***PHOEBE: Gender & Cultural Critiques***

Volume 16, Number 1 SPRING 2004

***This issue is dedicated to the memory of Ann Silsbee (1930-2003)***

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## Introduction:

### *“Reimagining the Americas”*

In this issue we present four essays which address fiction and non-fiction writers’ take on reimagining the Americas, and reframing notions of postcoloniality in relation to the Americas. Silvia Nagy-Zekmi’s essay on “The Postcolonial Debate in Latin America” argues that postcolonial discourse does, indeed, apply to Latin America, not only the Anglophone and Francophone world; and she, further, notes that postcolonial textual production was pioneered in Latin America not in the West during the decolonization era after WWII. To support her thesis Nagy-Zekmi begins with Fray Ramon Pane’s 15th century account of “the earliest resistance to the Spanish colonial enterprise by the natives of Hispanola,” and goes on to discuss the validity of regarding many other texts as postcolonial: Jose Marti’s *Nuestra America* (1891), Fernando Ortiz’s *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azucar* (1940) and Roberto Fernando Retamar’s *Caliban* (1971) to name a few. Coincidently, Cesar Valverde’s esssay on “Failed Manhood” supports Nagy-Zekmi’s idea of postcoloniality by comparing two texts, Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855) and Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of This World* (1943), both indictments of slavery, “colonial decadence” and “racist ideological apparatus.” By reexamining slavery as hemispheric, Valverde argues that the production of the “other” as “failed models of masculinity” is best examined in its “fullest literary representation,” i.e., in transnational terms.

In “Latino U.S.A.” Elena Machado Saez examines the work of Rosario Ferre, particularly *The House on the Lagoon*, to argue that Ferre reimagines and identifies Puerto Rico as part of a U.S. - Latino population, which corresponds to Ferre’s own political reversal – from supporting independence to now statehood. Ferre equally sees her own work as part of the U.S. literary canon and Puerto Rican history (as of 1898) as part of U.S. history. Hence, *The House on the Lagoon* plots the history of Puerto Rico as indivisible from the island’s relationship with the U.S.A. This statehood aesthetic is achieved through the metaphor of marriage in the text. Finally, Sumita Lall’s essay on “Subverting the taste buds” of America argues that Bharati Mukherjee’s ficitional characters, immigrants and refugees, seek to “find a place in and feel at home in the world” in ways that rely on the global extension of the American Dream and the U.S. Constitution to all its citizens. In addition, Lall stresses that the figures of the migrant in Mukherjee’s fiction are only as free as the domestic narratives they access and mobilize. In the novels *Wife* (1975) and *Jasmine* (1989) Lall sees Mukherjee’s portrayal of social mobility as “agentic” only to the degree that the characters can successfully deploy the myth of the American nation as an extended family. Mukherjee’s fiction, Lall argues, contributes to a reevaluation of the question of agency itself for her character’s experiences confirm different nation-states’ narratives of home and family.

***Enrique Morales-Diaz and Kathleen O’Mara, Co-editors***

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## Relocation of Knowledge:

**The Postcolonial Debate in Latin America**

### *Silvia Nagy-Zekmi*

Postcolonial discourse encompasses a vast and by no mean homogeneous field of study. In this article I will focus on the possibilities, limitations and consequences of textual representation, and therefore will emphasize this aspect of postcoloniality.

The problematization of the postcolonial starts with the term itself. Beyond a postmodern reluctance to offer formulaic definitions, critics raise numerous questions regarding the scope, time frame, and methodology in the study of the postcolonial. For example, Ella Shohat asks: “When exactly does the postcolonial begin?” (103) and the historian, Arif Dirlik “misreading the question deliberately” gives an answer that is only partly funny: “When Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe” (329). I will, however, offer a working definition for the purposes of this work: “the postcolonial entails the social, political, economic, and cultural practices which arise in response and resistance to colonialism” (Mishra and Hodge 284). I will use this definition to challenge two general assumptions about postcoloniality:

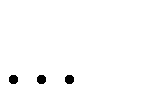
* that its discourses relate only or mostly to the English (Commonwealth textuality) and Francophone areas, and
* they are produced mostly after the second world war, when a vigorous decolonization process was taking place in many parts of the so-called Third World (India, Middle Eastern and African countries) (cf. Paredes).

Focusing on the postcolonial debate in this continent, I seek to demonstrate that Latin America is not only a postcolonial space, but also that postcolonial textual and cultural production, in fact, is pioneered in Latin America. Hugo Achugar points out that the desire of postcolonial studies to liberate knowledge production from the categories and ideas produced by colonialism has been a major concern in Latin America for over a hundred years. If this is so, the question might be asked: why has Latin America, ostensibly a quintessential site of such postcolonial phenomena as mestizaje, linguistic and cultural hybridism, not produced texts that have been canonized as required reading for postcolonial scholars worldwide? Is the problem, as has argued Jorge Klor de Alva that the employment of colonial structures and the enactment of the decolonization process in Latin America are unlike that which took place in other parts of the colonized world? Klor de Alva, and also Mark Thurner, point out that, since the majority of independence struggles in Latin America were waged by *criollos* belonging to the landed elite, and not by the indigenous population, independence then did not mean restoring governmental control to the original inhabitants, but to a new population modeled on European forbears. Should we assume then that Latin America has not produced a Gayatri Spivak or Ngugi Wa Thiong‟o because colonialism was something different in India

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*Relocation of Knowledge: The Postcolonial Debate in Latin America*

or Kenya than it was in Mexico or Peru? Do the Americas really have a colonial, much less a postcolonial history? In an article published in the *PMLA*, Santiago Colás argues that neither of these categories is applicable to Latin America, because “there is a striking lack of coincidence between the changes that have been brought about by independence and the relative stasis in economic and social relations” (384). In fact, Colás is not asking what the term postcolonial can contribute to the understanding of Latin America, but in a clever move he inverts the question: “What can the culture of Latin America contribute to the understanding of the postcolonial?” (383).



Following this logic, my answer to the question of the postcolonial theory's validity in the study of Latin American texts has a double agenda: first, to show how Latin America' s very nature as a postcolonial territory prevented it, until fairly recently, from participating fully in an international discussion of postcoloniality, and secondly, to demonstrate that, Latin America has been producing important, even groundbreaking contributions to this discussion. When we visualize the body of postcolonial theory, why do we concentrate only on names like Bhabha, Spivak, Said, Ashcroft, or more recently, Loomba, Dirlik or Ahmad (some of whom are from postcolonial countries currently living in so-called industrialized countries), and not remembering names like García Canclini, Ricardo Kaliman, Roger Bartra, Enrique Dussel, or Sonia Montesinos (who still live and write in Latin America)? Clearly, this tendency illustrates that postcolonial theory is itself a product of globalization, and its dissemination in a world market depends on economic and linguistic powers in the realm of publishing and book distribution (both in print and electronic form)2, powers to which Latin America still has limited access. This paradox is compounded by the fact that postcolonial theories, complete with terminologies, strategies of resistance, and transtemporal applications, have been circulating in Latin America for at least 100 years -- as Achugar suggests -- but they were not recognized as such. What Ngugi Wa Thiong‟o calls the “decolonization of the mind” has been an ongoing process in Latin America (cf. Achugar, Paredes). Here is a small sample of what I believe are some of the most important texts that may be included in the postcolonial critical body of writing. The

earliest text, and one of the most ignored, is *Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los indios,* by Fray Ramón Pané. Written in the 15th (!) century, it documents the earliest resistance to the Spanish colonial enterprise by the natives of Hispañola. Juan José Arrom compares it to the *Popol Vuh*, a text written in the Quiché language using the Castilian alphabet. As in the best postcolonial tradition, the authors of the *Popol Vuh* adopt and use -- as a tool of resistance -- the two main instruments of cultural subjugation: the European writing and the Christian worldview, just like Guamán Poma did in *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno.* Among the works written during the Independence period José Martí‟s *Nuestra América* (1891) should definitely be included, as well as major works of the 20th century. These include Fernando Ortiz‟s *Contrapunteo cubano de tabaco y el*

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azúcar (1940), Calibán (1971), by Roberto Fernández Retamar, Angel Rama‟s brilliant follow-up of Ortiz‟s book, Transculturación narrativa en America Latina (1982), his Ciudad Letrada (1985), and the works written in the past decades by José Joaquín Brunner, Enrique Dussel, Nicolás Casullo, Mirko Lauer, Jesús Martín Barbero, Leopoldo Zea - the list is far from complete.

What might these texts bring to postcolonial theory, and what postcolonial theory might we bring to such texts? We could look closely at Fernández Retamar, a writer whose ideas in many ways parallel those of his Caribbean counterpart Frantz Fanon. The employment of his theoretical frame begins with a recognition of Latin America's long and continuing tradition of anticolonial protest. “Para ser consecuentes con nuestra actitud anticolonialista,” he says, “tenemos que volvernos efectivamente a los hombres nuestros que, en su conducta y en su pensamiento, han iluminado esa actitud. Y en este sentido, ningún ejemplo más útil que el de Martí” (43). True to his Marxist orientation, at no point does Retamar calls his “anticolonial attitude” a theory; for him it all depends on action. But he does recognize that “thought” embodies this attitude, and that the best example of this thought in the Americas is found in the work of José Martí.Martí's vision for an America that progressively frees itself from colonialism, not just in terms of Spain's initial colonization, but also from the colonizing ideology of the United States, is present in much of his enormous body of writing, but is outlined most concisely in *Nuestra América.* As Edna Acosta-Belén notes:

While Martí developed the concept of *nuestra América* in reference to a nineteenth century Latin America that was struggling with the evils of tyranny, exploitative economic forces, and social injustice, (even after most Spanish colonies had achieved independence) he realized that the destiny of the continent was inextricably linked to the Colossus of the North. (87)

*Nuestra América* marks the beginning of a new epoch of resistance to the empire in the Americas. José David Saldívar sees Martí as a specific intellectual in the Foucauldian sense who “stands between two ways of thinking: the last representative of a 19th century romantic idealism and the first forerunner of a Latin American continental solidarity” (7). In my view,*3 Nuestra América* may be read as a dialogue with nineteenth-century writers such as Sarmiento, whose post- independence texts combined racist and elitist rhetoric to promote a new wave of Eurocentric attitude. If the distinction between *civilización y barbarie* for Sarmiento4 is between the maintenance of European models of cultural and economic production and the “threat” of the indigenous element, then his worries, as Martí realized, were really about gaining independence at the expense of losing a colonial format. Sarmiento proves that colonization is not about “us” as a native power and “them” as the finally ousted colonizer, but about the pervasiveness of colonialist

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notions within the so-called post-colonial nations.

Martí's rejection of Sarmiento's ideas and his insistence on *nuestra América mestiza* constitutes one of the first sustained attacks on Eurocentrism and neocolonialism in Latin America. Written in New York in 1895, many years after the independence of all of Latin America except Cuba and Puerto Rico, Martí focuses on two main points: the necessity to recognize the value of indigenous elements in the development of free republics, and the demand for creation of home-grown methods instead of imitation of foreign models in the execution of these efforts. Unlike the picture Klor de Alva paints for us today, Martí was convinced that both independence and Latin America‟s contemporary condition as a conglomerate of free republics depend on Indian, mestizo, as well as *criollo* elements. In spite of this, it must be recognized that Martí himself was not devoid of Eurocentric thinking. For example, his suggestion about the different countries in Latin America that have been established “entre las masas mudas de indios,” whose collective future depends on “estos hijos de nuestra América, que ha de salvarse con sus indios” (27). Why are the indigenous masses „mute‟? Because they do not express themselves, or because they are not heard, not even by Martí? Whom does he call “estos hijos de nuestra América” to be saved “con sus indios”? Aren‟t the “indios” also sons of “nuestra América”?

Differing from Klor de Alva's assumption that mostly *criollo* populations formed a new governing class in the image of Europe, Martí marks a crucial distinction between the two factors in the process of building independent nation- states. “Los hombres naturales han vencido a los letrados artificiales,” he writes. "El mestizo autóctono ha vencido al criollo exótico. "And then, in a clear rejection of the kind of Euromodeling that informs Sarmiento' s work, and according to Klor de Alva, pervades the would-be Latin American postcolonial condition, Martí adds, "No hay batalla entre la civilización y la barbarie, sino entre la falsa erudución y la naturaleza" (28). Like Angel Rama would do many decades later, Martí emphasizes the role “letrados” played in establishing and maintaining colonial order. He specifically targets the use of imported books and the suppression of local languages and histories, both common battlefields in contemporary postcolonial debates. These are the functions of "la república que lucha contra la colonia" (30), that is, a republic that struggles against the colony in a Latin America that, at the time, had been independent for the greater part of 70 years. The *Nuestra America* essay is vintage postcolonial theory because it addresses both the history of colonialism, and the current threat of colonialist practices from the “colossus of the North.” That is, it recognizes the presence of the colonial within the postcolonial.

This is perhaps the most important distinction between the colonial/postcolonial question in Latin America (and other areas of the globe). Many Latin Americanists recognize the complex and varied vestiges of colonialism in the post-independence epoch, the resilience of structures brought by the colonizers and maintained by *criollo* and mestizo supporters of colonial institutions, and later

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layered with the implantation of “foreign economic models that have failed in all countries in question” (Manzor 157). On the other hand, there is no doubt that independence efforts and national agendas *were* in many cases tied to postcolonial or anti-colonial beliefs, despite the fact that those advancing these agendas were not strictly of the “native” population.

Retamar believes that Martí's views project "una visión calibanesca"(46), an idea he develops in substantial detail in his essay "Calibán." Martí is the grand figure of Latin American anti-colonial thought, and Caliban is the consummate symbol of that resistance, a literary icon that spans the entire range of historical moments from Columbus through to the present moment. One of the remarkable characteristics of this essay is its visionary nature. Some twenty years before the current discussions on the validity of a concept like "hybridity" in postcolonial studies, Retamar already recognized that José Vasconcelos' idealist views of a hybrid "cosmic race" were "a bit confused but full of intuitions" (13). Although Retamar accepts Martí's description of the Americas as mestiza, he notes that despite this *mestizaje,* countries with highly developed systems of capital can create and have created what he calls "una relativa homogeneidad en este orden" (11). For Retamar, Martí prefigures Fanon5 being the "primer anti-colonialista de nuestro continente" (55), part of a tradition from which stems a sustained discussion that continues to expand and develop. It may be evidenced in Fanon‟s ideas about the psychological effects of colonization, Aimée Césaire‟s take on the Caliban theme, *Une Tempête*, Edouard Glissant‟s proposal of reappropriation of history and language, and Fernando Ortiz's use of the terms *transculturación, ajiaco,* and *contrapunteo,* all of which contest the simplistic and traditional reading of Caribbean history as only colonial or once-colonial. We can see this theme evolving in the region‟s negotiation of complex racial and ethnic legacies as manifestations of the interaction of colonial and postcolonial conditions, and we can see it more recently in the critical work of Walter Mignolo, whose emphasis on "writing without words" is both an examination and a criticism of the colonial privileging of the written text, resulting in the exclusion or suppression of other forms of historical representation (a similar approach to that of Angel Rama in *La ciudad letrada*). Finally, we can

return to Retamar's *calibanismo,* because it recognizes both the tremendous impact of colonialism in the New World, as well as the existence of a history of resistance, both colonial and postcolonial. Many scholars have reread Shakespeare‟s *The Tempest* as a commentary on decolonization using the "colonial" metaphor of Prospero and Caliban‟s relationship. This relationship parallels the interaction between colonizer and colonized (Zabus 35). Retamar uses the figure of Caliban as a kind of marker that moves from colonial to postcolonial discourse, between colonial history and contemporary reality. For this reason he follows the Caliban vs. Ariel debate from José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* (1900) to O. Mannoni's text, *Prospero and Caliban: Psychology of Colonization* (1950)6, and then to Fanon's rejection of Mannoni's ideas in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)7. I would argue that Retamar

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reads all these texts through a lens that depends not just on Marxism (as many argue), but more so on a postcolonial interpretation of literary events. This is why Retamar finds value in Vasconcelos' cosmic race, and believes that even if Rodó is wrong about who is Ariel and who is Caliban, recognizing the importance of *The Tempest* as a key work in the representation of postcolonial Latin America was Rodó‟s undoubted merit. He arrives finally at the well-known conclusion that Caliban is an iconic figure for *nuestra América mestiza.* Caliban thus becomes the colonized everyman, the first and last in a long list of anti-colonial voices that includes Túpac Amaru, Bolívar, Martí, Zapata and Sandino. The list goes on today to include those who will not, as Djelal Kadir does, place their hope in the “civility of graceful endurance” (21), and who find neo-colonialist efforts directed toward Latin America objectionable: Eduardo Galeano, Cornejo Polar, Paulo Freyre, the much embattled Rigoberta Menchú, and other “organic intellectuals” like her (Beverly‟s term). In addition to the interpretation of contemporary works, the Latin American textual production of decolonization may be used for rereading texts written during the Colonia, such as those I already mentioned: Fray Ramón Pané‟s *Relación*, o *El Primer Nueva Corónica* by Guamán Poma or the *Popol Vuh*. If we read them without these theoretical groundings, these texts remain merely ethnographical or historical accounts; but with them we recognize an entire Calibanesque discourse not just of “vituperative cursing” (Pané), but of the aftertaste of deception, the awareness of annihilation, and the reality of cultural submission. Without Martí's *Nuestra América,* we can discount such texts as the lost messages of obliterated people; with it we recognize them as integral elements of the long tradition of Latin American resistance to colonization.

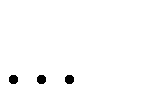
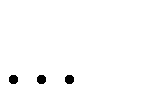
The question here finally is not whether Latin America's colonial and postcolonial histories are different from what was experienced elsewhere, but *how* they are different. Just as the issue for Ortiz was replacing the universalist (and essentialist) notions of acculturation with the local reality of transculturación8, the melting pot with a local *ajiaco* and Cuban citizenship with *cubanía9,* thus should we, as Latin Americanists, recognize the rich tradition of local postcolonial textual practices.

In conclusion, I am not advocating here the usage of analytical frameworks that originate from theories that are inapplicable to Latin America just because they are now popular in the academic scene. It is precisely Martí who warns against “confused and incomplete readings of foreign texts” (Ripoll). Moreover, Pérez Firmat also points out, “One of Ortiz's important lessons ... is this awareness that one of the most insidious types of colonialism is the onomastic or conceptual, the situation that arises when the originality or distinctiveness of the home-grown is explained and rationalized using foreign categories” (31). Because I do not believe that it is productive, or even possible, to attempt a neat separation among current critical practices of discourses of resistance, I conclude that what I call Latin American postcolonial critique comes with many names, brands and approaches.

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Some Latin Americanist critics, like Román de la Campa, Nelly Richard and Eduardo Mendieta explore a community of discourses in an effort to disentangle the narrative complexities of an “incredibly rich self-referenced Latin American discursive tradition” (Campa ix). John Beverly, Marc Zimmerman, Georg Gugelberger and Ileana Rodríguez initiated the Latin American subaltern studies group that was fashioned after Ranajit Guha‟s subaltern studies group (1982), which lead to the publication of the *Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* (2001). Alberto Moreiras, Brett Levinson, and Gareth Williams advance theories related to Bhabha‟s concept of a “third space” in their analysis of Latin America's cultural, political, and literary practices. What unites all these approaches in my mind is an attitude of resistance to cultural colonization that is a vital characteristic of postcolonial discourse (Galeano, Yúdice, Canclini).

I conclude this article with an observation by Walter Mignolo regarding alternative centers of enunciation and theorization that I find particularly relevant: “ postcolonial discourse is not just a new field of study or a gold mine for extracting new riches, but the condition of possibility for constructing new loci of enunciation as well as for reflecting that academic knowledge and understanding should be complemented with learning from those who are living in and thinking from colonial and postcolonial legacies. Otherwise we run the risk of promoting mimicry, exportation of theories and internal (cultural) colonialism, rather than promoting new forms of cultural critique.” (130-131)



**End Notes**

1. Hugo Achugar suggests that it is misleading to construct accounts of Latin American history and culture from the perspective of the colonial past rather than from that of the modern nation. Latin Americans, he says, have long debated their identities and their locations relative to the metropolis on the basis of their emergent nationhood. These identities are already known to be deeply heterogeneous and hybrid – so postcolonial studies has nothing to add (380).
2. An interesting article by V. Carchidi talks about the importance of the Internet for postcolonial writers,en- titled: “Come Into My Web: Literary Postcolonialism in the Information Technology Age.”
3. Although I offer a purposeful reading of Martí‟s *Nuestra América*, I exclude myself from the group that Saumell Muñoz talks about suggesting that certain readers adjust their “horizon of expectations” (Jauss) in their rendering of Martí‟s ideas. (He talks about specifically Fidel Castro‟s appropriation of Martí‟s works for the advancement of his Marxist agenda.) (99).
4. From Idelber Avelar‟s “Transculturation and Nationhood”: Ricardo Piglia once pointed out that the apocryphal quote at the beginning of Domingo Sarmiento‟s *Facundo* (1845) – the French sentence “on ne tue point les idées,” written by Sarmiento on a wall after being attacked by a federalist gang – can be taken as an emblem of Argentine literature in its foundational moment; not simply in its banal content, but primarily in its form and in the discursive economy that presides over its historical inscription. By relating how Rosas dictatorship, “after sending a committee in charge of deciphering the hieroglyph,” (Sarmiento 5) must have wondered what in the world it could mean, Sarmiento draws the line between civilization and barbarism with a mere epigraph: barbarians are, of course, those unable to read the sentence. More than in the utopian vision it voices, “the sentence‟s political content resides in the use of the French language” (Piglia 15). A voracious student of foreign languages, Sarmiento locates in the transculturation of European sources a sine qua non condition for the construction of a modern civilized Argentine nation. Transculturation is, however, always already torn apart by aporias, not the least of which plagues the authorship of Sarmiento‟s epigraph (web source).

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1. Fanon‟s two major concerns, the ill-effects of colonization on the psyche of the colonized and the anti- colonial liberation are interrelated throughout this work, although the critics are divided on how this interrelation might work. According to Bhabha, Fanon indicates that colonial identities are always oscillating, a divide between black skin and white mask is not a neat division, but “a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once...It is not the Colonialist Self or the Colonized Other, but the distrubing distance in between, that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness - the White man‟s artifice inscribed on the Black man‟s body” (187). On the other hand, Benita Parry reads Fanon as an author of liberation theories who “affirmed the intervention of an insurgent, unified black self, acknowledged the revolutionary energies released by valorizing the cultures denigrated by colonialism and, rather than constructing the colonialist relationship in terms of negotiations with the structures of imperialism, privileged coercion over hegemony to project it as a struggle between implacably opposed forces” (226).
2. Mannoni was the first psychologist to make use of this metaphor in a critical study of colonization: “Mannoni‟s inaugural gesture helped to shape the trajectory of those associated appropriations which lay ahead and, concomitantly, to bring about the reestimation of “The Tempest in Africa and the Caribbean” (Nixon 562).
3. We could also include George Lamming in the list of those who subscribe to the calibanesque discourse: “...a new turbulence is at work everywhere and Caliban is wide awake.”
4. “Entendemos que el vocablo transculturación expresa mejor las diferentes fases del proceso transtivo de una cultura a otra, porque este no consiste solamente en adquirir una distinta cultura, [que es la aculturación], sino que el proceso implica también necesariamente la pérdida o el desarraigo de una cultura precedente, lo que pudiera decirse de una parcial desculturación, y, además, significa la consiguiente creación de nuevos fenómenos culturales que pudieran denominarse de neoculturación...En toda mezcla de culturas sucede que en la cópula genética de los individuos; la criatura siempre tiene algo de ambos progenitores, pero también siempre es distinta de cada uno de los dos. En conjunto, el proceso es una transculturación y este vocablo comprende todas las fases de su paráola” (Ortiz 103).
5. Pérez Firmat uses of the term (intralingual - Spitta) *translation* instead of transculturation (living in the period of “trans” after the “post”). The problem with this term is that it overlooks the friction that may be present in any cultureal exchange.

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**Failed Manhood, Failed History: Masculinity and Agency in Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* and Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of This World***

### *César Valverde*

Written nearly one hundred years apart, *Benito Cereno* (1855) and *The Kingdom of This World* (1943) are two seminal works in the indictment of slavery and its racist ideological apparatus. They tell of colonial decadence, slave uprisings, the brutality of freed slaves, and ultimately mourn failed Afrocentric models unable to take hold as national models. In both narratives, the violence of the uprisings reads ambiguously and, while not removing all responsibility from the actors themselves, they both ultimately argue that the system of slavery is the cause for the horrors the insurrections produced. In Melville‟s tale, the slaves take over a Spanish slave ship, the San Dominick, a name used interchangeably for the island of Hispaniola and the countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In Carpentier‟s novel, the text follows the uprising of Haitian slaves in the first revolution in the western hemisphere after the U.S. gained independence.

The most compelling reason to revisit both texts together is the scope and transnational nature of the slave trade in the Americas. We should “reexamine its root causes and present day effects,” recognize that slavery was hemispheric and that its “fullest literary representation as well as its fullest political critique required a view that embraced several cultures, several nations, much as Du Bois was later to recognize that the attack on American racial injustice and the reconstruction of African American cultural history had to be pursued in a diasporic Pan-African framework” (Sundquist 136). Centered on the enslavement and trafficking of Africans, both texts can, and should be read in transnational terms.

But an examination of the dynamics of slavery in these texts is not as transparent as one might think. Their denunciation is not at all Manichean: we do not have the luxury of seeing good and evil distinctly separated, although that was a common reading for *Benito Cereno* up until the 1950‟s (the rebellious slaves embodied evil and the goodness of the American captain was their diametrical opposite).1

Herman Melville and Alejo Carpentier‟s texts lack the one dimensional language of simplistic propaganda; they are narratives where monological explanations are not always possible and the reader must construct complex interpretations. I will argue that beneath the dialogism of the texts lie failed models of masculinity, and male characters‟ “positive” and “negative” types of maleness and agency; that is, they ascribe admirable qualities to certain male characters and undesirable traits to others, all of which can be associated with the male characters‟ possibilities for historical change.

In order to show the role masculinity and ambiguity play I will divide my

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analysis into three parts: the weak masculine characters and the resulting historical implications; the use of shaman and trickster masculine archetypes; and the dialogic nature of the texts.

In *Benito Cereno*, Melville sets the story off the coast of Chile and changes the date of events to 1799. Captain Amasa Delano, an American, goes to a ship to offer his assistance and is met by a skeletal Spanish captain (Benito Cereno), his attentive black servant (Babo), and a motley crew of mostly slaves. (Benito Cereno tells Delano that the San Dominick tried to round Cape Horn and hit terrible weather, disease broke out on board, and all but a few of the Spaniards and many of the Africans were killed). Delano notices that many times during the course of the day Cereno is reduced to trembling and speechless gagging. When Delano's questions become especially direct, Babo leads Cereno away into the hold in order to shave him; he explains that they are on a *strict schedule*. For a long time during his visit, Delano experiences an interpretative dilemma: what is happening on the ship? Is Cereno simply a lackadaisical and inefficient leader, or is something sinister afoot? This ongoing tension precedes and imperils the moment of enlightenment, which comes after Delano takes his leave and attempts to return to his own ship. At that moment, Benito Cereno jumps into the boat with Delano, followed by Babo, who attempts to stab the Spanish captain. Delano quickly (and finally) understands what has been happening on the San Dominick; he realizes that the African slaves have revolted and control the ship. As they depart, a shroud falls from the bowsprit of the San Dominick; it has a human skeleton tied to it. Underneath are the scrawled words: *Follow your leader*.

Alejo Carpentier was clearly impressed and influenced by Melville‟s tale. Melville‟s story has the same esoteric opaqueness of much of Carpentier‟s work, but its blunt dealings with slavery, violence and history make it especially appealing to Carpentier, who writes in 1955:

On one of his trips, he came across a dismantled ship which was apparently left to try its own fate in the Pacific. Upon being visited by the captain of another ship, the ship‟s crew examined the visitors with a strange reserve. He soon learned that the black slaves aboard the ship had rioted and were forcing the captain and his officials to return them to their native Africa. A skeleton was hung from the ship‟s bow: the ghastly remains of a Peruvian gentleman assassinated during the mutiny. Melville was therefore given all the necessary ingredients with which to write *Benito Cereno*, a tale named after the captain of that tragic vessel and one of his most hallucinatory and mystic works. (Stavans 57)

Carpentier‟s own novel is published after a visit to Haiti in 1943. He sets his story there during the period of the French Revolution, and we can see how beneath

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a sheen of economic prosperity and social tranquility lies the desire to revolt and overthrow the French masters. Leading the uprising is Macandal, a one armed slave who escapes and poisons livestock and men. While he is captured and burned publicly, his spirit lives on and inspires the other slaves to rise up when the French Revolution takes place. A former cook, Henri Cristophe takes power and creates his own kingdom, modeled grotesquely after his own masters‟ aesthetics. The story is told through the eyes of another slave, Ti Noël, who is forced into labor after the Revolution and wanders aimlessly throughout most of the action. This novel, like *Benito Cereno*, has a layered texture of meaning that is reflected in the action of the story; it is up to the reader to disentangle meaning from the chaotic events and unreliable points of view. What they also share is a utilization of a gendered system that assigns *positive* male qualities to particular characters and *negative* female ones to others. In that respect, they operate much in the same way that our society does today.

Our social organization is not dramatically different from Melville‟s in 1855 or Carpentier‟s in 1943 in terms of patriarchy; we are still essentially societies that are *male-identified* in that “core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are associated with how we think about men and masculinity” (Rothenberg 130). And that male identification manifests itself as (“the cultural description of masculinity and the ideal man in terms that closely resemble the core values of society as a whole. These include qualities such as control, strength, efficiency, competitiveness, toughness, coolness under pressure, logic, forcefulness, decisiveness, rationality, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and control over any emotion that interferes with other core values (such as vulnerability)”) (Rothenberg 131).

In a bipolar fashion, we still operate in a system of opposites, where a contrast between the ideal male individual and the resulting core cultural qualities produce a non-male subject that is equated with (“inefficiency, cooperation, mutuality, equality, sharing, compassion, caring, vulnerability, a readiness to negotiate and compromise, emotional expressiveness, and intuitive and other nonlinear ways of thinking are all devalued *and* culturally associated with femininity and femaleness”) (Rothenberg 131). This devaluing of the feminine, especially when attached to a *male* character in these two texts, is a common rhetorical strategy used to devalue them individually, and by extension, to undermine the social environment in which they operate.

While a surface reading of *Benito Cereno* would lead us to believe that strength resides in the American captain Amasa Delano and weakness in the Spanish captain Benito Cereno, a closer reading reveals that in fact the object of Melville‟s criticism is the American captain. Melville presents a clear contrast between the physical strength of Delano, a manifestation of his country‟s growing economic and political might, and his moral weakness. Delano has the *muscle* but not the *inner strength* of Cereno and Babo. While the Spanish captain is seen through Delano‟s eyes as a man devoid of authority and strength, Melville is

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challenging the sense of superiority held by his countrymen through the character of Delano (Zagarell 127).

The moral weakness in Delano represents a country that is a perpetuator of commercialism, colonialism, and slavery; the contrast between his power and his morality reveal how Americans denied the consequences of these practices.

Through this dual portrayal of Delano, authoritarian but spiritually hollow, Melville criticizes a variety of American cultural codes and assumptions to expose what Americans “didn‟t know, why they didn‟t know it, and the consequences of their ignorance” (Zagarell 128). Zagarell argues that Melville‟s “presentation of cultural discontinuities result from an unstable social order” because when “there is inequity, the social conventions in place in the society are converted by disempowered groups into dissent and insurrection” (Zagarell 128). Those cultural discontinuities and the resulting dissent and insurrection are portrayed *narratively* in the gendered binomes male/female and strong/weak.

Babo‟s *strong* mind is clearly separated from his *weak* physical strength; and in a reverse fashion, Benito Cereno‟s *weak* constitution is often underscored (the emphases are mine):

As for the black (Babo) – whose *brain, not body*, had schemed and led the revolt, with the plot – his *slight frame*, inadequate to that which it held, had at once yielded to the *superior muscular* strength of his captor, in the boat. Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words . . . Don Benito did not visit him. Nor then, nor at any time after, *would he look at him*. Before the tribunal he refused. When pressed by the judges *he fainted*. On the testimony of the sailors alone rested the legal identity of Babo. (Melville 258)

Don Benito‟s inability to look Babo in the eye, Don Benito‟s refusal to testify against Babo, and Don Benito‟s fainting when pressed to do so shows that while he is a weak and unworthy leader in Delano‟s eyes, Don Benito has fully appreciated the moral validity of Babo‟s uprising and is unwilling to seek reprisal against him. What appears to be his effeminate lack of courage, (fainting when compelled to help the state punish the slave), can in fact be seen as a defiant show of moral fortitude. At the end of the story, when both Benito Cereno and Babo meet their end, they do as the ship‟s writing had admonished: they follow *their leader* (emphases are mine):

Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his *voiceless* end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met,*unabashed*, the gaze of the whites; and across the Plaza *looked towards* St. Bartholomew‟s church, in whose vault

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slept then, as now, the recovered bones of Aranda: and across the Rimac bridge *looked* towards the monastery, on Mount Agonia without; where, three months after being dismissed by the court, Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow *his leader.* (Melville 258)

Babo, silenced by the *superior muscular strength of his captor,* is corporally destroyed while his head remains defiant. He meets his oppressor‟s gaze unabashedly and looks towards the resting place of his former slave master. Cereno, in seclusion on Mount Agonia, suffers the weight of moral enlightenment. Babo‟s head, the violent remains of his attempt at freedom and a return to Africa, is strikingly similar to two famous episodes in Carpentier‟s novel.

The two scenes in *The Kingdom of this World* that speak to Babo‟s decapitated head are the opening sequence when Ti Noël, the slave protagonist, sees wax heads in a store window next to calf heads for sale, and the dramatic scene where Macandal, the leader of the slave revolt, is burned in public.

In the first scene, we can see how the lifelessness of the wigged wax heads metaphorically and metonymically represent the moral, spiritual and historical bankruptcy of the French colonial forces. Their *fixed stares* are *dead,* their voices as phony as an itinerant *talking head*. The juxtaposition with the calf heads next door is a foreshadowing of the violence that will eventually come to the French. And in a third parallel, the pictures in the next shop are *heads* of *state*, images of the kings of France and an African nation:

While his master was being shaved, Ti Noël could gaze his fill at the four wax heads that adorned the counter by the door. The curls of the wigs, opening into a pool of ringlets on the red baize, framed expressionless faces. Those heads seemed as real – although their fixed stare was so dead – as the talking head an itinerant mountebank had brought to the Cap years before to promote the sale of an elixir for curing toothache and rheumatism. By an amusing coincidence, in the window of the tripe-shop next door there were calves‟ heads, skinned and each with a sprig of parsley across the tongue, which possessed the same waxy quality. . . . The morning was rampant with heads, for next to the tripe-shop the bookseller had hung on a wire with clothespins the latest prints received from Paris. At least four of them displayed the face of the King of France in a border of suns, swords and laurels. . . . But Ti Noël‟s attention was attracted at that moment by a copper engraving, the last of the series, which differed from the others in subject and treatment. It represented a kind of French admiral or ambassador received by a Negro framed by feather fans and seated upon a throne adorned with figures of monkeys and lizards. (Carpentier 11-12)

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The importance of this first imagery is that it will lay out the values that will follow throughout the novel. The powdered wigs, effeminate and out of place in the tropics, are connected to a corrupt and worthless masculinity. Its end will soon come when the African model, closer to nature and defined by strength, will challenge it.2 But the characters in the Haitian revolution are presented with a choice: take the flamboyant and frivolous French model of manhood or the strong Afrocentric one of their ancestors. The tragedy, of course, is that the slaves opt for the defunct model and it spells their downfall.

In both *Benito Cereno* and *The Kingdom of This World*, we see moments of historical and economic transition where paternal figures are being replaced by new models, and in both a discredited economic and social paradigm is associated with a weak masculine figure. Delano represents the “corporate nation,” a “father-figure of national proportions” to which the old masculine models forfeited their authority (Sommer 113). Both Delano and Henri Cristophe, the former slave who becomes the leader of a free Haiti, represent how “the Western imperial governments that gave birth and fostered notions of individual rights and freedoms proved intolerant of the Haitian Revolution” (Sommer 120).

Christophe‟s reign is a manifestation of this transition from colony to a new social paradigm led by a weak masculine figure, a new yet unworthy father figure. When Cristophe assumes the throne of Haiti, he takes that image of the African King Ti Noël sees in the print and contaminates it with the European: monkeys and lizards become mixed with feathery fans. The *abominable feast* that the wax heads, calf heads and prints foreshadow eventually give way to an actual grotesque banquet at Sans Souci, presided over by Cristophe (Gray Díaz 53). The degradation associated with the European (“radishes cut open in the shape of the *fleur de lis*”) leads inexorably to the abject (“innards and kidneys”), a parallel rendering of the violent end that befalls both the French and the Haitians that assume power after the revolution.

Like many other American uprisings where former slaves rise to power, Cristophe surrenders an “organic view of society and the idea that men were responsible for each other, while they retained the worst of both traditions, most notably, their ever deepening arrogance and contempt for the laboring classes and darker races” (Handley 113). Similiarly, he “proves committed to the oedipal error in his desire to both control his destiny and ignore the historical difference created by the presence of blacks and a separate geography” (Handley 125).

In his attempt to inscribe himself as a European subject, Cristophe ends up a tragic parody of what he tries to imitate. The historical failure of his government, his cruelty and contempt are the result of his misguided project, is represented by the hellish scene Ti Noël witnesses near the palace:

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On the way down he could see coming up the flanks of the mountain, by every path and byway, thick columns of women, children, and old men, each with a brick to be left at the foot of the fortress, which rising like an ant-hill, thanks to those grains of fired clay borne to it unceasingly, from season to season, from year‟s end to year‟s end. Ti Noël soon learned that this had been going on for more than twelve years, and that the entire population of the North had been drafted for this incredible task. Every protest had been silenced in blood. Walking, walking, up and down, down and up, the Negro began to think that the chamber-music orchestras of Sans Souci, the splendor of the uniforms, and the statues of naked white women soaking up the sun on their scrolled pedestals among the sculptured boxwood hedging the flower beds were all the product of a slavery as abominable as that he had known on the plantation of M. Lenormand de Mezy (Carpentier 122).

Cristophe‟s downfall can be read in terms of masculine iconography. In a desperate attempt to salvage his empire, he takes a symbol of male strength, the bull, and corrupts it by sacrificing it in order to protect his hold on power. At his palace, many bulls were killed every day in order to protect Sans Souci. “Every day in the middle of the parade square several bulls had their throats cut so that their blood could be added to the mortar to make the fortress impregnable” (Carpentier 120). That corruption of an African religious male icon, the bull, leads to his demise. He fails because he chooses to imitate the French models and ignores the possibility of the African model: as a mere parody of the European masculine ideal he is an inadequate leader for his people.

Ti Noël and Babo are border subjects, living on the margins, connecting two separate realities and having the opportunity to choose between the corrupt and abject model that imitation represents, and the honorable and potentially redeeming African model. Ti Nöel drifts without direction, staying on the outside of events and worrying mostly about surviving. As victims of injustice, Babo and Ti Nöel have lost faith in their capacity to participate in society and feel no qualms about killing, lying, or pillaging. In terms of masculinity, they are both modeled on an *archetypical* model: the trickster. Although using archetypes to discuss constructions of gender is ripe with problems, one cannot deny that both of these authors intended certain characters to have transhistoric gendered qualities, which necessitate the use of the Jungian model.3

Both are concerned with survival first. They feel that their victimization gives them a right to fight for their lives at any cost. As Ulysses, they use deception in circumstances that test them constantly and feel no remorse for the violence they inflict on others:

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Odysseus resorted to tricky deceptions out of necessity, as his encounter with the Cyclops dramatizes . . . Like the little peasant, Odysseus is not a simple criminal, whose goal is to remain unknown and escape punishment. In general, after stealing, Tricksters do not flee and try to evade responsibility for their actions. They typically stay around to see the results of their ruses and suffer the consequences. (Chinen 66)

Babo and Ti Nöel‟s masculinity, a trickster archetype, is a pre-patriarchal model that is not historically viable in their current contexts. It turns out to be not much more than a nostalgic or utopian project with little or no possibility of redemption.

Babo‟s apparently sadistic violence has led to conflicting readings of this character. He seems intent on terrifying his captives rather than actually producing a good outcome for the slaves. In the court documents that appear at the end of Benito Cereno we see Babo‟s cruelty and intimidation: “(T)he negro Babo showed him a skeleton, which had been substituted for the ship‟s proper figure-head – the image of Christopher Colon, the discoverer of the new World; that the negro Babo asked him whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white‟s” (Melville 245). Babo‟s attempt at rewriting history, of finding political agency aboard the mutinied ship, turns out to be full of misguided ideals, but short on practical results. Against the advice of other slaves, in particular Atufal, he opts for the romantic flight of fancy that a return to Africa represents, ignoring the reality that such a trip in their condition was an impossibility, an irrational option.

Despite their unreliability, both Ti Noël and Babo function as go-betweens in archetypical fashion. As in many narratives, “where the patriarch and hero claim one viewpoint, one mate, one family, and one territory as their own, the Trickster crosses boundaries and constantly seeks out new connections” (Chinen 111). They also serve as message bearers, communicating between disparate groups, the masters and the slaves, the Europeans and the Africans, the outsiders and the insiders. “Tricksters carry messages and are even credited with inventing language itself. They also mediate between the archetypal and the mundane, the inner and outer worlds, and combine the sublime with the demonic in their world” (Chinen 115).

But at the conclusion *of The Kingdom of this World*, Ti Noël, like Babo, finds a kind of historical dead end. He recognizes that being a Trickster, having stayed on the margins of historical events, has meant failure for him and his people. He had the opportunity to use another masculine model, that of the revolt‟s leader Macandal, but did not use it:

Ti Noël vaguely understood that his rejection by the geese was a punishment for his cowardice. Macandal had disguised himself as

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an animal for years to serve men, not to abjure the world of men. It was then that the old man, resuming his human form, had a supremely lucid moment. He lived, for the space of a heartbeat, the finest moments of his life; he glimpsed once more the heroes who had revealed to him the powers and the fullness of his remote African forebears, making him believe in the possible germinations the future held. He felt countless centuries old. (Carpentier 184)

In sharp contrast to the moral weakness of Delano and Cristophe, and the physical weakness of Cereno, Babo and Ti Nöel, both texts have strong and threatening male characters that are “true” to their African heritage. While Babo and Ti Nöel follow an archetypical model of trickster masculinity, Atufal and Macandal are drawn with a hunter-shaman model instead. As such, they place more emphasis on healing rather than heroics, and communication over conquest. Atufal is “a powerful negro, who being supposed to have been a chief in Africa, his owner set great store by him” (Melville 240) while Macandal, who represents shamanic values, is the bearer of a collective memory, serves as a guide to others, and presents an etymological alternative to European rationality. He organizes the resistance, keeps traditions alive and encourages others to sacrifice for the common good. He tells of the Great Kingdoms of Popo, Arada, Nagos and Fulas, of great migrations, secular wars and battles where animals had helped men (Carpentier 12). Macandal‟s sense of *alienation* and *rebellion*, and that of his fellow slaves in Haiti, is manifested in his metamorphosis:

Yet the existential form which Macandal‟s animal metamorphoses take in *The Kingdom of This World* parallels that of the animal metamorphoses of Maldoror and expresses also a very modern and Western sense of alienation and rebellion which has its roots in Romanticism. In *El reino* animals provide the model for humans to conceptualize their alienation from convention and for rebellion, just as the female shark and so many other animals had done for Maldoror (Gray Díaz 54).

Macandal weaves an African epic, based not on the Eurpean written word but on oral tradition. In contravention of a positivist world view, his African history includes magical and mythical elements, where traditional lines between rationality and fantasy are blurred. He incorporates animal characters in his tales and he himself transforms into one. He is the *Mandigue*, at once a member of an African group and the devil himself. If European rule is rhetorically tied to the forces of “good,” with Macandal the line between good and evil is also undefined. As a shaman, he is allowed to transgress established social norms.

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But an Afrocentric masculinity, both in Atufal and Macandal, fails because they are not able to find a way to synthesize in an effective way the African and European models. If we read both texts as *postslavery* narratives, regardless of the anachronistic implication of including Melville‟s, we can understand the reason they are both at once so ambivalent and defeatist. We can see the apocalyptic closures of both texts as serving a particular purpose: to expose “the very driving forces of the historical imagination and suggest the possibility of new histories beyond the memory of slavery” (Handley 10).

The failure of Afrocentric masculine models in both works are failures of the “generative impulse,” where “modernization presented the challenging task of finding

„new and different ways of conceiving of human relationships‟ in order to „substitute for those ties that connect members of the same family across generations‟” (Said qtd. in Handley 113). Carpentier and Melville‟s hypermasculine African royal slaves are a simplification of “another past that is free of colonial chains – that of the African and the autochthonous – and that is itself antimodern and perhaps also ahistorical” (Handley 114).

Macandal, the African leader martyrized in *The Kingdom of This World*, is metonymically the “father” that is killed in the novel, standing in for a collective

self that is discarded by both the Europeans and the black revolutionaries. Like in *El siglo de las luces,* the “father that Hugues has slain is not the father figure he replaced in Sofía‟s home, but rather what proves to be the real directive force of history to which Esteban and Sofía eventually ally themselves, that of the people” (Handley 125).

Why are these two texts, quite apparently denunciatory, somewhat evasive in their criticisms? I would argue that when we read them through a gendered lens those apparent contradictions or ambiguities seem clearer because the gendered apparatus that both use is traditional and easily interpreted. So we are still left to wonder why they invested such dialogism in their texts.

Melville‟s is so because of a combination of stylistic preference and political circumstances. And precisely because of those characteristics, Carpentier was impressed by *Benito Cereno* and eventually would draw inspiration for his own *The Kingdom of this World*. In Melville, the historical allusions and dramatic enactment are meant “to exploit the revolutionary spirit present in the American New World” (Sundquist 146). Melville depicts the “climate of the entire region and the epoch: Columbian discovery, democratic revolutions in the U.S., Haiti and Latin America, and the crisis of „slave power‟ in the United States, in order to define his different characters (African, American, and European)” (Sundquist 148). The tensions in contemporary discussions of slavery are manifested in *Benito Cereno* and that is why it has been read as both an indictment of and an apology for, slavery. That such opposing interpretations could exist is possible because of the purposefully ambiguous nature of the text.

Joyce Sparer Adler expresses this difficulty in assessing a true reading in the following way:

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An oracle for the United States before the Civil War, with resonating meaning for all humanity, *Benito Cereno* has been, like many a legendary oracle, misconceived by those who expect meaning to be conveyed in conventional ways . . . But Melville was a poet – maker, not taker, of symbols, methods, and forms. His head, being like Babo‟s a “hive of subtlety,” he transformed the 1817 narrative written by a real Amasa Delano into strange suggestive art through which he explored, more deeply and creatively than ever before, the master-slave relationship and the entanglement of slavery and violence; though he felt here, as everywhere else in his works, that the great iniquity resides in slavery, not in those who fight, no matter how bloodily, against it, he was impelled by the extraordinary situation recounted in the source to probe as profoundly as possible “horrors that happen so.” (Burkholder 76)

*Benito Cereno* is an antislavery piece, though certainly not in the manner of typical antislavery writing (such as the Cuban novel *Sab*): “Antislavery literature was primarily aimed at moralizing, with the use of black speech, about the humanity of the slave and inhumanity of slavery, and it pointed primarily to a future where such speech would find legitimacy and where the black subject could reconstruct a family community” (Handley 3). So if we see *Benito Cereno* as one of those texts that “are haunted by their own shortcomings in attempting recovery of repressed histories and in finding meaning in such failures,” and if we read it as a postslavery text, the inner tensions acquire a more cogent meaning (Handley 3).

Melville was already problematizing a point in the future when there would be a need to address “the use of a tainted history” and is therefore ambivalent about presenting projects for the future. In *Benito Cereno* and *The Kingdom of This World*, the authors “wrestle with the contradictions of depending on a reprehensible history for establishing new postslavery life and identity and warn against simple or hasty solutions” and also strive to establish a “contemporary responsibility to „unread‟ history, to read for what has been buried by ideology” (Handley 11).

Another characteristic of postslavery narratives that applies to Melville and Carpentier is the fact that in both authors we see a particular tug o‟ war:

The narratives all have a double movement of resistance and complicity because they all contain an oscillation between an omniscient narrative control ... symptomatic of a foundational, generative impulse, and disruptive testimonial languages, [and] are symptomatic of the genealogical impulse to wrestle with the questions of historicity and contingency. (Handley 32)

Finally, the dialogic nature of *The Kingdom of This World* and *Benito Cereno* can also be explained by a similarity to other transnational postslavery texts: they 20

are “riddled by the contradictions of egalitarianism and imperialism and inevitably condemned by its own historicity” (Handley 115). One thinks of the scene where Ti Noël, a free man, takes a break by sitting on top of a stack of discarded encyclopedias, unaware of their use or of his place in history: “He had also carried off a doll dressed as a shepherdess, an armchair upholstered in tapestry, and three volumes of the *Grand Encyclopédie* on which he was in the habit of sitting to eat sugar cane” (Carpentier 170).

*Benito Cereno’s* labyrinthine structure can also be explained by Melville‟s political convictions and frustration with his readership. His frustration with failing to produce books that were both fulfilling to him as a writer and financially successful led him to write on a dual level:

Out of his failures with *Mardi* and the slave labor of the next two books, Melville had built a literary theory in which a writer writes simultaneously for two audiences, one composed of the mob, the other of “eagle-eyed” readers who perceive the true meaning of those passages which the author has “directly calculated to deceive

– egregiously deceive – the superficial skimmer of pages. (Baym 2152)

In *Benito Cereno* we see this strategy in the naïve Delano‟s “superficial skimming” of the ship and its people, and the more “eagle-eyed” narrator that provides clues for the more enlightened reader to develop a much earlier understanding of the events.

The constant attempts in *The Kingdom of This World* to subvert a logical and linear reality are manifested through the non-linear hidden reality of Haitian culture. The visible model, the French, is denounced and mocked; the latent and ungraspable, the Afro-Caribbean, is presented in a more preferential light. Ideologically both models, whether cultural, historic or gendered, are manifested in two different epistemologies: science and belief, the European and the primitive, in a dichotomy that the *real marvelous* represents.

What both of these novels do is grapple with the legacy of slavery in terms that are not transparent or heavy handed. They lay out the tensions, abuses, contradictions and ironies that follow the uprising and liberation of the oppressed. Their texts narratively reflect those dualities. But in terms of the gendered universes they create they do not take any great risks: the traditional bipolar system of male and female is used to ascertain each character‟s worth. The effortlessness of the truly admirable male characters and the self-conscious struggles of the weak characters is the product of a patriarchal axiom: “To be seen to labour in anything deprives a man of credit; whereas admiration doubles if he seems to throw it without effort or forethought” (Schwenger 30).

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**End Notes**

1. For example, see Schiffman‟s article in Burkholder. “Williams says: „{Natural} to Babo...is hatred for the happiness of hatred, evil for the sake of evil...{his is} a motiveless malignity...) This is a customary misinterpretation, for Babo‟s malignity is not motiveless. He was leading a rebellion of slaves in their fight for freedom, and all his acts of cruelty were dictated by this purpose ... Almost all critics who insist that Babo is evil refuse to discuss the question of slavery” (30).
2. This *primitivist* strain that Alejo Carpentier taps into was typical of other *avant-garde* artists of the time and the essence of Carpentier‟s famous thesis on the *marvelous real* in the New World, which appears in the 1949 edition of *The Kingdom of This World.* Carpentier‟s *marvelous real* proposition states that the American reality is inherently different from the European: while artists like the surrealists must strive to invent worlds that are wondrous, the American reality is such that it “naturally” is given to produce the marvelous.
3. R.W. Connell explains that Jung distinguishes between the self constructed in transaction with the social environment, which he calls the “persona,” and the self formed in the unconscious out of repressed elements, which he calls the “anima.” These tend to be opposites, and the opposition tends to be a gendered one. But his work gradually went away from the process of repression towards one of the resulting *balance* between a masculine persona and a feminine anima. He also argues that the “feminine interior of masculine men was shaped not only by the life-history of the particular man but also by inherited archetypal images of women. So while Freud was struggling to overcome the masculine/feminine polarity, Jung not only settled for it, but presented the familiar opposition as rooted in timeless truths about the human psyche.” Jung‟s treatment of the masculine/feminine polarity as a “universal structure of the psyche also leads to quagmire. No historical change in their constitution is conceivable, all that can happen is a change in the balance between them” (Connell 14).

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## “Latino, U.S.A.” Statehooding Puerto Rico in Rosario Ferré’s

### *The House on the Lagoon Elena Machado Sáez*

During the 1990s, Rosario Ferré began publishing in English at the same

time that she shifted her support to statehood as the ideal political future for Puerto Rico. Written in the midst of Ferré’s shifting affiliations, *The House on the Lagoon* (1995) is consequently infused with these controversial authorial and political moves. This essay examines three main thematic levels of political engagement in Ferré’s novel. First, Ferre’s location of her own novel within the

U.S. literary canon, and by extension, Puerto Rican history within the sphere of

U.S. history. Out of the intersection of these spaces and histories evolves a second thematic trend, a “statehood aesthetic” establishing marriage as the metaphorical solution for the political relationship between Puerto Rico and the

U.S. The marriage metaphor ultimately leads to a radical conceptualization of statehood; *The House on the Lagoon* imagines and identifies Puerto Rico as part of a U.S. Latino population and market rather than as subsumed into a hegemonic American culture.

*The House on the Lagoon*, may be read as a narrative that plots the history of Puerto Rican politics alongside the author’s own trajectory. The novel defines the political scene in Puerto Rico as indivisible from the island’s relationship to the United States, in particular, its political status as an “associated free state.” The main political parties in Puerto Rico are indeed categorized according to their support for a specific political status: the Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño, which advocates independence from the U.S., the Partido Popular Democrático which seeks to maintain the status-quo, and the Partido Nuevo Progresista, which aims to make Puerto Rico the fifty-first state of the United States. My timeline for the novel’s historical context begins in 1972, the year Rosario Ferré announced that after campaigning in 1968 for Governor Luis Ferré, her pro-statehood father, she was now switching to the left and in support of the independence movement in Puerto Rico. Fast forward then to 1998, when the author published an opinion piece in *The New York Times*, revealing that she planned to vote for statehood in the next Puerto Rican plebiscite. Her article, entitled “Puerto Rico, USA,” was criticized by the islands’ leftist intellectuals not only for advocating statehood but also for its assertion that

Puerto Ricans were “more American than John Wayne” (A21).1

Emerging out of this personal context, *The House on the Lagoon* has a special place in Ferré’s prolific writing career**.** Certainly, the selection of the novel as a finalist for the 1995 National Book Award in the U.S. demonstrates the success of Ferré’s statehooding aesthetic, since the award officially recognizes the novel as “American literature.” Taking shape as a historical fiction, the novel

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expands the literary and linguistic borders of the U.S. and Puerto Rico by positioning itself as a literary descendant of one of the American canon’s indisputable members, William Faulkner, superficially mirroring the plot of *Absalom! Absalom!* I decipher these unexpected textual references and Ferré’s seeming desire to statehood her novel by turning to the use of marriage as metaphor within *The House on the Lagoon* as a metaphor for the neocolonial

relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico.2

The plot of Ferré’s novel revolves around the voices of Isabel Monfort and Quintín Mendizabal as they rewrite each other’s family histories. *The House on the Lagoon* blurs the lines between the personal and the public as these narratives take on a larger significance, competing over historical truths in the sphere of Puerto Rican politics. The novel itself exhibits this battle of narrative production, alternating between the voices of Quintín and Isabel, husband and wife, each making claims about the line between history and fiction. With the marriage struggle center-stage, *The House on the Lagoon* explores a gendered revision of Puerto Rican history and identity. At the same time, this revisionist impulse also focuses on the political history of Puerto Rico as an associated free state and its relationship with the United States. Ferré’s novel goes on to rewrite the borders of the Americas such that Puerto Rican history becomes defined as part of U.S. history. This move is not only representative of what I call the fiction’s “statehood aesthetic,” but also a desire to shift or relocate Puerto Rico’s status from being exclusively (culturally, politically, geographically) Caribbean to being

U.S. Latino.

In *The House on the Lagoon*, Ferré reformulates the historical and literary borders of both Puerto Rico and the U.S. via a statehood aesthetic which relies upon the location of Latinos within the United States as both a bilingual population and a market category. Isabel’s diary forms the bulk of *The House on the Lagoon* and the character herself imagines publishing it under the same title, even doing so in English in order to reach a wider audience. Ferré’s novel spans the histories of the U.S. and Puerto Rico while also commenting on the effects of the marketplace upon literary production; the ending of the novel presents Isabel as a Puerto Rican author seeking to publish within the Latino market. As a result, the plot of *The House on the Lagoon* not only rewrites the linguistic and historical borders of the Americas but also seeks to expand the concept of *Latinidad*.

*The House on the Lagoon* establishes its literary lineage through the outward or apparent parallels with *Absalom! Absalom!*’s plot. The mirroring of plot occurs on two levels: structural and thematic. On the structural level, there exists the similarity in the names of the main male reading-narrating character, Quentin in *Absalom! Absalom!* and Quintín in *The House on the Lagoon*. The patriarchs in both novels are figured in analogous terms of social rank and behavior. Faulkner’s Sutpen and Ferré’s Buenaventura are both foreigner- strangers with a fuzzy history, they both build plantations in a swamp-lagoon with

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the help of architects (a nameless Frenchman and Pavel respectively) and while they attempt to establish a respectable life by marrying an aristocratic woman, they are nonetheless depicted as crude and cruel. Both novels also cursorily acknowledge the population of blacks who are subjugated, whether by slavery or servitude, in order to maintain the stability of the patriarch’s power and plantation. Finally, both of the novels culminate in the burning down of the plantation houses by patriarch’s children. In Faulkner, the fire is attributed to Sutpen’s illegitimate daughter while in Ferré’s novel, it is Quintín’s legitimate son who is responsible for the destruction of the house on the lagoon.

In addition to the coincidences in setting and narrative events, there are also two main themes that preoccupy both *Absalom! Absalom!* and *The House on the Lagoon*. The first is that of writing history and the various layers of reading involved in producing that history. For instance, in Faulkner’s novel, Quentin is asked by Miss Coldfield to write the history of her family. In the course of doing so, Quentin reads letters by his father, Rosa Coldfield and Charles Bon, which narrate Sutpen’s life. However, Quentin is not the only reader; so is Shreve, his roommate, not to mention ourselves, the reading audience. Ultimately, Quentin is reading and narrating the history of the South through the story of Sutpen and its multiple narrators. This theme is repeated in Ferré’s text: Isabel is asked by her grandmother Abby to write the story of their family. Isabel extends her writing mission to include her husband Quintín’s family history, tracing Puerto Rico’s history through that of the Monfort and Medizabal families. Accordingly, Isabel’s manuscript cites July 4, 1917, marking both Buenaventura’s arrival in Puerto Rico and the granting of American citizenship to Puerto Ricans, as the founding year of the family history. As we read Isabel’s novel, likewise entitled *The House on the Lagoon* (another layer), so does Quintín. Once he suspects that Isabel knows he’s reading the manuscript, Quintín begins to make notes in the margins, thus switching to the role of the writer. Upon reading Isabel’s story with its version of Puerto Rican history, Quintín the historian feels obligated to make corrections.

The second theme linking the two novels is the project of constructing a family lineage. The stories read and written in both novels center upon family histories, and contain an obsessive compulsion to prove the legitimacy and purity of the family tree. The narratives of both novels bear the burden of this proof, exhibiting the contradictions, ambivalences and conflicts within (perhaps even the impossibility of) such a project. In *Absalom! Absalom!*, Sutpen builds the plantation and marries a respectable woman, all to give him the credibility of a gentleman’s life and past. Nevertheless, several gaps in the narrative point to the fictions on which his lineage is based, in particular Sutpen’s assertion that he was born in West Virginia, at a time when the state itself had not even existed (Faulkner 179). The repetition and overlapping of stories, attempting to go into the past to fill in such gaps, allude to the anxiety fueling the narrative’s quest for a pure, white lineage. It is worth noting that at the end of the novel there are

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several pages containing a chronology of the novel’s events and a list of genealogy.

In *The House on the Lagoon*, Isabel’s narrative is similarly concerned with tracing a pure lineage, back to European ancestors. The novel even opens with the picture of a family tree, already haunted by question marks. The most obvious example of the concern for the legitimacy of roots lies in Buenaventura’s famed parchment. When Buenaventura arrives from Spain, he carries with him an old parchment that claims he is the descendant of Francisco Pizarro, the conqueror of Peru. It is based on this documentation of the Mendizabal’s lineage that Quintín forbids his son Manuel from marrying Coral, a mulatta. Citing the Bloodline books, Quintín asserts that their lineage is clean of Jewish, Islamic, and black blood. And yet, when Buenaventura mimics and makes fun of the Spanish nobles who marry his daughters, Isabel wonders “if Buenaventura’s legendary parchment with his family tree on it—which he had supposedly brought with him from Valdeverdeja—as well as his coat of arms—had all been a hoax” and that he was “really of humble origin.” (Ferré 253).

What then do we make of the superficial parallels drawn with that of *Absalom! Absalom!*’s narrative and thematic concerns? By situating itself as a rewriting of Faulkner’s novel, *The House on the Lagoon* invites the reader to formulate another family tree. In this case, the literary family tree links an eminent American author with a Puerto Rican one, thereby figuring Puerto Rican literature as an offshoot of the American literary canon. Such a literary lineage in turn implies a shared literary and political history, with similar concerns regarding the formulation of historical narratives. The linking of *The House on the Lagoon* with *Absalom! Absalom!* represents a formulation of a statehood aesthetic, the incorporation of Puerto Rico’s literature and history within that of the United States. In addition to situating Puerto Rico as historically and culturally an integral part of the United States, Ferré’s novel also seeks to open up the category of “American.” The parallels between these two novels point to Puerto Rico as a site of U.S. history and literature.

Nevertheless, *The House on the Lagoon* simultaneously interrogates and calls into question this ostensible statehooding project. In particular, the metaphor of marriage within *The House on the Lagoon* allows us to complicate its own impulse towards statehooding, and Puerto Rican literature by extension, through the allusion to Faulkner’s work. Marriage is the organizing system of the novel, as evidenced by the double narrative through which Quintín and Isabel marriage emerges, with Isabel writing her account of the family history while Quintín reads along, questioning the validity of her narrative and inserting his own commentary. Their marriage is consequently depicted as a tension between alternative histories, ideologies and memories. Moreover, the main characters’ marriage, and the institution of marriage itself, serves as a metaphor for the conflict and tension between the United States and Puerto Rico.

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Before narrating the story about her romance with her husband, Isabel makes this precise connection in the chapter entitled “Vassar College.”

The way I see it, our island is like a betrothed, always on the verge of marriage. If one day Puerto Rico becomes a state, it will have to accept English—the language of her future husband—as its official language, not just because it’s the language of modernity and of progress, but also because it’s the language of authority. If the island decides to remain single, on the other hand, it will probably mean backwardness and poverty. (184)

By equating commonwealth status with that of an engagement, Isabel posits statehood, or marriage, as a “natural” step for Puerto Rico. For Isabel, the institution of marriage ideally reflects the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. In addition, this marriage brings with it a linguistic responsibility: statehood implies the acceptance of English as the official language. The language that Isabel chooses to write in reflects her assertion that only English can be the language of authority, the language in which she will formulate her own historical narrative. Isabel’s strong pro-statehood sentiments are expressly articulated via a traditional and conservative concept of marriage. By following the logic of Isabel’s marriage metaphor and comparing it to the novel’s overall representation of marriage itself, the novel’s political affiliations and “statehood aesthetic” take on a certain ambivalence.

Aside from the marriage of Quintín and Isabel, the two other main or predominant relationships are that of Quintín’s parents, Buenaventura and Rebecca, and Isabel’s grandparents, Gabriela and Vincenzo. Through these characters, the narrative consistently portrays the institution of marriage as oppressive to women. For instance, after her marriage to Buenaventura, Rebecca attempts to continue her life as a free spirit within her circle of artistic friends by holding regular literary soirées. Following Quintín’s birth, Buenaventura finds Rebecca performing the part of Salomé, naked, for her fellow artists. Buenaventura whips her, and Rebecca emerges from the experience as a “broken doll.” Following the beating, “Rebecca bore her frequent pregnancies patiently, reconciled to her fate…She put away her dancing shoes and her poetry books and slowly faded from view” (69). Even in a loving relationship, as that of Abuela Gabriela and Abuelo Vincenzo, marital “duties” debilitate women: “For six years in a row she had a baby every year” (83). In the seventh year of their marriage, Gabriela refuses to continue having children, choosing to “fall out of favor with God rather than lose her inner peace”(83). Her marriage experience prompts her to relay the following warning to her daughters: “two babies are a powerful link in the iron chain with which men tie women down and make them their prisoners” (85).

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Although Isabel asserts that the solution to Puerto Rico’s Commonwealth status must be a wedding, meaning statehood, the novel certainly does not depict marriage as the most desirable of relationships. Furthermore, Isabel’s marriage challenges her own viewpoint regarding Puerto Rico’s political status. The last chapter of *The House on the Lagoon* not only presents the violent conclusion of Isabel’s marriage, but Puerto Rico’s political scene also begins to mirror her own personal crises. During the course of her marriage, Isabel follows Quintín’s orders, slowly becoming more and more passive in the relationship. After she gives birth to her son Manuel, Quintín orders Isabel to tie her tubes and she complies. Isabel’s newfound interest “in keeping the peace rather than whipping up controversies” is also reflected by Puerto Rico’s passivity in the public sphere. Isabel describes the seventies as a time when “the national obsession…seemed to be in remission, and politics ceased to be the seed of angry arguments” (329). The alignment of Isabel’s emotional state with that of Puerto Rico identifies Isabel as the embodiment of Puerto Rico within this marriage metaphor.

While Isabel’s marriage takes a downturn at the end of the novel, a political struggle is also ensuing over the upcoming plebiscite in Puerto Rico. Hence, the conflicts within the family continue to resemble similar political tensions in the public sphere. Once Quintín finds that Manuel has joined a radical Independentista group, AK 47, and organized a strike against him, Quintín disinherits both Manuel and his adopted son, Willie. Even though Isabel disagrees with such a gesture, she signs the will at Quintín’s request, later explaining she “was so afraid of Quintín I didn’t dare open my mouth” (373). Despite Isabel’s inability to defend her sons or take action, the events in Puerto Rico’s public arena foreshadow an escalation of violence within Quintín and Isabel’s marriage. As the date for the plebiscite approaches, a political crisis arises via the resurgence of interest in the status of Puerto Rico as a commonwealth. Not only do radical groups like AK47 use violence to exact social change, but the Puerto Rican government also attempts to strike fear into voters by shooting student protesters and harassing Independentista sympathizers. Quintín’s status and behavior consequently mirrors that of the government authorities, using brutal tactics to maintain control and power.

When the Commonwealth party wins the plebiscite, the pro-statehood governor announces that the results form “a declaration of war” (297). Quintín takes these words literally and begins stocking an arsenal of arms in the basement. At the same time, Isabel safeguards her own weapon, her novel, leaving it with Petra, the family’s life-long servant. When Quintín decides that he wants to institutionalize Willie, due to his constant epileptic convulsions, Isabel finally decides to leave her husband and end the marriage. The same night Isabel that plans an intricate escape, her rebel son Manuel decides to burn down the house on the lagoon. Quintín and Isabel, along with an unconscious Willie,

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are released by Manuel and the Independentistas, the final face-off occurring as they escape on the boat. As a manuscript falls out of the box Willie had carried out of the house, Isabel realizes that the novel she had given to Petra has been since safeguarded by Willie after Petra’s death. Quintín, seeing the manuscript, begins to beat Isabel for disobeying his orders to burn the novel. Seeing her “life unreel before [her] like a film,” remembering the countless acts of violence Quintín has perpetrated, Isabel grabs hold of the boat’s steering wheel and directs it so that Quintín is struck by a steel beam in the head, and killed before he can strike her again (407). Following this metaphor of marriage, statehood figures as dangerous relationship not only for Puerto Rico, being subject to oppression, but for the United States as well. Isabel’s final rebellion and murder of Quíntin point to the threat a statehooded (and wed) Puerto Rico would pose to the U.S.

*The House on the Lagoon*, through its portrayal of two powerful upper class families, relates a history of Puerto Rico. What do we, as readers, then make of this text’s move for inclusion in the American literary canon, via its relation to Faulkner? How does such an inclusion correlate with the marriage metaphor presented in the text as the logic behind US-PR relations? If the novel indeed argues for statehooding itself, along with Puerto Rican literature as a whole, how is this reconciled with the negative depiction of marriage as the statehooding of Puerto Rican women? With the violent ending of the two *The House on the Lagoon* novels, written by both Ferré and Isabel, it appears that statehood status is being redefined. To quote Isabel, “With the difficulty Congress was having retaining English as the official language of the United States, I thought, letting a Spanish-speaking territory become a state would be like letting a fox into the chicken coop” (390-1). Ferré thus reconceives statehood as a

radical solution to neocolonialism.3 Puerto Rico, by choosing statehood, has the

potential to transform the culture and population of the United States, specifically by challenging the monolinguistic construction of American identity.4 In this sense, Ferré’s literary allusions to Faulkner point to the statehooding of Puerto

Rican literature as a challenge to the cultural and linguistic borders of the United States’ literary canon.

This reading is, however, problematized by the events narrated in the last section of Ferré’s novel, specifically, the aftermath of Quintín’s murder. Willie and Isabel move to Florida, where the “warm waters glimmering like a sapphire around San Juan” and the “graceful palm trees swaying like winged angels,” haunt Isabel. Despite her obvious longing for Puerto Rico, Isabel feels “no desire to go back to the island” (380). Isabel’s perspective on her novel takes on a different meaning when considered alongside this nostalgia and self-imposed exile. Isabel explains, “My novel is about personal freedom, Quintín, not about political freedom…It's about my independence from you” (386). Isabel rejects Quintín’s label of the novel as an “Independentista manifesto” by affirming the personal as nonpolitical (386). Thus, *The House on the Lagoon* does not offer a

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definitive conclusion to the struggle between statehood and independence. Rather, the ending of the novel and Isabel’s exile from Puerto Rico represents a withdrawal from Puerto Rican politics. Ferré’s novel consequently offers a personal and literary solution. Fiction emerges as a means of escape, absolution or resolution of political struggle. *The House on the Lagoon* both engages and withdraws from Puerto Rican politics, in an attempt to expand the borders of Puerto Rican and U.S. literature.

Though Isabel affirms the personal as nonpolitical, it is nevertheless possible to view *The House on the Lagoon* as formulating the expansion of Puerto Rican and U.S. literary borders in the hopes of identifying (with) a specific population: Latinos. The withdrawal from Puerto Rican politics represents a movement towards the U.S. mainland and Latinos. Isabel writes the last section of the novel, three years after Quintín’s death, but she is no longer writing from Puerto Rico: she finishes her novel in Florida. Isabel also expresses a desire to publish the novel in the U.S. despite her fear that “publishing it may have dire results, but a tale, like life itself, isn’t finished until it is heard by an understanding heart” (380). The novel’s own structure allows for the conflation here of Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon* with Isabel’s same-titled text. In turn, the shift in setting from Puerto Rico to Florida blurs the fiction-reality border of the novel(s). *The House on the Lagoon* will be published in the /. and read by an “understanding” audience that presumably will be able to read in English since that is the idiomatic form the novel takes, both Isabel’s and Ferré’s. The movement towards this audience implies a rejection as well. The “dire results” of publishing seem tied to the reaction of an audience lacking in understanding, island Puerto Ricans, who see the author’s choice of English for the novel as a

betrayal to the community.5

Indeed, the novel’s literary statehooding of Puerto Rico also denotes Rosario Ferré’s self-positioning as a *Latina*, rather than a solely Puerto Rican writer. Returning to the linguistic uniqueness of *The House on the Lagoon*, Ferré’s decision to write and publish in English has often been criticized as an inherently political decision serving the aims of the Statehood party. While *The House on the Lagoon* certainly encourages this superficial reading, I would like to complicate this analysis by noting that this movement towards “Puerto Rico, U.S.A.” is linked to the formulation of island Puerto Ricans *as* Latinos and therefore marks an important moment in Rosario Ferré’s literary career: a shift towards marketing herself as a Latina writer. Isabel’s novel points to 1917, the year Puerto Ricans were given American citizenship, as both the initiating moment for the family and Puerto Rican history. Consequently, *The House on the Lagoon* identifies island Puerto Ricans as *always already* Latinos *because* they are U.S. citizens.

The formulation of Puerto Ricans as Latinos would not only make them one of the largest and most influential Latino populations, but also reshape the

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linguistic composition of Latinos in the United States. Isabel’s commentary on statehood as a solution to Puerto Rico’s commonwealth status alludes to the potential threat such a Latino population could present to the U.S.: “With the difficulty Congress was having retaining English as the official language of the United States, I thought, letting a Spanish-speaking territory become a state would be like letting a fox into the chicken coop” (390-1). Here the radical nature of statehood is presented solely in linguistic terms; it is the inclusion of a non-

English speaking territory that will transform monolingual American culture.6 Isabel not only redefines statehood radically, but also names the Spanish

language as a defining aspect of Puerto Rican culture and identity. In doing so, *The House on the Lagoon* is again forging a link between the island population of Puerto Rico and mainland U.S. Latinos.

Due to the novel’s positioning within the timeline of Ferré’s political affiliations, its is possible to read her subsequent writings through *The House on the Lagoon* in order to further develop Ferré’s conception of Latina/o identity. I would then juxtapose *The House on the Lagoon* alongside two New York Times articles about Rosario Ferré’s views on statehood and writing in English, “Puerto Rico, U.S.A” and “Bilingual Author Finds Something in Translation.” Published in March of 1998, Ferré argues for statehood in “Puerto Rico, U.S.A.” by stating that “Puerto Ricans have been Americans since 1898,” thereby conflating the political status of Puerto Rico as a colony with the status of its islanders as American citizens (A21). Since citizenship was not actually granted to Puerto Ricans until 1917, Ferré uses the colonial status of Puerto Rico as the determining factor of their American identity. According to Ferré, however, the affirmation of Puerto Rican’s “American-ness,” does not entail a process of assimilation or the disappearance of Puerto Rican culture or language. Rather, the integrity of Puerto Rican culture is assured by the presence of mainland U.S. Latinos, which Ferré notes “are the fastest growing minority in the United States” (A21). For the author, the presence of an ever-growing Latino community secures the existence of a “multicultural America [in which] we won’t lose our culture” (A21). The loss of culture is inextricably linked to a loss of language. The prevention of this loss is not simply guaranteed by a multicultural America but by a multilingual America,

an America that is mainly multilingual as a result of a Latino presence.7 Ferré defines the Latino population not only as American citizens but also as *Spanish-*

*speaking* American citizens thereby drawing a further parallel between the Puerto Rican island population and the U.S. mainland Latinos.

Is this linguistic connection an innovative reconception of Latino and Puerto Rican identity? “Bilingual Author Finds Something in Translation,” a New York Times interview which appeared a couple of months after Ferré’s article, in September 1998, contains similar references to a multicultural America and bilingual Latinos. However, these references are used to explain Rosario Ferré’s linguistic switch in writing *The House on the Lagoon.* In the interview, Ferré explains her decision to write in English as “purely practical” since it allows her

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“to get better distribution of her work and thus reach a wider audience” (E2). This wider audience includes “Hispanic readers [who] thank her for writing in English because they say they have long forgotten their Spanish” (E2). While she “admonishes them to hold on to their native tongue,” a contradiction emerges between the U.S. of *The House on the Lagoon* and the U.S. that Ferré constructs in these articles: the image of a monolingual empire whose borders must be challenged versus the image of a multicultural and therefore multilingual nation that can serve as a safe haven.

The paradoxical representation of the U.S. results from the multiple locations of Latino identity. *The House on the Lagoon* represents Ferré’s attempt to engage and differentiate these multiple spaces, while endeavoring to draw connections between island Puerto Ricans and mainland U.S. Latinos through the character of Isabel, an upper class Puerto Rican, and highly literate woman. It is Isabel who serves as the representative of Puerto Rico, and her character seems to point to two contradictory impulses: the impulse towards independence as seen through her violent rebellion against her husband Quintín and on the other, the impulse towards statehood, realized by her choice to leave Puerto Rico and settle in Florida. How are these impulses reconciled? As I noted before, the ending of the novel turns toward an apolitical aesthetic resolution. This aesthetic is derived from a literary project, in Isabel’s decision to publish the novel so that “it is heard by an understanding heart” (Ferré 380). The “understanding audience” is a new audience, one that would not be available if Isabel published in Puerto Rico, or if she published in Spanish. That audience is the mainland

U.S. Latino community. Thus, another contradiction emerges regarding the defining aspects of Latinos: are they mainly a Spanish-speaking community, as the statehooding aesthetic seems to suggest by defining Puerto Ricans as Latinos, *or* are they predominantly English-speakers, in accordance with this

allusion to the understanding U.S. audience?8

It is perhaps this very difficulty in defining the Latino community and its language that informs the novel’s conclusion, fraught with nostalgia for the island of Puerto Rico and for the “warm waters glimmering like a sapphire around San Juan” (380). If Isabel has the capacity to connect with a Latino reading audience and thereby bring to them a story of a family as a history of Puerto Rico, this potential for linking the spaces of the U.S. and Puerto Rico and by extension the Latino and Puerto Rican communities, is offset by the isolation to which Isabel escapes. Isabel resides in Florida, in the United States, but more specifically she lives on an island: “We took refuge in a small hotel on Anastasia, a narrow island on the peninsula’s western coast which appealed to us because of its peaceful atmosphere” (379). While reminiscing about Puerto Rico, Isabel stares “at the pale cold Atlantic and at the desolate beach, with its solitary pine tree undulating in the wind” (380). Isabel is not only disconnected from Puerto Rico but she is isolated, alone and without a community in Florida. Her creation, the novel,

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stands as an attempt to reconcile the tension she herself embodies, a conflict reflected as she remains inert looking at the “comforting” Atlantic, watching the “tranquil surface of the water” and imagining “the eternal struggle to eat and escape being eaten [which] went on beneath its surface” (380).

The final image in *The House on the Lagoon* is of Isabel nostalgically reading the layers of the ocean, imagining the violent battle of survival that remains hidden by the tranquil surface of the Atlantic. Along with Isabel’s hibernation, a stage of pre-publication, comes this description of consumption that terrifies her and yet is the source of Isabel’s imaginings. Isabel’s isolation and longing represents a further development of Latino identity, this time, on U.S. rather than Puerto Rican soil. The formulation of *Latinidad* here is linked to a fear and fascination with the workings of the very market Isabel’s novel will enter, and

be consumed by.9 Throughout the novel, Isabel alludes to the existence of this capitalist market as a means of statehooding Puerto Rico and its culture. Indeed,

Quintín accuses her of repeatedly including historically inaccurate “facts.” These criticisms are mainly directed at Isabel’s insistence on locating the appearance of globalization10 much earlier than historically accepted (according to Quintín). For example, Isabel’s description of Buenaventura’s arrival in Puerto Rico on July 4th, suggests that the globalization of American culture was already evident there in

1917. As Buenaventura walks along the streets of San Juan, he sees the Fourth of July celebrations, noting the Americana decorating the streets, even eating a hotdog. Quintín criticizes Isabel’s historical representation: “Isabel had made some inexcusable mistakes. Some of them were silly; for example, pretending there were hot-dog stands in 1917, and that Buenaventura had eaten a hot dog on the day he arrived in San Juan. Quintín laughed again. No one knew for sure when hot dogs had arrived on the island, but he doubted it was before the Second World War” (73).

Quintín seeks to decipher these purported historical inaccuracies as indicative of Isabel’s motive for writing her novel: “She had consciously altered the facts of history to serve her story” (74). Isabel’s motivation to write her novel is continually coupled with her obsessive writing of the processes of capital and globalization into a pre-global history. For example, Quintín complains that “when Isabel talked about San Juan Bay, she was describing the way it looks now, polluted by the huge tourist liners that visit the city daily, not the way it appeared in 1937” (149). Isabel’s market imaginings at the close of *The House on the Lagoon* therefore represent a concern throughout the novel with globalization and Puerto Rican identity. This infusion of globalization into Puerto Rican history is a facet of the statehood aesthetic as articulated by the novel. Isabel depicts American culture and consumerism as inextricably tied to Puerto Rican identity by situating globalization as the organizing structure for Puerto Rican history, projecting that connection into a time when the political status as territory did not yet “officially” bring this cohesion of cultures about.

Furthermore, the statehooding of Puerto Rico through the globalization of

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American culture points towards the construction of Latino identity itself as a market-based concept. When Isabel describes the importance of the Sears catalogue within Puerto Rico during the forties and fifties, she also depicts the Latino community primarily as consumers, a community created by the United

States market.11 As a result, “Sears wasn’t a place, it was a state of mind,” that provided Puerto Ricans with another identity, one that separated them from their

Caribbean neighbors: “We weren’t like Haiti or the Dominican Republic, where people still hadn’t heard of the telephone” (181-2). Isabel repeatedly associates Puerto Rican access to the Sears catalogue in terms of providing economic equality; it was “thanks to the Sears catalogue we had the same access as the people of Kansas and Louisiana to the latest inventions” (182). Hence, this other identity, associated with progress and access to the American products, is that of the Latino consumer.

Puerto Ricans are Latinos then, not only because of their American citizenship but also because of their participation within the U.S. capitalist market, as both consumers and a market that is consumed by American multinational corporations. By recognizing Latino identity as a targeted market group, the political affiliations of independence and statehood become irrelevant, or superceded by this larger, encompassing category. Isabel points to the Sears catalogue as the one activity with unites Puerto Ricans of all political parties:

There was a Sears catalogue in every middle-class home in Ponce at that time. Like most families on the island, ours was divided politically…But we all liked to browse through the Sears catalogue. Having it at hand was reassuring—proof that Puerto Rico was an inseparable part of the United States. (181-2)

As Latinos, Puerto Ricans are statehooded via the U.S. market economy. Within this context of the Latino as a market identity, Isabel’s final declaration that her novel is not sympathetic to the Independentista party takes on another significance. The withdrawal from Puerto Rican politics within the novel is associated with a shift in social context, from that of colonialism to globalization. *The House of the Lagoon* points to the opposition between independence and statehood as an outdated conceptualization of the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. Puerto Rico and its place within the U.S. global market have already called into question this political binary. At the end of the novel, Isabel points to the Atlantic as a metaphor for the market, imagining beyond the appearance of tranquil water a power struggle purely in terms of consumption. By comparison, the binary of independence and statehood relies upon the imagining of a relationship between a big fish (US) and the little one (PR). Isabel’s metaphor erases these differences in power and size, emphasizing

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that all those enclosed by the market’s waters are equally subject to eating the other and being consumed themselves.

The novel’s theorization of Latino identity via the global market reiterates the movement away from Puerto Rico and its political debate between independence and statehood. As Latinos, Puerto Ricans are no longer a commonwealth or colony, and presumably, the market enables them to have equal footing with the United States via their “buying power.” *The House on the Lagoon*, however, seems to problematize this value as it simultaneously statehoods Puerto Rico into the United States via its *Latinidad*. While the Sears catalogue initiates Puerto Rico into the “wonderful world” of U.S. capitalism, the effects of globalization bring with it “a lot more besides” (181). Within the narration of the Monfort family history, Isabel ties the appearance of an American market within Puerto Rico to the self-destruction of her family. It is U.S. tourism that brings the hotel to Ponce where Carmita, Isabel’s mother, gambles away the family’s life savings, putting the Monfort family into serious debt. While Isabel remarks “it was Carmita’s gambling [that] finally did him in,” her father’s suicide is also directly connected to the success of the Sears catalogue (200). Carlos’s death is at the hands of the U.S. market: Abby “found him hanging from the rafters in the attic, her shiny new garden hose from Sears tied around his neck” (201).

The ambivalence within *The House on the Lagoon* focuses on the construction of Latino identity. The text demonstrates an awareness of the Latino community as a category within the US global market, and at the same time exhibits a desire to locate the potential for resistance within the system of globalization. Perhaps ironically, the language of globalization, English, becomes the site of this very resistance. The story of Ermelinda’s education, as narrated by Isabel, illustrates the “accidental” empowerment the Puerto Rican population received when Commissioner Easton decreed that English be taught in all public schools. The institution of English as a public language not only forms part of the spread of U.S. language and culture but also promotes the development of Puerto Ricans as Latinos, as a bilingual population. Ermelinda embodies the potential threat of such a bilingual population since her ability to read in English allows her to also read the layers of exploitation within the U.S. market. Looking through an American magazine, she sees an advertisement for Saks Fifth Avenue and realizes that the model “was wearing the very same negligee she and her little sisters had finished only three weeks before, for which Mr. Turnbill paid her mother exactly fifty cents” (213). Seeing that the negligee was being sold on the market for fifty dollars, Ermelinda convinces her mother to stop working for the factory and organizes a garment industry union for the seamstresses. Nevertheless, the recurring and contradictory descriptions of Latinos as either Spanish-speakers or English-speakers foreground the text’s difficulty in locating a truly bilingual Latino subject, such as the singularly unique Ermelinda, within the context of globalization.

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*The House on the Lagoon* points to an interrogation of the Latino community’s radical power or potential transformation of U.S. culture. Throughout the text, the globalization of American culture is linked to the globalization of its language, English. As the novel indicates the formation of Latino community is inextricably tied to the context of globalization and the U.S. market, likewise, *The House on the Lagoon* situates itself as a product of this interaction and exchange in terms of language and identity. Both Isabel and Ferré choose to publish their works in English, as a means of reaching an understanding audience. Consequently, these two fictional texts exhibit the market’s successful classification and dissemination of English as the official global language. Moreover, the narrative of *The House on the Lagoon* continually emphasizes its context of globalization, defining the Latino community as consumers within the market and as a marketing category. The choice to publish in the United States, on the part of Isabel and Ferré, consequently reaffirms the position of the novel as a product shaped by the U.S. market. Indeed, the marketing of *The House on the Lagoon* as U.S. Latino literature, within the fictional narrative as well as the

“real” publishing market, highlights the realization and importance of the “Latino” as a market category within U.S. capitalism.12

Quintín’s accusation or critique of Isabel’s novel calls attention to this intersection of language, writing and globalization:

Would she have written her manuscript in English if she didn’t think English was important? If she had written her novel in Spanish and published it in Puerto Rico, why, only a handful of people would have read it! But if she published it in the United States, thousands would read it. (151)

The question of language and authorial intent remains unanswered for Isabel. At the end of the novel, Isabel lies in wait, isolated, hibernating. In turn, the manuscript she writes is fraught with a conflicting desire to expand the literary and political borders of the United States, while fearing “being eaten” and disappearing within the global marketplace. The aesthetics of statehooding within the narrative primarily aim to link the United States and Puerto Rican history, Puerto Ricans with mainland U.S. Latinos. Nevertheless, Rosario Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon* remains deeply ambivalent about the form in which it seeks to make these connections. The contradictions within the aesthetic project of statehooding Puerto Rico stem from the language it uses to imagine and formulate a new America, as well as the market the text will or has entered. *The House on the Lagoon*’s narrative tension alludes to the challenges facing a Latino text due to its location within the U.S. capitalist market and the concomitant implications for Latino identity, language, authorship and audience.

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**End Notes:**

1. One of the main criticisms of Rosario Ferré’s pro-Statehood declaration was offered by another Puerto Rican writer, Ana Lydia Vega in her article entitled, “Carta Abierta a Pandora” (1998).
2. The concept of the “lite-colonial,” which Juan Flores describes in *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* (2000) is particularly useful in regards to the contemporary development of this relationship. More specifically, Flores uses the term “lite-colonial” to provide a sense of how colonialism continues to structure U.S.—Puerto Rico relations and yet with a difference, indicating a shift from a colonialism defined by production to one “grounded on consumption” (38). In essence, neocolonialism is moving between the primacy of the nation-state to that of the market, without completely diluting the power of either.
3. Ferré is not the only person to conceive of statehood radically. For an alternate definition of “radical statehood,” consider Juan Duchesne Winter’s *La Política de la Caricia* where he articulates a “Manifesto Radical de la Estadidad.”
4. This perspective is one that is repeated within the field of Latino Studies, in particular by Ilan Stavans. In *The Hispanic Condition* (2001), Stavans describes Latinos as “yesterday’s victim and tomorrow’s conquistadors,” who will exact the revenge of Montezuma, “the unhurried process of the penetration of and exertion of influence on the United States” (5).
5. Even Ferré’s decision to translate her earlier Spanish-language works into English has garnered criticism. In *Rosario Ferré: A Search for Identity*, Suzanne S. Hintz characterizes the English translations, “The Youngest Doll” and *Sweet Diamond Dust*, as betrayals of their original Spanish versions. In particular, Hintz argues that the translations lacked the radical feminist tone of the early writings via a “softening” of sexually explicit language or the removal of obscenities altogether. In addition, Hintz notes that the anti-American tone of these works has also been diffused and even more interestingly, supplanted by specifics regarding the “U.S. commercial brand names” that the characters purchase or consume (182). Further along in this essay, I will also be commenting on the representation of Puerto Rican politics and the significance of the U.S. market within *The House on the Lagoon*.
6. In the prologue to *The Hispanic Condition*, Ilan Stavans describes a dream in which he imagines this very future of the Americas, with Latino bilinguality resulting in the “dismantl[ing] of all North American borders” (xv).
7. Ilan Stavans describes Hispanic culture in the U.S. as comprised of many cultures that are “linguistically tied together” (*The Hispanic Condition* 7). Whether this linguistic tie is Spanish or Spanglish, Stavans argues that Latinos as a group aim to “cure” American society of its monolingualism (11).
8. This question of language and Latino identity has been discussed by numerous Latino Studies critics, such as Ilan Stavans and Gustavo Pérez Firmat. In *Latinos Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (2001), Arlene Dávila also provides an interesting analysis of how Latino identity and its linguistic parameters are shaped by the media.
9. The linking of fear and fascination with the processes of consumption is also aptly alluded to in Juan Flores’ reading of the “infamous Madonna incident.” In *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, Flores explains the public furor over Madonna’s “suggestively pass[ing] the Puerto Rican flag between her legs” at a concert in relation to the “crass and ubiquitous commodification” of the flag, rather than an outcry of patriotic nationalism (*From Bomba to Hip-Hop* 31-2).
10. I define globalization and globalism here as an intensified form of capitalism that, with the development of new technologies in the 1970’ and 1980’s, has led to an increased and uneven global flow of products and culture. Obviously an enormous bibliography on globalization exists; my ideas have been particularly influenced by *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.
11. Both Juan Flores and Gustavo Pérez Firmat refer to consumption as a defining facet of Latino identity as they focus on two different populations, Puerto Ricans and Cuban-Americans, respectively. Juan Flores is specifically concerned with the “constitutive role played by translocal consumption practices in the forging of contemporary cultural identities” (*From Bomba to Hip-Hop* 46).
12. Rosario Ferré is often included within critical works and anthologies devoted to U.S. Latino literature. For example, in *“Saddling la Gringa” Gatekeeping in Literature by Contemporary Latina*

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*Writers*, Ferré is discussed alongside such canonical Latina writers as Dolores Prida, Cristina Garcia, Nicholasa Mohr and Esmeralda Santiago. The commentary by Julia Alvarez gracing the cover of *The House on the Lagoon (*1995 edition) further exemplifies Ferré’s canonization as a U.S. Latina writer. **Works Cited:**

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## "Subverting the taste buds" of America: Transnational Political Agency in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels *Wife* (1975) and *Jasmine* (1989)

### *Sumita Lall*

From Dimple‟s search for belonging in both India and America in *Wife* (1975) to Tara‟s cosmopolitan self-exploration in *Desirable Daughters* (2002), Bharati Mukherjee‟s characters seek versions of political agency that rely on, what the author argues is, the global extension of “the American Dream and the American Constitution to all its citizens” (Mukherjee 33). By transgressing various international borders as immigrants and refugees, her characters experience an almost enviable degree of freedom in their ability to find a place and thus feel at home in the world. However, despite her potential to disrupt conceptions of the nation as unified and sovereign, the figure of the migrant in Mukherjee‟s fiction is not *a priori* an embodiment of nomadic freedom, individualism, or global agency. Although mobility has gained importance in postcolonial theory, especially in Homi Bhabha‟s poststructuralist valorization of the mobile subject as “the nation‟s margin and the migrants‟ exile” (139), Mukherjee‟s transnational subjects are only ever as free as the domestic narratives they access and mobilize. For the protagonists of *Wife* and *Jasmine*, more specifically, social mobility is *agentic* only to the extent that Dimple and Jasmine can successfully deploy the myth of the American “nation as an extended family” (Rée 83). They only move freely in the world and at “home” (i.e. ultimately in America) if their actions confirm their author‟s faith in “the making of a new American culture . . . [and the] invent[ing of] a new vocabulary” ( 33). In other words, domestic narratives structure the conditions of possibility for imagining political agency in a transnational setting. It is only in the intersection of the local and global -- indeed in the domestically naturalized female subject‟s movement across international borders and ideological boundaries -- that political agency is even possible in *Wife* and *Jasmine*. By offering narratives of women‟s experiences that at once exceed and confirm different nation-states‟ narratives of “home” and family, Mukherjee‟s fiction therefore contributes to a reevaluation of the question of agency itself.

When considering agency and social mobility in relation to a U.S. minority writer of the South Asian diaspora, it is important to keep in mind the numerous modalities of Utopian abstraction that define women‟s subjectivity in the world today.1 As geographically mobile subjects, Mukherjee‟s characters hold the potential to escape various forms of domination experienced in their homelands and, more importantly, to forge new identities abroad. However, their mobility comes with baggage: it occurs only within the confines of their embodied (i.e., material) and, at times, imagined (i.e., idealized) domesticity as female immigrants. In spite of

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Mukherjee‟s faith in the cosmopolitanism of the American Dream, therefore, both novels‟ protagonists fail to detach themselves from their private experiences in their negotiation with public abstractions. For them, the very meaning of “home” evokes both the private sphere, or the individual‟s process of self-representation in language, and the larger public sphere, or the nation-state‟s narrative of communal belonging both in India and America. “Home” is the site of private *and* public struggles to define the self in relation to contentious processes of subjection, of becoming abstract as both Asian American citizens and women in a transnational setting. Mukherjee‟s novels situate Asian American identity formation and claims to Asian American political agency at a juncture between the private and the public, the local and the global, the psychic and the social, and the center and its periphery.

These emerging tropes of belonging in some ways force into crisis the Western myth of the nuclear family as the foundation for imagining both national and transnational bonds. The diasporic experiences Mukherjee represents in her novels disrupt the “foreign” versus “local” divide that, at the national level:

proposes the state as the unified body in which all subjects are granted equal membership . . . [provided that] differences . . . be subordinated in order to qualify for membership in that democratic body (Lowe 361)

At the international level, she ensures that immigration for female “dependents” like Dimple – that is, for brides dependent on the temporary labor of their husbands – and refugee situations like Jasmine‟s remain coded as domestic, privatized, or (inter)nationally invisible phenomena. If the process of assimilation or Americanization is possible only in the public sphere, a sphere that consolidates the immigrant‟s identity on his/her ability to labor and earn in a capitalist culture, Dimple and Jasmine essentially remain unassimilable immigrants. Mukherjee‟s novels thus offer narratives in which the “unbelonging citizen” 2 discovers a way of forging her sense of agency out of the domestic scripts she carries with her to America.

Dimple relies on Hindu nationalist scripts of womanhood that are products of her Bengali middle-class background, but these scripts hardly comfort her with familiar imaginings of home. More importantly, they prevent her from finding communal support from Asian Americans and feminists after she migrates to America. Instead of succeeding in a performance of the model immigrant, Dimple‟s character undergoes a process of subjective dissolution whereby agency is now the success with which she is able to lay claim on the products she expels from her body (e.g., her vomit, her aborted fetus, etc.). Jasmine is seemingly much more independent in her pursuit of American citizenship after her husband‟s death; however, her unique sense of American individualism relies heavily on her fantasy of “complet[ing] the mission of Prakash [her dead husband]” (97). The trajectory she follows from invisible refugee to landed immigrant and, finally, to abstract citizen (achieved by means of cross-cultural/racial love and marriage) and her inclination

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to perform the stereotypical role of the model minority in America are products of her Hindu upbringing and sense of wifely duty to her deceased husband. These details from the lives of both protagonists convey the importance of reading global traffic and processes of assimilation in America as private, psychic, or domestic struggles. It is crucial, in other words, to imagine a new social contract that highlights “the paradoxical double meaning of *domestic* as both the public space of the masculine (nation-state) and the private realm of the feminine (home)” (Eng 35), indeed to consider the ways in which the private experiences of Mukherjee‟s characters carry implications at the national and international levels.

Dimple sees herself as perpetually constructed by grand national narratives, both those that remind her she is marginalized in America and those she transports from India. Early in the novel and while she is still in India, Dimple finds the task of fulfilling her role as “wife” impossible even as she anticipates marriage. She believes that her suffering before marriage has no “precise, even dignified, name” (6) and is told by her mother to believe that her “mysterious pains, headaches, nervous tics were Nature‟s ways of indicating a young woman‟s readiness for marriage” (6-7). Interpreted under the despotic sign of the heterosexist contract, of the necessity to marry in order to reproduce the name of the Father both within the family and for the nation at large, Dimple‟s bodily suffering is made intelligible to her in terms of her function as a dutiful daughter awaiting marriage: even “Nature” or the natural body is, in her mother‟s reference above, constructed in terms of her unmarried status in India. Initially, Dimple‟s desire to fulfill her duty as an upper-middle class woman -- to marry, have children, and to be loyal like “a short, voluptuous Sita hip-deep in pale orange flames” (53) -- is a longing to be mythologized, to be written into history via the nation‟s invention of tradition, to “bec[ome] Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legends, who had walked through fire at her husband‟s request” (6).

Partha Chatterjee writes that, “The new politics of nationalism „glorified India‟s past and tended to defend everything traditional‟” (116). The ideal Bengali woman within this anti-colonial discourse of the national elite, Chatterjee suggests, became the marker of tradition and “was accorded a status of cultural superiority to the Westernized women of the wealthy *parvenu* families . . . the mark of woman‟s newly acquired freedom” within the nation (127). Dimple‟s identification with, or her desire to be like, the goddess-figure Sita indicates her complicity with this religiously- charged invention of tradition, in which “„[t]he essence of womanhood‟ remained Sita, the long-suffering wife of Rama who was a particular favorite model of Gandhi‟s” (Mazumdar 261). In effect, Dimple‟s idealization of Sita acts as her micropolitical translation of the anti-colonial struggle into domestic terms. Passive resistance, for example, is not a public act “of freedom fighters and fasting armies led by a balding, bespectacled old man,” (9) but Dimple‟s private act of assuming the role of “a good wife, a docile wife conquering the husband-enemy by withholding affection and other tactics of domestic passive resistance” (9). After reading historical accounts of “The Rebellion of 1857" (7) and of the national elite‟s anti-colonial struggles in India, Dimple projects herself onto India‟s masculinist scripts. She re-appropriates the

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postcolonial nation‟s earliest hegemonizing myths in order to imagine her own politics of national and historical agency.

Nationalist narratives especially thrive in the Bombay film culture with which Dimple and her friend Pixie are enamored. The “Hindi movie” (Mukherjee 9) attracts Dimple‟s attention prior to marriage, suggesting the influence of various films on her own ideals of wifehood. Mehboob Khan‟s film *Mother India* (1957), for example, “celebrates woman in the linked roles of daughter of the soil ... and mother of her sons . . . [with] Radha [the main character as] the strong, stoic, sacrificing toiler, the equal and partner of her husband” (Rajan 109).3 To conceive of herself as equal to men in these popular texts, a woman must be a sacrificing, dutiful, and stoic wife, a Sita-figure whose agency is expressed in marriage:

Hindi films consistently link female characters to mythical models, most often as the perfect wife who, like Sita, acquiesces to the demands of an often undeserving husband. Since its inauguration in 1979, the feminist magazine Manushi has regularly reviewed Hindi films, lamenting that they constantly portray women as doormat Sitas. (Derné 198)

Interpellated by these different texts professing the ideals of the nation, Dimple‟s sense of agency can only be found within the confines of Hindu marriage. Marriage provides the only potentially political, although not public or institutionally documented, space to which Dimple has access. Expected to practice a version of patriotism by preserving domestic -- implying also the national versus foreign -- tradition, Dimple learns how to assert herself politically within the home.4

Dimple‟s burden of preserving Indian tradition is felt immediately after marriage to Amit Basu, especially after her mother-in-law gives her the sanskritized name “Nandini” (18). Her mother-in-law attempts to superimpose upon Dimple‟s already highly mediated identity an authenticating image of the ideal middle-class Bengali woman, “the new *bhadramahila* (respectable woman) . . . who acquire[d] the cultural refinements afforded by modern education without jeopardizing her place at home, that is, without becoming a memsaheb” (Chatterjee 128). As with all national idealizations of womanhood, Dimple‟s forced and nominal entrance into this image of the *bhadramahila* implies that she is now to “become the repository of . . . national spiritual essence; a „goddess‟ who must remain untainted

by „westernization‟ and its implied pollution” (Mazumdar 257), including the pollution associated with an embodied sexuality. The asexuality of the wife-as-goddess that is imposed on Dimple after marriage contradicts her pre-marital fantasies about having the perfect body for her husband. Her desire to match the ideal bust size as represented in the “ads in women‟s magazines” (Mukherjee 4) which she reads in preparation for marriage is a futile pastime because of the irrelevance of her sexualized body after marriage. Dimple‟s body, instead, becomes the site upon which conflicting cultural abstractions of the ideal “wife” assemble. Looking at herself

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in an oval mirror in her bedroom, Dimple confronts her bodily image in an attempt to address the frustration she experiences at losing her own sense of embodiment, of being dismembered from both the name representing her past, Dimple Dasgupta, and her memories of the past in the form of the “things she really liked, like the velvet monkey Pixie had made for her long ago . . . back in her own room . . . not with a name like Nandini” (31).

Having experienced the initial shock of dismemberment -- of not being allowed to remember, and of losing her body in marriage -- Dimple learns to separate her duties as a wife from her memories of life before marriage: “She let him [Amit] grab her and push her down among the pillows . . . Sometimes in bed she thought of the baby lizard she had found in her pillowcase” (23). During this moment of expected intimacy, Dimple dissociates herself from the immediate, physical experience of being violated by her husband and recalls, instead, a past event in which she once “found a dead baby lizard in her pillow-case” (7). The horror of a past event emerges like the repressed to haunt her in her present crisis. It is only after marriage that Dimple realizes that, unlike her own body which has been dismembered from her family and its name, her husband‟s body is an assemblage of metonymically-related parts of a phantom whole. Even though “the sum of the parts did not add up to the whole” (23), the body of Dimple‟s husband *implies* “wholeness” and “unity,” a state of autonomy Dimple is denied during her pre-marital preparation for wifehood and in marriage.5 This realization early in her marriage gives Dimple the impression later in the novel that “she was missing a mouth or tongue or lips, missing an element necessary to make intelligible noises” (190). She realizes that she “talked in silences” (191). Inhabiting this dismembered and silenced body, however, still allows Dimple to exist as a desiring subject. The body itself becomes the catachrestic limit of her subjectivation, a form of agency confirming that “all [subject] predications are exclusive and thus operative on the metonymic principle of a part standing for the putative whole” (Spivak 174), pointing ultimately to the fact that there exists in any self-representation in language a problem with sovereignty. Dimple‟s sense of betrayal after marriage is a result of her bourgeois alienation, her realization that there is no guarantee of happiness in the narratives she has inherited and must reproduce for success in her marriage to both husband and country. Dimple initially dreams that, “Marriage would bring her freedom,

cocktail parties on carpeted lawns . . . [and] love” (Mukherjee 3) but this neo-liberal vision of freedom, a product of her conflation of capitalist ideals with Western notions of love, conflicts with her actual status as a “dependent” immigrant in America. She is warned by Ratna Das, a woman whom she meets before leaving for America, that one “may think of it as immigration, my dear . . . but what you are is a *resident alien*” (47). Dimple relies on her husband Amit‟s status as a white collar worker in order to imagine possible articulations of her identity in the U.S. In a conversation between Meena Sen and Ina Mullick, members of her local South Asian community abroad, Dimple overhears a comment about the “dependent” status of South Asian wives who are considered unskilled labor in America: “Any Indian girl who comes over

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alone is entitled to stay on any way she can. Could *you* have come over alone? Could any of us?” (94). Aihwa Ong writes that “globalization has made economic calculation a major element of diasporic subjects‟ choice of citizenship . . . [and that] nation-states are reworking immigration law to attract capital-bearing subjects while limiting the entry of unskilled labor” (136). Unlike their accompanying wives, Jyoti Sen and Amit Basu are globally marketable subjects whose mechanical expertise as engineers allows them to be recognized as contributing members of an American- centered global economy. Their technical knowledge of “load centers and substations and line outage and high voltage power transmissions systems” (91), a knowledge and language that eludes their wives, ensures their own participation in America‟s civic rituals and, therefore also, their process of becoming citizens within a new (trans)national order of Global Capitalism.6 In other words, an immigrant can only successfully assimilate or, in Mukherjee‟s words, engage in the “exciting chance to share in the making of a new American culture” (32), if he can activate a narrative of Americanization that ironically exceeds the nation itself. This new global predicament is precisely what Mukherjee‟s national formula of assimilation overlooks: that in order to be successful in the world today an immigrant must engage in a public sphere larger and more elusive than the nation itself, a sphere that

consolidates the immigrant‟s identity upon the basis of his ability to labor and earn under a new global order.

Instead of acknowledging this global transformation of national identity, Mukherjee subjects her protagonist to various challenges in America that she is expected to overcome; however, this U.S-national imperative is a rather unrealistic measure of success in defining agency in a transnational world. It is a measure of success, for example, against which Jasmine in Mukherjee‟s 1989 novel of the same name fares well. As will be addressed in detail below, Jasmine‟s success is a result of her heroic enactment of postmodern subjectivity, ever shifting and strategic in its deployment of love for both America and its capitalist ethos. Jasmine possesses all the right fairy-tale scripts to accomplish national, and therefore also *magically* international, assimilation. By being confined to the home while Amit engages in the process of becoming-citizen, however, *Wife’*s protagonist reacts with paranoia to the national imperative. She feels abandoned and imagines that her home is constantly being invaded by a particularly U.S. form of urban violence and terrorism, a feeling gleaned from televised images of street violence, from conversations between Jyoti and her husband Amit, and from the sound of sirens she hears outside her door. Surrounded by more technical appliances than she knows how to work, belonging in themselves to their own postwar history of the transformation of the middle-class American home, Dimple can only access a consumerist version of assimilation through her interaction with the television: “She thought how lucky she was to be alone among Marsha‟s appliances, to explore the wonders of modern American living, unencumbered by philosophical questions about happiness” (136). She lives, in this hyper-privatized life, in constant fear of “a dangerous world” (120) of “Muggings, rape, murder” (85). While Amit expects his wife to “become . . .

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American [and have] . . . dreams [that are] American” (113), Dimple is denied “the secret of happiness” (88) that fuels the American ethos in a global age. Unfamiliar with even the geography of America -- Dimple says to Jyoti, “I get so confused here .

. . Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Iowa; they all sound the same to me” (100) -- Dimple is unable to imagine her place in the new country (let alone her place in a new global order) until she is able to forge a kind of identity as “producer” in relation to her own body, thus again enacting a kind of co-opting of national narratives to suit her very private understanding of her function in society.

By the end of the novel, the body and its products are the only signs that remind Dimple of her domestic function, the only function she knows. Consequently, when Dimple begins to vomit as an indication of her pregnancy, she becomes fixated on the regurgitated products that her body expels in the toilet bowl. She begins to lay claim of ownership on these products: “The vomit fascinated her. It was hers” (31). Rather than laying claim to the body *itself*, Dimple fetishizes the expelled *products* of her body, seeing in them her own role as a producer. Dimple constructs, in other words, her own abstraction by which to order her experience, by which to subjectivate herself: she forges for herself the role of producer or laborer, assigning value to the *products* of her body while at the same time allowing herself to *be the product* of her own process of subjection. Dimple, therefore, lays claim to the right of aborting the fetus within her, the right of expelling yet another product from her body because “vomiting was real to her, but pregnancy was not” (32). This psychic process represents, in effect, Dimple‟s claim to agency and, although compelled by the partial drives of sado-masochism, it helps her to obliterate her fetus in an act of asserting ownership over the products of her body. In this way, Dimple‟s relationship to her body mediates between her subjective formation and the national discourses -

- in the case of the aborted fetus, the discourse of patrilineage -- that vie to control her subjection in the socius. Dimple begins to vomit compulsively, falls desperately ill, and tries to document her own bodily products as a performative act of self- assertion, as though she were writing a history of her corporeal transformation toward dissolution: “vomiting could be pleasurable; thinking of all the bathrooms she had vomited in she felt nostalgic” (150). She, in effect, induces nostalgia where it fails to exist as an ordering principle in her life. It is this claiming and subsequent historicizing of her body‟s products that provides Dimple with the necessary *lines of flight* 7 from the traditional, patriarchal, and singular encodings of her subjectivity or identity. Unable to find this same sense of freedom in the discourse of Ina and Leni‟s women‟s movement, a movement that advocates a kind of pseudo-feminist belief in, for example, sartorial transformation (i.e., the changing from a sari into slacks) as a sign of individual “progress” and agency, Dimple is alienated further in the process of becoming-citizen. For a woman like Dimple whose very body becomes a “shell she inhabit[s]” (186), indicating the complete deterritorializing of her body (i.e., Deleuze and Guattari‟s Body without Organs), even the process of cross-cultural dressing is no guarantor of successful assimilation. Ina‟s women‟s group, therefore, fails to

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address the material problems that immigrants like Dimple face when they come to America without proper narratives to survive the inscriptions of the *socius*.

Instead of succeeding in a performance of the model immigrant, Dimple consciously becomes a figure of excess because she realizes that “some monster had overtaken her body” (157). Her body represents, in other words, a potential site for agency because of its tendency toward the postcolonial moment of catechresis which Spivak defines as “a generality inaccessible to intended description” ( 29). The body becomes the limit of describing agency and yet, for Dimple, is the site of her psychic encounter with social transformation.8 In some ways, this paradox points to a central contradiction in Mukherjee‟s writing. The author‟s portrayal of Dimple‟s excessive embodiment cannot be evaluated against the nation-state‟s abstract codes of belonging that the author‟s neo-nationalist beliefs espouse. The private or psychic struggle of the dependent female immigrant always accompanies her assimilation and exists as a parallel narrative of becoming-global via national scripts.

In *Jasmine,* signs of the First World (i.e., Western influence) in India are points of celebration, not contestation, allowing the protagonist to assume more easily an *agentic* position in the Enlightenment tradition of U.S. nationalism and assimilation. *Jasmine* sets up a dichotomy between what the protagonist‟s husband Prakash calls an India that is “backward, corrupt, mediocre” (81) and an America that represents “the perfect freedom” (83). At a very basic level Jasmine is like Dimple only in that she is a woman who begins her life in India as highly interpellated by certain cultural myths, ideals, and values, some of which are attributable to the two protagonists‟ sharing of a religious upbringing as Hindu women; however, *Jasmine*‟s initial setting of rural Punjab points to an entirely different set of ideological underpinnings because Mukherjee‟s setting immediately aligns Jasmine‟s experience of India with an ahistorical understanding of India‟s traditions. This difference between the settings of the two novels underscores the deliberation with which Mukherjee deals with what she constructs as an insurmountable gap between “tradition” and “modernity.” Unlike the province of Bengal which has a long history of British colonialism and whose natives were the first in India to develop an anti- colonialist stance, *Jasmine’s* rural Punjab lacks any connection to anti-colonial nationalist struggle, evident especially in the novel‟s depiction of Jasmine‟s early life in India. *Jasmine*‟s initial accounts of Jyoti‟s, later Jasmine‟s, experience presage the novel‟s association with the *bildungsroman* genre, a genre within which Mukherjee‟s novel also promises to plot the development of an autonomous, (politically) disembodied, bourgeois, Western capitalist subject. Jasmine‟s childhood experiences as Jyoti, moreover, connects her to certain ahistorical and decontextualized versions of Indian “tradition” which serve as markers of India‟s “Third World-ness.”

One such tradition is the dowry system which, we are told in Jasmine-Jane‟s retrospective account, “marked . . . daughters [as] . . . curses . . . [because] dowries beggared families for generations” (39). Unlike the portrayal in *Wife*,9 it is clear in

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Jasmine‟s retrospective account of dowry that the narrator excuses her mother‟s attempt at infanticide as a product of the unchanging nature of India‟s traditions. Such sensationalistic and ahistorical accounts of tradition can be called “death by culture” explanations that are usually cross-cultural representations of a death- related event or phenomenon that women are subjected to in the Third World, phenomena like *sati* or dowry murders (Narayan 84-87). These explanations usually tap into the popular imagination of the developed world‟s mainstream public and utilize stereotypes about the Third World‟s practices against women, thereby further exoticizing the Third-World as either a backward or “barbaric” culture. In *Jasmine*, tradition is defined as the antithesis of Jasmine‟s own belief in necessary progress, so a description of an attempted infanticide is simply linked to “dogged dowryless wives, rebellious wives, barren wives . . . [who] fell into wells, . . . got run over by trains, . . . [and] burned to death heating milk on kerosene stoves” (41). These sensationalist details about Indian wives‟ supposedly accidental deaths are immediately juxtaposed against details representing the West‟s modernity as liberating, details like “Masterji‟s hoard of English-language books” (41) which Jasmine reads in order to improve herself: Jasmine admits later in the novel that “To want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world” (68). Interrupted by an account of Wylie‟s shock at the protagonist‟s “foremothers” (40), shock that intercedes in the narrative as a point of identification for mainstream audiences of the novel, Jasmine‟s retrospective account of female infanticide requires Wylie‟s point of cultural interlocution in order to ease the mainstream reader.

Unlike Dimple who willingly accepts her roles within the nation‟s anti- colonialist narratives -- although one could say that her bodily reactions indicate an unconscious *unwillingness* to enter these roles -- Jasmine is not as easily interpellated by those traditions which Mukherjee represents, in the words of Jasmine‟s husband Prakash, as “feudal.” In the opening scene of the novel, Jasmine-as-Jyoti vociferously challenges the village astrologer‟s forecast of her future as a widow in exile. She asserts her agency by refusing to believe, as perhaps the rest of the village and her family might, the premonitions of the astrologer whose traditional authority is suggested by the violence with which he strikes Jyoti. Although Mukherjee represents the religious traditions of India as mysterious in this first chapter, making reference to holy sages with third eyes which allow them to “peer into invisible worlds” (5), it is clear that Jasmine wishes to transcend what comes across as the “backwardness” of India. Jasmine, for example, uncritically explains the “Partition Riots . . . [and] Muslim[-Hindu]” (41) tension in fatalistic terms, “God is cruel” (41), without providing any sense of the ways in which the British colonial practice of “divide and rule” left its legacy in the internecine warfare between groups in India. Without any access to medical or scientific literature, she instinctively boils river water “three and four times, when everyone else just let the mud settle before drinking” (45). She writes “the best English compositions” (46) and knows that she “couldn‟t marry a man who didn‟t

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speak English” (68). Unlike Dimple, Jasmine is aware of her very American sense of individuality in India, perhaps a result of her incomplete readings of Western novels like “*Shane* . . . *Alice in Wonderland* . . . *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*” (41), read even before her marriage to Prakash. Her sense of agency develops as an assertion of her will and her desire to excel or progress in the world, an agency closely tied to the bourgeois individualist‟s. Within the tradition of the American capitalist‟s dream (i.e., the rags-to-riches mythos), more importantly, Jasmine‟s humble beginnings are marked by her exceptionality, qualities that will allow her to flourish later in America. It is, moreover, these “American” qualities that help Jasmine to survive in a changing world of geographic disruption and transnational movements.

Because of her poverty, lack of education, and rural dwelling, Jasmine does not have Dimple‟s access to India‟s official national narratives. Jasmine relies instead on stories of the deities passed down to her from her mother (e.g., *Kali*), on the films whose songs she hums (e.g., “„I Love You,‟ my favorite song from *Mr. India*”[69]), and on Indian traditions she witnesses as a child but later rejects. One such tradition is the practice of *sati* which, perhaps, influences Jasmine‟s own desire to perform *sati* after Prakash dies: “When Pitaji died, my mother tried to throw herself on his funeral pyre. When we wouldn‟t let her, she shaved her head with a razor, wrapped her body in course cloth, and sat all day in a corner” (61). Mukherjee‟s focus on *sati* is strange given the fact, first, that it is no longer a common Hindu practice and, second, that it is never enacted privately but, instead, performed as a grand public spectacle: “sati as a spectacle is an important consideration” (Rajan 21) because the ultimate purpose of the widow‟s performance of *sati* is to achieve “deification” before an audience of participating Hindus. Performed mostly in rural Rajastan, *sati* does not suit the sensibility of a character like Jasmine. Although the reader can speculate that Jasmine‟s desire to commit *sati* in America at the Florida Institute of Technology is based on her indoctrination as a Hindu woman, her mission seems much more personal than a blind following of what is culturally expected of her. Jasmine desires not so much an engagement with the public, which would be denied her anyway once she performed this act in America, than an act of suicide independent of the traditional and religious connotations of *sati*. Part of what makes Jasmine less inclined to fulfill the “duty” of *sati* is her sense of independence from the traditions that she views, because of her prior inclination toward a sense of Western modernity and Prakash‟s influence on her.” As “a modern man, a city man . . . [who] trash[es] some traditions, right from the beginning” (76), Prakash attempts in his marriage with Jasmine to modernize his wife, playing a role as father-figure and mentor like *“Pygmalion*[‟s] . . . Professor Higgins” (77), further preparing Jasmine to become an adaptable immigrant once she moves to America.

What forces Jasmine to flee India is not the simple “desire not to be poor, or simply not to die” (Malcomson 240), but rather a sense of the urgency she feels in wanting to “complete the mission of Prakash” (Mukherjee 97) and in wanting to escape the doom of the widow‟s “traditional” fate in rural India. In addressing

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Jasmine‟s transformation after arriving in the U.S., especially considering her arrival as an illegal, it is important to remember Mukherjee‟s polemic against dividing the “Third World and the First World, margin and the center, or minority and mainstream” (Chen and Boudie 11). Mukherjee‟s belief in the accessibility of the American Dream to all who seek belonging in America deeply informs how the novel *Jasmine* engages in questions concerning the South Asian-born woman‟s experience of migration to America. As her problematic collapsing of the categories “First World,” “center” and “mainstream” indicates, the author is not so much concerned with the Third World and its relation to the First, but with the national question *in America (i.e., in the First World)*. Engaging in her own hegemonizing practice as a cultural producer, Mukherjee is interested in defining those cosmopolitan relations that explain the push and pull of discontented and desperate immigrants to America.

Similarly, Jasmine-Jane adopts a fragmented subjectivity as a model for the immigrant‟s postmodern survival under Global Capitalism. Jasmine-Jane asks herself after observing her adopted son Du, “How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, how many more husbands?” (Mukherjee 215). Realizing that the American Dream in a world of increasing transnational flows can only be achieved by those who “arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find th[at] . . .

.Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won‟t disintegrate” (181), Jasmine embodies what could be called an ideal subjectivity in a postmodern world: fragmented, split, and ever-shifting or nomadic in her global cultural positionings. Jean-François Lyotard writes that “A *self* . . . exists in a fabric

of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before . . . : one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass . . . (language games, of course, are what this is all about)” ( 15). Jasmine, who states that “We‟ve [Du and I have] been many selves . . . I envy Bud the straight lines and smooth planes of his history” (214), embodies the postmodern *self* that Lyotard describes. In suggesting that “We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams” (29), Jasmine indicates her awareness of the shifting myths and national tropes by which subjectivity is defined and points to the importance of imagining or forging an identity in order to adapt to the different, shifting situations one is forced to travel as a nomadic survivalist. It is this postmodern sense of mobility combined with the shifting qualities of the mythic deities to which Jasmine appeals that allows her to survive her violent rape by Half-Face. Becoming empowered by her appropriation of the violence with which she is attacked and transforming this violence into a scene of transmogrification -- of becoming both Sati and Kali after she is raped -- in a ritualistic act of burning all of her belongings and splitting her tongue, Jasmine forges her own death and rebirth as soon as she sets foot on American soil. Survival depends, therefore, on one‟s ability to invent random identities, whether one is forging immigration documents in order to become a participating citizen in a nation, culturally passing as white in order to find stability in a small town like Elsa County in Iowa, or playing the role of a “maharani” in order to find personal stability in a partner. All of these means of survival are, according to

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Jasmine, ways of “subverting the taste buds of” (19) America and, in the process, transforming America‟s national consciousness.

Mukherjee clearly believes in the importance of immigrant survival in America. Her belief, moreover, takes into account the various obstacles that an immigrant must overcome by appropriating national codes in order to construct her own identity, but Mukherjee‟s understanding of global mobility in *Jasmine* fails to contend with the delicate interplay between the local and the global in a transnational world. In other words, Mukherjee‟s loyalty to the question of an emerging *American* sensibility privileges the local transformation of the Third World immigrant without taking into account her global status. Pheng Cheah writes that:

although globalization creates a greater sense of belonging-to-a- world insofar as it makes individual lives globally interdependent, it has not, thus far, resulted in a significant sense of political allegiance . . . to the world. (315)

This sense of belonging-to-a-world becomes most apparent in the metaphor of food to which Jasmine-Jane refers in her account of “subverting the taste buds of Elsa County” (Mukherjee 19). The metaphor of fusion that Mukherjee develops through Jasmine‟s reference to her practice of taking “gobi aloo to the Lutheran Relief Fund”(19) runs the risk of replicating the very forms of cross-cultural contact in America that Mukherjee criticizes in her essays. Why is it that Mukherjee is willing to exalt the virtues of Indian cooking as a cultural symbol of the immigrant‟s old traditions, but advocates that immigrants must become American and shed their cultural hyphenation as individuals? It seems that food provides a much safer ground of crossing cultural boundaries because it is a marketable commodity that can easily be appropriated by mainstream culture. Whereas food provides a pleasurable form of consuming the Other in a cosmopolitan metropolis, other cultural icons and symbols -- take, for example, Jasmine‟s disgust with a “certain kind of Punjab alive [in Queens]” (162) that she criticizes as an “artificially maintained Indianness” (145) -- are dismissed as “backward” or retrogressive in a new world requiring the immigrant to be fluid in her ability to shift between identities. What is it, exactly, about “gobi aloo” that makes *it of all things* an authentic and legitimate way of engaging in a transformation of America? Where, exactly, do the “ghetto walls”

(145) and the “fortress[es] of Punjabiness” (148) begin and where do they end? If Spivak‟s statement is true, that “all explanations . . . claim their centrality in terms of an excluded margin” (106), the ghettos and other underworlds of “black . . . American beggar[s] . . . clawing . . . , grabbing and . . . yell[ing], „You fucking bitch. Suck my fucking asshole, you fucking foreign bitch!‟” (*Mukherjee* 139), the infernos of Half- Faces acting as the disfigured anomalies in America provide the margins against which Jasmine can claim class membership and, hence, citizenship in America.

Transnational networks create more than immigrant flows to the U.S.; they can also create terrorist organizations. The Khalsa terrorist movement that kills

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Jasmine‟s husband Prakash is, despite Mukherjee‟s treatment of it as a Third World problem, connected to the First World because of the funding it receives from the diaspora, as indicated in Mukherjee‟s reference to Vancouver Singh (62-63). The Khalsa movement, an example of the radical religious nationalism sweeping the world in response to the disruption of totalizing narratives of the self under various globalizing tendencies, is not so much India‟s internal problem but a global one that involves *both* the First and Third worlds. Even Professor Vadhera, whom Jasmine sees as a ghettoized figure, and his labor in the First World depends on the capital produced by Third World women, possibly even of the underclass. His dependence on flexible forms of labor and offshore capital indicates how the First World is inextricably tied to the Third. It suggests that an immigrant in America, more importantly, is neither autonomous in his identity formation nor completely free to use America‟s old codes of Manifest Destiny and the last frontier. As Spivak suggests, “changes in the international division of labor question notions of national sovereignty. All investigations into culture must be complicated by this ideological shift” (223).

In an essay simultaneously published in the popular magazine *Mother Jones* under the title “American Dreamer” and in the more literary *Journal of Modern Literature* under the title “Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties” -- both titles providing a clear indication of the ways in which ideas about America‟s changing demographics are marketed to different audiences -- Mukherjee suggests the need in America for a “pioneering” way of imagining the American nation:

What we have going for us in the 1990s is the exciting chance to share in the making of a new American culture rather than the coerced acceptance of either the failed nineteenth-century model of

„melting pot‟ or the Canadian model of „the multicultural mosaic.‟ (*Mother Jones,* pg. 6, and *Journal,* pg. 32)

From these comments, it is evident why Mukherjee and her writing could so easily be allied with neo-nationalist and assimilationist ideology.10 Mukherjee wants to “invent a new vocabulary” (33) for communal relations in America, and thus rejects hyphenated identity (e.g., Asian- or Indo-American) for its denial to nonwhite Americans, in their assuming of these divided and partial identities, any access to full recognition as citizens. Mukherjee believes that a consequence of hyphenation is a “categorizing [of] the cultural landscape into a „center‟ and its „peripheries‟ [ . . .which denies the „peripheries‟] the promises of the American Dream and the American Constitution to all its citizens” (33). Given the interplay between the local and global in Mukherjee‟s two novels, however, national ideals professing a universalist notion of “agency” – like the American Dream – can no longer act as an alibi for “freedom.” If, as Spivak suggests, “„Agent‟ and „subject‟ are different codings of something we call „being‟” (231), the implications of the word “agent” are as numerous and diverse as they are for a term like “multiple subjectivities” in our contemporary world of shifting, contesting, and proliferating identities. What is implied in Spivak‟s statement

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is the opposition between a subject who is in active pursuit of knowledge and an object that passively accepts its discursive construction,11 but this is an opposition that Spivak herself tries to deconstruct. Although it is difficult to provide a universal definition of “agency” -- one that avoids privileging the white, heterosexual, bourgeois subject who resists hegemony by becoming an active transgressor of various forms of domination -- theorizations of political agency must not remain suspended in the antinomian logic that postmodernist relativism often demands.12

Globalism, or the increased flow of people, ideas, and capital across international borders, has resulted in mobility becoming the new cultural dominant. Mukherjee‟s novels represent mobility in terms of the cross-cultural contact that inevitably confronts both the First and Third Worlds under Global Capitalism, therefore disrupting the distinction between what Frederic Jameson calls “the American public . . . [and] other national situations” (77), between an “us” in a postmodern, First-World America and all of “them” in a nation-obsessed (i.e., modernizing), Third-World. Choosing to assume the position of the mobile subject by becoming a member of the diaspora, however, cannot be viewed as intrinsically *agentic* or as symbolic of some essentializing ideal of freedom. In a transnational context, agency is increasingly aligned with the deterritorialized subject‟s ability to deploy domestic narratives in her negotiation with global circumstances, indeed her ability to engage in a process of reterritorialization. Agency, instead of signifying mobility itself, is therefore the power of the embodied (versus abstracted) individual to mobilize various narratives and discourses for the purposes of survival. At the same time, however, such privately forged narratives engaging in public discourses run the risk of remaining limited in the implications they carry at the national and international levels, especially because the ability to reterritorialize the “self” is a function of class. Mukherjee‟s narratives of bourgeois empowerment, perhaps, remain too invested in their protagonists‟ private struggles to contend with the material consequences of globalism, but her novels at least help to raise questions about transnational agency that are often ignored in postcolonial and postmodern theorizations of the global.

**End Notes**

1. Feminists like Inderpal Grewal et al. have coined the term “scattered hegemonies” in reference to the many forms of violent naturalization that affect women under the sign of Global Capital, a condition that accompanies the increasing global traffic and transnational movement of peoples, ideas, and capital. Other feminists like Ruth Lister provide specific terms to evaluate a new kind of hegemony in the form of citizenship; She suggests that “Citizenship as participation represents an expression of human agency in the political arena, broadly defined; citizenship as rights enables people to act as agents” (36).
2. Sarah Lawson Welsh uses this term to discuss the conditions of “invisibility” that black British immigrants face in the “policing of state boundaries . . .[that define] citizen/alien, British immigrant, us/other . . .” (43-65).
3. Dimple is highly dependent on the image-producing machines of the nation, on the apparatuses with which her bodily inhabitation -- unconsciously in both Dimple‟s characterization and in the narrative structure of the novel itself -- contends. Althusser, in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” writes that “individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: individuals are „abstract‟ with respect to the subjects which

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they always-already are” (266).

1. Parama Roy‟s rigorous examination of the culturally symbolic role of the actress Nargis, the lead figure in the film *Mother India*, allows one to read the parallels between India‟s collective fascination with of Bombay film “stars” playing goddess-type roles and the ongoing political construction of the nation: “the fact remains that these stars accumulate a kind of cultural capital in the cinema which seems eminently amenable to that other form of public life that is elective politics” (153).
2. One could read the difference between Dimple and her husband‟s bodily image in terms of the phallocentrism of the Lacanian model of desire: whereas the male subject seeks his coherence in the mirror of (self-) representation, the female is not a subject but is the Other of Lacan‟s libidinal economy.
3. In his book *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism,* Arif Dirlik discusses “ new pathways for the development of capital [that] cut across national boundaries and intrude on national economic sovereignty, which renders irrelevant the notion of a national market or... economic unit” ( 93). These are precisely the forces at play in America‟s importation of foreign temporary workers.
4. Mukherjee‟s novels, as narratives about female immigrants in a postmodern world, easily lend themselves to Deleuze and Guattari‟s idea of the deterritorializing and reterritorializing processes by which selves emerge as subjects and, in a parallel way, immigrants emerge as citizens. This conception of emergence is developed in terms of the “capitalist machine” in *Anti-Oedipus*: “The prime function incumbent upon the socius has always been to codify the flows of desire, to inscribe them, to record them to see to it that no flow exists that is not properly dammed up, channeled, regulated” (33). In Deleuze and Guattari‟s theorization of subject-formation is the way in which an abstraction regulated by the nation- state, like the concepts of “citizen” and “woman,” “translates contents of ... kind into a single substance of expression” (179-80). I read this process of subjection as the deterritorialized “self” becoming-abstract within the codes of the nation-state . In their words, *“Very specific assemblages of power impose significance and subjectification* as their determinate form of expression....[while] A concerted effort is made to do away with the body and corporeal coordinates through which the multidimensional or polyvocal semiotics operated” (180-81, authors‟ emphasis). This “body” to which the theorists refer is called the deterritorilized “body without organs” (Bw0), an open-ended and free-floating signifier, which becomes reterritorialized under various despotic signs of the family, the law, and the state.
5. This obliteration of the self is similar to Frantz Fanon‟s description of the racialized other‟s experience of repulsion in facing his Self in, what could be called, Lacan‟s mirror of representation: “the emotional sensitivity of the native is kept on the surface of the skin like an open sore...and the psyche shrinks back, obliterates itself” (56). The native‟s psyche fails to exist – it “obliterates itself” – and is, therefore, a *body- without-organs (BwO)* in the act of making contact with his own image as a prescribed Other of the white, male self.
6. *Wife’s* representations of dowry are much less stereotypical: “Mr. Dasgupta had the horoscope checked, made preliminary inquiries about dowry requirements (he said he was prepared to give the usual gold ornaments, saris, watch and fountain pen, some furniture, perhaps, but absolutely not a scooter or a refrigerator)” (15). Dowry, as Uma Narayan suggests “has become „commercialized,‟ [and] traditional norms have significantly eroded” (110). Dowry is no longer simply a “traditional” practice, but carries overtones of a very “modern” economic system in which technological appliances are often demanded.
7. Anne Brewster argues that “Mukherjee‟s discourse on migrants in the U.S. positions them not on the margin of contemporary American culture but, rather, as exemplars of a hegemonic nationalism...Mukherjee explicitly endorses the notion of „assimilation‟” (1).
8. In her critique of rationalist or scientific discourse Donna Haraway suggests that “an object of knowledge is finally itself only matter for the seminal power, the act, of the knower...[and] any status as agent in the productions of knowledge must be denied the object” (197-198).
9. The word “agency” can assume very different meanings within the confines set up by different discourses for example, within the materialist realm of cultural production an agent is one who possesses the means of production; within an existentialist subjectivity, an agent possesses the will to understand, the will to know; within certain psychoanalytic models, the agent *looks* and, therefore, desires a sense of visual coherence as a Self; within theories of the “nation,” an agent is a member of the labor-force and is, consequently, valued as a citizen; and within certain historical frameworks, the historigrapher finds agency - her own and the text‟s - in the recuperated subaltern voice.

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# SHORT FICTION / ESSAYS

## I USED TO KNOW A GIRL NAMED MARIA

### *Phyllis Azar*

The last time I saw Maria, my best childhood friend, she was living with a guy in a slum without much furniture in her apartment, but in one room there was a grand piano. It stood out like a shiny piece of jewelry surrounded by uneven walls of peeling yellow paint and a 40-watt bulb hanging from an exposed wire in the center of the ceiling. There was nothing else in the room, just the piano and some dust in the corners. And it wasn’t clear who played it. It had been about 15 years since I last saw Maria but I guessed the instrument wasn’t hers. As kids we had lived in low- income housing projects in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn and kids in the projects didn’t have pianos, much less take piano lessons. We occupied adjacent, monolithic 20-story pink brick buildings cut down the center with common terraces on every floor, fronted with two rows of benches where old people spent the rest of their lives. Ten, maybe 20 feet of grass in front of each building was cordoned off with small steel posts connected with one strand of linked chain. We would play a game that involved jumping over the poles one by one in a straddling position. More than once we’d fall directly on the poles and the pain between our legs was fierce, but that was the point of the game, to avoid the poles. Kids in the projects went to zoned public schools and hung out in the streets all day as long as it wasn’t raining. And even when it did rain, hanging out under the awning in front of a candy store or bodega was preferable to being in your apartment, cooped up with your parents who were either fighting or not talking to each other, sitting stone-faced in front of the TV/stereo console. Our buildings were just two of maybe ten that made up the projects; a huge fenced-in area was at its heart and contained four handball courts, two basketball courts, a playground for small children, and a baseball playing area– all concrete underfoot. Actually, the only grass we had was roped off by the post and chain fence and you weren’t allowed to play on it. Hence, playing outside was somewhat of an oxymoron because the risk of concrete finding its way to your summer skin was imminent. The ice-cream man wore a white uniform complete with a white sea captain’s cap and parked his small push truck at the project’s perimeter facing the bordering street. His uniform and cap were too big for him and his cheeks were always a bit too rosy. He had one eye that didn’t follow the movement of his other eye, and though we were sometimes afraid to get too close to him, deep down we knew there was almost nothing we wouldn’t do to have ice cream every day. People hung out in the streets at all hours and a constant stream of garbage ran in the hydrant water that flowed in the gutter during the summer–in those days they didn’t cap hydrants off with the sprinkler attachments they have now, in those days kids cut off both ends of a SpaghettiOs can and while embracing the hydrant from the dry side, the can firmly in hand, directed the gushing torrent high in the sky, and

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the kids screamed with abandon, and it didn’t matter that they were standing almost knee deep near a garbage-clogged sewer grate, or that at any moment the rushing water might push you out in front of oncoming traffic, what mattered was ice cold water gushing around hot feet. To outsiders, the projects probably looked unkempt, unsupervised, and underachieving, in short, like a slum. The truth was, most families worked long hours at blue-collar jobs that kept them just above that hydrant water, their apartments were clean, and kids ran around in soiled clothes, but that was only after a long day of playing outside until their hands were completely black. Inside our apartment there was little laughter, and even less conversation, and no summer vacations away. And this part was true for most families who lived in the Williamsburg projects. Everybody was always around: spring breaks, winter breaks, holidays. All vacation ever meant to most project kids was that school was out.

Anyway, I visited grown-up Maria with my then-husband in tow who didn’t know from projects or slums. He lived in a California suburb for most of his young life. I met him after his parents divorced and he was forced to move east with his mother and younger siblings to a tiny apartment in Brooklyn–which is where his mother’s family lived–just upstairs from my family’s post-projects apartment. It didn’t take him long to turn his Italian heritage into a tool of the Brooklyn streets. He adopted the look, the walk, the cigarette, the slicked back DA, and I fell for the whole package. All the macho, tough-guy bravado a 16-year-old can dish out, I decided was for me. In a few years we were married. I was 18, he was 19 and there we were with our little jobs; I was a bank secretary, and he worked at a local junkyard for the local mobster, and all of our single friends with no place to hang out hung out at our apartment, sprawled out on our wall-to-wall shag carpeting. We smoked pot, we snorted coke off of Led Zeppelin and Grand Funk Railroad album covers, we drank beer, we watched TV, we watched the spectacle of our two Oscars swim in their 55- gallon home as they hunted down and chewed off heads of the unsuspecting goldfish we fed them, and we blasted Black Sabbath on our decked-out stereo with the two speakers the size of portable washing machines. We had MasterCard, a used Toronado, a fully furnished apartment, and we were in debt, but we had all the hardware and we looked good and we felt good. Sometimes a little too good.

Now here’s my old friend Maria–the last time I saw her (before this time) we were maybe 11 years old–and this guy, in this slum with this piano and not much else. I don’t remember anything that we talked about or how we even finally ended the visit, only stark impressions. He had Asian-black, shoulder-length hair, and wore blade-sharp, center-creased black pants with zoot suit-type darts running down the front, topped with a tight fit, sparkling white tank that revealed his slight build, naturally muscled arms, and golden skin. His face though is now a blur. I think he was handsome. There was secrecy as to his political involvement in some underground something that seemed relevant at the time and prompted my husband to give me his special signal that we should get the hell out of there. But I couldn’t just walk out of my friend’s house in a rush. She was already heating up a pot full of pasteles, a Puerto Rican delicacy which I happen to hate, almost to the point of gagging, and I knew my husband would never eat. As she removed the stringed

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paper packets of mashed plantain pregnant with specially seasoned meat and peas from the huge pot on the stove, drips of orange grease oozed out of each one and slid down the front of the white oven door. I remember thinking *is she even going to wipe it up*? *Will I have to politely eat one of these disgusting packets in honor of our past?*

The whole visit seemed surreal. Here was my best childhood friend I had not seen for what seemed a whole lifetime, and she’s living with some kind of political criminal, with very few creature comforts, with a piano that she doesn’t play– and it wasn’t clear if he played it–cooking complicated food, and her hair hanging loose. The Maria I knew was an extremely neat and well-groomed child. Her clothes were always clean and crisp and though she was what we would have called skinny, I always envied her physique. She was very straight, her back was flat as a board, her legs were evenly shaped, not long, but slender and balanced, smooth and perpetually tanned and turned out in second position. Her hair was naturally straight and silky, always parted straight down the middle of her head and combed into a stay-put ponytail at the nape of her neck. I always felt disheveled and misshapen in her presence. I was too tall, too under-dressed or overdressed, unspecific, dull, uncrisp, and pimply. Yet we were best friends: she a Puerto Rican and me a Jew. The thing that was so different about her now was that she was involved with a man at all. As a preteen she had zero sexual appeal, she was uptight and prissy, whereas unbeknownst to her (I believe), at ten I was already making out with her older brother on his chopper bicycle behind the elementary school. Her other brother, who was next in age to the older one, but still older than we, was also interested in me, but he was immature and did childish things to get my attention whenever we hung out in Maria’s room.

My mother died when I was ten. About a year later, my father was on his way to marrying his second wife, the woman that would become my stepmother. I remember bringing a wallet-size photo of her with me over to Maria’s house and showing it to her father. As I was about to accept this woman into my life in place of my biological mother–who was mentally ill for most of my life–I showed him the picture of the woman who was going to change my world and fill it with sanity and love and with all those things I was sure Maria took for granted. Her father took the picture from my hand cautiously and held it between his thick callused hands, held it at arm’s length and stared at it through his bifocals with a wrinkled brow and squinted eyes. Maria’s father was very handsome, thin and muscular, a strict disciplinarian to his four children, who always walked cautiously in his presence. He held that picture in his hands for what seemed an interminable amount of time, at the end of which I expected to see an approving glance in my direction, something that said “you’re a lucky kid” or “nice work on scoring a new mom.” He said, “I don’t trust her” and he handed the picture back to me without even looking at my face to see the effect. Maria’s mother, a wonderfully warm and beautiful woman, and someone I always sensed cared about every person that entered her home, quickly came to my rescue. She admonished the father for saying what he did and immediately put her

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arm around me and guided me out of the living room and into the warmth of her kitchen. She assured me he didn’t mean anything, and anyway I should not care what anyone else thinks.

So there we were, my first husband of about two years and my best friend from my pre-teen days. She was about to serve us the packets of greasy mashed plantains that I was dreading, but I would eat one anyway to be polite. I knew my husband would not let politeness get in his way of turning down the offering. He’d say something smart like *Thanks, but I just ate.* I suddenly remembered that back in our days, Maria had this little growth jutting out from her pinkie finger on her left hand. It was a small, skin-colored thing, the size and shape of an oversized ice cream sprinkle or, as it would be referred to in the suburbs, a jimmy. As a child I was always amazed at how she could use her hand effectively without having this growth effect its movement. And she never seemed to hide it or touch it self-consciously. It was just a part of her. And as she deftly maneuvered kitchen tongs and grabbed the plantain packets out of the large steaming pot, I looked as hard as I could to find the growth, to find a thing that would positively identify the Maria that I knew. *Did I remember the wrong hand?* When I finally got a good look at both hands I could see that the growth was gone. *Did she have it removed? Was it ripped off in a freak accident? Or did it just shrivel up and fall off on its own?* That little detail, that little piece of Maria was gone and so too, it seemed, was the childhood friend I remembered. My husband grew more and more annoyed with every new conversation thread that wove its way into the one before, and I could see that he was trying to signal me that it was time to leave. He refused to eat, yawned openly at the table, raised his eyebrows and tilted his head toward the apartment door every time Maria turned away. I can’t remember anything we talked about, but I do remember coming away from that visit feeling uniquely disappointed. I had now lost something. The memory of Maria as my best friend, someone who I saw almost every day all those years ago, was now superceded by this new image.

Her boyfriend is just a shadow to me now. He was probably polite, but I remember he didn’t even stay in the kitchen while we ate. He was in and out, busy doing things. *But what things? Political things? Underground things? Illegal things?* I remember my husband whispering to me later something about what’s-his-name and his involvement in some big newspaper story and how glad he was to get the hell out of there. But I didn’t believe him. It was just not like Maria to be involved with someone like this. Then again, what did I know about her life now that she was grown, and what type of man she was attracted to? Maybe this life she was living now was her brand of rebellion, her way of breaking away from her family, from our neighborhood, even from herself. She was turned around. Her hair was hanging loose, her finger deformity was gone, she had become someone else. And when we finally got out of there, I had no feeling of ever wanting to see her again and I almost wished I had never come.

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## SEEING THE LIGHT

### *Vivian Lawry*

Jeannie‟s eight, finally old enough to go coon hunting with Daddy. She isn‟t big enough to carry a rifle, but Daddy says she can carry the flashlight. It‟s eighteen inches long and takes six batteries. Her gloved fingers slip on the heavy silver cylinder and she has to carry it in both hands. It‟s a lot easier when she holds the flashlight for Daddy to work on the car or under the kitchen sink. Then she can rest it on something sometimes. Helping Daddy‟s always fun–learning about Phillips and flat head screwdrivers, socket and pipe wrenches, needle nose pliers and ball peen hammers. She likes helping him build things, and when she and Daddy fix something, it stays fixed.

But being with Daddy tonight is extra special. Jeannie‟s never been out so late before. They didn‟t even leave until after her usual bedtime. And nobody else is with them. She‟s all alone with Daddy.

Tramping across the field toward the dark smudge of woods on the other side, they don‟t even need the flashlight. Moonlight on snow makes it about as bright as day, but with a pale green cast to the light. Everything Daddy says is new and special, almost magical. He points to the trees across the way. “You can tell an oak or a maple or a walnut by their bare bones. You don‟t need the leaves.”

He walks easily, the rifle cradled in the crook of his arm. Jeannie scrambles to keep up. “Always keep the safety on till you‟re about to shoot. And don‟t never run with a gun in your hands.” They come to the fence that separates the Kull farm from Joos‟s. Daddy says, “Whether you‟re goin‟ over a fence or under it, you always lay the gun flat on the ground first.”

*No Hunting Allowed* and *No Trespassing* signs dot the fence and nearby trees. Daddy says, “You don‟t never want to hunt on posted propity without talkin to the owners first–lessin you don‟t care about gettin fined and stirrin up bad blood with the neighbors. Any of the farmers around here‟ll let me hunt. They know my dogs ain‟t gonna kill sheep or suck eggs. But I talk to em every year anyway, just to stay friendly.”

Daddy stops to smoke a cigarette. He‟s got a thermos of coffee in his coat and he gives Jeannie a sip–hot enough to scald and bitter, too, but the cup warms her fingers. Daddy says, “There‟s no point coon huntin till the weather‟s been cold for awhile–till they get their winter coats. Thin coats ain‟t worth takin.”

Daddy flicks the butt of his cigarette into the snow, the sizzle loud in the night silence just before the dogs start up. “You can tell when the hound‟s treed a coon by his voice. You hear Lead now? He‟s just havin‟ a good time. He ain‟t picked up a scent yet.” They‟re hunting with three hounds, but Lead is Daddy‟s favorite. He‟s the best. Daddy paid over three hundred dollars for him and always says, “Lead more‟n paid for hisself that first year, and him still just a pup.”

One of the dogs changes key, his voice deeper, and Daddy says, “Lead‟s Volume 16, Number 1 SPRING 2004 **phoebe** 62

got one treed now. Which way is he?” The dogs have fanned out and they‟re all barking. Jeannie listens and then points off to the right. Daddy grins. “Yep.” Jeannie starts to run toward the baying hound but Daddy grabs her arm. “Whoa! Don‟t go runnin in the woods at night. You could trip and break a leg–or worse. That coon ain‟t goin nowhere.”

When they get to Lead, he‟s up on his hind legs against the tree, in full voice. The other two dogs lope up and circle the tree, baying in chorus. The moonlight is so bright that sometimes Daddy and Jeannie can see a flash of the coon‟s eyes. Daddy says, “Now you put the light up there in the notch of that maple where his eyes is shinin so‟s I can get a good shot. Hold it steady now.” He has a light on his cap for when he hunts alone, but now Jeannie holds the light steady and Daddy shoots the coon in the head. It thumps onto the ground. Daddy growls, “Stay! And all three dogs back off, whimpering and prancing, while he cuts the jugular vein and lets the coon bleed out.

It‟s nearly four o‟clock in the morning when they head for home. Daddy‟s carrying the rifle across his arm and three dead coons in the game pockets of his hunting coat. Jeannie‟s fingers and toes are numb. She doesn‟t complain but her feet are leaden and she stumbles twice. The last mile to the car, Daddy carries Jeannie piggyback, her head bouncing against his shoulder.

The next day Jeannie holds a coon by its hind feet while Daddy skins it out. Before, he always just hung the coon upside down from a gamblin‟ stick to skin it, but this time he said, “Daughter, if you‟re gonna hunt, you gotta take care of what you kill.” His hunting knife has a wide blade and a bone handle and is sharp enough to split hairs. In Daddy‟s big, hard hand, it looks almost little. He rings the coon‟s legs at the foot joint and cuts down the middle of both hind legs from the rings to the crotch. He does the same with the front legs, cutting to the middle of the chest, and then opens the pelt along the belly from the crotch to the end of the jaw. He peels the skin back slowly, cutting through the pale yellow layer of fat to separate the hide from the muscle, taking care not to nick it. “What we‟re doing here is getting the whole pelt off in good shape. You don‟t want no more holes than‟re necessary,” he tells Jeannie. “That‟s why it‟s best to use a rifle and aim for the head.” He cuts across the base of the tail, only on the underside. He skins out the back legs then grips the base of the tail between two little sticks and pulls slowly, sliding the tailbone out. “Iffin you want to sell the pelt, it‟s best not to pull the tail off.” The coon‟s coat is thick and sleek. Jeannie thinks about how a coat like that would feel. Daddy will stretch and scrape the pelts and set them to cure so he can sell them in the spring–thirty-five or even fifty dollars apiece.

He skins out the front legs. “To cook up a coon, you gotta get rid of them scent sacs,” Daddy says and removes the two pear-shaped musk glands under the forearms. “A lotta folks‟ll eat coon.” He grins and drawls, “An some of them as eats it even like it.” The ones that like to say you just got to treat it like dried beans–bring it to a boil with a couple of hot red pepper pods and then let it sit off the heat for or an hour or so. Pour off the soaking water and put in fresh, along with salt and a little

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vinegar to take away the wild taste. Boil it again till it‟s tender, maybe an hour or two. Then you can fry it or make a stew or even barbecue it. Jeannie‟s seen a lot of people do it, and tasted it a few times. She thinks it tastes all right, but Mommy doesn‟t. Mommy doesn‟t mind squirrel or rabbit, pheasant or deer, but she says coons are too gamy by half. So Jeannie‟s family doesn‟t cook coon. They give most of the meat to folks on the other side of town and feed the rest to the dogs.

Skinning out the head, Daddy cuts the ears off even with the skull and leaves the nose button attached to the pelt. “If you make a bad ear hole, the pelt‟s value‟s gonna go down, fifty cents or even a dollar.”

Finally he slits open the coon‟s belly from crotch to throat. He drops the guts onto newspapers spread on the cement floor of the basement. They‟re mostly shades of brown and grey with blue lines that look like big rivers drawn on maps. The smell of blood and raw meat hangs heavy in the air. The last thing Daddy does is to cut off the head, tail, and feet. He drops the carcass in a bucket of ice water and takes up the next dead coon.

When all three carcasses are done, Daddy says, “You were a big help, Daughter.” Jeannie smiles. Hunting is fun. She can hardly wait to go again.

But Jeannie can‟t go hunting on school nights and Daddy starts working a second job on weekends to pay the doctors‟ bills. Mommy‟s in the hospital an awful lot. Jeannie cooks the beans, dusts the whatnot shelf, irons Daddy‟s work shirts, and keeps an eye on her little sister. (Louise is only five and just a little bit of a thing. Everybody calls her Weezie.) Jeannie asks Daddy when they‟re going hunting. He just shakes his head and says he doesn‟t know. When she asks him again, he says, “Don‟t pester me now.”

Sometimes Daddy goes out in the backyard to shoot target practice. Jeannie hangs around, handing him shells, setting cans up on the posts. She doesn‟t say anything–she doesn‟t want to pester–but she watches every move he makes. One day Daddy says, “You wanna have a try, Daughter?”

“Oh, yes! More than anything!”

Daddy is using his light-weight rifle. He shows Jeannie how to line up the sights. “Once you got the shot lined-up, take it. You wait too long, that rifle‟s gonna start feelin might heavy. You gotta hold her steady an squeeze the trigger easy.” Jeannie hits the can with her first shot. She just nicks it, but the can wobbles off the post. Daddy tells her to try again and her second shot is better. Daddy laughs. “It looks like I got a regular Annie Oakley here.”

Mommy is one of thirteen children and when the family has a get-together, which they do two or three times a year at least, there‟s likely to be fifty people or more. The women try to outshine each other as cooks and as the most beleaguered. They carry their covered dishes into the kitchen and sit around the table or lean against the sink, trading recipes and talking about who‟s pregnant, who‟s in the hospital, who‟s out of work, and whose kids are acting up. The littler children run in and out, banging the screen doors and yelling, playing tag or hopscotch or hide-and- seek, crying and tattling when they get pinched. The older girls giggle and talk about

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boys and Coty‟s new Hot Pink lipstick. The older boys hang around the men, who smoke cigarettes and drink beer and spin yarns. Usually there‟s a game of penny- ante poker going on and as often as not, someone suggests target shooting.

This time Daddy brags on Jeannie‟s marksmanship and the uncles think he‟s putting them on. He says, “I wouldn‟t pull your leg. Jeannie‟s a right good shot. I bet she could outshoot you or any of your kin.”

Uncle Ris says, “We don‟t allow no BB guns. No cap pistols, neither.” Ris just says it to rile Daddy, knowing he doesn‟t hold with toy guns. Daddy‟s always saying, “A gun ain‟t a toy and kids shouldn‟t get used to thinking of em that way.”

Now Daddy says, “I‟m not talkin about any damn fool toy. I mean a rifle, a pistol, or a shotgun. Take your pick.”

The uncles hoot and slap their knees and say things like, “Elwood, you got such a poker face, if I didn‟t know better I‟d think you was serious.” After a while, the talk goes so far nobody can back down. Everyone who‟s going to shoot puts a dollar in the pot, the fathers anteing up for themselves and their sons. None of the girl cousins shoot, or even come out to watch. The rules are rounds of nine shots per person, three each with pistol, rifle, and shotgun. After each round, those tied for the highest score go on to another round, until there‟s a winner.

Jeannie picks up the pistol, holding it in both hands the way Daddy taught her. They are shooting cans and bottles off fence posts–easy targets. Her first six shots are hits and the uncles and cousins stop laughing. The shotgun is heavy, though, and Daddy kneels behind her and takes some of the weight so the gun won‟t waver, so she can aim. The kick knocks her backwards and Daddy catches her. Her aim is true. The shooting goes on and on. The butt of the shotgun is bruising Jeannie‟s shoulder to purple pulp but she doesn‟t cry. And in the end, Daddy wins the bet.

The spring Jeannie is ten, Mommy and Daddy sit at the table with her and Weezie. “The doctor says I can‟t have any more babies,” Mommy says, and there are tears in her voice. “So we want to talk to you girls about adopting a brother for you.”

but...”

Daddy is looking at his hands. He says, “We love you girls more‟n anything,

Mommy finishes. “But having a son to carry on the family name is real

important.” She clears her throat. “So how would you girls feel about us adopting a brother for you?”

Weezie shrugs. Jeannie looks from one to the other. Finally she says, That‟d be all right, I guess.”

The county adoption service says they‟ll have to wait a couple of years for a baby. But if they would consider an older boy, there would be no wait. Jeannie‟s mom is twenty-nine, her dad twenty-seven. They say they are too old to wait and that giving a good home to a boy who needs one would be a Christian thing to do. Daddy is a deacon in the Evangelical United Brethren Church and Mommy teaches Sunday School. Weezie and Jeannie know that doing the Christian thing is good. Mommy

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and Daddy visit the county children‟s home several times and then they bring Richard home for a weekend. He‟s not quite a month younger than Jeannie but he‟s in the same class as Weezie because his real parents never sent him to school. He started two years late, after Children‟s Services put him in the county home. He‟s very quiet. Very polite. And he eats a lot.

Rich visits several times and then comes to live with them for a trial year. The rules say Rich must have a room of his own, so Weezie moves all of her things in with Jeannie. Late at night they whisper about how hard his life was before–being tied to the bedpost, having to comb the sidewalks for cigarette butts for his mother, not having shoes in winter. They wonder why Mommy seems so set against Rich and vow that they‟ll do everything they can to make it all up to him.

When the first snow falls and Jeannie asks her father when they‟ll be able to start coon hunting, her mother says, “You‟re getting to be a young lady now, Jean– too old to be a tomboy, tramping around the woods in the middle of the night. You can see that, can‟t you, now that you‟re growing up? Besides, your dad has a son to take hunting now.”

Tears well up in her eyes. She turns mutely to her father. “Now, Jean, there‟s no use lookin at me. You know you can‟t play your mother and me agin each other.” So in the end, she never goes hunting again. When Dad works on the car, Rich holds the flashlight. He doesn‟t know one tool from another.

The trial year is up and the adoption is about to be final. Mom, Dad, and the three kids all sit around the table one Saturday morning, talking about changing Rich‟s name. He has been in school under his old name all this time. Everybody knows him as Rich Ballantine. Dad says, “Given your age and all, maybe you don‟t want to change it.”

Rich says, “It don‟t make no difference to me one way or the other. I‟m as much a part of this family as I‟ll ever be.”

Louise doesn‟t say anything. Jean thinks this is really something for Mom, Dad, and Rich to decide. She does wonder who would carry on the family name, though, and whether that doesn‟t matter anymore. And if not, why not? But she doesn‟t ask. In the end, he stays Rich Ballantine

For his twelfth birthday, Dad and Mom give Rich a rifle. Jean runs her finger along the smooth steel blue barrel, traces the carving on the walnut stock.

A brass plate on the butt is engraved *Richard Ballantine.* Rich is a fair-to-middlin‟ shot and doesn‟t much like hunting. Mostly he plays sports. He becomes a star athlete, letters every year in baseball, basketball, football, and track. His rifle is seldom out of the the gun case.

The oak gun case sits in the corner of the dining room. Dad converted it from a bookcase and the curved glass in the door shows off the guns. They are kept

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loaded at all times. Sometimes someone–usually one of the aunts–says something like, “Elwood, having all them loaded guns in the house is dangerous. Ain‟t you afraid somebody‟s gonna get hurt?” Dad‟s answer is always the same: “People get shot all the time with guns they think aren‟t loaded. In this house, everyone knows they‟re loaded and handles them accordingly.”

Aunt Bessie is especially outspoken, and threatens not to let Eddie come visit any more. “You don‟t even have the door on that cabinet locked!”

Dad says, “What good‟s a lock on a glass-front door? Eddie‟s got sense enough not to fool with loaded guns. But every man sees by the light of his own candle. You keep him home if that‟s what you think is best. I hope you‟ll think better of it in time, but even if you don‟t, there‟s no hard feelings.”

Four years later, Rich‟s gun goes missing. Dad asks about it and Rich says, “I guess I musta lost it.”

Dad slaps him across the face so hard Rich stumbles into a chair. “Don‟t you lie to me! I know you‟ve been playin‟ pool and poker down at Horty Solt‟s. You sold it to pay gamblin debts–and didn‟t even get a decent price!” It‟s a small town and everybody knows.

Rich starts to deny it but says only, “I never...” before Dad slaps him again and grabs him by the shoulders, shaking him like a mop. Mom grabs Dad‟s arm, says, “Elwood, stop! Let go. You‟re gonna hurt him.”

Dad lets go his hold. Rich is looking at his feet. “So do you want me to get it back or what?”

Dad shakes his head. “It was yours. You were free to do with it what you wanted. I‟m just hurt because you went sneaking around about it. Disappointed because you gambled yourself into debt that way. And mad that you lied about it. Son, don‟t you ever lie to me again. I can‟t abide a liar.”

Nothing feels quite the same after that, though Dad continues to go to all Rich‟s games and watches for his pictures in the sports section of *The Eagle Gazette.*

Mom‟s health never really came back after all those miscarriages. She has one problem after another, everything from appendicitis to bowel obstructions to suicidal depression. She‟s hospitalized or bedridden about two thirds of the time while Jean‟s in junior high and high school. Jean‟s in charge of the house, doing the banking and buying groceries. She bosses Rich and Louise around, trying to be fair without letting them forget who‟s boss–trying to be like Dad. When Jean is thirteen, she overhears Aunt Nora telling Dad, “Jean can put a meal on the table good enough for anyone to eat, and she keeps the house cleaner than her mother ever did.” She feels proud–and superior to her sick, useless mother. She never says this to anyone, though, and feels guilty even admitting it to herself.

There‟s no doubt that Jean can master the wifely skills. She takes cooking 4- H and wins blue ribbons at the Fairfield County Fair for a chunky applesauce she invented at the last minute. She takes sewing 4-H and makes her dress for the

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prom. These things are gratifying but not challenging. Housework stifles Jean. For one thing, it keeps her in the house when she‟d rather be out in the world. And for another, nothing ever stays done. The washing and ironing, sweeping and scouring, cycle „round again and again. And no matter how long it takes her to cook a meal, it‟s gone in minutes, leaving nothing behind but the washing up. She resents having to do it. Jean wants to escape–*needs* to escape–and the only way to do that is to get a real job. She‟s been babysitting for years–full-time in the summers, before and after school when it‟s in session–but their little town offers nothing else for her. As her sixteenth birthday approaches, Jean gets her learner‟s permit and a week after getting her driver‟s license, she has a job waitressing in the next town. Jean is a hard worker and honest. Soon the owner is asking her to take the last shift and close up at night.

Dad says, “A woman drivin around at night alone‟s gotta be able to protect herself.” He opens a small cardboard box and Jean sees a pistol nestled in tissue paper. He says, “It‟s only accurate to about thirty yards. But further than that, you don‟t need to shoot–just run.” He holds out the pistol. “It‟s for your car.”

Jean turns the weapon over in her hands. The barrel isn‟t as smooth as on Dad‟s guns. The grip is cheap plastic molded in a diamond pattern that will chip if she isn‟t careful. “Can‟t I get in trouble, carrying this?”

“Not if you don‟t hide it. It‟s only against the law to carry a *concealed*

weapon. So you just lay it right out there on the seat beside you.”

Jean hasn‟t shot for a long time. Dad makes sure she can load and clean the gun, checks that she remembers about safety. They go out into the back yard and Dad pins a target up on the side of the old outhouse, empty for years now. Within the gun‟s range, Jean‟s as good a shot as ever. They shoot till night falls and they have to use the big flashlight to see the holes in the target.

THE END

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## The Amoeba

### *Robyn Norris*

When I was in the seventh grade, my Honors English teacher, Ms. Kazowloski, made us keep a journal. Seventh grade was the year we went to the Junior High school and it was a loathsome year for everyone. Well, everyone but the Amoeba. The Amoeba walked around in a big group, inseparable, glommy – onto guys mostly. They reminded me and Tim of the shapeless organism we were learning about in bio, and when he told them that, they liked it. They took it as their own. I am an Amoeba, they would say. They wrote it on the cover of their notebooks; they wore it on their sleeves. There were seven girls officially The Amoeba – they were the ones together that day in the hall when Tim said they looked like the amorphous single cell – Sandy, Ashley, Courtney, Stacey, Kimmie, Cindy, and Mindy. They had other girl friends though – Margot, Kelly, Suzie, Tracey, Chrissy – but they weren‟t official. I watched them when I sat in the back row in English class. It was just like that Dr. Seuss book where some sneetches had stars on their bellies and they strutted around saying how great it made them. Even though they were all sneetches, the ones without wanted to be the ones with. There were levels within levels.

I wasn‟t even a sneetch. It wasn‟t just that I couldn‟t write Amoeba on the cover of my notebook – it was that I wasn‟t even the same species. At Timberland Junior High, three grammar schools converged and our grammar school was by the far the least cool. The other two were located near two towns; and even though they were only towns of about 2,000, they were hipper because of it. While we tried to tip cows over, they tried cigarettes; when we chased boys on the playground, they kissed boys in the milk line. Those kids had better clothes, and worse, they were wittier, quicker, and more confident because of all that togetherness and money.

In sixth grade when Jordache jeans were the thing to have and Tretorns were the sneakers to wear, I couldn‟t get them. Or, I could only get the lesser version of them. The Tretorns I finally got were from a discount store, but the V was in solid yellow. That was the season the V was cool, like red madras or pink polka dots. I got last season‟s version, and not even the color I had wanted last season. Anyway, in the sixth grade I could convince myself not to care too much about it. My parents tried to give as much as they could and I knew that these were just material things...they didn‟t matter.

Still, when I got to the seventh grade, I didn‟t have that same fortitude– suddenly, clothes really mattered. They mattered because Sandy Mattler‟s clothes were really nice. She always looked good. She didn‟t just wear her Swatch (she had 17 of them), she wore long flowing skirts that she bought from Bloomingdales – the one in New York I heard her say. She wasn‟t hip – she was beyond that and merely in step with fashion – she was cool, she had her own style. I wanted my own style

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too. I wanted to evoke ideas: romance with a long skirt, ruggedness with a suede shirt, classiness with the perfect black pants.

I tried. I raided my mom‟s closet and wore pants that were too big for me. She had argyle sweaters and I wore them – an attempt to make the transition from kid, to prep. In my own closet, I found my athletic clothes – t-shirts with logos from every soccer team I ever played on, every camp I ever went to. I turned to this, as my style, taking a cue from Flashdance, cutting my t-shirts and sweat tops. I wore sweats to school with my fraying muscle T‟s. I wore jeans all the time. I was a jock anyway and I wanted to be strong. I felt strong, as if I could still beat my little brother in basketball, or go faster than him on a bike down the hill by our house.

The teacher wrote, “If I could be anyone in this room, I would want to be...” That was our journal topic for the day. Usually the topics would be something stupid and I would just write song lyrics in my journal. We had to leave the journals in a box on the windowsill and she said she wouldn‟t read them, ever; she said they were for us. It seemed dangerous. I hated this topic and thought it was unfair. What was she trying to do, have us admit we‟d rather be someone else, say, flat out, that we are jealous? Aren‟t these bad things for a developing mind? Isn‟t she supposed to be the teacher? I wanted to answer it though, more than I wanted to write about anything else she had ever posted on the board. I wanted to because I knew the answer; I knew before she stopped writing the sentence on the board.

I wanted to be Sandy. Perfect Sandy, with perfect clothes, the one all the boys were in love with. She was in all my smart classes though didn‟t speak much in class. She was athletic and on all the girly teams like field hockey and lacrosse, while I played soccer, basketball, and softball. She seemed nice, and though she never spoke to me, she smiled – she was always smiling. She got her hair cut every six weeks and she had it highlighted. I put the pen on the paper and wrote out the words,

*If I could be anyone in this room, I would want to be...Sandy.*

And then I crossed out Sandy and drew a big boat over the top of her name.

I wrote out some more song lyrics.

*I still haven’t found what I’m looking for, with or without you. Every breath you take, every move you make*.

I only had to fill up ten minutes of time so I scribbled away, glancing up only to see Sandy‟s foot tapping. What was SHE writing?

*Everyone is probably saying they want to be Sandy – I wonder if she is writing, “I would want to be me. I love me. I’m perfect Sandy.”*

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*No one’s writing about me. No one knows I’m even here except for Tim. But I went to grammar school with him so he doesn’t count because he’s the smart dumb guy with a crush on me. I can’t believe I care about these people and what they think; they’re all so shallow. These are Salinger people, people J.D. would say were phonies, a bunch of mindless phonies with their 17 swatches.*

“Journal time‟s up,” Mrs. Kazowloski says. “Sandy, will you collect them and put them on the sill?”

Oh, God, even the teacher loves her. I hope she doesn‟t have x-ray vision and can read through the cover of this journal. This journal idea is soooo stupid.

For the rest of the class, we talked about a short story where a horse dies in the end and Mary asked if we could please stop reading stories where animals died in the end. Trip laughed at her. She started to cry and Mrs. Kazowloski gave her a pass to see the nurse.

When the bell rang, everyone filed out of the classroom. The Amoebas were first out – they had packed up their things somehow, their Ziplocked pencil cases and Jansport backpacks slung over one shoulder and out the door of 7th grade Honors English. They stopped there though, circling up like a pack of wolves. Wolves – another animal. As a group they really did resemble something from the animal kingdom. It was hard to get by them and into the hallway because they stopped traffic, eighth grade boys mostly. Tim came up behind me.

“Just push through.” “You do it then.”

He tried. He had to take off his backpack and hold it in front of him like a shield. But he made it and created enough of a wave for me to get through.

Once in the flow of the hall, we walked around the square toward my locker. “The Amoebas are so self-absorbed,” he said.

“It works for it...them.” I said. “What does that mean?”

“We despise them and what they stand for yet we love them; isn‟t that strange? Isn‟t it weird that what makes someone popular is that we all like them, yet at the same time we hate them for being popular?”

“I don‟t understand you.”

“I‟m just saying the power is in our hands...it‟s sorta like an oxymoron.” “Your hands, maybe, not mine.”

“What does that mean?”

“I‟m a geek, a skinny white kid, honors class-attending geek.” “Don‟t call yourself a geek; you‟re smart – leave it at that.”

“Why don‟t you just go join their team already?” “Tim, please be quiet.”

“You can be one of them – you‟re just as pretty and much more cool – so, go ahead and do it already.”

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“I thought we hated them.”

“We do, but they have more fun.”

We were at my locker by now and I rolled the lock dial and my eyes at the same time. Becky, my new friend, came running up to me.

“Oh. My. God.” she said.

“What?” I said, as Tim peeled off to Spanish. “Johnny would like you,” she squealed. “Johnny McFadden?”

Could it be him, the cutest boy in the eighth grade, blue eyes, dark hair, great legs...?

“He just told Jane,” Becky said. Becky, who‟d given seven blowjobs this year. Jane, who‟d done twice that, at least. These were my friends now. I went to Jane‟s house after school and before basketball practice. I fielded phone calls for her, Jason, Jimmy, Jordan – all the J‟s called. Sometimes she‟d be in her room with one of them and I‟d sit in the living room reading Cosmo, waiting for the phone calls.

“What?” I asked again.

“Johnny said he would like you if you had a better body.” “Oh, of course, I knew there was a catch.”

“This is so great,” she said. “It‟s horrible.”

“You‟ll get boobs soon, and then you can go OUT with him.” She squealed

again.

He was talking about how flat I was, for sure. I was too skinny, too flat. I

was still a girl. I hadn‟t even gotten my period yet. Becky had, Jane had. Maybe that‟s what made them want to give head – being a woman.

“I think you‟ll have great boobs, you‟re lucky like that.” Becky added. I guess that‟s why she was my friend. She was nice to me.

“It‟s still a mean thing to say. Guys are so obsessed with bodies.”

Becky laughed. “I can‟t talk, I like big guys – all muscles and cut and – men, I like men.”

I turned away. I felt she was saying I wasn‟t whole or full. I didn‟t want boobs or my period. I wasn‟t waiting for those things; I didn‟t go to the bathroom and pull down my pants and cross my fingers wishing for blood. Gross...and such a pain. And boobs...I didn‟t look at the small triangles of the flesh and wish they filled out a sweater.

I did wish my quads were bigger. I checked them out when I ran suicide sprints, each day examining how it swelled with the speed, pushing it harder. Becky never practiced, except for those we must we must we must increase our bust exercises from the Judy Blume novels, which sure wasn‟t helping our relay team any and I doubted it was enhancing her cup size – which I told her but she said it was worth the try.

“Hey, what‟s wrong?” she asked, but I still couldn‟t look at her. “It‟s not like you like him anyway, right? It‟s a good thing. It‟s his way of saying he thinks you‟re

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pretty and the hottest guy in the eighth grade saying you‟re pretty is a very cool thing.”

The bell rang, relieving me of a response. “Fuck,” she said, “Late again.”

Becky had what my little sister would call a potty mouth. I slammed my locker and followed her down the hall to gym class, which is where we met. We had both run the 400 in less than 60 seconds. She said I ran like a gazelle, I told her we should run the 4 by 400 in the Junior Olympics. We‟ve been friends ever since. Anyway, Johnny had gym our period – and we were doing indoor volleyball with the eighth graders.

“Hurry up,” Becky said, already far ahead of me, dodging people as they quickly slinked into classrooms. I didn‟t run. We had five minutes to change and then get out on the gym floor before we were considered “Late.” I watched her turn the corner and duck into the locker room.

Becky had traded with another girl so her locker would be near mine. She was half-naked when I got there. She pulled on a jog bra – which she most definitely needed – as I pulled off my shirt and undid my lock standing naked like a boy. Then I felt weird. Like Eve in the Garden of Eden after she bit that apple, I felt naked and even though I stood there topless tons of times, it felt wrong this time. It took me three times to undo the lock and I felt hot. I grabbed the wrinkled tank top from the locker and pulled it over my head.

I pulled on my soccer shorts and some old socks that needed to be washed and Becky wiped some lip-gloss across her lips.

“I have some A-cup bras,” she said. “I‟ll give them to you later.” She swooped up her hair and we were gone, out the door and onto the bleachers. The gym teachers were walking around with clipboards, like important football coaches before a big game. Only they were just taking attendance, the only thing that seemed to matter in gym class, attendance and attitude. Attitude being how much of the gym teacher‟s butt you could kiss each quarter.

They told us to keep the same teams as yesterday and just rotate one to the right. That, as fate would have it, put our team against Johnny‟s team. And it was “Johnny‟s team.” He was the captain, he was the best. We lined up in our three by three formation. I started in the back corner, the serving spot. I couldn‟t help myself and snuck a look at Johnny. He was hunkered over bent-knees, ready for action. Looking at him only made the ball go directly to him when I served it; he set the ball for some tall guy who played on the basketball team, and then that guy spiked it on us. My service turn was over.

Our team lost three straight games in a row before I had a chance to reconvene with Becky in the locker room.

“I saw you flirting with Johnny,” she said. “I was not.”

“Come on.”

“I hardly even spoke to him.”

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“Whatever. I saw you chuck the ball under the net a few times aiming right for his balls. Luckily he has fast hands.” She smiled with her line about the hands. I‟m sure they had hooked up, on the tennis courts, two dances ago.

“He was being a jerk–I mean the teams were unfair and he was acting like they were better.”

“Well you should go for it. I mean, I know I‟m right about your boobs, they‟re about to come in.”

I didn‟t like her talking about them or acting as if she knew something about how things were going to go for them. Plus, I had never even thought about Johnny until he brought up my body. I wished Becky had never told me because now I have ideas and that‟s just stupid.

“I don‟t like him.”

“He‟s sooo cute,” she said, purposefully egging me on.

What‟s worse is that now I was thinking about my boobs. Should I be wearing a bra? They don‟t bounce or anything but there is something there that‟s not, well, as it was before. Suddenly, I didn‟t feel like taking off my t-shirt. Becky must have sensed it because she turned away and gave me some privacy. Flashing everyone my half-ness, my state of growth, is probably rude. I wonder why my mom didn‟t give me a bra. Wasn‟t she suppose to know when to do that? Isn‟t it her job?

“Hurry up already,” she said. “We can talk to him out there.” “I don‟t want to.”

God is she boy-crazy, I thought. But, we did hurry and we did get there in time to talk to him.

“Hi Johnny,” Becky said. “Hey Beck,” he replied.

“Heard you kicked ass in gym today,” Becky said, kissing his ass. I rolled my eyes.

“Hey. Don‟t roll your eyes, we did give you an ass-whipping.” “Maybe you‟ll get an A+,” I said.

He laughed a big laugh with his whole body, something he did often and

easily.

“You hate losing don‟t you?” “I guess so.”

“I respect that,” he said with a big smile. “Don‟t take it out on me though

when the teams are that unfair.”

I smiled then, knowing he was trying to acquiesce. Becky started to smile too because she was successful in aiding and abetting this flirtation. Finally the bell rang just before we all started to look like a bunch of clowns.

He took a quick start down the hall and Becky huddled in close to me. “Mmm,” she said. “Something‟s there for sure–did you feel it?”

I just kinda giggled, acting like a girl, not knowing what else to do when feeling giddy and high like that.

I didn‟t see Johnny until after Becky had left me for her Science class. He

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was at his locker. I had never noticed his locker was right there, even though I had probably seen him stand by it a thousand times. He grabbed a math book and turned to look around. I looked away and then felt stupid knowing I should be braver but also knowing I had nothing I wanted to say.

It was then that I saw Sandy. Her skirt was hung low on her waist and her belt was trying to hold it up but failing. The skirt drooped in loops where the belt tried to hold desperately to her body. She was getting skinnier and I didn‟t think it could possibly be good for her field hockey.

That day in English class, Trip told her she looked skinny. And good. He said she looked great. Sandy smiled.

I started wearing Becky‟s bras to school. I did fill out an A-cup and I was happy to have skipped the training bra simply because I hated the thought that my boobs were in training. In training for what and exactly how did they practice? It was just another stupid thing.

I was training all the time. High school soccer season was over but I still played traveling team. Also, basketball was in full swing and I was always trying to get Becky to train with me for the Junior Olympics. I guess all that training paid off.

I wore my basketball shorts to school one day in late February. We had a game and we had decided to psyche ourselves up by wearing the team shorts in the freezing cold. The shorts were silky and ugly, gold mostly with black trim. I didn‟t wear my high tops to school because I didn‟t want to ruin the tread–they were for gym floors only. I had on my Tretorns, without socks.

I knew where his locker was now. I checked it everyday, sometimes purposely walking around the square of our halls when I didn‟t have to, just to see if he was there. Today, he was there.

“Sexy mamma,” was all he said. Then he whistled. If he hadn‟t whistled, I would have thought he was making fun of me for wearing ugly shorts in winter. But the whistle had a different emotion behind it. It embarrassed me and got my face hot.

“We have a game today,” was all I could think to say. “I might have to check out that game,” he said.

“You would deign to attend the girls‟ game instead of the boys‟ game?” I asked, getting my groove on.

“If you play as good as you look...heck, even if you don‟t...” he said. I had kept walking past him and had turned away but before I did, he let me see him look at my butt. In English class I took my seat and forgot to look around at all the Amoeba members to see what they were wearing today. The journal topic was already on the board but I forgot to read it and forgot to write how much I hated it. Instead, I wrote about him.

*I saw him in the hall today. He stopped me. I was wearing my basketball shorts as a psyche and he looked at them. He looked at my butt too. On purpose, as if he were trying to say he liked what he saw. It’s weird*

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*because just last night, when we were running suicides after practice I looked down at my leg each time I brought it up and I could see the outline of my quad and I thought I wished he could see them. Now he has.*

I didn‟t write his name inside my journal for fear I might jinx it or he might somehow know I was writing down our story. But I did write it on the cover of my Reader‟s Anthology. Johnny Johnny Johnny. Then I wrote his last name, in cursive like a signature–McFadden. If we got married our kids would only move one letter up the alphabet from where I am right now. They‟d never be at the heads of lines or the last ones in line...hmm, I wonder if that was good. The bell rang and everyone got up to leave.

Tim came over to join me in our push to get out the door. We approached it, like always, with backpacks in hand and tried to squeeze our way out of the narrow opening filled with Amoebas and their entourage. It was especially crowded and I didn‟t see anything until it happened.

Sandy‟s face planted on the ground–bouncing off Courtney‟s shoulder and my backpack landing face first on the green speckled floor. Everyone cleared back quickly, making a perfect circle around the body until Courtney went toward her, bent down, and tried to turn her over.

“I think she‟s fainted,” Courtney said. “Get the nurse!” Trip shouted.

“It‟s because she‟s not eating enough,” Cindy said, quietly to Kimmie.

Her body looked awkward. Frozen in an awkward position, arms bent strangely, knees inward, and so shrunken, so like a little girl. Her hips had vanished and her chest, her chest was almost sunken.

The nurse came and waved her smelling salts back and forth. Sandy opened her eyes, saw everyone, and then closed them again.

“Back away,” the nurse said. “Please, she needs air.”

No one moved until the principal emerged, a young man who looked concerned, yet at a loss–his presence alone making the crowd move back and some drift away–but he just stood there, looking down from a distance.

Sandy opened her eyes again and the nurse cooed, “You‟re going to be fine.” The nurse pulled her up to a seated position and it was clear that she would live. A small drip of blood hung from her nose, which the nurse quickly wiped away. Our principal finally sprung to action and helped the nurse lift her to her feet. They helped her walk towards the nurse‟s office; Sandy avoided everyone‟s stares.

We heard that they called her parents and her mother showed up. A petite woman who played golf, gardened and ran. She was too tanned from all that outdoor activity and she was slight, sinewy, like long-distance runners are apt to be. The nurse said her daughter was anorexic. That she was well below her normal body weight. That she had lost 22 pounds since her physical for field hockey in September. The nurse asked whether her mother had noticed anything, whether she found it strange that her daughter was living off 100 calories a day–an apple

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maybe, some sugar-free gummy bears.

Her mother said that thinness ran in the family.

The nurse said she had to go to the hospital or she might die.

We won our game that night by 24 points. I scored 18, a lot for me. Johnny was there as he said he would be. His friends came too, they cheered loudly, and a little obnoxiously–they said one girl was fat and slow and they hooted at her as she ran down the court to get back on defense. Having the boys there made everyone on our team happy, upbeat, and giddy. They livened up the echoey gym that was usually just packed with our parents and siblings.

Our team was psyched and we were winning; we had a lot going for us that night. When I knocked down some girl and she went sprawling across the gym floor, I thought about Sandy laid out in our hallway. The other girls on my team had heard about it but it was just gossip to them. Something she had coming to her anyway, they figured.

After the game, Johnny tried to talk to me. So did my dad, so I had to introduce them. I didn‟t want Johnny to say anything weird in front of my father, so I walked to our car quickly and got in.

Our journal topic was, “I feel fat when...” I hated it when Mrs. Kazowloski tried so obviously to give us life lessons. Why couldn‟t she just pick a pertinent book like all the other English teachers, then we could talk about theme, and it wouldn‟t have to be so personal. She gave us a lecture on body image and self-esteem. She had the nurse come in and talk about symptoms of anorexia and bulimia. No one said anything the whole class.

It was easy to get out that day, no one lingered in the hall, and the flow was clockwise out the door, to the right, as I needed it to be. As Tim and I walked side by side, we heard Kimmie tell Courtney about Sandy. She had tubes and she weighed 92 pounds. She told the nurse to eat her food if it was so good for her. The nurse would only take one bite so then Sandy would only take one bite. Sandy accused the nurse of not wanting to get fat.

Tim and I stopped at my locker where I threw everything in. Becky raced up to us and screamed, “You are soooo lucky.”

Tim narrowed his eyes and I said, “Why?” “He is so going to ask you out.”

“Who?” Tim said.

“Johnny McFadden,” Becky said. “You like him?” Tim wanted to know. “No,” I said. “He‟s in my gym class.”

Becky smiled and bounced up and down. “He went to her game,” she said. “Be careful,” Tim said.

“Why?” I said.

“Just, because...” he said, “he‟s one of those guys.” And he shook his head.

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Becky just smiled with her teeth perfect from the braces she got off last month. Tim walked away.

“He was going to ask you out but your dad was there,” Becky said in a screaming whisper.

“He was not,” I said, thinking back, remembering him following us, trying to get closer, and trying to get me alone.

“He‟s going to ask you to the Eighth Grade Dance.”

“I can‟t go. My parents would never let me go on a date with a boy.”

“Tell them you‟re going with me. I‟m going with Steve. We can all go together so it‟s not like a real date or anything.”

“You think he‟ll really ask?” “Definitely.”

“What should I say?”

“Yes,” she said. “You‟re going to say yes and we‟re going to have a great time. I‟m so excited for you.”

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I went to the Eighth Grade Dance wearing a dress of Becky‟s. My parents were OK with it because it was a dance, like every other dance, held in the cafeteria, hosted by the school, and Becky‟s mom was driving us to and from the dance. They knew we couldn‟t go anywhere; the chaperones wouldn‟t let you leave and come back so you had to stay until your ride got there, sort of. Unless you went to the tennis courts past the baseball diamond and just met your parents in the parking lot later–pretending you came out of some door around back.

But, Johnny didn‟t take me to the woods. He took me on the dance floor. He pulled me close to him as only a few of the boys had the balls to do. I felt him warm and tight next to me. His hands drifted to right above my butt, everyone watching, seeing how far he would go, how far I would let him. I pulled him and spun us. He laughed.

“Are you leading?” “I‟m moving us.”

“I like it,” he said.

We danced every dance together. He never said, “I have to dance with my friend,” like some of the other dates said going off to flirt with girls who liked them. He never spent too long with his friends when a fast song came on. He danced with me and I danced with him. Becky smiled at me across the room and I felt great.

Then he kissed me. Softly, on my lips and he held us together and I couldn‟t breath. Until Mrs. Hamer came up and pulled us apart.

“You know the rules,” she said. But she smiled, knowing everything.

Sandy had gained seven pounds and been allowed to leave the hospital. She danced, surrounded by her friends, helping her have a good time. She was smiling as usual, as if nothing had ever changed.

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Madonna came on and Johnny pointed his finger at me because I had already explained to him that I loved Madonna. He swung me around and said, “You‟re funny.”

“Funny ha ha or funny weird.”

“I meant weird but you‟re also funny funny,” he said. “That doesn‟t sound so nice.”

“It‟s supposed to be,” he said. “That‟s like saying, „you‟re a freak.‟”

“I just mean you‟re in all those Gifted & Talented classes and you play hardcore sports like softball and basketball, and you‟re friends with the sluts...”

“Hey, Becky‟s never said anything bad about you.”

“You know what I mean, you‟re all these different things mixed up into one and it makes you...”

He was trying to be sincere, which I thought was amusing. I tried to hide my

smile.

“...not what you‟d think,” he said. “A heck of a lot funnier.”

I laughed because he was hardly making any sense at all, yet somehow it

was still perfectly understandable.

Then he pulled me close to him conspiratorially, “See,” he smiled so wide his eyes scrunched up and made a thousand wrinkles. “I‟m funny too.”

Mrs. Hamer spied us from her perch on the stage, cocked her head, and wagged her finger. I‟m sure that‟s the only reason he let me go.

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## ZEPHYR

### *Janet Thornburg*

For solitary travelers, Christmas Eve is not an auspicious day to undertake a long journey by train. Doing so practically guarantees they‟ll spend the holiest of nights among strangers. Still, trains run on that day, and lost souls climb on board when they are too scattered to get home on time or have no home to get to.

Both of these things were true of Morgan. Perhaps that‟s why she appeared to lag even as she tried to rush. Perhaps that‟s why she was dragging her bags into the Emeryville station at 9:35 a.m. for a train that was scheduled to depart at 9:36 a.m.

“The *California Zephyr* is running ninety minutes late,” the Amtrak agent told Morgan when she bellied up to the ticket counter.

“Well, that‟s not very zephyr-like!” Morgan said.

She had a cup of coffee, and then she went to the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later, she had to go to the bathroom again. The bathroom stalls were small, and Morgan and her suitcases were large, so before her second trip she asked an older woman with an honest-looking face to watch her bags.

The bags were large because Morgan was going to Denver for an extended stay. Morgan was large–and had to pee every few minutes–because she was pregnant.

Back in the waiting room, Morgan studied the other passengers. She noted that the woman who had watched her bags was the perfect choice if one needed a bag-watcher in a train station. She had white hair, rosy cheeks, a portly build, and upright posture. Her expression was pleasant but no-nonsense, and she was knitting a sweater out of red and green yarn. She could, Morgan reflected, be Mrs. Santa.

Other passengers were not so chipper and self-contained. “Get over here and sit the fuck down,” a haggard woman barked at her three-year-old twin boys, who had identical red hair and unwiped runny noses. They ignored her and continued to chase each other across the feet of waiting passengers, tipping over suitcases as they ran.

A teenage girl in the seat next to Morgan whined on a cell phone, “It wasn‟t

*my* idea. *I* never wanted to in the first place.”

Morgan moved over next to the woman who had watched her bags. “Where are you headed?” she asked her.

“Well, I‟m headed for Des Moines, but I‟ll be getting off in Osceola,” the woman said. “How about you?”

“Denver,” Morgan said.

“Going home for Christmas?” the woman asked. “Yes, sort of,” Morgan said.

“Hope you‟re ready for some cold weather. We‟re having quite a winter back

there.”

Morgan forced a thin smile and shrugged. In spite of all the sweaters in her

suitcase, she knew she wasn‟t ready for cold weather or the baby or any of the other

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things that were inexorably coming her way. She hadn‟t been ready to be deserted on Thanksgiving, had been so pitifully unready, in fact, that she had come to feel she would never be ready for anything again.

Morgan opened a book and read. Mrs. Santa clicked away at her knitting. Finally the public address system crackled, “Attention all passengers headed eastbound to Reno, Salt Lake City, Denver, Chicago, and points in between. The *California Zephyr* is pulling into the station and will be ready for boarding momentarily.”

The teenager snapped her phone shut with a pout and joined her parents. Her father was bald, and her mother was wearing a straw sombrero with “Chevy‟s” stitched on the front in red.

When Morgan stood up, the redheaded twins broadsided her and knocked her back into her seat. Their mother screamed from the door, “Get over here right now or I‟m leaving you.”

Morgan buttoned her raincoat and towed her suitcases after the crowd. The teenager‟s father, who had dropped back to smoke a last cigarette, watched her struggle to get her bags up the steps to the train. He took pity on her, ground out his cigarette, carried her bags up the steps, and stashed them for her.

She made her way down the narrow aisle between seats in the coach car. It was a tight squeeze. The only seats that were open were the two directly across from the twins and their mother. The twins were kneeling in the window seat, bouncing up and down and pulverizing graham crackers against the glass.

Morgan slid into the window seat opposite them and put her purse and shoulder bag on the seat next to her. The mother of the twins leaned across and said, “Just so you know, that aisle seat is ours.”

Morgan nodded, moved her things to her lap, and stared down at her puffy ankles. She raised her footrest and tried to reach down to rub them, but her big belly blocked the way. She turned her face to the window and waited.

An observer might have thought that Morgan was listing the many ways her child would be different from the little terrors across the aisle, but this was not the case. Her concern extended no lower than her own bruised heart. It was as if the baby inside her, almost full term, was just catching a ride with her, just hitchhiking to Denver in the same body she happened to inhabit.

When the train shrieked and lurched into motion, the twins went wild. Morgan pressed foam plugs into her ears, and watched the backs of houses, rusted swing sets, fenced-in Dobermans, and stacks of old furniture pass by her window. People in their backyards stopped what they were doing when the train passed. A woman kneeling in her garden set down her trowel, a boy stopped pedaling his tricycle, two men working on a boat lifted their heads. All of them turned toward the train and waved, and Morgan waved back. She began to feel like they were waving to her personally and wishing her a good trip. She half expected them to yell, “Call me when you get there,” and that made her cry because of course they didn‟t care what kind of trip she was having or when she was going to get there, and

neither did anyone else.

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When the train left the suburbs and moved into open countryside, the steady green outside her window and the gentle rocking of the train lulled Morgan to sleep. The next thing she knew, the dining car steward was shouting, “First call for lunch in the dining car. That‟s through this door and three cars back. First call for lunch!”

She could smell bananas and grease as the twins and their mother broke out their lunch, and she longed to get away from them, but she was too groggy to drag herself to the dining car. She ate dried apricots and raw cashews from a plastic bag in her purse and then fell back into an uncomfortable sleep and dreamed she had to run with a raw egg balanced on a spoon in a race where there was a great deal at stake.

She dozed and read for the rest of the afternoon, depending on the din from across the aisle. When she woke up at five, the twins and their mother were gone. She felt a rush of hope, but then she saw two plastic pistols in the pile of potato chip bags and banana peels on the floor, and she knew they‟d be back.

The train was high in the Sierras by then, and snowflakes were blowing against the window. Gradually the dark green pines turned black, and by six, moonlight was sparkling on deep snow.

The twins came screaming down the aisle and collided with the dining car steward, who yelped, “First call for dinner.” This time Morgan didn‟t hesitate. She struggled to her feet and lurched down the aisle before the twins could lift their pistols.

In the dining car, the steward seated her next to the rosy-cheeked woman who had watched her bags in the station back in Emeryville, and for a few moments Morgan felt that things were looking up.

She scanned the menu greedily. She was hungry enough to eat three dinners, but she knew she‟d have to settle for one. There wasn‟t much room in her stomach because of the hitchhiker who was pressing up from below.

“Tired, dear?” the woman beside her asked.

“Yes,” Morgan said and waited for the woman to give the details of the final months of her own pregnancies.

“I‟m going to have the pork tenderloin,” the woman said. “I shouldn‟t, but we are on vacation, aren‟t we?” She winked at Morgan.

“I think I‟ll have that too,” Morgan said.

The parents of the teenager entered the dining car, and the steward seated them at Morgan‟s table. The father nodded at the two woman and said, “Skip Mills.” Morgan thought he said, “Skip meals,” and she was unsure how to respond.

Was he saying she‟d gained too much weight with the pregnancy?

She frowned at him, but he continued, “And this is my wife, Nancy. We‟re headed home to Omaha.”

“I‟m Esther Robinson,” said the rosy-cheeked woman. “Morgan,” Morgan said.

“So when are you due?” Nancy asked Morgan. “In January,” Morgan said.

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“I‟m surprised your doctor let you travel, this far along,” Nancy said.

“Oh, you know how they are these days. Work up until the day you deliver; go home from the hospital the next day,” Morgan said. Actually, her obstetrician had refused to give her a note to fly to Colorado, and that‟s why she was on the train, but she considered this none of Nancy‟s business.

“What are you knitting?” Morgan asked Esther to prevent Nancy from presenting unappetizing details of her own pregnancies and deliveries.

Esther laughed. “It‟s a Christmas sweater for our hound dog.”

Morgan wanted to put her head on Esther‟s shoulder and take a nap while they waited for dinner. She wanted Skip and Nancy to disappear until the train arrived in Denver; then Skip could materialize long enough to help her get her suitcases off the train.

A waiter came and took their orders. As soon as he left, Nancy asked, “So where‟s your husband?”

There was a long silence. Morgan blushed and stared down at the navy blue Amtrak logo on her paper place mat. “I‟d rather not talk about it,” she said softly.

“The bastard!” Nancy said.

Morgan bit her lip and looked out the window. Warmed by Nancy‟s sympathy, she was fighting back an impulse to tell her and Skip and Esther the whole story, but she stopped herself. People from Des Moines and Omaha might not be ready to hear that it was a bitch rather than a bastard who did this to her.

Instead she asked Esther, “What kind of dog do you have?” “A basset hound,” Esther said.

“We‟ve got a German shepherd,” Skip volunteered. “More of a watchdog than a pet. Maybe you ought to knit Butch a sweater, Nance.”

“Sure,” Nancy said, “and you put it on him.”

“He‟s not really a people dog,” Skip explained. “Too bad, too. I got him as a pet for our daughter, Tiffany.”

“You did not. You got him to guard your goddamn boat,” Nancy said. “Excuse me,” Morgan said, and she left the table, hurried down the aisle,

and exited the dining car. She was back in kindergarten, running toward the bathroom, too late, too late.

In a tiny bathroom on the lower level of her coach car, she sat down on the toilet. Her maternity jeans and her stretched-out underpants were soaked, but not with urine. An odor she‟d never smelled before filled the air. It smelled like metal rusting in marsh water.

Her heart pounded in her ears. This was it. Her bag of waters had broken, so the baby was going to come soon. But it doesn‟t happen right away, she told herself, not like in the movies. There‟s still time. I can make it to Denver. First babies take a long time.

She checked her watch and then pulled a timetable out of her purse. It was 6:30, and the waiter who‟d taken their order said they‟d be in Reno shortly. The train was running two hours late, so she‟d be in Denver by 9:30 the next morning. It

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would be soon enough. She didn‟t feel even a twinge of cramping. She was sure she could make it, in light of the alternatives. She wasn‟t about to get off and have a baby in a hospital room with slot machines in the corner. Besides, she didn‟t have insurance, so they probably wouldn‟t let her through the door. She had to make it to Denver, where her sister knew a midwife who could help her have the baby at home. Morgan waited till the coast was clear and waddled to the baggage shelves,

where she pulled some clean underwear and a fresh pair of maternity jeans out of her suitcase. She stepped into the tiny shower compartment and changed her clothes. She paused, wondering what to do with the soaked pants that she‟d removed. They were too smelly to leave in the wastebasket, so although she hated to litter, she flung them off the platform between cars.

The freezing wind snatched them into the darkness. Morgan‟s white underpants soared off on their own, like an owl on night business, and her maternity jeans flapped through the snow until they were impaled on a fence. The waist caught on the barbs of the upper wire, and the legs snagged on the barbs of the lower. Future passengers on the Zephyr would see Morgan‟s dark blue pants stretched taut against the empty sky and wonder who had hung them there and why. “Good. You‟re back,” Esther said to Morgan when she got back to the table.

“Don‟t let your dinner get cold.”

Morgan ate with gusto. She hoped nobody smelled anything. “So what‟s it like?” Nancy asked Esther.

Esther turned to Morgan. “I was just telling them about my roomette. I feel like the Queen of Sheba! My back was so bad this fall that the folks back home took up a collection and got me a private sleeper.”

“We should have got one of those,” Nancy said, giving Skip a scornful sideways look. He ignored her and kept chewing a large bite of well-done steak. There was a time when he would have paid the extra money to be alone on a swaying train with Nancy, but that time was long past, and besides, his Christmas bonus had already been earmarked to pay Tiffany‟s orthodontist and re-varnish the cabin on his boat.

“Of course, it‟s just the standard, not the deluxe, but it‟s real cozy,” Esther said. “I praise the Lord that I‟ve got it. I‟m worn out from the big showdown we had at the Corps.”

“Are you in the military?” Morgan asked.

Esther smiled. “Yes, I am. I‟m a Senior Soldier in the Salvation Army.”

Morgan felt a touch of vertigo. The train was taking her back where she had come from, and though she‟d been gone for only three years, it felt like she was entering foreign and dangerous territory.

“It‟s the Army that sent me to San Francisco,” Esther said. “To protest. The city government there told our San Francisco Corps they couldn‟t get any city money unless they gave health benefits to domestic partners.”

“To who?” Skip asked. “The gays,” Nancy told him.

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“Well,” Esther continued, “the head officer was about to give in. All of the other organizations in San Francisco were going along with it, even churches. But that‟s when we put our foot down. Grass roots, all over the country, soldiers in the Salvation Army said no.”

Morgan felt queasy. Her hands and feet felt cold.

Esther sat straighter and taller, feeling the power of belonging, of being able to stop a wrong thing from coming into the world. It took away the ache of the things she hadn‟t been able to head off–her husband‟s stroke, her daughter‟s unhappy marriage, her grandson‟s trouble with the law.

“Our waiter at Chevy‟s was gay,” Nancy said. “He was sweet to me when I spilled my margarita, and he gave me a sombrero for free even though it wasn‟t my birthday.”

“We don‟t have anything against the gays,” Esther said. “It‟s the principle of the thing. We don‟t give health benefits to any partners except married partners. Gay or not gay.”

“The difference is,” Morgan said in a squeaky voice, “the not gays can get married.” She reached for her water glass, but her hands were shaking, and she knocked it over.

“There, there, dear,” Esther said and handed over her napkin for the spill. “God will look after the gays, just like he‟s going to look after you. He hates the sin but loves the sinner.” She patted Morgan‟s shoulder. “The Lord works in mysterious ways, and he‟s standing right behind you. I can feel him there.”

“Reno!” The conductor announced, and the train stopped in the middle of downtown. Morgan felt a mild contraction. It occurred to her that maybe she should get off after all, take whatever Reno had to offer in the way of hospitals, and put it on her credit card. Then she looked at the faces of the people on the sidewalks, their skin tinted garish colors by the neon as they scuttled from casino to casino on Christmas Eve, and she decided to stay on the train. At least she‟d shared a meal with these strangers, and if she really started having contractions, she could get off in Winnemucca in a few hours.

As the train pulled out of Reno, the waiter brought dessert, and Morgan lost herself in a wedge of hot apple pie a la mode. She took tiny bites, trying to make it last a long time so she wouldn‟t have to go back to her seat, but other passengers were lined up, waiting impatiently for tables.

“Let‟s retire to the observation car,” Esther said, and they all stood up and followed her there. They sat in a row on swivel chairs, watching Reno thin out and fade away. Johnny Mathis sang a barely audible *White Christmas* over the PA system.

After they passed through Sparks, Nevada, Morgan went downstairs to pee. The ladies‟ bathroom had a lounge area with a well-lit mirror over a stainless steel vanity counter. When Morgan came out of the bathroom, she found Nancy sitting at the vanity pouring a can of mai tai mix into a plastic cup with ice in it.

“I‟m afraid to drink in front of Esther,” she said.

“I‟m afraid to exist in front of Esther,” Morgan said. She sat down at the

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vanity and winced at her blotchy skin and the dark circles under her eyes. She ran her palm across her half-inch-long hair and turned away from the mirror.

“Excuse me for asking this, but are you gay?” Nancy said. “Yes,” Morgan said.

“I thought so. Your hair, and that conversation at dinner.”

“Since I‟ve gotten pregnant, nobody thinks I‟m a lesbian. It‟s awful. Before, I was a big butch.”

“That‟s our dog‟s name,” Nancy said. “I know,” Morgan said.

“I hate that dog,” Nancy said.

“People used to be afraid of me,” Morgan said. “Now they come up and rub my belly.”

“Yeah, it changes you. Skip says I turned into my mother the second I got pregnant.”

“Shot full of estrogen,” Morgan said. “It‟s made me soft. I let strangers rub my belly.”

Nancy finished her mai tai and took another canned mai tai out of her bag and poured it into her glass. “Too bad you can‟t drink,” she said.

“You can say that again. Can I smell it?”

“Sure,” Nancy said and handed it over with a grin. Nancy was coming to life, hiding out in the ladies‟ room in pursuit of forbidden pleasure.

The scent of rum in Nancy‟s drink took Morgan back to college football games, rum and Coke in a thermos, frozen fingers on the red plastic thermos lid, the burn of the rum as it went down. And later, in bars, other rum drinks, all kinds of drinks in women‟s bars, drinking a lot to get up the nerve to ask for phone numbers, borrowing pens from bartenders and writing numbers on matchbook covers in the dark. And later still, drinking hot buttered rum in front of a huge fireplace after skiing with Judith, feeling the sweet heat of it all the way to her toes and fingertips, reaching over to interlace her fingers with Judith‟s.

Morgan handed the mai tai back to Nancy. The smell of rum and the rocking of the train had created a certain coziness, and Morgan began to feel close to Nancy, secure in the intimacy that can spring up between travelers anywhere, but most especially on a train in the middle of nowhere at night.

“On Halloween,” Morgan told Nancy, “I didn‟t go to the Castro with Judith because it‟s too crazy there when you‟re sober. Judith went with our friend Marcie instead. They‟re both phlebotomists, so they wore their hospital scrubs and vampire teeth and went around tying surgical tubing around people‟s necks and pretending to suck their blood. They were a big hit. At least that‟s what Judith told me when she came roaring in at three a.m. I got mad at her for waking me up, but she didn‟t apologize. She said, „I‟m sick of reading baby books and refinishing antique baby furniture. I want to have a little fun.‟

„“What about our baby?‟ I asked, and she said, „Whose baby?‟” “Well,” Nancy said, “whose baby is it?”

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“I thought it was mine and Judith‟s. We got the sperm from Eddie, a gay guy at the bookstore where I worked, but he was never going to be the father. Just the donor.”

“Skip always wanted to be a father. I wasn‟t so sure I wanted to have kids. Maybe like your girlfriend. I had two miscarriages before we had Tiffany, and it nearly killed him. He‟s spoiled her for her whole life, it was so hard to get her.”

Morgan put her hands on her stomach. “I talked to this baby all day long from Easter until Thanksgiving. Maybe too much. I know Judith felt left out sometimes.

“She had to work on Thanksgiving, so I went to Eddie‟s house for dinner. He was doing a huge production for eight guys and me, and he got hysterical when he found out he didn‟t have any nutmeg for the pumpkin pies. I went over to our place to get some. While I was in the kitchen, I heard giggling coming from the bedroom. I tiptoed down the hall, and there was Judith lying on top of Marcie in our bed.”

“Shit,” Nancy said. “What did you do?”

“I screamed, „You call this *working?’* Marcie flew out of bed and cowered in the corner, and Judith got up on her knees and clasped her hands and whimpered,

„I‟m sorry, I‟m sorry, I‟m sorry, I‟m sorry.‟ If I hadn‟t been in shock and chock-full of hormones, I probably would have hit her, but as it was, I burst into tears and ran out of the bedroom. At the front door, I remembered the nutmeg, and I went back and got it and took it to Eddie‟s.

“That night I felt like I was going to die. I didn‟t, but the baby and I sort of stopped speaking to each other.”

“I shut myself into Eddie‟s back bedroom and cried for a week and a half. Then Judith called from Tahoe, where she‟d gone skiing with Marcie, and she said she hoped we could all be friends. When she tried to give me Marcie‟s therapist‟s phone number, I ripped the telephone out of the wall and threw it across the room. Unfortunately, it hit Eddie‟s framed photo of his boyfriend as second runner-up in the Mr. Leather contest at the End Up, and it broke the glass. I took it to Cliff‟s Variety and had them cut new glass for it, but the picture was a little torn, and Eddie was beside himself.

“Of course I paid to fix the phone, too, but then I cried for another couple of weeks, and finally Eddie couldn‟t take it anymore, so I called my sister in Denver. She said I could go there, even though her husband can‟t stand me, but by then they wouldn‟t let me fly, so here I am.”

An industrial-strength contraction seized Morgan, and she let out a moan. “I feel like I need to lie down,” she told Nancy.

Nancy helped her up the stairs to the observation car, where Skip and Esther were sitting side by side watching snow whirl in the yard lights of lonely ranch houses along the track.

“Quite a storm,” Esther said. “I‟m glad I‟m not out there driving in it.” “Morgan needs to lie down,” Nancy said to Esther.

“I‟ll bet she does, poor dear. Now that you mention it, I do to,” Esther said and stood up. “Well, goodnight all. Maybe we‟ll meet at breakfast.” She gave them

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a brisk smile and left.

“I was hoping she‟d offer that roomette she was bragging about,” Nancy

said.

“Thanks,” Morgan said. “Winnemucca‟s only a couple of hours away. I‟ll get

off there.”

“I thought you were going to Denver,” Skip said. “She‟s having contractions,” Nancy said.

“Holy Toledo,” Skip said and jumped up. “Here, let us help you back to your seat. The coach seats aren‟t too bad when you recline them all the way. Do you have a blanket and pillow?”

Morgan shook her head.

“We‟ll get them for you,” Skip said and led the way toward the coach cars.

Morgan sat down with Nancy while Skip looked for an attendant. Across the aisle, Tiffany was asleep with her headphones on, and Nancy reached across and took them out of her ears and turned off her CD player. She brushed a strand of hair out of Tiffany‟s face and tucked it behind her ear. Then she pulled the blanket on her lap up around her shoulders. The tenderness stirred something in Morgan and made her feel she could make it to Winnemucca.

Skip finally returned with two blankets and three pillows. Before Morgan could get to her feet, the train screeched to a sudden stop. Skip lost his footing and sprawled out in the aisle. Other passengers cried out as they were catapulted against the seats in front of them. Skip crawled over to check that Tiffany and Nancy and Morgan were all right, and then he went up the aisle to see if anyone needed help.

“He was a medic in the Navy,” Nancy said. “He feels like he owes the whole world first aid.”

“That‟s great,” Morgan said.

Nancy raised her eyebrows. “It is? I always thought it was a sort of hero-to- the rescue, pain-in-the-butt thing.”

“No,” Morgan said. “It‟s a beautiful thing.”

Nancy looked up the aisle at Skip, who was putting a rolled-up sweatshirt behind the neck of an old man who had a nosebleed. Skip felt her looking at him and looked up. She smiled at him, a smile that lit up her face and made him remember times when he‟d have spent any amount of money to get her alone.

Morgan doubled over in pain. Finally she couldn‟t keep from letting out a loud groan.

“Are you all right?” Nancy asked. “Did you hit your stomach?”

“I don‟t think I hit my stomach,” Morgan said, “but I‟m having whopping big contractions now.”

Nancy said, “Tiffany, go get your father.”

When Tiffany and Skip came back, Nancy told Skip, “That old biddy in the roomette has to let Morgan lie down. Let‟s go.”

Nancy got up and helped Skip pull Morgan to her feet.

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“Bring your purse and your CD player,” she told Tiffany, and the four of them fought their way back through the aisles of three coaches, through the dining car, and through the observation car. Rumors were flying all around them. Derailment. Hit a truck. Drunk engineer pulled the wrong handle.

An attendant stopped them inside the door of the sleeping car. “We‟re here to see Esther Robinson,” Nancy told him.

“She didn‟t say anything about visitors to me,” he said, but he led them to the end of the car and stopped in front of a sliding glass door with a curtain drawn across it.

Nancy tapped on the glass and called out, “Esther! Are you all right?”

Esther pulled back the curtain. She was wearing a flannel nightgown, and she had a brown net over her hair. When she saw who they were, she slid the door open. “My, that was some bump,” she said. What happened?”

“Snowdrift derailed the freight train in front of us,” the attendant said. We‟re not going anywhere tonight. They‟ll have to dig us out in the morning.”

“Where are we?” Morgan asked him.

“I‟d say we‟re just about exactly halfway between a rock and a hard place,” he said and laughed at his own joke. “No, actually, we‟re about halfway between Sparks and Winnemucca. They‟ll probably send a crew out from Sparks.”

“Well, I‟m about to have a baby, and it feels like it‟s going to happen before they can dig us out.”

“Holy shit. We can‟t get an ambulance or even a helicopter out here in a storm like this. Who let you on the train in this condition? Where did you get on anyway?”

“I don‟t think that really matters now, does it?” Skip said. “Why don‟t you just bring us a first aid kit?”

Esther sat on her bed with her pursed lips and folded arms.

“Esther,” Nancy said, “the people up there in the coach cars are really shaken up. They could use your help. Otherwise they‟re going to be heading for the bar car, and we all know what that could turn into.”

Esther closed the curtain of her compartment. Tiffany listened to her CD player and popped her gum in time to a song that nobody else could hear. Morgan leaned against the wall and grimaced with each new wave of pain. Nancy slipped her arm around Skip‟s waist, and he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in close. They listened for rustling in the compartment, and they were not disappointed. Something was happening.

Esther threw back the curtain and emerged through the sliding glass door in full uniform. She had on a navy blue skirted suit with red epaulets on the shoulders of the jacket and a red *S* on each lapel. She was wearing navy pumps and a perky blue cap.

“Cool,” Tiffany said, and the adults nodded in agreement.

“Use my room,” Esther told Morgan. “I won‟t be needing it.” She marched toward the front of the train, and the others cheered.

Thus it was that Esther took on the most difficult mission of her life. She

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calmed three coaches full of weary travelers who were gradually realizing they were going to spend Christmas on a train without heat. She led them in singing *Hark! The Herald, Angels Sing,* and *Joy To The World.* She organized the kitchen crew to hand out free, healthy snacks. Most important, she single-handedly prevented a vigilante group from flinging a single mother and her redheaded twins off the train.

And thus it was that in Room 6 on the stalled *Zephyr* on Christmas Eve, Nancy and Skip labored with Morgan and drew closer to each other than they had been for sixteen years, and Tiffany saw with her own eyes where babies come from and swore she would never have one.

And thus it was that Morgan spoke to her baby after a month of silence, and she said, “You can come out now–we‟re safe,” and then, “Come out now,” and then “Come out! Now!”

And thus it was that many hours later, just as the sun rose over the icy desert, the baby forgave his mother for deserting him and slid out into this world somewhere between a rock and a hard place.

And thus the world is born anew.

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## A CRONE SPEAKS

### *Ann Evans*

I’m a Crone, a woman who has been around the block a few times, come to terms with my wrinkles, who now feels a kind of power and insight which I didn’t have when I was young. And it is time for me to speak up.

Another Crone, a former feminist activist, says that she’s not going to agitate and march to preserve Roe v. Wade. “It’s up to the younger women,” she says. “I can’t have children any more. This is their problem now.”

But do the younger women know what they are losing? I don’t see them protesting. They’re apathetic, haven’t thought this thing through.

Sex happens. Let’s start there. My 92 year old mother lights up like a Christmas tree when the cute, male physical therapist comes into the room. My boss’s 87 year old mother has a new boyfriend and sounds like my 23 year old daughter when talking about it. Nature has assured that the sex drive is strong enough to cause us to procreate through feast and famine, drought and plenty. Sex is with us all our lives. We get carried away sometimes, on the kitchen table, in the corn field, in the uncomfortable back seats of cars. Maybe some of us have iron discipline, but the majority of us are merely humans who crave the bonds which sexual union brings. We are willing to sacrifice a lot for these bonds.

Do the science: sex means pregnancy sometimes.

Let me tell you about one abortion in the days before Roe v. Wade.

The reasons for the abortion are irrelevant. It might have been my 11th child, or I might have been ill, or going through a divorce, or I might have been raped, or I might have been 13 years old, or I just might have thought I’d be a miserable parent, unable to care for a child properly, or -- I might have gotten carried away in a corn field or on the kitchen table. There are as many reasons to terminate a pregnancy as there are women who get pregnant. Each one is different. No matter the intricacy of rules, there will be thousands of cases which don’t fit within the rules.

I wasn’t a virgin. I had had sex one time, sort of, with a hardware salesman who was visiting from Tennessee. I knew so little about sex at that time that I didn’t even know what an erection was. I stared at it with my jaw dropping as he sheathed himself with a condom, saying matter-of-factly, “If you get pregnant you’ll come down to Memphis and we’ll get married.” He was bloodless and without passion. I was too confused by this baffling experience, including the prospect of marriage (!!!!???), and too deeply committed to the sex act to call it off.

I guess my jaw-dropping amazement, and my complete inexperience in mind, heart and body, turned him off because he left for Memphis the next day and I never heard from him again.

My next boyfriend was an acrobatic lover, and I probably got pregnant when we had sex in the bathtub in his room at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City. The pleasure involved in making love in a bathtub was minimal, compared to the pain in the knees, the fear of drowning.

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He left for Europe and after a few weeks I started getting sick for no apparent reason. I thought I had mononucleosis. I hadn’t ever heard of morning sickness, but things fell into place when a friend inquired if maybe I could be pregnant. I went to the doctor, the rabbit died, and now what? My boyfriend was traveling in Europe. I had no idea where he was, only a “c/o American Express” address. Travelers in those days would visit the American Express offices in each city they visited and pick up their mail. Maybe. What would he say, IF I could find him? Would he want to get married? Would I want to get married? That seemed like the right thing to do. I had only a limited time to decide, and decided to wait a short time to see if the letter I had written got through to him. I would marry him and have the baby if that’s what he wanted, though I couldn’t imagine how we could be parents, how we could support a household.

His letter came back. “Hi! I’m in Innsbruck. Sorry. Can’t help you out. I don’t know when I’ll be back in the U.S. My parents want me back right away but I’m having too much fun. Be careful.”

I read the letter over and over again to suck in the supportive chaff between the careless lines. “Be careful” was a big one. “Sorry.”

I would not give my child to total strangers to raise, knowing that I could never find out how well the child was being cared for. This child was my responsibility and I would not just throw it into the world without my love to shield it. Adoption, in other words, was not an option. This pregnancy was my problem, the result of my own mistakes, and I had to figure out how to deal with it. On the off- chance that there was a Hell, it would be I who was going there.

Either care for the baby, or don’t have it. Those were the choices, as I saw

them.

A friend recommended a gnarled and worldly female gynecologist in New

York, who said to me, “I’ll tell you how you can do this, but I want you to remember one thing. Just a casual mention of the fact that I have recommended you could cost me my license, could ruin my life.”

That was a heavy load for a sick, hurting, pregnant, ignorant, confused

person.

A friend gave me a bulging envelope filled with the $400 for the procedure,

slipping it to me at a dinner gathering. To give you an idea of how much money $400 was in those days, rent in a New York City one-bedroom was $88. This $400 would be the equivalent of maybe $5,000 today. Let’s say that’s too much, that it would be only $2,500, or $1,000. Where would I have gotten that money were it not for my friends? I couldn’t pretend that I could pay it back at any foreseeable point. I had just finished my freshman year in college and had no resources of my own, and by the time I was in a position to pay this back, this would be just a rough, bad memory. My boyfriend was in a worse financial position than I was, and less responsible. Not the sort of person I would choose to raise my baby.

A friend took me to the abortion doctor’s office in a row house in West New York. There were calm, bored, ordinary people in the waiting room, reading LIFE

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magazine or staring into space. From the gender, age and moods of these patients, they were not waiting for abortions. I was the doctor’s money-making sideline.

The receptionist (the doctor’s wife) told my friend that I would be “about half an hour.”

“I’ll just wait outside in the car then,” he assured me, squeezing my arm.

I was finally called into the doctor’s office. He took the envelope stuffed with cash, and explained to me that I would feel “some cramping.” He set me up on the gynecologist’s table, pulled out his instruments and inserted one of them to inflict the greatest pain I have ever felt. It felt like he was carving me with a large knife. I couldn’t sense exactly what sort of maneuver was going on down there because the intense pain spread from the focal point into the entire area, and obviously, I couldn’t see anything. I involuntarily moaned.

“Stop doing that!” He looked up sharply from between my legs. “We can’t have the people in the waiting room hear you.”

The doctor’s wife came to put her hand on my forehead, “I know it hurts, but you must be quiet.”

I looked at her in stunned panic. There was no way to get whatever was inflicting this agony out of me without canceling my decision not to have this child. I couldn’t speak, couldn’t express any thoughts. The agony was overwhelming.

“Poor thing,” she said, stroking my forehead. “Shhhhh. We’re not allowed to give you an anesthetic. I’m sorry.”

I was angry that nobody had informed me beforehand of the pain. “Some cramping,” did not touch the garment of what I was feeling. How long would I have to endure this? The doctor’s “This won’t take long,” did nothing to reassure me.

I knew this doctor, too, was also in danger of losing his license, of having both his life, and his wife’s life, ruined. Given the risk they were taking to resolve my horrible problem, I forgave them for raking in 400 extra bananas here and there between their patients’ flus and headaches.

I have never surpassed the physical domination which was necessary to keep quiet while this torture continued.

Finally the doctor dropped the instrument of torture with a clank into a metal container which he passed to his wife, who slipped out the door with a smile. “There. It’s all over.” He wasn’t a bad man. He was just ordinary. An ordinary doctor. I never wanted to lay eyes on him again.

The wife came back, sympathetic and motherly, and said, “Now you have to rest. Come with me.” She took me into a side room, showed me the couch, closed the door, and disappeared. There was now no pain. There was bleeding, shock, astonishment, fear, confusion. The room was dark and I was too stunned to find the light switch. How long was I to stay here? My friend was waiting in the car on the street. I had to get out of here as soon as possible.

The place was silent, all visible doors closed. I had no watch. The doctor’s wife had told me to “rest,” but I couldn’t rest. I was worried, angry, stunned, relieved it was over, confused, hurt that my boyfriend hadn’t let me know where to find him,

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yearning to see him. There was no thought of the baby. I never for one instant, then or thereafter, second-guessed my decision.

When the doctor’s wife finally came back I was sitting nervously on the couch. “Did you get some sleep?” she asked.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Oh. You were supposed to rest.” She ushered me to the door.

My friend scrambled to open the back door of the car for me. “Get in. Lie down. I was about to go inside to find out what was happening. How was it?”

I told him a little bit.

“Are you okay? You look terrible.”

“I want something sweet,” I said, and he got me Twinkies at a deli.

He told me later that he was worried I would die in his back seat, leaving him to explain what had happened.

If I had had the wisdom of my present years, I might have decided to tell my parents, but I was not close to my parents, and felt there would be a destructive cataclysm in my home if they found out. Instead, I spent the night at a friend’s house, falling into the bed the instant I got there, and waking late the next morning. I don’t know if her parents knew why I looked so awful and slept so long. They must have known something, and, even today, I am grateful to them for their tact and support.

In the following few days, the bleeding was profuse. The original gynecologist was in New York, and any local doctor would inquire, and I would have to explain. So I just bled.

I was nineteen and in good health, so I recovered.

Neither I nor the several friends who had helped me ever mentioned this experience again. It was not worth discussion.

Human life is human life, and the arguments about abortion are very difficult to reconcile -- apparently a lot more difficult than the decisions taken in killing grown men and women in prison death chambers, or knowingly, heedlessly killing civilians and children in our wars. I am not a Christian, but Jesus does not appear to me to be saying that we should sanctimoniously snuff out all the bad guys, or anybody at all, without thinking twice, without regret.

By the time a pregnancy is confirmed, the hormones bonding the mother to the baby have already begun to kick in. Abortion decisions are likely to be made with nuanced regret and humility. There is no way this is ever easy.

Every once in a while I do a mental calculation to figure out how old that child would be. I have an inner place dedicated to its spirit, honoring the person who never was. Some world views think this spirit will be expressing itself elsewhere by now. It is sad, but I was a grown-up and took responsibility for what I had foolishly, and so very ignorantly, done. I am glad I don’t have a child who carries the genes of, and was raised by, a father who would abandon a woman carrying his child, leaving her to deal with it alone.

These days, when a woman finds herself in pregnant despair and panic, she

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can go to a doctor, receive counseling and decide what course to follow. If she decides to have an abortion, she can undergo the procedure, have follow-up, and pay a sane and reasonable price for this service. Birth control has advanced far beyond the diaphragm and the condom, and her options for avoiding future pregnancies are easy to get and easy to use.

My pregnancy started, as I said, in New York City, but the father and I were both students at The Principia, a Christian Science college in Elsah, Illinois. Neither of us drank or smoked, and, while I can’t speak for the father, I never had and still never have taken drugs. Our first sexual experiences took place on these isolated, holy grounds, on the bluffs hundreds of feet above the Mississippi River, where we were watched like hawks, under curfew, reading our religious lessons every morning, chapel twice a week. I never noticed that religious people have sex any less or more responsibly than the “hippies” in Greenwich Village (where I moved the following year). Nobody, religious or not, wants the emotional pain, pregnancy and disease which can result from irresponsible sex. Sex happens. It happens everywhere: at The Principia, at Bob Jones University, in the Vatican, everywhere, in Greenwich Village, Oklahoma and Nebraska and Alabama. Everywhere.

And you, Maidens, do you want to go through what I went through?

Or worse? Many of you wouldn’t have the money to compensate the doctor for the risk he or she was taking. Some of you might not survive the assault upon your body as well as I did, might bleed to death because you were afraid to go to your local doctor with a hemorrhage which you would have to explain. Some of you might have been raped or molested. (Let’s not pretend this doesn’t happen.) Do you want people asking you questions about that? At this vulnerable, hurting, sick point in your life, do you want to confront the father/cousin/teacher/brother/ neighbor who molested you ? Maybe your religious beliefs are different from your parents’ beliefs. Do you want to sort this out at a point when you are vulnerable, beating yourself up because you have made an unforgivable mistake? What if you are in a sexless marriage and are having an affair? (No use pretending it doesn’t happen.)

Do you want to be on the defensive, explaining yourself at every step? Do you want to be attacked and harassed? Do you want to feel like a criminal? Do you want to give up leverage over the people who are providing this service for you? Do you want to place in your life a deep secret?

I’m a Crone now – I am never again going to have a baby, no matter how many corn fields or kitchen tables I frolic upon. This is no longer my problem. You have access to much better birth control than I had when I was young; but for the same reasons as ever, you Maidens are still getting pregnant when you least expect it.

Religious conservatives, not unlike the Christian Scientists at The Principia, are leading the effort to overturn Roe v. Wade. Do the math -- if one pregnancy in four ends in abortion, and if religious conservatives make up a substantial percentage of our population, there must be plenty of religious conservatives making the decision to have one – who thereafter remain silent, as I have remained until

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writing this article. They will not be there to help you.

Think about it. And soon.

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# POETRY

### *Log Bridge*

(after *Three Children,* Roy C. Nuse)

Three children, each one an open form: hillside and stream: each child dissolving into the random other, each thin, uncertain child a blank enjambment of the species. Two boys

and a girl on a log bridge, and the girl (do you care about detail?): she is barefoot and clad, the boys both naked, and she is between them smaller, holding both boys‟ limp fingertips in her small hands,

she herself a female bridge of flesh and fabric between the aimless males standing on the log bridge over scumbles of water.

The children do not move forward, although

one boy seems to try, light welling up in his body like secondhand fire. The other boy, in shade, shies back from the transitioning girl, who will believe silence, memorize disorder.

The girl will not let either boy go: she has been warned, the water crying beneath her feet, the oak tree mustard with sunlight.

The girl‟s flesh is articulated with less care than the fabric of her skirt, her inattentive skin sorting compressed light into meaning, a fairy tale

of hands and arms pressed out to her companions, the soles of her feet gripping the log‟s bark.

The girl interposes: this is her best work, both boys now attenuated structures pigmented like the water they stand above, quick little grids of

light blinking out.

##### Carol Frith

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### *Crescent Bruise*

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She is here in her body, wide awake and sitting upright, her skin a message someone else

will memorize, little words that shimmer

from the crescent bruise beneath her right breast, her eyes the color of water splashed on the skin.

How often she has sat here in the orange light: breasts, stomach, thighs her only story, her skin unwrapping itself to the sparse unfurnished room.

The posing is an option - hum of moments pressing on her idle flesh.

*I am leaving,* she thinks, and absence writes its message on her belly and her legs. She has found the simple marvel of the act, her breath a warm scatter.

Last night, she dreamed a stiff camellia shaking in the wind, its cold, shed blossoms colored like her flesh, bruised little messages of decay latticing the petals.

She daydreams now, her muscles a standard pleasure: tetany and loss, her breasts like peonies, a flower she doesn‟t quite recall but likes the word, the way it presses her tongue to the roof

of her mouth: *peony.* It writes itself above the nipple of her injured breast: Apollo‟s epithet.

Her skin‟s osmotic to the light. 2

It is sunset somewhere, or perhaps it‟s dawn, the world inside her floating like a sea.

Her meaning climbs the underwater light like a lattice.

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She tells herself her flesh is a one-dimensional reparation, names herself *pattern near a doorway,* withdraws inside the wet networking of her breath and blood, her skin a border that she cannot cross.

She is a blind fish in her own ocean, curling and uncurling in a bland sea, her plump skin tattooed with waterproof

messages, blue ink that spells out *sunset, bruise*

and *breast.*

She presses her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

*Peony,* she says. *Peony.*

##### Carol Frith

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### *With this cup*

Spread round about the pungencies of her wealthy little stove

lie the various Mrs. arts and

the capacities of crystal and live wind:

A chalice of small lemons

centers the table laden with plunder:

English walnuts and pepper, a biscuit and ice,

an empty vinegar bottle, a stalk of celery,

a peach

A cup, a moment‟s grace: Irredeemably fictional,

as virgin and jewel-bright

as a mouthful of electrical wire as coriander

as five-hundred-dollar knives

as very old music

and barely reputable wine.

##### Erica T. Carter

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### *Adam’s maiden*

She is appallingly homely boldly common

simple, almost absolute.

In the conjunction of pain and elastic patience,

the grinding philosophy of familiar devices a third volume, an acquisition

playing area between probability and surface facile and fluid

a costly half-witted breakdown.

Challenge the tappet of the ecumenical whole– skin-perceptiveness

the sphere of feather tops and flat tires azaleas on the tundra.

movement plain but debonair

Specialist of clean cloth of penetration

of accomplishment.

A force of melted people professional

in prim long-sleeved dresses

in the good land of anticipation and construction the deep confines of courage.

##### Erica T. Carter

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### *WITCHING HOUR*

Not midnight, but twilight.

There‟s a black dog in the windy woods, and other things: a clamor

of dogs across the river,

a barred owl calling hunger and question from the swamp.

A whickering of sparrows settling to quiet, and me, and a new quarter moon in a spill of cloud.

Power is on the wind, and faith: the owls are huddling chicks through the darkness and ice by the grace of blood.

Skunk cabbages shoulder up through the trickling spring: their striped frog-heads crack

through snow, waiting for the one

fly to hatch which pollinates skunk cabbage.

They are sure it will come, sure enough to trust everything

to the cold still coming.

Magic. More power than any witch in Hawthorne could muster.

Round-based as a wine bowl, the quarter moon tips light into the glowing cloud.

Springwater begins to gleam.

I kneel and swallow, and swallow again; for now, there is still

more power, more water, and more.

##### Catherine Carter

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### *MY GEEKS*

Though *geeks* were once circus freaks, biters-off of moles‟ heads, birds‟

heads, rats‟ heads, the word now means those who find their lives

in books. Geeks,

nerds, losers, teachers‟ pets with straight A‟s, thick glasses (first pair, age eight), bad haircuts, cheeks pocked, perhaps, with acne, too thin

or fat or weak, who remember with awe the day they learned

to read – these are my silver

studs, my fantasy boys, whose bowed faces and perilous eyes and pauses

before speech call tenderness

into my heart, and other places. I long to read them Tolkien out loud, to bid them come

to the library‟s darkest carrels.

These are the boys who argue, for weeks: could Spiderman defeat Moth-ra? Whose alter egos are stern elven warriors who never

get wedgies or Indian burns, are never called queer, never

*are* queer. Who quiver to the shrieks

of the orcs on their screens (not the girls in their beds.) Who come to love footnotes; who have even less

place in the world of faces and facts

than I had, and who will finally desire it as little, though not yet. Safe from me

behind the gradebook‟s iron gate, they are nonetheless sons and lovers

and brothers, these awkward and unkempt, these entirely geek, these children

of the book and the wire and the liquid screen, these born of the word and the fire.

##### Catherine Carter

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### *Long Scary Titles On Danger With Very Short Poems: A Mini-Series*

Lost Late at Night in That Strange City, Round and Round Through Labyrinth Streets Lined with Oil Refineries and Warehouses

That Always Dead-end at the Railway Tracks Which Cut You Off From the Distant Downtown Lights and a Way Out and This Happening Three Times

Thank God, you have always been with me.

At a Stoplight In a Bad Neighborhood Sweating for Green, Checking Locked Locks, Looking Very Un-nervous and Straight Ahead And Jumping When a Man Appears at the Window Even Though He

Only Wants to Tell You That Your Extra Keys Are Dangling From the Trunk I remember to say „thank you.‟

Near Midnight You Take a Shortcut Main Street to the Interstate Through the Wrong Town Which Has the Wrong Main Street That Does Not

Go to the Interstate and You Find Yourself On a Straight Road in the Country and Your Town Is a Scattered Star Cluster on a Dark Windowscape to Your Left and Outside Glass

So You Know Where You Are Going But Not How To Get There And Do Not know If This Rattletrap with 180,000 Miles Will Give It Up

I made it.

Your 7-Year-Old Granddaughter Panics (And So Do You But Hide It) When The Car Breaks Down at 9 P.M. On An Unpeopled Street Downtown

And You See One Filling Station Lighted Long Lonely Blocks Away

Until a Woman Stops With Her Cell Phone, Locks You in Her Car. Then She Tells That She Stopped Because Her Daughter Was Murdered This Way and She Herself Was on Her Way Home From a Governor‟s Meeting

For Families of Victims of Unsolved Crimes

And She Called the Police and Your Daughter and Your Wrecker Service and Stayed With You 30 Minutes and the Policeman

Took the Next 30 Minutes.

Your Daughter and Your Wrecker Arrived Together Adrenalin has outlived its usefulness.

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##### Carol Hamilton

***Miss Gertrude Stein***

I knew nothing of you except your name -

I knew it was Miss

even though I never knew until I knew

(and then I wrote it down).

I want to tell you you are a bird

a crow

an unreasonable crow who makes me look when I don‟t want to.

You make me look

until I see the absence of beauty. Until I see beauty in the absence of.

Yes, an unreasonable crow with a silly light making you beautiful.

“A rowboat with one oar,” my husband says when I read you aloud.

Somehow I hear you whisper “If you were a woman

you would need only one.”

Unreasonable crow with the sun on your neck, my oiled body wants to hang

on a wall in your salon. Manet? Maybe Picasso, a naughty trinity with their hands bathed in the smell of cigarettes and vodka

as they let the light play distort, distortion unto death.

I meant depth. I meant depth.

##### Betsy Johnson-Miller

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### *Girls*

Many mothers have girls. Many bring them to breasts.

Some mothers give girls to white-shoed nurses.

Some girls have lawyers as storks.

Many girls resemble their mothers, usually around the eyes. This girl discovered her mother lives in South Dakota.

But this girl has no idea if her mother still has both breasts.

That mother did not want to see this girl. This girl has her own girl.

This mother finds flesh

and breath in this room is invisible but it does not go unnoticed.

##### Betsy Johnson-Miller

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### *Studying Psychiatry*

I wanted to help so I cut my hair.

I wanted to help so I gave away my mini-skirts to befriend the insane.

What did I know about science? I‟m still afraid of the dark,

blowing on a small fire until it ignites.

My mother took up a stick to strike her daughter

and someone was watching.

I ordered the Ativan for the delirious man

and broke the heartbreak to his wife.

One day I found myself in the last hall, the one stripped of furniture, concrete and hosed down.

A young woman my age walked over to me and said *“I’m glad you’re here.*

*We have clothes on today and I feel like talking.”*

##### Connie Donovan

***A Woman’s Body, Remembering***

A hot coin spoke from one side, a dog of a backache sniped.

The legs were pillars of Samson, and the head, a swarm of gnats. Why then, do I miss you,

Aunt Flo, Little Visitor, Ragtime Sally, Queen‟s X,

you who have taken yourself away, tightlipped, silent?

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Sometimes I lie in bed calling to you from the second half of my life.

Remember me?

Remember my useful body?

You came to me, made me

a worker of the world each month, told me–you comforting clock, scenic calendar page,

baby maker/trouble maker, cascade of moon juice, Rorschach quilt–

that I was all right.

I would curl into you for five days, go sit in my little hut,

without men, without kitchen duty, curl nights into you,

be an embryo of the moon.

I would begin with ocher clay,

move on to the true flush of poppies, and finally, would-be baby pink,

all these colors in health–

on a canvas of winning landscape. This would be folded in linen, handled only with clean hands, laid in a cedar trunk,

brought out on feast days

to show my daughters-in-law:

“This is the stuff of your original husband. Now go and paint your own.”

Today, my body remote as an elevated railway, like soap, like the horizon,

my body wishes to remember.

God‟s bound to be a woman sometimes,

to think up this bright paint between the legs. Where else is flowing blood the picture of health, a lovely joke about the future?

##### Jan Epton Seale

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### *Transport*

Ruth carries

always a small bottle of nitroglycerin; and tissues, wads of

tissues; two Tums (for calcium, she tells me),

Tic-Tacs in a little plastic box that snaps; often several

Smith Brothers Lemon Licorice Throat Drops. Pocket portage: pajamas to robe to sweater. Mornings, beneath her pillows, I find these nested, plus, a butterscotch ball; her bedside flashlight; for under

her breast where it itches, baby powder**–**Giant-sized with Cornstarch–though

the list for her daughter said *small***,** so Ruth could manage it better prone, in the dark**.**

*Maybe I can just dump some on the sheet and roll in it,* she says***.***

Ruth resists

bathing and changes of her *Cuddl* thermal bottoms.

Her daughters have abandoned all

hope of showers. Ruth hasn‟t said No (No

is not how she does it), but any bath-manipulations hunker down her jaw, dead-weight her round-bellied body,

and, given her bathroom, it would take me *and* her night lady both

to step her up over the tub and lower her down onto the rubber seat of the stool, and one of us to get in there to hoist her back to standing. The

main in-charge daughter tells me they‟re backing off on personal hygiene, but could I perhaps dampen her hair with a washcloth, then give it a touch with the

curling iron. When I suggest to Ruth perhaps the dirty clothes for her pajamas after a

week*,* she says*, Why I’ve never been so clean.*

Ruth desires horseradish mustard,

pickle relish, ginger sauce.

She hills these little pick-me-ups

around the edges of her Meals on Wheels,

the mounds of Swiss steak and carrots, rhrrrred

to mush in the new little chopper–her dentures lost

two months ago, the night her husband of sixty years died. More maple syrup on your oatmeal, more honey in your tea. Yes, oh yes. Sweets and the local newspaper. Much is a blur,

but print, squinched at through just the right part of her bifocals, fills

her morning. She reads me random headlines while I iron: Man Charged With Cow Neglect, and random phrases: finally a cure for the common cold.

We both agree we are not going to follow the story about the baby abused at his daycare. And greeting cards: Ruth has dozens for every occasion. For years she‟s

been the Sunshine person for her D.A.R. I say, We might be able to go to their luncheons**.**

*Oh no,* she says, *finally I have an excuse.*

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Ruth worries

about her daughters: driving at night, using a riding mower. Things men

do that aren‟t safe for women.

Be careful, she tells them. Do you

think you should try that? Her daughters, nearing sixty, look heavenward. *And* she worries

about catching something: pneumonia or flu, regards me with suspicion if I cough or sneeze. Her daughters

worry about her feet: poor circulation. For Christmas she got a little foot whirlpool. Could I toothbrush her toes? And

what horny nails she has, yellowed with white spots and threat- ening to curl in upon themselves. I check my own as though early detection might improve my chances. *But* the night lady and I worry

about Ruth on the stairs. Ruth, how about using the portable toilet in the dining room? Her walker does not change direction. Five perilous journeys

on my watch. Going up: me behind her, with a tight grab on her waist–fall forward

if you start to go. Descending, when she starts to list, we sit side by side, and come down on our rears. Ruth on recent falls*: My body goes where it will.*

Ruth fears Tuesdays and Thursday afternoons

when she must be in her house alone. All right you‟re

all set: your nitro‟s in your pocket,

your lap blanket‟s right here, your book

with everybody‟s numbers, your lifeline‟s on, the remote, this little tub of fudge. I‟ll leave the

kitchen light. Would you like Anne Murray or Miss Read? Remember all you have to do is push the red

button with the X if you want to stop the tape. Ruth claims

she cannot figure anything out, she never could. I say, Oh that‟s just what women do when there‟s a man to fix things, but if you had

to, and you were willing to stand there in the cold and puzzle out how

this little gizmo hooks up over that little whatsit...in order to free this, you‟re

going to have to do that...eventually you‟d get it. But she never lets that through. I put on my coat and make my final entry in the log. See you tomorrow morning.

*Have a nice evening,* she says, *and don’t you worry about me.*

##### Ginnah Howard

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### *My Grandmother 1947*

A bib-apron over a house dress, she turns sheets through her Maytag‟s rubber ringers to coil to the lined basket below, to hang between her house and Egbert‟s

or on rainy days to pin taut on the lines in her whitewashed basement, no dirt left in any corner to harbor mold.

Her back straight, she closes the steel press of her mangle, her right hand guiding the sprinkled-down sheet through the top, while the fingers of her left draw it flat and hard from below.

She surveys her shelves, arms akimbo tallies the totals to compare with her back-fence neighbors: tomatoes, green beans, mincemeat, pears; the clamp of each jar snapped down on its red ring by her practiced thumb.

While my mother runs up ensembles on her Featherweight: skirts that swirl and one-shouldered tops, my grandmother weaves rugs from the mounds of ripped rag balls, throwing the shuttle back and forth, as her black lace-up shoes pedal to raise and lower the sheds.

When she mops beneath her roomers‟ beds (Melba, Delphia, Mr. Reilly), I lean into her linen closet, touch the rounded rows of towels, wonder at the folds of crocheted dresser scarves.

Always dressed and corseted. Always I thought of her as old. (She was only fifty then, ten years younger than I am now.) There, when I came home from school; there, when my mother went on dates with Joe or Judge. She had lost two husbands

to appendicitis, a son to World War Two, a farm to the Depression. But what I know is her tall brick house on Dixie, her holiday Fostoria: the flash of rainbows on the white, white cloth.

##### Ginnah Howard

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### *WING WALK*

“Women are seeking freedom. Freedom in the skies!”

**-**journalist and amateur pilot, Marjory Brown, 1930

clotheslines and children blur with chickens through greased propeller blades

that slice the air heavy with fumes

the biplane tears the field trampling stalks of dead dry weeds

at the nape of her neck the knot comes loose freeing tendrils of ash brown hair

blown taut at her temples

following the line of her scarf the horizon

dips her heart beats

to the hum of her favorite part the leaving

in defiance of gravity

soaring to where fields are quiltwork patches that blanket the dirt

the river the road just paths back

the goggles this time come off reaching for a cross bar

lifting her body by her fingertips she crawls out onto the wing

for a brief bright moment stands triumphant

in shredded chiffon that sucks at her breasts against a deaf sky

##### Elisabeth Harrahy

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### *NEBRASKA*

not tonight I say too much whiskey

my stomach is upset in this cheap hotel

with spanish talk outside the middle of nebraska a sweaty june

oh come on baby

take your clothes off for me i say not tonight

please not tonight

he says let me look at you I sit up

slip the fuschia satin over my head on top he says

you can be on top and not puke

i say not tonight please not tonight get on top he says so i do

it is easy

to stare at cheap art how the details

rise and fall rise and fall

i am numb

when he flips me over on my belly tears apart my legs

thrusts deep to my navel i think

is this rape

i feel like i am raping you he says thrusting harder

i slam into the headboard palm first

god i feel like i am raping you

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he says breathless

i do not breathe only focus

on the crispness of these sheets crunching cheap plastic

as if the maid knew who was coming

when he is asleep i slide out to pee

splash water on my face

stare at the place my eyes should be nothing there

skin on bones

a drop of blood runs down my leg and escapes

##### Elisabeth Harrahy

***HESITANT***

***(Bizonytalan)***

We come here with

hesitant steps, and we leave here with hesitant steps. Only while here do we strut confidently

in the wrong direction.

##### Katalin Mezey

**translated by Paul Sohar**

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### *LIKE RUSTY KNIVES*

***(Akar a rozsdas keseket)***

Using dentures, eyeglasses, and a few old rags

I rig up my mother every morning.

Between her skeletal legs I tuck a diaper,

I pull socks and the carpet slippers on her feet. Then,

holding on to each other by both hands, we shuffle out to the living room.

She, the champion of independence, who never depended on anyone;

I, the champion of liberty,

who escaped her as a teenage, because I could not put up

with her rigid ways.

Folks who knew us then

would be surprised to see us now. We are like rusty knives

God rubs together

in order to sharpen us.

##### Katalin Mezey

**translated by Paul Sohar**

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### *AIR*

Buckling our seatbelts before take-off,

I turn to my mother: “I‟m almost anorexic. I could really do it, go all the way.”

The plane lifts its nose, the wheels curling into the packed belly underneath.

I want to tell her how I love the feeling

of an empty stomach, how absence carves into my body like a meat hook into a carcass,

and how good it feels to be so light–hanging, dangling

like this plane in flight. We sit in silence, suspended in air, in this vessel with windows, where we watch

what appear to be clouds. All we see is white, dense and bare as bone.

##### Courtney E. Putnam

***ENVOI***

I bring my friend in the hospice a rose. Heart-red, it lies on pale tissue,

petals closed, stem end sliced aslant. I slip it in a bud vase

filled to the lip with warm water, lean it toward her on her tray. It defines

my time with her in this no-man‟s land I need to enter, mined with ending

unexploded. Are words safe?

*rose? vase? Earl Grey?*

We try

*snowdrops coming–her daughter’s letter–*

leaf through grandchild photos. One petal opens its silken palm. As if through rain the hard land shimmers in our voices.

##### Ann Silsbee

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# BOOK REVIEWS

***Madame Sadayakko: The Geisha Who Bewitched the West*** by Lesley Downer (NY: Gotham Books, 2003), 321 pp., $13.00.

This biography of Mme Sadayakko by Lesley Downer achieves a portrait that is both intimate and thoroughly contextualized. Born Sada Koyama in 1871, this extraordinary woman achieved unheard-of fame and glory on stages in Japan and the West, rising from poverty to a position of wealth, status – and notoriety. This biography traces the vicissitudes of her life, from her youthful training and great success as a geisha, to her marriage to penniless actor Otojiro Kawakami and their eventual triumphs in Europe, including the Paris Expo of 1900. On their return to Japan she met with further success introducing Western dramas to the kabuki- dominated Japanese theater. Following the death of her husband, she renewed connections with the great love of her youth, Momosuke Fukuzawa, who had become a wealthy business tycoon, and finally retired into obscurity before her death in 1946.

The full import of Sadayakko‘s career can only be understood in its context of Meiji Japan and *fin de siècle* Europe, which Downer conveys by, among other techniques, vividly describing the actress‘s encounters with known figures such as Count Hirobumi Ito and Pablo Picasso, not to mention presenting Sadayakko‘s own reaction to seeing a performance by the legendary Sarah Bernhardt (to whom she was often compared). The fascinating evolution of her career is mirrored in the various names she was known by, and which her biographer lucidly explains: Yakko was her geisha name; she combined that with her given name to produce Sadayakko, her stage name; later, on retiring, she became Sada Kawakami, the name of a respectable wife and widow.

Without ever losing admiration for her subject, Lesley Downer carefully indicates the many perspectives and opinions of Sadayakko‘s work – ranging from the breathlessly overblown reviews of her performances in Europe to the snide comments of the Japanese press towards the end of her career. Sadayakko and her heirs seem to have wished to ―spin‖ her story away from the more lurid elements of her love affairs, also de-emphasizing her theatrical ambitions, since acting was an extremely low-status occupation, nor were women supposed to take the kind of initiative that she seems to have done. The Japanese press, very concerned that Japanese culture and traditions be portrayed to the West as highly civilized, lambasted the Kawakami troupe‘s performances, which were designed rather to attract the largest paying audiences possible (having arrived in Europe penniless and swindled by various managers and promoters on the way, who can blame them?). The Western press, on the other hand, was caught up in its own Orientalist fantasies

– as one of the first groups to attempt to bridge the cultural differences between Japan and the West, the Kawakami troupe, and Sadayakko as its main attraction,

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seem to have ridden a fantastic wave of mutual fascination and misunderstanding between Europe and Japan during the first decades of the twentieth century. Like many who have broken new ground for women‘s participation in the arts, Sadayakko garnered praise as well as unreasonable criticism, poverty and social ostracism – this biography, accessibly written for a general audience, introduces us to a forgotten heroine of both East and West.

*Elizabeth Small*

*Assistant Professor of Spanish SUNY Oneonta*

#### ***Between Faraway***. By Val Goldenbrook. (Bloomingdale: 1st Books Library, 2001. 142 pp. Paper, $12.50, ISBN 0-7596-8322-0).

Every now and then a vanity press such as 1st Books Library publishes a gem. Unfortunately, Val Goldenbrook‘s ***Between Faraway*** is not one of them. She begins with a great concept: a band of aliens pursuing a bad guy land on earth in 1824 in New Mexico Territory. The locals assume that this odd assortment of travelers must have come from California. In the hands of another writer this premise might have exploded into an incandescent psychedelic romp across a region of the imagined landscape of Area 51, Roswell, where strange lights appear in the night sky, and people are driven to sculpt oddly shaped mash potato mountains that emanate from their dreamtime. Unfortunately, Goldenbrook takes us in another direction.

Aral, the narrator and main character, is Warrior Queen of the planet Nukyron. Although just 19, she is expected to lead her people against the Marduk, who have managed to destroy several worlds, including their own. Just in case this is not enough to make them appear evil, it is also revealed that they have reptilian skin, an ability to gobble up beauty and spew out waste, walk on three legs, have slits for eyes, and great foaming mouths. These beast men and hate mongers are led by Jonin, a vivisectionist and mad geneticist in a class with the truly vile, Dr. Moreau. As a result of the Marduk invasion, Aral falls into the clutches of this interplanetary Mengele. In his lab, Jonin experiments only on females and produces various hybrids, including Mycen, Aral‘s female lover, and Tarsus, an intersexual who looks like a man but possesses female genitalia. On Marduk, Aral is sustained in her resistance to Jonin through her telepathic connection to River Raven, a mystic priestess. Eventually Aral and the other prisoners find a way to kill off several Marduk, escape from the laboratory, and begin their pursuit of Jonin, who takes refuge on earth in 1824. On earth, the extraterrestrials encounter good old boys who spit tobacco, have missing teeth, greasy hair, drink ―cups of joe,‖ and say phrases like, ―yews lookin‘ mighty fine on that hoss, Miss Sofa.‖ Other human earth creatures include Mexican *brujas*, hybrid Choctaws, and the Genizaro people.

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The audience for science fiction is generally easy to please: a good idea, a few battles, a telepath or two, and some technobabble are enough to satisfy most readers. So, here there is a spiral vortex, protection matrix, psychokinetic power, and a soloton automat that dispenses food and drink. There is also a shaman-type spirit priestess, and a planet called Quetzalcoatl that is the home world of the Bird Clans. One area of promise in the book is Aral‘s effort to understand her sexual identity. Caught between her love for Mycen and her affection for Parris, the earthman who Goldenbrook describes as part Hopi, Spanish, and Negroid, Aral realizes that she can never really love another until she loves herself. ***Between Faraway*** contains several good ideas that never get developed. As such, it is a good draft in need of revision.

*Ralph Watkins*

*Professor of Africana & Latino Studies SUNY Oneonta*

***Anna Chennault: Informal Diplomacy and Asian Relations by Catherine Forslund.*** Biographies in American Foreign Policy, No. 8 (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 2002) xxxiii, 180 pp., $65.00 (cloth),

#### $19.95 (paper).

*Biographies in American Foreign Policy Series* editor Joseph Fry finally eschews dead white men in favor of a living Asian woman--albeit one whose early claim to fame was as a widow of a dead white man--in his eighth release, Catherine Forslund's *Anna Chennault:Informal Diplomacy and Asian Relations*. The dissertation-turned-book contains more than the title allows, highlighting Anna Chennault's involvement with the Republican party as a donor, fundraiser, Asian authority, and token minority leader until a 1989 falling-out.

Journalist, businesswoman, airline consultant, foreign relations expert, presidential trade promoter, hostess, and author, Chen Hsieng-mei--as the Chinese still know her today--became a Republican through her anti-communism stance and the influence of her much older husband, General Claire Chennault. The general, founder of the "Flying Tigers" and war hero to the Nationalist Chinese, introduced his young wife to her first key contacts, members of the "China Lobby," an informal group that advocated total support of the Nationalist Party in its civil war with the communists before and after its escape to Taiwan as the Republic of China (ROC). After her husband's death in 1958, Chennault supported Richard Nixon in his three campaigns for the White House. She played an integral part in the oft-told story of the 1968 October surprise, when she cautioned South Vietnam's leadership about attending the Paris peace talks. When Nixon later started Vietnamization and withdrawal, Chennault felt betrayed, as she did when Nixon went to China. But due to her practical nature, or because she realized the error of her previous ways, she

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did not let anti-communism stand in the way of better relations, not only between the

U.S. and the People's Republic of China (PRC), but between the U.S. and the ROC, and the PRC and the ROC.

Forslund emphasizes the difficulties Chennault faced as a refugee in wartime China and as a widow fighting for respect in the male-dominated business and political worlds. The author explains that Chennault used her femininity and "exotic allure" as an Asian as an advantage rather than a liability. She appropriated the racist or sexist views some held and inverted them. For example, after being called the "Dragon Lady"--a reference to a character in Milton Canniff's "Terry and the Pirates" comic strip--Chennault commissioned Canniff to draw her portrait that she later hung in her apartment for all to see.

The book succeeds as more than merely a brief biography of Chennault. First, Forslund has shed more light on the previously obscure but quickly growing body of literature about women in the history of American foreign relations. Secondly, her discussion of informal diplomacy points out something most U.S. foreign relations historians tend to downplay as "too revisionist" in their more military security centered works: the importance of the intersection of big business and government. In Chennault's case this intersection was obvious, occurring as it did in regular parties she hosted in the living room of her Watergate apartment! To Forslund, informal diplomacy is more than just direct business dealings; it is the wide range of contacts that tie together citizens of different nations. The author points to Chennault's parties as places where American and Asian officials and business executives could meet and informally discuss ideas or agreements that they could formalize later. Due to Chennault's continuing discretion, however, Forslund can cite few examples of specific influence concerning these dinner parties.

Although well-written, the book suffers from some surprising, niggling errors. The chronology section in the introduction lists the second Sino-Japanese war as starting in 1935 rather than 1937, the text itself misstates the end of World War II in Asia as August 10, 1945, instead of August 15, and has Strom Thurmond a Republican in 1964. Even more egregious is the author claiming that the refugee flow into Hong Kong in 1962 was caused by the Cultural Revolution rather than the famine after the Great Leap Forward. Yet these minor flaws hurt only the early chapters and do not detract from an interesting account of a fascinating cross- cultural political figure. Forslund succeeds at pointing out the importance of informal diplomacy through Chennault's many and varied business and journalistic ventures.

*William Ashbaugh*

*Assistant Professor of History SUNY Oneonta*

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***Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*** by Azar Nafisi. New York: Random House, 2004. 356pp, Paperback. $13.95.

*Reading Lolita in Tehran*, part memoir, part literary criticism, and part political analysis, is a highly readable account of Azar Nafisi‘s eighteen years living and working in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Educated in Switzerland and the United States, Nafisi returned to her homeland with her architect husband after the 1979 revolution and took up a post teaching contemporary fiction at the University of Tehran. The site of continuing political debate and endless protests, Nafisi lost her university job for refusing to veil, though she returned to teaching several years later at a different university where she developed a following, especially among young Iranian women.

She begins her ‗memoir‘ in 1995, less than two years before she left Iran, when she invites seven of her ―best and most committed students‖ to hold class again in the privacy and security of her own house. This reading group, and the books discussed, are the compass points of the memoir. However, she discusses much more, including aspects of her students‘ lives, much autobiographical material, and reflections on both pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran. That alone makes for a riveting read.

The book is divided into four sections: Lolita, Gatsby, James, and Austen, and in each section Nafisi employs the literary works and their authors as thinking points for her students to reflect on their own lives--what they have gone through and what they are going through--in contemporary Iran. Although this pedagogical technique does not always produce the desired result, Nafisi‘s passion for literature shines through.

The story within the story in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* turns out to be that of the eclectic and vibrant mix of women that Nafisi has picked for her literary ―club‖. These seven women are a veritable cross-section of the female cadre in Iran‘s universities. From the devoutly religious to the red lipstick wearing secular Marxists, they are engaging personalities--both in their critique of literature and in their response to the Islamic Republic. The genius of Nafisi is in her eye as an observer of post-revolutionary life in Iran. Her students serve as metaphors and (not-so-subtle) allusions to the hypocrisy of life under the mullahs and their blind film censor.

In an episode early in her tenure, Nafisi is faced with uber-religious male students who are opposed to the immoral, western-oriented text (Fitzgerald‘s *Gatsby*) assigned in the class. Responding to these critics with confidence, Nafisi suggests that the class put the novel on trial. In a brilliant coup, she corners the most zealous revolutionary in the class to serve as the prosecutor. In that role he has to present and defend his ideological position and can no longer thoughtlessly level accusations about corrupt Western values. What ensues in the mock trial is an illustration and critique of his (and by default, the Islamic Republic‘s) twisted logic and *raison d’etre*. Nafisi utilizes the classroom to showcase the duplicity of the Islamic revolutionaries that paraded the hallways of most Iranian universities in the

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early 1980s: men who would accuse women of being ―decadent floozies‖ for showing a strand of hair, but all the while would gawk at them through their Raybans.

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a joyous and at the same time moving reading experience. What shines through, even more than the student‘s passion for literature is the unique strength of spirit that Nafisi and her students display when faced with religious demagoguery and an irrational political establishment. When towards the end of the book I realized that she was going to leave Iran for the United States, I felt sad and letdown. Her mere presence in Iran served as a reminder to the mullahs, that much like the trial of *Gatsby,* they can be humiliated using their own rules.

*Shahbaz Shahbazi Process Ark, Inc. Milwaukee, WI*

***The Trouble with Islam*: *A Muslim’s Call for Reform in Her Faith*** by Irshad Manji. New York: St. Martin‘s Press, 2004. 240pp. Hardback. $22.95.

Irshad Manji self identifies as a television journalist, media entertainer, lesbian, feminist, Westerner, Muslim and Muslim refusenik. Not shy about her post modern, complex, hybrid subjectivity—she was born in Uganda, fled in 1972 as an infant with her South Asian parents and was raised near Vancouver, BC-- she nonetheless addresses this book to ―My Fellow Muslims‖ with: ―I have to be honest with you. Islam is on very thin ice with me.‖ She then invites dialogue: ―When I consider all the *fatwa* being hurled by the brain trust of our faith, I feel utter embarrassment. Don‘t you?‖ The rest of the book, alas, is not a pseudo-dialogue nor an inquiry, asking and answering ―tough questions,‖ but a disjointed monologue about a number of aspects of contemporary Muslim social and political practices that supremely annoy her. With some questions, many could agree, ―Why are we squandering the talents of women, fully half of God‘s creation?‖ With others, ―Why are we being held hostage to what‘s happening between the Palestinians and the Israelis?‖ many might disagree with the assertion. The problem with both questions is that the subsequent discussion fails to take account of significant social, political, and historical contexts—beginning with the context of positions of power. Her underlying assumption is that there is a level playing field, whether it is between Palestinians and Israelis or Muslim immigrants and native born citizens.

I looked forward to reading this book after I saw Manji as a participant in a roundtable discussion on Islam aired by Canada‘s NWI channel in late 2003. She was sassy, indomitable, comfortably out as a lesbian and ready to quote Qur‘ anic verse to a Muslim scholar. However, what comes across in thirty second sound bytes as concerned, becomes merely flippant in print form, especially with poorly researched historical material, factual errors, and distorted characterizations of

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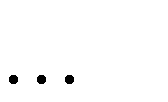
others‘ arguments, theses, and intellectual contributions. Her historical discussions are particularly quixotic: two pages on Maimonides‘ medical contributions, but no mention of al-Razi or ibn Sina; over five pages on Muslim Spain, but only two paragraphs on the Baghdad based Abbasid Khalifat; and one liners for ibn Khaldun and Edward Saïd, both misportrayed. This is writing by ―p.c. mouse,‖ *point-and-click.* Most sources Manji identifies in her bibliography are recent, 1994-2003, and apparently read according to the Evelyn Wood Method. She infers that she read Edward Saïd as a searching student in the 1980s, but describes his path breaking work *Orientalism* as ―a word (used) to describe the West‘s supposed tendency to colonise Muslims by demonising us as the exotic freaks of the East.‖ Said‘s studies of the way European scholarship on Islam was part of the arsenal of European imperialism and its justifications merits a more accurate rendering, especially since one of her book‘s primary arguments is about the failings of men in selectively quoting and acting on Qur‘ anic messages. She justifiably condemns her fellow Muslims for closing down arguments through their selective use or distortion of scholarship (including Saïd‘s work), but she replicates this tactic in her own offhand treatment of intellectual work--contemporary and historical scholarship.

This is purportedly an open letter to Muslims, not history or political policy, however, Manji does, in the end, make recommendations. She says Muslims need to revive the practice of ―ijtihad,‖ i.e., independent reasoning or reasoned struggle; in this, she repeats a call that is now over a century old and which she borrowed from Ziauddin Sardar‗s article, ―Islam: Resistance and Reform‖ in *The New Internationalist* (May 2002). Sardar lays out the historical factors behind contemporary ―militant traditionalism‖ (read fundamentalism). He argues that modernist leaders who succeeded departing colonial powers continued to rule through using excessive force, suppressing ‗traditional‘ leaders, and ridiculing

‗traditional‘ cultural values and thinking. Globalizing economic practices further impoverished traditional cultures, contributing to a siege mentality and new expressions of militant traditionalism.

In the last chapter Manji returns to the ―woman question‖ in her argument for

―Operation Ijtihad,‖ asserting that ―supporting female entrepreneurs would be goal number one of a campaign to kick-start change in Islam.‖ The cash for this would come from the USA, EU, and other rich nations apportioning ―part of their national security budgets as micro-enterprise loans to creative women throughout the Muslim world.‖ This would globalize the micro-lending model of Bangladeshi social activist, Muhammad Yunnus. She‘s hardly the first to call for that! Furthermore, men will



―benefit directly from Operation Ijtihad, since widespread entrepreneurship will encourage foreign investment.‖ Her own field, ―media will have to be another front line,‖ and she imagines a ―Western coalition of Muslims and non-Muslims‖ supporting women in the Muslim world ―to own and manage local TV stations.‖ She also imagines Oprah Winfrey leading the coalition, as her ―very presence would issue a stark screw-you to men who want to run everything of worth in Islamic countries.‖

Today, without question, we need a multiplicity of Muslim voices, and venues in which wide ranging opinions can be heard. There is a paucity of progressive

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voices beyond the confines of academic writing. I am afraid that Manji‘s book is not a significant alternative to the loud militant Islamist voices heard in all media—print, internet, TV, etc. Perhaps her contribution is simply as *agent provocateur*, and like Qasim Amin whose *The Emancipation of Woman* in 1899 provoked the production of many dozens of works in the following years, Manji will spur many others to have their say. Insh‘allah.

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# CONTRIBUTORS

**Phyllis Azar** is a native New Yorker who has never lived anywhere else and probably never will. She spent her formative years in the housing projects of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, attended Brooklyn public schools K-12, worked as a receptionist, a secretary, an art sales person, an advertising media director, and is currently the advertising and promotions director for the noted SF/Fantasy publisher Tor Books in New York City. Her short fiction has appeared in various journals across the United States.

**Catherine Carter** was raised on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and now lives in the Smoky Mountains with her husband where she teaches at Western Carolina University. Her work has appeared in *Poetry, North Carolina Literary Review, Potomac Review, Faultline, The Lyric, The Southern Anthology, Sulphur River Literary Review, Comstock Review*, and as a feature page in *Chiron Review*. Her full-length manuscript, *The Memory of Gills*, will be published by LSU Press in 2006.

**Erica T. Carter** lives in the woods with her companion Rose. She teaches part-time where she can, right now at the University of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia University. She is also a free-lance computer programmer. Some of the cynicism of her poems is technologically induced, she knows, but programming is literary composition on the abstract and language spread out in veneer of pure sign, so it gives her a little comfort as well. She is too gray to be a romantic writer and too young to be a postmodernist, so she ends up with eclectic pieces like these.

**Connie Donovan** is a retired physician who has worked as a psychiatrist in Boston for thirty years. She is married and has raised three children. Her chapbook “Fire Cloth” won first place in a contest at White Eagle Coffee House Press and was published in 1999. She has published poems most recently in *River Oak Review* and *Icarus* and is a recent graduate of the M.F.A. Writing Program at Vermont College.

**Ann Evans** is an interesting, good-humored woman. “Potential” was perceived in her as a child, and she skipped the second grade with substantial fanfare. A 3rd grade writing assignment was circulated through the school system of Montclair, New Jersey, as a sample of a prodigious talent, but the talent went underground. She plodded through a B.A. and an M.A., and learned five foreign languages (Greek, French, Spanish, Italian, German). She’s finishing a second M.A. in Linguistics this spring. Intensely curious, she has never taken the path most traveled. Raised a Christian Scientist, she left it and C.S. - related Principia College and transferred to New York University. Comfort did not lie in the loose but lonely life of Greenwich

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Village in the 60's either, so she stepped out of the temples of her childhood and left for Europe. She didn’t come back for twelve years. How do wifes-mothers-working women write books? If they want to write books, they do, however slowly. She also enjoys teaching others to express themselves.

**Carol Frith** co-edit’s the poetry journal *Ekphrasis*, and was winner the of the 2001 MacGuffin Poet Hunt. Her work has appeared or been accepted in *Clackamas, Chariton Review, The Lyric, Blue Unicorn, The Formalist, Valparaiso, Asphodel, Poetry, New York, Sundog, Cutbank, Literary Review,* etc. A four-time finalist for the Nemerov Sonnet Award, she has chapbooks from Bacchae Press and Medicinal Purposes. Her third chapbook, *Never Enough Zeros, was co-winner of the Palanquin Press Fall 2001 competition.*

**Carol Hamilton** does medical translating and has recent and upcoming publications in *Southern Poetry Review, Bogg, Poem, Primavera, P.D.Q., Midwest Quarterly Review, Lilliput, International Poetry Review, MacGuffin,* and others.

**Elisabeth Harrahy** completed her Ph.D. in environmental toxicology at Colorado State University, where she was able to take poetry courses to fulfill her “language” requirement. She currently works for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and is conducting research on the toxic effects of flame retardants. Elisabeth’s poetry has appeared in *Slightly West.*

**Ginnah Howard** lives in Gilbertsville, New York. Her work has been accepted for publication in such journals as *North American Review, Room of One’s Own, Permafrost,* and *Blueline.* She has been granted residencies at the MacDowell Colony, Blue Mountain Center and Ucross.

**Betsy Johnson-Miller** has an M.F.A. in poetry from Bennington College, and works as an assistant editor for the journal *Karamu.* In addition, she worked as a contributing editor for an on-line anthology with David Lehman (it can be found currently at www.slope.org). Her work has appeared or will appear in *AGNI (on-line), The Seattle Review, 5 a.m., Calyx, So to Speak, Slope, Mad Poet’s Review, Diner, Plainsongs* and *Poetry Motel.*

**Sumita Lall** is a Ph.D. candidate in the English Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research focuses on contemporary British literature, South Asian writers of the Diaspora, and Postcolonial studies. She has also taught courses in Asian American literature.

**Vivian Lawry** is Appalachian by birth, a social psychologist by training, a college teacher and vice president for academic affairs by profession, and a writer by passion. She has written an as-yet-unpublished murder mystery set in academe and

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is working on a sequel. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Chelsea, The Chrysalis Reader, The Distillery, Descant, Lullwater Review, North Dakota Quarterly,* and *RiverSedge.* This is her first appearance in *Phoebe*.

**Elena Machado Saez** received her Ph.D. in English from SUNY Stony Brook and is currently an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Florida Atlantic University. She has recently published in the Caribbean journal *Sargasso* and has an essay forthcoming in *Small Axe*. She attended Maryse Conde's seminar on cannibalism as a Caribbean literary strategy at Cornell University's School of Criticism and Theory. She is working on a manuscript that deals with literary representations of Caribbean diasporic identity and their intersection with globalizing forces of consumption.

**Katalin Mezey** has had several volumes of poetry and short stories published, in addition to children’s story books. She also runs a publishing company that is a mainstay in the literary life of Hungary (maybe not in quantity but quality), turning out hardcover books of some of the best Hungarian writers.

**Silvia Nagy-Zekmi** is Chair of the Department of Classical and Modern Languages and Literatures at Villanova University, and professor of Hispanic literature and cultural studies at Villanova University. Her research interests include postcolonial and other cultural theories, writing by women, and Latin American and Francophone literature. Her books include: *Paralelismos transatlánticos: Postcolonialidad y narrativa femenina en América Latina y Africa del Norte*, *Identidades en transformación: El discurso neoindigenista de los países andinos*, *Le Maghreb Postcolonial*, and forthcoming: *Paradoxical Citizenship: Edward Said*.

**Robyn Norris** comes to fiction writing from a background in film and journalism. She made her first short film while at Stanford, a documentary about the Names Project/AIDS Memorial Quilt. A New Jersey native, Robyn moved to Los Angeles where she worked in film production and New Media. She earned her M.F.A. from the University of Southern California (USC) School of Cinema-Television, where she received the Paramount Studios Interactive Fellowship and the Edward Small Excellence in Directing Award. Her short film, THERE LIVED A GIRL, won the Bronze Award at the Charleston International Film Festival. Since graduating, she has produced an independent feature, “KATE’S ADDICTION,” starring Kari Wurher, which aired on HBO. Her short stories have appeared on *Scrivener’s Pen, Outsider Ink, Girlswrite.com* and the *Independent Mind.* You can visit her at [www.robynnorris.com.](http://www.robynnorris.com/)

**Courtney E. Putnam** earned an M.F.A. in creative writing from Antioch University, Los Angeles. Her work has appeared in such journals as *4th Street and Moon Journal,* as well as in the anthology *Inhabiting the Body* from Moon Journal Press.

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*Contributors*

She lives in Seattle, Washington.

**Jan Epton Seale** has received an N.E.A. fellowship in poetry. She writes and teaches writing in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Her poetry volumes include *Bonds* and *Sharing the House* (RiverSedge Press), *Texas Poets in Concert* (with 3 other poets; Univ. of North Texas Press), and *The Yin of It* (Pecan Grove Press). Her poems have been published in periodicals such as *Blue Mesa Review, Calyx, Kalliope, New America, Coe Review,* and *Descant.*

**Ann Silsbee (1930-2003)** was a composer whose musical output included works for soloists, choruses, chamber ensembles, and orchestras, which have been performed and recorded in the USA and abroad. Her poems have been published in *Atlantic Review, Seneca Review, Nimrod, Spoon River Poetry Review,* and many other poetry journals, as well as in a chapbook, *Naming The Disappeared.* Her full-length book, *Orioling*, won the 2002 Benjamin Saltman Prize and was published by Red Hen Press. A new book, *The Book of Ga*, will soon be published by Custom Words. Married to the physicist Robert Silsbee, and the mother of three grown sons with families, she lived in Ithaca, New York.

**Janet Thornburg** has had short stories published in *Phantasmagoria, In The Family, Lumina, The MacGuffin, The Distillery,* and *Carve Magazine.* This past fall her short story, “Split Shift” won a runner-up award in the Astraea Lesbian Writers Fund Fiction Competition. She earned her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University in 1995, and lives with her partner, Michelle, and their two children in San Francisco, where she teaches English as a Second Language at City College.

**César Valverde** teaches Hispanic Studies at Illinois Wesleyan University. His research interests are Latin American literature and gender studies, particularly the intersection of culture, gender and nation.

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