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THE SHAPES OF SILENCE:
Contemporary Women's Fiction and the Practices of Bearing Witness

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For my mother, Bashori Tagore

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the complex and multi-faceted ways in which contemporary minority women's fictions may be thought of, both generically and individually, as practices of bearing witness to silence – practices of giving testimony to the presence of lives, experiences, events and historical realities which, otherwise, have been absented from the critical terrain of North American literary studies. For the most part, the texts included in this study all tell tales of various, and often extreme, forms of sexual, racial, gender, colonial, national and cultural violence. Through readings of select works by Toni Morrison, Shani Mootoo, Arundhati Roy, Louise Erdrich, M.K. Indira, Mahasweta Devi and Leslie Feinberg, I argue for the ways in which these fictions may be understood as situated within the bounds of a genre – a genre that attempts to provide an account of what we might call "the half not told." I examine these fictions, both generically and specifically, as texts which have the ability to make several important critical interventions in the field of literary studies. Firstly, these texts have the potential to negotiate the impasse that feminist and postcolonial literary scholarship finds itself in around debates about the relationship between theory, activism and experience – as well as in debates about the relationship between violence, beauty, culture, subjectivity and desire. Secondly, the fictions under study help to challenge our very definitions of witnessing. Witnessing, in these works, is not simply a matter of "speaking out" against violence, but rather the issue of making space for the affective and emotive dimensions of various kinds of silences and silencings. Finally, in attempting to chart more precise vocabularies with which to assume readings of these narratives, my thesis also helps to think about the ways in which reading, writing and story-telling may, themselves, be seen as profoundly ethical undertakings that seek to give evidence of and testimony to complex histories of gender, race, nation and sexuality.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette dissertation examine les multiples facettes de la littérature contemporaine des femmes de minorité, et les façons avec lesquelles on peut les percevoir en tant qu'exercices de témoignage du silence – en tant que témoignages de la présence de vies, d'expériences, d'évènements et de réalités historiques qui, autrement, ont été écartés du terrain critique des études littéraires nord-américaines. La plupart des textes inclus dans cette étude rapportent sur des formes variées, et souvent extrêmes, de violences sexuelles, raciales, coloniales, nationales et culturelles. A travers la lecture d'oeuvres choisies de Toni Morrison, Shani Mootoo, Arundhati Roy, Louise Erdrich, M. K. Indira, Mahasweta Devi et Leslie Feinberg, je décris les façons par lesquelles on peut comprendre ces oeuvres en les situant à l'intérieur d'un genre – un genre qui essaie de rendre compte de ce que l'on pourrait appeler "la moitié non racontée." J'examine ces pièces fictives comme des textes qui ont l'abilité de faire plusieurs interventions critiques dans le domaine des études littéraires. Premièrement, ces textes ont la possibilité de négotier l'impasse dans laquelle la recherche littéraire féministe et post-coloniale se retrouve lorsqu'il a trait aux débats sur la relation entre la théorie, l'activisme et l'expérience – ainsi qu'aux débats sur la relation entre violence, beauté, culture et subjectivité. Deuxièmement, les oeuvres étudiées nous aident à ré-examiner notre propre définition du témoignage. Dans ces oeuvres, le témoignage n'est pas simplement question d'expression contre la violence, mais plutôt question de faire une place pour les dimensions affectives et émotionnelles de différents types de silences et de censures. Finalement, en essayant de définir un vocabulaire plus précis avec lequel on puisse assumer la lecture de ces pièces, ma thèse aide aussi à penser aux façons par lesquelles la lecture et l'écriture peuvent, en soi, être perçues comme des travaux profondément éthiques qui cherchent à rendre évidente et à témoigner de ces histoires complexes de sexe, de race, de nation et de sexualité.

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This work would be incomplete without the love, certainty and support of my family. Above all, I would like to thank my parents, Bashori and Prasun Tagore, my grandmother, Anima Tagore, and my sister, Shaunga – for their presence in this and everything.

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There is a silence that cannot speak.

There is a silence that will not speak.

Beneath the grass and the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees come from that amniotic deep. To attend to its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is stone.

I admit it.

I hate the stillness. I hate the stone. I hate the sealed vault with its cold icon. I hate the staring into the night. The questions thinning into space. The sky swallowing the echoes.

Unless the stone bursts with telling, unless the seed flowers with speech, there is in my life no living word. The sound I hear is only sound. White sound. Words, when they fall, are pock marks on the earth. They are hailstones seeking an underground stream.

If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come at last to the freeing word? I ask the night sky but the silence is steadfast. There is no reply.

– Joy Kogawa, Obasan

Mother, one stone is wedged across the hole in our history
and sealed with blood wax.
In this hole is our side of the story, exact figures,
headcounts, burial artifacts, documents, lists, maps
showing our way up through the stars; lockets of brass
containing all textures of hair clippings.
It is the half that has never been told, some of us
must tell it.

– Lorna Goodison, "Mother the Great Stones Got to Move," Selected Poems

I know the use of fiction in a world of hard truth, the way fiction can be a harder piece of truth. The story of what happened, or what did not happen but should have – that the story can become a curtain drawn shut, a piece of insulation, a disguise, a razor, a tool that changes every time it is used and sometimes becomes something other than we intended. The story becomes the thing needed.

Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is what it means to have no loved version of your life but the one you make.

– Dorothy Allison, Two or Three Things I Know for Sure

INTRODUCTION

Between Speech and Silence: The Art of Testimony

The title of my dissertation owes a debt to Toni Morrison, who in her Afterword to her first novel, The Bluest Eye, speaks of the way in which this work was, first and foremost, her effort to "shape a silence" while "breaking it" at the same time. Like Morrison, all of the writers I will be discussing in this study see fiction-writing as a practice of "bearing witness" to silence. However, this practice of witnessing is not simply a matter of "speaking out" against silence and silencings, but rather the issue of making space for the affective and emotive dimensions of "a silence that cannot speak," or "a silence that will not speak." This practice of witnessing is thus not only about discovering the words behind certain kinds of inarticulations, but also about finding a means to trace out the very contours or *shapes* of silence. In turn, my intention in writing this thesis is to examine the complex and multi-faceted ways in which contemporary minority women's fictions may be thought of, both generically and individually, as practices of bearing witness to such moments of non-discursivity. They are endeavours, I argue, that seek to give presence to lives, experiences, events or historical realities which, otherwise, seem to have "no living word" in the critical terrain of North American literary studies – studies, for the most part, that rely heavily upon the analytic languages of western liberal tradition. Accordingly, my dissertation

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[1] Toni Morrison, Afterword, The Bluest Eye (New York: Plume, 1970) 216.

attempts to chart new, more precise vocabularies with which to assume readings of narratives that fall outside of such a tradition. My work also helps to think about reading, writing and story-telling as, themselves, profoundly ethical undertakings that often give evidence of and testimony to those silences and silencings that arise out of complex experiences and histories of violence, love, loss, anger, pain, hope and intimacy.

For the most part, the texts included in this dissertation all tell tales of various, and often extreme, forms of sexual, racial, gender, colonial, national or cultural violence. As such, I am tempted to argue that these fictions may be understood not only as examples of a "genre," which attempts to provide an account of what we might call "the half not told," but also as examples of narrations which demand the formulation of new ways of reading. This formulation is required, in part, because prevalent modes of literary analysis and criticism do not seem to be able to provide an account of the ways in which such stories offer testimonies to the "unspeakable" – ways that have both political and affective reverbations for readers.[1] The first set of fictions I examine in my thesis includes Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night

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[1] The use of the word "genre" here might seem strange, and perhaps even quite problematic, within the context of such a study -- but I use it because I want to insist that these works are a few of a distinctive selection of texts which help to sketch out the contours of a certain body of a writing. In part, this genre, or body of writing, is distinctive not simply in terms of the forms of a romance, epic or some other distinctive way of "saying" a story, but rather in terms of the forms of silence used, or the distinctive ways of articulating the act of "not-saying" – an act which yet, overwhelmingly, makes use of and reinvents the complex psychological possibilities of the novel form. What should be striking is that the very existence of such a genre must therefore be dependent, in part, on a reader's ability to recognise it as such; accordingly, the bounds of this genre must constantly be shifting according to whether or not there is the presence of someone who is able to "hear" what is "not said." It is for this reason, too, then, that this particular "genre" is marked not so much by the forms and structures it uses, but more interestingly, by the ***way it is read and why***.

and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things. When read together, these three novels serve as witnesses to both the violence and unspeakability of incest, among other things. Narrated largely through the perspectives of children, these novels describe a kind of witnessing that takes place primarily at the somatic level – for example, in the form of watching, observing, listening to or otherwise sensing and absorbing the various violences, pains and pleasures of one's immediate cultural or familial environment. The next set of fictions that I examine include Louise Erdrich's Tracks and M.K. Indira's Phanivamma. In contrast to the first collection of texts, which highlight for the most part certain private deaths or traumas, the emphasis in these two novels is on the witnessing of the historical, as well as individual, violences and losses associated with conquest and colonisation. Tracks and Phanivamma focus on the relationship between witnessing and memory – that is, on the practice of remembrance as a means of bearing witness to certain disappearances within history. The last set of fictions I examine include three short stories by Mahasweta Devi – " The Hunt," "Draupadi," and "Douloti" – and Leslie Feinberg's novel, Stone Butch Blues. These fictions explore, both explicitly and specifically, the links between reading, writing, passion and politics – or the relation of forms of intimacy to various modes of acting and reflecting.

My different fictional examples thus help me to chart an analytic trajectory that follows from a discussion of witnessing as visceral incorporation, through to a consideration of witnessing as remembrance, and finally to a conceptualisation of witnessing as doing or acting in the world. These texts and this trajectory seek to illuminate the ways in which acts of imaginative witnessing function, in the face of

violence and "othering," also as gateways *out* of violence; as means of healing and connection; as practices of beauty and desire; and as ways of seeing, listening, knowing or imagining "otherwise." Consequently, all of the narratives I consider in my thesis – through their distinctive and elaborate understandings of what it means to experience, observe, remember, listen to, speak about, or act in opposition to violence – force us to reconsider conventional meanings of "bearing witness" and even the act of "giving testimony," as well the particular instrumentality or ethical force of literature, witnessing and storytelling to different kinds of political projects that seek, among other things, to mobilise against violence and oppression.

Historically, of course, the notion of "bearing witness" has been connected with questions of truth, evidence and authentication. As a legal expression, a witness is someone who has observed a certain event and who testifies to this observation in a court of law, under oath, in order to authenticate a particular fact. In its religious sense, to witness is to pronounce and affirm the truths of a religious faith in a public forum. In more secular terms, the act of witnessing is the act of declaring, on the basis of personal, or "eye-witness," observation that something is true. Consequently, genres of writing such as autobiography, documentary, oral history and other types of testimonial narratives become modes of witnessing because of the way in which such narratives are rooted in personal experience or observation. As John Beverley explains, what is at stake in testimonial writing is the question of a text's relation to the real such that testimonial writing "is not, to begin with, fiction. We are meant to experience both the speaker and the

situations and events recounted as real. The legal connotation implicit in its convention implies a pledge of honesty on the part of the narrator, which the listener/reader is bound to respect."[3] In such forms, then, there is a direct link assumed between narrator and author. Breaching the distinction between public and private, the narrator of a testimonial is "a real person who continues living and acting in a real social history that also continues."[4] Moreover, the situation of the narration in testimonial works generally involves "an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself."[5] The testimonial narrative differs from other more "literary" forms in the way it bears a necessity to place its narrative in the world, and through the narrator's words and eyes, to provide evidence regarding the truth of a particular historical and social reality.

However, as Georg Gugelberger writes, testimonial narratives foreground not just the question of what *is* real, but also the issue of what *can be* real.[6] Testimonial writing thus does not simply "document" a reality; it helps to establish that reality through the narrator's speech act. In other words, testimonial writing helps to bring into being certain subjectivities that did not necessarily exist prior to the act of telling. Furthermore, the narrative comes to life, or comes to have

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[3] John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio*," The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America, ed. Georg M. Gugelberger (Durham: Duke UP, 1996) 27.

[4] Beverley 37.

[5] Beverley 26.

[6] Georg M. Gugelberger, "Introduction: Institutionalization and Transgression: Testimonial Discourse and Beyond," The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America, ed. Georg M. Gugelberger (Durham: Duke UP, 1996) 5.

effect, through the bond between the speaker and listener. What is of greatest import, then, in testimonial narrative is the powerful affirmation of the speaking subject. In the words of Beverley, the main formal aspect of testimonial narratives is "the voice that speaks to the reader in the form of an 'I' that demands to be recognized, that wants or needs to stake a claim on our attention. This presence of the voice, which we are meant to experience as the voice of a real rather than fictional person, is the mark of a desire not to be silenced or defeated."[7] Witnessing within the testimonial narrative thus indicates not only what is spoken, but also the ability of the spoken word to transform and intervene in actual political situations and in the lives of the people represented within the text.

In a similar vein, most of the writers included in this dissertation are quite explicit about envisioning their writing as a form of "witnessing." In part, the term "witnessing" helps these authors to differentiate their own fictional works from other kinds of literary texts, ones which understand the literary as a sphere completely separate and detached from political, ethical, cultural, practical or experiential realms. By contrast, the writers included here all draw our attention to the fact that their fictions emerge out of specific "realities." Moreover, these narratives are attempts to respond to, give due respect to, and oftentimes change or make interventions in this reality. The notion of bearing witness, then, conveys the idea that the acts of writing and reading these fictions carry some very serious and real consequences. In this sense, all of the texts included in this thesis may be thought of as "testimonies" of sorts. At the same time, they do not quite fit the

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[7] Beverley 28.

generic description of the testimonial narrative as outlined by Beverley in that they are all clearly *fictions*, or what I might call "second-person" testimonies at best. Perhaps, one of the distinctions between these texts and the testimonial narrative as defined by Beverley has also to do with their uneasy relationship to "speech." While the standard testimonial affirms the speaking subject, the novels included here are concerned both with what can and with what cannot be said. The complicated relationship between silence, speech, subject-formation and political action that is established in all of these novels is then what distinguishes these texts from other testimonial narratives, as well as from other literary works, and thus what marks them perhaps as a genre as yet unnamed.

For this reason, I look at these fictions, both individually and generically, as texts which have the ability to make important critical interventions in the field of literary studies and criticism, particularly the areas of feminist and postcolonial literary scholarship. These texts, I argue, help us to rethink the ways in which these fields have conceptualised things like the relationship between theory, activism and experience – as well as the relationship between violence, beauty, culture, subjectivity and desire. Of course, one of the milestones of both academic feminism and postcolonialism has been the recognition of the correlation between personal and political narratives. For example, second-wave North American feminism has always insisted on the intricate and important connections between women's narratives and the reconstitution of female voices and subjectivities, especially in cases of violence. Indeed, one of the most notable strategies within this movement has been that of collectively "speaking out" and "giving voice" to

stories of personal pain and violence, thereby breaking taboos about previously "unspeakable" experiences that had been buried in shame or secrecy.[8] The emphasis placed on the need to testify to violence serves to highlight a crucial fact: individual experiences of trauma require to be integrated into a collective narrative memory that allows traumatic events to be verbalised or communicated. The importance of naming, narrating and remembering violence thus has to do with the way in which such communicative gestures are able to call individuals into relation with the lives of others. In turn, these stories are not only able to offer instances of healing, but also to provide crucial links between women's interiorities and the exterior political culture.

But, at the same time, it is important to be aware of the fact that the act of simply "speaking one's trauma" is also, often, not the best or only path of bearing witness to violence or situations of grave material injustice. One needs to acknowledge that there are moments when speech, or intercommunication itself, is violent – moments when the contexts and ethical efficacy of "dialogical reciprocity"[9] need to be questioned. For example, in situations where there has

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[8] See Ellen Bass and Louise Thornton, eds. I Never Told Anyone: Writings by Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); Vera Gallagher and William F. Dodds, Speaking Out, Fighting Back: Personal Experiences of Women Who Survived Child Sexual Abuse in the Home (Seattle: Madrona Publishers, 1985); Toni McNaron and Yarrow Morgan, eds. Voices in the Night: Women Speaking about Incest (Minneapolis: Cleis, 1982); Elly Danica, Don't: A Woman's Word (Charlottetown PEI: Gynergy Books, 1988). See also Catharine MacKinnon's chapter on "consciousness raising," in Toward a Feminist Theory of the State (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989). See, as well, Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation," Signs 18.2 (1993): 260-90 for a discussion of both the possibilities and limits of feminist methodologies of consciousness-raising and "speaking out."

[9] In fact, it is important to note that the kind of "dialogical," "communicative" or "discourse" ethics that has dominated thinking around questions of violence, injustice, difference and othering in western philosophy has been quite inadequate in coming to terms with the reality of such situations. For examples of "discourse ethics," see: John Rawls, A Theory of Justice

been "too much communication," or when contact and exchange between peoples has taken place on uneven grounds, here the "terrorising potential of communication" needs to be considered.[10] Certainly, in cases where the bodily or psychological bounds of the self have been transgressed or violated in particularly painful ways – for example, as in the incest narratives I will be examining – there is often the need for a relentless reinstallation of boundaries.[11] Similarly, in relations of coercion where self-exposure is continually demanded, silence, reticence and other kinds of non-communicative gestures may in fact be appropriate "defence strategies" to avoid further appropriation. In fact, as You-me Park notes, while second-wave North American feminism has been vigilant about "recovering women's voices," it is perhaps just as important not to "fetishise speech" and thereby reduce women to "faceless metaphors" – especially those that dismiss or essentialise complicated histories of gender, class, nation, race, and sexuality that are sometimes difficult to encapsulate within the usual feminist mode

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(Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972); Jurgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification," Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT P, 1990); and Charles Taylor, Multiculturalism and the "Politics of Recognition" (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1992). See also Seyla Benhabib, Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics (New York: Routledge, 1992), an account I will return to, in more detail, in the next chapter. In part, the failures of thinkers such as Rawls, Habermas and Taylor in addressing questions of injustice or inequity have to do with how the "ideal speech situations" imagined in their works simply do not account for the extreme violence through which unequal settings are produced in the first place.

[10] Jacqueline Rose, "On the 'Universality' of Madness: Bessie Head's A Question of Power," Critical Inquiry 20 (1994): 401-18. Here Rose speaks specifically of colonialism as an example of a metaphoric "take-over" of the mind and body. She argues that colonialism is a historical reality characterised, perhaps, by "too much communication," thus often producing situations where "channels, lines, wires" or the means by which things get transmitted are often up for "total, hostile sabotage."

[11] See Laura Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," American Imago 48.1 (1991).

of "speaking out" of trauma.[12] Of course, in part, all of these resistances to speech have to do with the way in which these writers and critics attempt to "talk back" to the legacies of second-wave feminism, particularly to feminism's silences around the questions of nation, race, class and sexual orientation, among other things. How, then, does one account for the institutional silences around suppressed histories of race, class, sexuality and nation that have been constitutive of feminism? When the contexts of "speaking out" systematically function to bifurcate and reinforce the "otherness" of minority speech and subjects, how does one hear the testimonies of minority women in a way that respects and preserves the wholeness or integrity of such subjects?

The fictions I examine in this thesis respond to such questions by positing complicated relationships between witnessing and telling, often suggesting that this link is not necessarily a transparent or directly cathartic one. As such, these texts, to borrow the words of the anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran, help us to "learn to listen not just to women's speech, but to women's silences as well."[13] In attempting to bear witness to silence, these texts necessarily have to elaborate on many different forms of witnessing – from watching, speaking, listening and remembering to doing and being. These novels define witnessing in ways that challenge our current understandings of what it means to bear witness or give testimony. For example, the witnesses in these works offer testimonies based not

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[12] You-me Park, "Against Metaphor: Gender, Violence and Decolonization in Korean Nationalist Literature," In Pursuit of Contemporary East Asian Culture, eds. Steven Snyder and Xiabing Tang (Boulder: Westview, 1996).

[13] Kamala Visweswaran, Fictions of Feminist Ethnography (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994) 31.

only on "eye-witnessing," or first-hand experience, but also on knowledges that are passed on across cultures and generations – that is, knowledges or experiences that are witnessed, often, by or through others. These texts thereby force us to reconsider our very definitions of speech and silence, their relation to one another and what these have to do with various kinds of histories and politics of violence.

Accordingly, I argue that the fictional texts I examine in this dissertation also have the potential to intervene in a wider set of academic debates regarding the relationship between politics, aesthetics, ethics, experience and activism: debates out of which my own work arises and to which it hopes to respond. Often falling under the rubrics of feminist and/or postcolonial studies, but also extending into such fields as anthropology, history, political science, development studies and cultural studies, these debates can be seen to have numerous and multi-faceted origins. As Sandra Harding explains, historically, many of these debates – sometimes also referred to as "the crisis in epistemology" – cannot be extricated from such things as the formal end of European colonial rule, new patterns of immigration, the freedoms and constraints offered by new technologies, and the particular pressures of a global capitalist economy at the end of the twentieth of the century. These and other events effected enormous shifts in power and balance within western universities from the 1960s onward. Often occurring along the lines of gender, class, race and nationality, among other things, these shifts brought about an "increasing loss of legitimacy and authority for the kinds of justifications of knowledge claims that have been developed by

the modern west."[1] Feminist and gender studies, for example, pointed to the ways in which modern, western epistemologies have typically been developed in exclusion of knowledge about the conditions of women's lives. In turn, this alternate terrain of scholarship provided the underpinnings for theories of feminist epistemology. In a similar fashion, disciplines such as development studies and area studies insisted that many of the significant achievements of western science and technology were not separable from the violences of colonial rule, the impoverishment of the third world, environmental loss and degradation, or the alienation of people living in industrialised societies. Within feminist and postcolonial literary studies, the most immediate context in which my own research and thinking is embedded, this new awareness has entailed asking critical questions about how such cultural, sociological, political, and economic phenomena have impacted the literary sphere – a sphere that had typically defined itself in isolation to these other domains – at the same time as it has asked questions about the place and relevance of literature, art, narrative, aesthetics and the imagination in a world that envisions and organises itself, increasingly, in purely political and economic terms. Paradoxically, western academia, having "let in" a significantly substantial number of peoples and ideas originally external to its walls, found itself, from the 1970s onward, having to answer to the question of the relationship between academic or intellectual projects and other non-academic sites of social action, practice, living and imagining that were usually excluded

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[1] Sandra Harding, "Gendered Ways of Knowing and the 'Epistemological Crisis' of the West," Knowledge, Difference and Power: Essays Inspired by *Women's Ways of Knowing*, eds. Nancy Goldberg, Jill Tarule, Blythe Clinchy and Mary Belenky (New York: Basic, 1996) 431.

from these more "theoretical" undertakings, yet undoubtedly bound to them as well. At the same time, for feminist and postcolonial critics, the particular pressures or exigencies of such historical placement led to a host of investigative questions which were as generative as they were the marks of an impasse or limit. Can thinking actually *do* anything to come to grips with certain kinds of physical or material injustice? Why would one choose the university, or the classroom, as a site of action? What is the place of experience in political and intellectual projects? What is its evidence? Whose experience matters and how does it count?

Thinking through the connections and cleavages between theory, practice, activism and experience as outlined by feminist and postcolonial projects is certainly one of the tasks that I, too, have set out for myself within the pages of this dissertation. Spilling out into the realm of experience, ethics and activism, this dissertation, I hope, bears the marks of my commitment to feminist and anti-racist politics, my links to specific cultural communities both in Canada and in India, and my participation in various women's organisations in each of these countries. For instance, part of my gesture in choosing the kinds of narratives that I do – narratives which deal with situations of extreme violence – is my effort to think through the issue of violence against women, an issue that has been the leading concern for almost all of the women's organisations with which I have been involved. These are organisations that are not simply about raising consciousness regarding violence, but also about intervening in a much more local and immediate fashion – for example, in the form of setting up shelters for abused women, providing medical care or counselling to women who do not otherwise

have access to such services in their own countries, or providing education, information, training and work-skills to women who desire to lead a life where they are less dependent on others for their care and safety. The writing of this thesis – which delineates various routes for thinking about the relationships between violence, feminist and postcolonial theorising, ethics and ethical living, bodily experience and transmission, and political activism – therefore allows me to articulate certain lessons and ideas that have grown out of these and other experiences or involvements. Firstly, feminist or anti-racist politics and activisms have a great deal to benefit from the kinds of rigorous, precise, thoughtful and careful reflective practices that intellectual projects have the ability to offer. Secondly, feminist and postcolonial theories have an enormous amount to learn about modes of living, thinking, acting and intervening in extremely urgent and complex situations that demand, often, immediate answers. Finally, both theory and activism need to be more open or attentive to the knowledges and practices of affect and everyday experience – to the ways people love, hate or grieve; to the ways in which they understand beauty, pleasure or peace; to the ways they know solitude at the same time that they strive to form families, communities and intimate relationships; or to the ways in which they desire, learn, imagine or transform themselves on a daily basis in response to the hopes, dreams and hungers afforded to them by their cultures – if either is to be interventionist in any substantial way.

The necessity to attend to these affective, emotive and sensuous dimensions of experience is precisely one of the main arguments made by the fictions I

discuss in this dissertation. Taken together, these texts move between and across the landscapes and cultures of North America and India, among other places, and therefore may be thought of as examples of a broad-based literary genre that attempts to offer testimonies to what the Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison evocatively refers to as "the half not told." I argue in this thesis that these "testimonies" function, in part, to reveal the insufficiencies of the analytical languages common to a liberal tradition – a tradition which often, though inadequately, serves as the main basis for claims to postcolonial and feminist agency. In contrast, because of their recourse to other ways of knowing and being, these fictions, both generically and individually, are uniquely positioned to negotiate the fissures and fractures between the domains of theory, activism and experience that liberal-legal discourse typically serves to reinforce – as well as to think across the rifts between what might appear to be very disparate cultural spaces and practices. Unlike more conventional comparativist projects, the relationship that my thesis draws between texts and specific cultural sites is not meant to be absolute by any means – nor is it meant to imply that each of these sites cannot or need not be examined on its own. To borrow the words of Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, my attempt to forge political and genealogical linkages between apparently dissimilar, and specifically-constituted, cultural contexts "is not meant to suggest a frozen or embodied inheritance of domination and resistance, but an interested, conscious thinking and rethinking of history and historicity, a rethinking which has women's autonomy and self-

determination at its core."[15] More simply, my juxtapositioning of different literary texts and the different cultural and experiential geographies out of which they emanate is my way of staging a conversation of sorts: one where each work helps to read the silence of another, where each fiction helps to say, perhaps, what another could not say, or was not able to say.

In such a scheme of arguments, the first chapter of my dissertation, "Bearing Witness: Toward an Ethics of Affect and Imagination," sets the stage for my discussion of specific fictional texts by outlining, first, in greater detail, the history of feminism and postcolonialism in the academic institution, as well as the various debates and formulations of theory, ethics, politics, aesthetics and subjectivity that have led to the impasse between feeling, thinking, doing and being that my thesis attempts to bridge. Toward the end of the first chapter, I sketch out the contours and the preconditions of an "embodied ethics" rooted in experience, affect and imagination – one which, I argue, will better enable us to think about some of the histories and experiences of violence traced out by the fictions discussed in the chapters that follow.

In chapter two of my thesis, "The Half Not Told: Violence, Love and the Fictional Imagination" I begin my textual analyses while considering the specific interventions that narrative fiction and other arts of the imagination might make in the domain of ethics and politics. To a large extent, the discussions in this thesis originate, unfold and come undone from my reading of Toni Morrison's The Bluest

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[15] Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Introduction: Genealogies, Legacies, Movements," Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, eds. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997) xvi.

Eye – a story that I feel exemplifies a particular interpretive challenge for its readers in terms of the complex affective and ethical responses it demands. The story of a young African-American girl's extreme victimisation and brutal rape by her own father, The Bluest Eye deals with experiences of violences that most readers would rather not have to "see" at the same time that the novel's seductive, evocative language and story-line make it tricky for readers to escape the fact of "looking." This chapter closes by reading Morrison's novel in light of two other, more recent and quite different "incest narratives" – Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things. By reading these three novels together, I attempt at once to unravel and to complexify the intermeshings of violence, sexuality, culture and politics that this chapter takes as its subject.

Chapter three of my thesis, "From Ghosts to Ancestors: Genealogy, Memory and the Hauntings of History" continues to examine the inter-relations between violence, culture and subjectivity through its examination of Louise Erdrich's Tracks and M.K. Indira's Phaniyamma. While chapter two attempts to place certain formations of interiority in culture and thereby trace out the cultural contexts of subjectivity, chapter three, in reverse, attempts to work out the interior dimensions of cultural or historical phenomena, particularly events surrounding two very different examples of colonisation and their effects on women's lives. In this chapter, moreover, I focus on violences that are not simply witnessed in the present, but on certain traumas and hauntings that get "passed down" through history while becoming transformed in time. Thus, whereas my analysis of

Morrison, Mootoo and Roy attempts to demonstrate the way in which the body becomes a space of witness in situations of immediate and extreme violence, my analysis of Erdrich and Indira demonstrates the ways in which certain modes of bodily transmission may serve, in a more active fashion, to bear witness to violence by externalising violence, especially through practices of memorialisation and remembrance.

My fourth chapter, "Intimate Encounters: Reading and Response-ability," examines three short stories by Mahasweta Devi – "The Hunt," "Draupadi," and "Douloti" – and Leslie Feinberg's novel, Stone Butch Blues, in order to think, in a more explicit fashion, about the ways in which we can take the lessons of affect, experience, memory and imagination into the domain of collective action. Accordingly, in this chapter, I trace out both the possibilities and limits of fiction – its reading and writing – in creating what Toni Morrison calls "shareable worlds and languages." I argue, alongside Morrison, that "writing and reading are not all that distinct." Indeed, "the imagination that produces work which bears and invites rereadings, which motions to future readings as well as contemporary ones, implies a shareable world and an endlessly flexible language. Readers and writers both struggle to interpret and perform within a common language and shareable imaginative worlds." At the same time, both reading and writing require "being mindful of the places where imagination sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision. Writing and reading means being aware of the writer's notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and response-ability." Perhaps, above all, these exercises and encounters require

"being alert and ready for unaccountable beauty" – that is, for moments which are both surprising and beautiful perhaps because of their very singularity or untranslateability.[10] Thus, throughout my analysis of these diverse examples, I argue that to read in a way that is "embodied" – that is, with affect, imagination and with an awareness of how experiential realities mediate the dynamics of our fictional encounters – is to be open, or receptive, to what these texts have to say and, still, to be respectful of the boundaries that shape both our own selves and others' realities. As readers and writers of fiction, the practice of bearing witness to violence, or to the shapes of silence, may hence be seen as a practice that involves being sensitive to the bodily, experiential, cultural, historical and even emotive limits which mark and place each of us – but which ultimately create the ethical and imaginative contexts for our actions and our possibilities in the world around us.

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[10] Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (New York: Vintage, 1992) xi-xii.

CHAPTER 1

Bearing Witness:
Toward an Ethics of Affect and Imagination

More than any other novel of which I know, Toni Morrison's Beloved – a book that speaks of slavery and its aftermath – reveals the immense difficulties of putting into words the story of an event whose unimaginable violences often make it painful to remember, easy to "disremember," desirable to pass over and not "pass on," and yet, at the same time, impossible to forget. On the one hand, Morrison's epic novel is all about breaking silences, about bringing to light "unspeakable things spoken at last."[17] Its very conception rests in a profound desire to recover the traces of a lost past, to give due respect, through writing, to those histories, people and experiences which have heretofore remained outside of the written word and, sometimes, outside of language altogether. To this extent, one of the story's most striking images is that of a scar. Sethe, the main character of the novel, has erased the painful memory of her daughter's death and the only trace of the past she bears is the scar she wears on her back: a scar the shape of a tree. Beloved opens with a scene in which Paul D, an old friend and fellow ex-slave, while caressing Sethe's body, runs his fingers across this scar. As Sethe's body awakens, she begins to recall her past, her husband, her children, and this recollection becomes, in effect, the story that Beloved sets out to tell. And yet, the book ends on a very different note alerting the reader not just to the

[17] Toni Morrison, Afterword, The Bluest Eye (New York: Plume, 1970) 214.

hazards and impossibilities of this looking back, but also to the fundamental misdemeanour and even impropriety inherent in this act of telling. "This was not a story to pass on."[18] Morrison repeats, over and over again, in the last few pages of her novel.

However it is interpreted, this phrase, one which is at once enigmatic and unsettling in its persistence, continues to haunt or reverberate in readers long past the physical edges of the novel. First and foremost, the phrase, "it was not a story to pass on," serves as a warning about a narrative that is not supposed to be repeated. Yet, it is a warning that has not been heeded. It is a pledge that has been broken, since Morrison tells the story anyway, *has already told it*, in fact, by the time we hear this warning. The fact that this phrase is not said just once but recited several times attests to its seriousness or gravity, on the one hand. But, on the other, the reiteration of this phrase also draws attention to the way it *has* to be repeated and reaffirmed in order to have effect. It is not enough to say it just once or, perhaps, it is not enough just to say it. Unable to stand on its own, Morrison's warning requires convincing, amplification, repetition. At an entirely different level, the hypnotic effect of this incantation also underscores Morrison's art, her ability to carve lessons onto her readers' minds through her skilful control of words and phrases. And yet, at the same time, the relentless and uncanny way in which this phrase repeats also points to a story that is altogether out of control, out of the hands of even the teller, detached from its subject. It is as if the story tells itself. Just like the ghost-girl who materialises without warning in Sethe's

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[18] Toni Morrison, Beloved (New York: Plume, 1987) 274-75.

house, demanding attention and her rightful place in history, the narrative commands speaking and listening whether or not writer or reader is prepared or even willing. Morrison's phrase multiplies in meaning. Hers is not a story to pass on: a story *not* to be told, *not* to be repeated, *not* to be relayed. Most importantly perhaps, this is a story that is undesirable to repeat *not just in words, but also in history*. Beloved narrates an account that no person should have to live through ever again. By the same token, the novel requires us to pass through this very moment, through acts of reading and writing, in order to convey this message. The tale that Morrison tells is certainly not a story to pass on, to be passed down – but it is also not simply a story to be *passed on*, that is, one we should simply pass by. This is a story that refuses to be dismissed.[19]

Beloved's ending, in many ways, is about the profound difficulty of writing and reading about violence: of the ethics, the urgency, the pressing need to "bear witness" to violence, as well as the various moral crises and exigencies opened up by such instances of telling, writing, reading, remembering, watching, listening or doing. In fact, speaking of some of her own ethical dilemmas in writing this novel, Morrison discloses her inhibitions dealing with a subject as violent as slavery.[20] She talks about how, initially, this was a story she did not want to

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[19] I would like to acknowledge Valerie Smith's essay, "'Circling the Subject': History and Narrative in Beloved," in Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amsitad, 1993) 342-355, for first alerting me as to ways of articulating some of the complexities of this enigmatic phrase and ending – particularly to the fact that "to pass on might mean either to transmit *or to overlook*" (my emphasis, 353).

[20] See Bonnie Angelo, "The Pain of Being Black: An Interview with Toni Morrison," Time 133.201 (22 May 1989): 100-23, rpt. in Conversations with Toni Morrison, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 255-61.

contemplate; she was not convinced that she desired to summon up or "dwell on" such violent, such terrorising, such *ugly* events. She resisted, for as long as possible, the telling of this story. In a similar vein, she could not understand why anyone would want to read her tale. She imagined an American audience for whom such a narrative was certain to evoke, by different degrees, feelings of guilt, revulsion, fear, anger, loss and pain. Yet, she writes the novel just the same, despite herself, despite her feelings, or conceivably because of them. Perhaps, above all else, Morrison's meditation on the dilemma of whether or not to write this book speaks to the deeply moral and ethical nature of story-telling itself, raising not only the question of how one writes stories that attempt to trace the contours of such buried lives and give shape to such profound silences, but also the question of how it is, then, that one reads these stories. What are the ethics of this reading? Of this publication? Of this "passing on"? What are some of the duties that attend witnesses who are either listening to or speaking about *another* person's experience of violence or pain? What roles do fiction, fantasy, memorialisation and other kinds of imaginative enterprises play in the histories and politics of violence? Do attempts to narrativise, fictionalise or aesthetically represent violence operate to sharpen or diminish the political impact of such tales? In other words, what does fiction *do* and what are its limits?

This chapter attempts to respond to some of these questions and in particular takes up the task of attempting to sketch out a certain ethics of affect and imagination which could serve as a point of departure for feminist and postcolonial theories that seek, among other things, to render opposition to

violence and oppression. But first, before embarking upon this task, it might be useful to look at several of the more prominent approaches that a number of Anglophone academic feminist critics have already taken in relation to the concept of ethics – and also at what some of the stakes involved in such theorisations may be.[21] The first major category of second-wave feminists who have tried to put forth a theory of ethics might be termed "egalitarian" feminists. Such an approach is characterised by views put forward Catharine MacKinnon and Shulamith Firestone, for example, and is in part an outgrowth of the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft.[22] In general, egalitarian feminists regard the particularities of the female body as obstructions to the various rights and privileges that patriarchal culture bestows upon men. For egalitarian feminists, then, ethical change typically involves fighting for new rights and freedoms which will enable women to gain access to public institutions and thereby become equal citizens or participants in the existing political order. In contrast to egalitarianists, another group of feminists have adopted what may be termed a "communitarian" approach, a

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[21] This categorisation followed, initially, from Elizabeth Grosz's overview of feminist theory found in her book, Volatile Bodies (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), although it contains some notable differences. While Grosz outlines three main positions in feminism (egalitarianism, social constructionism and sexual difference), the three main streams of thought that I see evolving with regards to the issue of ethics are: egalitarianism, communitarianism and postmodernism/dialogism. As Grosz herself warns, none of these categories are by any means fixed. Many of the theorists mentioned certainly mediate between the different categories describe. Likewise, there are other theorists who do not fit into any of these groups. The different positions that I outline are intended, firstly, to provide a general overview of some of the developments within feminist theory on the question of ethics. Secondly, they are intended to sketch out possible anchoring points against which contemporary feminist and ethical philosophies may locate themselves.

[22] See Catherine MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989); and Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex (New York: Bantam, 1970). See also Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (London: Johnson, 1798, rptd. by Norton, 1967).

stance exemplified by such critics as Carol Gilligan and Carol Pateman.[24] These critics argue that because the existing political system is based on male values, egalitarian feminists cannot challenge patriarchy by simply fighting for inclusion into the dominant cultural sphere. Communitarians call for the recognition of women's distinctive capacities and support the idea of an alternative female community in which an "ethics of care" would override what they see as a predominately male "ethics of justice." Yet, it is important to note that by constructing a feminine sphere that unquestioningly privileges the values of family, kinship and empathy, communitarian feminists also fall into the trap of perpetuating existing gender roles or stereotypes. Moreover, both egalitarians and communitarians generalise from the experiences of limited groups of women to draw conclusions on behalf of all women regardless of variances in race, class and sexual orientation. Thus, neither model proposed takes into account the differences in and amongst women and how this enters into the process of political or ethical negotiation.

Against both egalitarians and communitarians, another group of feminists, also emerging from within the North American critical scene, have recently taken an interest in the issue of ethics. These feminists, sometimes referred to as "postmodern" feminists, I will term "dialogical" feminists because of their apparent interest in resolving questions of difference and differential locations. Many of these theorists argue against an egalitarian programme that attempts to overcome

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[24] Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982); and Carole Pateman, The Sexual Contract (Oxford: Polity P, 1988).

differences through a struggle over rights, as well as against the communitarian project that tries to fix differences according to certain more or less easily stereotyped ideas of universal womanhood. One example of a critic who promotes a "politics of difference" is Iris Marion Young. She takes as her model the image of the heterogeneous city. Explaining that the public spaces of the city offer an ideal instance of ethical and social relations, Young recounts how in the city, "strangers encounter one another, either face to face or through the media, often remaining strangers and yet acknowledging their contiguity." Moreover, during such encounters, the differences that exist between people always remain intact, as here people "experience each other as different, from different groups, histories, professions, cultures, which they do not understand."[24] Nonetheless, another feminist theorist of ethics, Seyla Benhabib, sees Young's politics as essentially ineffective in that it provides no way of evaluating different ethical claims. Like Young, Benhabib also asks the question of how to negotiate the demands of people engaged in different purposive enterprises; but her answer to this problem is somewhat different. Drawing upon the philosophies of Jürgen Habermas, Benhabib argues for the necessity of a "feminist universal" which is based not upon a set of substantive ideals but upon a willingness to engage in a dialogic interchange: what she calls "a process of conversation in which understanding and misunderstanding, agreement as well as disagreement are

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[24] Iris Marion Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," Feminism/Postmodernism, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1992) 318. It is probably important to note that, perhaps, above all, my problem with Young's desire to posit the "cosmopolitan metropolis" as the ideal space for ethical engagement has to do with how most of the "examples" I am trying to think through in this dissertation are ones that find themselves either outside of or far from such a metropole -- or else severely marginalised and ghettoised within it.

intertwined and always at work."[25] In other words, according to Benhabib, ethical action proceeds by way of a shared commitment to a certain discursive procedure rather than by way of communal identification.

However, in my view, what all of these theorists fail to see is that despite their focus on "difference," their proposed models can only accommodate those questions of difference to which the ethical solution is already known. In the end, even these latter postmodern or dialogical theorists fall into a kind of liberal feminism not unlike their predecessors, that is, a feminism that denies all variances except those which are internal to itself. In part, the problem with this liberal style of feminism has to do with its valorisation of a deontological view of ethics that privileges a public, rational sphere as the *only* site of political or ethical change. In addition to placing undue emphasis on the public realm, these critics also view democratic organisations and institutions as the only means of negotiating contact between different individuals, often without seeming to recognise the fact that these same establishments have been, paradoxically, the source of immense injustices and inequalities. Numerous questions remain unanswered: how do those individuals who have been excluded from such institutions forge their own senses of self and their own definitions of ethics? How does one mediate between competing claims, conflicting commitments and different ideas of ethics in a way that is non-violent or at least non-coercive? What is required of any ethical, political or theoretical paradigm that seeks to make space for knowledges that

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[25] Seyla Benhabib, Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics (New York: Routledge, 1992) 198.

remain outside of its own parameters? Most importantly, is deontology absolutely necessary to ethics? Or, is it possible to rethink the concept of ethics by opening up new subjectivities, new ontologies or new ways of being in the world?

It is my contention that the task of mediating diverse ethical claims entails exactly this kind of revisioning of ethics so that it is extricated from a purely abstract or deontological sphere and instead placed in a more phenomenological or experiential realm. This is necessary because what is at stake in ethical debates is not simply the concept of justice or of right, but more crucially the very concept of reality. This is because, often, when the "rights" of one individual are opposed to the "rights" of another, the question of what constitutes justice can become not merely a matter of "dispute," but a site of violence and of profound incommensurability. In altercations of this kind, ethical "agreement" is impossible since the principles that give meaning and shape to a notion of truth in one person's world have no equivalent form in another person's reality. Patricia Williams, in a simple and yet remarkable story, narrates how this happens. In the following passage from her book, The Alchemy of Race and Rights, Williams recalls a childhood argument with her younger sister in which ethical agreement was difficult because of two subjective realities:

> One summer when I was about six, my family drove to Maine. The highway was straight and hot and shimmered darkly in the sun. My sister and I sat in the back seat of the Studebaker and argued about what color the road was. I said black, she said purple. After I had harangued her into admitting that it was indeed black, my father gently pointed out that my sister still saw it as purple. . . . My sister and I will probably argue about the hue of life's roads forever. But the lesson I learned from listening to her wild perceptions is that it really is possible to see things – even the most concrete things – simultaneously yet differently;

> and that seeing simultaneously yet differently is more easily done by two people than one, but that one person can get the hang of it with time and effort.[25]

In narrating this incident, Williams attempts to reveal how the experiential distance between even very similar individuals results in a certain perceptual rupture, a gap between two selves which is at once incommensurable and irreconcilable. The prospect of being able to communicate across this rift, or what Williams calls the potential to "see simultaneously yet differently," is thus not a question of simple reasoning or understanding; it is more accurately the process through which one being becomes cognizant of the way another being might experience or "feel" his or her own reality. According to Williams, it is only through this act of "slippage," or "transliteration," that one can begin to negotiate the kind of incommensurability which is at once the source and consequence of violence.

Hence, what Williams reveals is that a phenomenology of some sort may be in fact crucial to a feminist theory of ethics. Her words also point implicitly to how imaginative undertakings may be a vital medium through which ethical "slippages" and "transliterations" between different ontologies could take place. Similarly, Drucilla Cornell suggests that ethical projects must not only work at ideological or societal transformation, but also at envisioning new subjectivities and new ways of being. She writes, a feminist theory of ethics needs at once to envision new worlds and to start imagining "what kind of individuals we would have to become in order to open ourselves to new worlds."[26] Once again,

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[25] Patricia Williams, The Alchemy of Race and Rights (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991) 149.

[26] Drucilla Cornell, Transformations: Recollective Imagination and Sexual Difference (New

imaginative literature seems to furnish a crucial site in which we can ask ourselves this question, providing as it does a whole array of subjectivities and universes into which we are able to enter. Following this, I would also argue that the very definition of ethical action should also be changed in order to include visceral and imaginative factors such as empathy, love, anger, pain, fantasy and desire in addition to the more conventional processes of reasoning or understanding. Indeed, I believe it is only by introducing these other emotive and subjective terms into the realm of theory that both feminists and postcolonialists alike can begin to conceive of an ethical and philosophical framework in which questions of violence may be addressed.

Of course, by moving us into the phenomenological or ontological realm, part of what Williams and Cornell seem to be suggesting is that theories such as feminism and postcolonialism require not just a rethinking of ethics, but also a rethinking of the terms of subjectivity.[24] As Etienne Balibar explains, post-Enlightenment notions of subjectivity centre around the definition of the subject as citizen, a political and juridical concept that arises with the age of empire and the subsequent appearance of the nation-state as the primary legal and political unit of power.[25] Prior to this time, the subject of western philosophy was quite literally a

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York: Routledge, 1993) 1.

[24] See Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics, trans. David Ross (London: Oxford UP, 1969), where it is argued that that there can be no ethics without ontology, and that ontology is based upon lived experience. This claim would support the idea that before any rethinking of ethics, there must be a rethinking of subjectivity and ontology. Aristotle's account of ethics is, in part, an account of ethics through bodily experience.

[25] Etienne Balibar, "Subject-Citizen," Who Comes After the Subject?, eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991) 33-57.

subjected being, a passive being under the divine rule of God. With the birth of the modern nation-state, however, there is a certain historical shift in what it means to be a subject, since the power of the state is now exercised over its subjects at the same time that it belongs to individuals, or citizens, who exercise their own power over the law. Thus, the citizen-subject is primarily a legal and political concept. Set apart by his involvement in the formation and application of legal decisions, the modern individual is an active agent who has the will to command his own obedience to the law. It follows, then, that the advent of the citizen-subject in history and politics occurs in conjunction with the appearance of the transcendental subject of philosophy. Just as the citizen-subject is defined, first and foremost, by his sovereignty, the transcendental subject is recognised largely by characteristics such as his independence, rationality, wilfulness and autonomy. In fact, as Elizabeth Grosz remarks, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, subjectivity itself, within the western philosophical traditional, comes to be thought of as a "consciousness" or "will" that is positioned outside the world, outside the body, and outside of nature because it exists in isolation to others and to the socio-cultural community.[5] It is this deontoligising, politico-juridical concept of the self, this image of the individual as an evanescent "mind," that feminist theorists, for example, have also had to grapple with in their own articulations of female subjectivity. Yet, undoubtedly, feminist understandings of subjectivity and agency have both invested in and contested this model of the subject in a number of crucial ways.

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[5] Grosz 3-13.

For the most part, theories such as feminism, marxism, postcolonialism and queer theory all tell of "impossible subjects." Typically left out of electoral politics, groups such as women, children, colonial subjects, gays, lesbians, the working classes, racial and other minorities have been cast as subjects who are not, and who often cannot ever be, citizen-subjects as defined by Balibar. As was mentioned earlier, the citizen-subject is, above all, an active agent – and he derives this agency and instrumentality from a set of supposedly universal, abstract, though politically-defined, rights and freedoms. Both theorists and activists have thus, on the one hand, fought to extend citizenship to various minority groups in the name of these universal freedoms. At the same time, it has been important to call into question the very universality of this particular idea of citizenship and the ways in which selfhood is conceived under this model. Accordingly, the subject as citizen can only truly exist if there also exists a body of subjects who are, by definition, non-citizens, thereby disclosing the violence inherent in a process that establishes subjects through various laws and boundaries that, by necessity, leave some out. In fact, if we remember that the concept of the subject emerges, politically and historically, within the context or confines of the Enlightenment and its attendant missions of European expansion and control, then we can also see how such a concept is not at all universalisable, because it is specifically contoured to fit not only the subjective reality of the bourgeois, white, male subject, but also the social reality of a time and place that quite violently dismissed all "other" subjects in order to be better able to pursue a rationalising imperialism without qualm.

One of the greatest achievements of second-wave feminism has, in fact, been to insist upon this piece of knoweldge: that, in effect, terms previously thought to be universal originate in particular cultures and serve very particular or "localised" interests. In critiquing this notion of the universal enlightenment subject, feminists, in particular, have proposed a number of alternative models of subjectivity. The first model I would like to discuss expresses the notion that has been articulated by Kathleen Kirby – namely, that "once we discard the Enlightenment notion of the individual as disembodied, evanescent, transcendent 'mind,' it is impossible to image the subject except in some yet-to-be-specified relation to 'real space'."[1] Accordingly, many feminists argue for an understanding of human relations, including all inflexions of gender, sexuality, subjectivity and selfhood, as fundamentally social and cultural relations which cannot be extricated from the contexts in which they take form. In a similar vein, postcolonial and cultural theorists have insisted on the importance of race, nation and geography in determining subjectivity – revealing the ways in which our places of birth impact us as subjects, giving us memberships in a particular race, class, religious and/or linguistic community. They speak, similarly, of the ways in which our physical environments, shaped by a particular landscape or topography, construct our realities and desires in different ways. This realisation that, as subjects, we vary according to the "place" we come from, occupy or inhabit has been a central idea for many feminist critics. Some feminists, such as Donna Haraway talk about "the

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[1] Kathleen Kirby, Indifferent Boundaries: Spatial Concepts of Human Subjectivity (New York: Routledge, 1996).

situatedness of knowledges"[32] to describe subjects embedded in social space. Others, including as Nancy Hartsock and Sandra Harding, use the term "standpoint epistemologies"[33] while still others, such as Chandra Mohanty or Adrienne Rich, refer to the "politics of location."[34] What all of these phrases convey is the idea that subjects exist in particular places, with identifiable physical co-ordinates. This idea of connecting subjectivity to physical, geographical, social or otherwise "locatable" space, moreover, has marked a major shift in the way that gendered subjectivity is theorised in the late twentieth century.

However, even as these feminist standpoint theorists have made crucial contributions to the rethinking of subjectivity – especially by asserting the insufficiency of unitary notions of selfhood in accounting for identities defined along the multiple lines of gender, class, sexual orientation, race and geography – it is my contention that there is still a long way to go for feminist thinking before it can address the precise psychic and somatic realities of such subjects. On the one hand, the importance of models of subjectivity based upon feminist standpoint epistemologies has to do with their attempts at thinking about identity in a less essentialising manner, by being more specific about the geographical, political,

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[32] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of the Partial Perspective," Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (New York: Routledge, 1991) 183-201.

[33] Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground of a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," Money, Sex and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism (New York: Longman, 1983); Sandra Harding, "Reinventing Ourselves as Other: More New Agents of History and Knowledge," Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) 269-95.

[34] Adrienne Rich, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location," Women, Feminist Identity and Society in the 1980s: Selected Papers (Amsterdam: Benjamin, 1985) 7-22; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience," Copyright 1 (1987): 30-44.

national or historical dimensions of women's subjectivity. On the other hand, standpoint theorists can be responsible for other kinds of essentialisations, for example, by sometimes anchoring identity too fixedly to a set of two-dimensional co-ordinates which function to schematise "differences" as absolute and objective.[35] In part, the failures of this model in addressing the full complexities of subjectivity have to do, I believe, with its reliance on a geo-political model of identity, not unlike the Enlightenment notion of the self, which focuses on "mapping" the subject, or locating and positioning it within a stable territory. In this respect, standpoint epistemologies fall largely within a liberal individualistic tradition that sees both bodies and individuals as discrete entities, with clear, definable edges or boundaries. As such, standpoint theorists sometimes fall into the trap of positing an all too transparent relationship between certain "external

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[35] See, for example, Minrose C. Gwin, "A Theory of Black Women's Texts and White Women's Readings, or the Necessity of Being Other," NWSA Journal 1.1 (1988) 21-31, for a rather crude example of such a "two-dimensional" approach. Gwin argues in this article that "white" women who read fiction by "black" women authors must read in a way that is "antithetical to the feminist project of retrieving female subjectivity" – defined by P. Schweichart as a process that involves "reading as a woman *without* putting one's self in the position of the other." Instead, Gwin argues that in order to "really hear black women," she must (as a white reader) "give [herself] over to that dark space of otherness created for me by another woman. . . . I must be able to read my white womanhood as a sign of everything I personally abhor." According to Gwin, "white women may need to read black women's texts' disempowerment of white women where it exists, and also take a second step in this direction by accepting white woman's disempowerment as a tropological model for reading black women" (23-24). Although the methodology of reading that Gwin outlines is a gesture to "reopen issues of race and positionality in feminist practice" – a call for a greater racial consciousness when reading – I am arguing that such a simplification of race and racialised experiences – a theorisation that sees race, rather uncomplicatedly, in "black and white" terms – effects certain erasures. Gwin's argument, first of all, views the categories of "black" and "white" as homogenous and does not take into account the variety of subject positions internal to such categorisations. Secondly, and ironically, Gwin's formulation that "white woman's disempowerment" should function as the "tropological model for reading black women" is a view that sees literature by minority writers as necessarily addressed to, and written for, the mainstream. See Barbara Christian's critique of this article, "Response to 'Black Women's Texts.'" NWSA Journal 1.1 (1988) 32-36. Christian argues against Gwin and for the necessity of seeing neither racial nor gender categories as "pure ones: instead they are always interactive" (36).

co-ordinates," such as geography, nation or race, and the "interior co-ordinates" of the psyche. By this model, interiority or subjectivity is often reduced, rather simplistically, to "ideology," a move which cannot take into account desire, affect, fantasy and other elements of interiority. By the same token, this model does not take into account the complexities of identity wherein a body may "house" various competing claims and ideologies. By simply emphasising the notion of "positionalities" or the "locations" of identity, this model does not ask the question of what it might mean to occupy and speak from several different places at once. Thus, at one level, standpoint theorists insist on the materiality of subjectivity by pointing out how subjectivity is embedded in social and political space. Yet, at another level, many of these models fail to talk about the very materiality of the psyche, of feelings, or of interiority. Standpoint epistemologies thus cannot adequately account for the movement or fluidity of affect, of desire, or of the unconscious, all of which usually work across regulative boundaries and such easy positionings.

Against these models that attempt to position subjects within "real" space, however, another group of feminist critics have attempted to define subjects and subjectivity more fluidly by pointing to the highly constructed or discursive nature of social, cultural and even geographical space. These anti-foundationalist theorists, which include critics such as Judith Butler, Joan Scott and Denise Riley, among others, attempt to define subjectivity in quite different terms by emphasising, instead, the ways in which discursive categories "mediate" experience and set the parameters within which subjectivities are formed and

negotiated.[4] For example, Joan Scott writes that experience itself is shaped by historical and linguistic processes that, through discourse, produce both subjects and their experiences; thus, "it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain."[5] In denying that identity or experience have any kind of primordial status, these critics instead foreground the normalising or disciplining mechanisms through which identities and subjectivities are produced. They call for a greater awareness to the discursively "contingent" nature of experience and how it is always made and remade within a shifting nexus of power relations.

Yet, one of the points at stake here has to do with whether or not the philosophical premises of contemporary anti-foundationalist or discursive theories are in fact congruous with feminism's political and ethical claims. In fact, if standpoint epistemologies are able to provide a firm ground from which to launch ethical action but deny the complexities or movements of identity, then post-structuralist discursive theories do the opposite: they render identity and subjectivity in more complex or at least fluid terms, but provide few points from

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[4] See, for example, Judith Butler and Joan Scott, eds., Feminists Theorize the Political (New York: Routledge, 1992); Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter (New York: Routledge, 1993) and also Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1990); Linda Nicholson, ed., Feminism/ Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, 1990); Denise Riley, 'Am I that Name': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988); Diane Elam, Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. En abyme (New York: Routledge, 1994); Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegner, Feminism Beside Itself (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Diana Fuss, Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference (New York: Routledge, 1989).

[5] Joan Scott, "Experience," Feminists Theorize the Political, ed. Butler and Scott 26.

which to act or even think about questions of action and ethics. Moreover, I would argue that while the convergence between feminism and poststructuralism has been fruitful in terms of offering a stringent critique of patriarchal politics and institutions, the bulk of this recent feminist criticism has still had an eminently more difficult time theorising women's power and agency, and like standpoint theories, continues to hold an overly sociological or linguistic view of identity and interiority.

Given the current terrain of feminism, then, many contemporary feminist critics find themselves at a point of crisis not only around questions of subjectivity, experience and personal testimony, but also around the issues of aesthetics, politics, ethics and activism – their relation to each other and to feminist epistemologies and practices. On the one hand, it makes sense to think about the ways in which our identities, our lives, and our actions are all "fictions" of a sort in that they are structured by various ideological, social and linguistic systems which produce our desires and subjectivities. On the other hand, the complete abandonment of gender, race, class, sexual orientation or nationality as "real" grounds on which to base movements, policies, and demands for recognition does not at all seem to resonate with the kind of "identity politics" that have been at the heart of most social struggles. In fact, as Rita Felski explains, these dissensions within feminist theory may be interpreted as connected to the more general difficulty "theorizing the relation between social and discursive structures on the one hand and a concept of agency or self on the other."[*] Given recent

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[*] Rita Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change

developments in social and linguistic theory, it of course seems troublesome to perpetuate the idea of an autonomous female subjectivity that unites the experiences of all women across racial, historical, economic or national boundaries, especially when such a notion serves to reinforce prevailing ideologies and stereotypes. At the same time, it seems important to maintain the idea that "experience" is what in fact lies at the root of feminist and postcolonial analysis or thinking. In the end, both feminist and postcolonial theorists find themselves in a rather paradoxical position, basing claims to identity and agency on certain categories while concurrently questioning the modalities of analysis that appeal to these terms. Consequently, part of the work of my dissertation will be to find a way of negotiating this impasse such that subjectivity may be thought in terms that are able to argue for the authority of experience, indeed to account for the "reality" or felt immediacy of bodily experience and transmission, while also being able to take into consideration the mediatory function of social, historical and political contingencies.

This study thus begins with the premise that far from demonstrating the irrelevance of a theory of the subject, these debates internal to feminism, postcolonialism and other politically-motivated theories rather foreground the persistent and ever-pressing need to think through the concept of subjectivity and to render more precise what is meant when one talks of a "self," a "body" or an "identity." I argue, moreover, that it *is* possible to talk about the ways in which socio-historic forces might "imprint" themselves on a body, while also imagining

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(Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989) 52.

that body as having an interiority. In other words, feminist and postcolonial critics need not automatically discount all ontologising efforts at describing the self; rather, we might begin by charting a phenomenology of selves that accounts for the varying cultural, political and historical specificities of people's lives and experiences. However, if current ways of thinking about subjectivity are inadequate to the task at hand, then what are some of the terms that might help? I would like to suggest, at this point, that it may be useful to rethink notions of subjectivity with recourse to the terms of affect and embodiment. Accordingly, I intend to move discussions of subjectivity, ethics and agency away from a framework of rights, freedoms and choices and into the horizon of those interpersonal and intrapersonal forces that motivate feminist thinking and action in the first place. In turn, by adopting an understanding of subjectivity as embodied – as originating, emanating and flowing forth from the body – feminists can also begin to counter the deontological and de-ontologising thinking that pervades recent feminist accounts of ethics.

The proposition to locate subjectivity in the body, however, is a somewhat tricky one for feminist theory to make given the academic climate of our day. In the political and social arena, feminist and postcolonial struggles alike have often made the body a pivotal point around which campaigns of resistance have been fought. For example, in the North American context, the right to the autonomy of the female body has consistently been evoked in relation to issues as wide-ranging as abortion, contraception, reproductive technologies and violence against women. Yet, in the philosophical corpus, feminists tend to be extremely wary of grounding

social and subjective identity in the specificities of the body."[*] This hesitancy is of course not without good reason. The varieties of oppression and discrimination in contemporary society – whether these be gender, racial or sexual oppressions – often ostensibly occur on the basis of bodily difference. For many feminist scholars, then, *any* attempt to cast the body as a foundation for subjectivity has been interpreted as an "essentialising" or conceptually violent move."[**] It is my contention, however, that even as feminist critiques of essentialism have been useful in denouncing certain reductive notions of gender difference, this critique inevitably denies the particularities of both bodily and ideological constituencies by ignoring a crucial dimension of the experience of all subjects: namely, the visceral realities of the physical and psychical self. Of course, this is not at all to say that the "visceral" is unrelated to the social or political context in which it takes place; at the same time, the experiential realities of a particular self cannot simply be reduced to – or fully "explained" by – sociological or political models. The concept of embodied subjectivity, then, is able to take into account these less calculable aspects of human experience – the visceral, affective, emotive, somatic,

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[*] See Moira Gatens, Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[**] The concept of "essentialism" came to be a highly contentious issue within feminist studies in North America, especially in the early 1990s. My own thinking around this concept has been greatly aided by Diana Fuss's Essentially Speaking. Fuss's book offers an excellent analysis and reconsideration of the different ways in which the notion of "essentialism" comes into play in feminist criticism – and what is at stake in the various debates involving this term. In particular, Fuss questions current trends in feminist theory that discount all questions relating to "nature" or "biology" on the grounds that these domains are somehow inherently "essentialist." Likewise, she critiques the trend that upholds "the social" or "the cultural" as domains which are always non-essentialist because they are "constructed." Rather, Fuss points to the ways in which certain social or cultural constructs can serve to "fix" women's roles and identities just as much as nature can and does change. Fuss's work leaves open the question of what it would mean to give histories of that change, a question that also resides at the peripheries of my own work.

conscious and unconscious dimensions of the self – while still situating these within a historical, political, social or cultural milieu.

In fact, what is important to note is that the concept of embodied subjectivity views the body as a site of active change and contestation such that all ethical action unfolds through the interplay between culture and corporeality. In this respect, my understanding of the body and of embodied subjectivity resonates, in many ways, with the model of embodiment that Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts forward in his The Phenomenology of Perception, one of the few accounts in the modern western philosophical tradition to ground subjectivity quite firmly in the body. In particular, Merleau-Ponty writes to counter the "idealist tradition of consciousness" that follows from thinkers such as Descartes and Kant. In the Preface to The Phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty explains how Kantian philosophy, for example, envisages the body and its surroundings as transparent, discrete entities ready to be identified, pointed out, or named. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty wants to define the body not simply as "one object among other objects," but rather as a dynamic agent which constitutes a "horizon of expectations and possible actions." For Merleau-Ponty, bodily space and external space form a "practical system," which includes not just the body, but also the background against which our actions stand out and the space in front where our intentions come to light. Through this definition, Merleau-Ponty seeks to trace the connections between psychic, physiological and social forces. He strives to show the body as a mediator between self and society, and to show how our mental operations are always both constrained and made possible by the characteristics of

our physical bodies. Thus, in attempting to break with the Cartesian split between the psychic and the social, Merleau-Ponty argues that the human subject is, above all, sentient and situated: the body is not only our point of view on the world, but our way of being in the world. To experience something subjectively is at once to "open up" an object and "to be opened up" by that object. To perceive something is to "inhabit it and from that habitat grasp all other things." In this way, by arguing that our being takes the form of an active and embodied subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the self identifies the body as a dynamic force that is able to negotiate, as well as transform, interior and external realities.[1]

But the problem still remains: how, precisely, might such a concept of subjectivity or embodiment help to formulate a feminist ethics around questions of violence or in spaces of immediate political urgency? Especially for those feminists working within non-white, non-western, highly racialised, highly politicised contexts, how can recourse to a language of affect and embodiment aid in appeals to agency or ethical intervention over a discourse of rights, choices or freedoms? Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's Real and Imagined Women, a work that arises equally out of literary and political commitments, I think, can help provide some tentative answers to these questions. Indeed, it was Sunder Rajan's discussion of the problems and politics faced by contemporary feminist organisations in postcolonial India when organising against *sati* – the "self-immolation" of widows upon their

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[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1962).

husbands' funeral pyres – that first led me to see "embodiment" as a highly useful concept in thinking about or formulating a feminist ethics. In particular, embodiment in Sunder Rajan's work appears as a concept which does not fall into the traps of a certain western liberal individualism that dominates feminist theorisations of ethics in North American universities today by silencing so many women around the world.[4] But before I elaborate on Sunder Rajan's appeals to the term of "embodiment," let me first place her work in context for those readers who may not be so familiar with the various, and often heated, debates and controversies that have erupted during the last two decades over "the question of *sati*" among postcolonial feminist critics in particular, and South Asian studies scholars in general.

Sunder Rajan's discussion of *sati* follows from a series of incidents which occurred during the late 1980s in India and which served to bring an unprecedented amount of attention to the phenomenon of *sati* in the form of newspaper reports, documentaries and popular films. In turn, this proliferation of journalistic and cinematic discourses functioned to spark numerous debates and inquiries into the phenomenon of *sati*, its contemporary manifestations as well as its historical manifestations, among scholars working both in India and outside of it. As Sunder Rajan tells the story, it all began in the fall of 1987, as 18-year-old Roop Kanwar, married only seven months, died on her husband's funeral pyre in a small village just outside of Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan, a northern Indian state.

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[4] Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism (New York: Routledge, 1993).

perhaps best known for its glorious martial tradition instrumental in the fight against British colonialism. This event fuelled immense amounts of media interest. This attention, coupled with the efforts of women's groups across India, eventually led to the issue of an ordinance banning not only the commission of *sati*, which was already illegal in India, but also the glorification of *sati* through representations of it in the popular media. At the same time, however, the passing of this legislation resulted in enormous pro-*sati* rallies protesting the government's interference in the Rajput's practising of their sacred, religious rites and traditions. In part, Sunder Rajan relays the story of these events in order to evoke the extent to which feminists in India are caught in an extremely paralysing dilemma when they try to organise against *sati* or other forms of violence performed against women in the name of religion or tradition. Some defenders of *sati*, for example, claim that *sati* cannot be called a "crime" because it is a venerated ritual and is supported by scriptures. Other sympathisers cannot seem to extricate *sati* from the history of the Rajput civilisation and so, for them, it serves as an index of a powerful warrior culture. There are even those feminist scholars who invoke *sati* as a certain yogic or spiritual practice for women in a society which did not allow them to gain spiritual mastery in any other way.[3] The question, then, for feminist theorists and activists who seek to argue, legislate and fight against practices like *sati* continues to be: how does one make claims against certain "traditions," certain practices of violence, without disclaiming the whole of one's own

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[3] See Arvind Sharma, Ajit Ray, Alaka Hejib and Katherine K. Young, Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1988).

"heritage" or, perhaps more importantly, without disclaiming and discounting those women who might "subscribe" to such traditions and on whose behalf these very claims are being made? In India, as in other postcolonial spaces, such questions are not easy given the tensions between "tradition" and "modernity."

Part of the difficulty in responding to the issue of *sati*, of course, has to do with the long and complicated history of the legislation surrounding it. *Sati* was abolished by law in Bengal in 1829 by William Bentinck, the British governor of the time. This moment came to be known, by successive generations of Indians, as a founding moment in the history of women in modern India. Yet, as Gayatri Spivak quite scathingly points out, because of the framing of this legislation – wherein colonial rule, with its moralising and civilising claims, helped to re-invent Indian "tradition" along the lines more agreeable to the "modern" world – the abolition of *sati* is also viewed by many Indians today as yet another case of the colonial rulers heroically "rescuing" native women from a backwards and barbaric patriarchy: "a case of White men saving brown women from brown men."[43] Lata Mani, another scholar who has spent an enormous amount of time charting a more careful history of *sati* and the legislation surrounding it, echoes the same sort of bitter irony involving the moment that saw the abolition of *sati* : "even the most anti-imperialist amongst us has felt forced to acknowledge the 'positive' consequences of colonial rule for certain aspects of women's lives."[44] Part of what

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[43] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader (Ed. Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams, New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 66-111.

[44] Lata Mani, "Contentious Tradition," Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History (Eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, New Delhi: Kali, 1993) 88.

both Spivak's and Mani's comments highlight is the way in which the very history of women in India is so caught up within a problematics of "tradition" versus "modernity" that, even today, attempts to make interventions on behalf of women, especially in the name of "progress," are often seen as furthering the bifurcation of a society which needs to remain whole. As Sunder Rajan writes, "Intellectual work produced under the sign of a global feminism and theory but over the signature of the postcolonial academic is open to charges of inauthenticity, dubiousness of politics, academic mileage, alienated modernism and native informancy. The activity of reading 'under western eyes' becomes a fraught and almost disabingly self-consciousness exercise."[6] Of course, writing or even thinking about the phenomena of *sati* from the vantage point of a North American university, as I am doing now, is no doubt even more troublesome and difficult – not just because of the distance, but also because of the incredibly racist stereotypes that this subject is sure to provoke here more than in India. Yet, perhaps it is precisely this extreme *difficulty* of "thinking through" something like *sati* – given its extreme violence and horror; given its complicated history; given the various resistances, charges or provocation that such thinking might meet and might have to answer to; given the fact that the phenomenon of *sati* has often quite singularly or emblematically stood for the "barbarity" of an entire civilisation; but also given the challenges it poses to the maintenance of an idealised notion of Indian culture – that makes the issue of *sati* such an important and productive site

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[6] Sunder Rajan 1.

for a rethinking of the grounds of female subjectivity and feminist agency.

But now that I have mapped some of the terrain out of which Sunder Rajan's work emerges and have outlined why the issue of *sati* might be important to a rethinking of female subjectivity, let us now go back to how, precisely, it is that her particular discussion of *sati* calls for a rethinking of subjectivity along the lines of embodiment as opposed to rights. Observing the case of Roop Kanwar, Sunder Rajan notices, for one, how questions about the "consciousness" of the woman who commits *sati* comes up time and again in determining the ethicality of the act. The point that is at stake, equally, for both defenders and opponents of *sati* seems to be: was the *sati* voluntary or the was the woman forced upon the funeral pyre? Pro-*sati* groups seek to establish *sati* as an individual, voluntary decision, wherein the woman who commits it does so in order to reach a transcendent subjective and spiritual state. By this logic, the woman who commits sati is likened to male heroes who perform other socially-sanctioned acts of self-sacrifice: for example, the warrior who dies in battle, or the ascetic monk, who starves himself to death. Against this, anti-sati campaigns attempt to show the ways in which sati is not a voluntary but coercive act. They cite the family or community pressure that was involved. They point out the censure and harshness the woman would have to endure if she "chose" to live life as a widow. Even in cases where it is possible that the woman may have conformed with the decision, anti-sati groups argue that this compliance was simply the result of ideological indoctrination or "false consciousness" and so, therefore, could not be truly "voluntary." Yet, part of what Sunder Rajan sets out to do is to show how, by

remaining locked into a framework which establishes subjectivity and agency solely on the grounds of voluntarism or "choice," feminists fall into a peculiar double bind. She writes, "If one subscribes to a liberal ideology of the freedom of choice one must sometimes grant sati the dubious status of existential suicide. To refuse to do so is to find oneself, as feminists have done, in another bind, that of viewing the sati as inexorably a victim and thereby emptying her subjectivity of any functioning or agency."[4] It is due to an effort to get out of *this* particular bind, then, that Sunder Rajan proposes the notion of "embodiment" as a less paralysing way to think about subjectivity and agency. Through the evocation of this term, Sunder Rajan asks us instead to consider the actual bodily conditions of the woman who commits sati: her pain, her burning flesh, her often drugged or comatosed condition, or in other cases, her screaming and jumping. Why not consider this woman's pain, and her reflexes toward escape or no-pain, as an active call for intervention? What might it mean to base our own ethics on our responses and reactions to such pain?

As Sunder Rajan does not really expand upon the implications of her arguments about pain or embodiment in Real and Imagined Women, this is the point at which my thesis takes its departure from her work. Whether or not we want to ground an ethics or our interventions specifically or solely in "pain," I think, is debatable. But what *is* important is this: by asking us to consider or think about this pain, by asking us to imagine what it might be like to inhabit this body, Sunder Rajan is, in effect, asking us to take *subjective* relation to an "other." Her

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[4] Sunder Rajan 19.

invocation of pain thus moves us toward an affective, as opposed to a purely intellectual, ground. And, what Sunder Rajan seems to imply is that the very legitimacy of ethical and political projects lie, in fact, within this affective domain. Part of what is at stake here, then, is our ability to imagine another person's experience, our ability to identify with or "understand" it, our ability to "see" it or "feel" it. Consequently, by extricating the concepts of ethics and agency from a purely abstract or deontological sphere and by placing these instead in a phenomenological or ontological realm, we can see how political engagement is not only a matter of reasoning, but also the process of becoming perceptive of the ways in which another being might experience his or her own reality, of how another might "live" in his or her body. Moreover, by working with such an idea of embodied subjectivity, feminist critics could begin to engage not only with conscious ideology, but also, in the words of the anthropologist Michael Taussig, "with what moves people without their knowing quite why or how, with what makes the real and the normal, and above all with what makes ethical distinctions politically powerful."[*]

In turn, this particular concept of the self – that is the self as an *embodied agent* – has important ramifications for the ways in which ethics is both practiced and understood by feminism. For example, the embodied subject is, in the first instance, a sentient subject. By this account, the body is porous and permeable because it is open to its surroundings and can only exist in constant exchange

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[*] Michael Taussig, Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987) 366.

with its environment. As a result, the body's identity is never closed or complete; rather, it is built, shaped, disassembled and reassembled through contact with other bodies. Of course, it is important to stress this because most traditional notions of ethics are based upon a liberal political model whereby bounded, autonomous individuals come together on a contractual basis. In such a process, the individual bodies themselves never change; people enter into alliance with one another, but always keep the boundaries between them intact. By contrast, an understanding of ethics based on the idea of a porous and permeable body reveals how ethics proceeds not contractually, but through *intersubjective relations*, as Sunder Rajan suggests. Ethics proceeds by those imaginings that arise from the affective relations between one's body and others; it flows out from the self and into the social world, invading and infiltrating everyday activities. Following this, the body is much more than simply the sense of muscles, or of limbs, or flesh, or physiology. It is a force for imagining and acting upon the flow of history; it is a site of knowledge, experience, and authority, as well as a point from which to act."

Consequently, whereas liberal-legal concepts of the bounded or autonomous individual are rooted in political philosophies that have their origins in an abstract notion of rights and freedoms – not to mention in a particularly violent moment of history in which European expansion effected massive

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" For interesting philosophical and historical investigations regarding conceptions of the body and embodiment, see, for example, Alphonso Lingis, Foreign Bodies (New York: Routledge, 1994); see also Fehr, Michel, Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi, eds. Fragments for a History of the Human Body vols.1-3 (New York: Urzone, 1989).

dislocations of land and of peoples – the notion of embodiment reminds us of the concrete, material ways in which people creatively determine a project for themselves given the constraints *and* possibilities of a particular social, historical or subjective milieu. As Andrew Strathern explains, "Terms such as *individual* or *person* tend to have an abstract ring of reference, belonging to political and social philosophies that have to do with rights, identities, and tendencies of will or self-definition that are psychologically or legally based. *Embodiment*, by contrast, reminds us of the concrete, the here-and-now presence of people to one another, and the full complement of sense and feelings through which they communicate with another."[5] In other words, the concept of embodied agency or subjectivity radically departs from the common deontological stance that pervades ethical thinking – a stance which, not incidentally, is implicated in the myriad of violences against women through its perpetuation of the radical split between mind and body. Instead, embodied ethics takes as its point of departure a phenomenological model that insists on the situatedness of all judgements. Because human perception is always partial, incapable of the kind of synthesis that would allow a person to be aware of all times and all places, ethics too must reject any transcendent set of rules that has the power to impose itself independently of the existing social, temporal or subjective terrain.[6] Accordingly, ethical freedom is not achieved within an entirely sovereign realm that is

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[5] Andrew Strathern, Body Thoughts (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996) 2.

[6] See Geraldine Finn, "The Politics of Contingency: The Contingency of Politics – On the Political Implications of Merleau-Ponty's Ontology of the Flesh," Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism, eds. Thomas Busch and Shaun Gallagher (Albany: State U of New York P, 1992) 171-87.

unfettered by difference. Rather, agency comes from one's embeddedness in a particular community; from the movements of one's body in a material reality; from the kind of interventions one is able to make in a particular society; from one's investments in certain ideologies; and from the bonds that one establishes with other bodies.

Following this, in order to understand how ethical action proceeds, we need to take a closer look at the various textures and contours of embodied sentience, at experience in all of its tangible and tactile modalities – and at the sensateness of human experience on which so many political movements, calls to intellection and collective motions for change and healing lie. Of course, the significance of imaginative literature to such a project quickly becomes apparent. By keeping alive memory as a reservoir of meanings and of possibilities, literature enables us to see where we have been, where we stand and where we are going. It offers us a background context against which we can think, move and chart out our future actions. But even more importantly, fiction also serves as a medium, an intersubjective institution, whereby subjects are able to open onto each other and ethically engage their different realities. To quote from Hélène Cixous, literature is, in this view, "the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me – the other that I am and am not, that I don't know how to be, but that I feel passing, that makes me live – that tears me apart, disturbs and changes me."[52] In other words, literature functions as a point of negotiation allowing for

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[52] Helene Cixous, The Newly Born Woman, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1986) 85-6.

the opening of worlds and of meanings. It occasions "slippages" or "transliterations" between different tongues and between different realities, thereby creating the possibility for change and transformation.

Of course, at this point, it may be important to note that while fiction enables individuals to communicate with or enter into the world of others, this kind of ingression happens only and always to an extent. In fact, the limits of empathising with or gaining understanding of the total contexts of the lives of others must also be acknowledged. To fail to accede the necessary limited perspective that any given person can have on the life of a differentially situated individual is to do such an individual serious violence: it is to fail to respect or make room for the gaps in situation between oneself and others. At the same time, these fictions are equally aware that we are always in contact with others, that our perceptions inevitably range over others and that, indeed, to know ourselves or to ascertain any kind of project for ourselves, we need to have interaction with others. As Linda Alcoff states, "There is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which one's words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others, nor is there a way to decisively demarcate a boundary between one's location and all others."[55] I am convinced that the novels and stories explored in this particular study demonstrate precisely such an understanding of human life and relations. On the one hand, they reveal a profound awareness of the limitations of knowledge through their insistence on specific historical, social and bodily realities, through the careful attention given to

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[55] Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," Cultural Critique 20 (1991): 20.

the various borders or boundaries that constrain us, marking our differences and the places in which we are singular. Yet, on the other hand, these fictions also show how these lines of demarcation are never impermeable, how they may always be negotiated, transformed, made and remade in response to the various crises or questions unlocked by the pressures and placements of history. In this way, these fictions enable us to experience and feel another tangible, corporeal world whose reality opens out to us, touches us and, thereby, moves us in powerful ways.

Finally, in discussing all of the textual examples that follow, it is important to note that one of the things that allows me to read these particular fictions together is the way in which they all stand in opposition to a rather narrow US-based feminism which has dominated most feminist thinking about politics and ethics and yet whose conception of politics is rooted almost exclusively in the experiences of white, western, middle-class, heterosexual women. As the postcolonial feminist critic Rajeswari Sunder Rajan notes, this kind of liberal feminism has all too often exonerated itself from its own inherent ideology by focusing simply, for example, on the sensationalist aspects of what she calls "stories of Third World torture and pain."[5] According to Sunder Rajan, while these types of stories are sometimes successful in illustrating the pressing need for ethical action, such examples more often than not serve as an index for cultural or

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[5] Sunder Rajan 22. See also the following: Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" in Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 196-220; Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"; Jenny Sharpe, "The Unspeakable Limits of Rape: Colonial Violence and Counter-Insurgency" Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory 221-243; and Lata Mani's "Contentious Traditions."

racial superiority, creating a binary opposition between "traditional" cultures and western feminism's "progressive" or "enlightened" stance. Moreover, in identifying all "minority" women – whether this be in terms of nation, race, class or sexual orientation – as the naïve victims of patriarchy, mainstream western feminism executes a certain "colonialist" move whereby women with privilege heroically act to rescue all "other" women not only from a "backwards" societal order, but also from their own "false consciousness." However, as recent developments in the fields of black criticism, postcolonial studies and queer theory have shown, such a move only functions to deny women positioned as "other" to mainstream feminism any agency of their own by ignoring the very methods of thinking and acting that such women have assumed given complex histories in which experiences of violence and discrimination based upon gender, race, class, nationality, ethnicity and sexual orientation often work to reinforce one another. Rather, new theorisations of the complex historical and contemporary relations between gender, race, class and sexuality embrace precisely this task of making clearer the interdependence of such categories and the fact that they cannot, in any case, be thought apart from each other.[“] Accordingly, the fictions considered

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[“] For examples, see Angela Davis, Women, Race and Class (London: Women's Press, 1981); Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds. This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Colour P, 1983); Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing P, 1984); Gayatri Spivak, In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (NY: Routledge, 1987); Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989); Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, eds. Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991); Makeda Silver, ed., Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian Anthology of Colour (Toronto: Sister Vision P, 1991); The Very Inside: An Anthology of Writing by Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbian and Bisexual Women (Toronto: Sister Vision, 1994); M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures (New York: Routledge, 1997); Martin Duberman, ed. A Queer World (New York: New York UP, 1997).

in this thesis trace the intricate connections between sexual, racial, class, colonial and national violences in order to define strategies of change that are appropriate for the particular political and historical contexts out of which these fictions arise. These works, then, do not focus on the stereotypical aspects of violence against women; rather, they show how violence is always implicated within elaborate histories of national, racial, gender, class and sexual relations which need to be understood on their own terms.

This task is important in a society where the imaginings and representations of "other cultures" – and by consequence the kind of imaginings projected onto experiences of gender, class or sexual orientation positioned as "other" – are often themselves the sites of such immense violence. Most commonly, "other cultures" are either romanticised and exoticised, posited simply as empty terrains for imperialistic fantasies, or depicted as "ugly" and "barbaric," invoking neither desire nor engagement. These works and discussions, however, understand culture – as well as the experience of the self in culture and history – in an entirely different way. In the pages of the novels I have chosen for discussion, cultures, families and people – their desires, their sense of belonging, their understandings of sexuality and subjectivity – are not so "black and white." For this reason, the reader is alerted to the difference between simple ethical prescriptions and complex ethical practices. For example, these stories do not attempt to "hide" the very real violences that exist in the particular communities or families of which they speak, nor do they reduce these communities simply to violence. They also speak of the profound beauties and loves that exist in the

same places. In fact, what is perhaps most remarkable about the narratives I discuss in this thesis is the way in which they all paint such "intimate" portraits of the places in which they are rooted, bringing to life for the reader even the most minuscule details of a particular locale – for example, the precise trails and trackings of insects, snails and other such small creatures; the very slight but decisive shiftings of atmosphere during a change of season which is also the onset of a fall in which flowers do not bloom; or the distinct coolness of a red-cemented veranda in an otherwise long, hot and incomprehensible summer. All the novels thus speak of the kind of cultural knowledge that is acquired through the senses, through immediate contact with or immersion in a culture, a geography, a history, a community, or a landscape. While steeped in history and politics, these books do not offer any simple historical, political or moral "lessons." They tell us what no number of maps or history books or newspaper reports can make palpable by rendering, instead, a very "deep" knowledge of a culture and what it is like to live, always, as we all do, compelled by and accountable to this real and tangible sense of culture. This is how these novels acquire their ethical force: they play out the ways in which people act and make judgments amidst highly intricate, binding and deeply felt matrices of relations, both real and imagined.

CHAPTER 2

The Half Not Told:
Violence, Love and the Fictional Imagination

I remember the first time I read Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye how completely transfixed I was by the tale. Morrison's first novel is perhaps one the of the most difficult, yet moving, books I have ever encountered. The difficulty of Morrison's text, however, lies not in its use of a complicated language or narrative structure. In fact, in comparison to some of Morrison's later works such as Beloved or Jazz, this early novel seems, on the surface, relatively uncomplicated in terms of its plot, style, volume, or even in terms of the breadth of "history" that it covers. Narrated, for the most part, through the perspective of children, of early adolescence to be more precise, The Bluest Eye is a novel that draws and invites the reader into an intimate sort of place: a place of comfort and fluency. In the Afterword to the book, Morrison herself comments on her use of a "speakerly" voice. She writes about choosing to begin her novel with the phrase "quiet as its kept," for example, in order to signal to her African-American readers a recognisable or everyday situation wherein a young child might be listening to black women conversing, or gossiping, with each other around a kitchen table.[56] Similarly, through its play on the Dick-and-Jane primers which would be immediately familiar to almost any one who grew up in North America in the mid-twentieth century, Morrison's The Bluest Eye imparts an aura of simplicity and

[56] Toni Morrison, Afterword, The Bluest Eye (New York: Plume, 1970) 211-15.

ease. What, then, is the novel's difficulty? The exigencies of Morrison's novel have to do with its overwhelming and often uncomfortable subject matter – for, it is a story of a young girl's extreme victimisation and brutal rape at the hands of her own father. The Bluest Eye impels and implores its readers to look at violences that most people would rather not have to see, or have to know anything about. Thus, the novel's complexity rests not so much in the critical-interpretive challenges it might generate as in the affective and ethical responses it demands of its readers.

This chapter attempts to take up precisely this question of the connection between affect and ethics in fiction by reading Morrison's The Bluest Eye alongside two other novels that also deal with situations of extreme violence and victimisation: Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things. The fictions of Morrison, Mootoo, and Roy impress upon their readers the immense obligations that accompany acts of speaking of and listening to violence, especially violences which take place *within* a locale of familial, affiliative or affective relations. Accordingly, all three works exhibit a pressing need to bear witness to violence while simultaneously exploring the difficulties or crises opened up by such an act. Often told through a series of flashbacks or memories, these texts do not simply speak from the sites of their traumas, but rather reproduce or re-enact the very experience of "traumatisation" through their narrative trajectories. The process of reading these works, then, may also involve a certain reliving or "passing on" of violence or trauma, since to be witness to such a tale is to enter into it, to come to inhabit it, to be seduced and

haunted by it. Indeed, as Julia Kristeva writes, one of the dangers of literature that bears witness to violence is that such writing often "encounters, recognizes, but also propagates the ill that mobilizes it."[5] At the same, I argue, it is ultimately this visceral or bodily response – this "traumatisation" of the one who listens – that allows previously "unspeakable" experiences of individual trauma to enter into a realm where such experiences may be cooperatively transformed and reworked.

What is perhaps most striking about all of the three novels considered in this chapter is how they all convey to their readers what it means to witness at a most basic, most visceral or most immediate level. The fictions of Morrison, Mootoo and Roy all try to grapple with what happens when people are forced to witness, watch, observe, listen to, be suffused by, or be immersed in an environment of violence on a continuous, everyday basis. It is no coincidence that all of the novels considered in this chapter focus on the experiences of children. In this way, they are able to introduce the idea of what it is like to be a witness to something – a set of experiences, events or even circumstances – that one does not necessarily "understand," that one cannot quite articulate, know, put into words or thoughts, or take action against. Thus, in the context of my thesis, these three novels allow for an imagining of the kind of agency that is exercised by those people who are normally thought of as not having any agency at all in a world of rights and choices. As a result, these stories can perhaps help us to formulate more responsible and responsive practices of witnessing and

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[5] Julia Kristeva, "The Pain of Sorrow of the Modern World: The Works of Marguerite Duras," trans. Katherine Jensen. PMLA 102.2 (1987): 138-52.

intervention on behalf of people who cannot in fact tell their own story.

These narratives therefore also allow me to make an important interjection in some of the debates and impasses that feminist and postcolonial theories encounter around questions of ethics, aesthetics and violence. On the one hand, these novels force the reader to look at those "madnesses" and dislocations of identity that most people would rather not have to see. On the other hand, they do so using language and imagery that is highly sensuous and seductive, at once provocative and evocative. Consequently, my analysis of these texts provides a point of departure for considering questions that are then taken up by my subsequent chapters: What are the some of the specific ways in which various imaginative and social projects undertaken by women have explored and refigured the conjunctions between beauty, pleasure and desire, on the one hand, and politics, power and agency, on the other? How might such a refiguration be especially important in negotiating the impasses that feminist theory and other sites attempting to put forward theories of violence run up against today?

Chapter One of my dissertation reviewed the ways in which much contemporary feminist theory has found itself at a point of crisis not only around questions of experience and subjectivity, but also around the very questions of aesthetics, politics and activism – their relations to each other, and their connections to feminist epistemologies. Not surprisingly, these tensions within feminism regarding the relationships between experience, aesthetics, politics, theory are even further exacerbated when it comes thinking through the issue of physical violence and the status of bodily emotions and experiences. Judith Butler

and Joan Scott.in their Introduction to Feminists Theorize the Political, cite a similar concern when they discuss the allegations of certain feminists who claim that the turn toward "textuality" in current poststructuralist thought risks trivialising the "reality" of bodily violence:

> Some feminists have argued that poststructuralism forbids recourse to a 'real body' or 'real sex' and that such recourse is necessary to articulate moral and political opposition to violence, rape, and other forms of oppression. The line goes something like 'rape is real, it's not a text.' By problematizing the political construction and deployment of 'the real,' do feminist arguments informed by poststructuralism end up in positions of moral relativism and political complicity? What have been the responses to this question? What kind of feminist retheorizations of violence and coercion are possible?[xx]

If we are to take seriously these questions, we must also ask: why turn to fictional or aesthetic works when thinking about such questions of bodily violence, questions of immediate physical and political expediency? If feminism and postcolonialism are indeed calls to think through the violences resulting from gender, racial and sexual oppressions, then does this turn to fiction risk the abdication of a certain responsibility to think through this violence? Do attempts to narrativise, fictionalise or artistically represent violence operate to sharpen or diminish political arguments against violence? How does one go about thinking through the attractions, seductions and pleasures of these texts *in relation* to the violences that they portray?[xxi]

[xx] Judith Butler and Joan Scott, "Introduction," Feminists Theorize the Political. (Eds. Butler and Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992) xvi.

[xxi] See also Priyamvada Gopal, "Of Victims and Vigilantes: The 'Bandit Queen' Controversy," Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independence India, ed. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (New Delhi: Kali P, 1999) 292-330, an article which raises similar questions around the issues of violence, rape and representation.

Of course, the task of creating a theoretical language that will give full weight to the issue of violence is made particularly difficult by the fact that pain, violence and other related phenomena are most frequently situated in opposition to and sometimes even outside of language itself. For example, Elaine Scarry, in her book The Body in Pain, describes the way in which physical pain often defies ordinary verbal expression. She writes, "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate revulsion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."[9] Scarry goes on to explain that for the person who suffers, the experience of pain, while undeniably present, is almost impossible to confirm through reference to external sources. Thus, although the sentient materiality of pain is readily grasped and immediately recognised by the individual who feels it, for those others who lie outside of its domain, there is no easily available method with which to identify, observe or measure another person's experience of pain. The unshareability of pain then has to do with the way in which pain refuses simple verbal objectification. Because of its intensely subjective nature, pain opposes traditional forms of representation and becomes incommunicable.

Yet, according to Scarry, it is also important to note that whereas the victims of violence lose the ability to share their experience of pain through reference to language, the perpetrators of violence customarily employ certain discursive and rhetorical structures in order to administer torture. In fact, torture

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[9] Elaine Scarry, The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 4.

not only consists of specific acts of inflicting pain; it also entails a complex process of bestowing visibility on the structure and enormity of pain. But even as displays of violence serve to objectify pain, they also function to deny the materiality of the victim's suffering, focusing instead on the power or agency of the one who is administering the torture. It is for this reason that torture and representations of torture induce fear instead of empathy, producing bodies that are submissive to the dominant political order. In a similar vein, Michel Foucault explains how violence attaches itself to human bodies, indeed, how it inscribes itself on individual subjectivities. He describes the way in which the body is trained, tortured and manipulated by a set of normative practices or judgements which form what he calls the political technology of the body: "a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge."[81] For both Scarry and Foucault, then, violence, including its representation, has the effect of objectifying the body, of extricating human subjectivities from the external social order.

The difference between Scarry and Foucault, however, lies in their respective theorisations about the body's internal response to this kind of violence. For Foucault, the body often takes on the form of a "raw material" on which violence is written or inscripted. As Teresa de Lauretis explains, Foucault's account leaves much to be desired for feminists, since it does not sufficiently

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[81] Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1975) 28.

engage with the question of agency, with the different ways in which bodies resist and react to violence.[92] By contrast, Scarry offers a theory of agency by looking more specifically at the relationship between violence, the body and the creative imagination. For instance, the sequence of actions through which the body is objectified, denied agency and severed from its own voice is described by Scarry as a process of "unmaking." In particular, the act of unmaking causes an emptying out of the body; it is a process whereby violence functions to destroy the self and its sources for self-extension. It is for this reason that Scarry depicts pain as a state which is utterly "objectless," precluding as it does the bonding of interior feelings with companion objects in the external world. And yet, paradoxically, it is this very condition of objectlessness that gives rise to a reverse process of "making," a complicated mechanism whereby the imagination invents a whole new world in which the subject is able to extend and sustain itself. Scarry writes, "Imagining is, in effect, the ground of last resort. That is, should it happen that the world fails to provide an object, the imagination is there, almost on an emergency stand-by basis, as a last resource for the generation of objects. Missing, they will be made up."[93] By way of the creative imagination, the subject is able to transform pain into an image of agency. This image is then able to lift the experience of pain away from the body and into the external world, thereby carrying some of the very attributes of pain along with it. In the same way,

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[92] Teresa de Lauretis, "The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on Representation and Gender," The Violence of Representation, eds. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (London: Routledge, 1989) 239-358.

[93] Scarry 166.

women's literature that imaginatively bears witness to sexual and racial violence is important not only because it offers the body in pain a method by which it can heal and transform itself, but also because it expresses the human body's extraordinary capacity for self-expansion and its propensity toward a larger collectivity.

Feminism of course has long recognised the intricate and important connections between women's imaginative enterprises and the reconstitution of female subjectivity. As I have already mentioned, the emphasis placed on the need to testify to violence within feminism serves to highlight an important fact: individual experiences of violence and trauma need to incorporated into a collective narrative memory that will allow traumatic occurrences to be communicated and integrated into the present. As was explained by Scarry, pain gains its power precisely because of its innate unshareability. Similarly, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub speak of the unusual silences that mark experiences of trauma. In particular, Laub writes, "Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction. The victim's narrative – the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma – does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence."[57] In other words, the inability of survivors of violence to experience, fully, traumatic events as they occur means that there is a peculiar absence at the heart of all traumatic histories – an absence

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[57] Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, by Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman (New York: Routledge, 1992) 57.

that results in trauma's inaccessibility. In light of this fact, the sharing or telling of stories may be a way for survivors to create an alternative historicity, an altogether new historical framework in which survivors are able to contemplate, evaluate and position their lives. The naming, narrating and remembering of violence can allow each of us to place in context the trajectories of violence that we, as individuals, have come to inherit and how these legacies press upon us in the present.

In many ways, the fictions to which I will shortly turn enable just such acts of survival, and it is for this reason that I am reading them together as literatures that "bear witness" to racial and sexual violence, among other things. However, if trauma is rarely experienced in the present, as Felman and Laub argue, or if it is experienced only as an absence, then the process of witnessing violence is actually somewhat more complicated than what we might at first take the acts "naming" or "narrating" to mean. My own understanding of what it means to "bear witness" resonates with the definition put forth by Sharon Rosenberg. In particular, Rosenberg explains that the call to witness can be understood as a summoning of one to attend to another's remembrance of violence or trauma, making the act of bearing witness first and foremost "a practice of listening." This process of listening, however, takes a very distinct shape: witnessing involves not simply listening for what is being testified to – the words of the testimony – but also listening for the silencings of the self. It is perhaps important to note that Rosenberg comes to this particular definition and understanding of "witnessing" through her own thinking around the Montréal massacre of December 6, 1989 – where fourteen women, all engineering students at Montréal's L'école

Polytechnique, were shot to death by Marc Lepine, a man who, in one "spectacular" moment of violence, stormed into the university and murdered these women for the "reason" that he saw them usurping roles that had been traditionally reserved for men and also due to his own "private frustrations" with a girlfriend at home.

What is particularly significant, however, about Rosenberg's account of both this event and her thinking process around the ways in which such "spectacular" or "unthinkable" moments of violence become memorialised or witnessed is that, in engaging with "other" women's experience of violence, Rosenberg finds herself, consciously and unconsciously, beginning a process whereby her own experiences become "defamiliarised" to herself. In specific, Rosenberg notes how, in thinking, talking and writing about the Montréal massacre, she begins, quite inadvertently, remembering, recalling and repetitively summoning forth her own memories of sexual abuse and incest. But the one thing that is most striking in all of this, Rosenberg writes, is her awareness of the way in which, for a long time, she had never identified her own experience of incest as either "violence" or "abuse" of any kind. Reflecting back on the reasons for this, Rosenberg explains that because she experienced incest and sexual abuse at such an early age, for so many years, and with such regularity, she had simply understood and experienced incest as part of her "identity." An ordinary and everyday occurrence, incest simply became, for her, a perceptual frame with which to view the world.

Rosenberg's account is important in terms of my thesis because it brings out the fact that sexual violence – especially familial or domestic violence – is often

silent and silenced, made secret and unspeakable not always because of its "extremity," but rather because of its very ordinariness – an ordinariness that has to do with the frequency of its occurrence and with the way it is often "not seen" even, or especially, by those who are closest to it. At the same time, her account reveals the process by which she comes to identify aspects of her life which were heretofore "natural" and "routine" as violent or abusive at the same time that she comes to see what had appeared to her at first as a "spectacular" moment of violence as quite ordinary or systemic – part of the many other routine violences and oppressions that occur in societal institutions. What Rosenberg's narrative implies and makes evident, then, is how the act of "bearing witness" involves a process of learning to see and listen to the self through other eyes and other ears: a process that, paradoxically, also involves learning to see more clearly through one's own eyes, or learning to place one's self more clearly in one's own body. For this reason, Rosenberg argues that the act of bearing witness to another involves, first and foremost, a process whereby one has to learn to listen for how a particular testimony might implicate oneself. By consequence, the practice of witnessing entails the recognition of a responsibility that signals a differentiation between a witness and what Rosenberg calls a "voyeur" or "tourist": "those subject positions that allow people to visit, pass by, even scrutinize without doing the work of thinking through the implications of a testimony for their own formation and relation to history."[65] In contrast, the fictions of Morrison, Mootoo

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[65] Sharon Rosenberg, "Intersecting Memories: Bearing Witness to the 1989 Massacre of Women in Montreal," Hypatia 11.4 (1996) 123.

and Roy impress upon their readers the immense obligations that accompany the acts of reading their works by relating seemingly singular, irrational or "extraordinary" instances of violence to other experiences that fall under the realm of the "everyday." Mostly, these fictions show that violence is not something that exists "out there," in other worlds, or in the lives of other people, outside of us; rather, it is something to be grappled with "on the inside" as well.

The first of the fictions I will discuss is Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, a novel that certainly takes up the issue of what it means to be both "witness" and "voyeur." Morrison's first novel tells the story of Pecola, a young adolescent African-American girl who grows up during the 1930s and early 1940s in a small town in Ohio. In particular, the text tells the story of how Pecola is raped by her own father. The book begins with the ominous revelation that Pecola is having her father's baby, but then the narrative recedes in time so as to explain how this terrible event has come to happen. As the reader passes through the seasonal cycles which organise Morrison's novel, he or she becomes part of a plot that leads, via flashbacks and circular storylines, to what appears to be an inevitable and inexorable conclusion: Pecola's rape and her ensuing schizophrenic madness. In many senses, violence is depicted in this novel as something that repeats itself endlessly and almost genealogically. For example, Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, is driven to alcoholism and sexual violence after having been himself the victim of extreme brutality. Likewise, Pecola's mother, Polly Breedlove, lives a form of psychosis as the servant of a white family. On the surface, then, Morrison creates an universe in which there is no immediate regeneration; her novel is a

place where even marigolds will not bloom, where violence perpetuates itself generationally and socially, where the characters are often no more than mere victims of a cruel, unstoppable history.

Indeed, Morrison's novel reveals not only the intense necessity to bear witness to sexual and racial violence, but also the sheer difficulties of doing so. By way of her fiction, Morrison asks a difficult question regarding the ethicality of telling and listening to stories of violence. What are the responsibilities that attend a witness? In fact, it is with this question of responsibility that The Bluest Eye both begins and ends.[*] The novel opens with the rather cryptic statement that "there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" and begs the question: why did the flowers not bloom? Who or what is responsible for this unusual occurrence? By the end of the story, however, we know how to interpret this statement. The primary narrator of the story, a young girl named Claudia, together with her sister, Frieda, have been fervently selling seeds all summer in the hopes of earning a brand new bicycle. But, in the end, they decide to "give up the bicycle" and, instead, to plant the seeds in response to the "gossip" they overhear about a friend of theirs: twelve-year-old Pecola, who is carrying her father's child.

In particular, the gossip pertains to whether or not the baby will live and how unequivocally "ugly" it will be if it does. Claudia, on the other hand, has a

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[*] In almost all of her interviews or musings about her own work, Morrison identifies her attempt to remember and historicize traumatic events as a particularly ethical act allowing for social change and survival. For example, in conversation with Paul Gilroy, she says of this, "It's got to be because we are responsible. . . . We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean. The past is absent or it's romanticized. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past.." See Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994) 222.

different reaction to this "terrible, awful secret." She muses, "I thought about the baby that everybody wanted dead, and saw it very clearly. . . More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live – just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls" (190). Thus, Claudia and Frieda plant the seeds as an offering made on behalf of the unborn child:

> So, it was confidence, strengthened by pity and pride, that we decided to change the course of events and alter a human life.
>
> 'What we gone do, Frieda?'
>
> 'What can we do? ... it would be a miracle if it lived.'
>
> 'So let's make it a miracle.'[6]

The planting of the seeds is an act of hope. It is something that the girls "can do." Yet, as we know, their act does not take fruition. There are no marigolds in the Fall of 1941.

Thus, while Claudia's narrative helps us to figure out *how* it has come to pass that hers is an autumn without marigolds, it still leaves open the question of *why* the flowers did not bloom. Why did the "miracle" not take place? Who is to blame for its not working, for this bleak turn of events? Let us examine Morrison's opening paragraphs for some clues:

> Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. But so deeply concerned were we with the health and safe delivery of Pecola's baby we could think of nothing but our own magic: if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right.

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[6] Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye 5-6. All further references to this text will appear in parentheses.

> It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds. Once we knew, our guilt was relieved only by fights and mutual accusations about who was to blame. For years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shrivelled and died; her baby too. (5-6)

This initial passage moves the reader through several different possibilities of who or what is responsible for the flowers not blooming. First, the passage places the burden of history on the people or characters who are the subjects of this affair. The flowers did not bloom because Pecola is having her father's baby, and the blame rests on Cholly for "drop[ping] his seeds in his own plot of black dirt." Next, the passage shifts responsibility to Claudia, Frieda and their "magic." If the flowers bloomed, then it would be because *they* "planted the seeds, and said the right wor ds over them." By the same token, since the seeds did not sprout, it was because someone planted the seeds too far down in the earth. But finally, the passage suggests that the blame rests upon the "unyielding" earth itself. For, it is not only their seeds that did not sprout; nobody's did. Similarly, in the last lines of the novel, Claudia denies that the flowers die through any fault of her own and, instead, extends the responsibility to each of us and, ultimately, to "the land of the entire country." She says, "I talk about how I did *not* plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. . . . This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not

bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live" (206).

All of these "answers," however, to different degrees, rest uneasily with the reader. It certainly cannot be Pecola's fault. She is the victim here. She is a twelve-year-old girl. Yet, we cannot *simply* assign all blame to Cholly, her father. As I will shortly explain in my analysis, the novel goes to great lengths to show how he is also, to an extent, acting out of a violence that is not entirely his own making. The idea that it is the fault of Claudia or Frieda does not make any more sense than to say it was Pecola's fault. Granted, they could have been kinder to Pecola; they could have loved her more than they did. But they too are just children. How sweet and sad at the same time that they would think that their "magic" could make such a difference. Is it true, then, as Claudia concludes, that this is all the fault of the town, the country, the society, or possibly even the fault of an unyielding earth? But this answer, too, sits uncomfortably with the reader. Certainly, a lot of blame may be attributed to "the town" or "country" or to the organisation of "society," but to resign all of these events to the fault of an "unyielding earth" appears to abdicate all responsibility altogether – the very ethics that this novel so desperately calls for. At an entirely different level, to leave such a turn of events to an unyielding earth perhaps also serves to abdicate all hope that things could ever change or that one could ever *make* things change. Perhaps, the novel's readers, despite their "grown-up-ness," need to believe, at least, in the *possibility* of Claudia's "magic" after all? Then, who indeed is responsible for what happens to Pecola?

While my reading of this text cannot in, any definitive way, answer this question – for, ultimately, I do not think that the text allows for such an answer – I would like to make some gestures as to how one might think about the various questions about power, responsibility and agency that this novel opens up. What is important is that, in this book, Morrison places responsibility neither solely on any one individual nor simply on a "society" that is external to all individual intervention. Rather, she asks us to consider the following: Who are we as individuals? What makes us so? What shapes us? What makes us do the things we do? By the same token, what or who makes up a society? What kind of agency does a culture or society exercise over us, as individuals? What kind of agency can and do we exercise over our cultures, over our environments? Any analysis of power and agency in The Bluest Eye consequently must begin by looking at the way in which Morrison insists on situating Pecola's rape within a complicated historical and social matrix of class, race, gender and sexual relations.

Set in the 1930s and 1940s, this novel documents in part the difficult and often violent history that attended the mass migration of Southern blacks to the industrial North. As the historian, George Fredrickson notes, prior to this, the image of blacks in US culture at large was closely tied to an ideology that linked blackness with a dangerous or irrepressible sexuality. As a result, institutional methods of fear and terror became the most common sociological method for both racial and sexual control. During the early twentieth century, however, a shift occurred, and a new psychological and sociological approach of whites to black presence came into prominence, one which was geared toward an increasingly

urban-oriented, bureaucratic and consumerist society. In particular, this approach involved what Fredrickson identifies as a method of "social engineering" designed to break up and neutralise the potential of black communities: namely, a process whereby a white bourgeois social model based on the values of respectability, patience, prudence and propriety was used to suppress black spontaneity and sensuality.[9] For the purposes of this analysis, what is particularly important to note is how the political model that is set up during this period is one in which racial control is administered through attendant mechanisms of sexual repression.

Morrison's novel tells of the immense physical and psychological violences that plague a society which is subjected to this model. In general, the book depicts the tragic consequences of black men and women who experience a loss of what Morrison calls "funk."[10] One example of such an individual is the character of Geraldine. Morrison describes Geraldine's life as being illustrative of the situation faced by many other black women who migrated from the deep South to the North. Having moulded their habits to fit certain bourgeois paragons of social etiquette, these women suffer from a kind of alienation that results, ultimately, in their inability to experience sexual or sensual pleasure: "She will give him her body sparingly and partially. He must enter her surreptitiously,

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[9] George M. Fredrickson, The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914 (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP, 1971) 325. See also Hazel Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the African-American Woman Novelist (New York: Oxford UP, 1987); and Evelyn M. Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, eds. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997) 170-182.

[10] See Susan Willis, "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison," Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives: Past and Present, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Anthony Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993) 308-29.

lifting the hem of her nightgown only to her navel. He must rest his weight on his elbows as they make love, ostensibly to avoid hurting her breasts but actually to keep her from having to touch or feel too much of him" (84). In a similar fashion, the character of Pauline suffers a certain loss of identity as she distances herself from her own sensuality and instead attempts to emulate the images of white beauty that she sees in movies. Of course, Pauline's life is further complicated. Having been thrown into poverty, she is forced to work as a maid in the houses of wealthy, white families. Here, she suffuses her employer's children with love but reacts violently toward her own. The profound psychological dislocation that Pauline undergoes only testifies to the barbaric ways in which sexual, racial and class oppressions work to reinforce each other – resulting in, not surprisingly, a daughter who wishes more than anything to have blue eyes.

However, one of the most dramatic and disturbing episodes in which sexual and racial violences coalesce in this novel occurs in a scene that involves not Pauline, but Cholly Breedlove. During this part of the story, the reader is taken back in time to meet Cholly when he was a naive and carefree adolescent. We see Cholly falling in love for the very first time, as he begins making love to a young black girl named Darlene in the midst of an open field on the edge of the woods. Morrison begins narrating this incident with a prose that is lush and sensuous, describing in detail the "taste of muscadine" that lingers on Darlene's lips as Cholly kisses them; the sound of "pine needles rustling loudly" in the background; the "smell of promised rain" that hangs in the air; and the soft hues of the "green-and-purple grass" in which they lie (146). Morrison's use of this

sensuous, evocative language – a language that seems to offer a new ocular vocabulary for perceiving the world – mimics for the reader Cholly and Darlene's own experience, as they discover, in each other, a beauty that they have not seen before. The narrator writes, from Cholly's perspective, "their bodies began to make sense to him" (147). Indeed, something new is becoming perceptible not only to Cholly and Darlene, but also to us, the readers, through Morrison's stunning descriptions.

But the scene is abruptly cut short. Cholly and Darlene's love-making is suddenly and traumatically interrupted by the appearance of two armed white men. Using the threat of their guns and their flashlights, the two men force Cholly to have sex with Darlene under the observation of their gaze and for the benefit of their entertainment. As the white men watch and laugh at the spectacle, they become witnesses to both Cholly and Darlene's subordination. Here, the white men assume the position of all-powerful subjects, while Cholly and Darlene are left with no subjectivities of their own: "There was no place for Cholly's eyes to go. They slid about furtively searching for shelter, while his body remained paralyzed" (148). If the beginning of this scene enacts a certain "opening up" of the senses, then this last bit focuses on the shutting down of people's sentient or perceptive apparatus: "Darlene had her head averted, her eyes staring out of the lamplight into the surrounding darkness and looking almost unconcerned, as though they had no part in the drama around them. . . . Darlene put her hands over her face" (148). This scene ends with Cholly feeling angry, on the one hand, at not being able to protect Darlene. On the other hand, he directs his anger

toward Darlene, revealing Morrison's belief that "violence is often a distortion of what, perhaps, we want to do."[1] And while Morrison by no means uses this episode to "excuse" Cholly's later rape of Pecola, the novel's presentation of this event as a "rape" of sorts aims to demonstrate how Cholly's role as rapist is complicated by his own feelings of helplessness, humiliation, emasculation, and the simultaneous distortion of his desires.

One of the reasons why this scene is so important and central in the overall narrative has to do with the way it experiments with what we might call the mechanics of "voyeurism," an experiment that actually goes on throughout the novel and is quite integral to some of the main themes of Morrison's book. In the episode where the two white men force Cholly and Darlene to perform under their observation and for their pleasure, Morrison makes us acutely aware of what happens when people are made to watch themselves from the outside, even or especially during their most intimate moments. However, Morrison's constant drawing of attention to the movement of eyes and gazes – to the act of watching or looking over as well as to the act of shutting down, to the withdrawing of sight and sense – also makes us mindful of the fact of our own reading, of our own watching, observing and witnessing of these not only horribly violent, but also extremely humiliating, events. Like the two white men with guns and flashlights, we too are witnesses of a sort to Cholly and Darlene's subordination. In light of this scene, the issue of the reader's act of watching and witnessing, and the

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[1] Toni Morrison, Interview, with Nellie McKay, Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present, eds. Henry Louis Gates and K. Anthony Appiah 397.

attendant questions of what it means for Morrison to "aestheticise" violence, and for us to take "pleasure" in this reading, arise with greater force at the end of the novel where Cholly rapes his daughter.

Through his own act of violence, Cholly, at the end of the novel, proceeds to pass on the experience of trauma to his daughter, Pecola. He forces Pecola to re-experience and re-live his former violation, and he does this in the most literal and violent way possible: he rapes her. Indeed, there are many parallels between the scene in which Cholly rapes Pecola and the earlier incident involving Cholly and Darlene. As Cholly approaches the kitchen where Pecola is standing, he becomes aware of the exact same feeling of powerlessness combined with anger that he originally experienced with Darlene: "The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, presence. . . . He wanted to break her neck – but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet" (161). Also, just as Cholly and Darlene disappear from the environment during the prior episode, Pecola dissolves in this later scene. Her response to Cholly's violation is the withdrawal of breath: "a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon" (163). The rape causes Pecola to vanish, ironically fulfilling her earlier desire to become invisible:

> "Please, God," she whispered into the palm of her hand. "Please make me disappear." She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. Yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost

done, almost. Only her tight eyes were left. (45)

Believing that self-negation is the only way to relieve pain, Pecola is the ultimate instance of "unmaking," since as Madonne Miner explains, "she attempts to shut out the testimonies of her own senses."[3] In fact, it would seem as if Pecola has no other choice in this matter, since she is given such little space for narcissistic development either within her home or within the society. The novel consequently relays the tragic effects of sexual and racial violence, especially its capacity to alienate the body from its own sensory capacities.

Yet, perhaps one of the most disturbing aspects of the last rape scene has less to do with the actual content of the narrative than with its positioning in the plot or story-line. The Bluest Eye deploys a circular narrative whereby the ending of the novel is already disclosed to the readers at the very start. Morrison begins with the secret that Pecola is having her father's baby and makes the reader curious as to how this has come to happen. In this way, Morrison certainly positions the reader as a "voyeur" of sorts: as someone who moves through the narrative with an acute awareness of one's own pleasure that doubles as horror. For example, at the moment of the final rape scene, the reader is reminded that he or she has in fact been "waiting" all along for this horrible, inexorable conclusion; this is the moment we finally come to "know" how it is that Pecola is having her father's baby. In the Afterword to the novel, Morrison comments on the particular narrative style she uses to depict this event – a style that serves to exacerbate the

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[3] Madonne Miner, "Lady Sings the Blues: Rape, Silence and Madness in The Bluest Eye," Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition, eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spiller (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 187.

reader's feelings of horror and discomfort. This part of the narrative is told through Cholly's point of view. Morrison writes that by doing so she intended to "feminise" the language of rape in order to rob it of its usual associations with a certain "male glamour of shame." The overall effect of her narrative strategy, then, is that Cholly seems almost vulnerable and tender in his act of aggression and violence. At the same time, Morrison's choice of narrative voice and perspective serves to align the reader with Cholly. The reader's primary affective point of access to the events of the rape is through Cholly, the rapist. Paradoxically, Pecola disappears once again in our very act of watching or reading.

Accordingly, part of the immense difficulty of crafting aesthetic, political or ethical evaluations of Morrison's The Bluest Eye has to do with the way in which Morrison writes a novel about the violence of rape and incest, but one where she literally *seduces* the reader into the narrative. She begins this book by telling a little secret and then makes the reader want to know more about this secret and how it came to happen. It is this very seductive power of the novel, coupled with the sensuousness of Morrison's language, that forces a host of questions not just about the necessity of bearing witness to violence, but also about some of the inherent difficulties and dangers of doing so using the forms and constraints of fiction and story-telling: What does it mean to aestheticise stories of violence? Why does Morrison choose to render such ugly events in such beautiful terms? Is this aestheticisation of Pecola's narrative appropriate to the subject matter at hand: the account of a young girl's horrific rape? Why would we, as readers, consent to

such a tale for pleasure or entertainment? What indeed is the pleasure of this text, and how does it relate to the novel's politics? How does one go about thinking about the pleasures of this text *in relation* to the violences it portrays?

I would like to suggest that, perhaps, in order to be able to answer some of these questions, it might be useful to think about how Morrison's The Bluest Eye is, of course, not *just* about rape or incest, but also about the devastating consequences of living in a racist and racialised society. Yet, in attempting to speak out against both sexual and racial violence, Morrison's novel occupies a somewhat complex positioning in terms of its reading public. Reflecting on the highly charged political climate in America between 1962 to 1969, the period when the book was being written, Morrison speaks about how, for her, the writing of this novel was an act of claiming a voice on behalf of a particular community at the same time that the publication of this novel felt like an act of "betrayal." Morrison writes that, as the "public exposure of a private confidence," this story involved the "disclosure" and the "exposure" of secrets – secrets which were both "withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community."[2] Certainly, the reception of this text and the questions surrounding early reveiws of Morrison's novel are reflective of what Morrison identifies as her dual position as both a "representative" and a "betrayer" of different social and cultural communities. These reveiws focused, often, on the depiction and characterisation of Cholly and raised issues that must be contextualised in terms of the more general concern with representations of sexual violence and race in writing by

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[2] Morrison, Afterword, The Bluest Eye 212.

African-American women authors that was prevalent at the time. Was Morrison's "sympathetic" portrayal of Cholly, particularly her depictions of the racial violences suffered by Cholly, intended to "justify" the rape of his daughter? On the other side, by focusing so intensely on Cholly's act of violence, did Morrison necessarily pander to a white American audience by encouraging racial stereotypes of the sexually-deviant black man?[*] Of course, the thing that should be so conspicuous about all of these questions and arguments is that, in pitting racial and gender allegiances against one another, what gets silenced, effectively, is the testimony of an African-American woman.

Morrison's text is not the only one to meet with such a contradictory response. In fact, the question of how the *aesthetics* of a particular novel bears upon its *political allegiances* is at the heart of almost all of the debates and criticisms surrounding many of the novels that I will discuss in the chapters to follow. For example, in the same way that The Bluest Eye was criticised for not taking a more clearly political stance, Louise Erdrich's Tracks has also been charged for what some critics see as its depoliticised posture. Comparing Erdrich's "postmodernism" to the "realism" of other Native-American writers, Leslie Silko argues that Erdrich's writing is divorced from Native historical and social reality.

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[*] See Patricia Sharpe's article, "White Women and Black Men: Differential Responses to Reading Black Women's Texts," College English 52.2 (1990): 142-51, for a discussion of some of the politics behind the reception of Morrison's text, as well as in other novels by African-American women writers, such as Alice Walker's The Colour Purple. Sharpe elucidates many of the complexities of these debates around race, sex, gender, violence and representation. For example, it is at once interesting, perplexing and distressing to note that Morrison was also exempt, in many instances, from precisely the kind of accusations that Walker and others were subject to, because Morrison was seen to be representing rape in a much more "aesthetically-pleasing" manner than these other writers.

Likewise, with M.K. Indira's Phanivamma, certain postcolonial feminist scholars saw the book as the archetypal "feminist" narrative for its critique of the injustices of an orthodox patriarchal community, whereas others saw it as anti-feminist for its valorisation of the traditional life of widow. In a similar vein, Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things has been claimed by some critics as representative of a national and regional culture at the same time that others see it as a misrepresentation of regional politics, or the "betrayal" of her own community, or conversely, a romanticisation of a particular reality. What is perhaps most striking about all of these arguments is the way in which the very "literariness" of many of these texts is seen to be at the expense of clear political views. Yet, it is my contention that it is precisely through their imaginings of beauty, aesthetics and desire that these texts make their political interventions.

To go back to my reading of The Bluest Eye, then, it is important to note that this novel is as much an indictment of violence as it is a reclamation of beauty, especially for subjectivities that are often perceived as being devoid of beauty and the transactions of desire. Describing her own experience of growing up black and female in the US – and of the small "deaths" one has to endure as such on a daily basis – Morrison says:

> It wasn't that easy being a little black girl in this country – it was rough. The psychological tricks you have to play in order to get through – and nobody said how it felt to be that. And you knew better. You knew inside better. You knew you were not the person they were looking at. And to know that and to see what you saw in those other people's eyes was devastating. Some people made it, some didn't.[5]

[5] Toni Morrison, "A Conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison," Conversations with Toni Morrison, ed. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 199.

Morrison's words illustrate the way in which certain kinds of "psychological splitting" often have to do with being made to view oneself, always, from the "outside" – that is, from a vantage point that is not one's own but that belongs to another. Morrison's task as an artist is to help think about, challenge and write back to the internalisation of inferiority originating from being subjected, on a continuous basis, to such an "outside gaze."[4] Morrison's account of Pecola and her desire for blue eyes poses the question: What is it like to always see oneself from an "outside point of view" and what happens when one internalises this gaze? Pecola's situation, her resulting madness or "schizophrenia," may be the result of the extremity of her situation: her immersion in an unusually disfigured and disfiguring family. Yet, it is but one extreme enactment of the kind of demonisation that transpires at all levels in a society ridden with countless "silent" or "invisible" occurrences of violences based on race, class, gender and sexual orientation, among other things. One of the reasons that Morrison writes this novel, then, is to explore how even these very "ordinary" acts of violence and discrimination can have quite crippling effects on those who experience such violence on a routine basis.

For all of these reasons, The Bluest Eye remains today, twenty-nine years after its original publication and thirty-seven years following its inception, a

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[4] Important accounts of the ways in which such internalisations work include: Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, trans. Charles Markhamn (New York: Grove P, 1967); Jean-Paul Sartre, Anti-Semite and Jew, trans.George Becker (New York: Schocken, 1948); Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1985); I am also indebted to Karin Cope's "To See What You Felt in Those Other People's Hearts" (Unpublished Paper, 1999) for an account of how fiction speaks to, through and against such instances of "othering."

powerful testament to these invisible, silent, silenced and silencing experiences. At the same time, in her Afterword, Morrison talks about the ways in which this novel still does not quite adequately account for Pecola's subjectivity. She says, "One problem was centering: the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. My solution – break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader – seemed to me a good idea, the execution of which does not satisfy me now. Besides, it didn't work: many readers remain touched but not moved."[9] Specifically, Morrison continues to be dissatisfied in her ineffectiveness at giving Pecola's "madness" – her profound dislocation of self – space within the main narrative structure such that the fact of Pecola's subjectivity becomes, simply, "a kind of outside-the-book conversation." For this reason, Morrison writes that the novel did not, in the end, "handle effectively the silence at its center: the void that is Pecola's 'unbeing.' It should have a shape – like the emptiness left by a boom or a cry."[10] What are the ways of bearing witness to such a silence? How does one give presence to the pains and pleasures of which this story does not or cannot speak? Where might we find evidence of the tales that lie outside of this narrative, but that shape the story just the same?

Two recent fictions that have taken up precisely such a challenge are Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things.

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[9] Morrison, Afterword 211.

[10] Morrison, Afterword 215.

Both of these first novels seek to give shape to silences and voids that often lie outside of narrative and sometimes even language itself. In fact, like The Bluest Eye, both Cereus Blooms at Night and The God of Small Things may be read as "incest narratives." And yet, if they are read as such, it is important to note the ways in which they also rewrite, reconfigure and re-member Morrison's narrative trajectory, particularly through their somewhat more complicated or nuanced understanding of what renders certain experiences "unspeakable." As a result, these novels, bear witness not simply to the violence of incest, but also to a whole range of desires and yearnings that often fall outside the bounds of the possible.

Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night is set on the fictional Caribbean island of Lantanacamara and its main character is a Indo-Caribbean woman by the name of Mala Ramchandin, who after sustaining several abandonments, losses and traumas, descends into a madness not unlike Pecola's. When the novel opens, we find Mala in a nursing home, where she has regressed to a state of almost complete silence and arrest. She comes alive only in relation to a world of insects, birds and flowers. Mala, like Pecola, is a survivor of incest. And just as Pecola experiences life schizophrenically, Mala replays scenes of childhood over and over again in her head such that she lives simultaneously in multiple times, places and realities. Having isolated herself from all forms of human contact, she exists in a world of memory and imagination. In this way, Mootoo's novel quite effectively paints a picture and gives shape to the kinds of dislocations that accompany experiences of extreme violence, and often, experiences of incest.

Mootoo traces the "beginnings" of Mala's story back to the experiences of

her father, Chandin Ramchandin. The Ramchandin family belong to an Indo-Caribbean community whose narrative bears witness to the history of indentured labour and missionisation on the islands. After the British abolition of slavery in the 1830s, labourers were brought to the Caribbean from India, China, Malaysia and other Asian countries in order to provide cheap labour on the plantations. They were subsequently left stranded on the islands after the British reneged on their contracts, and so formed their own communities and cultures. Cereus Blooms of Night is thus, in part, a genealogical investigation of the multiple displacements, both interior and external, that this history entails.[5] The book opens with the story of how Reverend Thoroughly, a British missionary who has set up a school and a church for the Indians on the island, takes on the task of "educating" and "civilising" Chandin, the young boy. Chandin is thus dislodged from his home and his family and begins living with the Reverend's family, which includes their beautiful, young daughter, Lavinia. Soon, Chandin falls in love with Lavinia: a love that is the cause for all the scandal and traumas to follow. When Chandin declares his feelings of love for Lavinia in front of the Reverend, Chandin is chastised for his shameful desires. Of course, it is clear that the real reason why Chandin's love is forbidden has to do with its inter-racial implications. Despite the extent to which Chandin becomes part of the Reverend's family, he can never, truly be one of them because of vast and fixed racial boundaries. At the same time, Mootoo gives this story an interesting twist. The reason that the Reverend

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[5] See S. Mintz, "The Caribbean as a Socio-Cultural Area," Journal of World Literature 9.1 (1965).

gives for why Chandin's love cannot be acted upon brings up the corollary to the rule of desiring outside of one's "race," or one's "biological category": the taboo against desiring *within* one's family. The Reverend asserts, "You cannot, must not, have desire for your sister. That is surely against God's will."[7] Thus, the Reverend renders Chandin's desire as incestuous and therefore wrong. Of course, the fact that Lavinia later ends up in love with and engaged to her "cousin" is something that is rather hastily glanced over by Reverend Thoroughly. In part, then, Mootoo's purpose in beginning her story in this way is to demonstrate the extreme sorts of shame, guilt and distortions of desire that arise from a very complicated history involving a certain convergence of discourses on race and sexuality. Chandin's desire for an individual not of his own race is seen as something entirely immoral and unthinkable amidst the historical and cultural milieu in which he lives, and so, in a paradoxical and complicated fashion, this story serves as an opening for Mootoo to initiate a process of locating desires which, because they fall outside of certain normative categories of knowing and fashioning the self, are rendered unspeakable.

In this way, Mootoo's novel is much like Morrison's. Both books situate the violence done to their central characters within an elaborate matrix of race, gender and sexual relations. It is difficult to unequivocally "hate" or condemn either Cholly or Chandin, given the way that they also seem to be responding to the violences that surround them. The paradoxes inherent in these characters,

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[7] Shani Mootoo, Cereus Blooms at Night (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1996) 37. All further references to this text will appear in parentheses.

however, do not take away from our understanding of the violences done to either Pecola or Mala; rather, the characterisations in these novels provide the reader with a fuller, though much more complex, picture of the contexts in which violence takes place. But, while in The Bluest Eye the full complexity of Pecola's own narrative is glimpsed only in the very brief outside-of-the-book conversation, Cereus Blooms at Night incorporates the conversation that takes place "outside" of Morrison's novel into the very centre and body of its text.

Through its circuitous narratives, its evocative language, and its many and dense silences, Cereus Blooms at Night makes space and makes palpable a subjectivity that is radically split. Consider, for instance, the passage that depicts Mala's descent into silence:

> In the phase just before Mala stopped using words, lexically shaped thoughts would sprawl across her mind, fractured here and there. The cracks would be filled with images. Soon the inverse happened. A sentence would be constructed primarily of images punctuated by only one or two verbalizations: a noun tentatively uttered in recognition, a descriptive word confirming a feeling or observation. A flock of seagulls squawking overhead might elicit a single word, *pretty*. That verbalization, she came to understand, was not the feeling itself but a name given to the feeling: *pretty*, an unnecessary translation of the delight she experienced seeing the soaring birds. Eventually Mala all but rid herself of words. The wings of a gull flapping through the air titillated her soul and awakened her toes and knobby knees, the palms of her withered hands, deep inside her womb, her vagina, lungs stomach and heart. Every muscle of her body swelled, tingled, cringed or went numb in response to her surroundings – every fibre was sensitized in a way that words were unable to match or enhance. Mala responded to those receptors, flowing with them effortlessly, like water making its way along a path. (126)

The extraordinary strangeness and beauty of this passage is derived, in part, from the ways in which it counters so many of our assumptions about what silence is.

Ordinarily, silence is imagined in terms of a void or absence: the absence of words or eloquence. By contrast, the process of becoming silent here, in this passage, is shown to be a rather complex, involved and elaborate. Silence is not static; it is fluid and flowing, like water along a path. It is active, reactive, attentive to its environment, and even in communion with its surroundings. In this novel, silence is, perhaps, a greater eloquence than speech.

Accordingly, Mala's silences and silencings take up space, take up time, ask for more room in the same way that snails, insects, foliage and dust suffuse the garden and house in which she lives. Even Mala herself proliferates. She is never just one person; rather, she lives in multiple times, places and realities. For example, throughout the novel, Mootoo renders Mala's split subjectivity palpable by giving Mala two names: Mala stands for the older woman, while Pohpoh signifies the young girl who "sacrifices" herself to her father every night in an effort to protect her little sister, Asha, from the same pain. At times, Mala and Pohpoh are two distinct characters: "Mala wished that she could go back in time and be a friend to this Pohpoh. She would storm into the house and, with one flick of her wrist, banish the father into a pit of pain and suffering from which there would be no escape" (142). But at other moments, it is not so easy to differentiate between the separate aspects of Mala's personality: "Pohpoh wondered which was her true self – the timid, gaunt, unremarkable girl staring at her, or the one who dared to spend nights doing what no one else ever dared to do" (158). In fact, there are many times in the novel when past and present are completely obscured and tangled within Mala's imagination. One example of this

blurring takes place in a scene where Mala, sitting in her garden, relives the time when Pohpoh escaped from her room at night to venture into another house: "A smile of triumph lit up Mala's face. She had relived this scenario so often that even she did not remember how much of it actually took place – whether it took place in the day or night, whether she was accompanied by Asha, whether she actually entered a house, whether she was ever caught" (159). Of course, it is precisely such confusions, overlappings and metamorphoses of identities and experiences that help readers to better "sense" the kinds of "madnesses" – the various dislocations or disruptions of identity – to which this novel bears witness.

Perhaps, one of the reasons why Mootoo's fiction "works" has to do with the author's nuanced understanding of "witnessing": an understanding that defines witnessing not simply as a "speaking out" of silence, but rather as the act of giving presence to a reality that is embodied by many other factors than mere spoken or understood language. Moreover, in Cereus Blooms at Night, this act of giving presence to aspects of the self that are previously "unseen" or "unspoken" is shown to require two bodies. Witnessing is thus always a reciprocal act that takes place *between* people. For example, Mala's strange silences are finally recognised not simply as absences, but rather as eloquent and unique modes of expression in the eyes of Tyler, Mala's nurse and the narrator of this tale. Unlike the other nurses, Tyler begins to empathise with Mala and thus discovers aspects of her identity that others are not able to see. Peering into her face, he notices that her skin, which he first expects to be dull and grey, is actually the colour of "ochre, like richly fired clay." Touching her for the first time, he finds out that her hair is

not "coarse and wiry, qualities that would have fit the rumours," but instead "soft and silken" (11). In a similar vein, Mala's once unintelligible sounds of "crying, moaning, wailing and sighing" become, to Tyler's increasingly tuned ears, a beautiful form of "humming," a skilled, "high-pitched, pulsing tremolo," that perfectly mimics the songs of birds and crickets (24). Consequently, Tyler's function in this story is to serve as an interpreter. At the same time that he allows Mala's silences to have a presence of their own, Tyler translates her reality for others who live outside of it.

In turn, Mala allows certain aspects of Tyler's self, which are initially silent, to find expression as well. In fact, Tyler is able to empathise with Mala because he too feels like an "outsider" (6). The only male nurse in all of Lantanacamara, Tyler breaks conventional gender roles such that the rest of the nurses ridicule him and leave him only menial tasks to perform. Mala's arrival, however, changes his position; he assumes responsibility for her and becomes her primary care-giver. At the same time, Tyler finds that, in Mala's presence, he is forced to attend to aspects of his self that he had not fully experienced up until that point. Mala's silence provokes Tyler to listen to his own silencings: "I became acutely conscious of my movements and the subtleties of my tone, which may have been all that communicated with her" (16). In particular, Mala helps Tyler to begin a process of gender transformation, presenting him with the nurse's uniform that he secretly desires to wear. By the end of the novel, new communities and socialities are born, and these identities cross normative, regulative definitions of both gender and sexual orientation. Tyler, who is now able to express his feminine self, falls

in love with Otoh, a girl who has become a boy. In turn, their love and recognition of each other allow them to know aspects of their own selves which had previously remained unexplored.

The stories of Mala, Tyler and Otoh thus point to the ways in which identities do not come into being simply through speech or direct representation, but, as well, through the witnessing of another. Not surprisingly, Mootoo, via Tyler the narrator, opens Cereus Blooms at Night with a meditation on the novel's sense of its own audience and the modalities of address that the narrative employs. Tyler says that "by setting this story down," he is "placing trust in the power of the printed word to reach many people." More specifically, it is his "ardent hope" that the desired Asha Ramchandin, Mala's little sister, "will chance upon this book, wherever she may be today, and recognize herself and her family." Addressing the reader, he continues, "If you are not Asha Ramchandin – who could, for all anyone knows, have changed her name – but know her or someone you suspect might be her or even related to her, please present this and ask that she read it" (4). Similarly, in the last lines of the novel, Tyler, speaking on behalf of Mala, writes, addressing Asha, "We await a letter, and better yet, your arrival. She expects you any day soon. You are, to her, the promise of a cereus-scented breeze on a Paradise night" (249). Throughout the novel, the cereus flower is an image for the possibility of change or transformation. Although weedlike and unremarkable for most of the year, the cereus flower, when it blooms, is known by Mala to possess an intoxicating smell and beauty, even as its blooming is always momentary. At the end of the story, all of the characters await

this moment of flowering. As such, the idea of "cereus blooming at night" represents not only the actual transformation itself, but the hope, anticipation and processes of "becoming" that precede all moments of metamorphosis. Like the central image of the cereus, Mootoo's novel may also be seen as a hopeful transmission. Cereus Blooms at Night is, above all, an address and appeal to an audience, who, through a mutual act of witnessing, will help to bring previously unimaginable or impossible encounters and identities into the realm of possibility.

Moreover, for Mootoo, an Indo-Caribbean-Canadian lesbian writer, this process of locating new possibilities for the imagining and understanding of identity is important precisely because of the transformations – personal, political, experiential – opened up by such acts of writing and reading. Reflecting autobiographically, Mootoo in fact places her writing of Cereus Blooms at Night within a context of "coming out" to a large, public audience. "My recent novel, Cereus Blooms at Night, has outed me beyond any safe place," she writes. At the same time, she continues to describe the new possibilities afforded by this process:

> Not needing to hide has its rewards: when one is visible and takes pleasure in being seen, one no longer needs to use clothing as a signifier, insurance against mistaken identity. One doesn't have to perform the part, either. . . . I used to wonder, and was sometimes asked, if I "became" lesbian because I was sexually abused as a child. Was it because I wanted to shake a fist at my father and avenge my mother? Because I wanted the freedom and power that my father and other men flaunt? Or did I simply come into the world with an eye for the girls? Content as I am these days, those questions and their answers no longer interest me. What does is the potential inherent in recognizing the finer details, the shapes and patterns of my desire. . . . The monologue addressed to my father has ended."[1]

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[1] Shani Mootoo, "Photo-Parentheses" Desire in Seven Voices, ed. Lorna Crozier (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2000) 123.

What is important and unique about Mootoo's autobiographical and fictional writings is how her "monologue" or what she also refers to as her "silent communiqué" with her father is not simply her monologue with an actual person, but also her monologue with the past, or certain scripts enacted from the past. In Cereus Blooms at Night, this burden of the patterns of the past, patterns which keep repeating themselves in an endless and incestuous fashion, is perhaps best represented, and made most palpable, in the image of the father's rotting skeleton: the father who is at once dead or absent and, yet, overwhelmingly present and very much *alive*, for example, in the form of the "smell" that seeps throughout the house, or in the form of the spectral actions attached to various characters of the novel. Consequently, what is particularly interesting about Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night is the way in which the novel must go back, as I have mentioned, to the story and question of "Chandin's origins" at the same time that the writing of this tale involves putting these questions to rest. Thus, the story begins an unravelling of the past and past scripts in order to come to a place in the present where these no longer have the same hold. Aiming for a certain opening up of the future through its re-working of the past, Cereus Blooms at Night creates possibilities out of impossibilities, bringing into being new racial, gender, sexual and social identities that, in many ways, do not, as yet, exist.

Like Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night, Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things is also a novel that attempts to imagine impossible identities, loves and relationships into the realm of possibility. Set in the South Indian state of Kerala in the 1960s, Roy's novel paints a vivid picture of a landscape where

Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, a strong Marxist government as well as a deep-rooted caste system all jostle up against each other. But more particularly, The God of Small Things, using a narrative lens that reflects a child's perspective of the world, relays a tale about two-egg twins, Estha and Rahel, and the traumatic consequences of a pivotal moment in their lives: the accidental death-by-drowning of their English cousin, Sophie Mol, and the various other tragedies that surround the family in the aftermath of this occurrence. These tragedies include the ostracisation of the twins' mother, Ammu, a divorced woman who is found out to be having a romantic relationship with Velutha, the untouchable handy-man who works at her father's factory; the brutal death of Velutha at the hands of police, an event that is witnessed first-hand by the twins; and finally the separation of the twins, as Estha is sent away to Bengal to live with his violent, alcoholic father. Like the other novels examined in this chapter, Roy's novel tells a story of the costs of those terrible silences and secrets that take shape inside families and communities, and of what happens when these traumas are witnessed by society's most vulnerable members.

My purpose in including The God of Small Things in this chapter, however, has even more specifically to do with the way in which Roy's novel is, among other things, an "incest narrative" like the previous two novels. But, it is a slightly more unusual one, I would say, than either The Bluest Eye or Cereus Blooms at Night. In contrast to the fictions by Morrison and Mootoo, both of which focus on the violence of fathers raping their daughters, Roy's book, at the near-end of its narrative, recounts a brief love scene between a brother and a sister – and twins at

that. Estha and Rahel, after twenty-three long years of silence and separation, re-encounter one another amidst the shadows of their dark, mossy childhood home:

> She whispers. She moves her mouth. Their beautiful mother's mouth. Estha, sitting very straight, waiting to be arrested, takes his fingers to it. To touch the words it makes. To keep the whisper. His fingers follow the shape of it. The touch of teeth. His hand is held and kissed. Pressed against the coldness of a cheek, wet with shattered rain. Then she sat up and put her arms around him. Drew him down beside her. They lay like that for a long time. Awake in the dark. Quietness and emptiness. Not old. Not young. But a viable die-able age. They were strangers who had met in a chance encounter. They had known each other before Life began. There is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that (in Mamachi's book) would separate Sex from Love. Or Needs from Feelings.[3]

Part of what is so remarkable about this passage has to do with the fact that incest, as it takes place between Estha and Rahel, is not violent as in the previous two novels, but sad. By this point in the story, Estha has become utterly mute; he no longer uses words and so his only means of communication is via his body. As a result, incest is the result of a huge and desperate loneliness that only Estha and Rahel know: things perhaps that they experience on their own, but can only verify in relation to one another. As the narrator of the story writes, "But what was there to say? Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together liked stacked spoons. . . . Only that they held each other close, long after it was over. Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief" (311). In contrast to Mootoo and Morrison's novels, then, where the incest is as much an act of force and power as it is of desire, Roy's rendition of incest

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[3] Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things (New York: Random House, 1997) 310. All further references to this text will appear in parentheses.

does not contain all of the usual elements that make incest such a brutal or even "spectacular" act. Instead, Roy's scene paints a picture of an encounter that is in fact the very opposite of violent. There is a tenderness, for example, in the way that Estha and Rahel hold each other afterwards. The falling of rain in the background echoes the falling of tears. The softness of Rahel's skin, wet with tears and rain, the hushed whispers, and even the description of all shadows and silhouettes in that cool, still, dark room all serve to create an atmosphere of gentleness, not aggression. Roy portrays incest through a language of sensuousness, even of sensuality. At the same time, incest in this novel is not simply depicted as pleasurable and exotic; rather, it comes to pass as arising out of Estha and Rahel's need to assuage one another's grief – their need to experience and touch one another's wounds.

Of course, it also the very sensuality of this passage, not to mention the atypical nature of the relationship between Estha and Rahel, that makes incest in this novel such a difficult "event" to theorise – perhaps even more difficult than the depictions of incest in the previous two novels we examined. For this reason, despite the provocative nature of this scene and despite the pivotal place that this incident occupies in the narrative, the fact of incest has gone more or less unremarked in all of the initial reviews or commentaries published about this novel to date. At the same time, Roy's book has been the source of a great deal of controversy within both intellectual and popular discourses around a whole host of other issues having to do with what this novel seems to say about sexuality, morality, culture and politics. Kerala's Chief Minister, E.K. Nayanar, for example,

attacked the novel both for its depiction of sexuality and for its "anti-Communist venom," maintaining that these were the only reasons for Roy's acclaim in the Western world. To add to matters, in June of 1997, an Indian lawyer, Sabu Thomas, filed a public interest suit claiming that the novel was "obscene" due to its representation of the sexual relationship between Ammu and Velutha. Thomas, who requested the "removal" of this last scene from the book, maintained that his opposition to the novel had to do with its "graphic" description of the sexual act; yet, it is clear that his fury was directed not simply at the novel's eroticism, but more particularly at its depiction of a sexual union between an untouchable and a factory-owner's daughter. The law-suit thus drew attention not just to the novel's sexual politics but also to its caste politics – and to the relation between these. Interestingly enough, the connections between class, caste and sex made by Roy's novel is the source of a different sort of problem among leftist postcolonial critics and intellectuals. Is Velutha's sexualisation, his figuring as the object of Ammu's desire, in the very last scene of the novel an example of the ways in which lower castes are "exoticised" only to have their political realities dismissed? Whether the criticisms of this book come from the "left" or the "right," what seems to be at stake in any reading of this novel is the question of Roy's aesthetics, or more particularly, Roy's use of a specifically sensuous and sensual aesthetic style, and its relationship to things like culture, or politics or morality. Does the aestheticisation that takes place in the novel occur at the expense of politics or of a clear political and/or moral stance?[3]

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[3] See Aijaz Ahmad, "Reading Arundhati Roy *politically*," Frontline 8 August, 1997, 103-08.

It strikes me as interesting that few of the critics who speak about the novel's "sexual politics" delve into any kind of deep discussion over the incestuous encounter between Estha and Rahel: rather, both critics and defenders of Roy's work focus almost exclusively on the love scene that transpires between Ammu and Velutha. Of course, part of the huge silence could be attributed to the "unspeakability" of incest. But what is this unspeakability exactly? In our analysis of the last two books, for instance, we drew upon feminist theorisations of violence that talked about the way in which incest, or rather violence, takes away speech. In fact, we looked at how violence destroys not just a person's speech, but her whole sense of self. Yet, unlike the previous two novels, as we have already noted, incest in The God of Small Things is not a violent occurrence. It seems that "incest," as it takes place in Roy's book, cannot be addressed through the terms and language of second-wave feminism alone: at the same time, it must also bear upon feminist theorisations of incest and violence. The "unspeakability" of incest in this novel is not quite the same as it is in the others. Or is it? What precisely is Roy's argument about the relationship between sexuality, culture, desire, love and violence?

Ahmad, the well-known postcolonial critic, while initially approving of Roy's mastery of language, criticises Roy's book for its representation of communism. Ahmad argues that this anti-communist sentiment allows her to write a story that is essentially a tale of private life and nothing more. Roy's novel can only register resistance in the private realm, more specifically in the realm of the erotic, and not in the public domain. Brinda Bose's "In Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things," in Ariel 29.2 (1998), 59-70, offers a good rebuttal to Ahmad's piece by arguing that, in terms of a feminist framework, the individual or personal transgressions that the novel depicts are also political choices – that the erotic is also a domain of politics. While, in general, I agree with Bose's arguments, her essay focuses largely on the sexual relationship between Ammu and Velutha, and does not adequately address the theme of incest. In part, this is because Bose's analysis of the novel ultimately reinforces the public/private dichotomy that she initially sets out to critique by viewing "politics" – or rather "transgression" – solely as a matter of "choice" and rationality.

There is a phrase that keeps repeating itself through The God of Small Things. It occurs in several different places, but for the most part, it goes like this: "They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much." Speaking of love and its boundaries, this incantation which crops up at different points in the narrative summarises a novel which, in Roy's own words, is "not about history," but rather about "biology and transgression."[8] The lesson conveyed by this phrase about love's laws – a lesson that is also about the transgressive potential of desire – of course plays itself out in numerous different ways in the lives of the characters of this novel. Most obviously, we can see the reverberations of such a lesson in Ammu's life and experiences. Strong-willed, independent and spirited, Ammu is a woman whose choices in life insist on breaking all the rules and boundaries that society has placed on her and her desires. First, as a Syrian Christian woman, she defies her community and her religion by marrying a Bengali Hindu man. Then, she proceeds to divorce him, bringing even more shame upon herself. Finally, and most shockingly to the people around her, she falls in love with Velutha, the untouchable or paravan: a liaison which, in many ways, inhabits the realm of the "unthinkable" even in modern India. In fact, Ammu's love is a love that seems to know no boundaries. She is a person whose choices and decisions in life are guided solely by her desires. Yet, in a society that insists upon placing strict rules around such desire, Ammu's actions result in the death and destruction of the world around her: for Velutha, for the twins, and ultimately for herself.

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[8] Arundhati Roy, Interview, Frontline (8 August 1997): 106-07.

If Ammu's story is a testament to the way love knows no boundaries, then Baby Kochamma's story tells of the dangerous repercussions of trying to restrict love to certain pre-established boundaries of caste, class, race or religion. Baby Kochamma is the twins' aunt who joins a nunnery as a young woman. Yet, she does so not because of her religious persuasions, but because of her fascination with a certain young priest. Ridden with guilt about her blasphemous feelings, Baby Kochamma does not last long in the convent and, in the end, leaves never having confessed her love to the object of her desire. Consequently, this unrequited love haunts Baby Kochamma for the rest of her life, which she spends in bitterness, resentful of other people's relationships. The fierce rage and frustration that boils inside of her is shown to be partly responsible for all of the tragedies that befall Ammu, Velutha and the twins. Thus, Baby Kochamma's story tells the classic tale of what happens when a person tries to "keep" love within oneself, within the bounds of one's own body. Love is shown, quite literally, to deform the body from the inside out.

Both Ammu and Baby Kochamma's stories thus, in their own ways, tell of love's refusal to be silent – of love's challenge to "the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much." On the one hand, this phrase reflects the way in which all of the relationships in this book bear witness to entirely "inexplicable" desires – to the intense bonds that form between people despite all of the social laws, rules or knowledge that would render these desires impossible. In an ironic way, then, the phrase about love's laws suggests that the very "biology" of love is something that both depends on boundaries and yet

crosses them at the same time. Love, by its very nature, is that which seems to cross the realm of the "how much," because it speaks to the presence of things in people that cannot be regulated, that cannot be measured, quantified, categorised or counted as such. This incalculability, or "unspeakability," is at once love's incredible power, pleasure and violence.

The relationship between the twins, then, perhaps also falls into this realm of "unspeakability" not so much because it crosses the boundaries of the "who loved who," but of the "how much." In other words, the "unspeakability" of incest in this novel has to do not only with the "unspeakability" of violence, but also with the "unspeakability" of love. As Roy herself remarks, "The book deals with both things – it deals with our ability to be brutal as well as our ability to be so deeply intimate and so deeply loving." The twins; moreover, are for her "what that is all about . . . the ability to actually dream each other's dreams and to share each other's happiness and pain." More than anything else, the relationship between the twins, as well as their relation to their mother and their extended families, tells not just about violence and love as separate entities, but about the intricate and inextricable ties between these two things, especially as they transpire in familial and other types of intimate relationships.

What I would like to argue, then, is that "incest" in Roy's The God of Small Things forces us to reconsider our very understanding of violence, love, power, sexuality and desire: a reassessment that not only impacts the way we think about the politics of Roy's writing, but also one that, when read in tandem with Cereus Blooms at Night and The Bluest Eye, forces us to re-evaluate the politics that is

inherent in these previous two works as well. Perhaps more than any other act of violence that it is possible to name, incest still today occupies the realm of the "unspeakable." Accordingly, it is the task of all three novels discussed in this chapter to come up with a language that is able to give voice to experiences which have been heretofore buried under layers of shame, secrecy, and silence. Yet, it is also my endeavour in this chapter to argue that these narratives of incest do much more than simply make audible what could previously not be told. One of the reasons for choosing these three novels has to do with the ways in which incest in each of these narratives fundamentally challenges us to rethink the whole notion of violence itself and its relation to things like beauty, culture, pleasure, love and ethics. For example, violence, for many of us, is something that only a "stranger does." It is thought of as an act that is "the opposite of love" and, for this reason, we often close our eyes and refuse to see the kinds of violences that occur in intimate relationships: the kinds of daily violences that transpire between people who have moral, legal, ethical, communal, familial and even affective ties to each other. By contrast, violence, as it takes place in the three stories that I have discussed, is something that is extremely complicated, something that is not easy to clearly distinguish or separate from other aspects of living or relating. All three novels blur the lines between love and violence; between pain and pleasure; between beauty and deformity; between desire and indifference. Yet, the confusions and entanglements around violence that these stories describe must not be read, simply, as perhaps a postmodern style of aesthetics that works to depoliticise the reader's reaction toward the violences portrayed in the pages of

these stories. Rather, these novels remind us that any politics that seeks to oppose violence must also take into consideration these other facets of life and living.

Thus, if Roy's book allows for the suggestion that it is impossible to speak of love without speaking of violence also, then perhaps violence, too, and the responses to violence cannot be categorised quite so neatly or easily. This idea could consequently allow for a re-reading of novels like Cereus Blooms at Night and The Bluest Eye such that we come to a greater understanding of the complex nature of violence in these texts. In The Bluest Eye, the confusion and complexity of Pecola's feelings are touched upon, for example, in the conversation that takes place between herself and her "alter." Throughout this dialogue, Pecola keeps changing her account of what happened between her and her father as the alter interrogates Pecola about the "details" of the rape. First, Pecola denies that Cholly raped her; but then Pecola adamantly "corrects" her interlocutor when she gets her "facts wrong" about where and how and how many times it happened. Eventually, when Pecola admits to not one, but at least two instances of sexual abuse, the alter says:

> *It's all over now.*
> Yes.
> *And you don't have to be afraid of Cholly coming at you anymore.*
> No.
> *That was horrible, wasn't it*
> Yes.
> *The second time too?*
> Yes.
> *Really? The second time too?*
> Leave me alone! You better leave me alone.
> *Can't you take a joke? I was only funning.*
> I don't like to talk about dirty things. (201)

What this small, seemingly insignificant, easily skimmable dialogue points to is the extreme ways in which Pecola's feelings must be split and doubtful of what it is that she knows to be real. While Pecola abruptly cuts off further discussion on the subject, the jeering tone of Pecola's alter when she asks if it indeed *really was* horrible the second time around, combined with Pecola's extreme anger and shame in the face of such a question, suggests that there are never any easy, uncomplicated responses to sexual violence or abuse.[*] As with the example of *sati* I spoke about in the previous chapter, these narratives of incest argue that questions of subjectivity around experiences of violence must not revolve around whether or not the victim acquiesces, or how much or why; rather, the act of reading these incest narratives demands asking what this twinning of love and violence means, not just in the lives of others, but in our own.

Accordingly, all of these novels require readers not just to think about, but to *think through* the complex matrix of affective relations that shape and frame experiences of violence. For this reason, I want to argue that the complexity of these texts – their apparent lack of clear political views – is not in actuality a mark of their depoliticised stance, but rather indicative of the way in which they call for

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[*] See Dorothy Allison's "memoir" Two or Three Things I Know for Sure (New York: Penguin, 1995) for an account of some of these complexities. Among other things, Allison writes in this book about "the way you can both hate and love something you are not sure you understand" (*). See also Allison's novel Bastard Out of Carolina (New York: Plume, 1993) for a fictional account of the questions and complexities surrounding incest, as well as Ann-Marie MacDonald's Fall on Your Knees (Toronto: Vintage, 1996). For a more philosophical/historical account of incest and its complex relation to histories and structures of family, see Vicki Bell, "Bio-Politics and the Spectre of Incest: Sexuality and/in the Family," Global Modernities, eds. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995). For a psychoanalytic account of the dynamics of subjectivity in survivors of incest, see Laura Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," American Imago 48 (1991).

a better, more effective politics. What all of these novels seem to stress is that a politics against violence cannot work unless it takes into consideration the full contexts of violence, as well as the complicated, entangled interior figurations of violence. Moreover, by tracing precisely these interior landscapes, The Bluest Eye, Cereus Blooms at Night and The God of Small Things insist on not reducing persons and subjectivities, ever, to only *one* thing. Rather, these texts insist on the irreducibility of all identities. Similarly, these novels appeal to and engage their readers through reference to a kind of bodily knowledge which forces us to attend to the totality of the experience that is being narrated. The sensuous language deployed by these three authors can then also be seen as a means of evoking precisely this kind of bodily response, as opposed to a purely intellectual one, in relation to the experience of those things that are not easy to talk about, that are not even easy to think about, but that are nevertheless "known" in very deep, bodily ways. The evocative nature of all three novels asks us to attend, as well, to the totality of our experience of reading: to the ways in which our bodies respond to the narrative; to the ways the language and the artistry moves us; to the seductiveness with which these novels call to us and ask to be read. As such, the three novels examined in this chapter challenge many of the distinctions that are often made between love and violence, between pain and pleasure, or even between the real and the imagined. Yet, they appeal to us because, in their confusions and their mystifications, they are more "authentic" to the complexity of life and living than purely scientific, or even sociological, categorisations of reality would allow. And while I would say that all three novels are deeply ethical in

nature and in purpose, their ethical force is derived precisely from the fact that they do not offer any simple ethical solutions or easy moral "lessons." They raise consciousness about violence; yet they leave it to each of their readers to determine his or her own way out. As such, these are not novels to be "passed by," but narratives and stories that we must "pass through" again and again. It is in such rites of passage that we are reminded: violence cannot simply be the problem of "other" women, something external to our own lives, if these stories have the power to reach and touch each of us, right here, on the inside.

CHAPTER 3

From Ghosts to Ancestors:
Genealogy, Memory and the Hauntings of History

The title of this chapter is derived from the work of the psychoanalyst Hans Loewald who wrote about the ways in which the "ghosts" that haunted his patients could be transformed into "ancestors" over the course of the therapeutic process.[85] Loewald claimed that this practice of dispelling spirits involved, first, reawakening them – or bringing them into conscious light within the contexts of therapy – and, next, relegating them to "history" so as to allow the person more flexibility in the present. Loewald's notion of turning ghosts into ancestors serves as a potent metaphor for thinking about what it is that the two novels about to be considered in this chapter do. Although rooted in very different cultural and historical frameworks, Louise Erdrich's Tracks and M.K. Indira's Phaniyamma share a common purpose: that of bearing witness to the legacies of an un-named or un-claimed past. Both novels, moreover, map the ways in which certain processes of literary and bodily transmission are able to transform such hauntings of history and genealogy into an account that is then more easily understood, incorporable and able to be acted upon in the present.

At first glance, Erdrich's and Indira's fictions might appear to have little in common. Tracks is set amidst the vastness of the North Dakota plains, and it testifies to the history of loss and displacement faced by Native peoples in North

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[85] Hans Loewald, "On the Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis," International Journal of Psycho-Analysis 58 (1960): 29.

America during the first decades of the twentieth century, specifically the Anishinabe. The backdrop to Phaniyamma, by contrast, is a small village of the Indian sub-continent, located in the Southern state of Karnataka. This novel spans both the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in order to document a world caught between the forces of colonialism, anti-colonial nationalism and the particular orthodoxies of a local Brahmin community. While the central character of Tracks is the wild and stormy Fleur Pillager, Phaniyamma tells the tale of the tiny, modest and disciplined child-widow whose name the novel bears. Even stylistically, the two texts are worlds apart. Erdrich writes with a prose that is lush and profuse, with words that seem to overflow from the page and into the reader's mouth. Indira's novel, a text that comes to us through translation and that is therefore removed from its North American readership by layers of mediation and distance, is sparse and skeletal in comparison. And yet, despite the wide cultural, geographical and linguistic gulfs that separate these two novels, both Tracks and Phaniyamma are important to this thesis because of the shared, and quite profound, way in which these texts speak of the imagination's ability to bear witness to the lives of women who have been erased from history, particularly by the political events of conquest and colonisation. Reading these two works side by side thus forces us to consider one of the things often at stake in such literatures of witness, memory and genealogy: namely, the way in which the disappearances of the past are often witnessed by the generations who inherit their legacies. At the same time, both novels demonstrate the very real, tangible and even healing effects that these acts of witnessing history can have on the

present. It is for this reason that I am describing these novels as works involved in the transformation of ghosts into ancestors. For, if the notion of "ghosts" refers to the hauntings of history and genealogy, then these novels provide an account of this past where such "ghosts" are at once honoured, given form, given space, claimed and named as one's own, but also laid to rest.

The idea of the ghost has of course provided a powerful image, both across cultures and across time, for the way in which past violences come to disturb or preoccupy the present. The anthropologist, Robert Hertz, was one of the first in his field to observe that, even in very divergent types of civilisations, the notion of ghosts often went hand in hand with those deaths that were uncontainable by a particular society. It was Hertz's belief that "when a man dies, society loses in him much more than a unit."[8] Thus, according to Hertz, for the most part, funeral rites are society's way not just of accounting for such passings, but also of restoring the loss of faith that accompany such wounds. As social events themselves, rituals of collective mourning commemorate the connections and attachments that bind people together in life and in the face of death. However, Hertz also made note of a peculiar class of deaths that most societies had great difficulty claiming – for example, accidental deaths, deaths caused by drowning, deaths associated with childbirth, suicides and other such occurrences where an individual is violently or shamefully torn from society. In such cases, Hertz observed, customary funeral

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[8] Robert Hertz, "The Collective Representation of Death," Death and the Right Hand, trans. Rodney Needham and Claudia Needham (Aberdeen: Cohen and West, 1960) 78. See also Michael Taussig's discussion of Hertz's work in Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987) 370-73.

rites are often suspended such that the person's death "has no end" and he or she is condemned to "roam the earth forever." Using a similar sort of language, the psychoanalyst, Nicolas Abraham, speaks about a special class of patients who seem to carry the "tombs" of their ancestors in their own unconscious. Like Hertz, Abraham remarks that most of these "ghosts" or "phantoms" have either to do with people who have been shamed during their lifetime or those who took unspeakable secrets to the grave. In such cases, the patient "appears possessed" not by his own unconscious, but by the gaps, concealments or silences of another, usually a predecessor or a loved one from the past.[87] In both Hertz and Abraham's accounts, then, the idea of the ghost conjures up a powerful image for those hauntings and disturbances that get passed down through history, from one generation to the next, as the inheritances of a violent or un-claimable past.

The field and practice of psychoanalysis from Freud onward is plausibly one of the places where the processes necessary to the laying of rest of such ghosts, hauntings, inheritances, or unclaimed deaths and losses have received an abundant amount of attention and elaboration. For Freud, one of the key elements to finding release and relief from the hauntings of the past was contained in the practice of remembering. However, in his lifetime, Freud described different types of remembering: various ways of putting the patient in touch with what needs to be completed from the past.[88] The first form of remembering

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[87] Nicolas Abraham, "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology," trans. Nicolas Rand, Critical Inquiry 13 (1987): 287-92.

[88] See Mark Epstein Thoughts Without a Thinker (New York: Basic, 1995) 159-202, for a very accessible overview and account of Freud's ideas on remembering. See also Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through," Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological

involved having the patient directly recall and relay traumatic events from the past in order to achieve catharsis. This view, which probably shapes the most common understanding of remembering in our culture today, presupposes a direct channel into repressed material and is based on the assumption that individuals can, in actuality, recover what it is that has transpired to so traumatise him or her. Yet, as was mentioned in the last chapter, trauma, because it is rarely experienced in the present, works itself out on the psyche precisely to render such "memories" absent. Thus, Freud found over the course of his career that remembering, as he initially understood it, was not sufficient to the task of healing. Many patients failed to remember anything of "consequence," anything which was able to unlock the secrets to their ailments. For this reason, Freud slowly began to move his focus away from a transparent past and onto the immediate present. Here, Freud noticed that, rather than recollecting past formative experiences through direct language, most patients usually reproduced such experiences on their soma, often through gesture, behaviour or in the manner of their relating. "Repeating" was the term he used to describe this other type of remembering. Following from this insight, one of the most vital contributions of psychoanalysis has been to point out the ways in which people "remember" not just through memory, but also through bodily practices.

If psychoanalysis alerts us to the connections between the practices of memory and the body, then it is in the realm of contemporary anthropology and

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Works of Sigmund Freud vol 12, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth P, 1958).

sociology that we find an articulation of the modes by which these bodily practices and memories often get passed down transgenerationally, through culture and history, from one person to another. One such theorist who looks at the important and intricate relations between memory, culture, history and the body is the sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. In his Outline of a Theory of Practice, Bourdieu speaks about the ways in which the body, through memory, functions as a locus of practices, which he terms the "habitus." In the words of Bourdieu, habitus is a bodily system of "lasting, transposable dispositions, which while integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks."[80] Bourdieu's notion of habitus imagines the body as a repository or receptacle of social, cultural and historical symbolism such that the physical self is at once a source of encoding memory and of schematising fundamental aspects of history. Moreover, cultural memory, as it is embedded in bodily movements, images or perceptions, is preserved and passed down through the habitus. Citing the work of Bourdieu, the anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff thus observe that it makes perfect sense, then, that social groups who seek historical change, reparation or healing invest a great deal in the bodily acts of "dismembering and re-membering." This act of "retraining the memory," they write, functions to "shape new subjects as the bearer of new worlds."[81] Accordingly, what I would

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[80] Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977).

[81] John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, Ethnography and the Historical Imagination (Boulder: Westview P, 1986) 70.

like to suggest in this chapter through my reading of Erdrich and Indira's fictions is that witnessing, in the form of remembrance, has a way of re-membering those places in our bodies, or somas, where certain historical or genealogical violences have taken hold.

Certainly one of the things that is so singularly striking about Tracks and Phanivamma, and one of my main reasons for choosing to read these novels together, is their emphasis on what it means to bear witness to the life of an absent other through the acts remembering, forgetting, dis-remembering and re-remembering. As such, these novels are interestingly positioned to make interventions into debates about the relationship between memory, history, storytelling and the body. They open up questions about how historical events, particularly the political events of conquest and colonisation, become incorporated both into a culture and inside people. What does it mean, for example, to locate the "beginnings" of one's history at a point of violence or conquest? How does one begin to trace a historical memory that has been engendered by an act of violence? Finally, how does one find release from certain debilitating cycles of violence, trauma or oppression that seem to repeat themselves genealogically, socially, historically? Erdrich and Indira's answers to these questions are necessarily complex, especially given the emotional burden that the concepts of remembering and forgetting carry in cultures which have been denied a place in the official archives of political history. As Nietzsche argues, memory itself may be seen as the effect of a pain caused to the body. A controlling factor of historical and social organisation, the recollective faculty is a basic means of maintaining

certain contractual relations founded not only on an economic system of debts and promises, but also on an intricate emotional network of pain and guilt. This is what Nietzsche calls the "mnemotechnics of pain."[51] Accordingly, the privileged sectors of society often have no memory; they live in a state of constant forgetfulness, never looking to the past but only to a limitless future. By contrast, those groups who are disadvantaged within society are incapable of forgetting. Often embittered by a long history of broken promises, they are possessed by the desire to retrieve, record and relive the past, even while such groups often have little access to written records, or even to history itself.

A similar kind of awareness occurs in the fictions considered here in this chapter. These novels communicate the idea that although the act of remembering violence may involve great pain, there are certain events and legacies which simply cannot and should not be forgotten. Indeed, for marginalised groups, the possibility of breaking away from recurrent patterns of violence and loss entails more than the kind of "getting out of history" that Hayden White prescribes when he says, "It is only by disenthralling human intelligence from the sense of history that men will be able to confront creatively the problems of the past."[52] At the same time, the repetitive or genealogical representations of violence in these novels should not be read as an acquiescence to a form of historical determination. Instead, the incessant desire to return to the

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[51] Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967).

[52] Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 40.

site of trauma and to explore it imaginatively functions as a means to restage a particular confrontation. The narrative techniques of these two novels aim to find agency in an image of the past despite the inescapable weight of history. Hence, Erdrich and Indira's project is not simply that of "getting out of history," but that of constructing what Diana Fuss might call "a different historicity" [35] for a new generation of witnesses who find themselves haunted by the inheritances and "memories" of a past violence – haunted, perhaps above all, by events and experiences they know next to nothing about and cannot remember on their own.

Consequently, these two novels are also able to shift and expand upon the definition of witnessing that was the focus of the earlier chapter. As I mentioned, Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night and Roy's The God of Small Things all emphasise what it means to witness at its most basic, most immediate, most visceral level in the form of watching, observing, listening or otherwise sensing and recording, often semi-consciously, the various violences, pains and pleasures of a certain cultural or familial environment directly on the body. Erdrich's Tracks and M.K. Indira's Phaniyamma also speak about the ways in which the body serves as a witness by being the receptor and carrier of the legacies of past generations. At the same time, these novels, through their focus not only on "memory" but also on "remembrance," speak of ways in which the body is mindfully able to recall the past into the present, even through generational gaps. For this reason, witnessing in these novels is understood as an

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[35] See Diana Fuss, "Getting Into History," Arizona Quarterly 45.4 (1989): 95-108. See also Nancy J. Peterson, "History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich's Tracks," PMLA 109.8 (1994): 982-94.

active and transformative practice.

Let us then begin by looking at Erdrich's Tracks. Much like the novels in the previous chapter, all of which tried to "give shape" to the silences of their characters' lives, Erdrich's Tracks, through its wandering narrative, through the traces and tracks it leaves behind, attempts to sketch the contours of the absence that lies at the heart of its tale: the story of Fleur of Pillager. Tracks takes upon itself the task of chronicling Fleur's life through the alternating voices of Nanapush, the wise tribal elder, and Pauline Puyat, the young, eccentric Catholic convert – each the last living member of their respective clans. Nanapush begins his account of Fleur with the story of the young girl's near death from the tubercular plague that destroyed her family. Pauline's narratives resume where Nanapush's words trail off. She follows Fleur off the reservation and into the town of Argus, where they have both gone to seek work. Here, Pauline witnesses the rape of Fleur by three white men. The novel then goes on to trace Fleur's journey back from Argus to the solitary woods of Lake Matchimanito, where she gives birth to one child but eventually loses another. Tracks ultimately ends with Fleur's departure from the reservation. Forced to be an observer to the devastation of her land, Fleur decides to leave behind her home, her community and her family – including her daughter Lulu, who is subsequently taken away to a residential school. In the last pages of the novel, as Fleur disappears into the horizon, following the bends of a road that, "eventually in its course," is to "meet with government school, depots, stores . . . the plotted squares of farms,"[*] we realise

[*] Louise Erdrich, Tracks (New York: Harper, 1988) 124. All further references to this text

that her story is as much a personal saga of pain and violence as it is a collective history of loss and displacement. Through the broken narratives of Nanapush and Pauline, as well as through the silent testimonies of both Fleur and Lulu, Tracks tells the story of what it means to love a land and a people that others see as property. Above all, it speaks of the interior configurations not only of this love but also of the rage engendered by processes of history which attempt to destroy those affective ties that bind a community.

Opening in 1912, Tracks hinges around a time when native lands, culture and communities were rapidly disappearing. By this time, Catholic missionaries were a long established presence among the Anishinabe; tribes had already been restricted to reservation land; and the policy of educating native children in off-reservation government or church-run schools was functioning, more and more, to weaken ties between members of the native community.* Moreover, as Sidner Larson explains, Tracks is set during that period of history when the Anishinabe would have been coping with the effects of the General Allotment Act of 1887 and the Indian Allotment Act of 1904 – what Nanapush, in the opening narration, refers to as "exile in a storm of papers" (1). The purpose of these Acts was to divide tribally allotted lands among individual Natives. Faced with confinement on the reservations and reduced game – part of the devastation caused by the fur-trade – the Anishinabe found themselves facing yearly winter famines. On the

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will appear in parentheses.

* See Kathleen Brogan, "Haunted by History: Louise Erdrich's Tracks," Prospectus: An Annual Journal of American Cultural Studies 21 (1996): 169-92.

brink of starvation, many natives were forced to sell off large portions of reservation land to white farmers, lumber companies and land speculators, while those who refused to sell often lost the land, unable to meet the holding fees. Aside from dramatically reducing indigenous lands, these Acts, in conjunction with the forces of Catholic missionaries and residential schools, thus resulted in the fragmentation of Native tribes, families and people at a time when they were at their weakest, having been hit with disease and starvation. Larson aptly describes Erdrich's novel as, in part, an "autopsy" of this process.[*] This is a novel that endeavours, among other things, to account for, and perhaps even put to rest, the losses and deaths of a traumatised past.

As was mentioned earlier, one of the peculiarities of both individual and social traumas has to do with trauma's essential inaccessibility because of the way it effaces voice and memory. Yet, as Cathy Caruth points out, trauma is also not any simple form of "amnesia." For instance, the "post-traumatic-stress-disorders" noticed in individuals suffering from trauma after the second World War in the west involved not only amnesia, but also situations wherein the original traumatic event came back to haunt survivors in the form of phantasmal dreams, flashbacks and repetitive behaviour.[*] The evidence of such observances led trauma theorists such as Caruth, Felman and Laub to conclude that trauma survivors cannot merely forget the past; rather, they are forced to live with a moment of time that curiously

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[*] Sidner Larson, "The Fragmentation of a Tribal People in Louise Erdrich's Tracks" American Indian Culture and Research vol 17.2 (1993): 1-13.

[*] Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," American Imago 48.1 (1991): 1-11.

has no ending, that has attained no closure and that can never be "done." The uniqueness of trauma thus rests precisely in its latency: it is tied quite inextricably to the disruption of temporal or historical categories.

Following this, Caruth concludes that the impact of psychological, historical and literary studies of trauma must be the revelation that trauma is not so much a pathology of the individual unconscious as it is a pathology of history itself. Survivors of extreme violence may then be thought of as bearing the imprint of an "impossible history" on their bodies, or, conversely, their bodies become the symptoms of a history that is impossible to own:

> The final import of the psychoanalytic and historical analysis of trauma is to suggest that the inherent departure, within trauma, from the moment of its first occurrence, is also a means of passing out of the isolation imposed by the event: that the history of trauma, in its inherent belated-ness, can only take place through the listening of another.... This speaking and this listening – a speaking and listening *from the site of trauma* – does not rely, I would suggest, on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don't yet know of our traumatic pasts. In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen to the departures we have all taken from ourselves.[98]

While Caruth's idea that "trauma" or structures of "catastrophe" may be the main point of connection between twentieth-century cultures is certainly contestable, what this passage serves to highlight, in the context of my thesis, is the importance of a "listening other" in bearing witness to violence. Because survivors of trauma are unable to experience the traumatic event as it occurs, trauma is never experienced in the present. A traumatic history is therefore usually one that is

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[98] Caruth 10.

communicated belatedly, often by a witness other than a survivor. Because the traumatic event is not assimilated fully at the time of occurrence, it is experienced belatedly in relation to events, times, peoples and places other than itself. Yet, at the same time, it is via this bodily transmission that a process of historicisation can begin for survivors.

Accordingly, in Erdrich's Tracks it is important to note that while Fleur's story is the focus of the novel, Fleur herself remains conspicuously silent throughout the text. Instead, Fleur's tale is narrated entirely through the voices of others – namely, the old tribal leader, Nanapush, and the younger, restless, mixed-blood woman, Pauline. Both speak their stories so as to come to terms with Fleur's absence. Nanapush's narrative is told, moreover, to Fleur's daughter, Lulu, so that she will come to understand the loss and legacy of her mother and, in this way, incorporate Fleur's tale within a larger cultural memory. Once again, the concept of remembrance has a special resonance within this novel. All of the story-tellers in this novel refuse to release the memory of Fleur, recounting the fact and fiction of her life again and again, until it "comes up different every time, and has no ending, no beginning" (31). In this way, the multiple voices of this book, each broken and incomplete on its own, reach across the rifts, both internal and external, caused by trauma so that otherwise forgotten stories may be heard.

Thus, like Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Erdrich's Tracks emphasises the concept of what it means to communicate *another* person's experience of violence. It wrestles with the question of how trauma might affect those individuals who listen to the stories of survivors and the issue of what kind of

responsibilities might attend such witnesses when they assume their role as speakers. For this reason, the relationship that is hypothesised between Fleur and the individual narrators or witnesses of this novel is necessarily complex. Pauline, for example, imagines herself as both a double and a rival of Fleur. On the one hand, Pauline abhors Fleur because of the latter's connection to tribal values. Ignoring her native ancestry, Pauline tries instead to assimilate into white culture. In the end, she embraces Catholicism and becomes a fanatical nun. On the other hand, it is also important to note that Pauline feels a certain affinity toward Fleur. In fact, Pauline believes that both she and Fleur have received a special calling that has caused each of them to be cast out of mainstream culture, whether native or white.[*] Of course, it is Fleur's enigmatic beauty, her knowledge of ancient "medicines" and her ability to survive even death by drowning that sets her apart from all others. By contrast, it is Pauline's awkwardness, her mixed-blood ancestry, her liminal position between "native" and "white" communities, and her unusual, hybrid religious views that brand her as marginal. Nonetheless, Pauline believes that she has insight into Fleur's life because of their shared eccentricity. Accordingly, she feels compelled to give voice to Fleur's story, since Pauline, in many ways, imagines it as her own. Indeed, it is only in seeing Fleur's story that

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[*] It is of course important to note that despite Pauline's scorn for her own native upbringing, she cannot entirely escape her old way of constructing experience. For example, as Catharine Rainwater notes, Pauline's beliefs regarding such things as the supernatural are educed in part from a non-Christian frame of reference so that her particular conception of religion is deviant even within the conventions of Christian martyrology. This is most evident during her last narrative when she hallucinates wrestling with the Chippewa lake monster, but calls him Satan. See Catharine Rainwater, "Reading Between Worlds: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich" American Literature 62.3 (1990): 405-22. Similarly, Kathleen Brogan speaks of Pauline's (as well as the other characters') experiences in terms of "windigo possession," which enacts a certain "freezing" or depersonalisation of the self, as understood by Ojibway belief structures.

Pauline is able to make room for own.[109]

Pauline gives herself the authority to speak on behalf of Fleur mainly because of her unique position as the only eye-witness to two crucial moments in Fleur's life. The first of these events is the rape of Fleur by three white men. The second event, narrated through imagery that reflects and recalls the first, is Fleur's loss of her second child only moments after birthing. In each of these occurrences, what is important is how Pauline revisions Fleur's pain and trauma as her own:

> Now I dreamed particularly of Fleur. Not as she was on the reservation, living in the woods, but of those last days, of the locker where I was broken by her, pressed by her, driven like a leaf in wind. I relived the whole thing over and over, that moment so clear before the storm. ... For that reason, at the Judgment, it would be my soul sacrificed, my poor body turned on the devil's wheel. And yet, despite that future, I was condemned to suffer in this life also. Every night I was witness when the men slapped Fleur's mouth, beat her, entered and rode her. I felt all. My shrieks poured from her mouth and my blood from her wounds. (65-66)

This particular passage conveys some very important insights into the nature of

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[109] In psychoanalytic terms, Pauline's experience may be described as an instance of "projective identification," as first explained by Melanie Klein in Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946 (London: Hogarth P, 1975). Projective identification occurs when an individual experience situations or feelings that are intolerable or in some way insupportable. In order to reduce sensations of discomfort, anxiety, or perhaps even perceived and/or real censure, the individual attempts to rid him/herself of the feeling by displacing , or projecting, it onto another person or object. As David Mann writes, it is important to note that what is projected is not always something "bad" – "frequently good parts of the self may be split off and projected into another to protect the positive aspects from being destroyed by the harmful bad feelings/fantasies," and I would add, situations, circumstances and environments as well. Mann also goes on to note that those who use projective identification in order to split intolerable psychic contents remain passionately attached, often *both in love and in hate*, to the containers of the projections. Pauline's relation to Fleur can, in many ways, be seen as a complex instance of projective identification. See also Mann, "Masturbation and Painting" in Art, Psychotherapy and Psychosis, ed. Katherine Killick and Joy Schaverien (New York: Routledge, 1997) 72-83; and also Joy Schaverien, "Transference and Transactional Objects in the Treatment of Psychosis," in Killick and Schaverien 13-37.

violence and its effects on those individuals who bear witness to its experience. What is made clear by Pauline's testimony is that to witness someone else's pain is also to be touched by its power. Indeed, for Pauline the very act of witnessing is similar to the experience of being possessed by another body. At the same time, Pauline's own life and body assume forms patterned after these experiences of violence, recalling Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as an event that operates through "contagion." She writes that trauma's ability to invade and infect all those who come into contact with it is its "possibility for transmission."[101] For similar reasons, Pauline is continually haunted by the events she witnesses. Her own life, a life that almost seems to relive the pain and trauma of Fleur's rape or violation, makes one think that violence has the ability to etch itself onto the very bodies of those who bear witness. Even Pauline's martyrdom, which finds justification in Catholic transcendental theology, is bound up with this phenomenon of bodily imitation and violence. Unlike earlier saints, however, Pauline does not imitate Christ's wounds, but Fleur's.

Thus, through Pauline's story, Erdrich's text shows how violence, once unleashed, cannot be easily restrained. For example, after observing the rape of Fleur, Pauline feels as if she has to become a witness not only to Fleur but to all those who suffer. She undergoes a process of extreme depersonalisation as she attempts to absorb the losses of the entire community within her own body. She says, "I was hollow unless pain filled me, empty but for pain" (192). Eventually, self-martyrdom becomes Pauline's religion and way of life, as she subjects her

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[101] Caruth 10.

body to agonising tortures, imagining herself as a vessel through which the pain of others is able to speak. As she descends into madness, Pauline slowly begins to lose her own body and, instead, haunts increasingly the flesh of others. She notes, "I ceased to breathe and turned invisible, clear like water, thin as glass, so that my presence was not more than a slight distortion of air" (161). Yet, unlike Pecola, whose invisibility deprives her of a voice, Pauline disappears precisely in order to gain access to speech. Having cast off her own skin, she is privy to others' stories and tells these, in the form of rumour and confession, to anyone who will listen. Pauline's tragedy, however, is that she testifies, in part, against herself. To illustrate, she embraces Catholicism in order to repress both her sexual desires and her connection to tribal culture; but the perils of such repression are made palpable when she directs her emotions angrily at herself, masochistically punishing herself. In the end, Pauline attempts to shed her psychic burden by renaming herself and joining the convent, but only after first becoming pregnant, attempting to force a miscarriage and then just as violently disclaiming her own daughter after she is born. The inordinately excessive, narcissistic nature of Pauline's narrative testifies to both the danger and the impossibility of self-denial, as well as to the immensely violent consequences this type of negation has on the body. Pauline's narrative maps out, as well, the costs of a model of transcendental subjectivity that attempts to move away from the body and embodied ways of knowing.

Erdrich thus presents Pauline as an impracticable model of subjective action, even while she is an effective narrator. In part, her tragedy has to do with

the fact that she bears witness to various kinds of sexual and racial violence, but then is unable to communicate this experience to another person in a way that physically relieves her of some of her burden. As a result, Pauline assumes the position of the classic melancholic as described by Julia Kristeva: a person who is riveted to pain, who is inefficacious in making connections with the external world. For such a person, "sadness is in reality the only object."[102] At a most fundamental level, the melancholic is an individual who is incapable of experiencing love. Accordingly, Pauline is unable to open up to the possibility of positive contact, and so she remains locked in a position where she cannot transfer any of her pain, indeed any of what she feels, onto another human being. Her narrative emerges as a warning of the vital fact that insofar as trauma remains incommunicable in both verbal and bodily ways, the melancholic effects of such incommunicability is nothing less than annihilative. In this sense, the story of Pauline demonstrates the tragic consequences of being witness to violence while not being able to externalise or transport this experience of violence and anger outside of the body. At the same time, Pauline's story is, paradoxically, that of a person who can only testify to herself through others – that is, by displacing her own self-experience in the story of another.

Reflecting on the origins of her novel, Erdrich remarks that while Tracks first started out with Pauline as the principal narrator, as the story progressed, it became necessary to add the character of Nanapush in order to give "balance" to

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[102] Julia Kristeva, Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia, qtd. in "Art, Love, and Melancholy" by John Lechte in Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva, eds. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1990) 34.

the extremity of Pauline's experience and tone.[103] The novel, as published, thus alternates between the accounts of Pauline and Nanapush, the wise tribal elder, who narrates his tale to Lulu, Fleur's daughter. While Pauline tells her story to testify to a personal saga of pain and violence, Nanapush recounts his tale of Fleur in order to chronicle a larger, collective history of dispossession. For Nanapush, the story of Fleur, in particular her loss of home and land, attests to the immense struggles faced by the Anishinabe at the turn of the century. Accordingly, throughout the novel, the act of story-telling itself is described as a form of survival by Nanapush, as it is related to a process of rescuing a way of life that he sees as slowly vanishing.[104] This ancient way of life is of course symbolised by Fleur, who is described by Nanapush as the "funnel of our history" (178). Yet, Nanapush's purpose for story-telling is two-fold, and his tale is complicated by his listener, or silent interlocutor, Lulu, who has come back to the reservation very angry at her mother for having given her up to the residential schools. Thus, on the one hand, Nanapush tells his story of Fleur to Lulu because he wants to pass on to the young girl the knowledge of her ancestry – the knowledge of the traditions and mythologies that shape her – so that this heritage will survive in the present. At the same time, Nanapush tells his tale so that Lulu can begin to forgive Fleur, "the one you will not call mother" (2), and in this way come to understand the reasons behind her mother's disappearance. As Nanapush

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[103] Laurie Alberts, "Novel Traces Shattering of Indian Traditions," in Albuquerque Journal (23 October, 1998) G-8.

[104] See Jennifer Sergi, "Storytelling: Tradition and Preservation in Louise Erdrich's Tracks," World Literature Today 66.2 (1992): 279-82.

attempts to dispel and work through Lulu's rage, the dynamics of the narrative function to at once register and resolve the intense, though complicated, emotive responses engendered by histories of colonisation, violence and dispossession. It is in this sense, then, that Nanapush's narrative may be said to have a social functioning: he attempts to maintain a sense of collective identity through his efforts to bridge the gap between past and present, while establishing a continuity between Fleur and Lulu.

For this reason, most analyses of Tracks have a propensity to focus on Nanapush's narrative over that of Pauline's; they tend to argue, moreover, that Erdrich's sympathies must lie with Nanapush as he seems to provide a more holistic model of indigenous culture. Pitting Nanapush against Pauline, critics, in particular, see Nanapush and Pauline as antithetical responses to the history of native dispossession. Aligned with both Fleur and Lulu, Nanapush is most often seen as providing a positive image of the ways in which indigenous traditions are able to survive in the present amidst grave devastation.[104] By contrast, Pauline's attempts to exorcise her connections to tribal culture through her violent adoption of Christian theology are seen as the ultimate denial and betrayal of Anishinabe cultural history. Yet, I think the intensity and beauty of Pauline's narrative should alert us to the fact that Erdrich does not merely offer Pauline as a narrator in order to negate either her account or the authenticity of her tales. In fact, it is important to note that Pauline's story is not one of simple compliance or defeat. Rather, in

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[104] For example, this is the approach that Sergi's article takes, as does Sidner's to an extent.

the moments before her transformation. Pauline feels herself to be "on fire" and thus conveys the simultaneous pain and rapture of her experience. As she sheds all of her clothing, she describes herself as being at once vulnerable, "naked in my own flesh ... with no shield or weapon," in the same instance that she is "ready and strong as a young man" (201). Similarly, she describes the way she is washed with love as she enters into the convent – "I am sanctified, recovered, and about to be married . . . I will be the bride and Christ will take me as my wife, without death" (204) – at the same time that she feels Christ's "love [to be] a hook sunk deep into our flesh" (205). When Pauline finally re-names herself, she likewise notes that the "unfamiliar syllables" of her name "fit" her in the manner of a protective cocoon, even as they "crack" in her ears "like a fist through ice" (205). The extremities of such descriptions remind readers that Pauline's narrative is not there to "make [her] whole," as we might imagine it to do; rather, it serves to force us to experience the way she and others are already and implosively "cleft down the middle . . . deep inside" (195). At the same time, the violence of Pauline's narrative, a violence that is also its very beauty, testifies, paradoxically, to Pauline's tenacity – to the ways in which her conversion is anything but docile or passive. Pauline's narrative is therefore not just a testimony to the violences of colonial dispossession and conquest, but also to the anger and fury – to the interior configurations of counter-violence – that such histories of conquest necessarily meet up against. Thus, in her rage and fury, Pauline cannot simply be placed in opposition to Fleur, but must be seen to be aligned with her as well.

Yet, I would argue that the ultimate witness in this novel to Fleur's story is

neither Pauline nor Nanapush, but Lulu. Like Pauline, Lulu's attitude toward Fleur is complex: a mixture of anger, love, rejection and imitation. At the same time, to Nanapush, Lulu represents the possibility for unity and is seen as carrying the history of her entire community in her body. She is Fleur's child, but her paternal origins are unknown such that her birth acquires a mythical status. It is possible that Lulu was conceived at Argus when Fleur was raped; thus, her father may be any one of the three butcher-men. Some, however, say that she is the daughter of Eli Kashpaw, Fleur's first love upon her return to the reservation. Still, others believe that Lulu is fathered by the mysterious water spirit, Misshepeshu, who first claimed Fleur as his mistress when she drowned, but then returned her back to life. The complexity of Lulu's origins and identity is best expressed by Nanapush when he too claims her as his descendant: "There were so many tales, so many possibilities, so many lies. The waters were so muddy I thought I'd give them another stir. 'Nanapush,' I said. 'And her name is Lulu.'" (61). Named after the child whom Nanapush had lost, Lulu symbolises the possibility for renewal and continuity.

In this way, Lulu's tangled and elaborate origins emphasise the importance of kinship, lineage and identity without regarding such linkages as either fixed or determinate. On the one hand, the patterns of Lulu's life find reverberation in Nanapush's words about the way in which "power travels in the bloodlines, handed out before birth" (31). For example, we see, in another novel in the series, Love Medicine, how Lulu grows up to inherit her mother's wild, seductive personality and how she is able to pass on her mother's secret powers to her own

children and grandchildren. At the same time, Erdrich's work discloses the mysteries and confusions of identity or lineage, allowing for genealogical openings and for the realignment between peoples. Once again, this possibility for change is best exemplified by Lulu, not so much in Tracks, but in Erdrich's earlier novel, Love Medicine.[lix] In this novel, Lulu gives birth to several different children; yet, most of their paternal origins are ambiguous and uncertain. Also, it is important to note how, at the end of this novel, Lulu forges a friendship with long-time adversary Marie, who is in fact Pauline's illegitimate daughter. In this way, Lulu is able, in part, to heal old wounds between enemy clans and stop the cycle of violence from endlessly repeating itself.

Similarly, the last passage of Tracks emphasises Lulu's role as a healer. Nanapush describes her as a symbol of survival, as she returns to the land and people that sustain her:

> You were the last to emerge. You stepped gravely down, round-faced and alert, so tall we hardly knew to pick you out from the others. Your grin was ready and your look was sharp. You tossed your head like a pony, gathering scent. Your braids were cut, your hair in a thick ragged bowl, and your dress was a shabby and smoldering orange, a shameful color like a half-doused flame, visible for miles, that any child who tried to run away from the boarding school was forced to wear. The dress was tight, too small, straining across your shoulders. Your knees were scabbed from the punishment of scrubbing long sidewalks, and knobbed from kneeling for hours on broomsticks. But your

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[lix] Although Love Medicine was originally published in 1984, four years before Tracks, Erdrich states that Tracks was in fact conceived long before her first two novels: "There was no chronological plan to the books. They started with an idea. Tracks had been written years and years before. It was the very first fiction I'd ever worked on" (Alberts, G-8). Tracks is thus historically the first of a four part saga surrounding several families living in the North Dakota region, set between 1912 and 1924. Beet Queen (1986) and now Bingo Palace traces some of the same characters from 1932 to 1972. Love Medicine follows up on their lives from 1934 to 1984. Hence, Erdrich reveals the inextricable interconnectedness between different people and events, weaving complex genealogies and fates as characters reappear in successive books.

> grin was bold as your mother's, white with anger that vanished when you saw us waiting. You went up on your toes, and tried to walk as prim as you'd been taught. Halfway across, you could not contain yourself and sprang forward. Lulu. We gave against your rush like creaking oaks, held on, braced ourselves together in the fierce dry wind. (226)

Although, in this novel, Lulu does not ever speak as a witness to Fleur, she nonetheless listens to the narrative told by Nanapush and, through her own silences, she testifies to the silences of her mother. In this last passage, it is Lulu's body, her scabbed and knobbing knees, her gestures and gait, her shorn hair and her ill-fitting dress that all testify to the historical legacy of displacement faced by Fleur and the Anishinabe in general. In fact, the markings on Lulu's body are perhaps the most profound sites of witness to the greatest loss suffered by both mother and daughter: their separation resulting from the historical violences that eventually leave Fleur with no choice other than to give up her own child to a government school. In this sense, Lulu's posture of defiance and anger are all testaments to the interior structures of rage engendered by a history of conquest whose very purpose it was to break up those affective ties that bind together peoples, cultures, families and communities. At the same time, it is in the presence of such traits – Lulu's "sharp" look, her boldness, her fierce grin – that we find traces of Fleur. As such, we are reminded of the ways in which people survive and endure through others, even in their absence or disappearance. Tracks thereby speaks across the rifts, both internal and external, caused by violence, making space for otherwise forgotten stories. The indirect "testimonies" of Nanapush, Pauline and Lulu tell more of Fleur's life than any direct account could say, as each of these narrators give shape to Fleur's silence through his or

her own. In accordance, it is perhaps only by telling the story of Fleur – a telling that is also a "not-telling" – that each of these narrators are able to speak their own.

Although emerging out of an entirely different cultural context, M.K. Indira's Phaniyamma is another text that attempts to bear witness to forgotten histories. Written originally by Indira in the Kannada language, and translated into English by Tejaswini Niranjana, Phaniyamma is at once a novel, memoir, biography, ethnography, oral testimony and a valuable source of history. Based on the "true story" of the author's great-aunt and told in the voice of the author's mother, this text recounts the life of a child widow living in a small village in the state of Karnataka during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; that is to say, in a world caught between the modernising impulses of the colonial state and an orthodox Brahmin community that views widowhood as the ultimate impurity. The novel thus reveals how the encounter between colonialism and nationalism in India functioned to map out its violence onto women's bodies, especially those that did not fit into normative sexual roles. It also illustrates how these women suffered from a sort of physical disembodiment attributable to certain disciplinary forms of bodily regulation that became ritualised within the culture and then began to act upon women's subjectivities through a combination of sexual, caste and religious prescriptions. In this way, the novel helps us to better conceive the complicated ways in which gender, racial and national violences came to be articulated through one another in colonial and postcolonial spaces. As such, the narrative operates in a "documentary" capacity, as it testifies to the "realities" of

women's everyday experience under colonialism and in its wake. At the same time, I will argue that Phaniyamma, if it can be read as particular kind of "testimony," must challenge our very notions of what it means to witness or give testimony, and indeed asks us to rethink the very ways in which "reality" itself comes to be established. Indira's novel – as a text that, on the one hand, insists on the reality of the experience it describes and, on the other hand, constantly reminds us of the ways in which this "experience" comes to us through various forms of mediation, intervention and translation – forces its reader to grapple with questions such as: What do the boundaries of time, space, or belonging demarcate in acts of bearing witness? How does one tell the story of violence that cannot be properly named, because it is a violence that has marked itself on the body, or because it is a violence that has no clearly identifiable beginning or ending and thus finds itself being passed down perhaps from generation to generation? How does one testify to *this* violence, to something that might not have ever been seen or known "first-hand" and yet still persists?

It is with these questions in mind that I turn to Indira's Phaniyamma, a novel that has been described by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, the editors of Women Writing in India, as a work of particular interest to both feminist and postcolonial projects of historical "recovery" at the same that it is a novel which difficult to classify in terms of its relationship to feminist and postcolonial politics.[107] Tharu

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[107] In part, I think this has to do with how in India, Indira's work and this novel, in particular, has received both critical and popular acclaim. Phaniyamma received the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award, the highest literary prize to be awarded on a state basis. But it is also a text that has enjoyed a large popular readership in its original language and has been made into a film as well.

and Lalita note, for example, how the book has been attacked by some feminist critics for glorifying the life of a "traditional" widow, while others see Phaniyamma, the protagonist, as a strong feminist heroine, not only because she exposes the hypocrisies of patriarchal culture, but also because "the reader is struck as much as by what becomes possible, even in the traditional life of a widow, as by the atrocities she is victim to."[108] The uncertain positioning of this novel in the context of Tharu and Lalita's project – a project that itself, not uncomplicatedly, seeks to recover a "tradition" of Indian women's writing – is perhaps best exemplified by the very portion of the novel that is anthologised. In this section, an older Phaniyamma goes to rescue an untouchable woman who is experiencing complications while giving birth. As an upper-caste Brahmin widow who adheres to rituals of purity with immense conviction and belief, Phaniyamma would not ordinarily partake in such "unclean" rituals of birthing, nor is she supposed to have any kind of contact with an untouchable woman. But in this episode, the untouchable woman's family comes to ask for Phaniyamma's help because of the widow's reputation for compassion. Paradoxically, it is Phaniyamma's capacity for affect – which stems, in part, from her sense of religion and duty – that allows this Brahmin widow to break the rules of purity and to help out in this situation without even thinking twice. Yet, Phaniyamma comes out of this experience with a dilemma about her own "un-cleanliness," as she examines with certain revolt her blood-stained hands which have been inside another

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[108] See the Introduction to the excerpt from Phaniyamma in Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, eds. Women Writing in India Vol II: The Twentieth Century (New York: Feminist Press, 1992).

woman. At the same time, this observation forces her to question the bounds and rules of the "traditions" under which she has been living, as she reflects on their inadequacy in formulating an ethics around lived situations. The conflicting impulses of the narration, as well as the contradictory pulls underlying the anthologisation of this story by the editors of a project that seeks to recover the silenced voices of colonial and postcolonial women, is important to my own use of this novel. The multiple directions that this novel faces underscores, I think, the multiple desires invested in the very enterprises of postcolonial and feminist recovery. Accordingly, I will argue that if Phaniyamma may be thought of as a testimony of sorts, then it is as much an act of witnessing events and experiences that happened in the "past" as it is a testimony to the desires and investments embedded in our current practices of remembrance.

Of course, another reason for Phaniyamma's multiple positionings in historiography could be attributed to the contradictory ways in which women were positioned in the history of colonisation and decolonisation on the Indian sub-continent. As recent feminist scholarship has shown, the bodies of Indian women became a primary of site of violence during the colonial period.[10] Firstly, during this time in history, the status of women in Indian society developed into a topic of considerable interest for the British administrators and one of the key arguments in the ideological justification of colonial rule: for this reason, this

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[10] While my paper summarises some of this history, more detailed accounts may be found in the following: Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds. Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History (New Delhi: Kali, 1993); Kumari Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World (London: Zed, 1986); Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class (New Delhi: Kali, 1987); Sudesh Vaid and Kumari Jayawardena, Embodied Violence (New Delhi: Kali, 1996).

period witnessed the rise of several major laws having to do with women's issues, including laws on women's inheritance, prostitution, widow remarriage, child marriage and *sati*. Secondly, just as the colonial state consolidated their hold on Indian women through legislative actions, Christian missionaries also intensified their efforts to penetrate the *zenana*, the name for women's private household quarters in India; in fact, through health and education, they were able to gain entry into what was considered by the colonial government to be 'uncharted territory.' Finally, with the unfolding of all these events, the appropriate roles and rights of women became a matter of fervent debate among elite Indian male reformers, who were fuelled by a newly emerging anti-colonial nationalism. And yet, what becomes apparent about this history is that if women were at all central to colonial and nationalist agendas, it is only because their bodies were the site of a series of violent transactions through which the modern Indian nation was secured. In short, colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism made Indian women's bodies a focal point of their respective violences; as a result, these bodies themselves became a locus of political and historical contestation.

The violence engendered by colonialism and nationalism in India, however, was not only confined to the physical or institutional violence described above; there were also other forms of historical and epistemic violence that continue to affect our present ability to account for the history of Indian women during the colonial period. What I am speaking about here is the way in which colonialism's violence was quite literally and physically imprinted onto women's bodies, but then how these bodies and the violence done to them was rendered invisible

according to dominant paradigms of knowledge and recognition.[110] The institutional silencing of women's experience consequently poses a particular problem to the history of women in colonial and postcolonial spaces. Unable to leave their marks on the official historical scriptures, these marginalised individuals are subjects who have left behind few if any source materials in the usual historiographic sense; and for this reason, are virtually wiped out of the maps of modern history. In the end, what we are left with is a world in which only a select group of people are understood to be whole beings, whereas others are emptied of all subjectivity. In fact, to borrow the words of the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, what we have is a situation wherein "the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual existences are the literate and the consequential." By contrast, marginalised subjects, such as women, are those who have had a violent history inscribed on their bodies and yet who have not "had the power to inscribe themselves over time."[111] Absent and illegible within the official records, their stories are ones that have never been told.

It is my contention, then, that what we need at this point is an alternative vision of history and historiography that will give us the tools to unearth these buried lives and the means to relay their stories. Yet, if the history of women is one that is largely unspoken, then the recovery of their accounts requires that we, as feminist and postcolonial scholars, are able to read the silences of this history. I

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[110] Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 140-54; and Mani Lata's "Contentious Traditions" in Recasting Women are two essays which deal with this idea in particular.

[111] Amitav Ghosh, In an Antique Land (London: Penguin, 1995) 3.

would like to suggest that one way of learning how to read from the silences of history may be by expanding the horizons of what we consider to be historical evidence. For instance, we could begin by considering the different kinds of historical knowledge that are embedded in sources such as fiction, personal reminiscences, ethnography and oral testimony – sources that until recently have largely remained hidden from modern history's purview. We would then need to understand these other modes of witnessing not as mere appendices to the official, "scientific" historical tracts, but as complex modes of historicisation in and of themselves – a means of surviving knowledge of the past in the present, often in intricately and artistically developed ways.[11]

Phaniyamma is, in many senses, a text that conveys this type of historical knowledge. The novel's status as both fiction and history is in fact something that M.K. Indira establishes from the beginning. In her preface, she points out how this work is based on the "true story" of her great-aunt whose name the novel bears. First relayed to the author by her mother, this tale may be understood as an oral reminiscence that is now being documented as a memoir:

> Born in 1849, died in 1952: she seemed to have lived an ordinary life. Those who lived with her did not know her innermost secrets. Only Banashankari remained to tell the story of her life, and pass it on to her daughters. . . . Since, I, Banashankari's daughter Indi, had heard Phaniyamma's story from my mother, and had actually seen Ancheyatthe myself, I was able to write this little history. So although this is the story of a nameless widow, it seemed to me that there was indeed something of significance

[11] Of course, it is important to note that classical history and pre-modern histories make extensive use of storytelling. In fact, I think, modern history, too, makes use of literature, but only in terms of "footnotes" – in terms of appendices, anecdotes, or examples. By contrast, my reading of Phaniyamma attempts to rethink this particular way of relating "fiction" to "history."

here. Which is why this book was written.[113]

This passage thus notes the fact that this "little history" is not only a genealogical investigation in to the author's personal past, but also a tale that is important to tell, one in which there is "something of significance" for others to learn. In other words, this novel is as much a commemoration of one woman's life as it is an important document tracing the experience of Indian women in general.

In fact, one of the ways that this text is able to mediate between individual and collective histories is because the author is careful to situate Phaniyamma's life in the social and cultural fabric that surrounds it. As the novel moves forward in time, the narrative is structured not only around personal rites of birth, marriage and death, but also around public ceremonies including seasonal festivals, religious observations and folk holidays. Furthermore, the text contains many ethnographic descriptions of the daily rituals performed by the people of the village and provides various lists of household duties, religious rites and other activities so that the reader is able to obtain a better picture of collective life. Consider, for example, this passage where the mother explains to her daughter what a typical day in the village would have been like during the time of Phaniyamma:

> Everyone woke at dawn in the Anchemane. The women and girls began work at once. The men went off to work in the fields or to distribute the mail. The old men bathed and began their puja and other rituals. Some women milked the cows and churned the buttermilk. The boys and girls too had plenty of work to do. The

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[113] M.K. Indira, Phaniyamma, 1976, trans. Tejaswini Niranjana (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990) 1. All further references to this text will appear in parentheses.

> girls had to swab the doorstep and the *tulsikatte* before decorating them with *rangoli*: they picked heaps and heaps of flowers and made chains with them; they went to the pond in the garden and washed clothes. From very early in the morning the old women went about reciting the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and various *slokas* that all the children learned by heart. The men boiled and dried the arcenut while the entire household joined in wielding the *mettukatthi* to take the rough skin off. The peeling process went on until everyone slept. (17-18)

In passages such as this, the book functions not only as a cultural document recording the various customs, traditions, values and practices of the times, but also as history that chronicles a past way of life that may be altogether forgotten if not preserved and kept for future generations.

Yet, it also important to realise that just as this novel is a history of a sorts, it is nevertheless one not found in the official archives. Rather, the history conveyed by this text is one that has been stored in the body and whose traces surface in the form of the mother's memory. For this reason, the story of Phaniyamma falls in the category of "embodied history." In particular, the notion of embodied history refers to the way in which the body here is imagined as a repository or receptacle of social, cultural and historical symbolism such that the physical self is both a source of encoding memory and of schematising fundamental aspects of a history and culture. Similarly, it is significant to note that the mother tells this story not simply to record the details of Phaniyamma's life, but also to teach her daughter certain practices that she hopes the daughter will also reproduce in her daily life: a history that will eventually be enacted in the daughter's body. The transmission and preservation of this history therefore depends equally on its telling as on its bodily passing on from mother to daughter.

The mother narrates the tale to teach her daughter about the community to which they belong and to which they trace their lineage. In this way, the knowledge of the past conveyed by the mother is able to give the daughter a sense of community and identity.

The most significant contribution, however, that Phaniyamma makes to the history of Indian women has to do with its account of how this bodily passing on of history from mother to daughter is crucial not only to the construction of identity in general, but also to the reproduction of gender, caste and sexual roles in specific. The history of women in India, for example, was one in which the image of spirituality and respectability served as a critical tool for the maintenance of race, class and caste lines; moreover, this discourse of purity was increasingly reflected in the legal reforms of the time. But before we turn to how it is that Phaniyamma relays this story, it is first important to review the significance of women's bodies to colonial and nationalist projects, and by this means, assess this history's overall impact on gender and sexual relations in India.

The categories of gender and sexuality were, of course, instrumental to the colonial venture as a whole such that racial or colonial otherness has always been visualised in fundamentally gendered terms. For example, by observing the salience of sexual symbolism in representations of Empire, the literary critic Edward Said describes colonialism as a "male power-fantasy" in which the Orient is envisioned in terms of an "unlimited sensuality" to be penetrated and possessed.[114] Similarly, Anne McClintock, referring to Columbus's image of the

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[114] Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage, 1978) 207.

earth as being shaped like a woman's breast, draws our attention to the way in which Africa, Asia and the Americas were commonly figured in the European imagination as "libidinously eroticized," functioning collectively as a "fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears."[115] At the same time, gender and sexual relations became key not only to the *imagining* of racial boundaries, but also to the *politics* and institutions of Empire. Both gender and sexuality therefore became subject to increasingly austere forms of scrutiny by the colonial state. Anthropologist Laura Ann Stoler remarks on how, all over the colonial world, issues of gender and sexuality provided both the psychological and economic underpinnings for "colonial distinctions of difference" and as a result were pivotal to the way in which "the very categories of colonizer and colonized were secured."[116] Indeed, gender increasingly served as a critical category for imperial practices and not as a matter of textuality alone.

Consider, for instance, the bulk of Orientalist writing in which the othering of Indian society occurs essentially in gendered terms. One of the best known specimens of this genre of orientalist thought is James Mill's History of British India, an account of India's past that, according to Uma Chakravorty, had an enormous impact on later historical consciousness. In this work, the strategic role that gender and sexuality played in the structuring and establishment of colonial

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[115] Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New York: Routledge, 1995) 22.

[116] Laura Ann Stoler, "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia" Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in a Postmodern Age, ed. Micaela Leonardo (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991) 52.

authority is made clear by the way in which Mill mobilises metaphors of gender to express the moral superiority of the rulers:

> Nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which Hindus entertain for their women. . . . They are held in extreme degradation, excluded from the sacred books, deprived of education and of a share in the paternal property. . . . That remarkable barbarity, the wife held unworthy to eat with her husband, is quite prevalent in Hindustan. . . . Hindu women are in state of dependence more strict and humiliating than that which is ordained for the weaker sex.[117]

This passage quite plainly reveals gender as both organising and organised by a larger politics of race and Empire. As Chakravorty notes, by emphasising the low status of women among the subject population, Mill was able to assert the higher morality of the imperial masters; thereupon, claims like his became a powerful device in the installation of a colonial ideology that required psychical advantage over the indigenous population.[118] It cannot be ignored that a central motivation behind such claims had to do with the way in which they were able to justify the presence of the colonisers. In fact, time and again, the lowly or "degenerate" state of Indian civilisation, especially with respect to the abject position of Indian women, was used to defend and exonerate British rule.

It was in this manner, then, that gender and sexuality became essential elements not only to the imagining and construction of colonial difference, but also to the very execution and efficacy of colonialism as a political project. Indeed, during the interval of colonial rule, India experienced a major upheaval in

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[117] James Mill, The History of British India 5th ed (London: James Madden, 1840) 312-13.

[118] Uma Chakravorty, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past," Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, eds. Sangari and Vaid 34-35.

its perception of gender roles, as the culture's organisation of familial and sexual relations were wholly reconstituted through specific legislative actions carried out by the colonial state. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a plethora of social reforms principally targeting women were introduced into Indian society – including reforms having to do with *sati*, widow remarriage, the education of girls and women, child marriage, women's inheritance and property rights, as well as prostitution. But even before that, numerous sexual regulations and prohibitions were disseminated within the culture in a more oblique fashion through administrative policies having to do with sanitation, health and disease. As we will see, these policies constituted an overlapping set of discourses, yoking together fears of contagion, degeneracy, biological difference, climatic incompatibility and moral corruptibility with issues of gender, race and sexuality.

Judith Whitehead, for example, explains how the Contagious Diseases Act of the late nineteenth century functioned as a major legislative intervention that initiated the redefinition of gender and sexual relations in colonial India.[118] First defended as a superior law meant to ensure that the military troops would have access to the "release of sexual tensions" while simultaneously being protected from venereal diseases through the medical surveillance of prostitution, the Contagious Diseases Act outlined a wide set of discretionary powers with which medical officers could regulate prostitution.[120] The Contagious Diseases Act

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[118] Judith Whitehead, "Bodies Clean and Unclean: Prostitution, Sanitary Legislation, and Respectable Femininity in Colonial North India." Unpublished Essay.

[120] The class biases inherent in such legislation are also apparent. Kenneth Ballhatchet points out the equation between common-class origins and licentiousness that was being made: prostitution was deemed necessary on the grounds that a common European soldier, who unlike

required, for instance, the registration and examination of all women suspected of prostitution; the segregation of prostitutes to designated streets of a city; and the establishment of specific hospitals for the treatment of women diagnosed with venereal disease. Under this system, if a woman was found to be infected, she was legally considered a prostitute and could be forcibly kept in such a hospital; if she refused treatment, she could be imprisoned. Moreover, prostitutes could be identified on the basis of suspicion such that it was not only women engaged in prostitution, but any woman found frequenting public spaces, who could be charged. Whitehead quotes the Surgeon-general of the Indian army ordering the police to "arrest all strange women found in the lines of the European regiments. . . . Where women are vagrants, prowling about the barracks of European soldiers, they might be arrested . . . for their own good and that of the community."[121] In fact, even while such statements served in all probability as recruiting devices, in much of the British literature supporting the Contagious Diseases Act, Indian prostitutes were instead portrayed as the unsavoury debauchees luring British soldiers and sailors into "contagious" surroundings. This literature suggested, moreover, that through sexual contact with such women, European men contracted not only disease, but also debased sentiments, immoral proclivities and extreme susceptibility to "uncivilised" states.

As a result, the Contagious Diseases Act and other sanitation legislation

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the "educated English gentleman" was thought to "lack the intellectual and moral resources required for continence," had to satisfy his sexual urges in order to avoid such unnatural vices" as masturbation or homosexuality. See Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj (NY: St. Martin's P, 1980) 2.

[121] Surgeon-General of the Indian Army, qtd. in Whitehead 12.

served increasingly to rationalise and ritualise the establishment and policing of boundaries between the imperial classes and its various others through discourses of biological contagion and degeneracy. More and more, biological images of disease and pestilence, rooted deeply in a form of social Darwinism, shaped a complex hierarchy of social metaphors that carried considerable authority. Just as the very hazards of disease were figured as part of a hostile or uncivilised environment, so too were poverty and social distress figured as biological flaws, an organic pathology in the body politic that posed a chronic danger to the imperial race. In fact, as Whitehead explains, the Contagious Diseases Act drew upon the most prevalent medical theory of the time – known as the "miasmatic theory" – which maintained that all diseases were caused by the "odours" of rotting or decomposing substances. The tropics, moreover, were perceived as prime breeders of "miasmatic contagion" since organic matter decomposed much more rapidly in hot climates than in cold. Within the colonies, there was a heightened anxiety about the "circulation of smells," an anxiety that was inextricably linked to the larger concern about how to prevent decomposition in the military barracks of the governing race, and by extension, in the ruling race itself. It is not at all surprising, then, that the Contagious Diseases Act – the same act that set out to regulate prostitution – also ruled that walls between Indian and European areas of the cities be constructed to prevent the flow of "odorous seepages." Thus, the miasmatic theory, along with corollary sanitation legislation, was symptomatic of a new biological idiom of race, as it functioned to naturalise social, cultural and bodily boundaries at a time when such boundaries were felt to

be dangerously permeable.[122]

But perhaps what is most striking in the context of my thesis is the way in which such hardening of colonial divisions was invariably enacted through the regulation of women's bodies and women's sexualities – making explicit the extent to which the British administration's policies were reflective of *both* racial and gender discrimination, while revealing the intricate connections between colonial and sexual violences. For instance, the fact that the Contagious Diseases Act constituted an overlapping set of discourses on areas as varied as sanitation, sexual contagion, racial degeneracy, city-planning and prostitution points to how such policies were symptomatic of the analogy between race and gender that was specific to the conditions of colonialism and modernity. Indeed, at a time when there was already a heightened anxiety over bodily boundaries in general and racial decomposition in specific, sexual activity was branded as one site where bodily boundaries were in danger of being transgressed, and where the lines of cultural and social separation were especially susceptible to breakdown. It is not surprising, then, that women's sexuality was deemed a primary transmitter of racial and cultural contagion, and sexual purity emerged as a controlling metaphor for economic and political power. To borrow Foucault's words, sexual conduct was taken as a "target of intervention," as the colonial era witnessed the production of

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[122] In addition to Whitehead's essay, see also the following: Nancy Leys Stephan, "Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science," in Anatomy of Racism, ed. David Goldberg (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990) 38-57; Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution (Routledge, 1966) and Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology (Random House, 1970); Sander Gilman, Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985); Jean and John Comaroff, "Homemade Hegemony" Ethnography and the Historical Imagination (Boulder: Westview, 1992) 265-295.

a new economy and new regimes of power in which discourses of race, class, gender and sex were inextricably woven together.[124] In the metropolis, this new economy was secured by promoting a strict reproductive ethics that involved domestic discipline and sexual rectitude, while emphasising middle-class productivity. At the same time, special opprobrium fell on "non-reproductive" men and women, including the working classes, the Irish, gays and lesbians, who were all collectively figured in the social imaginary as racial deviants or "degenerates," the breeding-grounds of disease, crime and cholera. In the colonies, of course, the dangers of contagion and contamination were even worse and the assertion of a distinct colonial morality was meant to ensure that the colonisers and the colonised blurred neither biological nor political boundaries that separated them. Toward the end of the century, increasingly harsh measures were taken up to police women's bodies and greater interventions were made in issues relating to domestic or sexual relations. In India, as was the case elsewhere, colonial, racial and gender oppressions were elaborately intertwined such that women's bodies were a major site on which colonial violence was both enacted and reproduced.

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[124] Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Volume I, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978) 26. Foucault, of course, is speaking about how a new discourse of sexuality in which sex becomes "an object of analysis" and "target of intervention" comes to be produced *specifically in Europe*. While he hints at how these new measures that transformed sexual conduct into "a concerted economic and political behavior" would in time "become anchorage points for the different varieties of racism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries," he nonetheless fails to consider how colonial bodies might figure as a possible site of the articulation of nineteenth-century European sexuality. For an excellent critique of Foucault's work in relation to this point, as well as for an insightful consideration of how some of the observations that Foucault makes in this work might be reworked in light of a colonial context, see Laura Ann Stoler's Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things (Durham: Duke U P, 1995).

If the colonial enterprise made women's bodies a focal point of its violence, then it was with the rise of anti-colonial nationalism in India that the status of women became again a locus of historical, cultural and moral contestation. Throughout the nineteenth century, colonial authorities regularly justified their rule and their administrative policies by focusing on the sexual organisation of India society, which, in turn, provided a crucial point of differentiation between Empire and its various "others." Consequently, one of the main points of aggravation for anti-colonial nationalist leaders had to do with the colonial government's constant denigration of indigenous gender practices and, by extension, of the Indian race in general. Yet, as the historian Partha Chatterjee notes, the anti-colonial nationalist movement in India was faced with a particular contradiction when it came to the matter of the "women's question."[12] On the one hand, official Indian nationalism could not just ignore the allegations made by colonial authorities and Christian missionaries regarding the abuses against Indian women. Priding themselves in their education and "enlightened" status, many nationalist leaders were actually in support of many of the legislations being made on behalf of women and lobbied for these changes. On the other hand, this nationalist elite also needed to assert a unique culture apart from the colonial rulers, and needed to affirm a distinctive identity on the basis of which claims to political nationhood could be made. According to Chatterjee, official nationalism proceeded to solve this dilemma by dividing the world into two separate compartments: the material and the spiritual;

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[12] Partha Chatterjee. The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1993).

the inner and the outer; the "home" and the "world." The material sphere corresponded to the world of politics, law, science and technology; and in this sphere, the nationalists claimed that India needed to conform with the West. However, the inner, private or spiritual sphere was where claims to nationhood could be made and, for this reason, all matters of cultural identity, including issues about the status of women, were relegated to this domain. While whether or not the boundaries between "inner" and "outer" were drawn quite so clearly and consistently as Chatterjee suggests is certainly debatable, it is certainly true that the very spiritual status of Indian women became a major factor in the imagining of the new nation. Gender became a powerful tool in the formulation of a nationalist ideology, as the honour of the state came to rely on the honour of its women.

Anticolonial nationalism and the various social reform movements which developed over the course of the nineteenth century thus signalled a new age in gender relations in India. Moreover, during the period, as the relations between gender, nation, religion, tradition and modernity were publicly rethought and refashioned with an unparalleled intensity, the question of women's social, spiritual and sexual propriety became of ultimate import. In fact, even more than men, women were upheld as the guardians of tradition, particularly against a foreign enemy. Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis note, for example, how the nationalist movement envisioned Indian women as the "carriers of authenticity" and therefore used them as "as cultural representatives" who were "constructed in relation to western domination."[125] This identification of women as

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[125] Malathi de Alwis and K. Jayawardena, Introduction, Embodied Violence (New Delhi:

the spiritual core of nationhood was perhaps most explicitly played out later in the Gandhian resistance movement. On the one hand, this movement sought to draw Indian women out of their homes and into the modernisation process in the service of nationalism. On the other hand, women emerged only on the terms that they represented the traditional spirituality of the Indian home. Thus, Gandhian nationalism deployed gender as a powerful tool that shaped the affective and emotive conditions of nationalist ideology; for example, through the idea of the motherland, Gandhi aroused nationalist sentiment by envisioning the nation as feminine and in need of protection. But, just as women were seen as being synonymous with the nation, the nation too was seen as reflecting the quality of its women. For this reason, the Gandhian movement also strategically drew upon pure, virtuous, sacrificing female mythological figures to represent the roles that women ought to play in the nationalist struggle. In this way, nationalism aligned the duties of a mother toward her children and husband with the duties of a woman toward her nation. [126]

What is important to note is that according to this nationalist model, female subjectivity could only be legitimately embodied in roles of marriage, wifehood, motherhood or domesticity. In fact, nationalism also fostered the construction of

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Kali, 1996) xiii.

[126] See Ketu Katrak, "Indian Nationalism, Gandhian 'Satyagraha' and Representations of Female Sexuality," Nationalisms and Sexualities, eds. Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger (NY: Routledge, 1992) 397-98; Suruchi Thapar, "Women as Activists: Women as Symbols: A Study of the Indian Nationalist Movement," Feminist Review 44 (1993): 81-96; Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in Sangari and Vaid 233-53; Tanika Sarkar, "The Hindu Wife and the Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal," Studies in History 8.2 (1992): 213-35.

the "new woman," who through education, was supposed to be instructed in the moral virtues of cleanliness, companionship, discipline, self-control and respectability. This domestic model sanctioned by nationalism, however, was derived almost exclusively from a Hindu upper-caste cosmological system. Women of other identities were thus cast into shadow as immoral sexuality was projected onto Western women, lower-caste women, working-class women and all other women, such as widows or prostitutes, who did not correspond to normative sexual or familial roles. In fact, as Mrinalini Sinha has suggested, the conditions of nationalism and colonialism in India engendered new official female subjectivities that "not only retained the negative repression of female sexuality, but also reactivated competing notions of community based on religious, caste and class affiliations."[17] Most of all, the dominant cultural tradition that emerged drew sharp lines of demarcation between pure and impure women, and this then gave rise to various legal institutions authorising the state to "protect" female virtue. In turn, the proliferation of such institutions meant that increasingly aggressive measures for policing Indian women's bodies were implemented by the colonial state. In this way, the circumstances of colonialism and nationalism in India occasioned everyday acts of violence that affected women's bodies not only in physical terms, but also in ideological ways.

But what I would now like to turn to is how this regime of purity was implemented not only through legislative actions, but also through a set of

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[17] Mrinalini Sinha, "Nationalism and Respectable Femininity," in Forming and Reforming Identity, eds. Carol Siegel and Ann Kibbey (New York: New York UP, 1995) 34.

embodied practices that came to have an even stronger hold upon the culture. Of course, one of the principal reasons for this had to do with the way in which these bodily practices were able to connect the lived-in experiences of race, caste and gender existing below consciousness with daily rituals of eating, decorum, hygiene and dress. Yet, while a substantial amount of research has shown how women's bodies were mapped out through the forces of colonial and nationalist violence, there has been relatively little historical analysis of the way in which these same bodies experienced and perceived precisely such everyday life both under colonialism and in its wake. Perhaps this is owing to the fact that although the political or economic conditions of colonialism have been examined in fair detail in the context of sub-continental scholarship, limited attention has been paid to the psychological, phenomenological or experiential dimensions of colonial violence and how this violence continues to impact our ability to imagine the history of Indian women. One of the main challenges of historical research today thus lies in relating the abstract, symbolic aspects of colonial violence to its more sentient manifestations.

The story of Phaniyamma, on the other hand, is one such example of this type of "embodied history" that makes the connections between the historical and the everyday, as it attempts to counter the disembodiment suffered by colonial women with an imaginative or "anthromorphised" description of their past and their society.[128] This is also an account, then, that requires us not only to take

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[128] The term "embodied history" is used by John O'Neill to describe the project of "rethinking society and history" with the terms afforded by our bodies much as the way in which "the first men were called upon to think the world with their bodies," qtd in Marike Finlay-de

another look at the official archives of political history, but also to consider the historical insights offered by fields such as literature and anthropology, fields that have dealt in a much more intimate manner with the everyday practices, experiences and emotions of human agents than has conventional historiography. Hence, the history that matters here is not one that exists outside of individual agents, but one that finds expression in personal life and culture, that becomes embedded in our everyday experiences, and finds shelter in the memories we carry in our selves.

The novel's central narrative begins just after Phaniyamma becomes widowed at the age of thirteen. As a widow, the young girl is shunned by the community, since marriage was the only respectable role for women at that time. Phaniyamma's parents thereupon seek the advice of the local priest so as to determine how the family can maintain their honour and save their child from the scorn of the community. It is at this point that the priest orders the young girl to take on the role of a ***brahmacarini*** – that is, a role advocating self control, purity and the elevation of the mind over the body – and to adopt a set of rigorous religious rituals pertaining to this role. Of course, Phaniyamma is so young when all of this happens that she accepts the rituals and practices as a way of life, incorporating them into her unconscious self. She does not question any of their meanings or functions, understanding them simply to be part of her identity.

Monchy, "Narcissism: Pathology of the Post-Modern Self or Healthy and Socially Progressive Investment of the Interests of Self-Centred Subject-Hood," in Free Associations 5.4.36 (1995): 453-82. Finlay, too, in this article, speaks of the need for the social sciences to adopt an "anthropocentric, anthromorphic world view" through a "reinvestment in the body."

However, as the story progresses, the reader comes to see just how these practices were in fact tied to a cruel regime of bodily regulation that attempted to control women's identities through the ritualisation of sexual norms. The reader also comes to understand how it was the fear of illegitimate sexuality that motivated the larger society's need to manage women's bodies through a set of rituals, or a set of embodied practices, that ensured women's social and sexual purity.

In particular, the effects that these ritualised practices have on Phaniyamma's consciousness and identity can be seen in the way in which these practices are tied to an experience of disembodiment that the young girl experiences both in her daily life and in history. For example, by restricting her participation in day-to-day activities of the other householders, the religious rituals that Phaniyamma must adopt cause her to live her life in seclusion, apart from worldly society. Also, her role as *brahmacarini* means that she cooks for the entire family, but then is unable to partake in any of the fruits of her labour. This is because, being a widow, Phaniyamma is made to cut out from her life all the excesses that are a sign of the body's pleasure: "Being a widow, the girl did not drink any milk. Not a drop reached her lips, although she milked the twenty-odd cows twice a day, boiled the milk, and churned the butter. She never thought about food" (52). In fact, as Phaniyamma's life progresses, she becomes better at being able to transcend the body's pulls. She eats less and less until she is able to survive on only a few morsels of food per day. Eventually, she is able to control not only hunger, but also other physical conditions such as pain, sorrow, tiredness or illness:

> Although she lived on two bananas a day and bathed in cold water, the life-spirit continued to inhabit her body, of which what was left was only skin and bones. Her spirit seemed to carry a strange electrical charge. Not once did she complain of weariness or pain. Never in her life had she fallen ill. ... By the time Phaniyamma was nearing eighty, her eyesight was undiminished. Her teeth were like a row of rice-grains. Only her skin was wrinkled, and her back a little bent. But she worked hard as ever, and her soul had achieved a state of complete detachment. (75-76)

In effect, Phaniyamma negates certain aspects of her corporeality altogether, training her body until she becomes "pure spirit." Phaniyamma's body is thus alienated from many of its own sensory capacities. In this sense, she is much like Pauline of Tracks or Baby Kochamma of The God of Small Things, or even like Geraldine of The Bluest Eye, all of whom attempt to shape their desires according to a model of transcendental subjectivity that has grave costs upon their material being. In a similar fashion, Phaniyamma's interior desires and passions are subsumed under a theological narrative of transcendence and asceticism that may be seen as a particular narrative of embodiment at the same time that also distances itself, in other ways, from the body and embodied ways of knowing.

The ritual disembodiment and subsequent ritual writing out of history that Phaniyamma encounters in her own life, however, is countered through the ritual acts of remembering and story-telling, both of which have the ability to reclaim lost subjectivities and reinscribe them into contemporary accounts of history through critical as well as empathetic means. Indeed, as Taussig has written, in situations where violence has led to historical forgetting, it is precisely the act of remembering that has the ability to heal or possibly even undo the history of

colonialism with its own memory.[139] Similarly, the healing or transformative powers of memory are asserted throughout this novel. Remembering and storytelling are shown to be paramount to a historical enterprise that attempts to recover the history of colonial women's lives, because these acts are able to fill the hole in current historical knowledge and simultaneously critique certain historiographic methods that contribute to this void. Most of all, acts of remembering and storytelling are important because they are able to give us embodied histories that emerge from the material fabric of women's lives. It is interesting to note that, in this century, history has often regarded those records based in personal experience or remembrance as constituting improper evidence because of their apparent mutability. According to conventional modes of history, memory is not to be relied upon because it is subject to the distorting effects of individual affect and perception. And yet, as the oral historian, Elizabeth Tonkin rightly reminds us, memories are not only singular and unique, but also a social fact. Central to the functioning of social roles, memories often reveal common attitudes or a shared world. Yet, it is important to understand how memory can also be creative, how memory can often blur the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious, and how it cannot be wholly distinguished from either thought or imagination. As Tonkin writes, "memory makes us," but it is also true that "we make memory."[140] To the extent that our bodies are reservoirs of memory, the

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[139] Taussig 392.

[140] Elizabeth Tonkin, Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of History (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 156.

capacity to remember and disremember points to the way in which subjects are operative agents who are able to imagine and act on the forces of history.

This understanding of memory and history is important to both feminist and postcolonial theorisations of subjectivity and history. The message of these books is that individual lives are always embedded in a historical context, but also that history itself is always attached to specific subjects. On the one hand, people come into the world not as pure, free or unattached individuals, but already burdened with a certain amount of history, as already ascribed members of a particular group, community, nation, race, gender or ethnicity. But, this is not to say that any of these categories are fixed and fast. In most societies, differently organised groups co-exist, recruiting their members according to different criteria; thus, human beings belong to more than one group simultaneously and often change their memberships over the course of a life. This interactive model of subject and society, one in which we are all social actors, affecting others and, in turn, being affected by them, is thus a dynamic model of witnessing whereby history is made and traced out in the present as opposed to be found in a distant and static past. History is not a realm to be externally described, but a place we carry with us insofar as it has become sedimented in our memories and our bodies.

Thus, if one aim of the novel is to criticise a certain history of disembodiment, then another, perhaps more important, goal of this text is to give one woman's life embodiment in the present insofar as it proceeds to incorporate Phaniyamma's experience within the collective memory and imagination of other

women. Indeed, as Shoshana Felman writes, "The specific task of the literary testimony is ... to open up in that belated witness, which the reader now historically becomes, the imaginative capability of perceiving history – what is happening to others – *in one's body*, with the power of sight or rather insight that is usually afforded only by one's immediate physical involvement."[131] Likewise, Peggy Phelan remarks that imaginative art derives its force largely from what she calls its "sustained conversation with incorporeality" – its "conviction that it can make manifest what cannot be seen."[132] Consequently, fiction may be thought of as an "instance of writing history" in the sense that it functions as a type of "memorial" to bodies, individuals and moments which are not immediately present, but which must be brought into being through acts of memory and imagination.

In a similar vein, Indira writes a novel that is both a fiction and "a little history" in order to recover and recreate the story of a life whose only trace in the present is its absence within official records. Thus, while the body of Phaniyamma is nowhere to be found at the end of the story, what we *are* left with is the sound of weeping and the ring of praises and song as all of the villagers mourn her passing. The image of the funeral that closes the book is reminder of the way in which the novel is also an elegy. It is fitting, in fact, that Indira begins her book with an epigraph that is a poem by another Kannada writer, Ambikatanayadatta,

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[131] Shoshana Felman, Testimony 108.

[132] Peggy Phelan, Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories (NY: Routledge, 1997) 1-5. See also Maxine Hong-Kingston's The Woman Warrior (NY: Vintage, 1975) for another interesting literary account of how this happens.

which speaks about a girl who "turned to dust" and then successively turns into "memory," "sorrow," "a story" and then "song." Just as this epigraphic poem is about the possibility of recovering loss through memory, story and song, Indira's novel is about the author's own desires to explore, as Phelan puts it, "the affective outlines of what is left after a body is gone."[155] In this sense, memory and story-telling emerge as transformative forces in this novel that is also a memoir. The ritual writing-out-of-history that the woman, Phaniyamma, undergoes is countered through the ritual act of story-telling, which has the ability to reclaim lost subjectivities and reinscribe them onto contemporary accounts of history through critical as well as empathic means.

Reading Indira's Phaniyamma alongside Erdrich's Tracks thus reveals how fiction, through the practice of remembrance, is able to bear witness to certain legacies of violences and disembodiment, and often to events and peoples not seen or heard, in ways that are as authentic to such histories as other kinds of "factual" records. Of the two novels, Phaniyamma, at first glance, perhaps seems more acceptable as a historical document because of its biographical and even autobiographical character. It insists that is based upon a "true story"; it functions in a "documentary" capacity listing rituals, celebrations and ethnographic details; and it makes a direct connection between the author of the novel and the story itself. Yet, any reading of this novel must also come to grips with various "disappearances" of which this story tells, as well as with the layers of distance, mediation and translation that separate the "subject" of the story from both the

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[155] Phelan 3.

author and the readers of this tale. By contrast, Erdrich's Tracks presents itself quite clearly as fiction: it draws the reader's attention to its own use of language, its highly aestheticised composition and to the art of story-telling. At the same time, by linking her role as a story-teller to her identity as a survivor of a disappearing culture, Erdrich insists that we view her writing as a means of bearing witness not only to the history of her forebears, but also to the ways in which such inheritances, latent and living, press upon her in the present. She says, "I think all Native Americans living today probably look back and think, 'How, out of the millions and millions of people who were here in the beginning, the very few who survived into the 1920s, and the people who are alive today with some sense of their own tradition, how did it get to me, and why?' . . . and so as we go about telling these stories, we feel compelled. We're, in a way, survivors."[15] Indeed, Erdrich often remarks about the ways in which she has tried, in her writing, to recreate the family legends told to her, as a young girl, by her maternal grandparents on the Turtle Mountain reservation. Accordingly, Tracks may be described as a type of genealogical wherein Erdrich attempts to offer testimonies not simply to a lost and distant past, but more importantly to the survival of that past in our imaginings and accounts of the present.

At the same time, if both Phanivamma and Tracks may be read as genealogical inquiries of sorts, then the genealogical characteristics of these books also have to do with how, in constructing narrative situations wherein a young girl

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[15] Louise Erdrich, "Where I Ought to Be: A Writer's Sense of Place," New York Times Book Review (28 July, 1985) 23.

listens to an elder's tales, both of these women writers create the possibility that these legacies may be changed or reworked, or the possibility that they can in fact make out of these memories and narrative legacies an altogether different tale. This disruptive and transformative power of remembrance, or its capacity to dispute what may otherwise appear as a rational, coherent historical narrative, is part of what Randolph Starn and Natalie Davis mean when they say, "Memory like the body may speak in a language that reasoned inquiry will not hear."[145] Indira and Erdrich's novels reflect a similar understanding of how memory and memoir-writing may function as a testimony to the silent and the silenced. These books reveal both the commemorative and creative aspects of memory; they centre on the inseparability of recollection, memory and imagination – and on the intertwined processes of re-membering, dis-membering, and un-forgetting. In this way, they are able to bear witness to a past that is both known and unknown, that is at once absent and yet peculiarly present to these authors in very deep, bodily, and even ritualistic ways.

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[145] Nathalie Davis and Randolph Starn, "Memory and Counter-Memory," Representations 26 (1989): 5.

CHAPTER 4

Intimate Encounters: Reading and Response-ability

All of the literary texts we have considered so far outline the effects of sexual and racial violence on the body while simultaneously reclaiming bodily or sensory experience as a site of knowledge and of history. Through their fictions, Morrison, Mootoo, Roy, Erdrich and Indira are able to create languages and narrative forms that are remarkable because of the way in which they are able to incorporate some of the extra-linguistic aspects of experience and identity, namely, those sensations which originate in the various rhythms and reverberations of the physical body. By evoking in the reader a similar kind of emotional and visceral reaction, these novels are then capable of communicating those realms of experience which are, by the very structure of their transpiration and circumstance, silent or "unspeakable." This process of communicating and externalising violence is crucial, I have argued, not only because it provides the body in pain with the chance to heal and transform itself, but also because the act of externalisation expresses the human body's extraordinary potential for self-expansion and the transmission of knowledge. It is this very potential of the self for extension, transmission and, ultimately, transformation that then opens up the possibility of forging affective linkages between different people and communities, thereby creating channels for collective action against various forms of gendered, racialised, colonial, sexual, national or cultural violence.

The next stories to be examined also ground their narratives in the visceral

experiences of the body. However, the fictions to be considered in this chapter go one step further by underscoring a concept of the body wherein it is not simply a site of knowledge, evidence or experience, but also a point of authority and action. In particular, the fictions chosen for discussion in this chapter include a set of short stories by Mahasweta Devi – "The Hunt," "Draupadi," "Douloti the Bountiful" – and Leslie Feinberg's novel, Stone Butch Blues. While writing and working in entirely different cultural contexts and languages, both Mahasweta and Feinberg share a commonality in that they are as much writers or artists as they are activists deeply committed to the politics and collaborative struggles which we, as readers, encounter in their fictions. Writing in the Bengali language, Mahasweta draws inspiration for her stories and novels largely from her grassroots work with tribal communities, agrarian classes, women's organisations and the formerly untouchable castes in India, especially those communities living in the rural parts of the North Eastern states of Bengal and Bihar. In stark contrast to the Indian countryside that pervades Mahasweta's fictions, the bars and factories of Buffalo, New York, constitute Leslie Feinberg's imaginative terrain. For Feinberg, a young "butch" who came out during the 1950s, this is a terrain that bears witness to the various gay, lesbian, transgendered and working-class struggles to which Feinberg dedicates her life and work. Thus, for both Mahasweta and Feinberg, fiction-writing is an extension of their political commitments and activisms. Both write stories to raise consciousness, to open up their readers' eyes, and ultimately to effect change on behalf of communities to which they are bound through ties of love and passion.

Reading Mahasweta's short stories in relation to Feinberg's novel thus allows us to come back, open out and also challenge one of the main questions regarding the relationship between literature, ethics and activism that has guided this thesis: What is the relation of the forms and styles of affect, experience and intimacy to politics – to various modalities of acting, making and doing in the world? In a certain sense, the narratives considered in this chapter differ markedly, both from each other and from my previous examples. While Feinberg's novel is intended to elicit empathy for the experience of its transgendered protagonist, Mahasweta's stories are meant to alarm and challenge their transcultural readers into contemplating the situation of tribal communities in India. In fact, one of the most striking features of Mahasweta's writing, I would say, is its incongruity in the critical terrain of English literary studies. For example, Imaginary Maps – the collection of short stories edited and introduced by the postcolonial critic, Gayatri Spivak, that contains most of the stories I discuss in this chapter – seems to me strangely "out of place" in the hands of North American readers. Yet, in a number of other ways, this book – perhaps more so than other texts falling under the rubrics of postcolonialism and to an extent feminism – schematises almost unambiguously some of the "re-mappings" of space and identity that, by way of these critical discourses, find increasing legitimisation in North American academies.[15] Accordingly, the question of how to read

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[15] The title of the collection, for instance, is clearly meant to resonate with certain "paradigmatic" pieces of writing/thinking in postcolonial studies around questions of "nation," "exile," "diaspora," and "home" – including Salman Rushdie's Imaginary Homelands (London: Granta, 1991) and Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1991) – at the same time as it is offered as a "counter-paradigm" to such works – an attempt to think about sites of displacement from a space "inside"

Mahasweta's stories, or the challenge of determining the sites of witness that these stories identify, is not an easy one. On the one hand, Imaginary Maps functions in a certain "documentary" capacity, ostensibly along the lines of "realistic" literary genres. On the other hand, the text is careful to remind readers of the way in which we are also always moving through an "imaginary" and heavily mediated geography.[15] In a similar vein, Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues, at one level, invites "autobiographical" readings and responses because of the intensity of emotions the novel elicits. At the same time, this text, unlike Feinberg's later non-fictional works such as Transgender Warriors, or Trans Liberation, where the narrating "I" is clearly meant to be identified as the author's own speaking voice, Stone Butch Blues announces itself as a carefully constructed fiction about invented or imaginary characters. Consequently, reading Feinberg with and against Mahasweta allows me to both expand upon and sketch out some of the limits to my earlier discussions of "witnessing," or the ways in which certain private, interior, or culturally remote experiences become perceptible to others, open to intervention

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the nation as opposed to "outside" it. See my previous work on this topic in "The Poetics of Displacement: Rethinking the Categories of Nation, Gender and Diaspora" (MA Thesis, McGill University, 1995).

[15] Besides the title, examples of such devices include: 1) Spivak's lengthy introduction and conclusion, which, together, serve to couch, frame, interpret, limit, provide points of identification and at once distance the stories for the readers; 2) the fact of translation, as well as Spivak's italicisation of "English" words – which draws attention to the hybridity of languages at work in the original – and even to the way in which the "original" is also a translation of sorts in that the "action" of all the stories do not actually take place in Bengali – the language of the writing – but in a mixture of Bengali and tribal languages; 3) the discrepancacies between the writing and the publication, again since Spivak has carefully picked and chosen from a vast body of Mahasweta's work and has thus brought together stories that were not initially conceived of as a collection. It is interesting that Spivak describes herself as a "dwarpika" – literally, a "gatekeeper," someone who initiates, introduces, but also protects – Mahasweta to/from the Western world.

and transformation due to their emergence into shareable, but specifically and concretely constituted, worlds.

At the beginning of my dissertation, for example, I spoke about how most of the writers considered in this study deployed the term or idea of "witnessing" to emphasise the connections between the imaginative worlds portrayed within the pages of their fictions and a certain material, political, historical, social or interior "reality" external to their stories. At the same time, witnessing, in each of the texts we have examined thus far; has taken on different meanings. The first three novels we looked at – Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things – all focus on what it means to witness at a most basic, immediate, or visceral level – in the form of watching, observing, listening or otherwise absorbing, often unconsciously, the various violences, pains and pleasures of a certain cultural or familial environment. It is no coincidence that all of these novels centre around the experience of children. In this way, these fictions are able to convey what it means to be a witness to events that one does not necessarily "understand," but knows intimately nonetheless. Hence, these texts make us aware that the site where this witnessing takes place – a witnessing that occurs in the absence of language or the resources for its articulation – is the place, the space, of the body.

If these three novels demonstrate the ways in which bodies become speaking witnesses to silenced events, then the fictions that followed helped me to show how such silences are communicated and externalised through different forms of bodily transmission. Louise Erdrich's Tracks and M.K. Indira's

Phaniyamma also speak about the body as witness. However, in contrast to the previous novels, these two texts, because of their emphasis on witnessing as remembrance, speak not only of the ways in which the body, through genealogy, is the receptor and carrier of the legacies of an un-named or un-claimed past, but also of the ways in which the body is able to actively recall the past into the present, in part to honour it and in part to change it. Tracks and Phaniyamma thereby allow us to think about the ways in which others sometimes lodge themselves inside of us and speak their silences through us, even across historical or generational gaps. As such, both novels are involved in a process of "translation" and "transliteration" that then becomes a basis for collective identifications and memories.

In turn, my discussion of Mahasweta's and Feinberg's fictions intends to chart a trajectory that moves us from a consideration of witnessing at a somatic level, through to witnessing as remembering, and finally to witnessing as doing or acting in the world. The devastating ways in which political oppression serves to circumvent precisely such action has been discussed at length by feminist and postcolonial theorists alike. Speaking of colonial and racial violence, for example, Frantz Fanon writes of the ways in which violence functions to regulate and constrict people's thoughts and behavioural patterns, rendering them inert:

> A motionless, Manicheistic world, a world of statues: the statue of the general who carried out the conquest, the statue of the engineer who built the bridge; a world which is sure of itself, which crushes with its stones the backs flayed by whips: this is the colonial world. The native is a being hemmed in. . . . The first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits. This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and

> aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing. I dream that I span a river in one stride, or that I am followed by a flood of motorcars which never catch up with me. During the period of colonization, the native never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the evening until six in the morning.[158]

Many of the protagonists of the fictions under consideration in this chapter are constrained by the political orders in which they live just as Fanon's native is paralysed by the colonial system that surrounds him. Characters such as Douloti, Dopdi and Mary in Mahasweta's stories or Jess in Feinberg's novel regularly experience violence at the hands of people who attempt to rob them of their capacity to think, speak, move and act. Yet, these characters also refuse to comply with the kinds of political, sexual or gender boundaries that others try to make fixed facts. These texts can therefore be seen as operating not only as certain "dreams of action," but also as modalities that take the reader on a journey that begins a process of politicising the body as a site of activism. However, against contemporary notions of politics that see politicisation simply as a coming-to-consciousness that involves abstracting oneself from certain immediacies of affect and imagination, what is important about *this* particular process of politicisation, or "activation," is that it does not entail an estrangement from the entanglements, enigmas or mystifications of interiority. Rather, this chapter holds that political action, organising and even freedom begins, first, with its interior dream. Accordingly, the literary examples included here argue, in their different ways, for the necessity of dreams, phantasy, desire, hope, passion, affect and

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[158] Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld P, 1963) 52.

intimacy to politics and activism. The fictions that follow ask the question of what it might mean to use interiorally located experiences as gateways for an empirically-grounded politics: a politics which strives to intervene, raise consciousness and effect change not in abstract ways, but in the material, everyday, experiential realties of specific individuals and communities.

Yet, at the same time, Mahasweta and Feinberg's fictions also mark the limits of a particular argument about the ability of fiction to engage people collectively through recourse to a shared and shareable language. In fact, where my previous chapters argued for a view of culture and of bodies as open and permeable, as sites of transference and transmission, as necessary preconditions to the imagining of an affectively-based politics, this chapter argues that it is equally important to think about the ways in which the very transactions of affect depend on the existence of certain limits and bounds. Indeed, any action, political or ethical, cannot take place without taking into consideration the dimensions of interiority, affect and experience, since these are the bases from which we all think and act. In part, doing things with others entails being able to see ourselves in others, and others in ourselves. At the same time, part of the pleasure and ethical force of relating affectively with others derives from the presence of boundaries, on the ability to make distinctions between oneself and others, and on the ability to see and experience things as singular and even unshareable. It is this double awareness that the narratives in this chapter hold: both Mahasweta and Feinberg's fictions insist on the necessity of rendering experience as simultaneously shareable and specific. Mahasweta's Imaginary Maps opens in fact with the naming of places –

names that remain singular and untranslatable, impossible to fill with a meaning that reaches beyond the places themselves. Both Mahasweta's and Feinberg's texts thus ask their readers to look through the eyes of another, to see the world from another point of view, at the same time that they refuse to translate this experience for another. This refusal to translate, moreover, is not a simply a deconstructive or "critical" move on the part of these fictions, nor is it simply an argument reinforcing a notion of "cultural insiderism," which states that one can know "nothing" of things that may be experientially, culturally, historically or socially "removed" from oneself. The refusals and silences of these texts are rather the places where these stories hold meaning – their sites of affect and of witness. To read these and other works from this place of witness, from their sites of silence, makes clearer the way in which the acts of reading and writing are themselves practices of bearing witness to a place that is at once mutually shareable and yet, at the same time, like all intimate encounters, private and singular.

Part of the immense sway of the fictions I will be discussing in this chapter has to do with the ways in which these stories and the authors who write them continually push their readers' minds and bodies from the pages of the text to the material of lived history that lies external to these fictions, thereby alerting the reader to the limits or boundaries that mark these texts. This is certainly the case with Mahasweta's stories – stories which are impossible to encounter without encountering, also, the assortment of passions and convictions that fuel this author's life. Born in Dhaka, the capital of what is now known as Bangladesh, Mahasweta grew up amidst a family of journalists, artists, intellectuals and activists

at a time when the nationalist movement in India was in full force. After Mahasweta's family moved to West Bengal, she began her studies at Visva Bharati, the experimental school and university founded by the poet Rabindrinath Tagore. But when the famine of 1943 called for student involvement, Mahasweta, just out of school, volunteered; since then, she has led a long and impassioned life working with several grass-roots organisations fighting for the rights of tribals, bonded labourers, the agrarian classes and women. In addition, Mahasweta has also taught in underprivileged areas and worked as a reporter. Now, besides writing fiction, she edits a paper for which tribals, villagers and factory workers write. As Gayatri Spivak has noted in her book, In Other Worlds, even the style of writing that Mahasweta employs reproduces the kinds of daily insurgencies that Mahasweta stages in her life. Using a prose where literary Bengali, different forms of colloquial Bengali, English, Hindi and tribal languages all intersect one another, Mahasweta shows us how fiction can be a veritable battle-ground, provoking both paralysis and action.[159]

The first of Mahasweta's fictions I will discuss here is called "The Hunt." It is the first of three stories to appear in Imaginary Maps. "The Hunt" tells the tale of Mary Oraon, the daughter of a tribal woman who has been raped by a white coloniser. In many ways, Mary's story is figured, through a logic of exemplarity, as a parable for her village's history – and even for the history and experience of the entire Indian subcontinent. The narrator writes: "Once upon a time whites had *timber plantations* in Kuruda. They left gradually after Independence. Mary's

[159] Gayatri Spivak, In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (New York: Routledge, 1987).

mother looked after the Dixon's bungalow and household. Dixon came back in 1959 and sold the house, the forest, everything else. He put Mary in Bhikni's womb before he left."[10] In this parable, colonialism is represented as the metaphoric rape of both the land and its people. Mary – half-white, half-tribal and the very embodiment of this imperialistic rape – symbolises the legacies of this violence. In turn, her story of revenge offers a glimpse into the eruptions of counter-violences that such a rape enacts.

Indeed, "The Hunt" is a story pervaded by images of rape, warfare, violence and violation. It tells the tale of how Mary's life is brought to a point of crisis with the arrival of Tehsildar Singh, a member of the local bourgeoisie who has come to exploit the tribal communities and the forests in which they live so as to make a profit. Tehsildar Singh is depicted throughout this text as a rapist not only for the way in which he ravages the lands, which he considers "virgin area" (¯), but also for the way in which he "hunts" and attempts to seduce Mary. At the same time, Mary is not any simple victim. She is both the hunted and the huntress. In fact, throughout, she is described as a person who inspires fear; she has a "hard perfect frame" and a "razor sharp" mind. She is also continually associated with her machete, which is "hers by right," not so much an external tool as an integral part of her own body. But the most obvious example of Mary

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[10] Mahasweta Devi, "The Hunt," Imaginary Maps, trans. Gayatri Spivak (New York: Routledge, 1995) 2. All further references to this text will appear in parentheses. Note that the italicised words in this and other passages refer to words that are written in English in the original; thus, the italicisation of these words are meant to make them re-appear to the Anglophone reader as "foreign words" – words which do not have any type of correspondence in Bengali and thus have been "adopted" in their English form by the native language. Of course, words of this sort, as is evident from the passages, are usually those words that have to do with the colonial government, administration or institutions.

as a huntress occurs at the end of the story when she violently yet calculatedly murders Tehsildar Singh. One of the most striking features of this murder has to do with the strong sexual imagery that Mahasweta uses in narrating this event: "Mary caresses Tehsildar's face, gives him love bites on the lips. There's a fire in Tehsildar's eyes, his mouth is open, his lips wet with spittle, his teeth glistening. Mary is watching, watching, the face changes and changes into? Now? Yes, becomes an animal. . . . Mary laughed and held him, laid him on the ground. Tehsildar is laughing. Mary lifts the machete, lowers it, lifts, lowers" (10). After her conquest, Mary is also filled with a certain sexual thirst. In this way, Mahasweta reminds us of the intricate networks of desire and violence that motivate Mary's actions.

However, by writing this event as a product of Mary's desires, Mahasweta shows us that Mary's programme of revenge is as much a singular act as one that is representative of any kind of collective tribal counter-consciousness. In fact, on the one hand, this story depicts Mary as a symbol for the community and country at large. On the other hand, Mahasweta also stresses the ways in which Mary is unique, belonging to no one community. The narrator describes her as "eighteen years, tall, flat-featured [with] light copper skin ... You wouldn't call her a tribal at first sight. Yet she is tribal." Mary's figuration in this text as an aporia is acknowledged by Mary herself. At one point in the story, as she is joking with a young tribal man, she refers to her unusual predicament by claiming: "Big white chief! Puts a child in a woman's belly and runs like a rat. My mother is bad news. When you see a white daughter, you kill it right away. Then there are no

problems!" (5). Then, when the young man asks her what would have happened if she had indeed been killed, Mary replies simply and starkly, "I wouldn't have been." In claiming such an abject status, Mary emphasises her own singularity. For this reason, Spivak calls Mary "an individual who is and is not," one who "completely undoes the binary opposition between the pure East and the contaminated West."[141] Because Mary is the illegitimate daughter of a white father, the narrator says that "the Oraons don't think of her as their blood and do not place the harsh injunctions of their society upon her" (6). At the same time, she is cast out of Indian tribal society as well as white imperial culture. Indeed, Mary belongs to many different social categories and yet to none at all.

The paradoxes and discontinuities inherent in Mary's characterisation become even more significant in Mahasweta's staging of the murder of Tehsildar Singh. In this part of the narrative, it is important to note that it is the festival of the Oraons which helps Mary to transform herself from her role as a victim to her role as hunter. Mahasweta explains the significance of this tribal ritual to us in the Preface of Imaginary Maps: "The tribals have this animal hunting festival in Bihar. It used to be the Festival of Justice. After the hunt, the elders would bring offenders to justice. They would not go to the police. In the Santali language it was the Law-bir. Law is the Law, and bir is the forest."[142] In this context, Mary's actions can be seen as a means of politicising tribal rituals such that she assumes a certain representative status through her appropriation of this festival. Or, the

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[141] Gayatri Spivak, Interview, Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Thought 5:1 (1990): 80-92.

festival can be seen to effect Mary's politicisation by giving her membership in a communal activity. At any rate, by arranging to meet with Tehsildar Singh on the day of the hunt, Mary stages her personal conflict with Tehsildar as part of the larger struggle regarding the erosion of the forest and the exploitation of the tribals by the native elite. Yet, at the same time, Mary's actual murder of Tehsildar remains a singular and isolated act due to the nature of its execution and therefore cannot in any way be seen as a programmatic plan against either colonial or sexual violence, revealing that the political may not always be able to function in any fully representative manner.

As in "The Hunt," Mahasweta's short story "Draupadi" also explores the complex interactions between violence, agency and action. Set in the India of the early 1970s, "Draupadi" relays the tale of Dopdi Mehjen, a Santal tribal woman who is the victim of violence. Having murdered an Indian landowner, Dopdi is arrested and taken to a military camp where she is subjected to brutal interrogation, physical assault and multiple rapes.[143] "Draupadi" maps a particular trajectory of torture, focusing on one woman's response to racial, colonial and sexual violence. At the same time, this text demonstrates how a politics of counter-

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[142] Mahasweta Devi, Imaginary Maps xviii.

[143] Dopdi murders this man as a result of her involvement in the Naxalite movement, a series of agrarian uprisings that shook India beginning roughly in 1967 and ending in 1971. In these movements, which originated in Naxalbari, a village in North India, but then became decentralised, tribals and the landless peasantry joined forces with certain (usually Marxist) factions of the intellectual community in order to launch armed resistances against the land-owning classes, as well as against the government. In part, the Indian Emergency of the 1970s, where the central government headed by Indira Gandhi suspended all civil liberties, were a response to these movements and rebellions. See Sumanta Banerjee, India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising (London: Zed, 1984).

violence could serve to disrupt and "talk back" to both imperial and patriarchal systems.

Unlike Mary Oraon who falls in between different cultures or communities, Dopdi gains her agency to act predominately through her identification as a Santal tribal. Throughout the text, her response to the political authorities is tied to the struggle of a particular community against oppression. As Partha Chatterjee remarks, this principle of community is in fact paramount to acts of resistance launched by a peasant or tribal consciousness. In bourgeois liberal politics, Chatterjee explains, solidarity is built through a contractual or aggregative process whereby individuals come together into an alliance on the basis of common interests and shared preferences. By contrast, collective action originating within a tribal consciousness does not emanate from a contract among separate and distinct individuals; rather, according to Chatterjee, members of a tribal community are enjoined to act as a part of a community bound together by necessity, by mutual bonds of kinship and solidarity that already exist.[187] The implication of this is that ethical action undertaken by a tribal consciousness cannot simply be understood as operating according to a logic of bourgeois rationality, but rather to a logic of community. At the same time, this notion of community cannot be assigned a single determinate value based on social categories such as race, caste, gender or religion, since the boundaries of solidarity can shift according to changing contexts of struggle, based as they are on an ethics of survival.

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[187] Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) 163-67.

In the short story, Dopdi is sustained by a similar sense of community. Her resolute faith in a larger tribal collectivity is perhaps best expressed by the proverb she keeps reciting to herself as she is being followed by the military officials: "Crow would eat crow's flesh before Santal would betray Santal."[145] Yet, Dopdi also politicises this sense of tribal identity through her involvement in the Naxalite movement. For this reason, when she is caught, she recalls the phrase, "No comrade will let the others be destroyed for her own sake" (194). Following this, Dopdi betrays herself to the soldiers so that she will be able to warn the other members of her community who have gone into hiding. She remarks, "Just as you know when you've won, you must also acknowledge defeat and start the activities of the next stage. Now Dopdi spreads her arms, raises her face to the sky, turns toward the forest and ululates with the force of her entire being. . . . The echo of the call travels far" (195). It is important that in this scene Dopdi imagines her own body as one pulse in a larger movement. The reader is reminded that Dopdi's behaviour is the result of a collective consciousness and loyalty, one that negotiates between tribal and political allegiances.

Dopdi's ultimate rejection of sexual and political moral norms occurs, however, at the end of the story, since it is at this point that she becomes cognisant of the conjunctions between political oppression and gender oppression. After being arrested by the police, she is brought to the military camp where she is pinned down to the ground and subjected to brutal physical assaults and multiple

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[145] Mahasweta Devi, "Draupadi," trans. Gayatri Spivak in In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics, by Gayatri Spivak (New York: Routledge, 1987) 192. All further references to this text will appear in parentheses.

rapes. Senanayak, the chief police officer, orders his soldiers to "make her," viewing Dopdi as an object devoid of any agency of her own. She is reduced to the condition of a lifeless, inert being such that the narrator describes Dopdi as a "compelled spread-eagled still body" over which "active pistons of flesh rise and fall" (195). Finally, after losing all consciousness, she is brought to a tent, thrown down on the floor and left there with a piece of cloth covering her body. It is at this point that a shift occurs in the story. Dopdi awakens just as a group of soldiers comes in and orders her to go to Senanayak's tent. Standing up, Dopdi ferociously tears the piece of cloth with her teeth. She then confronts Senanayak, who is violently unsettled to see this naked, yet fearless, woman advancing toward him:

> The commotion is as if the alarm had sounded in a prison. Senanayak walks out surprised and sees Draupadi, naked, walking toward him in the bright sunlight with her head high. The nervous guards trail behind. What is this? He is about to cry but stops. Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. What is this? He is about to bark. Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, Dopdi Mehjen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me? . . . Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (196)

In this scene, the reader witnesses the transformation of Dopdi's body. She now employs her body as an instrument of retaliation, and this time, it is she, naked, who takes away Senanayak's power to think, speak or act. Standing in front of Senanayak at once as the subject of speech and the "object of [his] search," Dopdi, in an ironic twist, launches her own physical resistance by reconstructing her body in "militaristic" ways. Accordingly, this formulation may be seen to substantiate

Sharon Marcus's arguments about rape. Marcus argues that rape and male violence, when understood as social scripts that shape both the verbal and physical interactions of women and the worlds in which they live, may be countered by "imagining the female body as subject to change, as a potential object of fear and violence."[146] Hence, in this last episode, Dopdi uses her physical body to force the army official to experience her reality not only in a very visceral way, but also in a way that evokes fear as opposed to sympathy and protection.

For this reason, in this scene she is able to reverse many normative, institutionalised conceptions of the female body in Indian society and history. For example, Dopdi's actions run counter to her mythological namesake, Draupadi of The Mahabharata, who is a model of feminine loyalty and modesty.[147] In the Indian epic, Draupadi is the object of a violent transaction and the cause of a crucial battle between two clans, the Pandavas and Kauravas. The eldest of the Pandavas, Yudhisthir, stakes his wife Draupadi along with all of his other material possessions in a game of dice with his enemy, Duryodhana. But when Yudhisthir loses, Draupadi refuses to comply, claiming that she is married not simply to

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[146] Sharon Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention," Feminists Theorize the Political, eds. Judith Butler and Joan Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992) 400.

[147] It is also interesting to note, however, as Mahasweta does in conversation with Spivak, that it is very possible the "actual" figure upon which the mythological character of Draupadi is based may, herself, have been a tribal. Firstly, she is described throughout The Mahabharata as black; secondly, in the state of Himachal Pradesh there exists a "Draupadi" clan in which women practice a form of polyandry similar to that of the epic heroine. Spivak then goes on to note that in this story it could either be that Dopdi, the tribal, cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name, or that "Dopdi" is in fact the proper tribalised form of the ancient "Draupadi." See Imaginary Maps ix.

Yudhisthir, but to all five of the Pandava brothers. At this point, Duryodhana attempts to violate Draupadi so as to disgrace his opponent. Draupadi then prays to the god, Krishna, to save her honour while she is being stripped in public. Upon hearing her prayers, the benevolent Krishna intervenes and converts Draupadi's sari into unending yards of cloth so that Duryodhana is unsuccessful in disrobing her. Gayatri Spivak explains, "Mahasweta's story rewrites this episode. The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi – in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the intervention of a benign or divine comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops."[148] Even more than refusing male leadership, however, Dopdi is successful in rejecting prevailing social, moral, imperial and gender codes by walking toward Senanayak naked. She challenges, for instance, the traditional equation of shame with the body of a raped woman. Instead, Dopdi transfers the feeling of shame onto the rapist: "You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed" (196). In this way, Dopdi upsets conventional Indian middle-class notions of shame, guilt, morality and sexuality, realigning the female tribal body with capacities for survival and the ability to fight back.

More importantly, Dopdi's refiguring of her subjectivity involves a direct

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[148] Gayatri Spivak, In Other Worlds 183.

politicisation of her body. Significantly, her last words to Senanayak are politically provocative: "I will not let you put my cloth on me," she says, "What more can you do? Come on, counter me, come on, counter me?" (196). As Spivak explains, the word "counter" is used here as a compendium for the phrase "killed by police in an encounter," a code description for death by police torture.[14] On the one hand, then, Dopdi is challenging her opponent Senanayak to kill her, to negate and obliterate her subjectivity altogether. However, her words and her attendant motions have exactly the reverse effect on the army official, paralysing him so that this time it is he who is entirely unable move, think or take any kind of action. In asking Senanayak to negate her while standing naked and fearless in front of him, Dopdi thus forces him to see her as a subject. In effect, she demands that he not only counter her, but also that he encounter her. And as Kavita Panjabi notes, in this last scene Dopdi deploys her body precisely to "force home the realness of her own counter-ideology."[15] As a result, she is able to penetrate and enter into him, infiltrating him with a sense of panic through her own act of counter-violence.

By way of this story, Mahasweta is able to indicate the salience of the physical body in processes of ethical and political transformation. And in this sense, the narrative trajectory mapped out by her text is able to attest to the fact that programmes of social action cohere to a logic that is vested not only in

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[14] Gayatri Spivak, In Other Worlds 184.

[15] Kavita Panjabi, Third World Feminist Standpoints on Political Struggle: Literary Narratives of the Naxalite Movement in India and the 'Dirty War' in Argentina (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1992) 160.

conceptual categories, but also in corporeal reticulations. Accordingly, Mahasweta's stories remind us once again of the centrality of physical reform in almost all ethical, political, historical and subjective arbitrations, as explained by Jean and John Comaroff. In chapter three, for example, we saw how activities which involve a simultaneous 'dismembering' and 're-membering' of the body often function as "prerequisites for retraining the memory, either to deschool the deviant or to shape new subjects as the bearers of new worlds."[15] In other words, social groups who seek change place considerable weight on the redefinition of bodily habits and images precisely because any systematic shift in the positioning of the physical body serves to index a synchronous realignment in social location. Similarly, in the short story, "Dopdi," the conscious process of bodily transformation that the protagonist undergoes at the end of the tale should be understood as a particular effort to rework the very material grounding of a local reality that is both physical and psychological, at once personal and social.

If both "Draupadi" and "The Hunt" portray what happens when women assume positions of action and aggression, Mahasweta's "Douloti the Bountiful" maps a very different trajectory. This story relays the life of Douloti, the daughter of a tribal bonded labourer, who is taken away from her home and then sold into prostitution in order to repay her family's loans. In this story, Mahasweta posits the body of the subaltern woman as a site upon which the intersecting forces of patriarchy, capitalism and nationalism all work out their particular violences. By

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[15] John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, Ethnography and the Historical Imagination (Boulder: Westview, 1992) 70.

the end of the narrative. Douloti is depicted as crippled and disfigured after being raped and abused for years as a prostitute. Her body is described, graphically and grotesquely, by the narrator as being "hollow with tuberculosis, the sores of venereal disease all over her frame, oozing evil-smelling pus."[152] Indeed, it is by evoking in the reader the mixed feelings of repulsion, on the one hand, and sympathy, on the other, for what has been done to Douloti that Mahasweta makes her argument.

The irony through which this story works has in fact been commented upon at length by Spivak in her analysis of this text. In particular, Spivak characterises Douloti's subjectivity as a site of discontinuity by pointing out how she does not fully belong to any community. Having been torn away from her home at a very young age and sold into prostitution, Douloti is shown to have been disengaged from the possibility of any collective sociality. Spivak notes, Douloti's psyche undergoes a particular dissociation since "her ego splits at her first rape and stays split until nearly the end." In this way, Douloti represents a "real aporia" because she is neither "an intending subject of resistance" nor an "intending subject of victimisation."[153] Sold into prostitution, she is kept in a cubicle by herself such that she is unable to form common cause with any one. At the end of the narrative, Mahasweta shows Douloti, after years of abuse, leaving

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[152] Mahasweta Devi, "Douloti," Imaginary Maps 91. All further references to this text will appear in parentheses.

[153] Gayatri Spivak, "Woman in Difference: Mahasweta Devi's 'Douloti the Bountiful'," Nationalisms and Sexualities, eds. Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Routledge, 1992) 111.

the house of prostitution in order to journey back to the village of her youth, ostensibly to find freedom and release. Spivak is incisive in pointing out how, in the original Bengali text, the recurrent images of home and family found in this last section of the story are accompanied by Mahasweta's conscious and idiosyncratic use of a language that falls within a particular sentimental tradition of Bengali literature. However, in the end, Douloti's journey is rudely broken, and she eventually dies in the middle of a schoolyard late at night.

The final irony of the story thus takes place when the school teacher and his students, all young villagers living in a remote rural area, discover Douloti lying on their schoolyard the next morning. To make matters worse, her body has fallen on and tarnished the effects of a map of India that Mohan, the well-meaning school teacher, has painted on the grass in order to teach the children about the upcoming Independence Day:

> Filling the entire peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies *bonded labor* spread-eagled, kamyia-whore Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today, on the fifteenth of *August*, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India. (93)

In the Bengali language, the word *doulot*, from which Douloti's name is derived, means "wealth, on the one hand, or that which is precious, but it can also mean "excess," "extravagance" or "waste." Douloti's name in this passage therefore plays with both of these meanings, thereby reminding us of those bodies upon which the wealth of the modern nation is built and yet which must always remain in excess or outside of its borders, figured as waste. But perhaps what is most

interesting about this passage is the way in which the reader here is allied with Mohan, the school teacher, who is sympathetic to, but at once complicit, in Douloti's oppression. The final question on which the story ends – the question of what Mohan will *do* – emphasises the urgency for action and its impossibility, by making the reader mindful not just of Mohan's paralysis, but also that of our own in response to this horrific ending. What is a school teacher to do when confronted with such a corpse? Indeed, what are we, as readers, doing? The questions, challenges and affronts staged by this text function to reveal the immense disjunction between good intentions and actions: between the sentimentality that codes Douloti's understanding of home and the harsh realities that frame it; between the world of Douloti and "our" own. At the same time, by forcing her readers to turn their attention away from the text and toward their own visceral selves, to their actions and bodies outside of the story, Mahasweta also makes us aware that what is required of real political engagement is not simply the kind of sympathy or even knowledge that ultimately works, in a rather condescending manner, to distance oneself from the struggles in whose name politics occurs, but rather something deeper, the discovery of which begins in our awareness of the discomforting experience of our immobility in relation to the complex feelings of disgust, anger, horror and compassion that the story "Douloti" evokes.

Yet, as Mahasweta notes in conversation with Spivak, this crisis should not be seen as a sign of paralysis, but rather as the point of a creative junction and as a call to action. At the same time, by "action," Mahasweta is not necessarily

speaking of the kind of "assistance" projects which is characteristic of much development work. Rather, she says that the first step toward action is the building of "trust" or of "points of contact." In a world where a hierarchical system of knowledge-production often leaves immeasurable gaps and sites of ignorance and apathy between different cultures or people, collective action begins with "learning to love" (xxii). In her Preface to Mahasweta's stories, Spivak too echoes this idea: that the seeds of activism are contained in a certain commitment and attentiveness that is akin to establishing ethical responsibility with another human:

> No amount of raised consciousness in field-work can ever approach the painstaking labor to establish ethical singularity with the subaltern. "Ethical singularity" is neither "mass contact" nor engagement with the "common sense of the people." We all know that when we engage profoundly with one person, the response comes from both sides: this is responsibility and accountability. We also know that in such engagements we want to reveal and reveal, conceal nothing. Yet on both sides there is always a sense that something has not got across. This we call the "secret," not something that one wants to conceal, but something that one wants to reveal. In this sense the effort of "ethical singularity" may be called a "secret encounter." Please note that I am not speaking of meeting in secret. In this secret singularity, the object of ethical action is not an object of benevolence, for here responses flow from both sides. It is not identical with the frank and open exchange between radicals and the oppressed in times of crisis, or the intimacy that anthropologists often claim with their informant groups, although the importance of at least the former should not be minimized. This encounter can only happen when the respondents inhabit something like normality. Most political movements fail in the long run because of the absence of this engagement. In fact, it is impossible for all leaders (subaltern or otherwise) to engage every subaltern this way, especially across the gender divide. This is why ethics is the experience of the impossible. Please note that I am not saying that ethics are impossible, but rather that ethics is the experience of the impossible. This understanding only sharpens the sense of the crucial and continuing need for

> collective political struggle. For a collective struggle *supplemented* by the impossibility of full ethical engagement – not in the rationalist sense of "doing the right thing," but in this more familiar sense of the impossibility of "love" in the one-on-one way for each human being – the future is always around the corner, there is no victory, but only victories that are also warnings. (xxv)

In this passage, Spivak makes some salient points about the conditions in which ethics, politics and activism work "best." First, she outlines several things which ethics is not. It is not simply "consciousness raising" or "mass contact" or "engagement with the common sense of the people" or a transaction of "benevolence" or even just "doing the right thing." Rather, real ethical engagement, she argues, is learned via the ways we enter into relation with other human beings, often in a one-to-one basis. As such, it is not a "radical" activity; it takes place in situations of "normality." For this reason, Spivak sees ethical action as a sort of intimate encounter, what she calls a "secret encounter" propelled by an "experience of the impossible," as in the "impossibility of love." But here I must take slight issue with the way in which Spivak weighs this argument. If ethical or even political engagement can indeed be imagined along the lines of an intimate encounter, then ethics is not merely built on an "experience of the impossible," but also on an experience and understanding of possibilities and potentialities generated through various forms of contact and desire. Moreover, in contrast to Spivak's formulations, I would argue that the ethics around such moments of contact – such "intimate encounters" – cannot simply be categorised as a critical awareness of the "impossibility" of any kind of positivism; rather, the ethical potential of such encounters resides in, and is immanent in, the various

patterns or modalities of engagement and relation, themselves; thus, such an ethics needs to be addressed in terms of its style and phenomenology as well.[14]

It is precisely such a phenomenology of contact, that Leslie Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues helps to chart out – and it is to this novel that I will now turn. A story of the pains, powers and possibilities inherent in various kinds of affective or intimate encounters, Stone Butch Blues helps us to think explicitly about the relationship between reading, writing and embodiment. Perhaps one of the ways in which the novel is able to move us into this phenomenological, embodied realm is by figuring itself as a love-letter. Speaking through a language of desire and yearning, the novel moves us into a very intimate space, not just in terms of

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[14] For example, Spivak, to help explain what such an ethics might look like, uses the Bengali word, *anushilan*, which she translates alternately as "attentiveness" and "vigilance." Commonly used in reference to scholastic exercises, *anushilan* describes the kind of awareness or concentration that comes through rigorous practice and repetition of exercises, although it may also have the connotation of the type of focus or attentiveness that is acquired, say, through meditative practice as well. While I think the notion of "practice" is important in trying to articulate what ethics is, I would want to shift the emphasis away from the rigour, and perhaps even vigilance, that Spivak seems to suggest is necessary in ethical engagement. Rather, I would like to suggest that ethical engagement perhaps is more akin to what the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas terms "receptivity" or the state of "evocation" when thinking about the ways in which the conditions for contact and transformation become created in the therapeutic setting when working, largely, with autistic individuals. "Reception and evocation have to with creating the conditions for the arrival of an object. We may think of a potential dream waiting for the conditions necessary for its dreaming," writes Bollas. In many ways, Bollas's words describing this process of evocation resonate with Spivak's notion of "responsibility," which is also a notion of response-ability, I would argue, an engagement in which "responses come from both sides," and in which "we want to reveal and reveal, conceal nothing." Yet, in Bollas's terms, such "revelations" are achieved "through a mental action characterized by a relaxed, not a vigilant, state of mind" – especially since "to evoke, from the Latin *evocate*, means to call forth or to summon." This act of summoning, or "calling into being and activity," moreover, "attributes agency to the called up." It is important to note, writes Bollas, that "nascent self states, dreams and inspired reflections, however, are not phenomena which can be aggressively summoned. . . . The evocative mental process occurs when the mind is receptive and at rest." In particular, Bollas paints a picture of what such an ethical practice might look like by giving the example of a parent who sits beside a child during bedtime, allowing the child's mind to wander and imagine his/her life. In this sense, then, ethics is not necessarily the "vigilance" we often think of it as being, a process of going from a state of "sleep" to "wakefulness"; rather it is the type of "receptivity" that is involved in the transition between "wakefulness" and "the dream." See Christopher Bollas, The Shadow of the Object (New York: Columbia UP, 1987).

subject matter, but also in terms of its mode of address. Consider the opening lines:

> Dear Theresa, I'm lying on my bed tonight missing you, my eyes all swollen, hot tears running down my face. There's a fierce summer lightning storm raging outside. Tonight I walked down the streets looking for you in every woman's face, as I have each night of this lonely exile. I'm afraid I'll never see your laughing, teasing eyes again.[155]

The letter goes on to recount all the memories that Jess shared with Theresa and then searches for reasons as to why they separated. Later, in the novel, we find out that this is a letter that Theresa, herself, has asked Jess to write during their last night together. When Jess confesses to Theresa that there are still so many things left unsaid, so many things that Jess wished to tell Theresa but couldn't find the words for, Theresa asks Jess to write it all down in a letter someday. In fact, words and phrases of the letter are repeated in the text of the novel so that we come to understand the novel itself as Jess's testimonial letter. The novel "fills out" the letter, so to speak, and "fills us in" during the process. Thus, the novel is Jess's way of explaining a particular life and point of view. At the same time, it is also an act of love: an intimate gesture in an effort to reach out toward another. Yet, it is also important to note that this is an "unsent" letter – for, it does not lie in the hands of "Theresa," but in a place where "women's memories [are kept] safe." It is exists as a "fiction": not quite real, but not unreal either. The question that the reading of this "letter" poses to its readers is therefore much the same as the challenge that Mahasweta's stories engender: as readers, what will you *do*?

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[155] Leslie Feinberg, Stone Butch Blues (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1993) 5. All further references to this text will appear in parentheses.

How will you act and answer? What will be your reply to this "letter" that is and is not addressed to you?

Using the first-person narrative, Stone Butch Blues tells a story that closely resembles Feinberg's own life-trajectory. Jess begins the narrative by saying, "I didn't want to be different. I longed to be everything grownups wanted, so they would love me. I followed all their rules, tried my best to please. But there was something about me that made them knit their eyebrows and frown. No one ever offered a name for what was wrong with me" (13). Later, Jess comes to recognise this "un-nameable difference" as arising from her identity as a "he-she," a person of ambiguous gender, neither male nor female, in a world that demands all persons to be quite clearly one or the other. Stone Butch Blues is thus a testimony to the ways in which Jess's own discovery, experiencing, understanding and naming of her own identity take shape – and to the ways in which identities and experiences are known, lived, negotiated, transformed, claimed and reclaimed. This narrative is not only about the immense hardships, rejections, wounds and isolation from which Jess suffers, but also about the communities, kinships and socialities that are born, alternately, out of capacities for passion and intimacy.

One of the things that Jess's story makes clear is the complicated, and sometimes uneasy, relationship between language, naming and belonging. In fact, throughout the novel, the reader is reminded of the ways in which Jess's experiencing of the self takes place outside language and outside belonging. "I don't have any words," Jess confesses, "I don't know how to talk about what I

feel. I don't even know if I feel things like other people do" (130). Similarly, speaking of the intense isolation that lies at the heart of such experiences of othering, Jess remarks, "There was no place outside of me where I belonged. So every morning I willed myself into existence" (209). In part, the structures of silence and remoteness that are so pervasive in this novel are a testament to the times themselves. It is important to note that Jess grows up in post world-war II America, during the cold war and at the height of the McCarthy era, the child of a factory-worker who had "grown up determined he wasn't going to be stuck in a factory like his old man" and a fifties housewife who "had no intention of being trapped in a marriage" (13). It is also significant that Jess's home is the only Jewish home in the "projects," or the former army barracks located in Buffalo, which then housed military-contracted aircraft workers and their families. One of the things that the novel testifies to over and over again is the way in which such differences are met with silence and fear in a society that persisted in stifling even the slightest deviation from the norm. At the same time, Feinberg shows that this moment in American history is a period in which various kinds of activisms, based on counter-cultures, are born.

In a scene that takes place early on in the novel, Feinberg is in fact able to demonstrate both humorously and yet poignantly how it is that Jess's gender, class and ethnic differences serve to mark and isolate the young child from the world and other people. By turns that are at once hilarious and heart-breaking, Feinberg describes Jess's first encounter with a new school and teacher. This scene, I think, is important because it stages something that happens to Jess throughout the

narrative. On the one hand, Jess is placed in a society that constantly asks her to name herself, to explain herself or her differences, and thereby place herself in language. But, on the other hand, what Jess encounters repeatedly is that the terms and codes upon which such a demand is made simply do not include her. For example, upon arriving at a new school in a new state, trouble starts for Jess when the teacher stumbles on her name during the roll-call. At first, the teacher is puzzled by Jess's name – she is concerned that it is "not a girl's name" – but soon finds some "comfort" in the idea that its difference may be attributed to the fact that Jess is "of the Jewish persuasion." But this is not all. Boldly announcing this fact to the class, the teacher then goes on to demand that Jess "speak up" and explain to the class "where she is from." Jess, only six years old and paralysed with fear and embarrassment, doesn't quite know how to answer. After a long silence, and to the great disappointment and frustration of this teacher who is looking for a clear and precise way to locate her student on some map, Jess says quietly, "I'm from the desert" (15). For the reader, however, the image of the desert that Jess uses to both describe and interpret her place in this world is interesting and appropriate for a variety of reasons that the teacher is unable to appreciate. Jess locates herself in a way that is imagistic and wordless. She describes her world in a way that is visceral, conjuring up the topography, the heat, the dryness or perhaps the vastness of the place that she knew. In a sense, then, Jess's description of "where she is from" is much more accurate and authentic to reality than if she were to, say, name a state as her teacher would have her do. At the same time, the image of the desert is particularly apposite

because of the way in which it summons the incredible loneliness and isolation not just of her geographical habitat, but of her interior landscape as well. In fact, I would say that a large part of the power and persuasiveness of the first part of Jess's narrative has to do with the way in which the recurrent images of storms and deserts, and the heavy shadows of silence that they cast, speak, more than anything else, of what it is like to grow up in a very lonely place, a place no one knows.

However, if Jess's childhood is marked by the desert of loneliness, then her journey into adulthood is punctuated by the bars and clubs of Buffalo, New York, where Jess finally discovers a community of belonging. It is here that Jess is able to "come out" as a young "butch," as she begins to forge loves and relationships in a culture that she is soon able to call her own. Thus, one of the foremost aims of Feinberg, in writing this novel, is to bear witness, and pay homage, to the "butch-femme" culture of the 1950s, a culture that not only gives Jess a home, but one that also nurtured Feinberg, the author. Attempting to give a clear and simple definition of butch-femme culture and identities, Gayle Rubin explains that "butch" and "femme" are ways of coding lesbian identities and behaviours that are at once linked with and yet distinct from standard societal roles for men and women. Butch is most usefully understood, she says, as the lesbian vernacular term for women who are more comfortable with masculine gender codes, styles, identities or behaviours than with feminine ones – as well as those who use traits typically thought of as masculine to signal their lesbianism or communicate their desire to other women. Femme, by contrast, is a gender identity associated with feminine

codes, signals, symbols, styles or behaviours.[196] Feinberg's novel describes both the pains and pleasures of butch and femme lives and identities through the story of Jess. The reader follows Jess on a journey where she falls in love with Theresa, a femme, who works at the same factory as Jess, and who seduces Jess on the dance-floor of a bar one evening. The novel goes on to map the life and home that they create together, as well as the various fights, struggles and violences that they face in the hands of the police who raid their bars on a regular basis during this pre-Stonewall era. At the same time, however, Feinberg's novel tells the story of the dissolution of this culture, as the streets and the cities became an increasingly dangerous place for gays and lesbians during the 1960s and 70s. Paradoxically, the rise of gay liberation and feminism spells the end, initially, of Jess's familiar butch-femme community. She can no longer live in or with the gender she had known. It is at this time that Jess decides to begin hormone therapy and to pass as a man in this progressively hostile environment: a decision that also marks the end of Jess and Theresa's relationship. After years of "exile," Jess finally stops taking the hormones and chooses to "come out" again, as transgendered. In fact, the novel ends with Jess finding the courage to "speak out" at a gay and lesbian rights demonstration, amidst a crowd and a movement that had previously made Jess feel "outside" of it and "alone" (295). Yet, this time, Jess finds a "voice" by virtue of finding an audience who is willing to listen. It is with the hopes and dreams of a new future – a less lonely and more collective

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[196] Gayle Rubin, "Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender and Boundaries," The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson P, 1992) 467.

future – that the novel closes.

Thus, by charting the various journeys and moments of exile through which Jess must navigate, Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues diagrams not just a personal history, but also a public and political one. In particular, one of the tales that the novel tells is that of gay, lesbian and transgender organising in the US – a story that is, not incidentally, connected to a particular race and class history while also being imbricated with the history of feminism. But perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Stone Butch Blues is the way in which it claims the fifties butch-femme experience as central to all of these histories, as well as a centre from which to begin thinking about some of the limits around the ways in which these histories have been constructed in the past and present. But, first, before it is possible to discuss how Feinberg's novel bears witness to lesbian, gay, queer and transgender politics and histories, and why such an account might be important for an understanding of the relationship between witnessing and activism in general, it is necessary to discuss how, in giving this particular account of 1950s butch-femme lesbianism, Feinberg's novel also positions itself to "talk back" to the North American feminism of the 1970s and 1980s: the legacies of which are present today and to which my dissertation also attempts to "talk back" in its own way.

For example, the novel tells the story of how in the 1970s, the streets become an increasingly hostile place for gays and lesbians in a number of ways. "The police really stepped up their harassment after the birth of gay pride," Jess narrates (135). At the same time, in a paradoxical fashion, this is the moment that

marks the beginning of weekly gay liberation and radical women's meetings and protests at the university, where Theresa works. Yet, ironically, there is then no safe place for the couple to go. It is too dangerous at the bars; and the dances and meetings at the university will not accept Jess because she does not look like a woman. It is at such a point that Jess decides to take hormones and to pass as a man. "I just don't know how to go on anymore," says Jess, "This is the only way I can think of I can still be me and survive" (148). But, this is a decision that Theresa cannot live with. "I can't pass as a straight woman and be happy. I can't live as the scared couple in apartment 3G who can't trust people enough to have friends. I can't live like a fugitive with you. I wouldn't be able to survive it" (152). They break up and Jess goes into exile. The end of Jess and Theresa's relationship also marks a historical shift, one that involves a conjunction between the shutting down of bars and factories and the birth of second-wave feminism, as well as gay and lesbian protest groups and rallies, centred at the university.

Jess and Theresa have different relationships to the feminist movement and yet both do not quite fit into the forms and structures perpetuated by second-wave feminism – a movement that found particular resonance in Adrienne Rich's notion of "woman identification."[15] Jess is unacceptable in this new feminist movement

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[15] See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, eds. Henry Abelove et. al (New York: Routledge, 1993) 227-54. A classic text in feminist and lesbian studies, Rich offers here the concept of the "lesbian continuum" in order to counter arguments about the natural or foundational status of heterosexuality and the family, arguing instead that the institutions of heterosexuality are rather "imposed" on women through various forms of social scripts. Interestingly, among the studies and arguments Rich cites is Catherine MacKinnon's Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), where MacKinnon questions some of the qualitative differences between sexual harassment, rape and heterosexual intercourse. Rich's idea of the lesbian continuum is offered as a means of bridging some of the divisions in the women's movement of the 1970s

and community because she is seen as being "male-identified" and therefore not the "right" kind of woman. But, paradoxically, Theresa is also viewed as the wrong kind of woman because of her association with Jess. One of the things that this novel shows is how, for the most part, the feminism and lesbian-feminism of the 1970s and 1980s characterised butch-femme relationships as mere replicas of oppressive heterosexual roles and structures.[158] As Joan Nestle writes, "At the crux of modern discussion about butch-femme identity is the question of autonomy: does the longevity of butch-femme self-expression reflect the pernicious strength of heterosexual gender polarization – or is it, as I would argue, a lesbian-specific way of deconstructing gender that radically reclaims women's erotic energy? Are femmes and butches dupes of heterosexuality, or are they gender pioneers with a knack for alchemy?"[159] What Nestle's words point to is the way in which butch-

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through its focus on a feminism centred around and motivated primarily by the identification of women with other women. See also Marilyn Frye's The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing P, 1983). Rich's piece has of course been critiqued and re-evaluated many times since its publication. Some of the most common criticisms include criticisms regarding Rich's use of the term "false consciousness" to describe women's experience, as well as her notion of a lesbian continuum which could too easily be interpreted to mean, for example, that "lesbianism" and "female friendship" are exactly the same thing.

[158] For debates about and reconsiderations of butch-femme, see the following: Sue-Ellen Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, 294-306; Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Subordination," The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, 307-320; Joan Nestle, ed. The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader (Boston: Alyson P, 1992) as well as Nestle's "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s" in her A Restricted Country (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1987), 100-09; Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, "Oral History and the Study of Sexuality in the Lesbian Community: Buffalo, New York, 1940-1960," Feminist Studies 12 (1986), as well as their book, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community (New York: Penguin, 1994); Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga, "What We're Rolling Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism," Heresies 12 (1981); Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, 3-44; Amy Goodloe, "Lesbian Identity and the Politics of Butch-Femme Roles" <http://www.lesbian.org/amy/essays/bf-paper.html> 1993-99.

[159] Nestle, Introduction, The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader 14.

femme identities were figured in lesbian-feminist theory as "inauthentic": as the products of a "false consciousness" or as the "imitations" of heterosexual norms. In such a political climate, especially within the structures of *a* feminist theory that was beginning to gain acceptance in universities and academia, it would indeed have been a difficult endeavour to brave the threat of feminist criticism and censure to make claims on behalf of butch-femme identities: these identities, it seems, were denied their own "authenticity" from all sides.

A large part of the difficulty of claiming such identities and experiences, of course, had to do with the way in which the feminism and lesbian-feminism of the 70s and 80s represented butch-femme lesbianism as a phenomenon that was, for the most part, "primitive" and "un-enlightened" – certainly not "radical" or "revolutionary" like the theories of an egalitarian feminism fighting hard for a "balance of power" in all sexual relationships. Against the doctrines of 1970s lesbian-feminism, butch-femme relationships and identities brought up questions over the foundational status of power and sexuality that could not adequately be incorporated in the frame offered by second-wave feminism alone. As Amber Hollibaugh, in conversation with Cherrie Moraga, remarks, "I think the reason butch/femme stuff got hidden within lesbian-feminism is because people are profoundly afraid of questions of power in bed. And though everybody doesn't play out power the way I do, the question of power affects who and how you eroticize your sexual need. And it is absolutely at the bottom of all sexual inquiry."[160] In another pioneering article entitled "Butch-Femme Relationships:

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[160] Hollibaugh and Moraga 59.

Sexual Courage in the 1950s," Joan Nestle writes about how the butch-femme couple "embarrassed" lesbian-feminism because they "made lesbians culturally visible, a terrifying act for the 1950s."[101] Speaking on behalf of the working-class community that shaped her own identity – "taxi drivers, telephone operators who were also butch-femme women," whose "feminism was not an articulated theory," but a "lived set of options" – Nestle describes, for example, the way in which academic feminism, when it came around in the 1970s to "sanction" lesbianism, made her feel so much more "respectable," so "less dirty, less ugly, less butch and femme."[102] What Nestle's arguments illustrate here are the complex ways in which feminism lends legitimacy to lesbianism as a political choice, but not as a sexual identity; similarly, it celebrates and validates certain experiences relating to gender, but by leaving aside the experience of class or race.[103] It is against such devaluations, then, that voices such as Nestle's, Hollibaugh's or Morraga's come forth to reclaim specific histories of race, class, gender and intimacy left out of the lesbian-feminism of Rich and Frye – not as replicas of heterosexual institutions, but as radical, political defiances of a patriarchal culture, as well as complex, authentic and natural ways of loving. As Hollibaugh states, her opposition to a narrow North American feminism that polices sexuality and champions only certain styles

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[101] Nestle, "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s" 108.

[102] Nestle, "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s" 105 - 06.

[103] One should in fact note the resonances between this language of "primitivism," "shame," "respectability," "false consciousness," and "imitation" or "mimicry" with certain kinds of Orientalist, racialised and/or class-based languages – for example, the language of certain arguments I noted in Chapter 1 which were about the need to "rescue" and "recover" women of other nations from a "backwards" societal order.

of intimacy as the most politically-correct or "ideal" forms of sexuality in the name of egalitarianism, stems from her refusal to disown the totality of her desires: desires that fight those views which, often through a veiled language of rights and freedoms, attempt to "take away" her ability to "genuinely feel, in my body, what I want."[104] In other words, she is arguing for an embodied politics that emanates from the lived experiences and desires of individuals in history – not a politics which prescribes and proscribes a person's desires and bodily movements.

It is precisely this reclaiming of desire and embodied experience that Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues attempts to effect. Feinberg writes with the kind of "honesty" that makes readers aware that the first step for political organising is this claiming of individual experience – and of all the complexities, contradictions and mystifications of that emotion and experience. There is a scene near the end of the novel, where Jess calls up an old friend, Frankie, who requires an apology. For years, Jess has refused to speak to Frankie, because Frankie challenged Jess's notion of what it means to be a butch. Frankie is a butch who loves other butches, but this was something that Jess found unacceptable and unthinkable. But finally, Jess comes to realise the limitations to this way of thinking, realising that love and identities, both, are much more flexible and complicated than she had previously imagined them to be. As Jess and Frankie become reacquainted after years of silence, Jess says to Frankie, "You know, there's so many things that have happened to me because I'm a he-she that I've never talked about. . . . I

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[104] Amber Hollibaugh, "Talking Sex: A Conversation on Sexuality and Feminism," by Deirdre English, Amber Hollibaugh and Gayle Rubin in Sexuality: A Reader, ed. Feminist Review (London: Virago, 1987) 64.

have never had the words." Frankie replies that Jess doesn't need words with her: she understands. But then Jess insists, "I do needs words, Frankie – sometimes it feels like I'm choking to death on what I'm feeling. I need to talk but don't know how." Moreover, Jess needs her own words. "What would these words sound like?" Jess asks Frankie. And Frankie replies that they would sound like "yearning" (275). What is so remarkable about this passage and about Feinberg's text as a whole is that it speaks precisely in this language of "yearning." The novel does indeed create this new vocabulary that Jess calls for. Its tone is neither that of strict pain nor pleasure, but of that profound space of ache and possibility that characterises yearning and from which all actions or movements toward collectivity, or intimacy, emanate. This novel is about the desire that prefigures and shapes language, being, and action – thus making Stone Butch Blues a phenomenological, as opposed to a merely critical, account of the ways in which history and culture works to shape identities, experiences and desires, and also of the ways in which these desires can never be determined absolutely by history.

This particular phenomenological or "embodied" nature of Feinberg's narrative is something that Jay Prosser writes about, when comparing Stone Butch Blues to other trans-sexual autobiographies. Prosser notes that Feinberg's text, like many other accounts of trans-sexual identity, figures the search for gender identity as a search for "home" or a community founded in and on the body. Yet, in contrast to these other narratives of identity where "passing" is usually just one "step" toward home, the subject of Feinberg's text does not ever "complete" the transformational process. Of course, it is important to note that many of the texts

that Prosser looks at are produced and read under conditions where the trans-sexual subject "needs to narrate a convincing trans-sexual autobiography for the therapeutic listener," often in order to receive authorisation for therapy or surgery. In such a narrative, what is important is that the trans-sexual subject be able to construct a "plausible history" and a coherent account of desire and subjectivity. Yet, as Prosser notes, it is often this very forced coherence that, paradoxically, instead of creating autobiographical or embodied subjects, functions to "de-subjectivise" trans-sexuals by forcing these individuals to erase certain aspects of the past and of the self. It is precisely this de-subjectivisation, moreover, that makes it difficult to generate a viable politics around trans-sexual identity, since the very coming-to-identity and the very process of coming-to-politics or "consciousness" for trans-sexuals involves a process whereby, in Prosser's words, "one is programmed to disappear" – or, in other words, where one is forced to efface the many complexities, conflicts and mystifications of identity in favour of a clear, coherent account.[164]

By contrast, Jess of Stone Butch Blues refuses such disappearance. In fact, according to Prosser, it is because of this insistence on holding on to all aspects of the self, even those that are in apparent contradistinction to each other, and on seeing all the facets of identity as equally "authentic" that Jess ultimately refuses to "complete" the transformation that will enable her to "become a man" and thereby find a "stable gender home." At the moment when Jess realises that she cannot

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[164] Jay Prosser, "No Place Like Home: The Transgendered Narrative of Leslie Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues," Modern Fiction Studies 41.3–4 (1995):483-514.

live life "passing as a man" any longer, she looks into the mirror and says, "What I saw reflected in the mirror was not a man, but I couldn't recognise the he-she. My face no longer revealed the contrasts of my gender. I could see my passing self, but even I could no longer see the more complicated me beneath my surface. . . . I hadn't just believed that passing would hide me. I hoped that it would allow me to express the part of myself that didn't seem to be woman. I didn't get to explore being a he-she though." Instead, Jess notes, "I simply became a he – a man without a past" (221-22). Part of what is so moving about Stone Butch Blues has to do with the way in which it insists, always, on the singularity and specificity of identity. Jess's "transgendered home" or body is never posited as a "nowhere" place, a place of in-between. Rather, this place has very specific, tangible and embodied contours, even if the shape of such a narrative, body or experience must be described in terms of the colour of twilight or the sounds of thunder and yearning.

Accordingly, Feinberg's novel prefigures a politics that is also embodied and that is outlined in Transgender Warriors and Trans Liberation. Feinberg, in fact, opens Transgender Warriors, which is at once a historical archive, a resource guide for transgender individuals, and an account of Feinberg's own "coming to consciousness," with the assertion that "there are no pronouns in the English language as complex as I am, and I do not want to simplify myself."[fm] Paradoxically, then, Feinberg suggests the possibilities of collective struggle,

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[fm] Leslie Feinberg, Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul (Boston: Beacon P, 1996) ix. See also Feinberg's Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue (Boston: Beacon, 1998).

identification, and a shareable world lie not in the dissolution of personal boundaries or in the simplification of identity, but in the maintenance of limits and in the insistence on singularity. But while Feinberg's historical and political tracts offer certain anchoring points for transgender experience, it is perhaps Stone Butch Blues which is more successful in terms of placing the experiences of one transgendered self in history and politics. Transgender Warriors provides photographs and snapshots as evidence that transgender individuals have existed in various different times and places; it provides lists of resource centres – places dedicated to the establishment of transgender collectivities and communities. Similarly, Trans Liberation sketches out the contours of various philosophical and political arguments around transgender mobilisation. Yet, both of these works presuppose the narrative that Stone Butch Blues tells, the story that provides the affective point of entry for such historical and political undertakings, and which gives such undertakings their urgency and meaning. Speaking from the site of affect, this novel strikes readers as a story that, in its felt immediacy, creates experiences that are at once shareable and yet impossible to translate, clarify or explain without recourse to the intimate, private and sometimes incommunicable contexts of reading and writing.

Therefore, reading Stone Butch Blues with and against Mahasweta Devi's stories allows me to distinguish the arguments I make in this dissertation about fiction, reading and writing from certain contemporary philosophical arguments about the ways in which literature should be placed culturally, geographically, historically or experientially. Many political critics today, in the face of theories

about the transcendental or universal nature of "great literature" which exists apart from the specificities of place, time and the experiences of concrete subjects, make the salient argument that literature can only, in fact, be understood in relation to the localised experiences of categories such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class and nation. While I agree with this latter formulation, I also want to be careful that such an argument should not be taken to mean, as many arguments about "cultural insiderism" purport, that one can know "nothing" of things that are experientially, culturally, historically or socially removed from one's own self. Throughout my thesis, I have been arguing against this idea, saying that it is in fact possible to know deeply, profoundly and intensely of experiential realities that may be "external" to one's self. In part, cultural and experiential shareability is a result of the ways in which bodies, cultures and selves are open and permeable; bodily experiences may thus be transmitted and transferred in both spoken and unspoken ways, often across the bounds of time, geography and fleshly existence. Moreover, the notion that it is impossible to know anything about experiences that are removed from the self is false, paradoxically, because we are all, to an extent, "removed" from precisely those things we "know best" – from those aspects of the self and identity that register themselves in the body viscerally, with immediacy, as part of lived experience and not as a body of fixed, knowable or sayable facts. In this sense, the process of cultural, historical or experiential transmission is important even, or perhaps especially, for those who are "inside" a certain experiential or cultural milieu. Ironically, then, the shareability of worlds and languages that is made possible by these fictions happens not because the

experiences, cultures and selves portrayed in these texts are either universal or imprecise in any way, but because of the way in which these narratives insist on the specific, immediate and intimate contexts of reading and writing.

Mahasweta and Feinberg's texts exemplify this idea of the simultaneous shareability and specificity of fiction, because of the ways in which they write at once to "reach out" to others at the same time that they refuse to translate the self. Hence, in reading these and the other texts I have chosen for discussion in this thesis, my aim has been to authorise a mode of reading that is very different from the methodologies of reading that view literature only as a matter of universalisable forms and structures. Such modes of reading do injustice to why people write, to what they have to say, and to how such practices of reading, writing and witnessing can move people in quite profound, specific and localised ways. At the same time, the mode of reading that I am trying to authorise is also different from methodologies that seek to categorise literature simply in terms of things like national boundaries, race, gender or sexual orientation. For, instead of seeing literary narratives in terms of their specificities, such models often abstract from the deep, experiential realities of subjects. By contrast, I am arguing that to read with affect and imagination – or to see reading and writing as practices of bearing witness – is to be concurrently open to what these texts have to say *and* to be aware of the limits and bounds of both reading and writing. This awareness of limits, however, is not simply a deconstructive or critical move, but rather, the process of becoming sentient, mindful and aware of the various bodily, experiential, cognitive, cultural and emotive bounds that mark and place each of

us, and that thereby create the contexts for our actions and our possibilities in the world around us, both as individuals and as beings in relation with others. Literature, of course, is one of the places where many of us *experience* this cognisance of our own responsiveness and receptivity. Literary criticism has, far too often, been a place where this experience is set aside.

CONCLUSION

Knowing Otherwise:
Witnessing and Bodily Experience

My dissertation arises out of, and has tried to respond to, a set of debates or efforts to think about the issues of witnessing, testimony, and the more general question regarding the ethics of speaking in the name of both others and one's own self, which came to occupy a central yet highly controversial place in academia during the late 1980s and 1990s. This rising preoccupation with what Linda Alcoff has termed "the problem of speaking for others" was in part due to the growing recognition of the correlation between speech and political identity; between the edifices of theory and the institutions of practical living; between the meanings, effects and truths of particular statements and the places in which these are formulated. As Alcoff explains, questions concerning the various social, political, geographical, racial, national, class, or gender "differences" through which discourses and theoretical practices gained their authority and influence gave way to a more generalised ambivalence about the dangers, arrogances and power struggles inherent in the act of speaking or pursuing representation on behalf of people or groups who occupied a "different" social location than oneself. On the one hand, this new awareness within the academy pushed many politically-conscious theorists to assume a position where all endeavours to speak for or of others were viewed as violent and essentialising, where it was only possible to speak for oneself. On the other hand, the adoption of a passive or purely individualistic voice carried its own problems in terms of its erasure of

agency, which also signalled a certain erasure or avoidance of responsibility and accountability for one's speech.[16] This problematic, moreover, which was particularly acute within feminism and postcolonialism – and exacerbated even more around questions of violence, culture, the body, or the relationship between aesthetics, politics and experience – remains an impasse still to be reckoned with today by continuing to frame and limit the kinds of theoretical projects taking place within academia under the rubrics of feminism and postcolonialism.

Perhaps one of the most influential essays to address this question of how it is that one can hear the testimony of others is Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"[17] In this essay, Spivak, via an engagement of a conversation that takes place between the two "activist philosophers" Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, critiques the common assumption of post-structuralist theory that "intellectuals must attempt to disclose and know the discourse of society's Other." Instead, Spivak exposes the way in which this same post-structuralism, despite its claims to radicalism, systematically ignores and silences questions of ideology, of global capitalism, of the international division of labour, and post-structuralism's own institutional position in an economic and colonial history. She concludes her essay with the provocative claim that, indeed, "the subaltern cannot speak" – and, especially, the subaltern as female "cannot be heard or read." In part, what leads Spivak to this deduction is the story and example of a young sixteen-year-old girl,

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[16] Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," Cultural Critique 20 (1991): 5-32.

[17] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" rpt. In Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader, eds. Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams (New York: Columbia, UP, 1994), 66-111.

Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, who hangs herself in her father's home in Calcutta in 1926, someone who Spivak comes to hear of through family connections. Upon questioning various friends and relatives, Spivak discovers many different interpretations of the suicide. One account is that the girl was simply delirious; there was no apparent cause. By another explanation, it is a case of illicit love and an illegitimate pregnancy. Upon further investigation, however, it becomes known that Bhuvaneswari was menstruating at the time of her death and so it cannot be a case of pregnancy. In fact, nearly a decade after her suicide, it was found out that she was a member of one of the revolutionary groups involved in armed struggle for Indian independence. Bhuvaneswari had been assigned with a political assassination but could not go through with it. Unable to betray the trust of her comrades, she killed herself. Yet, according to Spivak, even by this account, her suicide is subsumed under a peculiarly twisted narrative of *sati*: the ideal, devoted woman who sacrifices herself in the name of the larger political cause. Spivak's point is that despite all of the official and non-official discourses that constitute this woman's subjectivity and intentions, her own testimony is nowhere to be found.

Spivak uses this story as but one means of making a larger argument about the inadequacies of certain types of academic discourse or intellectualising in recuperating subaltern agency and voice. But, at the same time, Spivak's preservation of Bhuvaneswari's silence is also used, in the end, as a way of privileging a Derridian deconstructive approach, over other more positivist or explicitly "activist" approaches, as the *most ethical* means of dealing with

questions of subalternity, difference, violence and othering. While I agree with what Spivak has to say about the way in which much radical political theory masks its own power, I cannot help but want to reformulate not only her verdict that the subaltern cannot speak, but also the compulsory ethicality of deconstruction above other modes of thinking and doing, even within the limits or confines of the academic institution. For all of its rigour and analytic force, deconstruction, based as it is in a critique of phenomenology, has not sufficiently addressed the functions of affect, bodily relations or experience. This move away from a consideration of the material dynamics of experience and affect, moreover, is not necessarily the kind of de-essentialising move that deconstruction imagines it to be. Rather, I have argued throughout this thesis how such a move may also serve to reinforce certain essentialist understandings of subjectivity in its refusal to consider a significant, although complex and irreducible, aspect of all subjects. In turn, this dissertation has tried to ask: If indeed "the subaltern cannot speak" because of the ways in which the analytical languages of intellectual discourse produce themselves, then what are the ways of reconfiguring and re-imagining our words and our conversations – the very ways in which we speak and listen – so that these other testimonies to the silent and silenced can be heard? What might be some alternative ways of imagining not only speech, but also silence itself – ways that do not simply imagine it as absence, but as living, breathing, taking up room and presence?

In contrast to Spivak, who posits silence as a kind of radical negativity, the Pakistani-British psychoanalyst, Masud Khan, in his book, The Privacy of the Self,

gives quite a different account of the modes in which silence speaks – an account that I feel might be more useful in thinking through the above questions.[106] In a chapter entitled, "To Hear With Eyes," Khan imaginatively reformulates conventional understandings of speaking, listening, seeing and sensing, as he describes his work with patients suffering from quite profound states of silence or "dissociation." In particular, Khan explains that, initially the phenomenon of psychological dissociation was defined by Freud, in his studies of hysteria, as a "splitting of the content of consciousness" resulting from trauma. This splitting occasioned, moreover, a state of "internal conflict" between a person's imaginative and adaptive capacities, and it was the analyst's task to re-establish the connections between the separate realms of the patient's psyche. In his own work on dissociation, however, Khan argues for the need to re-examine the conflictual dynamics of psychic reality as outlined by Freud and suggests that there is indeed more to the human experience than the operations of conflict, defence or repression, since these categories did not quite seem adequate in describing the realities of his patients. Khan goes on to note that while prevailing views of splitting assert that what is repressed is always sensible to us through the various defence mechanisms that an individual constructs around him or her self, this "sensing" in the case of dissociation is a much more difficult and complicated process – complicated because "the dissociated person *is* all the elements of his dissociated states and lives them as such." The peculiarity of dissociated states

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[106] Masud Khan, The Privacy of the Self: Papers of Psychoanalytic Theory and Technique (London: International UP, 1974).

rests in the fact that while there may be a great deal of tension within a dissociated person, there is never true conflict, since the very nature of conflict demands that the person is aware of the different sides of the psyche but simply cannot "choose." By contrast, the dissociated person is totally involved in each part of his or her identity. Thus, Khan surmises that although conflictual states may be "acted out," dissociated states are always "enacted in life" and thereby require "a witness" capable of experiencing alongside the other.

Khan goes on to explain that what enabled him to come to this particular conclusion was a case study involving a young woman, who, on the one hand, relayed a very painful, horrific narrative in which her body was no more than an object to be used and abused by others, and yet whose body-presence in the clinical setting was that of a strong, academic, disciplined and driven subject.[17] In coming to know and experience this patient, Khan realised that the person of whom this woman spoke, the person who allowed her body to be abused by others, was indeed someone quite *other* than the woman sitting before his eyes. This experience made Khan aware of an immense gap in psychoanalytic theory: namely, the lack of discussion about the knowledge that comes from simply looking at a person in his or her *body* as against looking at just the verbal material presented by the patient. Khan thus proceeds to argue that the interpretation,

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[17] In part, what allows Khan to make this analysis is a case study recorded by D.W. Winnicott in Playing and Reality (London: Tavistock, 1971), wherein a young girl comes to Winnicott for therapy and yet what persists in Winnicott's mind, through the transference, is that his patient has a different identity or "true self." "What I see is not a girl, but a boy, in front of me," is Winnicott's feeling and assessment. Khan has a very similar response to this particular patient and uses Winnicott's analysis to help his patient articulate and express the differently gendered aspects of one self.

understanding, experiencing and knowing of an other must take into account the total relationship between patient and analyst, since it is rendered possible by many other factors than mere spoken and understood language. Indeed, he writes, the reality of a patient is "much larger than language could ever metaphorize, symbolize or signify in itself." Consequently, Khan defines the analyst's task as that of "hearing with one's eyes," or that of listening to a patient's "narrative" by attending to his or her total body-presence. In fact, in the case of this above patient, he explains that he had to allow himself to "look at her and accumulate a vast data which was outside her discourse and narrative"; he had to "let her pile up on me a visual testimony of her presence which was more authentic to her predicament than anything she could tell." For, it is only in this way – through the interactions between two bodies – that the analyst can enable the patient to "bear witness" to his or her own silences and silencings.

Khan's discussion of silence and bodily knowledge provides an interesting and useful framework for understanding the ways in which the fictions considered in this dissertation appeal to and engage their readers through reference to a kind of bodily knowledge which forces us to attend to the totality of the experience that is being narrated. In other words, these fictions of witness "work" because they are able to communicate the experience of those things that are not easy to talk about, that are not even easy to think about, but that are nevertheless "known" in very deep, bodily ways.[77] The truth, or testimony, of these fictions is

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[77] See also Christopher Bollas, The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known (New York: Columbia UP, 1987).

thus also transmitted to readers through bodily ways, through the affective and emotional responses that these texts elicit. The force and persuasiveness of these fictions, moreover, has not only to do with what the reader comes affectively to understand about these narratives, but also to do with what remains unknown. As a result, these unidentified silences – not just of the texts, but of our readings – keep us coming back to these narratives, calling on us to take them up again to try them once more on our tongues, to weigh them in our mouths and in our minds.

Accordingly, my dissertation has been interested in asking such questions as: What is the purpose of such evocations and incitations in fictions that attempt to bear witness to violence? Does the highly sensuous language employed by many of the stories considered in this thesis diminish or enhance their political impact? Why indeed do these writers use fiction – a medium that is typically described as "escapist" – as privileged modalities for making arguments against violence, especially when a sociological or political approach might seem to be better able to make more direct interventions in certain historical and social "realities"? Do the silences, entanglements of desire, or the confusions of identity in these texts detract from their ability to provide political and ethical points of departure for thinking about and acting in situations of violence – situations that, many would argue, require clear solutions in the form of policies, laws and legislation against violence?

In working with my particular textual examples, I found that the various hauntings and seductions I encountered in my readings did not necessarily indicate that these novels are apolitical responses to political problems; rather, part

of the insistence of these novels has to do with the fact that these fictions seem to be asking questions that the analytical languages of the liberal-legal tradition within which I had been working – and within which most feminist and postcolonial theorisations of both violence and agency are typically staged – simply could not answer. In fact, throughout my readings of these texts, one of the things that I was struck with over and over again was the way in which all of these fictions make quite elaborate and forceful arguments about violence; yet, they do so not simply in terms of needs, injuries or narratives of victimisation, but also in terms of their sheer beauty, pleasure and power. For example, in her Afterword to The Bluest Eye, Morrison speaks about how this novel was a reaction to a certain "violence" that she herself had witnessed: it was written in response to the anger she felt when a classmate of hers – a young African-American girl – admitted to a desire for blue eyes. However, it is at this moment, Morrison remarks, that she comes to understand something different about the nature of "beauty." She writes, "Until that moment I had seen the pretty, the lovely, the nice, the ugly, and although I had certainly used the word 'beautiful,' I had never experienced its shock – the force of which was equalled by the knowledge that no one else recognised it, not even, or especially the one who possessed it." She goes on to reflect, "It must have been more than the face I was examining: the silencing of the street in the early afternoon, the light, the atmosphere of confession. In any case, it was the first time I knew beautiful. Had imagined it for myself. Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could

do."[172] In much of the critical material surrounding The Bluest Eye, the question of "beauty" has been discussed at length. Most analyses of the novel have talked about the ways in which this story shatters "myths of beauty" and reveals the underlying violence of the gender and racial ideals of which Pecola is a most obvious victim. Yet, Morrison's words in her Afterword speak of something else. Morrison, while assuredly critiquing conventionalised images of beauty, nevertheless reclaims beauty as something "she can *do*." In other words, she posits it as a grounds for subjective agency. In fact, she writes this novel is, above all, an attempt to "hit the raw nerve of racial self-contempt, expose it, then soothe it not with narcotics but with language that replicated the agency I discovered in my first experience of beauty."[173] What does it mean to lay the foundation for agency or subjectivity in a concept such as "beauty" as Morrison does? What kind of beauty would this be? What kind of agency would this afford? What are the ramifications of doing so for feminist and/or postcolonial theory?

Perhaps part of the answer to these questions lie in the fact that Morrison's novel – and all of the fictions we have considered for that matter – are much more than simply stories of violence. The characters, worlds and stories that these writers create through their fictions evoke as much wonder, curiosity and pleasure for their readers as they do pain. We may find ourselves intrigued or even "seduced" by the narrative. We may find ourselves "attracted" to different personalities that we might not have imagined as "attractive" before. We find that

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[172] Morrison, Afterword, The Bluest Eye 209.

[173] Morrison, Afterword, The Bluest Eye 211.

we are "captured" by certain images or phrases or movements of language. Most certainly, we come to see the ways in which these characters – however tragic or victimised they may be – constitute totalities that cannot ever be reduced to just one experience or event. As a consequence, such women's imaginative and aesthetic enterprises, I am arguing, are critically and politically positioned so as to make important interventions in contemporary feminist understandings of subjectivity and agency. They undoubtedly help to raise consciousness about violence; yet, they are careful not to define women's subjectivities in terms of violence alone. They are also able to introduce a new set of terms with which to talk about subjectivity and agency: terms such as beauty, desire, love, passion and pleasure. While, often, these terms are avoided in feminist definitions of agency in favour of a notion of "choice" grounded in a liberal-legal language of "rights" and "freedoms," I am arguing that by opening up our ideas of subjectivity and agency to new re-writings, we will be able to think about female subjectivity less reductively and with more respect for the immense diversity among women.

What might it mean, then, to re-read The Bluest Eye in light of Morrison's idea that the act of witnessing violence can also be a practice of beauty and desire? Certainly a part of this re-reading would entail the recognition that if one of the aims of Morrison's text is to critique the methods through which society systematically enforces racial and sexual violence through attendant mechanisms of social and psychological repression, then another, more important, goal of this novel is to reclaim black female sensuality. It is perhaps Claudia, one of the young narrators of Morrison's novel, who best expresses this need to repossess the

visceral specificities of the body.[17] Note the way in which Claudia revels in the smells, tastes and feelings of which the body is capable in the following passage. Open to a full range of polymorphic sensations, she says:

> Had any adult with the power to fulfill my desires taken me seriously and asked me what I wanted, they would have known that I did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object. I wanted rather to feel something on Christmas day. The real question would have been, 'Dear Claudia, what experience would you like on Christmas?' I could have spoken up, 'I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.' The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama's kitchen, the smell of lilacs, the sound of music, and, since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterward. (22-23)

By privileging experience above all else, Claudia is able to open the reader to a kind of beauty that is not found in magazines, newspapers or Hollywood movies. Claudia argues against a notion of beauty that perceives individuals as simply objects to view; she speaks instead of the beauty of individual experience that is rooted in a specific time, place and relation to the senses. In this passage, Morrison, via Claudia, combats the sensual numbing that often accompanies experiences of racial and sexual oppression. Indeed, Morrison's novel is much more than a political indictment of racial or sexual violence. It is, above all, her way of re-claiming, re-possessing and re-situating black female culture and subjectivity. Through the multiple voices of this novel, its circular storylines and its evocative language steeped in the rhythms and reverberations of African-American women's bodies, Morrison is able to awaken her readers to the

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[17] See Jane Kuenz, "The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity," African American Review 27.3 (1993): 421-33.

subjectivities – to the emotional and visceral realities – of black women.[175]

It is in this way, then, that Morrison is eventually able to imaginatively disrupt the genealogical pattern of violence from repeating itself along the lines of an endless and incestuous cycle. In fact, the transformational potential of Morrison's writing is perhaps best expressed not in The Bluest Eye, but in her later novel, Jazz, a text that I would like to suggest presents a certain re-writing of the earlier work. Both novels, for instance, depict the historical realities of Southern blacks who migrated to the urban North during the first half of this century. Both works also focus on the violence done to an adolescent African-American girl. In the case of The Bluest Eye, the narrative revolves around Pecola's rape. In Jazz, the story centres upon Dorcas, a teenager who is shot to death by her jealous older lover. Furthermore, just as Morrison's first novel begins with an apocalyptic revelation of the tragedy that is to come, her later novel opens by foreshadowing what at first appears to be another inevitable death. This time, however, the reader is taken by surprise: there is no second murder. The narrator explains, "I missed it altogether. I was so sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen. That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself... I was so sure, and they danced all over me. Busy, they were, being original, complicated, changeable – human."[176] In this way, Morrison's fiction always contains within itself at least the possibility for

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[175] See Linda Dittmar, "Will the Circle be Unbroken? The Politics of Form in The Bluest Eye," Novel: A Forum in Fiction (Winter 1990): 137-55, for a more formal analysis of Morrison's writing, particularly its affinities to both modernist and African-American musical forms such as jazz and blues.

[176] Toni Morrison, Jazz (New York: Plum, 1993) 220.

change, revision, historical interruption, narrative variation and ethical transformation. Hers is certainly a genealogical investigation, but one which seeks to trace a history of the past in order to open up its gaps and fissures. Morrison's novels reveal the ways in which a violent history has often functioned to constrain and constitute the experiences of African-American women. Yet, at the same time, they also demonstrate the way in which African-American women's bodies have resisted any kind of easy historical determination and how they have always remained open to change, as sites of contestation. As such, Morrison's fiction points to women's imaginative abilities to alter history and to break the chain of racial and sexual violence.

This is the case not just with Morrison's fiction, but with all of the novels and stories considered in this thesis. For example, Louise Erdrich's Tracks and M.K. Indira's Phaniyamma are more than historical documents that speak of the legacies of colonisation and conquest. As I have argued, Erdrich's novel, among other things, speaks of what it means to love a landscape and a people that others see as property; it speaks of the interior configurations both of this love and of the rage one feels at the processes of history that attempt to destroy precisely those affective ties that bind a community. As such, Tracks is as much a story of mothers and daughters, of genealogy, lineage and kinship – of the fusions and confusions of blood – as it is a tale of the ways in which cultural knowledge becomes passed on and passed down through history. Similarly, Indira's Phaniyamma is not only a testimony to the horrors or atrocities of widowhood. More than anything, this novel speaks of the love and curiosity that the author has

for a past that has both disappeared and yet remains peculiarly present in certain cultural and bodily practices. After all, Phaniyamma is, above all else, Indira's memorial of her own great-aunt: a woman the author did not really "know" at all, but whose life is encountered through childhood memories and the stories told to Indira by her mother. As a result, Indira writes a story of her own, but not of herself, bearing witness instead to a knowledge that appears to be at once absent and present to the author in quite profound, even ritualistic, ways.

By the same token, Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things are not simply stories of violence, betrayal or incest. Mootoo's book, which closes with the image of the cereus flower about to bloom, captures the spirit of a novel that is equally about hope and possibility. In fact, both novels end with several different love stories. In Cereus Blooms at Night, there is the new relationship that has been forged between nurse Tyler and Mala; there is the renewal of love between Mala and Mr. Mohanty; and there is also the discovery of a new love between Tyler and Otty, a love that allows both of them to see aspects of their own selves that had previously never been experienced. Finally, this is a book that closes with a profusion of letters to Mala from her little sister Asha – letters that are testaments to love and the ties that bind people together, ties that are as fragile and imperfect as they are powerful and strong. In the same manner, Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things ends not simply on a comment on the violence of caste, religion and class lines, but a comment on the violence and pleasure of love. This novel speaks about the various borders and boundaries that people construct in love's name, but also

about the unpredictable ways in which these boundaries are transgressed every day – and not just as a political statement or a matter of radicalism, but because the very nature of love demands that if we love at all, then we always love "too much." It is important to note, however, that the "love stories" with which these novels end are not simply symptomatic of the conventional happy ending, but rather figures for the re-imagining of new, but intimate, worlds.

Consequently, the "silence" to which these novels testify and bear witness is thus not just that of violence, but also that of the "small intimacies" of love and other types of affective relationships – of all the passions, pains, pleasures, desires and attachments that are "unspeakable" for no other reason than that they simply cannot be measured, counted or spoken as such. Yet, any action or endeavour, whether ethical, political or critical, cannot be properly understood without giving due consideration to how the domains of affect, experience and imagination bear upon and provide direction for the construction of these other, more analytical projects. I have written this dissertation in an effort to learn how better to attend to these "small things" and their enormous significances in various types of intellectual and political mobilisation, regardless of their ostensible political correctness – for, ultimately, what these stories ask us to do is to take up their words and narratives for ourselves, to attend to their force in our own imaginings, to sit with them, to give shape to them, to make them our own, and by consequence, to make something of our own from them.

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