. In 1993, Diana Mahabir noted in a UNESCO report that

The effect is that the educational system has been marked by increasing violence, truancy and general lack of discipline in state schools and a decline in literacy standards generally. At one time Trinidad and Tobago had an official literacy rate of almost 95%. That has declined sharply in recent years and is now no more than an estimated 80% although education of all children is now compulsory, by law, until the age of 16. Many children, for economic reasons, are simply not sent to school. Others, although they attend primary school, receive so little attention that they reach the age of common entrance functionally illiterate.¹⁸

Contemporary discourses on education may be missing the point, as Fr Pantin (co-founder of a community-based education initiative) notes:

What they really want is to be independent men and women, in their own right, to make their own decisions and to have access to those structures of power, influence and finance, which are essential factors in getting anything accomplished in this modern world.¹⁹

But today’s education system is *not* designed to broaden “access to power structures.” It is based on a colonial model established to ensure social divis-

¹⁴ World Bank, *Trinidad & Tobago Youth and Social Development*, 10.

¹⁵ *Trinidad & Tobago Youth and Social Development*, 10.

¹⁶ *Trinidad & Tobago Youth and Social Development*, 29.

¹⁷ Richards, *Trinidad and Tobago: UNDP Report Tells of Neglect and Despair Among Youth*.

¹⁸ Mahabir, *SERVOL pre-school and adolescent training programmes in Trinidad and Tobago*, 4.

¹⁹ Pantin, *The mobilization of grassroots communities*, 7.

iveness, competitive social mobility, European cultural hegemony, and unequal economic relations. A particularly politically sensitive question would be: Why exactly are Afro-Trinidadians disproportionately represented among the socially excluded or socially vulnerable?

Bowen and Hobson assert that we must look to the past in trying to understand the present – “education, perhaps more than any other cultural process [...] carries almost all of its past with it into the present.”²⁰ To better deconstruct discourses on education in Trinidad, and to more fully contextualize education and its role within the wider society, it would be instructive to examine the evolution of education over time.

Education in the Late Pre-Emancipation Period (before 1834)

give them some education in the way of reading and writing but no more. Even then I would say educate only the bright ones; not the whole mass. If you educate the whole mass of the agricultural population, you will be deliberately ruining the country.²¹

Although Columbus landed on the island in 1498, the Spanish never colonized it until 1532. When the British seized control of Trinidad in 1797 (formalized in 1802), the island was a Spanish possession. Because the island’s population density had been considered low, settlers were attracted to the island in the 1790s through a ‘Cedula of Population’ which offered large tracts of land to Catholic settlers who mainly came from the French colonies in the aftermath of the French revolution.

The Spanish colonies are considered to have had more developed colonial education systems than the British or French.²² The author of a history of Jamaica is cited by Eric Williams as noting that, in British colonies,

[...] learning is here at the lowest ebb: there is no public school in the whole island, neither do they seem fond of the thing [...] The office of a teacher is looked upon as contemptible and no gentleman keeps company with one of that character; to read, write and cast accounts is all the education they deserve, and even these are but scurvily taught. A man of any parts or learning that would employ himself in that business would be despised or starve. The gentlemen, whose fortunes can allow it, send their children to Great Britain, where they have the advantage of a polite and generous education.²³

²⁰ James Bowen & Peter Hobson, *Theories of Education: Studies of Significant Innovation in Western Educational Thought* (Brisbane: John Wiley, 2nd ed. 1987): 2.

²¹ A slave owner quoted in Eric Williams, *The Negro in the Caribbean* (New York: Haskell House, 1942): 73.

²² Williams, *The Negro in the Caribbean*, 77.

²³ *The Negro in the Caribbean*, 70.

Williams goes on to say that if the above describes the situation as far as whites are concerned, the situation of the black slaves was worse. Slavery and the formal education of slaves were considered incompatible.²⁴ Education of blacks was pioneered by missionaries. It was the deliberate policy of the planters and governments to keep the people “ignorant and unlettered.” Education meant discontent, and planters must have their labour supply.²⁵

John Mangan argues that missionary work served to effect a transfer of pupils from one universe to the other, and goes on to say that the missionary educationalist played a key role in this cultural migration, as “spiritual salvation was part and parcel of a native commitment to British civilisation with its superior social, economic and political forms [...] civilisation had the stamp of divine approval upon it.”²⁶

At this time, the socially excluded were the slaves. Religious orders initiated slave education, and they were to play a pivotal role in shaping the system. In terms of social structure, education supported (with apparent divine authority) European cultural superiority and consequently – the European ‘right to rule’ – as well as validating ethnicity as a basis for slavery (of Africans and indigenous peoples). Status was determined by ethnicity and education reinforced this. In 1834, emancipation came at last.

Education in the Post-Emancipation Period (1834–1962)

Their concern with colour and lightness of skin was almost an obsession [...] The mulatto [half black, half white] middle class deprecated the vernacular songs but went into ecstasies over the Lancashire dialect, shunned Negro spirituals, spent their holidays in England, and cultivated Oxford accents.²⁷

In 1833, the British government’s plan for the Abolition of Slavery pledged to “aid the local legislatures in providing for the religious and moral introductions of the Negro population to be emancipated.”²⁸ As such, the government

²⁴ Carl C. Campbell, *The Young Colonials: A Social History of Education in Trinidad and Tobago 1834–1839* (Mona, Jamaica: The Press, UWI, 1996): 24.

²⁵ Williams, *The Negro in the Caribbean*, 71, 73.

²⁶ John A. Mangan, *The Imperial Curriculum: Racial Images and Education in the British Colonial Experience* (London: Routledge, 1993): 20.

²⁷ Eric Williams, *Education in the British West Indies*, foreword by John Dewey (New York: University Place Book Shop, 2nd ed. 1968): 8.

²⁸ Cited in Carl C. Campbell, *Towards an Imperial Policy for the Education of Negroes in the West Indies after Emancipation: Social and Economic obstacles to the development of popular education in post emancipation Jamaica 1834–1865* (Mona, Jamaica: The Press, UWI, 1988): 10.

allocated funds to the various missionary societies with agents in the West Indies to build new schoolhouses and run schools free of government control.

The Imperial scheme for West Indian education was copied from the plans devised for Ireland and England. In Ireland in particular, where Roman Catholicism was the predominant religion, a popular education scheme supported only non-denominational schools. This was the model used in Trinidad; no Catholic denominational schools were supported with public funds.²⁹

From 1845, indentured servants began to arrive from the Indian subcontinent to supplement the dwindling labour force on the plantations, caused by emancipation in 1834. These new arrivals were based on the rural plantations and at first lived separately from the larger population. In today's terms, they were socially excluded, at the same time as the ex-slaves were seeking social integration.

At the time of emancipation, Trinidad had only been British for 32 years, the vast majority of the middle and upper classes were Catholic, and education began to be used to 'anglicize' the island.³⁰ Aside from beliefs in the racial inferiority of non-whites, there were fears of losing part of the labour force if education became a lever of upward social mobility. Fees and various rules (such as those on illegitimacy) restricted secondary-school access by non-whites. The children of the planter class stood to inherit businesses and property, but for coloureds (mixed-race people) and blacks, education was crucial for social advancement.

Post-primary education was almost exclusively limited to one kind of school, the academic, college preparatory type, pointing towards the clerical, official and professional callings.

The Queen's Collegiate College School ("QRC," founded in 1859) was an attempt by the colonial administration to pursue a policy of anglicization.³¹ English university graduates ran it, and the best students were offered 'Oxbridge' scholarships every year. It was modelled on Eton. When Oxbridge re-organized their programmes of study to form closer links with the newer grammar schools of England, QRC was the first school outside of England to participate in the Cambridge Examination System. One of the early Masters of QRC was the editor of the *Port of Spain Gazette*, a newspaper then supporting the Protestant English interests against the Catholic French.

The upper classes, in general, lived a life apart from that of the rest of the community. During the last third of the nineteenth century and the first third

²⁹ Campbell, *Towards an Imperial Policy for the Education of Negroes in the West Indies after Emancipation*, 5.

³⁰ Campbell, *The Young Colonials*, 2.

³¹ *The Young Colonials*, 17.

of the twentieth, many of the Masters of the secondary schools were graduates of Oxford and Cambridge. C.L.R. James notes that their social influence went far beyond their actual numbers as children of

Englishmen and local whites, many sons of the brown-skinned middle class, Chinese, Indians and black boys, often poor who had won some of the very few scholarships to these schools, and others, not too many, whose parents could afford it. These Oxford and Cambridge men taught Latin and Greek, mathematics and English Literature, but they also taught, rather diffused, what I can only call the British public-school code.³²

In the rival (Catholic) St Mary's College and its sister school – St Joseph's Convent – most staff were French and students spoke French and Spanish at home. St Joseph's Convent and St Mary's College were like the local branches of French metropolitan schools. Unrecognized by the colonial administration (before 1890) were the Canadian Presbyterian Mission schools for the Indentured Servants, which operated mainly in the southern part of the island. These immigrants from India generally lived apart from the larger population. Their social integration was accelerated, however, in 1916, when the Indentureship system was cancelled.

There were ongoing debates about whether secondary schools should focus on agriculture and engineering, which is what the colony needed economically. Nevertheless, the focus remained on preparation for Cambridge entrance exams and Government service. Williams believes that graduates developed a contempt for manual labour, which already had to struggle against the stigma inherited from its association with slavery.³³ The result was the creation of a vested interest in the colony in favour of the alien system because of the opportunities (for social advancement and domination) it offers to a few educated colonials; and white-collar unemployment when the supply of secondary school graduates exceeded the openings in government and similar services.

As a geographical entity, Trinidad was culturally separated from its nearest neighbour, Venezuela, by the promotion of English as a first language and French as the second language in the school system. In terms of social structure, education served to preserve the role of the Catholic elite while consolidating English rule and disseminating English cultural values. Newly freed blacks and coloureds were effectively allowed limited social advancement so long as it served the needs of the colonial administration (effectively through the civil service).

³² C.L.R. James, *Cricket* (Essex: Anchor, 1986): 120–21.

³³ Williams, *Education in the British West Indies*, 12.

As a group, the Indo-Trinidadians who arrived from 1845 to 1916 were socially excluded. They tended to live apart, spoke a non-European language, worshipped differently, and were educated separately. Sat Maharaj notes that the Hindus of the colony of Trinidad & Tobago at that time were humiliated, ridiculed and stereotyped on account of their religion and culture. He goes on to cite the attitude of the Creole (non-Hindu) towards Hindus expressed in the *Port-of-Spain Gazette* in 1851:

The universal characteristics of the Hindoos are habitual disregard for truth, pride, tyranny theft, falsehood, deceit, conjugal infidelity, filial disobedience, ingratitude (the Hindoos have no word expressive of thanks), a litigious spirit, perjury, treachery, covetousness, gaming, servility, hatred, revenge, cruelty, private murder, the destruction of illegitimate children (particularly by procuring abortions) [...] and the want of tenderness and compassion to the poor, the sick and the dying.³⁴

By the time of independence in 1962, an educated elite made up mainly of Afro-Trinidadians assumed political power. As education began to drive social advancement, a lack of education meant social stagnation or demotion.

Education in the Early Post-Independence Period (1962–1980)

Pre-independence education in Trinidad was governed by the Education Ordinance(s) (from the 1870s onwards). Among other things, it enshrined

- universal primary school education;
- intermediate schools for those who did not go on to secondary schools;
- denominational boards (religious boards appointed by the specific religious authority concerned and responsible for the management of all schools of that particular religious affiliation) totally controlled their assisted schools;
- teachers were not public servants; and
- denominational boards were assisted by public grants (usually for salaries).

On independence in 1962, the People's National Movement party (with its popular support among Afro-Trinidadians) won the election on a platform of secondary education for all – “to educate is to emancipate.” Attempts to exert greater control of denominational board-controlled schools were resisted and the government was forced to compromise in the form of the “Concordat” or “Assurances for the Preservation and Character of Denominational Schools.” Among other things, it held that

³⁴ Sat Maharaj, “Hindus are stronger than ever,” *Internet Express: News from Trinidad & Tobago and the Caribbean Region*, 3 March 2002. <http://www.trinidadexpress.com> [09/03/2002]

- government is responsible for teachers but denominational boards can object;
- pupils were not to be coerced into religious expressions that were not of their faith;
- government will continue to aid denominational schools;
- 80% of Common Entrance Examination (CEE – secondary school entrance exam) places go to the government and 20% are retained by denominational boards / school principals (who would be guided by the CEE); and
- all new secondary schools are to be established by the government.

Dana Seetahal believes that this dual system is perhaps the best example of resolving cultural diversity and diffusing conflict between State and Church.³⁵ Nasser Mustapha disagrees, siding instead with Eric Williams: the Church schools were (and continue to be) socially divisive and “the breeding ground of disunity.”³⁶

As the number of government secondary schools increased, power shifted in the State’s favour by the late 1960s. In response to social discontent and an ‘oil boom’ in the early 1970s, junior secondary schools, senior comprehensive schools and the shift system (same facilities used by one group/shift in the morning and another in the evening) were introduced to increase the number of secondary-school places. In 1997, the Minister of Education termed the shift system a disaster.³⁷ The 1970s also saw an expansion of vocational training in secondary schools and post-secondary vocational institutions. It should be noted that secondary-school construction was concentrated along what is called the “East–West corridor” to the north of the island. These areas had a large Afro-Trinidadian population.

A three-campus regional university system modelled on the University of London was established in 1962 in the West Indies with a campus in Trinidad (northern part as well). It was to be the centre for tertiary-level research and teaching. Its monopoly continues to this day.

³⁵ Dana Seetahal, “Denominational Boards and the Education Act,” in *Cultural Diversity: Politics, Education and Society; Conference Proceeding*, ed. Ramesh Deosaran (Trinidad: McAl Psychological Research Centre, University of the West Indies, 1995): 96.

³⁶ Nasser Mustapha, “Commentary on ‘Denominational Boards and the Education Act’,” in *Cultural Diversity: Politics, Education and Society. Conference Proceeding*, ed. Deosaran, 99.

³⁷ Kumar Mahabir, *Sector Report on Education, Trinidad and Tobago: Information on the education system in Trinidad and Tobago* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: British High Commission, 1998): 27.

Education Today

There are some 10 000 fewer places in secondary schools than there are students trying to qualify each year. Those who do not qualify are, in effect, barred from further academic development. There are ‘school leaving’ classes – which come under the general umbrella of a post-primary programme for these students, which, theoretically, if they do well enough, may give them another chance to enter junior secondary school. For most of them however, it is a sort of ‘holding bay’ until they reach the age of 16 and compulsory attendance of school ceases.³⁸

Today, the government typically spends between 4% and 4.5% of GNP on education – compared to Barbados’ 7%.³⁹ Inequity in primary and secondary schools is evident, both in the scores resulting from the Common Entrance Examination (CEE, the exam to compete for a place in secondary schools), and in the practice of ‘tracking’ which places students with poor scores in schools of ‘lesser’ quality.⁴⁰ In 2001, a Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) replaced CEE – the main difference being the introduction of a Continuous Assessment Programme (CAP). Yet ‘tracking’ remains and considerable variation in exam performance is expected to continue, based on a number of variables, including

- the management authority of the primary school;
- education district;
- county of residence;
- sex of student;
- socio-economic status; and
- self-declared race group.

Writing on prestige / denominational schools, Sat Maharaj says:

The reality that many of the social problems plaguing our country are the inescapable result of the massive failure and dysfunctional operation of government-run schools. It is only because of the denominational schools that we do not face a greater disaster. Mary King, Lloyd Best, Bro. Michael Samuel and many other analysts have noted the link between low quality schooling and social problems.⁴¹

³⁸ Mahabir, *SERVOL pre-school and adolescent training programmes in Trinidad and Tobago*, 3.

³⁹ Louis Araujo, “The good and bad of a boom,” *Trinidad Guardian* (online edition), 22 February 2002. <http://www.guardian.co.tt>

⁴⁰ World Bank, *Trinidad & Tobago Youth and Social Development*, 30.

⁴¹ Sat Maharaj, “Unite against Manning’s school threat,” *Internet Express: News from Trinidad & Tobago and the Caribbean Region* (1 May 2002). <http://www.trinidadexpress.com/01/05/2002>

As can be expected, children from higher socio-economic status households score better than those from lower socio-economic households. Students of self-declared African origin are more likely to score lower than those of mixed or Indian origin.⁴² The latter, in turn, have normally performed more poorly than Syrian/Lebanese, Caucasian and Chinese students. Students from lower income families are placed disproportionately in ‘inferior’ state-run junior secondary, senior comprehensive, and composite schools (about 70% of enrolment) – or fail to gain a place altogether. Afro-Trinidadians fare worst in the tracking system.

Students from upper- and middle-income families are more likely to enter five- and seven-year traditional schools (often known as “prestige” schools, most of which are denominational), as seen in the table below. This stratification reinforces perceptions of inferiority and low self-esteem among students who perform ‘poorly’ (being placed in schools perceived as inferior or not being placed at all). In this regard, Oakes noted that “tracking forces upon schools an active role in perpetuating social, economic and political inequalities.”⁴³

Mean CEE Score and Enrolment in Secondary Schools,
by School Type and Family Income Level⁴⁴

School Type	Mean CEE Score (%)	Upper Income (%)	Middle Income (%)	Lower Income (%)	Unemployed parents (%)	Others (%)	Number of Students
junior secondary:							
a.m. shift	54	1.9	42.9	36.7	5.7	12.9	13,684
p.m. shift	53	1.9	41.5	36.3	5.0	15.3	12,866
whole day	60	3.8	47.8	36.6	2.8	7.1	4,624
snr. comprehensive	55	3.0	48.7	31.6	3.9	12.7	15,991
composite	57	2.3	42.9	35.5	6.0	13.3	7,983
5-year traditional	75	9.5	62.3	19.4	2.4	6.5	10,460
7-year traditional	82	19.6	60.8	11.3	2.0	6.3	17,423
6th-form college	–	14.1	63.0	13.0	3.2	6.7	284
totals		6.9	50.3	28.0	3.9	10.8	83,315

In Mustapha’s view, a dual system (state and denominational schools) exists administratively but not sociologically. He sees this system thus:

⁴² World Bank, *Trinidad & Tobago Youth and Social Development*, 31.

⁴³ Jeannie Oakes, “Tracking: Beliefs, Practices, and Consequences,” in *Social Issues and Education: Challenge and Responsibility*, ed. Alex Molnar (Alexandria VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1987), cited in World Bank, *Trinidad & Tobago Youth and Social Development*, 31.

⁴⁴ Vena Jules, cited in World Bank, *Trinidad & Tobago Youth and Social Development*, 31.

[...] a hierarchically structured system rigidly stratified along lines of social class [...] the conflict is no longer between church and state, but between different socio-economic groups. Trinidad and Tobago today has a highly centralised education system in which the sphere of influence of the Church is minimised. The system reflects the growing secularism of the wider society [...] emphasis being placed on rigid competition of academic achievement rather than on instilling positive values and noble human ideals [...] Hence the culture of the individual school seems to be the culture of a particular class within the hierarchy [...] the stratified secondary school system reflects the stratification of the wider society.⁴⁵

With one third of students not making it to secondary school, the State began in the 1990s a Secondary Education Modernisation Programme (SEMP), to increase the number of secondary school places. SEMP essentially meant a massive school construction programme financed by a USD 105 million loan from the Inter American Development Bank (IADB). SEMP is ongoing, but it has been plagued by allegations of corruption. Critics point to teacher shortages and continued deterioration in discipline as a sign that school places alone would not effect meaningful change in the education system. These criticisms are summed up in the UNDP National Human Development Report for 2000:

Research and analysis scrutinising the social groups and individuals the school system is processing also reveal very baffling outcomes, since some social groups and individuals appear more at risk of being funnelled out and or emerging with feelings of greater disempowerment than they had on entry.⁴⁶

In terms of changes, however, the landscape of tertiary education is undergoing more transformation than primary and secondary education. It is generally accepted that the proportion of students (7%) who enter tertiary education is too low in Trinidad & Tobago to meet the manpower requirements of a modern society. Professor Spence at UWI is among those who argue for an expansion of tertiary education opportunities.⁴⁷

There have been many changes in the realm of continuing education (evening classes for working people). There has been a virtual explosion in the number of places in private-sector institutions. While the government has had to warn the public against institutions offering courses for which they are un-

⁴⁵ Mustapha, "Commentary on 'Denominational Boards and the Education Act'," 100.

⁴⁶ Quoted by Peter Richards, *Trinidad and Tobago: UNDP Report Tells of Neglect and Despair Among Youth*.

⁴⁷ John Spence, "The case for a second university," *Internet Express: News from Trinidad & Tobago and the Caribbean Region* (5 May 2002). <http://www.trinidadexpress.com/01/05/2002>

qualified, “joyfully, educational barriers are now broken,”⁴⁸ as the monopoly of the regional university – the University of the West Indies (UWI) is shattered. Tuition costs, however, remain prohibitive. Assisted by the internet and teleconferencing, universities from the UK, Canada and the USA are teaming up with local providers to offer a wide range of qualifications – from diplomas to PhDs.

Aside from this, UWI is expanding, and the government launched a continuing-education initiative known as the College of Science, Technology and Applied Arts in 2000 (COSTAAT) offering a range of certificates and associate degrees (many accredited by foreign institutions). In the late 1990s, the government established an Institute of Technology affiliated with a foreign university, prompting some to ask “will we ever learn to stand on our two feet?”⁴⁹

What is clear, however, is that most of the emerging tertiary-level education opportunities are in the field of business administration and IT, reflective of the view of education as a means of social mobility.

A 1970s calypso by the Mighty Sparrow remains as relevant today as then:

Children go to school and learn well,
otherwise later on in life you go catch real hell,
without an education in your head,
your whole life will be pure misery,
you better off dead.

For there is simply no room in this whole wide world,
for an uneducated little boy or girl.⁵⁰

Bridging the Divide

Little black boy, go to school and learn.
Little black boy, show some concern.
Little black boy, education is the key,
to get you off the streets and out of poverty.⁵¹

Social exclusion has always existed in Trinidad. The expansion of educational opportunities to combat social exclusion is perhaps necessary but not sufficient. Addressing notions of quality that underlie the ‘tracking’ system, and the

⁴⁸ Peter Richards, *Continuing Education Programmes Flourish In Trinidad and Tobago* (2001). http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/know_sharing/grassroots_stories/trinidad.shtml [23/05/2002]

⁴⁹ Spence, “The case for a second university.”

⁵⁰ Popular song written down from memory.

⁵¹ Chorus from a 1997 song called “Little Black Boy” as performed by a calypsonian called “Gypsy.”

power of the system to label students as failures, are also important. Although apparently meritocratic, studies point to the importance of ethnicity and family background in influencing performance within the tracking system. Afro-Trinidadian young people are viewed as particularly vulnerable.⁵² Yet for those who venture to explore this apparently ‘off-limits’ area (the performance gap between Afro-Trinidadians and the rest), there is little or no discourse from mainstream academics or politicians. This is usually the realm of conspiracy theorists and those regarded as extremists.

Mahabir, in a UNESCO report, echoes this point in concluding that

[...] a rigid educational system governed by a civil service bureaucracy that resists change or innovation, has limited financial resources and an inability to connect early childhood deprivation with poor academic achievement and patterns of criminal behaviour later in life are the chief causes of the particular patterns of neglect of the early childhood and adolescent educational levels. In addition traditional attitudes towards children are to regard them as possessions to be treated any way parents wish to treat them, under the stresses of low income and social neglect, without any training in parenting or understanding of child psychology.⁵³

At the same time, such conventional notions of socio-economic influences on student performance *do not* fully describe the contemporary situation, as Afro-Trinidadians had a ‘jump-start’ educationally vis-à-vis Indo-Trinidadians and exist under the same system as the other higher performing ethnic groupings. As John La Guerre noted, historically, there was

a neat division of labour in Trinidad [...] the Europeans controlled the economy and the state, the Indians were on the plantations and the Africans were in the public service or in the educational sector.⁵⁴

This historical situation changed, culminating in the 1995 rise to power of a political party with a largely Indo-Trinidadian base. With the Afro-Trinidadians having reduced influence in the public, private and education sector, the “theoreticians in the African descended community now feel that the African is an endangered species.”⁵⁵

⁵² World Bank, *Trinidad & Tobago Youth and Social Development*, 10.

⁵³ Mahabir, *SERVOL pre-school and adolescent training programmes in Trinidad and Tobago*, 9.

⁵⁴ John La Guerre, “Commentary on ‘Cultural Diversity and National Unity: a psychological agenda for research and public policy’,” in *Cultural Diversity: Politics, Education and Society*, ed. Deosaran, 56.

⁵⁵ La Guerre, “Commentary on ‘Cultural Diversity and National Unity’,” 56.

Another explanation for the performance gap and broader social exclusion is found in discourses on colonial education being used to justify colonization and reinforce notions of native inferiority:

[...] education, far from giving people the confidence in their ability and capacities to overcome obstacles or to become masters of the laws governing external nature as human beings, tends to make them feel their inadequacies and their inability to do anything about the condition of their lives.⁵⁶

According to this argument, as people are taught that literature and culture of any worth comes from Northern countries, then “the myth of England with which he is educated can only have meaning and weight by a calculated cutting down to size of all non-England. The first to be cut down is the colonial himself.”⁵⁷ This argument obviously falls flat when one considers that Afro-Trinidadians are educated side-by-side with other groups.

Yet another explanation is found in the idea of a disconnected or disrupted history. In this discourse, emphasis is placed on the psychological dislocation inflicted upon the diaspora by the two-pronged attack of slavery and colonialism. As Wilson Harris notes,

One must remember that breath is all the black man may have possessed at a certain stage in the Americas. He had lost his tribal tongue, he had lost everything except an abrupt area of space and lung; he possessed nothing but the calamitous air of broken ties in the New World.⁵⁸

Erna Brodber takes this idea of disconnection, and shows how it is exacerbated by inherited education systems:

Anita was studying. The kind that splits the mind from the body and both from the soul and leaves each open to infiltration.

[...]

“Percy and Master Willie can only be bad, bad, bad. He gives them no mind. He has [...] – Zombified them. That’s the word you need. –”

“–Meaning–”

“–Taken their knowledge of their original and natural world away from them and left them empty shells – duppies, zombies, living deads capable only of receiving orders from someone else and carrying them out. –”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o, cited in John Southard, *Colonial Education* (1997). <http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/Education.html>

⁵⁷ George Lamming, *Essays, Addresses and Interviews 1953–1990* (London: Karia, 1992), cited in Valerie Braman, *Political Discourse: Theories of Colonialism and Postcolonialism*. <http://65.107.211.208/poldiscourse/braman/1.html> [30/09/01]

⁵⁸ Wilson Harris, *History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas*, intro. Selwyn R. Cudjoe (Amherst MA: Callaloux, rev. ed. 1995): 44–45.

⁵⁹ Erna Brodber, *Myal* (London & Port of Spain: New Beacon, 1988): 28, 106–107.

Hence, the performance gap and exclusion of youth can be conceptualized (at least in part) as the extent to which the Afro-Trinidadian remains ‘un-grounded’ or psychologically disconnected – an historical scar made worse by socio-economic discrimination in the present education system. This is where projects such as SERVOL come in.

A Grounded Model – SERVOL

[Feedback from] the business community on SERVOL training has been positive and pronounced. The expressed preference for SERVOL-trained employees despite their limited academic backgrounds, when there are ample resources of unemployed academically superior job hunters, is an endorsement of both the SERVOL technical training and the SERVOL philosophies. In a basic civics course all students are taught about the concept of communities, why they are important and are given some insight into their environment generally, into their country, the Caribbean and the fact that it interrelates with other world communities.

The young people are taken to get national identification cards, passports, to open their own bank accounts, to attend sittings of parliament and to visit the town council. They are taught the basic elements of citizenship to emphasise the importance of themselves as members of a community and citizens of the country.⁶⁰

Aside from the state-sponsored and market-driven initiatives to expand the *quantity* of secondary and tertiary education, and training opportunities, there are initiatives that focus on the quality of education/training. These are initiatives that seek to redress what the UNDP terms “baffling outcomes” where “some social groups and individuals appear more at risk of being funnelled out and of emerging with feelings of greater disempowerment than they had on entry.”⁶¹

One such initiative is SERVOL. ‘SERVOL’ in Trinidad is part of the growing education/training movement to combat social exclusion. A Roman Catholic priest and a West Indies cricketer formed SERVOL (Service Volunteers for All) in 1970. One initiative under the SERVOL umbrella of project models, called the Adolescent Development Program (ADP), trains ‘dis-advantaged’ youth, aged 15 to 23, and effectively promotes their re-inclusion in ‘mainstream’ society. SERVOL staff and teachers emphasize six areas of development: social interaction, physical health, intellectual growth, creative

⁶⁰ 1985 Evaluation Report, cited in Mahabir, *SERVOL pre-school and adolescent training programmes in Trinidad and Tobago*, 32.

⁶¹ Richards, *Trinidad and Tobago: UNDP Report Tells of Neglect and Despair Among Youth*.

expression, emotional growth, and spiritual growth (not necessarily Catholic). Young people develop their skills through community service, followed by vocational training and formal certification. An impressive 95 percent of them complete the programme and enter the work force.⁶²

This notion of *community-owned* education to some extent echoes the notions advocated by Brodber in both her literary works and her community-development work in Woodside, Jamaica. Paul Bennell draws on SERVOL (and others worldwide) to analyse the emerging consensus that anti-social exclusion training and education initiatives should be

- community based;
- part of wider development initiatives that incorporate political, social and economic constraints and objectives;
- driven by people-centred pedagogy that maximises locally available skills and empowers people to learn for themselves; and
- facilitated by the state which performs a regulatory role with training provision contracted out to local/private providers.⁶³

For those who fall through the cracks in the formal education system, *community-owned* projects like SERVOL hold the key to their eventual re-engagement with the mainstream and with themselves. Projects such as SERVOL apparently help Afro-Trinidadians (though it should be noted that all groups are welcome) with issues of self-esteem, community cohesion, and individual identity. This is a very under-researched area, however, as noted by Bennell,⁶⁴ and my future ethnographic research will seek to bring understanding of the ways in which community-owned education projects create what Brodber terms ‘myal’ and ‘groundation’. These are Brodber’s concept-metaphors for healing (from a still present and painful past) and conducting of image/spirit to earth – oncept-metaphors that are inherently liberating and healing, as they validate and promote an indigenous, diasporic cosmology, as opposed to conventional North Atlantic ideologies.

⁶² International Center for Research on Women, *Adolescent Livelihoods: A Selective Review of Issues and Programs* (1999). <http://www.icrw.org/adollivelihoods.html> [17/08 /2001]

⁶³ Paul Bennell, *Learning to Change: Skills development among the economically vulnerable and socially excluded in developing countries* (Geneva: Employment and Training Department, ILO, 1999). <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/download/etp43.pdf> [23/05/2002]

⁶⁴ Bennell, *Learning to Change*.

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Voice as a Carnavalesque Strategy in West Indian Literature

Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending*

GISELLE RAMPAUL

DESPITE CARNIVAL'S RELEVANCE to West Indian society as cultural fact and symbol, and the fact that so much has been written on theories of the carnivalesque, it has been largely overlooked as an organizing principle and a specifically relevant critical tool in West Indian literature. The voice is an issue, however, that is dealt with extensively, as it bears significantly upon postcolonial literary criticism. In my essay, by examining Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending*, I would like to show that there is a strong relationship between the voice and theories of the carnivalesque, and to examine the ways in which this relationship impacts upon the status of West Indian literature as a popular discourse.

The carnivalesque, as usually defined by theorists, suggests the way in which themes associated with Carnival are *written* or *expressed* in the literary text. These themes may involve the subversion of authority – something that can be said to be the crux of postcolonial literature, which writes back against dominant and 'superior' discourses.¹ It also suggests the celebration of the common man, and the granting to him of the power of *voice*. In order to examine these issues, this essay is divided into two parts – the first explores the ways in which the selected texts are structured to convey an oral mode, and the second focuses on language as a carnivalizing strategy.

¹ I would like to clarify here that I am referring to the particular label of 'postcolonial literature' and that I am not suggesting that the main project of all writing produced in ex-colonial societies is necessarily to write back to the empire.

Structure

In the course of my reading, I have come across a term coined by Jennifer Rahim that I believe encapsulates a good deal of West Indian literature, especially when considered as carnivalesque. Rahim refers to Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey* as a "calypso narrative,"² and this, I think, is a good starting-point for the examination of the structure of the West Indian work of carnivalesque possibility. Other critics such as Michel Fabre and Kenneth Ramchand have also remarked on the structural similarities between the calypso and Sam Selvon's Moses novels, and on the extent to which these similarities contribute to the themes of subversion and survival. These structural similarities are crucial to the presence of the theme of Carnival in the novels, since the calypso is the musical form best associated with the West Indian version of the festival. The calypso as weapon and as 'retort' to colonial authority and superiority calls into question notions of resistance and counter-discourse but also suggests a popular form.

The calypso is related to the oral tradition of the islands that is often reflected in the literature of the region. It is a literature in which one can recognize structures and syntax consistent with the oral rather than with the more controlled and structured language usually associated with the scribal nature of imperialist literature.³ The oral discourse is, in turn, interpreted as an expression of the vitality of the people and a reflection of the historical practice of using the voice as weapon. It may, therefore, also be regarded as a powerful means of resistance to the prescribed literary structures offered by colonial education. This rebellion in itself is a frequently noted tendency of all post-colonial literatures and a dilemma with which the postcolonial writer must come to terms; but the calypso and oral structures that suffuse West Indian literature give it a specifically West Indian flavour unique to the region and therefore invites critical enquiry on different terms. In this way, West Indian literature offers particular carnivalesque structures.

To determine the extent to which West Indian texts tend to imitate the structure of calypso narratives requires something to be said about the relevance of calypso to West Indian society. Calypso itself was born out of colonialism and slavery, when the slaves used the song to ridicule and satirize their white masters, thus attempting to empower themselves. The only weap-

² Jennifer Rahim, "Laughter in M. Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey*: An Exploration in Comic Discourse," in *The Comic Vision in West Indian Literature*, ed. Roydon Salick (Marabella: Printex Converters, 1985): 98.

³ Of course, West Indian literature is scribal by the very act of being written rather than spoken, so when I refer to oral discourse, I mean written discourse in which there is the sense of a speaking voice because it is structured such that it is more consistent with the cadences of the spoken word.

on to which they could lay claim was the voice, and song was used as an important social instrument that *demystified* the power of the masters and revealed the reality of the condition of the slaves. The suggestion that these West Indian novels may have calypso structures therefore associates the discourse with themes of colonialism and resistance but also signals identification with the local popular folk culture. The idea of a calypso narrative also implies a rich linguistic structure and the power of the characteristic discourse. In this way, the *voice* in the West Indian work may be read as an important carnivalizing strategy.

Examination of the bare structure of *The Lonely Londoners* immediately reveals its episodic quality. The novel seems to be made up of various stories or, to use Selvon's own music-related word, 'ballads', combined to form a unified whole. It is this quality that imitates the structure of the calypso in its social commentary on the motley assortment of West Indian immigrant characters in London and their experiences. Fabre, for example, calls the novel "a likeable rogue's gallery in the style of the calypso."⁴ Indeed, Ramchand remarks on the effectiveness of *The Lonely Londoners*, in which "writing can feed on oral literature and on the stuff that oral literature itself also draws upon without losing its identity as writing."⁵ Clement H. Wyke also observes that "the Trinidadian reader especially listens to it as if he were hearing some 'old talk'."⁶ 'Old talk', meaning chatting among good friends, implies that a relationship between the text and the reader is created, and intimates the oral nature of the text. Wyke's description of the reader-response as one of 'listening' and 'hearing' is also germane to our discussion of the voice and its relationship to calypso.

Each ballad is, in fact, an individual examination of specific problems faced by the immigrants in a hostile environment, although they appear at first simply to be funny stories. The section describing the inexplicably irresistible Captain who takes advantage of his women and his fellow immigrants, and the episode of Galahad's luring the pigeon and Cap, the seagulls, into their stomachs, for example, may seem on the surface to be merely humorous anecdotes thrown in for good measure. These stories, however, can be seen as parts of a discourse of social and cultural interrogation of the conditions with which the immigrants are forced to deal. By using the stories to comment on

⁴ Michel Fabre, "From Trinidad to London: Tone and Language in Samuel Selvon's Novels" (1979), in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, ed. Susheila Nasta (Washington DC: Three Continents, 1998): 215–16.

⁵ Kenneth Ramchand, "Introduction" to *The Lonely Londoners* (1956; Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1985): 10.

⁶ Clement H. Wyke, *Sam Selvon's Dialectal Style and Fictional Strategy* (Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1991): 34.

issues such as the exodus of the West Indians from the islands to England, racial and colour prejudice, domestic violence, sexual exploitation of women, and the general difficulties of living in an alien environment, the narrator is seen to take on the responsibility of the calypsonian as social commentator. The episodes, then, function in terms of a collective discourse, and the novel as a whole becomes the medium through which these problems and survival strategies are articulated through the 'voice' of the narrator.

Despite this departure from the literary models proposed by the imperial literature, there is a keen sense of structure and organization in Selvon's work. Ramchand, for instance, has remarked on the relationship between the episodic nature of the novel and the oral tradition, but he refutes any assumption that there is a lack of structure or tightness in the craftsmanship of the novel, and insists that the end result is "literary."⁷ This technique constitutes a form that distinguishes itself from the discourses exported wholesale into the West Indies by England, and thus becomes counter-discursive and carnivalesque.

This structural and linguistic variance is also a function of the parody of the dominant discourses on which the novels are based – evident, for example, in Moses's bumbling with phrases from traditionally canonical English texts in *Moses Ascending*. Robert Stam calls parody "the privileged mode of artistic carnivalization," as it "appropriates an existing discourse but introduces into it an orientation oblique or even diametrically opposed to that of the original." He therefore argues that it is "especially well suited to the needs of oppositional culture, precisely because it deploys the force of the dominant discourse against itself."⁸ Selvon's use of the English language in a way that suits his own needs to portray a West Indian sensibility is such an example.

A most significant passage which clearly reveals this almost opportunistic use of language to create a parodic variance is the summer sequence in *The Lonely Londoners*, in which there is a complete lack of punctuation:

Oh what a time it is when summer come to the city and all them girls throw away heavy winter coat and wearing light summer frocks so you could see the legs and shapes that was hiding away from the cold blasts and you could coast a lime in the park and negotiate ten shillings or a pound with the sports as the case may be or else they have a particular bench near the Hyde Park Corner that they call the Play Around Section where you could go and sit with one of them what a time summer is because you bound to meet the boys coasting lime in the park and you could go walking through the gardens and see all them

⁷ Kenneth Ramchand, "Song of Innocence, Song of Experience: Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* as a Literary Work" (1982), in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, 227.

⁸ Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore MD & London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989): 173.

pretty pieces of skin taking suntan and how all the old geezers like the sun they would sit on the benches and smile everywhere you turn the English people smiling *isn't it a lovely day* as if the sun burn away all the tightness and strain that was on their faces for the winter [...]⁹

The rhythms and cadence of the language are consistent with the oral tradition as opposed to the scribal tradition of imperialist literature and reflect the joy, excitement and warmth the summer brings, as well as the sexual excesses hinted at in the passage. The consistent use of the generic 'you' contributes to an informality that is more consistent with the oral mode and suggests an audience that is being directly addressed. The words I have italicized denote a change in rhythm and linguistic structure through its grammatical 'correctness' and suggest a British voice (still in the speech of the West Indian) that contrasts with the West Indian way of speaking. Because the novel (and the passage) is also set in London, the contrast between the two voices becomes even more pronounced; but, significantly, it is the West Indian voice that dominates.

Related to the calypso structure of the novel, comedy (in the sense of the provocation of laughter) is an important carnivalesque strategy and a feature of West Indian identity. Humour is an important ingredient in the calypso and gives it potency as a satiric force and carnivalesque mode. No one can deny that the Selvon novels are funny. In an interview with Peter Nazareth, Selvon describes comedy as a perennial and characteristic force among Afro-Caribbean people, for whom it acts as a "means of defence against the sufferings and tribulations that they have to undergo."¹⁰ Laughter is a means of survival and a defiance of their wretched lot and, therefore, becomes an empowering gesture. As the Moses of *Moses Migrating* says, "It [is] a kind of Caribbean laughter, derisive and mocking, what put you in your place."¹¹ From the literary critic's point of view, Wilfred Cartey suggests the way laughter and comedy are used in the novel in his notions of the "fête" and the "fatigue" [Trinidadian slang for 'teasing'] emphasizing their alliance with "communality."¹² As the most potent attacks on authority in the song were often delivered through the weapon of laughter, such words bring into focus the carni-

⁹ Samuel Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, intro. Kenneth Ramchand (1956; Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1985): 101–102. My emphases. Further page references are in the main text.

¹⁰ Peter Nazareth, "Interview with Sam Selvon" (1979), in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, 77–94, 81.

¹¹ Samuel Selvon, *Moses Migrating* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1983): 26.

¹² Wilfred Cartey, *Whispers from the Caribbean: I Going Away, I Going Home* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, UCLA, 1991): 271.

valizing tendency of the narrative and emphasize its character as a calypso narrative.

Language

The use of characteristic idiom or idiomatic range is crucial to many West Indian literary works. It appears in various forms, mixing dialects¹³ and communicating ideas in particularly versatile and interesting ways. Because of the existence of a language continuum that accommodates various versions and dialects of English, language is particularly malleable and dynamic for the West Indian writer. Bill Ashcroft et al. describe the creole continuum, which is accepted as “an explanation of the linguistic culture of the Caribbean,” as “not simply an aggregation of discrete dialect forms but an overlapping of ways of speaking between which individual speakers may move with considerable ease.”¹⁴ This sort of free-flowing language thus highlights the oral nature of the writing. Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia is also applicable to West Indian English. The use of dialects and particularly what Bakhtin calls the “language of the marketplace,” code-switching, and billingsgate, are important considerations in the examination of this versatile language, but they also reveal a carnivalesque dimension. According to Susheila Nasta, “as a dialogic and polyphonic cultural practice, Carnival enables a creolization of language and form that can bring together both the marketplace and ‘yard’ culture of Selvon’s ‘boys’ within the world of the printed book.”¹⁵

The Lonely Londoners, written wholly in an alternative form of British Standard English, is a very important novel in the development of West Indian literature and in the forging of what Edward Brathwaite would call a ‘nation language’: i.e. a distinct and revolutionary language born out of the varied underground or submerged languages of the postcolonial West Indies.¹⁶ The role of language in demythifying “solemn postures”¹⁷ is well illustrated by the scene in which the very earthy Tantie meets the pretentious

¹³ I am using the word ‘dialect’ in its strictly linguistic sense meaning a version or form of a particular language.

¹⁴ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New Accents; London & New York: Routledge, 1989): 45.

¹⁵ Susheila Nasta, *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (Houndmills & Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002): 79.

¹⁶ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, “Nation Language” (1984), in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (London & New York: Routledge, 1995): 309–13 (excerpts only).

¹⁷ Fabre, “From Trinidad to London: Tone and Language in Samuel Selvon’s Novels,” 222.

Harris, another West Indian, who, however, we are told earlier, could “spout English” (111) such that you realized you didn’t know the language at all:

“Harris!” Tanty scream out. “You don’t know me? You don’t remember neighbour who used to live behind you in George Street?”

“I’m afraid –“ Harris start to stammer.

“But look how big the boy get!” Tantie bawl. “I didn’t believe Tolroy when he tell me. Tolroy say how you living in London for a long time, and that you doing well for yourself. I tell Tolroy: ‘Not little Harris what use to run about the barrack-yard in shirttail!’ And Tolroy say yes, is you self. I tell him I don’t believe, so he say come tonight to the dance and you will see for yourself. Well, to tell you the truth, I don’t go anywhere at all, you could ask Ma here, but when I hear that is you who giving this fete I say I must come and see you. Ma, look at little Harris how big he get! But the years pass quickly!”

“Yes, yes, I remember you,” Harris say quickly, giving Tantie a push.

But Tantie didn’t budge. “Don’t push,” she say, “have some respect for your elders. I not going to dance until you come inside. I want the first set with you. It still have some life in the old hen. But bless my eyesight!” she begin again as if she just come in. “Look at little Harris what used to thief fowl egg under the house!” (114)

Tantie’s effervescent and earthy language is characteristic of Bakhtin’s ‘language of the marketplace.’ The energy conveyed through her use of language contributes to the construction of the West Indian spirit in the novel as effusive and ardent. She refuses to be dominated by Harris, who tries to brush her off in embarrassment but who is only greeted by more enthusiasm and even a good West Indian comeuppance, against which he is powerless. Because the dialogue is framed by the narrator’s voice, which also uses Trinidadian dialect (for example, in “Tantie scream out” and “Harris start to stammer” in which the absence of tense markers denotes the dialect), Harris’s pretension becomes even more glaring and is drowned by an assertion of the dominant West Indian language (again represented by Tantie’s ‘scream[ing]’ and Harris’s ‘stammer[ing]’). The oral nature of the narrative is therefore not only preserved but also affirmed.

The language used in *Moses Ascending* also contributes to the popular nature of the text, drawing as it does from various sources in literature, the media and ancient myth.¹⁸ As Nasta observes, “The first-person narration modulates between the formality of nineteenth-century English, Trinidadian

¹⁸ Sam Selvon, *Moses Ascending*, intro. Mervyn Morris (1975; London: Heinemann, 1984). Page references are in the main text.

proverbs, Greek myth, American films, contemporary advertising jingles and the banter of the old days.”¹⁹ According to Fabre, the novel represents

a unique attempt, along the lines of postmodern fiction, to unite the iconoclastic techniques of the West with the iconoclastic techniques of the calypso in order to liberate Trinidadian fiction by negating the monopoly of the ‘great tradition’.²⁰

Although Fabre is more concerned with exploring the postcolonial nature of the novel here, he also suggests the popular nature of the narrative when he alludes to the presence of both Western literary traditions and those of the West Indies.

The juxtaposition of British Standard English and creole is especially evident, but these are so subtly interwoven that it is not always easy to separate them in the novel. However, italicized West Indian words do jump out at us, such as “heng” (3), “peddle” (39), “trimble” (64) (creole forms of ‘hang’, ‘paddle’ and ‘tremble’ respectively, although, ironically, Mervyn Morris argues that they represent upper-class English pronunciation²¹), “chook” (28; slang for ‘prick’) and “pappyshow” (98; slang for ‘mockery’ or ‘ridicule’). This is also the case with foreign words such as “Kay sir rah, sir rah, as the Japanese say” (66) which Moses, of course, gets terribly wrong in both orthography and cultural ownership; and recognizable literary phrases from the English canon such as “the slings and arrows of misfortune” (43) and my personal favourites, “Fie, I say” (7) and “God’s blood” (8). These literary phrases – especially the last two – further contribute to the oral nature of the text, since they represent oral exclamations of the early modern period. Selvon’s free movement along a linguistic continuum therefore contributes to the popularity of the narrative.

The text is also interspersed with juxtapositions of English phrases and their creole variants. For example, when grabbed by a policeman, Moses declares, “If I had had time I would of said, ‘Unhand me, knave,’ but instead I say, ‘Let me go, man, I ain’t done nothing’” (36). Likewise, his use of “dear R” and “gentle R” and other variants throughout a novel that is largely written in a modified creole emphasizes the contrast between the oral and scribal modes as prescribed by the English literary tradition. The inclusion of Trini-

¹⁹ Nasta, *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain*, 85.

²⁰ Fabre, “From Trinidad to London: Tone and Language in Samuel Selvon’s Novels,” 220–21.

²¹ Mervyn Morris, “Introduction” to *Moses Ascending*, xv. This ambiguity only contributes to the ingenious way the various dialects meld into each other to create a carnivalesque text.

dadian aphorisms also contributes in this regard, as in the very telling “When you crooked you bend, as we say in Trinidad, meaning when you are in the shit you sink down deeper, and monkey smoke your pipe” (66). Code-switching, then, becomes a main ironic device.

Billingsgate, which includes various forms of underground languages such as the language of the common people (as already noted in Tantie’s speech), profanity, oaths and sexual language, is another linguistic strategy as identified in carnivalesque theories. Their ‘natural’ way of speaking and the earthiness of their utterances render the characters of *The Lonely Londoners* agents of attack on the authoritative discourses. Profanity and oaths are frequent in both novels, although there is one major distinction in the way they appear on the page that calls into question the potency of the attack and complicates the distinction between oral and scribal modes. In *The Lonely Londoners*, characters frequently swear – especially Big City. However, the swear-words are expurgated through the use of a dash. We therefore get passages such as the following: “Listen, why you —ing me up so? Why you don’t — off and leave me alone?” (94). This follows the very English tradition of censorship, again suggesting awareness of wider audiences but also of some sort of higher authority. The dash, however, also denotes a scribal tradition even while using the speech of the marketplace. If we are disappointed at the diffidence thus shown in *The Lonely Londoners*, then *Moses Ascending* rewards us with uncensored swear-words riddling the discourse and lambasting notions of English politeness and decorum.

The use of sexual language in both novels is far more confident. The immigrants are open in their sexual exploits, and their attitude of “One today, one tomorrow” (*The Lonely Londoners*, 121) is reflected in their speech. There is no love in their relationships and the interest in the women as mere objects to satisfy their sexual appetite is evident in the derogatory names by which they are called – for example, “pieces of skin,” “thing,” “it,” “cat,” “pussy,” “number,” “chicks.” This is also consistent with the definition of the novel as “calypso narrative,” as the musical form was also used to express the sexual prowess of the calypsonians and was often full of sexual innuendo. One should, however, note that the women with whom the immigrants have sexual relations are all white. This, it can be argued, is another way in which white superiority and authority are challenged in the novel, although issues of patriarchy and sexism are also relevant here.

The following excerpt from the calypso “Congo Man” by The Mighty Sparrow illustrates well the subversive effect of the calypso and of the novel, since Frank’s advice to Galahad in *The Lonely Londoners* that “it have bags of white pussy in London and you will eat till you tired” (90) is, in fact, reminiscent of the calypso. The song tells of a pair of white women travelling

through Africa who are confronted by the Congo Man. It plays with the notion of cannibalism, but the eating of white meat also carries heavy sexual connotations. The calypsonian is full of congratulation for the Congo Man, who has managed to enjoy the white women sexually, and he bemoans the fact that he has not been so lucky to ‘eat’ white meat. Ribald punning is used here to effectively subvert white power and authority. Colonialism is implied, as the song is set in Africa, but the sexual assertion of the black man suggests resistance to white domination.

I will end my essay here by quoting the chorus of “Congo Man,” hoping that it will serve as an example of the relationship between the featured narratives and the calypso, and of the tendency to use this carnivalesque voice as a subversive gesture in postcolonial literature:

Oh I envy the congo man
I wish I was he
I woulda shake he han’
He eat till he stomach upset
And me? I never eat a white meat yet.²²

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The Representation of Oppressed (Corpo)realities

Cripples, Dwarfs and Blind Men
in the Plays of Edgar Nkosi White

NÚRIA CASADO GUAL

Introduction

AS THE PERFORMANCE THEORIST Philip Auslander maintains, the acting body is doubly coded “through the performance itself and through the exterior, socially determined discourses.”¹ In post-colonial theatre, the sociohistorical and cultural connotations which invest corporeal representations are especially significant. In particular, the performing body characterized as suffering some form of derogation often serves as a theatrical strategy to “physicalis[e] the oppression endured by the subordinated group,” as Gilbert and Tompkins maintain, with reference to indigenous drama.² The Afro-Caribbean, Montserrat-born playwright Edgar White draws on this dramatic device to convey the major theme of his work, the effects of white-on-black oppression. Indeed, most of his plays literally enact a disturbingly evocative statement by Frantz Fanon: “There are times when the black man is locked into his body.”³ This essay will offer a panoramic vision of three types of corporeal derogation which recur in Edgar White’s plays: namely, those relating to cripples, dwarfs, and blind men. By considering the different meanings inscribed in them, derived from sociohistorical and theatri-

¹ Christopher Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-colonial Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999): 167.

² Helen Gilbert & Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996): 226.

³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, tr. Charles L. Markmann (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1956, tr. 1967; London: Pluto, 1986): 225.

cal connotations, it will be shown that White's corporeal metaphors are significant not only as part of the black theatre produced in the 1970s and 1980s, but also as signs of our contemporary world, still handicapped by oppressive forces.

Crippledom as Global Expression of the Oppressed Self

Out of the three types of derogated corporealities mentioned above, cripples are the most recurrent in Edgar White's dramatic world. Judy Stone maintains that the "spiritually crippling lives" of these characters "are manifested in the physical impairment of their bodies."⁴ Their lives are indeed crippled by the colonial past and persistent racial stigmatization. Crippledom in White's plays, therefore, stages the brutal effects of a history of oppression inflicted on the black community.

A case in point is Uncle Charles in *Ritual by Water* (1984). Uncle Charles is a one-legged spirit who can only be seen by the protagonist of the play, Barzey, a West Indian social worker living in London. "Too much one-legged man in the Caribbean,"⁵ he tells his nephew at the beginning of Act Three. On the one hand, this statement reveals that his crippledom bears an iconic relation to the medicine of underdevelopment, as reflected when he says, "is not my fault that doctors love for chop off you damn leg first thing back home" (58). In theatrical terms, on the other hand, Uncle Charles is part of the ritualistic pulse of *Ritual by Water*, marked by, among other elements, the sound of his crutches. Thus, Uncle Charles is also a symbol of the West Indian past which is still present for the Caribbean exiles and the second-generation West Indians, represented in the play by Barzey and the youths he works with. In this sense, the history of deprivation present in his absent leg signifies the cultural and historical amputation that colonialism and its racist discourse inflicted on the colonized and their descendants.

More purely metaphorical is the function of Privie, the black crippled servant in *Segismundo's Tricycle* (1971). The submission of the black man to white hegemony is presented in the play as outliving the colonial era. In an apparently timeless dramatic space, Privie also needs crutches to walk.⁶ The restraint imposed by the bandages on his feet (130) underlines his situation of bondage to his white master, a despotic old man called Segismundo. In this

⁴ Judy Stone, *Theatre: Studies in West Indian Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1994): 163.

⁵ Edgar White, "Ritual by Water" (perf. 1983), in *The Nine Night & Ritual by Water* (London: Methuen, 1984): 58. Further page references in the text. Year of first performance is indicated in subsequent footnotes for each play mentioned.

⁶ Edgar White, "Segismundo's Tricycle" (perf. 1969), in *Black Review 1*, ed. Mel Watkins (New York: William Morrow, 1971): 130. Further page references are in the main text.

absurdist tragicomedy, Privie provides the comic relief by answering back with wit to Segismundo's self-centred remarks, and sometimes even with compassion. Like Uncle Charles', Privie's crippledness is ambivalent, as it underlines his victimization as much as his resilience. The end of the play nevertheless enhances the former. Segismundo, unable to bear the truth of Privie's assertions, strikes him with his tricycle and abandons him (154). Segismundo's use of this peculiar machine, built by Privie, displays the white character's crippled ethics. In an image reminiscent of colonial and neocolonial relationships, however, it is the black character that remains vulnerable, abandoned onstage.

Other cripples in White's drama merely contribute to creating an atmosphere of decay, like the beggars in *The Burghers of Calais* (1970).⁷ Being socially as well as physically disadvantaged, they doubly illustrate White's use of marginal figures to dramatize the stigma of oppression. The lack of freedom which the cripple experiences in his own flesh is also used to project the sense of entrapment that fitter characters feel in oppressive environments. Thus, cripples are used as images as well, as a character of *The Wonderful Year* demonstrates:

You try to figure out why you were born poor, or Puerto Rican, or with a particular family, all of that. And while you're disentangling that, more and more people are coming into your life, cripples, young people dying. And you try to get all that shit together. What does it mean?⁸

The spiritual lack of meaning can derive from a sense of incompleteness, on both an individual and a social level. Regarding the latter, the lack of wholeness signified by White's crippled characters may reflect, in some cases, communal fragmentation. For instance, Sores, the crippled albino in *Redemption Song* (1985) is rendered the scapegoat of inter-community racism in a Caribbean village.⁹ In *Lament for Rastafari* (1983), the inner division of the Jamaican community is displayed when members of the black bourgeoisie are sarcastically presented as enjoying a race by spastics.¹⁰ Likewise, in *Les Femmes Noires* (1985), King Alfa, another crippled spirit, blames the Afro-American

⁷ Edgar White, "The Burghers of Calais" (perf. 1970), in *Underground: Four Plays* (New York: William Morrow, 1970): 7.

⁸ Edgar White, "The Wonderful Year" (perf. 1971), in *Underground: Four Plays*, 183. Further page references are in the main text.

⁹ Edgar White, "Redemption Song" (perf. 1984), in *Redemption Song and Other Plays* (London: Marion Boyars, 1985).

¹⁰ Edgar White, "Lament for Rastafari" (perf. 1971), in *Lament for Rastafari and Other Plays* (London: Marion Boyars, 1983): 24–26.

upper and middle classes for his eternal enslavement.¹¹ As in *Segismundo's Tricycle*, it is the physically capable bodies that are exposed as morally deficient in these plays. White-on-black racism, nonetheless, equally underlies the fragmentation of the oppressed community.

Female Cripples and Dwarfs: Handicapped Relationships in the Context of Oppression

If the aforementioned crippled characters may be read as metaphors of the oppressed self, other handicapped bodies in Edgar White's drama reveal more specifically the harmful effect of oppression within the sexual and sentimental relationships of the victims. Mary Alice in *Les Femmes Noires*, for example, is a crippled Jamaican woman who dwells in a dehumanized cityscape. On the one hand, her crippledness is representative of her marginal situation in a white-dominated world. Thus, her stating that they did not think of her when they made the streets of New York (163), or her referring to the snow as increasing her difficulties in walking (163), would equally underscore the displacement of the black (migrant) male. But Mary Alice's crippledness can also be linked to her double disadvantage as a black woman living in a world dominated by white men. Besides being alienated by white society, Mary Alice avoids conflictual relationships with black men, also marked by discrimination. Despite the twofold metaphoric meaning of her lameness, however, the play closes with her hoping to be healed by a street preacher (191–192). This mirrors the author's tendency to present black women as more resilient and thus as more capable of overcoming the trauma of oppression.

"Women wear pain better than men," affirms a character in *The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus*,¹² underscoring the masculinist viewpoint of White's drama. In this play, the alteration of black masculinity inflicted by white supremacy is mirrored in Smintheus, an African-American intellectual tormented by double consciousness. In a world which he still perceives as colonial, his adulterous relationship with a black prostitute who is proud of her African roots exacerbates his confused identity and presents him as the weaker partner in their relationship. This particular deficiency affects not only Smintheus' body, which ends up self-alienated and confined to an asylum, but also other distorted bodies that act as Smintheus' alter egos.

¹¹ Edgar White, "Les Femmes Noires" (perf. 1974), in *Redemption Song and Other Plays*, 158. Further page references are in the main text.

¹² Edgar White, "The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus" (perf. 1971), in *The Crucifido: Two Plays* (New York: William Morrow, 1973): 28. Further page references are in the main text.

One of them is a patient who crawls around him in the manner of a paralytic (64–65), thus staging the total separation between Smintheus' body and his mind. The other deformed characters are two dwarfs who appear in several scenes. Albeit less frequent than cripples, dwarfs play a similar dramatic function in White's plays. Whereas the aesthetic and kinetic qualities of his theatrical cripples dramatize the disability of the oppressed in the historical and social spheres, dwarfs reflect the same reality through the veil of the burlesque. Thus, in *The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus* dwarfs can be interpreted as satirizing the situation of abnormality created by oppression. In the play, colonialism is said to persist under other "costumes" (28), which reinforces the vision of an allegedly egalitarian society as merely a farce in which the oppressed are dwarfed by the oppressors. In *The Mummer's Play* (1970), Pariah, a black poet, demonstrates that this influence can also be psychological when he talks about "unkind men" that are "mostly white," who want to "bruise [his] small body for some reason."¹³ Discrimination is not only reflected in the victim's dwarfed self-image, but also in the distortion of the context in which oppression is exercised. Pariah thus goes on to describe the dwarfs who surround those in power (142), presenting oppression as a gloomy circus in which the oppressor's delusions of grandeur are caricatured.

White's use of dwarfs to dramatize both the emasculation of the black male and the distorted views of the oppressor may again be linked to the past of slavery. Especially in this case, dwarfishness brings echoes of the African teenagers and children who were made slaves and kept as body-servants or pets.¹⁴ As Peter Fryer points out, the original names of those slaves were taken from them; the custom among owners with social pretensions was to give them "high-sounding Greek or Roman names."¹⁵ Smintheus' name may well reproduce the objectification of the black male generated by slavery. This not only reinforces the symbolic potential of the dwarfs who surround him, but also foregrounds dwarfs themselves as another of White's potent dramatic strategies.

Alternative Visions in the Darkness of Oppression

Implicit in Edgar White's use of dwarfs is a game of contrasts; that which is strangely miniaturized onstage becomes magnified at the level of reception. This is also implicit in his exploitation of blindness. In other words, the char-

¹³ Edgar White, "The Mummer's Play" (perf. 1965), in *Underground: Four Plays*, 142. Further page references are in the main text.

¹⁴ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1984): 21.

¹⁵ Fryer, *Staying Power*, 24.

acter who lives in darkness enlightens obscurantist misconceptions. Gongora is a powerfully enigmatic character in Edgar White's dramatic world. In *The Crucificado* (1973), he acts as part of a tripartite Chorus and functions, like Smintheus' dwarfs, as one of the protagonist's alter egos¹⁶. Through Gongora's blindness, White dramatizes another aspect of the oppressed: their constant sense of uncertainty. One of the playwright's typically ironic endings in dialogue is the sentence "I think," which usually unsettles a preceding categorical statement. The insecurity that this sentence creates is staged via the movement of a blind man, whose erratic pace mirrors the incapacity of the oppressed to master fully the world they live in.

Blindness, by contrast, augments the sensitivity of the other senses and, as a result, increases the consciousness of one's body schema. This can be easily compared to the acute awareness of the body acquired by victims of racism. Fanon suggests that this type of consciousness is "a solely negating activity," "a third-person consciousness"¹⁷ which, as a result, may become self-alienating. The use of a black blind character in White's drama is not only allegorical but also strongly subversive, since it connects the idea of disempowerment with the notion of darkness. Hence, the link between blackness and threat, as perpetuated by white racism, is dismantled by Gongora's vulnerability as a blind man. This effect is also created in a scene in *Ritual by Water*, in which there is a power-cut and the criminalized black youths feel exposed in the dark (60–62).

Blindness is further associated with art in White's plays. Gongora is a poet; *Les Femmes Noires* is conceived as a play "from the viewpoint of a blind man perceiving sound" (148); and in *The Mummer's Play* a retired black sculptor refers to a blind man to express his incapacity to understand the world (147). In both the iconic and the figurative uses of blindness, the artistic vision does not disappear. On the contrary, it is consolidated. According to Geneviève Fabre, Gongora "embodies faith in the artist's mission at the cost of a more total destitution."¹⁸ Gongora's faith cannot be other than blind, since, though he is constantly denied the opportunity to recite his verses, he does not renounce his poetry. Similarly, a whole play derives from the fictional blind creator of *Les Femmes Noires*, and the sculptor in *The Mummer's Play*, like the other black artist-characters in White's drama, keeps on searching for meaning despite his sense of disorientation. Blindness, in this vein, reveals

¹⁶ Edgar White, "The Crucificado" (perf. 1972), in *The Crucificado: Two Plays* (New York: William Morrow, 1973).

¹⁷ Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 110.

¹⁸ Geneviève Fabre, *Drumbeats, Masks and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre*, tr. Melvin Dixon (*Le Théâtre noir aux États-Unis*; Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1983): 198.

another facet of the oppressed: the acquisition of an alternative and resistant kind of knowledge through hindered access to the world.

Inter-Theatrical Connections in Handicapped Bodies

The types of derogated body mentioned so far have been related to the theme of white-on-black oppression in Edgar White's drama. This seems to be the most straightforward connection considering the author's personal history as an Afro-Caribbean man, his own experiences of discrimination, and the context in which he wrote most of his plays: i.e. the America of the 1970s and the Britain of the 1980s, with their respective black-culture movements. Taking into account the prevalence of different forms of real-life oppression, such a reading prevails over other possible interpretations with a more universalizing and, therefore, less committed orientation.

Nevertheless, the characterization of White's cripples, dwarfs, and blind men is aesthetically composite, which could favour a universalist reading. Besides their sociohistorical connotations, these characters are coded through the dramatic context in which they exist. The phenomena of "interdiscursivity and interpraxia" that are part and parcel of the theatre¹⁹ become more intricate in the performance-potential of White's plays, characterized by a high degree of allusiveness and a mixture of different theatrical traditions. Through these interdiscursive relations, the author's derogated 'corporealities' send numerous ripples through the mind of reader and spectator. Needless to say, the significance of these ripples varies according to the cultural specificity of the recipient. Subjectivity nevertheless plays an active role in the creation, production and reception of a dramatic text. Moreover, the high degree of intertextuality in White's drama would seem to foster participation in the recognition and generation of other meanings.

Hence, the three types of character observed may be regarded, for example, as personifying the Ciceronian connection between body and prison. Various other meaning can be attributed to the crippled characters in White's plays. Uncle Charles has been defined by Judy Stone as combining "the Shakespearian characteristics of chorus and comic relief."²⁰ Also Shakespearian is the albino in *Redemption Song*, inasmuch as he can be deemed a reversed Caliban-figure. The title *Segismundo's Tricycle* signals the Calderonian inspiration of Privie's dramatic world, and its absurdist mode creates a link with Samuel Beckett's theatre. The resistance of Mary Alice's crippledom may also have Beckettian associations; and the beggars in *The Burghers of*

¹⁹ Susan Melrose, *A Semiotics of the Dramatic Text* (London: Macmillan, 1994): 47.

²⁰ Stone, *Theatre: Studies in West Indian Literature*, 164.

Calais echoe figures in Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* (1928).²¹ Brechtian devices also underlie White's dwarfs and their use of signboards in *The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus*. As a matter of fact, the world of farce, the grotesque, and the commedia dell'arte intermingle in White's drama, dwarfs being only one component of such a combination. The main intertextual referents of Gongora are the seventeenth-century Spanish poet of the same name, as well as Tiresias, reflected in his unhistorical characterization. Finally, the supposedly blind creator of *Les Femmes Noires* somehow links the play with Strindberg's conception of a theatre of the mind, subsequently re-created by the German Expressionists.²²

The Western tradition is not the only source of the interdiscursive quotations and theatrical borrowings in White's drama. All of the characters mentioned so far belong to plays which also contain African and Afro-Caribbean elements. With reference to his handicapped characters in particular, however, what matters is, rather, the fact that different cultural symbols, mainly of Western origin, intertwine in their character-conception. In White's epitomes of oppression, these symbols converge in a dramatic discourse that contradicts their frequent association with a white-oriented universality. To give some examples: Privie shows that it is he rather than Segismundo who is an emblem of oppression, living in a dream which he cannot control. Segismundo's dwarfs are substantial signs of the farce of colonialism, as opposed to other grotesque characters in circus performances aimed purely at entertaining. Gongora is established as the real Tiresias, having travelled throughout history and gender, yet he remains relegated to the world of invisibility. In this light, White's handicapped bodies can be perceived as sites of an inter-theatrical and, by extension, intercultural dialogue which includes both the culture of the oppressor and that of the oppressed, to represent, ultimately, the altered reality of the latter.

Conclusion

Edgar White's derogated bodies remain significant within the political discourse of black theatre. Furthermore, when their composition is taken into account, they could also be linked to Homi Bhabha's 'Third Space of enunciation', inasmuch as they demonstrate that the same signs "can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew."²³ Although this 'Third Space' can

²¹ Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, tr. Desmond Vesey (*Dreigroschenoper*, 1928; New York: Limited Editions Club, 1982)

²² Christopher Innes, *Holy Theatre: Ritual and the Avantgarde* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981): 38.

²³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 37.

be detected in White's drama as a whole and in postcolonial writing in general, its manifestation is especially disturbing when conveyed by handicapped 'corporealities'. From this perspective, White's cripples, dwarfs, and blind men transcend their specific domain to draw attention, additionally, to the crippling, dwarfed or even invisible state of the cross-cultural dialogue offered by the doubly syncretic nature of postcolonial theatre. If the world's theatre could also be regarded in corporeal terms, the voice of the oppressed would still be located in a neglected member. The same could be said of the body constituted by other social spheres.

Ultimately, White's drama highlights the lessons that bodies onstage convey in their own right. Through the immediacy of the theatre, the potential physicality of his handicapped characters undermines the perception of the oppressed subject as merely a corporeal text to be read. In *The Wonderful Year*, a character who is also victim of discrimination claims, "you know (*pause*) the human body is such a poor place to have to keep a soul" (228). White's recurrent use of derogated bodies insists, rather, on the spiritual poverty that oppression can generate. The playwright's cripples, dwarfs, and blind men counteract their own physical deficiency with the interdiscursive density of their characterization. The suffering they represent, however, surpasses their hybrid nature, fostering a reaction to the oppression existing in the world offstage. It is then left to the reader and spectator not to remain crippled, dwarfed or blind. In this sense, the handicapped characters in Edgar White's plays, like the grand characters of the world's theatre, lead to a notion of wholeness through their own imperfection.

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BRITAIN AND EIRE

Between Aphasia and Articulateness – Alien-Nation and Belonging

National/Ethnic Identities in Selected Black British Novels

SUSANNE PICHLER

Introductory Remarks

Considering the [...] dispersal of people, cultures and lives, we are inevitably confronted with mixed histories, cultural intermingling, composite languages and creole arts that are also central to our history.¹

IN RECENT DECADES there has been a growing awareness almost everywhere of the boundaries between cultures; the divisions and differences that not only allow us to distinguish between cultures, but also enable us to see the extent to which cultures are humanly made entities of both authority and participation, benevolent in what they include, less benevolent in what they exclude. It is therefore indispensable to take into consideration the different circumstances, different needs, different values, and different constructions of reality that significantly shape the experience and behaviour of cultural groups in their familiar, as well as their unfamiliar cultural contexts. The chronicles of diasporas, of migration and movement – from rural areas to urban centres, from ex-colonies to metropolitan cities – are, according to Iain Chambers, cultural, historical and social testimonies of intricate transformations of old and new spaces that question and undermine any simple and uncomplicated sense of origins, traditions and linear movements.² It is the “dispersal attendant on migrancy that disrupts and interro-

¹ Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994): 17.

² Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, 23.

gates the overarching themes of modernity: the nation, and its literature, [...] the sense of centre; the sense of psychic and cultural homogeneity.”³

With the steady transformation of the present world into a world of diversity, relativity and fluidity due to globalization⁴ and postcolonialism,⁵ there is a clear tendency for these processes to provide a stage for global differences and a field for greater cultural and ethnic heterogeneity, constantly making us aware of the many-sidedness of cultures and nations. The nation-states in the ‘West’⁶ have had to learn to tolerate a greater diversity which manifests itself in greater multiculturalism and polyethnicity. Terry Eagleton contends that “the drastically shrinking world [...] pitched diverse life-forms ever more eclectically together, making men and women at once newly aware of their

³ Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, 23–24.

⁴ The process of globalization simultaneously suggests two images of culture. Heterogeneous cultures become integrated and incorporated into one single dominant culture. In this sense, the world becomes a singular space where everyone becomes assimilated into a common culture. The second image associated with globalization points to the compression of cultures. Things formerly held apart are now brought together into contact and juxtaposition. Cultures intermingle without organizing principles. It has been argued that the phase of intense globalization which took place between 1880 and 1920, and which drew nations into a tightly structured, global figuration of interdependence and power relations produced an intense nationalism and “wilful nostalgia”. See Roland Robertson, “Mapping the Global Condition,” in *Global Culture*, ed. Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1990): 25. The efforts of nation-states to produce homogeneous, integrated common cultures and standardized citizens led to attempts to eliminate ethnic and local differences. A second phase of nostalgia can be related to the phase of globalization which has taken place since the 1960s. This phase can be related to pressures for nation-states to reconstitute their collective identities along pluralistic and multicultural lines which take into account regional and ethnic differences and diversity.

⁵ In his article “DissemiNation,” Bhabha talks about the relationship of the postcolonial space to the metropolitan centre. He holds that “the postcolonial space is now ‘supplementary’ to the metropolitan centre; it stands in a subaltern adjunct relation that does not aggrandize the *presence* of the west but redraws its frontiers in the menacing, antagonistic boundary of cultural difference that never quite adds up, always less than one nation and double”. Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990): 318–19. Interestingly enough, Bhabha seems to equate the postcolonial with the migrant and the migrant with the subaltern.

⁶ I am perfectly aware of the reductionist and essentialist implications of the ‘West’ and ‘Western’. I would like to draw attention to the fact that for want of more appropriate terms I use them to denote individuals coming from individualist cultures. See Edward Hall & Mildred Reed Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences: Germans, French and Americans* (Yarmouth: Intercultural Press, 1990), and Gary R. Weaver, *Culture, Communication and Conflict: Readings in Intercultural Relations* (Needham Heights MA: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

cultural [and ethnic] identities and freshly insecure about them.”⁷ Thus, the concept of culture, especially within pluralistic societies, and by implication also the concept of the nation, have recently come to include an additional component that recognizes the extent to which groups of people sharing some characteristics may be viewed by others as members of a group. Jody Bennet Veroff and Nancy Rule Goldberger convincingly hold that “in our society today it is not uncommon for groups identified by race, gender, class, ethnicity [...] or age to call themselves ‘cultures’ and to be so called by others, despite the fact that their members also reside in and partake in the ‘culture’ of the larger society.”⁸

Veroff and Goldberger emphatically stress that cultures within cultures do exist, despite the fact that a nation’s social and cultural structure may well be organized around what J.W. Berry and others call “a multicultural ideology.”⁹ This is to suggest that culturally plural societies, like Great Britain, are said to more readily tolerate and accept cultural diversity, and are more likely to provide immigrants or other types of newcomers with a network of social commodities that help the individual to acculturate. Sadly, though, reality and fictitious representations (of reality) often prove otherwise, partly due to the fact that the notions of ‘culture’ and ‘nation’ are still too frequently conceived of in their most monolithic, essentialist and reductionist dimensions, and also due to the fact that nationality and nation-ness command an incredibly profound emotional legitimacy.

The concept of the nation, similar to the concept of culture, is an ambiguous, ambivalent construct.¹⁰ In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson hints at the paradoxical implications of the concept. On the one hand, he maintains, social theorists are puzzled by the “formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept – in the modern world everyone, can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality, as he or she ‘has’ a gender”, and on the other hand, by “the irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations.”¹¹ Hence, belonging to a nation refers to something to which one is tied – almost naturally,

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000): 13.

⁸ Jody Bennet Veroff & Nancy Rule Goldberger, “What’s in a Name? The Case for ‘Intercultural Psychology,’” in *The Culture and Psychology Reader*, ed. Goldberger & Veroff (New York: New York UP, 1995): 11.

⁹ J.W. Berry, Robert Kalin & David Taylor, *Multiculturalism and Ethnic Attitudes in Canada* (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1977): 23.

¹⁰ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and the Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Timothy Brennan, “The national longing for form,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha, 44–70.

¹¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5.

– thus considering national identity part of our nature.¹² Interestingly, though, it is only in the course of time that individuals acquire their national identity, that they learn what it means to be English, for example, due to the fact that Englishness is represented through the English national culture. Therefore, it can safely be inferred that the nation: i.e. Anderson’s “imagined community,”¹³ besides many other things, is a system of (cultural) representations; a discourse which creates significations and influences our behaviour towards, and perceptions of, others and ourselves. Evidently it is a concept that many make use of in order to exclude ‘Others’ from being part of, and taking part in, the “imagined community”; to exclude those ethnic groups¹⁴ that do not have the same religion, those ethnic identities that do not dispose of the same linguistic competence, those people(s) that do not claim the same historical past and those that do not belong to the same ‘race’. Timothy Brennan reminds us that the term ‘nation’ refers not only to the modern nation-state, but “also draws on the meaning of *natio*, a local community, [...] a condition of belonging.”¹⁵ It is the last part of Brennan’s statement that again underlines the commonly agreed-upon implication of what the essence of a nation is and by which features national identities are tied to each other: i.e. a sense of belonging, of memberment, and a sense of sharing a feeling of togetherness and sameness. Nevertheless, one should be aware of the fact that “the nation is no longer the sign of modernity under which cultural differences are homogenized in the ‘horizontal’ view of society.”¹⁶ This, in fact, influences, determines and shapes the way an alter-nation could and should be envisaged. Nations can no longer and should no longer be conceived as “imagined communities” built upon the notions of common descent, common language, common religion, and a collective memory that binds the national subjects into an indissoluble whole. Rather, societies where now postcolonial encounters take place “at home” in the metropolitan centres, where diverse cultural backgrounds, world-views and personal his- and herstories eventually meet, complement the majority population’s or clash with the majority’s views, should address changing notions of community, reviving and refashioning the

¹² Gellner, *Nationalismus und Moderne*, tr. Meino Büning (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1991).

¹³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the vast area of ethnicity, ethnic identity and ethnic minority, see Johan Fornäs, *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity* (London: Sage, 1995), Marcus Banks, *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions* (London: Routledge, 1996), *Ethnicity*, ed. John Hutchinson & Anthony D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), Stephen Cornell & Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race. Making Identities in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks CA & London: Pine Forge, 1998).

¹⁵ Brennan, “The national longing for form,” 45.

¹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation,” 304.

bases upon which such a community has been imagined. Again, Bhabha's reflections on the nation fit in perfectly well here, since he is clearly of the view that the difference of those people at the margins from the host population repudiates the harmony imposed by readers who suggest that nations consist of those sharing an 'imagined community'.¹⁷ The discourse of those on the margins, Bhabha contends, serves as a "supplement" to "the dominant discourse" and, as such, it "antagonizes the implicit power to generalize, to produce the sociological solidarity."¹⁸ Immigrants are, according to Bhabha, "themselves the marks of a shifting boundary"¹⁹ of a modern nation. Bhabha's position, then, I feel, definitely also pays credit to the widely held view that every individual culture is always already multicultural²⁰ and that "people of different nations address changing notions of community, renegotiate borders and territory [...] in an increasingly multicultural environment."²¹

It is precisely this renegotiation of borders, the "grappl[ing] in the contact zone"²² and the re-appropriation of a new cultural space, that Black British writers²³ like Sam Selvon and Caryl Phillips concentrate on in their fictional representation of their immigrant characters' realities. Both of them, under-

¹⁷ Bhabha's intentions are certainly directed at a reconsideration of Anderson's imagined community.

¹⁸ Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 306.

¹⁹ "DissemiNation," 315.

²⁰ See Salman Rushdie, "Sean French Talks to Salman Rushdie" (1988), in *The Rushdie File*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi & Sara Maitland (London: Fourth Estate, 1989): 9, and Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993): xxix.

²¹ Sidonie Smith & Gisela Brinker-Gabler, "Introduction: Gender, Nation, and Immigration in the New Europe," in *Writing New Identities. Gender, Nation and Immigration in Contemporary Europe*, ed. Smith & Brinker-Gabler (Minneapolis & London: U of Minnesota P, 1997): 1.

²² Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992): 4.

²³ The term "Black British" was deployed by the Caribbean Artists Movement in the late 1960s, a movement that "bridged the transformation of Britain's West Indian Community from one of exiles and immigrants to black British." See Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement, 1966–1972: A Literary & Cultural History* (London & Port of Spain, 1992): xviii. I would like to draw attention to the fact that the use of Black British to denote a particular branch of postcolonial or immigrant writers is problematic, just like the use of any sort of label is problematic. So, for example, the questions that arise range from: Does black denote the colour of the skin or the quality of the mind? What is black about black? For a discussion of this contested issue, see David Dabydeen & Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *A Reader's Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature* (London: Hansib, 1988), Mark Stein, "The Black British Bildungsroman and the Transformation of Britain," in *Unity in Diversity Revisited? British Literature and Culture in the 1990s*, ed. Barbara Korte & Klaus-Peter Müller (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1999): 89–105. Susanne Pichler, *Buchi Emecheta's 'London Novels': An Intercultural Approach* (Trier: WVT, 2001).

standably to different degrees, have experienced “the tension between articulation and aphasia, between the limitations of spoken language and the possibility of expression.”²⁴ Despite the fact that these two writers came to Great Britain at different moments, Selvon as an adult in the late 1950s and Phillips in 1958 when he was only three months old, they have both experienced what it means to be an ‘Other’. Obviously, British society and politics have for a very long time denied the interdependence of the ‘centre’ on its ‘peripheries’ in order to allow for a discourse of ‘us’ and ‘them’ – for discriminating against, excluding, and silencing those ethnic identities that are not ‘white’ and ‘British’. This, in fact, clearly shows that ethnicity is a matter of contrast, drawing a boundary between in-groups and out-groups²⁵ and having meaning only in a context that involves ‘Others’. The writers also share another similarity concerning their (un)belonging in an alien, and overtly hostile²⁶ cultural environment; particularly at the beginning of their stay in Great Britain, they inhabited an “in-between”²⁷ reality, positioned in “borderlands”²⁸ which, according to Gloria Anzaldúa, are physically present where two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races, sexualities, classes, and genders occupy the same territory.

This essay concentrates on Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Caryl Phillips’s *The Final Passage* (1985), and attempts to investigate how each author deals with the concept of the nation, its constitutive elements of (un)belonging, the problems they and their fictional characters face in subverting and transgressing the circumscribed concept of Englishness, and the creation of an alter-nation within the nation, thus fostering their ethnic sense of self.

²⁴ Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London: Routledge, 1994): 153.

²⁵ For a discussion of in-group and out-group phenomena, see Harry C. Triandis, Robert Bontempo & Marcelo J. Villareal, “Individualism and Collectivism: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Self-Ingroup Relationships,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54.2 (1988): 323–38; Kenneth Cushner & Richard W. Brislin, *Intercultural Interactions. A Practical Guide* (London: Sage, 2nd ed. 1996); Harry C. Triandis, “The Self and Social Behaviour in Differing Cultural Contexts,” *Psychological Review* 96.3 (1989): 506–20.

²⁶ For a detailed discussion of the politics of immigration to Great Britain, see Zig Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Immigration, Immigration, ‘Race’ and ‘Race’ Relations in Post-War Britain* (London: Blackwell, 1992), David Mason, *Race and Ethnicity in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), and Bob Carter, Clive Harris & Shirley Joshi, “The 1951–1955 Conservative Government and the Racialization of Black Immigration,” in *Black British Culture and Society*, ed. Kwesi Owusu (London: Routledge, 1999): 40–70.

²⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 1.

²⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute, 1987): 43.

The Lonely Londoners (1956): Stuck In One World

Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* offers an account of the West Indian immigrants to Great Britain in the early 1950s – a time when Britain, after the Second World War, was desperately in need of cheap labour to staff the vacancies in the economic market. “Britain sought the West Indian immigration as an indispensable aid to the British economy; indeed, encouraged it.”²⁹ The British Tory government tried to keep the fast-growing non-white population under control by enacting a number of Commonwealth Immigration Acts, and as a result “established a second class citizenship status for West Indians and other Afro-Asian peoples in Britain.”³⁰ It is evident that one act of discrimination entailed the emergence of others, in the sense that the huge waves of immigration naturally coincided with an acute housing shortage in the 1950s. Selvon very outspokenly deals with this issue in his novel, pointing to the fact that there was “a ‘commonsense’ correlation between housing shortage, slums and black immigration,”³¹ and that “only areas designated for slum clearance and/or areas with short-lease properties were generally available”³² to black immigrants.

Selvon's mouthpiece for the dreary and monotonous lives of the West Indian immigrant population in London is Moses Aloetta, who was one of the first Jamaican immigrants to London, lured to the “mother country” by the illusion that “the streets are paved with gold.”³³ Moses, unlike the other newcomers, has partly acculturated successfully to the British social and cultural environment; therefore, it is not astonishing that he is the one all the new arrivals turn to and ask for advice in their initial phase in England, which is marked by a sense of complete disorientation, unbelonging, and uprootedness. The newcomer Henry Oliver, who is later to take on the name Sir Galahad, is at a loss, hopeless and helpless, despite the fact that he pretends to know his whereabouts and to know how to organize his life, which, he feels, cannot be ruled by parameters other than the ones he was used to in Jamaica. Here, in fact, like Caryl Phillips yet to a different degree, Sam Selvon takes into account sociological and intercultural phenomena that influence and shape a newcomer's stay in a foreign cultural territory. At the beginning, Sir Galahad,

²⁹ Claudia Jones, “The Caribbean Community in Britain” (1964), in *Black British Culture and Society*, ed. Kwesi Owusu, 50.

³⁰ Jones, “The Caribbean Community in Britain,” 51.

³¹ Carter, Harris & Joshi, “The 1951–1955 Conservative Government and the Racialization of Black Immigration,” 27.

³² “The 1951–1955 Conservative Government and the Racialization of Black Immigration,” 27.

³³ Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956; Trinidad, Jamaica & London: Longman Caribbean, 1972): 87. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

for example, has to overcome what Kalvero Oberg calls “culture shock,”³⁴ which is intensified by the fact that, first, British immigration policy is such that “English people starting to make rab about how too many West Indians coming to the country” (8), secondly, that he has had no “pre-cultural learning”³⁵ before emigrating to Great Britain, and thirdly, that Great Britain’s social and cultural pillars are not based on a multicultural ideology – quite the contrary.

The concept of the nation, as Selvon depicts it, is definitely an exclusionist one – tolerating only those members of the “imagined community” that are ‘white’ and ‘British’. This is something that Moses, the man with “the soft heart” (39), found out the day he landed on British territory. How else could it be that the English people chose their workers on the grounds of nationality and colour?

“Now on all the records of the boys, you will see mark on the top in red ink. J—A, Col. That mean you from Jamaica and you black. [...] Suppose a vacancy come and they want to send a fellar, first they will find out if the firm want coloured fellars before they send you.” (30)

How else could it be that black people like Bart, Moses’ friend, are turned out of the house of an Englishman: “The father [of Bart’s English girl-friend] want to throw Bart out the house, because he don’t want no curly-hair children in the family” (49). At one moment in the novel, Galahad reflects on the colour-issue in depth, pondering over injustice in life, racial prejudice, the degradation non-white people constantly have to grapple with, and the irrationality behind the dichotomy of ‘black’ and ‘white’, ‘us’ and ‘them’:

Galahad watch the colour of his hand, and talk to it, saying, “Colour, is you that causing all this, you know. [...] You know is you that cause a lot of misery in the world. Is not me, you know, is you! I ain’t do anything to infuriate the people and them, is you!” (72)

The extracts emphatically highlight the fact that the concept of colour is omnipresent not only in the English people’s minds when interacting with the immigrants but also in the immigrants themselves, which, as is obvious here, can undoubtedly be traced back to their inferiority complex.³⁶

³⁴ Kalvero Oberg, “Culture Shock and the Problem of Adjustment in New Cultural Environments” (1979), in *Culture, Communication and Conflict: Readings in Intercultural Relations*, ed. Gary R. Weaver (Needham Heights MA: Simon & Schuster, 1996): 169.

³⁵ Ronald Taft, “A Psychological Model for the Study of Social Assimilation,” *Human Relations* 10 (1957): 145.

³⁶ See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, tr. Charles Lam Markmann (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1956; New York: Grove, 1967).

This, in fact, in no way reduces the intercultural distance between English and West Indian cultures, nor does it in any way reduce the distance between representatives of those two cultures trying to engage in intercultural dialogue. Not surprisingly, the immigrants are situated at one end of the social spectrum while the majority population is placed at the opposite end. "London is a place like that. It divide up in little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to and you don't know what happening in the other ones" (58). The worlds are separated from each other not only ideologically, but also in a very concrete way. Like Caryl Phillips, Sam Selvon discusses the ghettoizing effect of such a separation. Moses, Tolroy, and Sir Galahad live in the most dilapidated houses, and they are cramped together there in little space. "Colony dwelling,"³⁷ as Annette Treibel aptly calls it, automatically increases the ethnic ties among the immigrants and at the same time understandably also reduces the likelihood of an understanding between the ethnic minorities and the majority population. As a consequence, Selvon's characters strengthen their ethnic selves by holding on to what is familiar and known, articulating a sense of home amidst homelessness by building on familial and communal ties and thus living in an 'alter-nation' that, however, is in no way equal to the nation, and rejecting or, at least, avoiding what is unknown and foreign.

Nevertheless, there is one character who has assimilated to British rules and norms and who has thus found partial access to the nation. It is not surprising to notice that Harris has definitely not managed to subvert 'Englishness' in the strict sense of the term, but that he has done everything imaginable to live up to the British way of life. He eats like an Englishman, walks like an Englishman, speaks like an Englishman, dresses like an Englishman – the only problem he has is that his skin colour is black. Here, once more, Selvon points up the fact that the immigrant characters are alienated in London, are not given the chance to transform the nation, which is built exclusively on the notions of common descent and on a collective memory that binds the national, 'white' subjects together. It is no coincidence that the immigrant characters look back on their Caribbean past with pain and nostalgia. It is a past that was, in a number of ways, much better than the present, since in England they inhabit a zone that is reserved for ethnic identities only, thus dwelling in a gap that is unbridgeable; a gap that clearly separates the national majority from the ethnic-minority populations.

³⁷ Annette Treibel, *Migration in modernen Gesellschaften: Soziale Folgen von Einwanderung, Gastarbeit und Flucht* (Munich: Juventa, 1999): 32. My translation.

The Final Passage (1985): Returning Home – A Better Option

In this novel, Caryl Phillips writes about the West Indian wave of immigration into Britain in the 1960s. The title openly connects with the historical dimensions of the slave trade; the final passage back home here is the story of nineteen-year-old Leila, who leaves her Caribbean island and emigrates to England, bringing her husband Michael and infant son Calvin with her. Through Leila we gain an insight into why the Caribbean people leave their homes, and what kind of life they actually encounter in Britain, where at that time it was legal and normal to display signs that read “No coloureds. No blacks. No dogs!”³⁸ Thus, Phillips’s novel, just like Selvon’s, has wider dimensions, of a historical, economic and cultural nature. This is one of the characteristics of Phillips’s fiction – a type of fiction that is about “historical transit, about people travelling from birthplace to homeland, or from homeland to places unknown.”³⁹ Moreover, and this is decisive for this particular context, “his subjects search for a sense of belonging, bringing identity and culture with them as they go, or re-creating it.”⁴⁰ This, in fact, has repercussions upon the way they find a space in the nation’s ‘imagined community’.

In the first section of his novel, “The End,” Phillips describes Leila’s and her family’s departure from the Caribbean. Not knowing much about Great Britain, which everybody talks about and everybody invests so great expectations and hopes in, Leila is split about the idea of going – she senses, albeit unconsciously and at that stage inexplicably – that the fact of leaving behind her home and best friend Millie might not be such a good idea after all. Leila is strongly tied to her home country and is worried that she might not be able to return back home to the same land. She fears diving into a threatening “au-delà [...] for there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’.”⁴¹ In the second part of the novel, “Home,” the reader gets an insight into why so many people leave their homeland. The situation on the island is such that the inhabitants have no prospects whatsoever. The men almost miraculously find money to go drinking day and night, but it is not a glorious celebration of life but, rather, a drinking through boredom and hopelessness into a state of stupor. The island is a place where the sound of a motorcycle starting up is a sufficient event to attract adult spectators. Michael captures the essence of the people’s lives there. “There’s nothing here for me

³⁸ Caryl Phillips, *The Final Passage* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985): 156. Unless otherwise indicated, further page references are in the main text.

³⁹ Ivan Kreilkamp, “Caryl Phillips: The Trauma of Broken ‘History’,” *Publishers Weekly* 17 (1977): 44.

⁴⁰ Kreilkamp, “Caryl Phillips: The Trauma of Broken ‘History’,” 44.

⁴¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 1.

to do, nothing! Nothing man!" (53). Thus, the islanders basically have no other option than to look for betterment elsewhere – this ‘elsewhere’ is concretized in the “mother country” – the gate to heaven and the passport to prosperity, as they think it must be.

“Elsewhere,”⁴² as Paul Gilroy sees it, can also be a space for resistance, renewal, reassertion, rethinking, and self-assertion, which Leila achieves to a certain degree. She at least gives it a try in the new cultural milieu, however difficult that may be. She is the active part – she is the one who seeks contact to the majority population, represented by her ‘white’ neighbour Mary, she is the one who gets a job, however degrading it may be. Mary cannot really help Leila to overcome the feelings of “marginality and alienation,”⁴³ due to the “bombardment of millions of new stimuli and cues,”⁴⁴ but she at least provides her with some of the clues necessary to orient herself in her new surroundings. Leila is a character who has to acknowledge that her original cultural background remains with her but must be challenged, re-interpreted and adjusted to the British surroundings – which brings Phillips’s female protagonist to reconsider the histories she has inherited: the histories of language, of politics, of culture, and of experience. At one point in the novel, Leila goes so far as to accept the whites’ racist treatment of Michael and herself. As the narrator states in a rather melancholy tone, “Leila felt grateful for their honesty” (156). Hence, after having tried to gain access to the larger society and the nation, Leila accepts that she will always be judged and categorized by her ethnic identity, an identity she redefines, thereby fashioning her own distinctive notion of who she is – as somebody who will never reach the same level of recognition as the members of the nation.

For Michael, the situation is different. Interestingly, his lethargic behaviour does not change at all in the new cultural environment – it even gets worse. His identity is frozen in a social frame, less susceptible to change and variation. It is therefore not surprising that a character like Michael should opt for “isolation and displacement, which produce the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration [...] and community.”⁴⁵ All he

⁴² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1993): 13.

⁴³ J.W. Berry, Uichol Kim, Thomas Minder & Doris Mok, “Comparative Studies of Acculturation,” *International Migration Review* 21.3 (Fall 1987): 492.

⁴⁴ Gary R. Weaver, “Understanding and Coping with Cross-Cultural Adjustment Stress” (1993), in *Communication and Conflict: Readings in Intercultural Relations*, ed. Gary R. Weaver (Needham Heights MA: Simon & Schuster, 1996): 174.

⁴⁵ Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha & Cornel West (Cambridge MA: MIT Press: 1990): 364.

does is to identify strongly with his ethnic community, and his reference point is first and foremost group-oriented. Michael thus fails to gain access to the 'nation', since he has never ever wanted to do so in the first place. His cultural inflexibility and ethnic absolutism clearly make him a victim of circumstance.

The situation in Britain, as Phillips depicts it, is fairly similar to the one presented by Selvon in *The Lonely Londoners*. Unqualified, unskilled, and unprepared, Michael, Leila and Calvin move into the poorest part of London, where "the endless views of decay and poverty only made [Leila] feel more depressed" (129). Leila, just like Sir Galahad in Selvon's novel, realizes that certain areas are reserved for black immigrants (121). This, obviously, also reflects the low social status of the immigrants: "[Leila] noticed that coloured people did not drive big cars or wear suits or carry briefcases, that they seemed to look sad and cold" (151). Thus, colony dwelling is also one of the sad realities that Leila and Michael are confronted with. Residential concentration of an ethnic population, it is argued, is one of the most prominent contextual factors likely to increase the salience of ethnic identities.⁴⁶ The boundary mechanism, also evident in Selvon's novel, drives a wedge between the 'white' British in-group, and the 'black' Caribbean out-group, increasing the West Indians' sense of ethnic self and at the same time excluding them from participating in the nation's 'imagined community'. No wonder, then, that Michael and Leila are exposed to racial prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping.

Concluding Remarks

Caryl Phillips's British centre threatens to absorb the hard-won immigrant message of transformation and change and, not least, to submerge the unsettling immigrant sensibility altogether. In de-centering the representations that control British perceptions, Phillips, like Selvon, has begun to examine the myths that still serve to explain Britain's national identity. The 'white' British population's postulate of a singular, 'white', British identity is shown to be still operative in Britain's culture, and is exposed as the ideological underpinning of exclusionary and hegemonic practices on a national level. For both Selvon's and Phillips's immigrant characters, England is definitely not their home, since "home is where you feel a welcome."⁴⁷ Therefore (and this is a general characteristic of Black British writing), the characters are driven by an intense urge to return home – to a place that "enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new

⁴⁶ Cornell & Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*, 190.

⁴⁷ Phillips, *The Final Passage*, 115.

ways of reality; frontiers of difference.”⁴⁸ In Phillips’s novel, Leila eventually returns home with Calvin – her five-months’ stay in England was too degrading and painful. The narrator sadly acknowledges that “England, in whom she had placed so much of her hope, no longer held for her new challenges. At least the small island she had left behind had safety and two friends.”⁴⁹ In Selvon’s novel, the characters do not return home, since, owing to their long stay in the ‘mother country’, they fear they would no longer fit into the old, Caribbean mould again. This is particularly paradoxical, given the fact that they do not feel at home in London. Thus, as the discussion of these two novels has shown, the immigrant characters have not yet reached the stage of equally participation in the British way of life, of subverting the exclusivist implication of Englishness, of inhabiting at least an ‘alter-nation’ that is fully recognized and accepted by the majority population. Treating the immigrants as equal partners in an intercultural and interpersonal interaction will be the only way of solving the many problems that they and the larger society encounter.

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⁴⁸ hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston MA: South End, 1984): 19.

⁴⁹ Phillips, *The Final Passage*, 203.

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(Re)membering the Disembodied Verse

Constructs of Identity in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry

CARMEN ZAMORANO LLENA

It is critics who talk of “an authentic voice”; but a poet, living his uncertainties, is riddled with different voices, many of them in vicious conflict. The poem is the arena where the voices engage each other in open and hidden conflict, and continue to do so until they are all heard.¹

IN “CHILD OF OUR TIME,” a poem included in Eavan Boland’s *The War Horse* (1980), her second collection of poetry, Boland captures the instant of awakening to the hidden truths of Irish history. There is a realization that, at the time of writing the poem, the pre-established order of Irish tradition has come to an end, and there is also the awareness that in the apparent upheaval brought about by the end of a period – symbolized by the child’s “unreasoned end,” “the discord of your murder” – the female persona has found a new order, a new beginning:

And living, learn, must learn from you dead,
To make our broken images, rebuild
Themselves around your limbs, your broken
Image, [...]
[...], a new language.²

These closing lines are an expression of the foundations of the work of the women poets discussed in this essay. Their main aim is to create a “new language” of literary expression that will allow them to incorporate female

¹ Brendan Kennelly, “Preface” to Kennelly, *A Time for Voices: Selected Poems 1960–1990* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1990): 12.

² Eavan Boland, “Child of Our Time,” in Boland, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995): 30.

voices and human female figures into the broken body of Irish literary tradition, and to (re)define the sclerotic constructs of femininity and Irishness that were largely defined by nineteenth-century poetry, and whose remnants can still be found in some contemporary works.

In the case of Eavan Boland, *The War Horse* already contains a conscious attempt to (re)define her place “in a city and a poetic world where the choices and assumptions were near enough to those of a nineteenth century poet.”³ One of the poets who was developing his work in that poetic world and whose work has been connected to the nineteenth-century nationalist tradition⁴ is Seamus Heaney, who, around the time of the composition of Eavan Boland’s *The War Horse*, gave a relevant lecture at the Ulster Museum.

In this lecture, whose publication under the title “The Sense of Place” in his collection of essays *Preoccupations* coincides with the publication of Boland’s *The War Horse*, Heaney defines a sense of Irish identity as emerging out of an attachment to place, characterized by its combination of the illiterate and unconscious, on the one hand, and the learned, literate and conscious, on the other. After analysing the construction of this attachment to place in the work of various contemporary Irish (male) poets, Heaney concludes:

We are dwellers, we are namers, we are lovers, we make homes and search for our histories. And when we look for the history of our sensibilities I am convinced, as Professor J.C. Beckett was convinced about the history of Ireland generally, that it is to what he called *the stable element*, the land itself, that we must look for *continuity*.⁵

The relevance of Heaney’s words to the present essay is twofold. On the one hand, what Heaney says shows his understanding of the main traits of Irish identity as he constructs it in his work, especially in his bog poems; this is, significantly, connected to nineteenth-century Irish nationalist poetry. On the other, they contain the traditional construct of Irish identity which various contemporary women poets have felt the need to (re)define, so as to enable their location in the Irish literary and cultural tradition.

³ Eavan Boland, Preface, *Collected Poems*, ix.

⁴ For the connection of Heaney’s poetry to the Irish nationalist political tradition and, more specifically, to the nineteenth-century nationalist Patrick Pearse, see Patricia Coughlan’s “‘Bog Queens’: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney,” in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. Michael Allen (London: Macmillan, 1997): 185–205. See also David Lloyd’s “‘Pap for the Dispossessed’: Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity,” in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. Allen, 155–84.

⁵ Seamus Heaney, “The Sense of Place,” in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980): 148–49. My emphases.

Heaney's construct of a sense of place – his "mak[ing] homes" – is based on the recovery of Irish roots which he traces back to the formerly Celtic territory of Jutland. The bodies of the bog people dug up from that land are made by the poet–digger into vessels of history which the extraordinary properties of the Celtic land have left virtually unaltered. They come to represent the hidden Celtic past of Ireland that has been hibernating there – "My skull hibernated / in the wet of my hair,"⁶ claims the female persona in "Bog Queen" (*North*, 1975) – waiting to be physically and historically unearthed and brought to life through the power of the poet's Word.

Through their wounds and the marks of the passage of time, the bog bodies reveal to Heaney an utterly vivid sense of history, a continuum which makes the past as imbued with life as the present, as suggested by the lines in "The Grauballe Man" (*North*, 1975):

The cured wound
opens inwards to a dark
elderberry place.

Who will say 'corpse'
to his vivid cast?
Who will say 'body'
to his opaque repose?⁷

Heaney's sought-for continuity and stability in his sense of place, of history and, consequently, of Irish identity brings the Grauballe man to life, and his wounds, purportedly caused by his being sacrificed to a Celtic goddess, mirror the wounds of the contemporary Irishman and his sacrifice to defend a unified Irishness in the internecine conflict following the rebellion against British colonialism, whose roots reach back to the twelfth century. In this historical continuum, Heaney assumes the role of the nineteenth-century bard, who would use his quill with political intentions as a tool to preserve tradition and the memory of the tribe. It is precisely this unchangeable, unified and patriarchal literary and national tradition in Ireland that various contemporary women poets have started to question over the past thirty years.⁸ One of the most

⁶ Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998): 112–14.

⁷ Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996*, 115–16.

⁸ In "Irish Women's Poetry and the Republic of Ireland: Formalism as Form," Catriona Clutterbuck argues for an island-wide apprehension of Irish writing, especially relevant for women's poetry. However, Clutterbuck's argument does not erase difference – on the contrary, she considers that "women's poetry currently leads Irish poetry in its role in prompting the people of this island towards recognition that accepting and celebrating difference is the truest basis of personal and group identity"; *Writing in the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics 1949–1999*, ed. Ray Ryan (London: Macmillan, 2000): 18. This is an

representative statements of the problems posed by the Irish patriarchal inheritance, whose continuation can be traced in the work of Seamus Heaney, is Eavan Boland's essay "Lava Cameo" (1995).

In this essay, Boland recalls the moment at which she started to become aware of the gap between her mind and her body produced by the inherited Irish literary tradition: "my body would lead my poetry in one direction [...] my mind could take up the subtle permissions around me and write a disembodied verse."⁹ This is the side-effect of a poetic culture that had traditionally kept the female body completely alienated and separate from the mind and the agentive voice. By troping Irish identity through the images of the Poor Old Woman, Shan Van Vocht, Dark Rosaleen, or, most recently, Heaney's "Bog Queen," male poets have been able to take possession of the land, to combat the sense of dispossession and exile in their own country,¹⁰ and, consequently, to assert: "we are dwellers, we are namers, we are lovers."¹¹ However, relegating woman to the passive role of an object that is inhabited, named and loved emptied the female figures in the poems of any particular traits of personality, turning them into receptacles of male constructs of Irish national identity.

Consequently, it is not surprising that, with the change in attitudes that came in the late 1960s and early 1970s, women poets started to realize just how much they were exiles from their own literary and national tradition. As Boland claims, their names were not part of that poetic history; on the other hand, they could not identify with a sense of Irish identity in which they had only been allowed to participate as metaphors, similes and muses. Faced with this estrangement, in which the words "woman" and "poet" could not be

understanding of national identity that clearly differs from Heaney's. The three women poets considered in the present essay are in line with Clutterbuck's definition of contemporary women's poetry in Ireland.

⁹ Eavan Boland, "Lava Cameo," in *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman Poet in Our Time* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995): 26.

¹⁰ In his poem "The Downfall of the Gael," included in the collection *1000 Years of Irish Poetry: The Gaelic and Anglo-Irish Poets from Pagan Times to the Present*, ed. Kathleen Hoagland (1947; New York: Welcome Rain, 2000), Fearflatha O'Gnive (fl. 1562) reports on the suffering of Irish men under British rule and their feeling of exile in their own country:

The Sons of the Gael
 Are in exile and mourning.
 Worn, weary, and pale,
 As spent pilgrims returning.
 [...]
 We are strangers at home!
 We are exiles in Erin!

¹¹ Heaney, "The Sense of Place," 148.

brought together,¹² Boland argues that the only solution is “to reexamine and disrupt and dispossess”¹³ the constructs of Irish verse and national identity. In this essay, I will focus on the work of Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Paula Meehan as representatives of a twofold common aim: first, to avoid a “disembodied verse” by endowing the female body with the female voice, which necessarily involves redefining traditional literary tropes; secondly, to re-shape the construct of Irishness so as to allow the incorporation of women’s voices. In this way, it will be shown how these women poets work to heal the mutilated body of the Irish tradition, left incomplete by a dominantly patriarchal bias that had dispossessed women of a sense of literary and national identity.

In his introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha argues:

In restaging the past it [the minority] introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition. This process estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a ‘received’ tradition.¹⁴

Bhabha’s words, though focused on cultural differences, can be applied to help throw light on the techniques used by Irish women poets to (re)inscribe gender differences: i.e. their bodies and voices, in Irish tradition. By “re-staging the past” from a different perspective, they illuminate the “‘received’ tradition,” bar unproblematic identification with an “originary identity,” and make it possible to remember women’s past and identity.

One of the re-staged elements of the past is the traditional manipulation of the female body in Irish poetry. Poems in praise of the different parts of a woman’s body elevate the object of love to the category of muse of the male poet, and in Irish poetry, especially since the nineteenth century, a nationalist element must be added to the poet’s utilization of the female figure. However, in these representations Boland reads the dehumanizing and perverting effect against which she casts her voice. Thus, in “Tirade for the Mimic Muse” from *In Her Own Image* (1980), the following advice is provided:

¹² In her essay “Turning Away,” also included in *Object Lessons* (1995), Eavan Boland refers to her poignant realization of the gender differences inherent to Irish literary tradition:

By luck, or its absence, I had been born in a country where and at a time when the word woman and the word poet inhabited two separate kingdoms of experience and expression. I could not, it seemed, live in both. As the author of poems I was an equal partner in Irish poetry. As a woman – about to set out on the life which was the passive object of many of those poems – I had no voice. It had been silenced, ironically enough, by the very powers of language I aspired to and honored. By the elements of form I had worked hard to learn. (114)

¹³ Boland, “Lava Cameo,” 29.

¹⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 2.

Make your face naked,
 Strip your mind naked,
 Drench your skin in a woman's tears.
 I will wake you from your sluttish sleep.
 I will show you true reflections, terrors.
 You are the Muse of all our mirrors.
 Look in them and weep.¹⁵

Boland thus calls the muse of patriarchal tradition to divest her body and mind of the limitations that traditional, institutionalized thought – the literary canon and Irish nationalism – have imposed upon women. Boland's (re)reading of the female body in Irish history can be aligned with Foucault's interpretation of the body as a political site in which power-relations are played out, and to his "political technology of the body," according to which what he refers to as the "privilege"

is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it' [women in this case]; it [this power] invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them.¹⁶

In her resistance to the power of the "privileged" (male) Irish tradition, Boland works to stop the (ab)use of the female body as an alienating poetic and nationalist instrument. Thus, her collections *In Her Own Image* (1980) and *Night Feed* (1982) are works of resistance that try to defamiliarize 'tradition' by presenting women's body as human in its crudest expression: undergoing the menses, pregnancy, mastectomy, anorexia – in the last two cases, forms of violence to the female body that, whether men- or self-inflicted, are in any case side-effect of the imprisonment of the feminine in the "privileged" patriarchal cultural body.

The collection that follows *Night Feed* marks a change in Boland's politics of resistance. In her previous collections, she focuses on the estrangement involved in traditional representations of the physical female body, and the alienating effects of its atomization.¹⁷ *The Journey* (1983), however, marks an

¹⁵ Boland, *Collected Poems*, 55–56.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, "The Body of the Condemned," in Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan (*Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, 1975; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977): 27.

¹⁷ Foucault's "The Body of the Condemned" opens with various accounts narrating the punishment to Damians, the would-be regicide who in 1757 tried to assassinate Louis XV. As the final stage of his prolonged torture, "his body [was] drawn and quartered by four horses and his limbs and body consumed by fire, reduced to ashes and his ashes thrown to the winds' (*Pièces originales* [...], 372–74)." Foucault, "The Body of the Condemned," 3. The physical atomization of Damians has, as a consequence, the atomization of his sub-

attempt to invest the already naked female body, divested of the smothering corsets of tradition, with a mind and a voice of its own by remembering the past Irish and classical traditions. This second stage of Boland's politics of resistance is where her work can be best aligned with that of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Paula Meehan.

In *The Journey*, Boland embarks on a formative voyage that leads her concomitantly inward to delve into the mysteries of her own self as poet and woman, and outward to probe into the silences and wounds caused by a dominantly patriarchal tradition. Part of this Ulyssean journey is still the need to (re-)create the female muse as a necessary step towards achieving union between the words "woman" and "poet." Against the inherited muse of the Irish poetic tradition, wholly detached from the daily lives of ordinary women, Boland re-examines the fixed certainties of the lyric muse, thereby allowing for a reconstruction of the old myths, turning them into "the woman / [who] gives the kiss of myth her human heat,"¹⁸ the one who will "bless the ordinary" and "sanctify the common," as suggested in her poem "Envoi."¹⁹

An apt instance of this "sanctification of the common" is to be found in "The Making of an Irish Goddess," which starts with a traditional representation of classical mythology, the Roman goddess Ceres, as timeless conveyor of an ostensibly unified and stable order:

When she looked back
all that she could see was

the arteries of silver in the rock,
the diligence of rivers *always at one level*,
wheat *at one height*,
leaves of *a single colour*,
the same distance in the *usual* light;

a seasonless, unscarred earth.²⁰

jectivity. The physical and psychological atomization of Damiens is useful in interpreting the 'quartering' of the female body in traditional poems of praise as the consequent atomization or annihilation of her subjectivity. — It must be noted here that Tom Herron also draws on Foucault's essay in his article "The Body's in the Post: Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Dispersed Body," in *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity*, ed. Colin Graham & Richard Kirkland (London: Macmillan, 1999): 193–209. However, the physical violence done to the (male) body is at the core of his analysis, whereas in my essay the comparison between Damiens' punishment and the '(dis)memberment' of the female body in Irish poetry should be read in a more metaphorical sense.

¹⁸ Boland, "Listen. This Is the Noise of Myth," *Collected Poems*, 126.

¹⁹ Boland, *Collected Poems*, 123.

²⁰ Boland, "The Making of an Irish Goddess," from Boland, *Outside History* (1990), repr. in *Collected Poems*, 150–51. My emphases.

However, this sense of unalterable perfection is suddenly broken by the adversative conjunction and the shift from the estranging third-person singular to the most intimate “I” in the following line, a female persona that bursts into a cry for the experience of time engraving the scars of life into her own flesh, as an alternative way of constructing a renewed and humanized Irish goddess and, thereby, a renovated Irish poetic tradition in which she will eventually be able to find her place. As stated in the poem, “There is no other way: / myth is the wound we leave / in the time we have,” and by probing into the wound left by her existence, every individual woman should be able to perceive the extraordinary qualities of her ordinary life, just as Boland suggests:

[...] in my case [myth] is this
 March evening
 at the foothills of the Dublin mountains,
 across which the lights have changed all day,

 holding up my hand
 sickle-shaped, to my eyes
 to pick out
 my own daughter from
 all the other children in the distance;

 her back turned to me.

This (re)construction of myth and Irish literary tradition and the necessary (re)examination of Irish historical nationalist tradition is dominant in Boland’s collections from *The Journey* onwards. However, in *The Lost Land* (1998), her second-latest collection to date, the interrelationship between re-examined literary voice and the construct of Irishness finds its best expression.

Like other poets, Boland is aware that she inherits the literary and nationalist responsibilities of the medieval Irish bards. However, she does not aim at continuing that tradition unchanged, but at opening it up and providing access to what she calls, in “Daughters of the Colony,”²¹ “the distaff side of history”: i.e. the female side of history that the Irish tradition had silenced. The writing of her poems turns Boland into “one of the few [bards that] remained to continue / a dead art in a dying land.”²² Like the bard, Boland takes over the role of recording and telling the history of the land. However, there is a crucial difference between them: whereas the bard’s record of history was determined by his dependence on the established order – the noble man that paid for his vellum – Boland’s aim is precisely to record the sense of estrangement and alienation from that order as experienced by individuals at different mo-

²¹ Eavan Boland, *The Lost Land* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998): 16–17.

²² Boland, “My Country in Darkness,” in *The Lost Land*, 13.

ments in Irish history, from the end of the bardic tradition to the present time. By delving into these records of exile, Boland works to redefine the Irish literary voice, so as to be able to find her lost land as a poet: namely, a sense of home in a renewed language,²³ which she calls “[a habitable grief] which hurts / just enough to be a scar. / And heals just enough to be a nation.”²⁴

Like Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin also locates her own sense of identity in a reconstructed language, as announced by “Pygmalion’s Image,” the opening poem of her collection *The Magdalene Sermon* (1989). In this poem, the stone figure of Galatea, which in classical mythology is brought to life by Aphrodite in response to Pygmalion’s prayers – another female reflection of male desire – comes to life with her skin “ruffl[ing] like a book,” and a renewed “green leaf of language [that] comes twisting out of her mouth”²⁵ to tell the silenced stories of women, and thus enable the re-inscription of their bodies and voices in the tradition. This is the dominant purpose in Ní Chuilleanáin’s second collection, as can be seen in poems like “A Voice,” in which a female voice leads the male listener to perceive the female image in a different light – as a mutilated body that, forced to be merely an “ornament” in traditional poetry, needs to be (re)membered:

What sort of ornament is this?
 What sort of mutilation? Where’s
 The muscle that called up the sound,
 The tug of hair and the turned cheek?
 The sign persists, in the ridged fingerbone.

And he hears her voice, a wail of strings.²⁶

As suggested in the closing lines of the poem, the optimistic view of the renewal of poetry and of the tradition that is represented in the poem by the male persona is still tinged with some doubts. Despite the apparent awareness of the damaging effects of male-determined representations of women in

²³ In Boland’s poetry, it is important to understand the double meaning – not only physical but also psychological – that she gives to certain terms, such as “exile” and “lost land.” Thus, in the conclusion to her essay “A Fragment of Exile,” published in *Object Lessons* (1995), she claims: “the expatriate is in search of a country; the exile in search of a self. [And] safety is not a place but a language” (50–51). With regard to her understanding of the “lost land,” she has defined it as “not exactly a country and not entirely a state of mind [...] the lost land is not a place that can be subdivided into history, or love, or memory. It’s the poet’s own single, and private account of the ghostly territory where so much human experience comes to be stored” (cover-blurb for *The Lost Land*).

²⁴ Boland, “11. A Habitable Grief,” *The Lost Land*, 29.

²⁵ Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Magdalene Sermon* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1989): 9.

²⁶ Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Magdalene Sermon*, 27.

poetry, the repressed female image is still fragmented and mutilated, since her body remains separated from its tongue, “the muscle that called up the sound,” hence symbolically disempowered and deprived of the possibility of allowing a full and coherent presence of women in the poetic tradition. The solution to the atomization of women’s (cultural) body is suggested in the closing poem of this collection, significantly entitled “The Promise.” As suggested in this poem, the promise is the certainty that, by re-examining the bones of the past – that is, private stories and public histories – “in retrospect,” one becomes aware of the edges and scars on what used to be apparently smooth land and bodies, and it is precisely by focusing on the stories hidden beneath “welded scar[s]” that a female sense of identity solidifies:

Where we have split and healed askew –

You rock inside your skin
Your bones rock in your flesh²⁷

Thus, in the collection that follows, Ní Chuilleanáin concentrates on realizing this promise: she focuses on unveiling what she calls “the real thing,” embodied in the image of the brazen serpent, by unearthing private stories and re-examining traditional legends as a way to materialize her own presence as a woman *and* poet in the Irish tradition: “to say ‘I’ in a female persona.”²⁸

With regard to their attitude towards the national tradition, Ní Chuilleanáin concurs with Eavan Boland. Neither of them follows the precept of what Boland considers to be some of the best feminist poets: “Wipe clean the slate, start afresh.”²⁹ Their view is that there is a social and historical construct of woman and that women, being members of this society and interpreters of history, will never be able to rid themselves of the traditional image of the feminine.³⁰ Consequently, as suggested by Linda Hutcheon,³¹ they reappropriate “forms of the past to speak to a society from within the values and history of that society, while questioning it.” The necessary combination of apparently opposite elements that results from this reappropriation – past and present, male and female, private and public, history and stories – finds its best expression in Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem “The Real Thing.” It opens by praising the

²⁷ Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Magdalene Sermon*, 40.

²⁸ Leslie Williams, “‘The stone recalls its quarry’: An Interview with Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin,” in *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, ed. Susan Shaw Sailer (Gainesville: UP of Florida): 39.

²⁹ Boland, “Outside History,” in *Object Lessons*, 145.

³⁰ *Irish Women: Image and Achievement*, ed. Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Dublin: Arlen House, 1985).

³¹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989): 12.

“miraculously copied” Book of Exits, an official religious document lying open to be viewed in the convent by the general public. However, in the convent, a space for confined women who follow the rules defined by the patriarchal institution of Christian religion, Sister Custos rebels against the established order and momentarily unveils the hidden truth that lies behind the public text: namely, “the longest / Known fragment of the Brazen Serpent,” which symbolizes the “true stories” that are inseparable from official history, and which stir behind it as if wanting to be discovered:

The torn end of the serpent
Tilts the lace edge of the veil.
The real thing, the one free foot kicking
Under the white sheet of history.³²

As suggested in “The Promise,” “in retrospect, it is all edge” and it is on the edges of official history, in the interstitial spaces, that the “true stories,” the real thing, are to be found, and where Ní Chuilleanáin can reshape her own identity and verse.³³

Cuts, wounds, edges, and broken bodies are frequent images in the work of Boland, Ní Chuilleanáin and Meehan. They are sites of lost identity, accidents in the geography of the land and the body, through which unknown stories of everyday life, human suffering, and female truths have percolated, and where they have remained veiled for a long time. Lost land in Eavan Boland and lost children in Paula Meehan are lost physical entities that belie a deeper psychological loss in these women poets, caused by their sense of being outcasts in the house of Irish identity and verse. The journeys that also abound in their poetry are inward, towards “the emotional or psychic wilderness,”³⁴ which can only be conquered through a voyage outward into the depths of historical memory and the layers of private memories behind it. Only through the harmony between their inner truths and the national and literary body will they be able to find a place they can call home, “to spell a map that makes sense.”³⁵ This is precisely the aim that directs Meehan’s latest collection, *Dharmakaya* (2000).

³² Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Brazen Serpent* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1994): 16.

³³ This concern finds its continuation in Ní Chuilleanáin’s latest collection, *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2001). In “Translation,” (25) she recovers the use of images from Catholic tradition so as to claim the need to recover the female voices (represented by the buried Magdalenes) that are “ridges under the veil” of History: “Assist them now, ridges under the veil, shifting, / Searching for their parents, their names, / The edges of words grinding against nature.”

³⁴ Inés Praga Terente, “Interview with Paula Meehan,” *The European English Messenger* 6.2 (1997): 19.

³⁵ Paula Meehan, “Home,” in *Pillow Talk* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1994): 71–72.

The title, a word from the Tibetan Book of the Dead, evokes this attempt to transcend physical and psychological limitations so as to bring (inner) truth(s): i.e. the *dharma* of this collection or the *chung fu* or ideogram for ‘inner truth’ on the cover of *Pillow Talk*, and (cultural) bodies or *kaya*, into harmonious existence. This is to be effected by a thorough reading of Meehan’s own personal Book of the Dead, to recover life through her poetry, memories of loss, and voices of ancestors, and by uncovering the lost children of the inner city – read here “inner self” – a phrase that serves as the title of a significant serial poem in *Dharmakaya*.³⁶ As stated in “Molly Malone” (25), the first of the seven sections that form this poem, the poet’s aim is to recover

Out of the debris of history
 a song, a name,
 a life we piece together

 from odds and ends,
 the cast off, the abandoned,
 the lost, the useless, the relicts.

The only piece of information that seems to have survived the passage of time is the factual, objective event that “[s]he *died of fever*,” a sentence borrowed from the Irish folksong “Cockles and Mussels,” which tells the story of this popular tragic figure who has become part of the legends of Dublin.³⁷ By being written in italics, this statement is differentiated from the poet’s words, which try to fill in the gaps left by public accounts and thereby unveil “the world of her children” – a whole world of unknown truth(s) to which the citizens of the past and the poet’s present have been blind. By finding the

³⁶ Paula Meehan, *Dharmakaya* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000). Further page references are in the main text.

³⁷ The Molly Malone legend serves Paula Meehan to criticize and redefine popular constructs of female identity. The legend tells the story of a young and attractive fishmonger who was found dead in the middle of a street in Dublin. The story of her life as well as of the causes of her death is ridden with significant ambiguities, such as the belief that she sold fish during the day and her body at night, or that she died of typhoid fever, caused by consuming infected Dublin Bay cockles and mussels, or of a sexual disease. Thus, the figure of Molly Malone embodies two traditional representations of women in patriarchal accounts, either as a young woman of divine beauty or as a corrupted and corrupting woman. The objectification of this female figure was further continued in the twentieth century, since during the Dublin’s Millennium in 1988 it was decided that a statue of Molly Malone was to be erected at the corner of Grafton Street and Suffolk Street in Dublin, which is also referred to in the poem. Paula Meehan’s purpose is precisely to read the human element that has been lost in all popular accounts and representations of this female figure. For more information on this legend, see, for example, the web page of the Centre for Irish Genealogical and Historical Studies. <http://homepage.tinet.ie/~seanjmurphy/irhismys/index.htm>

“human face” in the stone of history (“The Stone Faces of Dublin,” 27), reading the hidden stories in the paradoxically open books of History (“History Lesson,” 28), and remembering the lines in the hands of her ancestors, the wounds of time in the body of her grandmother (“Grandmother, Gesture,” 29), Meehan can draw the map that will eventually lead her to achieve a balance between her inner truth and the outside world and thus reach her longed-for home, as she states in the closing lines of her collection *Pillow Talk* (1994):

[...] When the song that is in me
is the song I hear from the world, I'll set down my burdens
and sleep. The spot that I lie on at last the place I'll call home.³⁸

As shown in this essay, despite the obvious differences in their work, these three women poets set off on their respective literary and existential journeys impelled by a shared anxiety at being left by Irish tradition in a liminal space between existence and non-existence, “between breath and no breath.”³⁹ Being forced to examine their literary tradition for true reflections of themselves as women and poets, they found that there were none and that the alternative for them was to write a disembodied verse. Resisting this fate, they aim to redefine the boundaries of tradition from their own liminality and to turn their interstitial space into a site in which physical and psychological coordinates of time, space, gender and age criss-cross to create a new pattern. Within and through this new pattern, they overturn traditional images of the body and of women’s silence. The body, on the one hand, becomes the location of their sense of home, by avoiding what Meehan calls “the twisty and already written fates”⁴⁰ but, at the same time, taking along on their voyages of formation the cultural baggage contained in their inherited tradition, in their “father’s old suitcase.”⁴¹ Women’s silence, on the other hand, is endowed in their poetry with a wholly new significance; their final aim is to make silence no longer the heavy load of repression, but the culmination of a long journey, revealing a sense of fulfilment. Thus, as Meehan suggests in “A Woman’s Right to Silence,” the closing poem in *Dharmakaya*, after so much time working to make their voices heard, what better climax than to savour the unspeakable joy, not of “a curst state,” but of a new “ecstatic, free, untried” silence?⁴²

³⁸ Meehan, “Home,” in *Pillow Talk*, 71–72.

³⁹ Meehan, “Dharmakaya,” in *Dharmakaya*, 11.

⁴⁰ Meehan, “Manula Junction,” in *Dharmakaya*, 43.

⁴¹ “Manula Junction,” in *Dharmakaya*, 43.

⁴² Meehan, “A Woman’s Right to Silence,” in *Dharmakaya*, 63.

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“Scotland, Whit Like?”

Coloured Voices in Historical Territories

CARLA RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ

DISCUSSING SCOTLAND'S STATUS as a postcolonial nation has become a legitimate concern in recent decades. The special number that *SPAN* dedicated to “Celtic Nationalism and Postcoloniality”¹ in 1995 posed the issue in the form of a highly significant questionnaire in which the suitability of Ireland, Wales and Scotland for inclusion within the historico-geographical framework of postcolonial societies was contrasted with the participation of their peoples in the process of colonial expansion within the British Empire. It was suspected that ‘Postcoloniality’ might be an empty category, a radically postmodern tool for playing with labels and thereby losing track of the original context that gave rise to the term. However, I would like to highlight what I consider to be the fundamental point the editors of the journal make in their initial analysis – the fact that to talk in these terms serves an important function: i.e. to open up the limiting scope of names and create “an available language to discuss imbalances between cultural relations.”² In the case of Scotland, Michael Gardiner uses what to me seems a most appropriate approach to the problem. If Scottish society cannot be defined as ‘postcolonial’ (as it has not gained total independence after a colonial stage), then we may talk of a different type of context:

But of course since Scotland is not postcolonial but nationally postcolonial, the nation already carries oppressive associations and the next turn is not to the nation as such but the nation within postcolonial theory – multiple identifi-

¹ *Celtic Nationalism and Postcoloniality*, ed. Ralph Crane et al. (*SPAN* 41, Special Issue, October 1995).

² *Celtic Nationalism and Postcoloniality*, ed. Crane et al., 3.

cations within metropolitan terms – to articulate national needs within acting subjects.³

The very multiplicity of identities he refers to is, of course, also inscribed in the national – mental – borders and the various experiences of its citizens, and does not just involve the uniform interpretations offered by history in its exclusionary, linear progress, but also the individual relations that have their origin in particular interests that are simultaneously being opposed. Homogenization within the group has traditionally been the instrument essential to acquiring political authority within discursive practices, but it has meant an inherent rejection of internal dissident subjectivities. The different gazes directed at Scotland, whether from colonial discourse or in the form of nationalistic justifications, have tended to offer a homogeneous view of its multiple realities. With reference to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, an already classic text on nationalism,⁴ Colin Nicholson has pointed out how, even on the linguistic level, Scotland is a highly problematic entity: "what national identity? Three language-uses – Gaelic, Scots, and English – makes for a complex psychological terrain. We need more work on the 'imagined' communities that comprise a (stateless) Scotland."⁵

The extended participation of the Scots – as a whole and single entity – in the colonial experience has often been remembered only as involving participation on the side of the colonizer; its own subaltern condition under English domination is frequently forgotten. The military field, perhaps the most obvious branch of colonial power, soon represented Highland regiments as some of the fiercest forces of the British army in its colonial expansion, and the visual impact of their distinctive uniforms helped frame the picture even more clearly. However intense this commitment may have been, we should not ignore the further implications. By incorporating Scots in the physical instrument of imperial repression – the army – colonial discourse achieved two main goals. On the one hand, it found a means of sustaining its hierarchies. On the other, it involved in inexorable process of alienation in which "the centre strengthen[ed] its position by selective inclusion in order to better exclude that which threaten[ed] it."⁶ As Cairns Craig suggests, Scottish identity was undervalued both by distorting the narrative of its past into indignity and

³ Michael Gardiner, "Democracy and Scottish Postcoloniality," *Scotlands* 3.2 (1996): 29.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and the Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 2nd ed. 1991).

⁵ Colin Nicholson, "Responses to Questionnaire by Stuart Murray and Alan Riach on Celtic Nationalism and Postcoloniality," *SPAN* 41 (October 1995): 51.

⁶ Gillian Carter, "Women, Postcolonialism, and Nationalism: A Scottish Example," *SPAN* 41 (October 1995): 65.

through the influential role played by its assimilated intellectuals – something that recalls the first reaction of the native towards the decolonization of their territory as described by Fanon⁷ – particularly during the (Scottish) Enlightenment.

But in Scotland the myths of Ossian had already been reduced to mockery by MacPherson’s ‘translations’, and the Anglo-Scottish tradition did not see itself – like sections at least of the Anglo-Irish – as having a distinctly separate cultural tradition from England’s. The dominant groups in Scottish society could view themselves as part of a continuum stretching through Britain and out across the Empire which they had helped to shape. That imperial identity, however, reduced specifically Scottish traditions to local colour.⁸

Many soldiers of Scottish origin who joined the British army came from the Gaelic areas of the nation, those affected by an ‘internal colonization’ exerted by the Lowlanders, with some characteristics that Angus Calder judges to be similar to those present in other colonized areas: namely, “dispossession of the land, erection of new towns as centres of commercial exploitation, attempts to stamp out the native language.”⁹ The destruction of the Celtic social order had caused a progressive loss of identity for these peoples with the post-Enclosure economic transformation of the clan system into a modern agricultural one. The chieftains, traditionally thought of as warlords, had become landlords, and the members of their clans, previously organized along the lines of military hierarchy, saw themselves cultivating a land that was no longer theirs. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Highland Clearances caused massive exodus or migration of these communities, mainly to Glasgow and Edinburgh, where their cultural traditions had to be adapted to industrial urban life. The British Empire was then experiencing its greatest territorial expansion and, needing manpower for its campaigns, found a ready solution for such a critical situation. Exploiting myths about Celtic bravery on the battlefields, the English and assimilated Scots offered this northern people at large an opportunity to ‘reinvent’ a new prestigious identity based on a reconstructed past in which loyalty was the highest virtue.

We also get a new function for the military elements and traditions of Gaelic society. [...] Highland regiments were raised and officered (sometimes these

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, tr. Constance Farrington (*Les damnés de la terre*, 1961; tr. 1956; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967).

⁸ Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996): 15.

⁹ Angus Calder, “By the Water of Leith I Sat Down and Wept: Reflections on Scottish Identity,” in *New Scottish Writing*, ed. Harry Ritchie (London: Bloomsbury, 1996): 222.

officers had seen earlier service) and men recruited to them from the areas of origin of these officers. Thus both those officers, the middle class, and the men, the lower classes, found new identities for themselves, new loyalties to the British Crown. This loyalty became a potent, if again sometimes ambivalent, factor in the identity of the Gael, fostered and refocused by the rhetoric that appealed to the traditional virtues of courage and obligation.¹⁰

By offering a masculine prestige previously denied by the discourse of colonialism, the army became a massive instrument of assimilation. The very difference of these soldiers, betokened by their distinctive uniform, was a means for the Empire to legitimize its discourse, since these already doubly colonized communities played a key role in the defence of imperial values. Their warlike spirit represented Great Britain's growth and prosperity, and the selective inclusion of members of the Scottish regiments demonstrated the successful internalization of their loyalty to the British Crown, setting an example to other peoples recently incorporated into the Empire. But even the fact that Highland regiments wore their distinctive kilts is highly significant if we trace them back historically and recall that they were banned from the rest of the civil population for years – not to mention the 'real' origins and meanings of the national garment. The Proscription Act of 1747 banned tartan clothing until 1782 for those people "other than shall be employed as Officers and Soldiers in his Majesty's Forces."¹¹ Thus, one of the most distinctive features of Scottish culture could only be worn by those individuals already assimilated to the British system. Marilyn Reizbaum, in a study of Neil Jordan's film *The Crying Game*, analyses these images – both feminine and masculine – in the colonial mirror, suggesting that the importance of kilts for the identity of the Scots was a manifestation of the metaphoric feminization undergone by colonized peoples. These same images of the masculinized feminine are also to be found during World War II, when Scottish soldiers were nicknamed "Devils in Skirts" or "Ladies from Hell" by German troops.¹²

the image of the kilted Scotsman is, in part, a kind of spectre of English construction; the clan system is a refashioned, if you will, modern codification of the Scottish clan system, evidence of the English fetishisation of the skirt, the projection, perhaps the idealization of the nation through the feminization of the subject people.¹³

¹⁰ Donald MacAulay, "Canons, Myths and Canon Fodder," *Scotlands* 1 (1994): 39–40.

¹¹ David McCrone, *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998): 181.

¹² S.J. Boyd, "A Man's a Man: Reflections on Scottish Masculinity," *Scotlands* 2 (1994): 100.

¹³ Marilyn Reizbaum, "Not a Crying Game: The Feminist Appeal; Nationalism, Feminism and the Contemporary Literatures of Scotland and Ireland," *Scotlands* 2 (1994): 30.

If colonial discourse insisted on the inferiority of the peoples under imperial influence, it has been through nationalist movements that the colonized have sought a dignified image with which to identify. In Scotland this redefinition emphasized the nation’s masculinity, as opposed to the passivity it was associated with in colonial eyes; here again, Fanon’s theories about the national intelligentsia beginning to justify a past of their own, a constructed collective identity, apply.¹⁴ David Cairns and Shaun Richards describe it as a process in which

the colonized are constrained to assert a dignified self-identity in opposition to a discourse which defines them as, variously, barbarian, pagan, ape, female; but always subordinate and inferior.¹⁵

It was in the 1920s – a time of nationalist reawakening in the whole of Europe – that the Scottish Literary Renaissance, led by Hugh MacDiarmid, started to demand political and cultural autonomy for Scotland. Scottish identity was revised – ‘imagined’, in Benedict Anderson’s term¹⁶ – to evoke its historical past and build up a homogeneous self-awareness more easily opposed to English culture. This Scotland as described by the intellectuals was born out of what Cynthia Enloe considers a traditional masculine reaction: “nationalism has typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculine hope.”¹⁷ And within this masculine ideology, the self-assuring definitions that working life offered to those engaged in the frantic activities of local industry are again a source of contradictions, for the mines, shipyards, steelworks and other similar domains were central to the preservation of the wealth of the Empire.

The ideas about a common ethnic origin for the nation that MacDiarmid and other intellectuals of the time – such as Ruairaid Erkskin of Maar or Fionn Mac Colla – promulgated would focus on a Celtic past that ignored alien influences on the genetic pool of the people of Scotland. However, some other outstanding members of the group looked back to other historical ethnic groups to assert the superiority of their race. Thus, Lewis Grassie Gibbon evoked the Picts and Eric Linklater the Vikings. In this respect, perhaps the

¹⁴ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

¹⁵ David Cairns & Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988): 8, quoted in Carter, “Women, Postcolonialism and Nationalism,” 69.

¹⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹⁷ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (London: Pandora, 1989), quoted in Sylvia Walby, “Woman and Nation,” in *Mapping the Nation*, ed. Gopal Balakrishnan (London & New York: Verso / New Left Review, 1999): 141.

most reasonable member of the group may have been Edwin Muir, who saw the importance of other settlers in terms of cultural transmission, instead of as a search for the ‘real’ roots of Scottish society:

I do not much mind whether it [the Scots’ background] is called Celtic or not. I am well aware there is not such a thing as racial purity in any nation. It is possible, indeed certain, that a strong underlying strain in the Scot is Celtic.¹⁸

If the claim of a unique “genetic” source was a fundamental step for traditional nationalist minds, language is probably one of the first areas in which ideology is reflected, as psychoanalytic theories have shown. When the nationalists of the interwar period felt the need for an unproblematically whole Scotland to back their cultural and political demands, the main feature on which this claim to homogeneity was based was the linguistic level. English was rejected as a means of expression and the creation of a ‘synthetic Scots’ was conceived as a first step towards achieving a national language that could lead to the ‘recuperation’ of an essential Gaelic Scotland. This language was created through the incorporation of words from different Scottish dialects, as well as from old-fashioned expressions, often extracted from sixteenth-century poetic works.¹⁹ By establishing an official means of expression and communication, the stalwarts of the Scottish Renaissance were not only demanding a language of their own but were reproducing the power asymmetries they denounced in English colonial discourse. Thus, other dialects such as Anglo-Scots, probably one of the most extensive contemporary voices, were rejected because of their proximity to the English language. As Angus Calder remarks in his meditations on Scottish identity – again conceived in homogeneous and simplistic terms – “[They] define [them]selves by what [they] are not. [They] are not English.”²⁰ He points to the fact that it was necessary to signpost the frontiers, to erase the mental borderlands that kept England and Scotland close to each other, in order to deny previous connotations of inferiority. The power behind this new language meant, for MacDiarmid, a possibility of achieving a positive definition for the Scots, always thought of in masculine terms, since, as he himself states in his “Theory of Scots Letters,” their vernacular language kept “alive a spirit of brave and virile gaiety.”²¹ Women were therefore left on the margins of Scottish society,

¹⁸ Edwin Muir, quoted in Susan Hagemann, “‘Bidin Naitural’: Identity Questions in Twentieth-Century Renaissance Literature,” *Scottish Literary Journal* 21.1 (1994): 47.

¹⁹ Isabel Carrera Suárez, “El Scots y su literatura: La búsqueda de una identidad nacional en una lengua minoritaria,” *Archivum* 36 (1986): 217.

²⁰ Calder, “By the Water of Leith I Sat Down and Wept,” 236.

²¹ Hugh MacDiarmid, “A Theory of Scots Letters” (1922), quoted in Carter, “Women, Postcolonialism and Nationalism,” 71.

lacking the right to play an active role in the national project or to have their voices heard in its construction. It was masculine hands that controlled words, and the hierarchies that their discourse was fighting against were projected on women, who became passive icons of reproduction – both physical and cultural – as well as the reified muses men ought to fight for in case of external threat.²²

With the passing of time and the progressive decline of the industrial sector, the masculine definition provided by such activities experienced a parallel crisis to the harsh social and economic context of the area. For some critics, this tension is the origin of a creative process through which culture has become the “surviving option” to the death of the nation’s wealth:

‘Working men’ can hardly find a basis for identity in prideful skilled work when such work is no longer there for them. [...] Culture has now become the surviving option. Fortunately, Scottish art and literature and music have achieved notable feats in the last quarter of a century. While in Glasgow Culture officially replaces shipbuilding as the city’s defining activity, the Scottish intelligentsia can find their Scotland and their own identity in their own activities and in the conceptions of Scotland which they themselves use and create.²³

The nation as a construct generates multiple ways in which to relate to Scottish identity. Culture becomes the economy, labour, and, most importantly, a holy belief at a time when discourses travel faster than ever. The consumption of a common identity easily adapted to particular circumstances allows for the destabilization of previous hierarchies imposed on marginal subjectivities, but at the same time legitimizes all kinds of approaches to the issue. Therefore, the sacred value attributed to cultural production feeds back into radically opposed identities, for it can both serve traditional exclusive ideologies and reveal their illusory ambitions. Even if that were not the case, and artists with an interest in politics were to believe in the inalienable rightness of their message, there would always be some divergent voice to reply to. If we think about the peripheral space represented by Scottish culture within the mainstream British canon, we would perhaps agree on certain points, such as the fact that it is still considered a type of parochial art by large circles outside the nation, and that this inferior status corresponds to long-lasting discriminatory strategies perpetuating the cultural imbalance between Scotland and England. Cairns Craig’s use of the metaphoric transposition of ethnicity to linguistic – and therefore – cultural otherness in Scottish culture may serve to illustrate the point:

²² Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London: Sage, 1997).

²³ Calder, “By the Water of Leith I Sat Down and Wept,” 223.

It is not by our colour, of course, that we have stood to be recognised as incomplete within the British context, it is by the colour of our vowels: the rigidity of class speech in Britain, the development of Received Pronunciation as a means of class identity, is the direct response of a dominant cultural group faced by a society in which the outsiders are indistinguishable by colour.²⁴

Other authors also use colour to symbolize categories in the Scottish context. Angus Calder mentions Christopher Harvie's use of the term 'Black Scots' to classify those who stayed at home and followed the path of stereotypical Scottish traditions and 'Red Scots' to refer to those who experienced a diasporic life and helped create a canonical – also 'fictional' – image of what they had left behind. As the editorial board of *SPAN* remind us,

such communities not only made massive contributions to the nature of the lands in which they settled but they achieved definitions of their own 'national' communities that were unavailable back home. Proverbially, 'Exile is the mother of nationalism'.²⁵

Calder himself talks about the sense of displacement of the Scot abroad and the bar imposed by a 'white' centre, an ideological British core to which the Scots would not belong.²⁶

However faithfully this may have reflected the situation of many individuals, there are many examples in Scottish culture of people who have experienced a higher degree of discrimination and to whom 'colour' is indeed a visible barrier. Taking as an example the works of Jackie Kay and Maud Sulter, we discover the discriminatory spiral which peripheral voices within a peripheral group enter. Sulter, interviewed by Rebecca E. Wilson, talks about the hypocritical way in which ethnic difference is dealt with and the false stereotype of Scotland's liberal character – speaking again in general terms:

the fact that Black people have been in Scotland for over four hundred years has also to be taken on board. What could be politely called standing on the sidelines of an issue people think has nothing to do with them has to come centre stage, because the issue of race is very important in British politics. It's another disheartening thing that in a country that claims to have such a radical, rebellious nature as Scotland, there is such a hesitation to take on board other people's voices.²⁷

²⁴ Craig, *Out of History*, 12.

²⁵ *Celtic Nationalism and Postcoloniality*, ed. Crane et al., 2.

²⁶ Calder, "By the Water of Leith I Sat Down and Wept," 228–29.

²⁷ Rebecca E. Wilson & Gillean Somerville–Arjan, *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990): 129.

Jackie Kay, for her part, is quite explicit about the negation of a hybrid Scottish identity. Being black and Scottish at the same time causes a reaction in many people, as is clearly reflected in what is probably Kay’s most popular poem, “So You Think I Am a Mule?”²⁸ Here a white lady asks the young black woman about her place of origin, assuming she must be a foreigner. Her blindness to difference within the essentialist standards of the nation raises the question “Where do you come from?,” which in the author’s words translates into:

“You don’t belong here.” [...] Either they mean “Go back to where you came from,” or just have this obsessive curiosity that is all the time trying to deny the fact that you’re Scottish.²⁹

But this discrimination is not only to be found among white people. The “anomaly” this hybridism means for the ideological centre of a white society is also reproduced within black culture:

Scottish people will either refuse to recognize my Scottish accent, or my Scottishness, or they’ll say, “Are you American?” And Black people will just hear my accent or think it really funny and say they’ve never met such a person before. And so being Black and Scottish is always treated as a kind of anomaly.³⁰

Hybrids have always been a preoccupation for essentialist discourses. Hugh MacDiarmid’s nationalism could not think of achieving a positive national representation without destroying “the monster within.”³¹ The fragmentation the Scots experienced could only be overcome through the suppression of the myths about the inferiority of national culture and the building-up of a new, positive definition of the community. Nevertheless, the destruction of the monster that haunts the Scots psyche must be analysed afresh in a contemporary context. If we consider Rebecca E. Wilson’s definition of ‘monsters’: namely, as a “fusion of contradictions,”³² then we must understand that

In many cultures such creatures, appearing in dreams or visions, are associated with a rite de passage, the centre point of a transition from one state of being to another. The power of monsters is that they jar us out of our own realities,

²⁸ Barbara Butford et al., *A Dangerous Knowing: Four Black Women Poets* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1987): 53–54.

²⁹ Jackie Kay, in Wilson & Gillean, *Sleeping with Monsters*, 121.

³⁰ Jackie Kay, in Wilson & Gillean, *Sleeping with Monsters*, 122.

³¹ Catherine Kerrigan, “Desperately Seeking Sophia: Hugh MacDiarmid and the Female Principle,” *Scottlands* 2 (1994): 160.

³² Rebecca E. Wilson, “Introduction” to Wilson & Gillean, *Sleeping with Monsters*, xi.

conceptual possibilities, they can create, and are created from, both fear and freedom.³³

These imaginary creatures grow a power out of their fragmentation, and their hybrid character allows for the construction of new valid moulds to suit those individuals forgotten by traditional categories. More than an attempt to destroy the monster of Scottish culture, what its margins are demanding is a negotiation of its qualities and the inclusion of difference within the national discourse. And it is precisely here that the ambiguity offered by the sacralization of culture already mentioned can be used as a politically deconstructive tool, for ex-centric voices gain access to a valued means of expression.

Liz Lochhead is one of the names that inevitably recur in discussions about contemporary Scottish writing and the ways in which social demands have been expressed in literary texts, as well as in performances. This prominent poet and playwright was one of the first female voices in Scotland to denounce the dangers caused by the transmission of essentialist assumptions from past to present. Their creation and re-creation through history has served the interests of a specific social group, assigning polar roles to those individuals incorporated in or excluded from the system. In a nationalist context like the Scottish one, the recuperation of the myths of the past through historiography has been one of the principal strategies used to validate reactionary or progressive discourse. In *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*,³⁴ from whose first scene “Scotland, Whit Like?” I have drawn part of the title of this essay, Lochhead uses the historical Mary Stuart as a symbol for the changing character of myths that Roland Barthes studied in his *Mythologies*.³⁵ Throughout the play, we observe the evolution of the character’s popularity, from the sixteenth-century Calvinist contempt for her religious and sexual behaviour, to the nationalist appropriation of the icon, once her story became an intentionally oblivious narrative, reconstructed according to those traditional feminine qualities praised by patriarchal discourse. Mary Stuart’s tragic end, her beheading in England by order of Elizabeth I, enabled her incorporation into the Scottish mythic pantheon; the reasons that induced her to flee from Scotland were left aside. The vicious icon of the queen, as symbolic mother of the nation who poisoned her people with her reprehensible conduct, became the image of Scottish suffering in colonial relations with England. Although the use of Biblical representations of women was a fundamental weapon in the campaign to question and destroy Mary Stuart’s

³³ Wilson, “Introduction” to Wilson & Gillean, *Sleeping with Monsters*, xi.

³⁴ Liz Lochhead, *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).

³⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957).

power, centuries later these same images were recuperated to praise the queen as one of the victims of a nation and mother country tortured at English hands.

The fact that Mary Queen of Scots, the last monarch of a completely independent Scotland, was herself a hybrid character in real life offers Lochhead a handy instrument for deconstructing the nationalist myth. If the Northern Renaissance denied the possibility of a plural society in Scotland, or at least defended the existence of a national essence opposed to any other community's, particularly that of the English, then the nationalist exemplification of the relations between Scotland and England through this queen's death subverts the logical basis of the movement. The unveiling of the original meaning of transgression associated with Mary Stuart's life allows Lochhead to show the construction of the historical character. In *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, the sixteenth-century queen gives up her role as symbolic suffering mother of the nation to denounce the intolerance of Scottish society towards other ways of understanding national identity. Lochhead does not reject the advantages provided by a national identity so long as it is not conceived in an exclusive and alienating way. Thus, the opening-up of the categories that define the members of the group starts with the use of different registers, dialects and languages that appear in the play.

Another instrument for the deconstruction of the myth of Mary Stuart is to be found in the correspondence between the models of the past and their reflection in contemporary Scottish society. The redefinition of traditional assumptions about the Scots' character is carried out via the fragmentary structure of the play, in which historical figures undergo constant transformation at the commands of an implausible narrator, La Corbie. She is in charge of revealing the different constructions of the elements making up the stereotype of Scotland through her ironic and sardonic comments. Her role as a vehicle of communication between audience and performance helps denounce institutional influence on public opinion, but at the same time her relative omniscience is questioned by some of the characters' reactions, which undermines her exclusive power of interpretation, thus questioning the validity of any society's mental authority. The opening scene of the play – “Scotland, Whit Like?” – destabilizes the unidirectional assumptions about the defining features of Scottish identity. Lochhead has the historical characters parade in a circus ring to La Corbie's whip. Her personalized description of the nation opens up the meaning of national symbols to the individual subjectivity of each member of the audience.

LA CORBIE: Country: Scotland. Whit like is it?

It's a peatbog. It's a daurk forest.

It's a cauldron o'lye. A saltpan or a coal mine.

If you're gey lucky it's a bricht bere meadow or a park o'kye.

Or mibbe ... it's a field o'stanes.
 It's a tenement or a merchant's ha',
 It's a hure hoose, or a humble cot. Princess Street or Paddy's Mer-
 kit.
 [...] It depends. It depends ... Ah dinna ken whit like your Scot-
 land is. Here's mines.
 National flower: the thistle.
 National pastime: nostalgia.
 National weather: smirr, haar, drizzle, snow.
 National bird: the crow, the corbie, le corbeau, moi!³⁶

As the fragments build up the image of a '(w)hole' Scotland, we observe how these national icons expand the factors that characterize them until the "national bird" – the narrator – defines herself in the different languages that appear in the play: English, Scots and French. This polyglot structure is another manifestation of the author's critique of the homogeneity of traditional Scottish culture. By demanding a hybrid origin for its basis, Lochhead reveals some of the influences that have taken part in the creation of the system we know nowadays. The use of this hybrid space, where "meanings and values are misread or signs are misappropriated,"³⁷ introduces a highly critical perspective on the unique intention of generationally transmitted knowledge.

All the characters in the play act as representatives of Scottish stereotypes of behaviour; the historical background is just an excuse to highlight their perpetuation through time. The last scene of the play, "Jock Tamson's Bairns,"³⁸ presents a group of 1950s children engaged in playground activity that reproduces the same kind of intolerance as that which led to the death of Mary Queen of Scots. The distance between the sixteenth and the twentieth century is crossed with no consequences, and linear chronology is altered when Elizabeth I orders Mary's execution. Lochhead intentionally omits the historical beheading of the queen, in order to insist on the irrelevance that official history has had in the creation of a society where its margins can fight for a space to achieve equality. The author herself summarizes the argument:

It's really about Scotland, more about the present than the past, how these myths of the past have carried on into the present malaise of Scotland today.

³⁶ Lochhead, *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, 11.

³⁷ Homi Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," *New Formations* 5 (1988), 65.

³⁸ Ironically enough, "Jock Tamson's Bairns" is defined in the *Scottish National Dictionary* as "the human race, common humanity, also with less sentimental force, a group of people united by a common sentiment, interest or purpose."

She was around when a lot of the things that rule Scotland today were forming and hardening, you know, misogyny, Calvinism, all sorts of stuff like that.³⁹

However, the characters’ transformation into children exonerates them at the play’s end, since everyone behaves according to inherited mental structures. It is in their game that the social models they have observed are reproduced. Ruth Frankenberg, in her analysis of childhood, states:

The landscapes of childhood are important because, from the standpoint of children they are received rather than chosen [...]. However, beyond a point, children do not define the terms in which the world greets them; they can only respond. And while throughout their lives people can and do make profound changes in the ways they see themselves and the world, it seems to me that the landscapes of childhood are crucially important in creating the backdrop against which later transformations must take place.⁴⁰

It is only through the alteration of traditional meanings that a restructuring of the social order will allow for the incorporation of other discourses within the legitimate ideology of a community. If the cultural construction of historical narratives is rejected because of its exclusive representation of individuals, *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* manages to transgress traditional unidirectional meanings and open them up, in order to incorporate the audience in the unfolding of the plot. Mary Stuart’s beheading is comically announced in the title, so that attention focuses on the mechanisms leading to that ending, allowing a redefinition of the myth created according to individual subjectivity rather than to institutionalized interpretations, as Jan McDonald and Jennifer Harvie have pointed out.⁴¹

If the historical landscapes we internalize from childhood have coloured the voices of the ex-centric, it may be high time to start thinking about the powerful difference these colours can bring about. We have experienced world-wide how the questioning of static definitions has expanded the marginal space allowed to cultural productions of a strongly subversive character. In the hope that this expansion does not imply an alienating incorporation, as a result of governmental strategies to defend what seems politically correct in postmodern times, the ex-centric Scottish artist engaged in the search for a

³⁹ Liz Lochhead, in Wilson & Gillean, *Sleeping with Monsters*, 9.

⁴⁰ Ruth Frankenberg, “Growing Up White: Feminism, Racism and the Social Geography of Childhood,” in *Space, Gender, Knowledge*, ed. Linda McDowell & Joanne P. Sharp (Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1997): 212.

⁴¹ Jan McDonald & Jennifer Harvie, “Putting New Twists to Old Stories: Feminism and Lochhead’s Drama,” in *Liz Lochhead’s Voices*, ed. Robert Crawford & Anne Varty (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1993), 145–46.

dignifying national identity may wonder, 'Scotland, Whit Like?' and offer various legitimate answers to the kilted Scot enjoying his haggis on Burns Night.

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OTHER PERSPECTIVES

The Smearred Metaphor

Viscosity and Fluidity in Bataille's *Story of the Eye*

JOSÉ MARÍA DE LA TORRE

JULIA KRISTEVA'S WORK on pollution and defilement, *Powers of Horror* (1980), deals with the role of flows, viscosity and waste in human imagery, while delivering an account of that slippery notion, the abject. Kristeva's attitude to fluids reflects previous approaches to the subject, such as that of the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre or the anthropologist Mary Douglas. All three – Sartre, Douglas and Kristeva – agree on the belief that there is something inherently disgusting in flows. By flows here we should understand not only body fluids, but all animal excretions. On this matter, our attention will also focus on Georges Bataille's novella *Story of the Eye* (*Histoire d'Œil*), published in Paris in 1928, a narrative studded with constant references to fluid and liquid, in which characters relate with all those body elements that, as Kristeva points out, have traditionally been labelled dirty or polluting: i.e. all those matters passing from inside to outside the human body. *Story of the Eye* is also relevant here because it manages to cast in doubt the starting-point for Kristeva's proposals. All that she calls "the abject" and labels a danger (more specifically, an *inherent* danger) is enjoyed and celebrated in Bataille's work, without triggering off any tragic consequences. It does not even arouse scandal, despite being a Surrealist work. From my point of view, one of the flaws of Surrealism was its need for the bourgeois order, so as to deny and corrupt it by using its very patterns; Surrealism needed notions such as 'the appropriate' and 'the refined' in order to invert and pervert them. My study will try to demonstrate how, in spite of its high level of sexual description and its thorough depiction and textual re-creation of body wastes, *Story of the Eye* is not a scatological – hence scandalous – narrative but simply a smearred one; a tale where urine, semen or blood are not regarded

as sickening or disgusting but simply as wet, viscous or sticky horror-free entities. Thus, filth no longer exists, since nothing at all provokes any revulsion. One of my contentions in this essay is that Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* is based on a rigid order underpinned by a system of strict oppositions; its ontological validity is denied by works which, like *Story of the Eye*, subvert notions such as 'the defiling', 'the immaculate', 'order' or 'the Other'. Let us go into this a little deeper.

The main concern of Kristeva's work is the fear that springs from what she calls "the abject"; a horror so rooted in the human scheme that it actually becomes the safeguard and primer of culture.¹ "The abject" is, then, one of the foundations of human experience. However, it is not objective or factual but "above all ambiguity" (3) and "simply a frontier" (9). This definition fits excrement perfectly. As a matter of fact, excrement is extensively dealt with in *Powers of Horror*. The problem here, though, is that body fluids flow and seep; theirs is a half-way state, submitting to no law. It does not respect any order – order for Kristeva being a "clean and proper" ideal – and so it embodies the abject, and the places in the body where it appears become the loci of abjection. Excretions are the enemy at home. They take advantage of their lack of stability to slide through the body's barriers and so prove the impossibility of achieving the solid, rigid and unambiguous order that, according to Kristeva, the body longs for. Therefore, in the process of expelling fluids we are at the border of our condition as human beings (3), since we are aware of a triple horror: first, expulsion betrays the fact that our body leaks and drips – is not impervious; secondly, it shows that we contain that which repels us; and, last, it reveals that existence is a vicious circle, because expelling such matter eventually leads to extinction: "such waste drops so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit" (3). Hence, all bodily wastes – urine, semen, menstrual fluids, blood, muck, shit – are feared and regarded as corrupt, since corruption is, from Kristeva's perspective, the socialized appearance of the abject (16), the sign alerting us to that terrible menace.

According to the propositions above, a pornographic work such as *Story of the Eye* should be marked as corrupted, and be repulsive for both characters and readers. *Story of the Eye* deals with the awakening to sexuality of two young people, an anonymous male narrator and a girl, Simone. However, they are not extraordinary beings. At the beginning, fear and horror are not alien to them. What matters in their case is the fact that, despite their being sensitive to disgusting phenomena, their attitudes evolve until they attain a state of

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980; New York: Columbia UP, 1982): 2. Unless otherwise indicated, all further page references are in the main text.

complete reconciliation with them. For instance, after crashing into a cyclist, they cannot help staring at the ripped-off face of the corpse, feeling at the time both quite repelled by it yet identifying with it as well: "The horror and despair at so much bloody flesh, nauseating in part, and in part very beautiful, was fairly equivalent to our usual impression upon seeing one another."² So in spite of the acknowledging of the sickening and the disgusting around them and even in their very selves, the couple decide to ignore this feeling of revulsion. As a consequence, in their sexual relations they take pleasure in all that flows. They do not hesitate when it comes to flooding the other's body, or to tasting or touching the other's urine or semen. In doing so, they discover the weakness of revulsion: the fact that there is nothing in itself that is dirty – defilement is an arbitrary idea. Because of this, *Story of the Eye* cannot be called a filthy narrative, as distinctions between the clean and the dirty are obliterated. Despite its being a story characterized by the process of flowing, by the liquid, the viscous and the constant appearance of wastes, such phenomena are not regarded as dangerous or repulsive. As mentioned above, the characters are not even repelled by corpses, which, according to Kristeva, are "the most sickening of wastes" (3), "the utmost abjection" (4). Actually, they lose their virginity beside the dead body of a girl and even come to kill a priest while Simone is having sex with him. My attention is drawn to the fact that the text also has a happy ending: "On the fourth day, at Gibraltar, the Englishman purchased a yacht, and we set sail towards new adventures with a crew of Negroes" (67). My question is, how can this be justified? If there is a frontier that repels us and that we inherently – according to Kristeva and others – fear and respect, what explains a narrative in which the abject can be overcome, without this implying any consequence at all?

In order to answer this question, we have to bear in mind that Kristeva's view of the human experience is based on the logic of prohibition, which implies that it is only through the exclusion of the abject that an inhabitable order can be guaranteed. Her system is clever enough not to be identified with morality, though; "there can be grandeur in amorality" (4), she claims, but it is a proposal based on the protection of a given system that she identifies with the "clean and proper" – a notion that ultimately conforms to her own culture. Kristeva's study gradually ranges from anthropology to sociology until it becomes utterly subjective and conservative. Her account of cannibalism (78) as an absence of the "clean and proper" is revealing, since it betrays her proposal's need for the scapegoat she calls "the abject." After all, human flesh is

² Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, tr. Joachim Neugroschel, with essays by Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes (*Histoire de l'Œil*, 1928; tr. 1979; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982): 11. Unless otherwise indicated, all further page references are in the main text.

not poisonous; it can be eaten, and as a matter of fact it *is* consumed, just as happens with the excrement that babies gladly devour. The moment Kristeva labels these practices “abject,” she is imposing an arbitrary constraint, one that coincides with and even justifies the very roots of her Western patriarchal morality. Take a remarkable example: if Kristeva lingers on the natural and constant horror of the fluid and, according to Elizabeth Grosz,³ women in our time are constructed as a leaking or formless flow – “women can always come up with some blood when it’s needed,” writes a character in a novel by Javier Marías⁴ – then Kristeva’s system is classifying women within the abject. Furthermore, while she seems to think that there is a link between menstruation and dirt, calling menstrual blood “the danger issuing from within” (71), she somehow calls into doubt the polluting valency of sperm.

As the latter examples prove, Kristeva’s divisions between the clean and the dirty are remarkably subjective and Manichaeic. Hers is a proposal based on shame and fatalism just as Christianity is; it censors and condemns anything outside its clearly limited boundaries. Applying Kristeva’s views, all of the body’s flows are embarrassing, since they stand for the impossibility of accepting the body as fully “clean and proper,” and so the fate of human beings is to hold this horror within them. Moreover, this is necessary in order for the body to exist. To make matter(s) worse, any attempt to get rid of this dirt betrays the organism’s self-consumption, “until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere, cadaver* –” (3). According to this, any hastening of processes of excretion would lead to a quicker revelation of “the abject,” whatever that might stand for. Thus, all those who do not have a firm control over their bodily flows – people such as the characters in pornographic works, for instance – should be terrified by that sword of Damocles always about to fall on them. But are they?

What *Story of the Eye* proves is that there must be plenty of situations in the world in which the whole notion of abjection can be brushed aside without the danger of challenge or punishment. In Bataille’s tale, there is no place for Kristeva’s distress and disgust, since nothing arouses any horror, not even death, a phenomenon that is regarded as merely a ridiculous hindrance (43). That is why the constant images of flows and fluids not only depict the characters’ sexual exploits but also imbue the work with a mood of wholesale acceptance of body fluids – and, consequently, of the abject. Hence, the Milky Way is described as a “breach of astral sperm” and the moon is associated

³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994): 201.

⁴ Javier Marías, *Tomorrow in the Battle Think On Me*, tr. Margaret Jull Costa (*Mañana en la batalla piensa en mí*, 1994; London: Harvill, 1996): 298.

with “the vaginal blood of mothers, sisters, that is, the menstrea with their sickening stench” (42). These fluid images are pervasive; the host is “nothing other than Christ’s sperm in the form of small white biscuits” and as for the wine in the chalice, “the ecclesiastics say it is the blood of Christ but they are obviously mistaken [...] Since they employ only white wine [...] they are quite sure this is his urine” (62). As already mentioned, nothing escapes the protagonists’ ‘smear-ful joy’, and so, after finding the dead body of a girl, Simone decides to urinate on the corpse. Even this act is not regarded as a transgression – transgression being, according to Kristeva (17), one of the expressions of the abject – but as something done “in boredom or, at worst, in irritation” (44). It is clear from the whole cast of the narrative that the characters are not aiming at mere scandal (the *épater les bourgeois* impulse or agenda that was, admittedly, one of the goals of some Surrealists and Dadaists). As mentioned above, scandal and transgression employ the patterns provided by order – an order that *Story of the Eye* ignores. The characters’ behaviour is, as the narrator makes clear, thus completely free of constraints and not conformable to comfortable views of perversion.

I was not even satisfied with the usual debauchery, because the only thing it dirties is debauchery itself, while, in some way or other anything sublime and perfectly pure is left intact by it. My kind of debauchery suits not only my body and my thoughts, but also anything I may conceive in its course, that is to say, the vast starry universe, which merely serves as a backdrop. (42)

As already mentioned, the characters’ reconciliation with the flow/the abject renders them incapable of submitting to the laws governing the “clean and proper.” Hence, while Kristeva’s system identifies with the solid, the characters’ is as pliable and chaotic as fluids. Kristeva’s proposal is ‘solid’, since it is unified; it is marked by rigid boundaries that avoid ambiguity and is made up of strict rules. By contrast, *Story of the Eye* is an account of the relaxation and softening of the narrator’s moral schemata, from the “strict boy afraid of anything sexual” (9) to the one enjoying rape, torture, hardcore sex and murder. What the characters’ trajectory reveals is that there is no force impelling or compelling us to subordinate ourselves to the clean and proper, terms that eventually become mere cultural labels for Kristeva’s inherent and exceptionless objection/abjection. This does not imply, however, that Kristeva’s apprehension of fluidity lack any basis. According to Luce Irigaray, there is indeed some disquiet springing from the half-formed or the indeterminate.⁵ However, this is not due to any polluting trait but instead to the cultural unrepresentability of fluids within prevailing philosophical models of ontology.

⁵ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, 195.

Such representation is possible, though. In Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of capitalism and schizophrenia, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), things, thoughts, concrete and abstract entities, are not seen in terms of limits and clear demarcation-lines, nor in a series of binary opposites such as clean/dirty, proper/abject. What they conceive instead is a system according to which all things – human(e), inhuman(e), animate or inanimate – are regarded as a series of flows. Thus, they speak of the human body as a surface of speeds and wave of intensities, an entity without organization that they call 'body without organs'. Since there is no hierarchy and no axioms taken for granted, the account that Elizabeth Grosz gives of Deleuze and Guattari denies any non-literal interpretation of acts: "Things and relations are not read in terms of where they originate or their history but rather, pragmatically, in terms of their effects, what they do, what they make."⁶ There is no place for the abject, then, nor for any other kind of constraint. It is, thus, a proposition perfectly fitting *Story of the Eye*.

My final contention is that by its fully and conflict-free acceptance of flows and wastes, *Story of the Eye* builds up a whole ontological system of its own. Thus, as a pornographic work, it possesses an ideological vector in line with nihilism or existentialism in its portrayal of the futility of human experience. From this perspective, pornography becomes a genre in which characters jettison all their fears, and actions never lead anywhere, nor do they have any further consequence than the mere physical action involved. Constraints vanish, and the only working rules are those of physics. All taboos and totems – be they religious, moral, political or of any other kind – fall apart. By draining acts of these metaphoric interpretations, pornography stands as one of the crudest and most fundamental representations of human experience. This prompts me to claim that it is not the gymnastics of sex and the emergence of fluids that repel in pornography but, rather, the vertigo that arises from facing the disappearance of constraints and thus of meaning. This connects with Freud's notion of the uncanny, a concept that coincides very much with Kristeva's 'abject'. According to Freud, the uncanny is that which is intended to be kept hidden, but manages to come to light.⁷ What Kristeva succeeds in doing in *Powers of Horror* is to describe those barriers that limit what is to see the light and what is to be concealed. However, she fails to foresee the weakness of the prohibition, the fact that barriers can be trespassed without anything happening. At the end of the day, Kristeva is locked up in her own artificial construction.

⁶ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, 181.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, ed. Adam Phillips, tr. David McClintock, intro. Hugh Houghton (1919; New Penguin Freud; Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2002).

Kristeva's flaw, however, does not reside in her account of the abject/Other as such. The rigid solid order whose existence she claims has already proved to be quite a useful prop when living in communities. The problem is her failure to analyse what happens when we as individuals, just like the characters in *Story of the Eye*, manage to reconcile ourselves with the abject and call into question the very patterns – clean, dirty, me, Other, good, evil – that shape us as human beings. All in all, the mere occurrence of works that, despite being produced within our culture, are able to question the latter's validity prove that another order of things is possible and that what we call social, cultural or moral values are only fortuitous arrangements we human beings have become accustomed to dealing with.

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Confrontational and Sociometric Approaches to Reform Strategy in German and Nigerian Prisons

Convergences and Divergences

EMMAN FRANK IDOKO

Introduction

THE QUESTION OF BODIES and voices is significant in any discourse that is situated within postcolonial structures, especially when making a comparative analysis of practical strategies in a developed world such as Germany and a developing one such as Nigeria. This essay recognizes the fact, but views it from a different perspective entirely, especially because of its emphasis on resolving some practical issues of treatment through Theatre for Development, which is the focus.

The role of theatre in changing perceptions and moulding consciousness cannot be underestimated. Over the years, theatre has evolved through several genres in order to improve strategies directed at these goals. In Nigeria, theatre has gradually come to take the form of Theatre for Development, a performance strategy capable of responding swiftly to the varieties of conflict that emerge within Nigerian society. This essay will not rehash the evolutionary trends involved, but will go into the current strategy of using theatre for therapeutic purposes. Despite its novel concerns, it may be viewed as yet another of many responses to a growing need for a determined focus on development and process – a move, that is, away from a community-based approach in the direction of involvement first with the individual and only then with the community; in the present case, the ‘captive audience’ of the prison community. The question is, whether this actually fits into the general conception of sociometric process (more on this later) and therefore serves to

properly identify and capture the strategic shift involved. The second concern of this essay is to discuss the efforts by a Non-Governmental Organization in Germany called the ‘*Fahrer*’ (meaning ‘driver/conductor’, from *fahren*, ‘to ferry across/drive’) and based in Bayreuth, and its attempt to curb the violent traits of ex-convicts, cases of violence that have not been prosecuted, and general violence – in the family, in schools and so on. The interest of the *Fahrer* programme is fundamentally that of identifying strategies within a post-prison process and investigating how recidivism can be curtailed. This is also important because the quest for a convenient and workable strategy for reintegration does not stop at changing consciousness but actually attempts to re-integrate former inmates into the broader society they came from, and where they committed the crime that landed them in prison in the first place. Finally, the essay attempts to identify convergent and divergent areas, and seeks a common basis for the integration of strategies for more result-oriented therapeutic work. The essay will therefore start by explaining the concept of ‘sociometry’ and how it relates to the strategies of the Theatre for Development within Nigeria’s prisons.

Conceptualizing ‘Sociometry’ and its Relationship to Theatre for Development

The concept of ‘sociometry’ relates to a form of group therapy, somewhere between sociology and psychology, in which individuals in the therapeutic situation make their own conscious choices regarding their lives in relation to the members of the group with whom they work and have a measure of interconnection. It is this interconnection that is called ‘sociometry’. The dramatic activities of the group is a form of sociodrama and that of individuals a form of psychodrama. All have a common thread linking them together. It is this relationship that the Theatre for Development is exploiting as a group process, while not discounting both social and individual areas of therapy or, rather, not allowing for any disconnection between them. According to Fox in *The Essential Moreno*, commenting on the documentation of Moreno’s therapeutic strategies, the essence of sociometry

lies in the idea that groups have an internal life of their own and that this life can best be understood by examining the choices members make at any given moment with regard to each other. Such knowledge – who is rejected, who is the “star”, where are the cliques – can then be used to institute a programme for positive change.¹

¹ Jonathan Fox, in *The Essential Moreno: Writings on Psychodrama, Group Method, and Spontaneity* by J.L. Moreno, M.D., ed. Fox (New York: Springer, 1987): xiii.

This is so because, beneath the surface of the group's existence, there is a measure of interconnectedness, a structure which is "dynamic and alive." It is this element of relationship and connections that is termed 'sociometry'. What the prison theatre in Nigeria at the Tandari Reformation Home is doing is utilizing the existing group to constitute a captive audience. The experiment goes beyond the psychodramatic strategy of the individual to connect it with sociodrama in a continuum, where together, as group, the members can identify their common problems and attempt to resolve them. Essentially therefore, it is a strategy where opportunities are created for them in an atmosphere where there is a "meeting, contact of bodies, confrontation, countering and battling, seeing and perceiving, touching and entering into each other in a primary, intuitive manner, a meeting on the most intense level."² A situation is created that makes the individual aware that he has the capacity to be creative and spontaneous – a situation in which members of the group act out their 'dream', moving from the therapeutic theatre into the terrain of the 'theatre of life', rather than merely talking about it. The difference lies only in the fact that the Theatre for Development has a broader utility as a community theatre, which, according to Boal, enacts "the poetics of liberation: the spectator no longer delegates power to the character to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is action!"³ In the process, the individual develops as an intricate part of the group, and of the broader group that is the larger society, with its social history intricately linked to the social group in which development is sought. Is the experiment being conducted within the Tandari programme 'sociometry'? Of course not. The intention here is to state that, whatever the process is called, the significant aim is treatment. The important issue is "a deep action method dealing with inter-group relations and collective ideologies."⁴

Group action and 'collective ideology' are relevant in any therapeutic work, because it moves beyond the individual healing process into group treatment. It consists of the methods required to assist the individual in seeing himself as important in any group drama therapy work that may be presented. This also enables members of the group to reconstitute the missing link between themselves and the other selves that may be important in their relationship with others in the wider society they may encounter outside the treatment arena. It also facilitates understanding of the variety of problems experienced within the group, along with the process of conceptualizing these problems in relation to

² Fox, *The Essential Moreno*, xiv.

³ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto, 2000): 155.

⁴ Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 18.

individual members and exposing them to larger, complex societal relationships. Moreno explains:

In a psychodramatic session, the attention of the director and his staff are centred upon the individual and his private problems. As these are unfolded before a group, the spectators are affected by the psychodramatic acts in proportion to the affinities existing between their own context of roles and the role context of the central subject. Even the so-called group approach in psychodrama is in the deeper sense individual centred.⁵

The director/therapist in sociodrama attempts to reach the consciousness and private world of each individual, separately from other participants.

The subject of the sociodrama is the group. The number of participants is not specifically limited but includes “at least of as many as belong to the same culture.”⁶ Therapeutic processes have been variously analysed, and the focus is usually on a client needing some form of treatment. Brenda Meldrum argues that, for a process to take off successfully, the therapist would need to see himself as a facilitator, assisting the protagonist to act and creating a dynamic relationship between them.⁷ The relationship between the therapist and client is a therapeutic process in itself. This is because, in actuating the healing process, both individuals speak freely and shed all ‘internal filters’ save that of responsibility. Irving Yalom says that, “in the therapy group, freedom becomes possible and constructive only when it is coupled with responsibility.”⁸ The therapist, in setting a given process in motion, must exercise prime responsibility towards that process, concentrating on the client’s journey and not on his own. But even though he does not regard his own journey as the focus, he has to be aware, guardedly, of his own kind of journey – a more difficult one involving the client, who needs to be carried along. If he makes a false step in the process, he derails the healing process and makes the client’s situation even graver and (self-)destructive. Thus, therapy

[...] concerns strong emotions, insight, intellectual appreciation and change. Central to therapy is a relationship with the therapist or relationship with the therapist and the group, which helps individuals to do what they have not been

⁵ Fox, *The Essential Moreno*, 18.

⁶ *The Essential Moreno*, 18.

⁷ Brenda Meldrum, “Historical Background and Overview of Dramatherapy,” in *The Handbook of Dramatherapy*, ed. Sue Jennings, Ann Cattanach, Steve Mitchell, Anna Chesner & Brenda Meldrum (London & New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁸ Irvin D. Yalom, *The Theory and Practice of Group Therapy* (1970; New York: Basic Books, 3rd ed. 1985): 225.

able to do for themselves alone. They are empowered to experience life as it is happening now.⁹

The British Association for Dramatherapists (BADth) has defined drama therapy as follows:

the means of helping to understand and alleviate social and psychological problems, mental illness and handicap; and of facilitating symbolic expression, through which man may get in touch with himself, both as individual and group, through creative structures involving vocal and physical communication.¹⁰

But these categories have, according to Meldrum, had to be revised because 'mental illness' or 'handicap' creates a negative atmosphere, and this would compromise the process even before the work begins. Recognizing the essential significance of theatre to the process of therapy, Sue Jennings explains drama (socio)therapy as "the specific application of theatre structures and drama processes with a declared intention that is therapy."¹¹ She sees drama-therapy as an art form that constantly renews the creative drive of the therapist and clients. Dramatherapy, like other creative-arts therapies such as art, music, and dance, is the use of a creative medium for purposes of psychotherapy. It specifically refers to those activities in which there is a therapeutic understanding between client and therapist, and where the process of therapy takes precedence. Their aim is

to reach goals that are essentially dramatic in nature. A general goal might be to help others increase their repertory of roles and their ability to play a single role more effectively. Specific goals are very much dependent upon the nature and needs of the client. Although therapeutic in nature, the goals often bear resemblance to educational and recreational drama goals. Further, drama-therapy relates in some ways to many major psychotherapeutic theories, viewing the client as embodying a confluence of conscious and unconscious processes of mind, body, feeling and intuition.¹²

It is against this background of the necessity and potency of drama in the treatment process that Nigeria's Tandari programme acquires its motivation.

⁹ Meldrum, "Historical Background and Overview of Dramatherapy," 16.

¹⁰ "Historical Background and Overview of Dramatherapy," 16.

¹¹ Sue Jennings, "The Nature and Scope of Dramatherapy: Theatre of Healing," in *Shakespeare comes to Broadmoor*, ed. Murray Cox (London: Jessica Kingston, 1992): 229.

¹² Robert Landy, *Drama Therapy: Concepts and Practices* (Springfield IL: Charles Thomas, 1986): 59.

Existing Levels of Reform in Nigeria

The existing official level of prisoner reform, generally, is the punishment of the individual by the state on the assumption that this may bring about a shift in consciousness, and in the hope that the offender will learn, through this, to change his behaviour when re-integrated into society after his term behind bars. Coupled with this are the supposed reformatory measures applied within the prison walls, which, it is hoped, will assist the inmate in altering his perception from maintaining a disposition toward criminality to being or at least becoming a decent member of society. These complementary measures include physical exercises and sports as well as the learning of skills, such as carpentry, woodwork, textile design, and pottery. This, it is hoped, will help the prisoner to develop specific skills enabling him become self-sustainable after he leaves prison. There are also classes, organized by the prison authorities, to assist prisoners in acquiring some form of education which can qualify them to sit external examinations and obtain qualifications of some sort for future employment. Sometimes religious activities are introduced to curtail (at least, it is hoped) moral depravations and, in the long run, reduce recidivism. Because of its potential in the process of shifting consciousness, theatre can therefore be utilized, in individual and group therapy sessions, to complement the other means aimed at assisting inmates prepare for re-integration into society. Theatre for development comes in as a complement to the process of reform and therapy.

The Tandari Prison Experience

Motivation

The Tandari Experiment focuses on young inmates, and on the place of theatre in reform processes. The desire to take theatre beyond rural communities into the urban setting, and the recognition that the prison constitutes the immediate target audience for any treatment process, becomes the focus. Realizing the potential of theatre for enabling development, I embarked upon a project, involving the participation of young people throughout the creative process, at a reform centre called Tandari Reformation Home, in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno in the state of Nigeria. In a preliminary investigation, I discovered that there were very few inmates in the centre owing to problems of funding; the number of young people was usually not more than twenty. The duration of their stay is limited to six months and can be extended if welfare officers feel that reform and a likely future for the young person in question has not been guaranteed. Several of the young people were also awaiting trial. The number was sufficient to attempt a theatre experiment. The project had the following objectives:

A: using theatre as a complement to the existing reform process in a prison for young people;

B: identifying practicable strategies that would produce results, especially in relation to the shift in focus of Theatre for Development from the collective to the individual in a captive situation;

C: finding possible post-prison strategies for social re-integration.

Methodology

STAGE ONE. The workshop utilized the Theatre for Development strategy, but moved the approach from the individual to the collective. Work started with general discussions and the building of confidence and trust. At this stage, the discussions were in private, between the individual prisoner and the facilitator. This dialogue phase was to give the prisoner confidence and trust in the whole exercise. The small number of inmates helped a great deal, because everyone could be attended to. This means that to achieve better results in treatment projects, a large number of participants may be counter-productive. It was at this juncture that the theatre strategy was introduced at the level of the individual. Here also the prisoner began to tell his story. It is important that his story is accepted so as not to discourage him from participating in the group discussions.

STAGE TWO. The next stage involved group discussions. The discussions centred on the general process of incarceration and what the inmates felt about it. With the confidence built at the first stage of the process, the individual can easily bring out his inner feelings without much inhibition. It may be gradual at this stage, which assisted in building confidence between the members of the group and the therapist/facilitator. It was important at this stage that their stories are not contradicted, to give them further confidence as a group.

STAGE THREE: EXERCISES. The next stage hinged on exercises and role-play. This is because play, apart from being entertaining, creates an avenue for the human touch, a most important feature in regaining the humanity the prisoner felt has been lost. Psychologically, it promotes a sense of being accepted, and ultimately generates a process whereby inhibitions are shed and trust created among the inmates. It is an opportunity for interpersonal contact. The theatre strategy was also discussed at this point, to give participants an opportunity to ask questions about theatre, particularly as most of them had no prior knowledge of it.

STAGE FOUR: FROM THE INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE. This is the stage at which participants begin to tell their own stories. Individual experiences are discussed openly on a voluntary basis. The individual tells his story and, after

that is done, an act is improvised, using his story as the basis. Skits are produced and each member is free to participate. At this stage, the individual's experience goes through a dialectical process. The individual is encouraged to play his role in his story, while the other participants enact the other roles. This is in order for the other members of the group to get a feeling for his real story, which enables them to participate in the discussions that follow. Here the individual is asked several questions leading to a discussion of why he feels he had to do what he did and why the other actors playing roles had to do what they did in the skit, and whether there is any justification for the central character's actions or those of the participants playing the other roles. These are re-situated in the real world of the criminal-justice system – of the concrete offence and the punishment that follows it. Each person has the opportunity to tell his story and have it enacted. This has the potential to open up others who might be hiding their inner feelings. As the enactment of stories continues, the level of distrust is reduced, and this creates an atmosphere conducive to the next stage in the process, which is identifying common problems as they affect all of the participants. This process, of course, is interspersed with exercises.

STAGE FIVE: GROUP PROCESS. When an appropriate atmosphere is created, after the individual dramatic sketches and improvisational work on the individual problems have been enacted, the next stage takes off without any problems. This involves identifying common problems. This stage is basically a discussion forum. Every member of the group is given an opportunity to contribute to a discussion of what each feels about the problems and the areas common to all participants. The identification of common areas makes room for participants to prioritize problems, making it easier to address them articulately as a group. This creates group confidence, and identification with the group as a friend and family regarded with affection. These emotional elements are crucial, to dispel any feeling the prisoners may have of being neglected and despised by society. Individuals now find an area of shared emotion, where love is expressed and where they can also express love. It serves as the most important aspect of the process. First is the human touch, and second, the emotions that emanate from this touch: a touch of acceptance and recognition. Through improvisation and discussion, a story-line emerges, with scenarios to give the subjects adequate scope for reflection on their problems.

STAGE SIX: REHEARSALS AND IMPROVISATIONS. Rehearsals, further improvisations, and discussions of the story-line then follow. This is an important aspect of the work because here the inmates begin to release their pent-up frustrations and energies, and these in turn become a source of discussion and

integration into the creative process. The Theatre for Development strategy relies heavily on the method of role-play. Two levels are identified in this process: role-play in the fictive world of the drama, and role-play in the real world. In the fictive world, a role is played which represents another self, created by the group through its interaction and mediating a characterization that should serve as a therapeutic icon. In the real role-play process, the individual within the group relates his life – his inner self – in a dramatic situation. He, rather than the fictive character, is the character depicted in the story that is created. His ability to expose his inner self truthfully depends on the atmosphere created by the therapist. The Tandari prison theatre has used both fictive and real role-playing in order to make room for psychologically depressed individuals who, because of their incarceration, require a longer period of time to shed their distrust for the group and to ‘pretend’ they are playing other roles. They gradually begin to identify, in the fictive role they are playing, several similarities with their personal experience, and this may be brought out in subsequent discussions. The therapist must therefore be able to identify such situations and assist the individual.

STAGE SEVEN: PERFORMANCE, POST-PERFORMANCE AND THE CONNECTION WITH THE ‘FAHRER’. The final fall of the curtain should be such that the audience appreciates the inmate’s creative work in the context of treatment. It should be applauded as aesthetically and creatively impressive, rather than sympathetic received because of the situation in which the inmate finds himself. This is intended to assist the inmate/participant to feel accepted once more as a part of humanity; an important aspect of the treatment process. The question arises, therefore, of whether there are any evaluative bases for the process. Evaluation is difficult to manage in the short term, except when there is sustainable and vigorous activity beyond the prison situation into post-prison activity. This is the area which the Theatre for Development aspect in Nigeria has not started to address, because it is at an experimental stage. Consequently, research lays emphasis on an integrative strategy, because of the strength and potential it has for prisoners, not only in prison itself but, most importantly, beyond the prison walls when they are confronted with the society that moulded their consciousness and ultimately caused them to end up in prison. It is a concern, therefore, for an individual to see where he will contribute to the decrease in criminality and enhance the growth and self-sustainability of the ex-prisoners when released from incarceration.

The post-performance situation is important, being a phase in the treatment process that is customarily fraught with problems. The performance itself serves its purpose of exhilaration and satisfaction and also encourages the inmates to feel they are accepted as part of society. The performance is there-

fore a climactic event, triggering a tremendous sense of release, exhilaration, and fulfilment. But treading in the hills beyond this intense rush of excitement is a sense of emptiness. The months of exhaustive preparation preceding the culmination have fully occupied, if not taken over, the actors' lives.¹³

After performance, the artist is left with a 'blank slate'. This blankness is a depressive period that requires the attention of therapists, whatever form of treatment they are involved in and whatever their strategy and approach. It is a period which David Read Johnson characterizes as follows:

post-performance depression in conjunction with the fear of losing the new self-image can lead to social withdrawal, substance abuse, or acting-out behaviour. In work with people with a psychiatric history, brief hospitalization and even suicide attempts are not uncommon.¹⁴

The emotional connection shared by the actors and the audience gives the actor a sense of familial relationship with the outside world, which is significant especially for "people who have experienced themselves as different or alien, who have been institutionalised or segregated."¹⁵ This feeling of connectedness, accomplishment, and acceptance, in conjunction "with the ensuing rush of love for one's fellow actors and director with whom one has shared the entire journey, is awesome. As the actors walk off the stage, with the applause of the audience still flooding their ears, they experience a rare and sacred sensation: glory."¹⁶ It is after this excessive feeling of attainment that the crisis begins. After this, then what? A void that left, and the question is whether participants can manage this void of post-performance insecurity or depression. They are faced with the realization that they must return to the dreary life of the prison. The connection between the inmate and his temporary fantasy of the drama is broken. The exhilaration of being part of a family and among loved ones soon fades away. This tips over into a depression that requires serious attention. What is to be done? The performance should be seen as a climax and not a finale; it is actually the most potent area of therapeutic work. This is where the *Fahrer* programme in Germany becomes of great significance for the entirety of the treatment process. But what, one might ask at this juncture, is 'confrontation', the basic strategy used by the organization?

¹³ David Read Johnson, "Effects of a Theatre Experience on Hospitalized Psychiatric Patients," *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 7.4 (1980): 295.

¹⁴ Johnson, "Effects of a Theatre Experience on Hospitalized Psychiatric Patients," 296.

¹⁵ Renee Emunah, *Acting for Real: Drama Therapy Process; Technique and Performance* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1994): 293.

¹⁶ Emunah, *Acting for Real: Drama Therapy Process*, 293–94.

It is important to attempt a conceptualization of the concept of ‘confrontation’, a strategy used by the *Fahrer*, which, as already indicated, is an NGO situated in Bayreuth, Germany. The concept of confrontation was first worked out by Moreno. The organization also uses role-play and what they term ‘role-reversal’. It is also important here to note that these strategies are not used in a context of dramatic performance. Rather, they operate with a concern for the individual and the reduction of his violence. A psycho-dramatic process occurs:

If you go into an office in which any of the current varieties of psychotherapy are practised, you may find only a chair. The space in which the protagonist experiences his traumas has no place in the setting. The idea of a psychotherapy of spaces has been pioneered by psychodrama, which is action-centred and comprehensively tries to integrate all the dimensions of living into itself. If a client steps into the therapeutic space, we insist on a description, delineation, and actualisation of the space in which the ensuing scene is to be portrayed – its horizontal and vertical dimensions, the objects in it, and their distance and relationship to one another.¹⁷

The correct ‘configuration of space’ would be appropriate in the ‘reduced reality’ or ‘infra-reality’ of that psychoanalytic office. It calls for a situation where reality can be simulated, in order to develop a fresh, new technique of living. This new technique of living is the ‘surplus reality’, and role-reversal as a technique is one of the most popular ‘surplus-reality’ approaches. In an instance where, for example,

a husband and wife fight in reality of daily life, each remains in his own role, in his own life situation. The perceptions, expectations, fears, disappointments, or whatever of each remains unchanged. And even if both parties come to some point of agreement, they still maintain the same relative status, which they have in life. The husband remains the husband, the wife remains the wife. But in Role Reversal we request the wife take the part of the husband, and the husband take the part of the wife. We expect them to do this not only normally, but to make an effort to go through the actual process of reversing roles, each one to try to feel his way into the thinking, feeling, and behaviour patterns of the other.¹⁸

Confrontation thus has two strands to it, role-play and role-reversal. It is effected in a realistic situation, different from the Tandari system, which uses fictive situations. Inmates, through role-play and role-reversal, are confronted with the reality of their situation and the violence or crime they have committed.

¹⁷ Fox, *The Essential Moreno*, 6.

¹⁸ *The Essential Moreno*, 8.

The *Fahrer* Methodology

The *Fahrer* organization has adopted various strategies to help curb aggression and violence in young people. Several methods are used to attain this objective. These are, as indicated, confrontation, role-play and role-reversal. It is important to note that it has so far not utilized the conventional dramatic mode in the execution of these strategies. The first model, and the one most often employed, is the 'confrontation' model. This is because the *Fahrer* takes the view that punishment for a crime, especially for young offenders, does not solve the problem; by contrast, it prefers to create a situation in which the offender or violent person is given an opportunity to test the situation in the world; to see the injured person or victim, to care for him, or to visit the scene of the crime. This is effected by having the offender confront the victim and enter into a dialogue, with the facilitator or therapist as mediator. The dialogue is centred on the particular offence or act of aggression. The crime is discussed and a resolution is reached, usually with the agreement of both parties. Sometimes the offender will consent to take part in social work or any punitive measure decided and agreed upon by the parties in the situation. The essence is that the offender, it is hoped, will feel genuine remorse for his aggression. It is also hoped that confrontation with the victim and the situation of the offence involved will affect and change his perception of the world and the society he lives in, and ultimately curb his violent tendencies. There is in any case a follow-up, in terms of a role-reversal. Here, the offender is made to take the place of the victim and engage in dialogue based on the specific situation that gave rise to the violence. Situations are therefore created to serve as the basis for dialogue. The crucial questions the violent/aggressive person is expected to ask himself are: What are my limits? Can I discuss my case, and if so, and with whom? Can I trust everyone I meet? If I am mistaken, and the dialogue exposes this, what should I do? How do I express remorse for the crime committed? A negotiated settlement of some sort is reached.

Conception of the Training Process

This is based on a learning and cognitive pattern. The offender analyses the theory of aggression and violence and, as a result, willingly creates a curriculum for the reduction of violence. At the heart of this training process is confrontation with the issue, provocative statements to members of the group, meetings and discussions with the offender in the hot-seat. Violent criminals are thereby confronted with the consequences of their offences and violence. They are provoked, in order to learn to cope with such situations by ignoring them. The target-group consists of youths, young adults and adults who are often violent in their relationship with others, and enjoy the use of violence or

force to resolve issues. They must be able cognitively to follow the programme and, importantly, to understand the language used. The programme is not suitable for suicide-prone offenders, children and youths in psychiatric homes, persons on drugs or alcohol, members of organized crime, and sex offenders. Suitability and motivation are usually checked during preliminary discussion sessions. The main objective is to enable participants to learn how to lead their own lives without violence, to feel remorse for their earlier acts of violence, to improve their ability for reflection, and to develop new strategies of conflict-management. All participants are expected to keep to, and accept, the rules of the training process in order for it to succeed, and someone with special education, preferably someone with a diploma, and also a co-trainer, are entrusted with the overall organization. Usually the group is made up of a maximum of six participants, in order to facilitate individual treatment. The training programme usually takes about sixteen hours, spread out in accordance with the decision reached by all the parties involved in the sessions. It is expected that all participants be drug- and alcohol-free before the course begins; participants must be consciously able to be part and parcel of the training programme.

There are three stages involved. The first is the *stage of integration*, which involves discussions that will motivate participants and identify the expectations of trainer and participants. This stage also involves the participants in narrating their violent experiences and imagining themselves in the place of the victims. It is hoped that this will break down whatever inhibitions may exist and create a new level of self-confidence in the participants before the next stage of the session.

The second is the *stage of confrontation*, which is called the 'hot-seat'. This takes nine meetings to complete. Here there is a test of the individual's ability to control himself, and he is confronted with the question of whether there is any justification for the crime or violence committed. The participant is then confronted with the victim. Here the role-reversal strategy is incorporated, to let the participant feel what it is like to be at the receiving end of violence. The next is the *stage of violence reduction*. In this stage, the participants discuss society at large and the tendencies in society that may lead to either dissatisfaction or protest and the release of pent-up anger issuing in violence. This involves discussing the background of the participant, his future, his hopes and aspirations, and possibilities of addressing these. It is expected that, at the end, the participant will have understood the society he lives in, tolerating the excesses that exist and being able to control his emotions when confronted with situations that may lead to violence.

Convergences and Divergences

What are the areas of convergence between the two practices?

- 1: They treat human beings who require attention and who have problems;
- 2: they treat captive participants who require psychological treatment;
- 3: They treat individuals who have been moulded by the complexities of society, regardless of the differences between the societies, one being developed and the other developing.

What are the points of divergence?

- 1: The *Fahrer* approach is concerned exclusively with therapy aimed at curbing violence, at avoiding prison in the first place, and with post-prison therapy, while the Tandari system is concerned with in-prison therapeutic work.
- 2: The societies differ. In the one, it is easier to assess the outcomes of the work and rely on the background of psychological assistance to supplement it. German society can guarantee social welfare for the participants; this is part of a government package. In the Nigerian situation, by contrast, even when the therapeutic work makes any progress, the follow-up may be bleak because the situation that caused the prisoner to be incarcerated may not have undergone any change. Every tendency for recidivism exists, largely compromising the work already done, or making the individual a 'psychological bad case'. This is why, in Nigeria, there is interest in the *Fahrer* strategy.

Deductions and Conclusions

The play situations, when these simulate crime-scenes, are basically the strategies that can most easily be incorporated into Theatre for Development programmes. How these strategies can be developed will depend on the would-be catalyst, a situation of improvisation that creates self-confidence, respect for the humanity of the other, and a situation of peaceful coexistence that respects differences and accepts that they exist in the first place. Addressing this requires several approaches and strategies. It cannot be limited to a prescriptive approach, but involves the creation of eclectic processes aimed at assisting the child or young person to be re-integrated into society. Conversely, it would be useful for the *Fahrer* to make use of the dramatic strategy of the Tandari programme, in order to make the process of psychotherapy more effective. This is because play situations ease tensions and can more easily clarify grey areas for the client in the treatment process.

The question of guaranteeing, where possible, the self-sustainability of the clients after the process is very vital. This makes it easier for the therapist to make consistent checks and assist the client being treated, and to have an

easier basis for evaluating the process and its success. It should be noted that this desideratum is lacking in both approaches. I would suggest creating a process in which all of these factors are addressed and incorporated. Setting up a regular practice, by creating a stable situation where a group of kids have the opportunity to register and thus receive some form of recognition by the state can reduce the rate of violence greatly – including the types of crime likely to send them to prison. Workshops established on this basis would be an avenue for acquiring skills, and this should make it easier to make connections with public institutions, so that, after the acquisition of certain skills by the participants, it will be easy to create employment spaces for them in government departments or companies and be useful to their society.

Suggested New Structures

STAGE ONE. The work within the prison should establish a relationship between theatre practice and the process of reform and rehabilitation to which the Tandari model is applied.

STAGE TWO. The *Fahrer* agenda is designed to incorporate the dramatic-performance method as a supplementary approach.

STAGE THREE. Establishing resident workshops with a kind of school system requiring attendance at given times, and involving theatre as well as training in several other skills such as carpentry, pottery, textiles, and computer work. These should also cultivate links with government institutions which, when there are vacancies, can provide jobs for applicants who have successfully completed their training period. Link to universities or technical institutions, to which students can progress for industrial training and gradually become absorbed into the system, would also be desirable.

STAGE FOUR. Getting the participants into the job market by using these links. This is the most vital and, ironically, most difficult stage in the proposed strategy for completing the circle of the treatment process. With these stages in place, a structure is created that will take care of every step on the way.

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Can the Postcolonial Critic Speak – And If So, Who Is Listening?

MARC COLAVINCENZO

THE IDEA FOR THIS ESSAY began with an image suggested by the title of the conference to which this volume is devoted: “Bodies and Voices.” The image was as follows: Bodies. And Voices. Perhaps, more exactly, bodies on one side, and voices on the other. The bodies were solid, flesh and blood, they were real; the voices seemed disembodied, transparent, lacking in substance. The voices spoke, at times chattered on and on, and their subject was ostensibly these bodies. And yet, somehow the connection often seemed thin; at times, even, I could have sworn that the voices were actually talking about and listening to themselves rather than these bodies. They sounded familiar; I figured I knew who those voices were. Introversion, self-reflexivity, extreme abstraction – those were sins committed by postmodern critics, and I should know, because I used to be a gung-ho member of that club. But I was wrong. Sorry, wrong ‘post’. The voices were those of postcolonial critics.

To put it in more academic terms, it is this all-too-frequent cleft between postcolonial theoretical discourse and its supposed subjects – postcolonial conditions and literatures – that is the topic of this essay. To return to my opening image, I am concerned about the cleverly theoretical, hermetic voices of postcolonial critics pronouncing upon the very real bodies of postcolonial – perhaps, more exactly: colonial – subjects and their very real situations. There is all this talk, but to what ends? I am concerned about what I perceive to be academic irresponsibility.

This is, of course, a big topic, much too large to deal with in its entirety in this brief essay. But I will try to hint at what, in my opinion, are the most essential aspects of this problem. Much of this is not necessarily new – there are voices to be heard warning of the state of things. But the very fact that a

warning is still necessary indicates that not enough has changed and, therefore, I feel it necessary to repeat this warning.

I need to start by differentiating between two fields which seem to mix more and more but which I wish to discuss separately – postcolonial literary studies and postcolonial studies. In essence, I am differentiating between literary and cultural studies, a move which, in the light of the New Historicism and the ‘cultural turn’ in literary studies, may not meet with much approval. But for my purpose here I would like to begin by separating them, because by separating them I will be able to show that they have become intimately connected. I will begin with the literary side of things.

As mentioned, literary studies have taken a ‘cultural turn’, perhaps in the hope that this is the road that will lead to their survival in the face of the powerful emergence of the new media. But I fear that in negotiating this tricky turn most literary scholars have ended up in the ditch, as I will make clear in a moment. In any case, literary critics find themselves increasingly called upon to be cultural theorists, and postcolonial critics are, of course, no exception. An understanding of the culture or times that influenced the writing of a work – what used to be called ‘background knowledge’ – no longer suffices, because literature is now seen as only one institution among many, all of which influence one another reciprocally. Now, while some saw this as an empowering new direction for literary studies, for those of us who still regarded ourselves as literary scholars interested in what literature could tell us about the world and humanity – not universally, mind you, but in its various forms – this was a frightening moment. The academic and institutional atmosphere shimmered with the following mantra: Go cultural ... or simply go.

In terms of postcolonial criticism, this is where the shift from postcolonial literary studies to postcolonial studies occurs, where literature either begins to take a back seat within criticism or is left behind altogether. And this is where, at the same time, the dissociation of postcolonial studies from the still-colonized world occurs. To put it quite plainly, the problem I see is that, in daring the turn from literary studies to cultural theory, postcolonial literary critics – not to mention literary critics generally speaking – have hugely overestimated themselves, not in terms of their abilities but in terms of their influence. They write papers peppered with all sorts of words and phrases which sound politically engaged, such as “sites of resistance,” “the subjected subject,” “moment of subversion,” and “the ambivalent gaze of the colonizer”; they drop the names of the holiest practitioners of their craft, known to us by such names as Bhabha, Spivak, Said, among others; and somehow, behind all this, ineffable, is often a smug sense of self-satisfaction, of being an engaged scholar, unlike, say, the ahistorical postmodernists with their clever games and theories. How-

ever, when I hear many critics speak at conferences or read the resultant papers in a journal or essay collection, I always find myself asking the same questions: Who are they talking to? Who is listening? Is this really engagement? Who is this helping? What does this have to do with the real colonial or postcolonial world? The literary car has landed in the ditch, its wheels spinning pointlessly.

I have now made the shift from literary studies to cultural studies, and in asking the above questions I am now also walking on territory fought over within postcolonial debates. The connection between theory and practice, in particular the possibility of siting and naming the postcolonial subject or the subaltern – these are issues in the postcolonial arena that are implied in all the questions I ask myself when faced with postcolonial critical discourse. It is here that postcolonial theory has to contend with the real political world and has to work out its engagement with the latter. If theory is considered to be of value in and of itself, then its relevance outside the institutions where it is practised becomes less important; the location of politics is somewhere else. In this case, my questions are, of course, irrelevant, out of place.

But I insist upon my questions. I will not accept theoretically neat problematizing which is at the same time hermetically distanced from the reality of the colonial world it talks about from a discipline that proclaims itself to be politically engaged, which has often placed itself in conflict – unnecessarily, I might add – with postmodernism, because of the latter's theoretical games, supposed ahistoricity, and deconstruction of the subject. I demand responsibility from a discipline that is so politically resonant. After all the debates about whether the colonial subject can be sited or speak or be found, after all the theoretical niceties and fine points, there is one truth that remains – real colonial subjects in real colonial situations. After all this talk, there is no way that theory can possibly account for the widely varied realities of colonial subjects and their situations. Yes, we all know this; no critic is not aware of this. And yet, as I read much postcolonial theory I see the hard reality of the still-colonized corners of this world disappearing in a fog of self-congratulatory, abstract theoretical chatter.

When I ask my questions, then, I find the answers to be unsatisfactory. First: who are they talking to and who is listening? I fear that they are talking to themselves and to an academic elite, and that these are also the only ones who are listening. If I write an essay for an academic journal, or to be delivered at a conference at a university, whom does it reach, and to what ends do I do this? As far as I can tell, it reaches a small group of intellectuals who then, at best, use my thoughts for their own further work or, at worst, are only interested in taking my work apart and exposing the holes in it, rather than looking at the points of merit. However, for the most part it does not penetrate

beyond the circle of academia to the everyday world of the very real subjects with which it purports to engage. In addition, when we in Europe, for example, discuss postcolonial issues, talking, say, about the sites of resistance in postcolonial discourse, perhaps even then feeling satisfied that we are engaged scholars, how many of us really understand what we are talking about? How many of us are aware of the real ramifications of what we are proposing; or does it remain theoretically tidy and distant? In the novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* by the Japanese-Canadian writer Hiromi Goto, the main character, Murasaki, is most scathing with regard to postmodern intellectuals:

You're invited somewhere to be a guest speaker. To give a keynote address. Whatever that is. Everybody in suits and ties and designer dresses. You're the only coloured person there who is not serving food. It's not about being bitter. You just notice. People talk race this ethnic that. It's easy to be theoretical if the words are coming from a face that has little or no pigmentation.¹

Clearly, in Murasaki's eyes, it is all too easy to be postcolonially clever and theoretical about issues of race and ethnicity if one is not affected by this personally. I think that she is, at least in part, quite right in feeling this way. I am not arguing for a sort of 'nativism': i.e. that only indigenous scholars can discuss these issues. But I do think we need to be acutely aware of the privileged position from which we make our pronouncements. In any case, I find it difficult to view this state of affairs as engaged scholarship.

This suspicion that academic discourse has limited influence beyond the academy becomes even stronger if one considers the form of expression often used by postcolonial scholars, which makes their undertaking even more hermetic or, worse still, a type of reverse colonialism. In her excellent article "The Race for Theory," Barbara Christian makes the point that the language of literary critical theory is one that "mystifies rather than clarifies [black people's] condition, making it possible for a few people who know that particular language to control the critical scene," and that the "race for theory" actually "silences" the writer.² This is a point often alluded to but, with the exception of Christian, I have seldom seen it made with such due vehemence and clarity, and with the conviction that this is a really perverse situation. I often have the sense of theorists paying lip-service to a necessary point while persisting in employing the obscure jargon that passes for learned discourse. And, as is often the case, it is the holiest who are the worst sinners. It is per-

¹ Hiromi Goto, *Chorus of Mushrooms* (Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest, 1994): 89–90.

² Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory" (1990), in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia (London & New York: Arnold, 1996): 151, 149.

haps trite to cite Spivak and Bhabha as glaring examples of this, but having looked into them again recently I found it to be an affront that their work is accorded so much status, despite its many critics. Their work goes beyond elitism to participate in a cult of obscurity – as Christian has indicated, only those who know the password and the secret handshake are granted access to this club. To put it plainly, there is no longer any particular striving for clarity – indeed, at times it is explicitly rejected. At one point in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Spivak wishes to rephrase a point she has just made, and she introduces this new phrasing with the following words: “A slightly tougher formulation which clarity-fetishists can ignore.”³ The implication is unmistakable – apparently to demand clarity of theoretical discourse is a type of fetish, a personality disorder. This is a form of critical arrogance which is intolerable, and irreconcilable with the supposed political engagement of post-colonial studies.

Credit where credit is due – both Spivak and Bhabha make very perceptive points with regard to the very issue that I have just been discussing. Spivak points out that “it is the disenfranchised who teaches us most often by saying: I do not recognize myself in the object of your benevolence. I do not recognize my share in your naming,”⁴ and Bhabha states, in a different context, that “the ‘scientific’ fact comes to be aggressed by the experience of the street.”⁵ However, as far as I can tell, such points as these are rare lights in a mess of theoretical obscurity which seems far too distanced from its apparent subject. Spivak wants direct, tough formulations? Then how’s this? – the wife of a man from the Caribbean who said to me that listening to, and reading, post-colonial criticism made her angry at times because it was so neat, while back in the country where her husband came from, people were being shot in the street every day. Now, that’s a tough formulation of a colonial situation; that is an aggressive street experience. And that is why I feel postcolonial critical discourse can only be an affront, at times, to the very subjects it claims to represent.

The answers I have given to my first two questions imply, then, the answers to my remaining questions about postcolonial discourse. Is this really engagement? Who is this helping? What does this have to do with the real colonial or postcolonial world? All too often I feel that what I am reading or hearing cannot be called engaged scholarship – is not helping anybody or

³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993): 121.

⁴ Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 137.

⁵ Homi Bhabha, “Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition” (1986), in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993): 114.

anything beyond the theorist and his career ambitions, and that it has little to do with the still-colonial world we inhabit. Here again, there is much critical self-reflection about whether the term ‘postcolonial’ is adequate or, indeed, just a euphemism for neocolonialism; but this is not what I mean, and this is not enough. For me, it comes down to one simple thought – the usefulness of all this abstract theorizing in the academy is highly questionable. It masquerades as politically relevant and important but in the end has little reach beyond the institutions in which it is produced. Anne McClintock suggests as much with regard to Africa: “The role of ‘Africa’ in ‘postcolonial theory’ is different from the role of ‘post-colonial theory’ in Africa.”⁶ It is precisely this cleft that troubles me immensely.

I don’t suppose that the position I am articulating here is particularly safe. In addition to the possible charge of nativism I indicated earlier, I fear that a type of essentialism could be added to the list of my crimes. And I imagine that my position will seem simplistic and under-theorized. Overall, it would appear that I have learned nothing from poststructural theories of the subject, agency, and reality. But I have learned something, and it is this: that these theories are in truth quite dangerous if not repeatedly called into question. I am quite willing to err theoretically here, for I choose to point to and consider the reality of a world which is still colonized in many ways and which cannot be grasped by theoretical shiftiness and sleight-of-hand. In one of her interviews, Spivak states that we should “learn to speak in such a way that the masses will not regard as bullshit.”⁷ Perhaps she and other critics should finally take this to heart, for I have little doubt that the masses would regard most theoretical discourse as, indeed, “bullshit.” When Bhabha, for example, states that “the colonial presence is always ambivalent”⁸ and I then, some time later, read about the trial in South Africa of Wouter Basson, who worked on official projects to develop strains of bacteria that would either sterilize or destroy the black populace, then I am prompted to call Bhabha’s clever theorizing an affront and an irresponsible act. Admittedly, I am misreading Bhabha here, but it is an intentional misreading in order to point out a hard reality from which Bhabha’s theory remains distant. This is a colonial presence that is anything but ‘ambivalent’; this is a reality that is anything but theoretical.

I suppose that my position is also one that seems to be deeply sceptical. But I don’t want to be sceptical, and would like to return to a point I made at

⁶ Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism’” (1992), in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Williams & Chrisman, 297–98.

⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York & London: Routledge, 1990): 56.

⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 150.

the start of this essay, in order to close with a bit of optimism. I mentioned an overestimation on the part of postcolonial literary critics in terms of their influence in making the move to cultural theory. However, this move also entails, and is perhaps even caused by, an underestimation – an underestimation of the power of literature to tell us something about the world. To make my point here I will resort to examples. When I teach Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* – a book about one Japanese-Canadian experience – in Germany, my students often respond by thinking about the Turkish experience in Germany, drawing comparisons and contrasts between the two. When I read Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* in a class, I see some students expressing the desire to understand more about a very troubled history of colonialism in North America, some even responding with outrage at the lack of respect and mistreatment which the Native North Americans were subjected to. When I teach a short story by Himani Bannerji or Frank Paci, I find students whose origins are Indian or whose father is Italian telling me that they have understood something about their experience in Germany. Or perhaps it is even as simple as a student who, having read and studied Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* in my class, comes to me and says "Now I get it. I love this book, it has become one of my favourite books." It is here, in responses like these, that I see meaning in the postcolonial critical endeavour; it is here that I see postcolonial literature and studies intersecting with the lived-in world in interesting, instructive, and useful ways. Postcolonial studies which can generate an awareness of this literature and the cultural issues and situations that surround it, and which can generate responses like the ones above, is far more useful, in my view, than a theoretically hermetic and abstract approach. It makes me feel a bit like the four old Indians in King's novel who proclaim that they are trying to fix the world – they try to fix up their little corner of the world, Blossom, Alberta; and I am trying, so to speak, to fix up my little corner of the world, Giessen, Germany. I do not dare to guess at my success and I might well be disappointed, although reactions like the ones above give me hope. But in any case, at least I feel like I am working in the world. If I am indeed working in the academy, at least I feel that I have the windows open and can still hear the sounds of "the experience of the street." I suppose that each of us works in a little corner of the world, and perhaps the power of postcolonial studies lies in its ability, if practised correctly (i.e. responsibly), to raise the awareness of colonialism and its legacy at work in the world, including a reflection on our own position within that legacy.

Bodies. And voices. At a conference in Aachen, a South African writer said to me that he really wondered what all that talk was about, including talk about his own work, which seemed to have nothing to do with the real circumstances under which he lived and wrote. Now, despite poststructural scep-

ticism about the author, I still like my authors, and despite distrust of the author's intentions, he still interests me more than all the talk about him. This comment only served to confirm all that I thought was going wrong with post-colonial studies. As Barbara Christian puts it, "literature is not an occasion for discourse among critics, but is necessary nourishment for [...] people and one way by which they come to understand their lives better."⁹ Bodies and voices. Real bodies living in a world at times all too caught in the grip or aftermath of colonialism, and disembodied voices speaking from a comfortable distance about it. I suppose the question in the title of my essay is answered – the post-colonial critic can speak, and certainly does. The question we need to keep asking, then, is should s/he speak – and if so, about what?

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⁹ Christian, "The Race for Theory," 149.

The Quest for Identity as a Pattern of Postcolonial Voices

JESÚS VARELA-ZAPATA

IT IS WELL KNOWN that the Greeks and Romans were more concerned about men as social beings than as individuals, and this led to a surprising lack of autobiographical texts in otherwise rich cultures that produced some of the best plays, poetry, historiography and philosophical writings in Western civilization. St Augustine, in his *Confessions*, is one of the earliest writers to have engaged in autobiography. However, Romanticism was the first movement to place the self at the centre of literary preoccupation (the most obvious example being Rousseau), thus starting a tradition of literary exposure of the inner layers of consciousness, which was further reinforced after the work of Freud and Jung.

We are going to consider now to what extent postcolonial literature has exploited the possibilities of autobiographical writing in connection with the quest for identity, both on a personal and on a national scale. In general terms, we start to discuss postcolonial societies after World War II, when most of the former colonies, such as India or many of the new African republics, achieved fully-fledged independence. In the case of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, these had enjoyed virtual sovereignty for most of the twentieth century, although tinged with the peculiar status of dominion, which preserves the ceremonial role of the British monarch as head of state; however, the aftermath of the War was marked by an unprecedented severing of emotional and economic links with the former metropolis.

All the new societies, facing the need to shape the contours of political, economic and cultural institutions, were also confronted with the desire to find their identity. Robertson Davies delves into Canada's constituent elements as a society in purely psychological terms:

Canada has a soul right enough, but it has until recently been exceedingly cautious about letting it show. Nor was this simply because Canada was shy, though reticence is a national characteristic; it was because Canada was spiritually lazy, and was perfectly happy to borrow soul, if it might be needed, from Britain or the United States.¹

Canada, the introverted country, feels no impulsion to spread its domination beyond its own boundaries [...] We are prepared to put up with almost anything to avoid trouble. This looks like weakness, and sometimes it is. But it also brings the introvert trait of selfishness.²

Similarly, in *Eucalyptus* by Murray Bail we find an attempt at defining the specific traits of Australian fiction:

Actually the trouble with our National Landscape is that it produced a certain type of behaviour which has been given shape in story-telling, all those laconic hard-luck stories [...] Not to mention the many hundreds of stories told in the confessional first person singular, with still more to come. A kind of applied psychology has taken over story-telling, coating it and obscuring the core.³

In some instances, the search for identity involved reconciliation with previously silenced precolonial roots (religious practices, languages or marginalized native minorities). In the case of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the ‘white territories’, it was also necessary to re-appraise the strength of the links to the former metropolis. This relationship proved especially relevant when trying to suppress other undesirable connections: the Asian and Pacific element in Australia and New Zealand, or the pervasive – indeed, overwhelming – presence of the USA that endangered Canadian identity. In this context it is only to be expected that the personal quest for the self should run parallel to a similar endeavour on a national scale. As Alan Lawson explains,

The inevitable recognition for the colonial, nurtured either personally or culturally on images of a distant and different place, was that there is a discrepancy between image and experience, between culture and context, between literature and life. Of those discrepancies the last will serve as a paradigm of the others. It is the intensity of the recognition of this latter gap that makes it an imperative part of the writer’s task and a major part of his/her problem to make sense of that gap – to provide images of the here that will not shock or embarrass by comparison with the long-held images of there. There is then, for colonial writers, especially those of Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the

¹ Robertson Davies, *The Merry Heart: Reflections on Reading, Writing, and the World of Books* (New York & London: Viking, 1996): 44.

² Davies, *The Merry Heart*, 50.

³ Murray Bail, *Eucalyptus* (1998; London: Harvill, 1999): 25.

West Indies, and Australia a psychological responsibility [...] To define, that is, images of identity, of community, of history, of place.⁴

Thus, we can say that autobiography, life writing and the exploration of the self are related in postcolonial literature to the quest for national identity. This introspective endeavour can be attributed to the historical crisis marked by World War II, independence, and the ensuing rapid social change and sense of crisis. The importance of autobiography in postcolonial writing is admitted, among many others, by Dennis Walder in his analysis of Chinua Achebe:

until the withdrawal of colonial rule, the colonised seemed to accept that they were always the objects of someone else's story, indeed, someone else's history [...] It was precisely the project of *Things Fall Apart* to resist and reject this assumption; by telling the story of the colonised, to retrieve their history. And more than that: by retrieving their history to regain an identity. This is why autobiography has been a favoured sub-genre among the 'new' African (and indeed Caribbean) writers.⁵

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One of the most distinguished of these practitioners of postcolonial autobiographical writing, V.S. Naipaul, deserves special attention. He is arguably the member of his generation who has most frequently made mention in his work of his vocation and writing career, pervaded by his various versions of the *Künstlerroman*, or portrait of the artist, to the point that some critics believe that "it is not the self that constructs the narrative, as Naipaul would have us believe, but the narrative that constructs the self."⁶ He can be considered an archetypal postcolonial individual voicing his concerns on the long way towards self-discovery. Naipaul, in a constant search for stability, comes to identify his homeland, Trinidad, and the West Indies as a whole with the opposite: chaos and squalor. There have been major conflicts in Trinidad since the oil workers' industrial action in 1917, followed by a general strike two years later and violent riots in the 1930s. In 1970 and 1995 there were important revolutionary uprisings, leading to a collapse of the rule of law. The fact that there has never been real integration between the descendants of African

⁴ Alan Lawson, "The Discovery of Nationality in Australian and Canadian Literatures," in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (1983; London & New York: Routledge, 1995): 168.

⁵ Dennis Walder, *Post-Colonial Literatures in English: History, Language, Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998): 7.

⁶ Wimal Dissanayake & Carmen Wickramagamage, *Self and Colonial Desire: Travel Writings of V.S. Naipaul* (1996; New York: Peter Lang, 1997): 153.

slaves and Indian indentured labourers, the former predominantly urban and the latter mainly confined to the countryside, has been a further source of conflict and instability in the country. The slightly higher number of blacks and their proximity to administrative posts has been enough for them to have control of power in the country for most of the time after the independence, and many among the Indian population feel a discriminated minority. The narrator of *A Way in the World* explains the reasons for the process of estrangement from his country:

It was four years before I returned. And then I came and went irregularly, coming sometimes for a few days, staying away once for more than five years. It was from this distance, and with these interruptions, that I saw this place I knew and didn't know, which continued in its state of insurrection [...] It went into independence in its state of black exaltation – almost a state of insurrection – and with its now well-defined racial division.⁷

In this context, it is particularly relevant to consider Naipaul's position as doubly 'Other', both as an immigrant to Britain and, previously, as an alienated member of a social (brahminical) minority within a demographic (Indo-Caribbean) majority in Trinidad. In his work and interviews, Naipaul time and again refers to his condition as the son of a minor journalist of Indian descent, living in a colonial backwater. In fact, it is remarkable that Naipaul has never fully identified himself with the place of his birth, nor has he made any effort to paint an affectionate portrait of the Caribbean. Other West Indian writers and intellectuals have similarly pointed up the political, social and economic shortcomings in the region, in both the colonial and the post-independence period, but none has been more caustic and detached than Naipaul, so that his distance from his fellow countrymen and other postcolonial artists and intellectuals has become greater, to the point of open hostility. He has even been accused of being a Western mandarin who voices opinions and prejudices that the metropolitan establishment would not dare utter. As Caryl Phillips points out,

Naipaul the chronicler of 'primitive' societies is highly conscious of his role in the tradition of delivering 'truths' about heathens, a role which follows in the footsteps of Trollope, Conrad and Graham Greene. Naipaul's castigation of these 'barbaric' non-Western societies, where neo-colonial elites merely ape the West, where 'resistance' of the masses is to be understood only as 'resentment', has gone unchallenged by the West, in large part due to his presentation

⁷ V.S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World* (London: Heinemann, 1994): 33.

of himself as a man with colonial connections of his own, despite his obvious distaste for, and impatience with any cultural value which is non-Western.⁸

However, we realize that, although there is no nationalistic backlash against Empire in Naipaul, it is clear that his work shares the traits we can trace in most postcolonial authors. Thus, we notice that he blames his condition as a colonial individual for hindering his first creative impulses, since the literary models he had in mind (the great classics studied at school) provided him with the form but not with the appropriate subject-matter. To use Lawson's words, Naipaul faces the discrepancy between image and experience, between culture and context, so that only when he turns to his native physical and social landscape will he achieve his own decolonization and maturity as a person and an artist, finding at last the appropriate theme for his early narratives, especially his masterpiece, *A House for Mr Biswas*.⁹ There is no doubt that his writing career and quest for knowledge are inscribed in the general process of colonial transformation into postcolonial societies, and although he makes no claim for national redemption, he wants to supersede the old order by finding a new model of place and identity.

Naipaul has not kept his biographical circumstances secret; they are, in fact, well documented throughout the numerous published interviews in which his central beliefs and obsessions are reflected: the writer's Indian ancestry, traditions and religious practices, the importance of the father-figure, his recurrent depressions, his unflinching vocation as a writer, his different residences in Britain.¹⁰ A collection of family letters edited by Gillon Aitken, who was assisted by Naipaul himself, provides us with much information about his early years as an Oxford undergraduate.¹¹ With respect to Naipaul's

⁸ Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001): 192.

⁹ V.S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

¹⁰ See the excellent compilation by Feroza Jussawalla, *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1997).

¹¹ *Letters Between a Father and a Son*, ed. Gillon Aitken (London: Abacus, 1999). Further information about Naipaul can be obtained, with the necessary precautions, from a kind of invective written by Paul Theroux, in the wake of the breaking-off of a lifelong personal and professional friendship. Theroux combines admiration and anger in recounting his (now deceived) friendship with Naipaul, as this passage from their early years of acquaintance illustrates: "He was one of the strangest men I had ever met, and absolutely the most difficult. He was almost unlovable. He was contradictory, he quizzed me incessantly, he challenged everything I said, he demanded attention, he could be petty, he uttered heresies about Africa, he fussed, he mocked, he made his innocent wife cry, he had impossible standards, he was self-important, he was obsessive on the subject of his health. He hated children, music, and dogs. But he was also brilliant, and passionate in his conviction, and to be with him, as a friend or fellow writer, I had always to be at my best." Paul Theroux, *Sir Vidia's Shadow* (Boston MA & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998): 70.

primary works, there are two brief pieces, “Prologue to an Autobiography,” included in *Finding the Centre* (1984), and *Reading and Writing* (2000), that are first-person recollections, although Naipaul somehow wants to warn the reader so as to avoid deception, stating that the former “is not an autobiography, a story of a life or deeds done. It is an account of something less easily seized: my literary beginnings and the imaginative promptings of my many-sided background.”¹² Naipaul’s disclaimer is explained by Sandra Pouchet Paquet when she says: “It appears that what is being rejected here is the biographical model, and in its place Naipaul proposes a different kind of autobiographical project, one that privileges the genesis of his own distinct aesthetic personality.”¹³ In fact, Naipaul has always transcended the mere autobiographical intention of the works considered above, although he has never been afraid of letting his life be known and has recently accepted Patrick French as his official biographer.

There are two other works by Naipaul that deserve especial attention, *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987)¹⁴ and the aforementioned *A Way in the World* (1994). Although both were subtitled in British editions “a novel,” this label has been generally regarded as a disguise for mere autobiographical recollections or meditations. As Peter Kemp says in a review, “Though its subtitle insists that it is ‘a novel in five sections’, it reads as something scarcely fictional”;¹⁵ Frank Kermode has a similar opinion, describing the book as “virtually a slice of autobiography.”¹⁶ Md. Akhtar J. Khan’s view is as follows:

in the case of some such non-fiction novels the unusual attention granted to them as compared to Naipaul’s other works is not, however, entirely due to the quality of his writing but to the central issues they deal with. These books, therefore, maybe taken as projecting Naipaul’s attempt at developing a new genre in modern fiction, that is, the art of non-fiction under the influence of artists like Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe and such other great artists.¹⁷

¹² V.S. Naipaul, *Finding the Centre* (1984; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985): 9.

¹³ Sandra Pouchet Paquet, *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2002): 184.

¹⁴ V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1987).

¹⁵ Peter Kemp, “Severed from rootlessness,” review of *The Enigma of Arrival*, by V.S. Naipaul, *Times Literary Supplement* (7 July 1987): 838.

¹⁶ Frank Kermode, “In the Garden of the Oppressor,” review of *The Enigma of Arrival*, by V.S. Naipaul, *New York Times Book Review* (22 March 1987): 11.

¹⁷ Akhtar Md. Jamal Khan, *V.S. Naipaul: A Critical Study* (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998): 8.

Naipaul has accounted for his attempt at crossing genre boundaries by revealing his belief in the limited possibilities of traditional fiction to reflect contemporary man, as he confesses to Aamer Hussein:

You have to write a different book from thirty years ago: you can't write the same book. Because you change, your knowledge of the world changes, and the forms have to change to meet the demands of the material you've accumulated. We can be burdened by dead forms [...] The dominant form at the beginning of the nineteenth century was the essay, surely. And then it altered. Because the novel became the way people could deliver truths they couldn't in any other way about society – mental states, and so on [...] This book [*A Way in the World*] is a way of dealing with all the various strands of the Caribbean or New World background, the place, and all the different stages of learning about it, as well. The learning is important, and the form I've arrived at seems to me truer and more natural than any artificial narrative.¹⁸

Further explanations for Naipaul's shift from fiction towards a new form of autobiographical narrative are provided by the writer to Paul Theroux:

I feel I want to say that I am not against narratives fundamentally. We must deal in narrative [one] just can't write a third-person narrative without defining who the participant, the viewer, who the 'I' and the 'eye' are. And probably more and more people, as the world gets more confused, will feel the need to define exactly who they are.¹⁹

In this regard, both the *Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World* seem to be primarily different approaches to finding the individual's place in the post-colonial context. The unnamed protagonist of the first is a middle-aged West Indian who finds refuge on the Wiltshire plains to continue his career as a writer; mention is made of books clearly modelled on Naipaul's own: a travelogue about the West Indies, a book on India, an historical re-creation (as in *The Loss of El Dorado*) of Raleigh and other Renaissance and seventeenth-century explorers.

Linda Warley has examined different authors' conceptions of autobiography, often seen as a quest in which the autobiographer traces his life by organizing the narrative according to significant stages. In this way, the *bios* or the referentiality of the 'I' is challenged, creating what Warley calls an "unlocated subject." Hence, she claims the special importance of the spatial element in

¹⁸ Aamer Hussein, "Delivering the Truth: An Interview with V.S. Naipaul," *New York Review of Books* (13 May 1979): 1, 36.

¹⁹ Paul Theroux, *Sir Vidia's Shadow: A Friendship Across Five Continents* (Boston MA & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998): 335.

postcolonial writing, especially when compared with classic canonical figures such as St. Augustine, Rousseau, Yeats and Henry James:

these autobiographical subjects are securely positioned within absolutely central, powerful, and known territories [...] the space they occupy is itself taken for granted. It is the site of Western culture. Not so for the African, Jamaican, or Canadian autobiographer to whom the intersection of language and place is at the very centre of post-colonial identity politics. Always aware that his or her place has at one time been marked red on the imperial map [...] [they] struggle to construct a viable representation of the 'self' as a located 'self'.²⁰

Pursuing this idea, we realize that in *Enigma* the protagonist reflects on the influence of time and space on the individual. While the Caribbean climate (hot, humid) and history (chaotic, violent) do not provide the necessary shelter for mental stability and artistic vocation, the greenery and mild temperatures of Britain allow the lonely walker to calm his nerves and find the inspiration to conduct his writing career, always with the solemnity of Stonehenge on the horizon. The mere fact of writing will help rescue a personality shattered by the uncertainties of the colonial past. Minoli Salgado has referred to Salman Rushdie in terms that help explain Naipaul's work:

'twice-born' fiction accommodates two contrasting notions of individual identity: one of a split subjectivity and the other of a renewed self: both aspects of migrant identity explored by Rushdie, most explicitly in *The Satanic Verses*. It is a redefinition predicated on fundamentally different notions of selfhood: one of a self that is fragmented, divided and inherently unstable (what could be broadly described as a post-modernist conception of identity) and the other, a sense of self that relies on a notion of retrievable essence or authenticity.²¹

This is precisely the notion of a fragmented and unstable identity that can be redressed only through writing, as the narrator of *Enigma* suggests:

The fact was that at that age of twenty-two, unprotected, and feeling unprotected, with no vision of the future, only with ambition, I had no idea what kind of person I was. Writing should have helped me to see, to clarify myself. [...] To get anywhere in the writing, I had first of all to define myself very clearly to myself.²²

²⁰ Linda Warley, "Locating the Subject of Post-Colonial Autobiography," *Kunapipi* 15.1 (1993): 24–25.

²¹ Minoli Salgado, "Migration and Mutability: The Twice Born Fiction of Salman Rushdie," in *British Culture of the Postwar: An Introduction to Literature and Society 1945–1999*, ed. Alistair Davies & Alan Sinfield (London: Routledge, 2000): 40.

²² Salgado, "Migration and Mutability," 84, 141.

In *Reading and Writing*, we find similar remarks: “Each book took me to deeper understanding and deeper feeling, and that led to a different way of writing.”²³ By the middle of *Enigma*, the protagonist admits to having recovered the psychic balance he had once lost:

In my welcoming [Wiltshire] cottage, hidden by layer upon layer of beech and yew from the public road, I began to feel oppressed by the labours and strains of the last twenty years; the strains connected with writing [...] But I had no vision now of being a corpse at the bottom of a river; no dream of an exploding head that left me shaken up, exhausted. [...] Through writing [...] I had arrived at a new idea of myself and my world.²⁴

This whole process might be considered as an example of what Mark Freeman defines as “a classic formula for the progress of self-knowledge: in order to become healthy, to ‘depathologize’ oneself [...] there is the need to strip away the various fictions and myths through which one has been living.”²⁵ In this case, Naipaulian fictions and myths would be represented as a mixture of his own literary production (‘refictionalized’ in books such as *Enigma*) and his life as a postcolonial migrant.



In the case of postcolonial women writers, their quest for the self is especially significant for the depth and intensity of the experiences recalled; it is also usually related to an effort to combat social exclusion and decolonize patriarchy. As already mentioned, the quest for identity is not always cast in the mould of straightforward autobiography; in fact, women writers have used all kinds of genres to explore the inner layers of the postcolonial consciousness. Jamaica Kincaid, in *Lucy*, portrays the plight of the postcolonial exile, no longer soothed by the comforts of desiring to return to the homeland. The love/hate relationship between Lucy and her mother is an indication of the conflict of an individual who rejects, and is rejected by, expatriate society, but is reluctant to indulge in memories of a troubled growing-up within the confines of the former empire. Other women had earlier resorted to fiction to explore the condition of the postcolonial female self and are now canonical models. Margaret Laurence (through her *Manawaka* cycle) is able to picture a map of female identity in all periods of life, from youth to old age. Margaret

²³ Salgado, “Migration and Mutability,” 27.

²⁴ “Migration and Mutability,” 179, 145.

²⁵ Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History: Memory, Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1993): 115.

Atwood's *Surfacing* presents the story of a young woman who returns to the landscapes of her childhood in search of her missing father. This quest can be symbolically interpreted as her desire to delve into her consciousness, where bitter memories of conflict with her parents and partners (including an abortion) linger. Doris Lessing, in *The Grass is Singing*, portrays a young woman confined to a remote and isolated farm in Africa, married to a passive man and falling in love with her black servant, enacting the model of what Robert Young has described as "going native," a transgression which leaves aside the threat posed by the 'Other', when feelings are overridden by sexual passion and fantasies of interracial sex.²⁶

In terms of autobiographical writing, Janet Frame has produced an archetypal portrayal of a young woman's descent into the hell of madness, caused by some kind of misunderstanding between her and society. She has written a chilling account of a woman on the brink of losing her physical integrity, until she recovers and is able to emerge as one of the best living writers in English. In her autobiographical trilogy we read about Frame's childhood of poverty and alienation and the artistic development of a woman in the face of adverse physical, psychological and spiritual circumstances.²⁷ When her spirit is at its lowest, she is relieved only by the idea of becoming a writer so as to accomplish her "ambition."²⁸ An unfavourable review of her later-acclaimed collection of stories, *The Lagoon*, sparks off the anxiety of losing the ground under her feet: "if I could not live within the world of writing books, then where could I survive?"²⁹ As in the case of Naipaul, writing is associated with physical and intellectual recovery: "Writing was to be my rescue."³⁰

Janet Frame's pathological self-effacement and timidity make her long for invisibility. Thus, the young girl is afraid of reading a copy of the weekly student newspaper, though we realize she is eager to have a glimpse of it, since she actually daydreams about sending her own poetry to it for publication. In these circumstances, it seems as if the voice had replaced the body and verbal capacity had replaced all other manifestations of life: "My only freedom was within, in my thoughts and language, most of which I kept carefully con-

²⁶ Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995).

²⁷ Frame's autobiography covers her first forty years. For other details and periods, see Michael King's authorized biography of the writer, based on research into her letters, diaries, medical records and other private and public materials; King, *Wrestling with the Angel: A Life of Janet Frame* (Washington DC: Counterpoint, 2000).

²⁸ Janet Frame, *An Angel at My Table: The Complete Autobiography* (1990; London: Women's Press, 2001): 213.

²⁹ Frame, *An Angel at My Table*, 217.

³⁰ *An Angel at My Table*, 239.

cealed, except in my writing.”³¹ We have an example of this substitution when she has to face the emotional shock at the news of her mother’s death; she does not attend the funeral, since language relieves her of acting, by answering letters of sympathy sent to the family and writing poems on the occasion.

We should consider now to what extent we can judge Frame’s writing as representative of the postcolonial perception discussed so far in connection with authors such as Naipaul, Kincaid and Lessing. In fact, there is some debate about the labelling of Janet Frame as a postcolonial writer. In the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, her “postcolonial concerns” are mentioned only insofar as they are utilized in the service of a consistently modernist vision. It is clear that her circumstances as a white New Zealand female are very different from those of some of the writers mentioned above. However, we should note that Frame’s slow progress towards self-acceptance and social recognition might similarly be equated with the process of national definition that was taking place in New Zealand almost simultaneously. Frame was born in 1924, soon after the end of World War I, which boosted national pride because of the leading role played by New Zealand soldiers. She turned twenty-one in 1945, a crucial year, both for personal and historical reasons (its significance is revealed in the fact that the figure 1945 is used as a heading in four chapters of the autobiography). Frame came of age at the same time as World War II ended and the dominions accelerated the process of loosening their ties with the metropolis, a process that had begun in the late nineteenth century with discussions about the granting of autonomy to the colonies.

It is obvious that the historical and political circumstances of settler territories such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada differed greatly from those of colonies of occupation in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. The citizens of European descent could claim some of the privileges afforded by the colonial system; for the indigenous populations, they actually became the representatives of the forces of oppression, and, although inhabitants of the imperial periphery, the settlers were connected to the centre by multiple filiative associations. However, it is also certain that they suffered discrimination, and within the binary categories colonizer/colonized constructed by imperialism they are located somewhere in between. As a matter of fact, their societies are frequently characterized by the metropolitan establishment as parochial and immature in intellectual and political matters; as Ashcroft et al. point out: “there is a perception that this new experience, if couched in the terms of the old, is somehow ‘falsified’ (rendered inauthentic) at the same time as its

³¹ Frame, *An Angel at My Table*, 246.

value, judged within Old World terms, is considered inferior.”³² John C. Hawley remarks:

most of these ‘post-settler’ nations are not reasonably described as economic members of the Third World, and their experience of ‘liberation’ from the colonizer is therefore on a less ironic level. Nonetheless, they do share with the Third World a struggle to define themselves against their troubled histories.

Hawley emphasizes the fact that writers from this background “consistently thematize their search for rootedness in lands where they are forever seen by the indigene as immigrants.”³³ Similarly, Linda Hutcheon writes about the “trauma of settler colonies like Canada, which have had to deal with the psychic and cultural (as well as economic) dependency of colonization and have struggled to articulate autonomy through constitutional or cultural means.”³⁴

There is no doubt that the transition from colonial to postcolonial status has been faster and more discrete in non-settler countries, and, as A.A. Phillips has pointed out, political independence has not run parallel to a decolonization of cultural practices in Canada, Australia and New Zealand.³⁵ Even the constitutional arrangements and political developments of the last century in these three countries point to an ambiguity in the definition of nationhood. Queen Victoria declared Australia an independent country in 1901, but it still fought two world wars as a member of the British Empire; remarkably enough, the advent of the twenty-first century was marked by a referendum that rejected republican status and a complete break with Britain. Canada has retained the same form of government, even after the 1982 reform replacing the British North America Act. New Zealand, which was granted full independence in the 1931 Statute of Westminster, did not adopt it until 1947.³⁶

³² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New Accents; London & New York: Routledge, 1989): 135.

³³ John C. Hawley, “Introduction: Voice or Voices in Post-Colonial Discourse?” *Critical Studies* 7 (1996): xvi.

³⁴ Linda Hutcheon, “The Post Always Rings Twice: The Postmodern and the Postcolonial,” *Textual Practice* 8.2 (1994): 209–10.

³⁵ A.A. Phillips, *The Australian Tradition: Studies in a Colonial Culture* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1958), and *Responses: Selected Writings* (Kew, Victoria: Australia International Press & Publications, 1979).

³⁶ Somehow New Zealand was considered by Britons as a land gentler than other colonies; both climate and geography were deemed similar to Britain’s. Cain and Hopkins point out that although New Zealand “was traditionally the most docile of the Dominions” and “the most trade dependent,” loyalty to the Empire suffered a deadly blow in the 1930s due to Britain’s failure to help solve financial difficulties and by the imposition of quotas on New

In this context, it is only by interpreting various historical events that the contours of the growth of national consciousness are made clear. The aftermath of the two world wars is especially significant, insofar as they made the former settler colonies aware of their potential and, despite their being on the winning side, the appalling number of casualties made people raise questions about the need to be fighting for a country – Britain – that was no longer considered as their own. War World II was crucial in establishing closer links between the three former British colonies and the new emergent superpower, the USA. It was also a time for an increasing role in international affairs, culminating in the formation of the United Nations. Immigration and the growing role of the native minorities (and the peculiar status of Quebec within Canada) also forced a reconsideration of national constituent foundations, as distinct from the British colonial heritage.

Linda Hutcheon thinks it important to consider

whether a nation has fought for political independence or has evolved a form of government out of imperial institutions: breaks and ruptures force an articulation of difference and enable the creation of a discourse of identity.³⁷

Stephen Slemon argues that white dominions, with obviously different historical circumstances from other colonies, should be labelled Second-World societies; Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge interpret Slemon's view to permit the following conclusion:

Through this counter-discursivity the settler colony acquires a political agenda which demonstrates its reaction against an imperial homogenizing tendency [...] in the complicity theory, the literature of settler colonies, which did not have to go through a prolonged independence struggle, still has postcolonial tendencies embedded within it. In the age of the postmodern, the settler colonies' counter-discursive energy can now speak with greater assurance.³⁸

In dealing with the literatures of these Second-World societies, other distinctions must be made. Thus, the general idea that women had undergone a double colonization is qualified by some critics, such as Robin Visel, to allow

Zealand's exports. P.J. Cain & A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction 1914–1990* (London & New York: Longman, 1993): 135.

³⁷ Linda Hutcheon, "The Post Always Rings Twice," 230.

³⁸ Vijay Mishra & Bob Hodge, "What is Post(-)Colonialism?" *Textual Practice* 5.3 (1991): 405. It is interesting to note that Diana Brydon, in her survey of different versions of *The Tempest* produced in English-speaking Canada, concludes that the main emphasis has been on Miranda, a symbol of the 'dutiful daughter'. By contrast, plays in Quebec emphasize the figure of Caliban, a more direct allusion to colonialism taken as oppression. Brydon, "Rewriting *The Tempest*," *World Literature Written in English* 23.1 (Winter 1984): 75–88.

them to conclude that it is only possible to speak about a 'half-colonization', since women of European descent somehow "share in the power and guilt of the colonists."³⁹ It has also been (quite rightly) argued that white women in the colonies achieved citizen's rights earlier than in the metropolis.⁴⁰

It seems easy to grasp why, to some critics, the discourse of decolonization and resistance can be more easily applied to Third-World writers. This can be seen when Ketu H. Katrak discusses Fanon's concept of the violent decolonization of culture in relation to postcolonial women writers:

In terms of language, it is as if writers now appropriate a version of the cultural and economic violence perpetrated by the colonizer in order to 'violate' the English language in its standard use. Both arenas – linguistic and cultural – are dialectically related. Language is culture, particularly the transformations of rhetorical and discursive tools available through a colonial(ist) education system; and one expression of cultural tradition (among others like film, popular culture, festival) is through language. How do postcolonial writers reconcile themselves to use the oppressor's tongue that had so effectively denigrated indigenous cultures and traditions?⁴¹

Feminist critics aim at decentering man-made language; Kristeva and others suggest that their primary task is to renegotiate their subject-position and identity, taking into account the fact that language enables each individual to construct his or her identity through differences such as gender. In the case of postcolonial women's writing, language is seen as the site where identity is further challenged by external forces that establish a hierarchical discourse of political and social superiority. Simon During has discussed the desire of the decolonized societies for an identity as a quest for self-determination related to nationalism, insofar as such communities tend to be nations. During further examines the role of language, stating that

in both literature and politics the post-colonial drive towards identity centres around language, partly because in postmodernity identity is barely available elsewhere. For the post-colonial to speak or write in the imperial tongues is to call forth a problem of identity, to be thrown into mimicry and ambivalence. The question of language for post-colonialism is political, cultural and literary,

³⁹ Robin Visel, "A Half-Colonization: The Problem of the White Colonial Woman Writer," *Kunapipi* 10.3 (1988): 39.

⁴⁰ George R. Marangoly, *The Politics of Home. Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Los Angeles & London: U of California P, 1999).

⁴¹ Ketu H. Katrak, "Decolonizing Culture: Toward a Theory for Postcolonial Women's Texts," *Modern Fiction Studies* 35.1 (1989): 169.

not in the transcendental sense that the phrase as *différend* enables politics, but in the material sense that a choice of language is a choice of identity.⁴²

The work of Frame and Naipaul can only be inscribed in this discourse with obvious qualifications, since for neither Naipaul nor Frame can English be identified as the language of the oppressor. However, we should take into account what Helen Tiffin has pointed out: that one of the basic features lending unity to postcolonial literatures is the tension they reflect between the imported language and the realities of the immediate environment; and it is clear that such tension exists in the case of both writers. It is notable that Frank Sargeson once mounted a hoax to create the idea that Frame was a writer from the Pacific Islands – and that, after the identity-crisis she underwent in England, Frame tried to assume the personality Sargeson had invented for her, and even cross-dressed so as to adopt a West Indian identity.

Cultural geography and toponymy help identify some examples of the ambiguous role played by Frame's New Zealand as an outpost of the Empire. When the narrator in *An Angel at My Table*, the second volume of her autobiographical trilogy, recalls the Sunday train passing by her house, geographical references such as Hampden, Palmerston, Port Chalmers, Ravensbourne and Sawyers Bay suggest a British location. This is only one indication of the colonial violence underlying the charting of territories, whereby names are given to mark Western hegemony, in many instances involving the suppression of precolonial topographic references. However, some of these are present in Frame's text, too, somehow striking a balance between the two communities in New Zealand/Aotearoa. Oamaru, Waianakarua, Mihiwaka – these indicate that, as postcolonial critical discourse has long established, maps and cartography are often ideologically laden and these names are invested with the symbolic testimony of the largely suppressed Maori legacy.⁴³

In spite of the aforementioned ideas, we realize that Frame, in the binary opposition colonial/native, is deeply rooted in her Anglo-Saxon background and, far from challenging the European renaming of the South Pacific, she interprets location within eurocentric discourse: "I was willing to follow the example and eventually 'love' the new city, as Charles Dickens, Hazlitt, Lamb loved their London."⁴⁴ There is no doubt about the existence of a variety of other colonial echoes in *An Angel at My Table*. We soon discover a

⁴² Simon During, "Postmodernism or Post-Colonialism Today," *Textual Practice* 1.1 (1997): 43.

⁴³ In this respect, it is instructive to read José Rabasa's "Allegories of Atlas," in *Inventing A-m-e-r-i-c-a; Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1993).

⁴⁴ Rabasa, "Allegories of Atlas," 150–51.

voice betraying a perception that gives a central position to metropolitan values. Frame's daydreams are located right at the heart of the empire: King's College, Cambridge; Hardy's Wessex landscape; Kew Gardens. Her innermost feelings are interpreted through conventional canonical literature: "I felt ashamed of my simple desires – haunted by Wordsworth's sonnet";⁴⁵ references to harsh weather are conveyed through images imported from British poetry; when she imagines the squalor of European cities she borrows Blake's imagery, thinking of them as "dark satanic mills."⁴⁶ In fact, white New Zealand society is steeped in colonial values, and Frame admits that, for them, people speaking with an 'Oxford accent' were immediately associated with a position of authority, something that Fanon would interpret as the archetypal colonial inferiority complex, and a phenomenon that antipodean thinkers have confirmed as the 'cultural cringe' or as obeisance to 'O.E' (Overseas Experience). These attitudes help explain later on why it is assumed that Frame's literary career should be built upon the solid foundations of a European sojourn, despite the apprehension she felt at the thought of embarking on such an adventure. It seems as if she were reluctant to have her sincere voice, echoing the deepest layers of her tormented soul, sanctioned or validated across the ocean at the heart of the Empire, but she was nevertheless following the tradition of New Zealand artists such as Katherine Mansfield and Frances Hodgkins, who consolidated their careers in the metropolitan centre.

The condition of Janet Frame as a postcolonial writer has been repeatedly questioned. Simon During, in a contested paper arguing that postcolonialism can be absorbed by postmodern principles, sets up Frame's *Living in the Maniototo* as an example of a postmodern text in contrast to Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* (lagging behind, since it enters only partially the condition of the postmodern and can merely claim postcolonial status).⁴⁷ However, it is clear that we cannot restrict the notion of postcolonial writing to the practice of open rejection of colonialism or to the articulate resistance to imperial power in political and cultural realms. Marxist-oriented discourse of liberation, in the wake of Vietnam, Cuba or Algeria and revolutionaries such as Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh and Amílcar Cabral, to adopt the list provided by Neil Lazarus,⁴⁸ is only one more model of postcolonial identity.

However, even with this political reference in mind, it is possible to trace elements which suggest that Frame's personal maturity is achieved when the

⁴⁵ Rabasa, "Allegories of Atlas," 271.

⁴⁶ "Allegories of Atlas," 272.

⁴⁷ Simon During, "Postmodernism or Postcolonialism?" *Landfall* 39.3 (1985): 374.

⁴⁸ Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999): 77.

narrator admits to feeling “the excitement of being in a land that was coming alive with its own writing, *speaking for itself*.”⁴⁹ Her nationalist sentiments are revealed at such moments as when her father talks about her “going home” (referring to her trip to Britain); the narrator feels “startled” at hearing such an outdated linguistic usage, and is relieved to know that her father is just being deferential to an old aunt who is still anchored in past times.⁵⁰ In this way we realize, as Ashcroft et al. state, that “in settler colony situations, resistance at the level of cultural practice may occur before the political importance of such resistance is articulated or perceived.”⁵¹

As a provisional conclusion at this point, we can say that postcolonial literature has exploited the possibilities of autobiographical writing and other genres to explore the self. The newly independent societies have faced the need to shape the contours of political, economic and cultural institutions and have also been confronted with the desire to find their identity. It is only to be expected that the postcolonial individual should be involved in a similar quest for self-knowledge. In many instances, the personal search for identity is linked directly to the process leading the former colonies to independence and is contemporary with it.

V.S. Naipaul’s quest for self and identity has probably come to constitute the main ingredient in his writing, pervading fiction, essays, letters and travel writing. He has even crossed the boundaries of literary genres to create a kind of fictional autobiography. His work and opinions have attracted boundless criticism; given his Indian ancestry, he has never identified with the Trinidad or with the Caribbean. A fresh attempt to find roots or emotional attachments in India also proved repeatedly unsuccessful, although his attitude towards this country has softened in his later books and remarks.

Naipaul’s situation as an expatriate has become permanent, but this has led to accusations that he is endlessly impersonating the role of the colonial exile while enjoying the comforts of social and literary recognition in the West. No matter how we interpret Naipaul’s condition, it is undisputed that he has become a postcolonial literary hallmark, at a time when membership in the ranks of diaspora can mean replacing ‘nation’ as a category; as Ania Loomba admits: “the migration of peoples is perhaps the definitive characteristic of the twentieth century, and in crucial ways diasporic identities have come to represent much of the experience of ‘postcoloniality’.”⁵²

⁴⁹ Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*, 200.

⁵⁰ *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*, 285–86.

⁵¹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000): 16–17.

⁵² Ania Loomba, *Colonial and Postcolonial Identities* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998): 180.

Janet Frame, from a very different background and personal circumstances, fits into the pattern of postcolonial voices echoing the search for self and identity in a context of spatial (dis)location. This also shows the relevance of comparative study in a vast academic and intellectual area that comprises literatures written in English all over the world.

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