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*Title:*

**‘This Is Not What Being a Woman Means’:  
Female Identity in American Narratives from 1960 to 1970**

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## Abstract

The project will examine literary representations of the female consciousness in American prose narratives of the 1960s. Addressing the different iterations of female identities and feminist politics in light of broader social and philosophical contexts, the thesis will ask the question as to what strategies are employed by patriarchal assertions of power in order to limit the capacity for self-expression and actualisation allowed to women. The issue of female representation will be analysed through the lenses of three fundamental thematic concerns: traditional semiotics as a means for the reinforcement of patriarchal oppression, the physical space (the home, the city, the office) and the ways it reflects and upholds the limitations posed on female bodies, and the idea of ‘intersectionality’ as fundamental to the process of female liberation. These factors will be explored in relation to their effect on the definition of roles available to female characters within the different social milieux of the narratives in question.

Canonical understandings of second-wave feminist practices—as presented, for example, in Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)—will be challenged to account for the diversity of experience and backgrounds that characterise the lives of intersectional female identities, and the effectiveness of different liberation strategies will be measured against the notion of female desires and self-expressive practices. The texts analysed in the thesis will seek to represent female characters that, consciously or unconsciously, strive against the multiple power centres that are aligned to exercise often violent and abusive control over the ways in which female identity is acceptably allowed to develop, and to offer a reflection on the consequences that derive from defying standardised gendered behaviours. Each in its own individual manner, the five novels and one memoir that make up the body of this research will offer insight into the combination of forces that play a part in shaping avenues of female social participation, at the same time as they attempt to allow a glimpse into the different ways in which the women in these stories seek to construct forms of autonomous identity beyond gendered, racial, economic, and social stereotypisation.

## Lay Summary

Imagine a world where half the population feels as if they ‘don’t exist.’ A world where women are expected to be ‘fluffy and feminine,’ and always be ‘the children’s mommy, or the minister’s wife,’ but never themselves. A world that constantly asks, ‘what is wrong with American women that they can’t accept their role gracefully?’ This is the world described by Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. Considered by many a ground-breaking piece of writing, Friedan’s study deals with what she terms ‘the problem with no name’—a sense of malaise that leads to profound dissatisfaction. According to Friedan, this malaise affects most women, and its roots lie in the social expectation that to be feminine means to marry, have children, and become the ‘perfect’ housewife. Friedan investigates the lives of these women to uncover the limitations that a deeply patriarchal society places on them, and to suggest solutions that would help them achieve greater fulfilment. Yet, on a closer look Friedan’s investigation reveals significant limitations: Friedan is almost exclusively concerned with the problems of white, middle class, suburban women whose lives denote a significant amount of social, political, and financial privilege. What about the unmarried city girls from modest backgrounds? What about the traditional Jewish mothers? Or the little Black girls? When there are so many different types of women, what does being a woman even mean?

These questions serve as the backdrop to the five novels and one memoir that make up the core of this thesis: Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road* (1961), Mary McCarthy’s *The Group* (1963), Joan Didion’s *Play It as It Lays* (1970), Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1964), Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). From ambitious housewives and model mothers to abused little girls, disillusioned movie stars, and promiscuous city dwellers, this, then, is an investigation into the female characters that colour the American narratives of the 1960s as they struggle to create a space for their desires. In a society that would prefer them to remain obedient and compliant, these characters explore and expand the available definitions of womanhood in light of their personal circumstances, and, in doing so, allow for a variety of new meanings to be created. As they attempt to become who they want to be, the women in these texts open up a debate on the limitations imposed by a society that considers men as the exclusive centres of public and private power, and imagine a new kind of feminist discourse: one that doesn’t prescribe identity stereotypes, whether gendered or otherwise biased; encourages diversity as well as inclusion; and celebrates the potential for radical change.

This thesis is intended as a guide to the philosophical and political discourses surrounding the feminist movement as represented in the American literature of the 1960s. These theoretical understandings of feminism are examined in the context of the private lives of women and their communities in order to investigate the impacts of different ideas and actions on the everyday existences of a variety of characters and social groups. Language, architectural design, landscape development, financial policy, political power and civil rights all play significant roles in the discussion, as the forces that shape and regulate the social order and determine women’s position. My principal objective is not to offer a definitive answer to the question of what being a woman means, but, rather, to highlight the complexities of the issue, enlarging Friedan’s scope to include the experiences of a more diverse set of circumstances. ‘Woman,’ I seek to demonstrate, is not a monolithic entity. ‘Woman’ is a varied and dynamic concept, and only by recognising this can we make real progress.

**‘This is Not What Being a Woman Means’:  
Female Identity in American Narratives from 1960 to 1970**

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## *Introduction*

### **This Is Not What Being a Woman Means**

*'Seeing men as the human default is fundamental  
to the structure of human society'*

Caroline Criado Perez

In the introduction to her best-selling book *Invisible Women* (2019), Caroline Criado Perez presents the idea of a gender-biased 'double not thinking' by asserting that, in the world of data, 'men go without saying, and women don't get said at all' (Criado Perez XII). What Criado Perez is emphasising with this statement is the tendency, on the part of large swathes of social and cultural groups and institutions, to view female existences as peripheral and incidental, and ultimately irrelevant in terms of their effect on social codes and norms:

The result of this deeply male-dominated culture is that the male experience, the male perspective, has come to be seen as universal, while the female experience—that of half the global population, after all—is seen as, well, niche. (Criado Perez 12)

Though the singular 'female experience' Criado Perez presents is a myth—the plurality and particularity of womanhood will be discussed later in this introduction—by being defined as 'niche' the lived reality of women across the spectrum of social and cultural milieux is virtually erased from mainstream appraisal, and constantly rendered superfluous to the creation and implementation of behavioural standards and expectations. Women are, in Criado Perez's analysis, unimportant—they are anomalies, and, as such, not significant to the processes of categorisation and organisation that shape society. As *Invisible Women* goes on to discuss, this is true for a number of different areas of life—Criado Perez mentions, to name but a few, housing, the workplace, healthcare, and politics—and this claim certainly appears to be relevant for the literary world as much as anywhere else. When it comes to contributions and reviews

in literary magazines, a 2019 tally by non-profit literary organisation VIDA reports that ‘despite the new co-editors claiming it would be a “priority” to work on increasing the number of women who grace their pages, *The New York Review of Books* published only 33.37% women’ concluding that ‘it’s clear that *The New York Review of Books* still does not value women’s voices’ (‘The 2019 VIDA Count’). The trend spotted by VIDA in *The New York Review of Books* is, as the ‘Count’ explains, not unique in its incarnation, and its fallacies are replicated across the industry at alarming levels. Projects like ‘The VIDA Count’ or Criado Perez’s book are aimed at countering this trend by bringing to light the regular omission of female experiences, needs, and opinions from mainstream media, politics, and policies.

Indeed, the recent cultural narrative surrounding gender equality seems to be singularly focussed on the idea of *silence*. In her book *Down Girl* (2018), Kate Manne discusses the idea of ‘strangulation’ as an act ‘(almost) only’ perpetrated by men and ‘characterized’—beyond its physical implications—‘as a demonstration of authority and domination’ (Manne 3). In fact, Manne titles her chapter on strangulation ‘Eating Her Words,’ and goes on to describe the process of testimony as one in which ‘you can train her not to say “strangle” but rather “choke,” or better yet “grab,” or best of all, nothing. It was nothing; nothing happened’ (Manne 5). The focus lies, rather than in highlighting the act of violence in itself, in the consequences of the act as a silencing tool that erases female voices from the conversation. Similarly, journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey name Chapter 3 of their exposé on the Weinstein scandal, *She Said* (2019), ‘How to Silence a Victim.’ In the chapter, Kantor and Twohey note how ‘any public records of abusive behaviour by Weinstein’ that they could get their hands on were ‘shrouded in the ultraobscure language of state bureaucracy’ (49) and how ‘standard practice for dealing with sexual harassment’ (53) involved ‘essentially paying the victims to keep quiet’ (52). Jeannie Vanasco’s personal account of sexual violence *The Things We Didn’t Talk About When I Was a Girl* (2019) goes even further than this by acknowledging that ‘his voice,’ the

voice of her rapist, ‘seems necessary’ (Vanasco 23) to her own retelling of the story: ‘I want to include him,’ Vanasco says, ‘because without him, the book will be yet another story about yet another sexual assault’ (8), then adding, ‘Why do I assume yet another story about yet another sexual assault can’t be told? Or can’t be interesting?’ (8). Vanasco’s questions mark a shift from an external form of silencing—the one imposed by an abuser, or by an unfair legal system—to an internalised one, a form of self-censoring in which internalised cultural pressures serve to thwart the expression of female personal identities and histories.

In this sense, contemporary debates surrounding female emancipation do not seem to have shifted dramatically from those presented by Betty Friedan’s seminal study *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) almost 60 years ago. When Friedan titles the first chapter of her book ‘The Problem that Has No Name,’ it is exactly this idea of ‘silence’ that she taps into. Women, Friedan tells her reader, ‘were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents’ (5), and ‘they learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights’ (5), or, in other words, do not want a voice. This is an issue that, Friedan is keen to stress, seems to be caused by ‘chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts’ (19) that ‘we can no longer ignore’ (20). A re-working of cultural modes is required to overcome this. Likewise, according to the ‘*Me Too.*’ *Movement* website, founder Tarana Burke began ‘me too’ by developing ‘culturally informed curricula to discuss sexual violence within the Black community and in society at large’ (‘*Me Too.*’ *Movement*). The underlying idea was to ‘bring resources, support, and pathways to healing where none existed before’ (‘*Me Too.*’ *Movement*), where the enforcement of female silence has given way to the ‘mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts’ that Friedan herself recognises as damaging. Both Friedan and Burke are focussed on restoring ways of speaking, ways of externalising and making heard, what the lived experience of different groups of women might look and feel like. The context is, undoubtedly, different: as this introduction will discuss, the

early-60s society that serves as the background to Friedan's book precedes a number of invaluable civil rights conquests for women—and particularly women of colour—and Friedan's focus is not so much on responses to sexual and/or gender-based violence—as it is, instead, for Burke, Manne, Kantor and Twohey, and Vanasco—but rather on daily living. Still, the message is remarkably similar: women's stories don't get told, and this is an imbalance that needs redressing.

Yet, literary history tells us that female stories do get told. The novels and memoirs that form the core of this research project bear testimony to this very truth. Indeed, the mere fact that Criado Perez, Manne, Kantor and Twohey, Vanasco, and even Friedan, were able to publish their studies and accounts bears testimony to this very truth. Thus, the question remains: what happens when female experiences are spoken?

### **What does being a woman mean?**

In William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Addie Bundren muses:

That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at. When [Cash] was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not. I knew that fear was invented by someone that had never had the fear; pride, who never had the pride. (Faulkner 155)

Only one chapter in Faulkner's novel is narrated by Addie. Even though Addie is, arguably, the title character—the one who lies dying—her voice is only heard once, and, when it is heard, it echoes through the novel with a warning: words, she tells the reader, cannot be trusted. Words are invented by those who do not—who cannot—understand their meaning. They are placeholders, effectively designed to replace experience where experience cannot be replicated or comprehended. 'Motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it,' and,

as such, its process of signification can never fully encompass the lived experience of ‘the ones that had the children.’ ‘Motherhood,’ Addie points out, is a social and cultural construct—an abstract idea that bears little resemblance to the reality of bearing and rearing children. In this context, there is no truth that language can fully and accurately represent, a fact that is further evidenced by Addie’s examination of the term ‘love’:

[Anse] had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn’t need a word for that any more than for pride or fear. (Faulkner 156)

If Anse holds on to the abstract notion of ‘love’ as an almost dogmatic truth, Addie is skeptical of its meaningfulness, for she can clearly see the existence of a gap between the word and the manifestation of its definition. The ‘word’ is ‘a shape to fill a lack,’ an expression of something that is missing rather than the description of something real. There is an apparent and inherent disconnect between the struggle of–female–existence and the language employed to communicate this, and within this disconnect there is a certain alienation—the alienation of someone who was not involved in the creation of the ‘words’ that are employed to describe and characterise her reality and identity. Addie rejects language as a means of communication and representation, for language is a social and cultural construct that fails to provide an accurate tool for self-expression. Indeed, Addie goes so far as describing her own self as outside and beyond linguistic classifications: ‘The shape of my body where I used to be as a virgin,’ she says, ‘is in the shape of a       ’ (Faulkner 157). Just like Pauline Puyat, one of two narrators in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* (1988), rejects her own name as a dangerous and controlling tool of oppression—‘Pauline! My name was a growl on their lips. A suspicion, a certainty, an iron hook on a rail’ (Erdrich 62)—Addie refuses to let her body be categorised in terms of the conventional descriptive practices that her social and cultural background would see as the appropriate

means of communication. Because she values her body as more than a 'lack' to be filled by a 'shape,' Addie chooses not to conform to normative linguistic prescriptions, nor to let herself become a 'name' that would 'die and solidify into a shape and then fade away' (Faulkner 157). The crystallising effects of language are challenged by Addie's experimental attitude, for identity, she seems to suggest, is fluid and changeable, and cannot be simply encompassed in any standardised form. Insofar as words serve as means of identification, their existence, Addie argues, is threatening to women, for their narrow system of categorisation can shape the ways of female existence, and challenge women's claims to an ever-developing type of personal identity.

In this light, then, what does 'woman' mean? And what does it mean to *be* a woman? These are the questions that lie at the foundations of my research, and they are questions whose answer, I hope to demonstrate, is complex, multi-faceted, and infinitely variable. It is also an answer that, by the questions' own nature, remains bound to be construed in opposition to the centres of power and dominance that seek to control its definition. As Criado Perez explains, 'The fact is that worth'—and, I would argue, (gendered) identity in the social sense—'is a matter of opinion, and opinion is informed by culture. And if culture is as male-biased as ours is, it can't help but be biased against women. By default' (Criado Perez 17). What happens when female experiences are spoken, I will argue, is that these cultural biases are brought to light with a sharpness of detail that allows for the dismantling of existing linguistic, cultural, and social norms, and the creation of alternative narratives of female representation. Not only that, but these alternative narratives have the distinct quality of portraying female identity from a variety of perspectives, raising questions of physicality, femininity, sexuality, discrimination, and oppression as composite mechanisms working simultaneously to affect the modes and avenues of female expression. As Manne suggests:

I argue that we should think of misogyny as serving to uphold patriarchal order, understood as one strand among various similar systems of domination (including racism, xenophobia, classism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and so on). Misogyny does this by visiting hostile or adverse social consequences on a certain (more or less circumscribed) class of girls or women to enforce and police social norms that are gendered either in theory (i.e., content) or in practice (i.e., norm enforcement mechanisms). (Manne 13)

The inherent misogyny that Addie Bundren identifies as characterising available linguistic tools should be read as working at the service of a ‘patriarchal order’ that relies on and openly exploits related ‘systems of domination’ to generate a form of compound oppression that cannot be overcome through one singular route, and requires instead a more nuanced approach. The texts analysed in this thesis do just that: they represent female characters that, consciously or unconsciously, strive against multiple power centres that are aligned to exercise control over the ways in which female identity is acceptably allowed to develop, and they reflect on the consequences that derive from defying standardised gendered behaviours. Each in its own individual manner, the six novels and memoirs that make up the body of my research offer insight into the combination of forces that play a part in shaping avenues of female self-expression, at the same time as they attempt to allow a glimpse into the different ways in which the women in these stories seek to construct a personal identity beyond gendered, racial, economic, and social stereotype.

### **Why the 1960s?**

Before delving deeper into a discussion of the ways in which each individual text contributes to the wider narrative of this project, it is worth stopping to consider the reasons why the 1960s offer a fertile ground for the further exploration of these themes. After all, female stories have

always been told, and, as the *'Me too.'* *Movement* demonstrates, they are possibly more prevalent today than ever before. What marks the 60s, then, as a particularly interesting timeframe?

Commonly associated with dramatic social upheaval, the 60s saw the rise of a variety of freedom campaigns on a global scale. With youth rebellions and civil-rights protests taking centre stage across the U.S., the thinkers and activists of the decade fought for the birth of organised movements whose ideas and struggles had a far-reaching impact for the American way of life. New avenues of discussion, expression, and self-realisation were being sought by different identity groups, affecting the legal, cultural, financial, and political landscape of the country. In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his 'I Have a Dream' speech against racial discrimination, journalists reporting on Buddhist monk protests in South Vietnam made the case for freedom of speech after having been attacked by the South Vietnamese secret police, and Earl Warren, Chief Justice of U.S. Supreme Court, took a decisive step toward secularising education by ruling state-mandated Bible reading in schools unconstitutional. From the following year, the Free Speech Movement, led by students at the University of California, Berkeley, began actively advocating for the right to support political causes on campuses and, in doing so, paved the way for the rise of the student-led acts of civil disobedience of the Seventies and beyond.

These momentous occurrences helped shape an image of the 1960s as a time of social development in which boundaries of race, class, and income, as well as thought, started to be abandoned in favour of changes that would lead to a fully realised cultural and social revolution. Ferree and Hess attribute this climate of change and progress to a generational renewal:

The cultural climate of the 1950s, which had nurtured the suburban homemaker and the baby boom, gave way in the 1960s to a 'postmaterialistic' ethic that challenged the

assumptions of postwar America [...]. Rather than achievement, the word that came to symbolize the new ideal was ‘liberation,’ defined as freedom to ‘do one’s own thing.’ [...]. All forms of arbitrary restraint were called into question—not only those of social class, but also those of race and gender. (Ferree and Hess 10)

Ferree and Hess shed light on the optimism of the time, sustained by the idea of a more positive future in which self-expression and self-actualisation would be within everyone’s reach. The new generation of youths, freed from the ghosts of World Wars and financial instability, were allowed the chance to explore liberal thoughts and forge a utopian dream of equality and prosperity. In this positive portrayal of the decade, the focus of attention lies in ‘the exhilaration of the 1960s’ generation, the openness and generosity with which it embraced the goal of social transformation, and the challenges it raised to prevailing values’ (Ferree and Hess 10). There is a distinct sense that, from the writers’ perspective, the 60s symbolised a time in which anything was possible, and much happened that successfully moved the country towards better horizons for all.

Yet, this narrative of optimism has its flaws. Ferree and Hess promote a depiction of the 60s as a time of all-encompassing radical change and encourage us to cluster gender reform together with other types of social and cultural transformation as an inevitable step toward the new culture of ‘liberation.’ However, more attentive research seems to suggest that this climate of social progress did not—and, in fact, *could not*—fully extend its influence to the issue of gender inequality. It suffices to consider that, ‘as of 1961, several states still actively enforced nineteenth-century criminal statutes prohibiting the sale or [...] even the *use* of contraceptives’ (Garrow 24), that ‘only in 1965, in *Griswold v. Connecticut* [...], was this ban finally held unconstitutional—at least as applied to married couples’ (Garrow 24), and that unmarried women would have to wait until *Eisenstadt v. Bird* in 1972 to gain the same access to contraception. This decade-long legal dispute over contraceptive rights de facto precluded

1960s American women from making independent decisions over their bodies and their social roles, a preclusion that was reinforced by the widespread existence of criminal abortion statutes across the country. As late as 1971, 23-year-old Shirley Wheeler was ‘believed to be the first American woman ever held criminally responsible for submitting to abortion’ (Nordheimer 37). Again, it wasn’t until 1973 with the *Roe v. Wade* verdict, that the U.S. Supreme Court concluded that criminal abortion statutes violated women’s constitutional rights.

Moreover, although measures to seek the improvement of women’s lives in areas beyond contraception and abortion were indeed implemented in the 60s—notably, the Equal Pay Act of 1963—these did not, in effect, prompt the same fundamental transformations achieved, for example, by the Civil Rights Movement’s sit-ins. To be sure, in talking about the practical effect of the Equal Pay Act for women, William H. Chafe claims that

explicitly and implicitly, those directing the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission [...] gave notice that they would not treat complaints about sex discrimination the same way as they would treat grievances based on racial discrimination. (548)

Rather than granting a greater measure of protection and paving the road for gender equality, the Act reinforced the idea that women belonged to a somehow lesser group, whose rights could not be included within the standard framework of the country’s legal system.

Even among politically active women, legislative initiatives to increase the breadth and width of women’s rights were often met with scepticism and, even, fervent opposition. For instance, though in 1967, spurred by veteran women’s rights activist Alice Paul, the National Organization for Women (NOW) officially endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the American Constitution, the amendment was met with staunch opposition on the part of conservative and traditionalist women. This opposition culminated with the foundation, in 1972, of the STOP ERA movement. As late as 1976, Phyllis Schlafly, founder and

spokesperson of STOP ERA, engaged in a televised debate with Betty Friedan—who, in turn, had helped found NOW—arguing, essentially, that ‘women were destined to be wives and mothers, and their domestic roles actually freed them from the drudgeries and dangers of the office, the factory, and the military, among other male-dominated venues’ (Miller 279). As Miller suggests, ‘STOP ERA rhetors successfully cast themselves as courageous heroes, striving against a villainous feminism on a journey toward fulfilment’ (Miller 279), and this type of rhetoric was quickly replicated in a variety of social and cultural discourses that strongly impacted the portrayal of women in media, politics, and society at large.

If, then, Ferree and Hess’ buoyant depiction of the decade may hold true for certain types of social and cultural progress, both the position of the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission and the rhetoric employed by Schlafly and the STOP ERA movement clearly define a struggle for the exclusion of women from the public and political life of the country. ‘If a group of journalists had gathered around the table in 1962,’ Chafe states, ‘they would not have been likely to select changes in women’s lives as one of the major emerging stories’ (Chafe 529): the general assumption of the wider political audience of the 1960s is that women’s progression in the established social order was, at best, irrelevant, if not damaging. Therefore, while the Civil Rights Movement allowed for historic gains and prompted institutional changes within the American legal and governmental system, the success of STOP ERA tells us there is little evidence that the same can be said with regards to female liberation movements: patterns of change for the American woman were slow in growth and patchy in nature, springing more from individual initiative than organised and controlled action (Coontz, *A Strange Stirring* 17-8) and facing wider and more aggressive opposition both within and beyond the social group itself.

Thus, if on the one hand the relative and partial successes of so-called ‘Second Wave Feminism’ may seem to make the 60s a not particularly relevant period for the evaluation of

female modes of liberation, examining the reasons why the women's movement did not, at least in the early part of the decade, gain as much traction as other liberation movements can prove to be a far more interesting exercise, for it helps illustrate the nuanced and diverse set of ideological concerns that mark the gendered struggle as a composite one. 'If, as some argued, women were oppressed like minorities, they surely did not all share the same material circumstances, suffer the same degree of discrimination,' (538) Chafe explains. 'Women' as a social and political entity could not participate in the same centred understanding of collective identity that the activists in the Civil Rights Movement experienced, for women were neither a minority, nor a homogenous, solidified group. In a society in which a woman's primary environment was the home, and her most important social bond was the family, 'what did it mean to share an identity' (Chafe 538) with other women? 'What defined the bonds of gender?' (Chafe 538)

As the idea of a 'problem with no name' and the women-led STOP ERA rhetoric demonstrate, divided between the sphere of private and familial life and the different political forces that pulled on their loyalties women were unable to recognise a degree of commonality in the issues and challenges they faced, and, instead, resolved to individualistic and often exclusionary understandings of gender that could only lead to disappointing outcomes. It followed, therefore, that, in order for women to reach the point of political organisation and foster the launch of a structured social movement, the question of group-identity needed to be addressed on a broader, more public level, so as to transform the mentality of the singular problem into a large-scale, collective endeavour. The first, tentative, push toward the idea that it might be possible to unify a large and necessarily diverse group of women into one social identity equipped with political power came in the form of the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, established in 1961. Defined by Chafe as 'hardly a bold or risky move from Kennedy's point of view' and as an 'ideal way to signal recognition of an important

constituency' (535), the Commission still had the effect of demonstrating, for the first time, the fundamental point that regardless of race, status, class, and geographical location, at their core, women's issues were broadly of the same nature: 'all experienced the difficulty of negotiating and living with men accustomed to privilege, control, and power based on their sex' (Chafe 544). Possibly inadvertently, the Commission 'had created an organizational structure of people sharing common concerns' (Chafe 536), thus giving life to the idea that 'something should be done. Something would be done' (Chafe 529).

Chafe offers an optimistic view of the power of the Commission to change the course of political history—the acknowledgement of gendered bonds across and beyond circumstantial differences equates in his analysis to a recodification of womanhood as a primary connecting identity propelling the group into action. Yet, despite the Commission's positive impact on the feminist liberation movement, as previously discussed it would be naive to believe that its creation presented women activists with a clear solution to the problem of group participation and strategising. The fact remains that the years following the Commission's establishment saw little to no concrete changes in the rights of women across the country, that it was not until NOW was founded in 1966 that female issues began being addressed on a larger scale and through focussed efforts, and that there remained consistent fragmentation around the cultural, social and political values that women chose to endorse. The gradual, difficult, and imperfect movement from social isolation to political and cultural organisation that characterises the 'second wave' of feminism remained one of continuous directional changes and reinvention, for the project of gender liberation needed—and, arguably, still needs—constantly be revised in light of the vast array of powers that exercise influence over the different sub-groups of women existing and working within the whole. The effort it took to establish a common fight underlines the diversity of female issues as linked to and affected by other forms of oppressive practices,

so as to shed light on the necessity for a broader and more inclusive approach to the concept of ‘liberation,’ at least where gendered struggles are concerned.

This is the first point of interest in the 60s: not so much the birth of a ‘second wave’ of feminism, but the acknowledgement that the achievement of rights for women is, by necessity, linked to the fight for worker’s rights, racial equality, LGBT+ activism, and all other forms of oppression inherently affecting the lives of women as a heterogeneous social group. In order for the project of female ‘liberation’ to succeed, the 60s seem to say for the first time, the movement needs to take stock of the diversity of issues and power centres dominating the identities of different women according to social, cultural, financial, and personal backgrounds. Moreover, even when these are acknowledged, the movement’s success remains dependent on the resolution of political disagreements not only among opposing political sides, but also, and possibly more significantly, within different factions of the same political parties. Indeed, it is enough to look at the fragmentation of the ‘Left’ throughout the decade to understand the difficulties of engaging a wide variety of people in one cohesive form of activism. Writing of the New Left movement of the 60s, Rossinow affirms that

the very experience of risk and struggle would assist [New Leftists] in the pursuit of a life more intense, meaningful and intact than the divided and isolated state of ‘alienation’ that radicals decried as the fate of humans within a capitalist, racist and imperialist society. (15)

If the reformative aims of radicals and New Leftists, then, might be similarly identified with the struggle for social transformation and liberation, the enormous ideological and philosophical divergences described by Rossinow translated in entirely different strategies as to the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ to achieve this transformation, for ‘New Left radicals perceived the Old Left as debased by tactical cynicism and compromise with large systems that stifled human freedom’ (Rossinow 17). Within this splintered political landscape, significant and often large

theoretical disagreements required overcoming in order to prioritise the interests of such a broad a diverse group as that represented by the category ‘woman.’ The difficulties that arose from this political fragmentation, then, brought to light the necessity of finding—or, even, of creating—a common ‘feminist’ ideology beyond demographic and political segmentation. Only by doing so can the feminist movement achieve a connection strong enough to withstand the pull that different identity and political groups exercise over women’s energies.

The second, crucial, point of interest in the 60s comes in the form of Betty Friedan’s controversial yet wildly popular *The Feminine Mystique*, first published in 1963. As Stephanie Coontz points out, Friedan’s study of the female ‘problem’ in the early 60s drew, and still draws, ‘extreme reactions’ from its readers: ‘*The Feminine Mystique*,’ Coontz writes, ‘has been credited—or blamed—for destroying, single-handedly and almost overnight, the 1950s’ consensus that women’s place was in the home’ (Coontz, *A Strange Stirring* XV). Whether deserved or excessive, this reputation begs the question of how Friedan might have achieved such notoriety at a time when women’s issues were not at the forefront of public thought. Coontz attempts to answer this question by praising Friedan’s style of writing and cunning use of rhetorical techniques to achieve mass recognition:

Books don’t become bestsellers because they are ahead of their time, they become bestsellers when they tap into concerns that people are already mulling over, pull together ideas and data that have not yet spread beyond specialists and experts, and bring these all together in a way that is easy to understand and explain to others.  
(Coontz, *A Strange Stirring* 145)

Coontz’s analysis is certainly not innovative. Friedan herself opens the first paragraph of her work by stating that ‘the problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women’ (Friedan 5). There can be no doubt that Friedan’s efforts, rather than being aimed at constructing and presenting a subversive image of femininity, found their focus in

offering a reflection of female life with which ‘each suburban wife’ (Friedan 5) could identify. Yet, by stating that Friedan’s main merit is that of bringing ‘ideas and data’ together and transcribing them ‘in a way that is easy to understand,’ Coontz seems to diminish the transformative power of *The Feminine Mystique*. While acknowledging that Friedan ‘electrified a layer of women [...] who might otherwise have been lost entirely’ (Coontz, *A Strange Stirring* 161), Coontz fails to recognise the ways in which Friedan’s work contributed to bringing about, both through merit and through its lack of inclusivity, a fundamental shift in the ideology of female liberation that resonated on a mass scale.

By contrast, Elaine T. May praises *The Feminine Mystique* for its radical content:

Friedan urged her peers to leave their homes, pursue careers, and reject the stifling constraints of postwar domesticity. Her book became an instant best-seller. It was one of the first statements to pave the way for the new feminist movement that would soon erupt. (May 528)

In explaining why *The Feminist Mystique* has often been referred to as a book that, for better or worse, ‘revolutionized America’ (Coontz, *A Strange Stirring* XV), May affords Friedan a much greater degree of agency. Friedan’s work is credited with being one of the very first proponents of female ‘liberation,’ offering radical alternatives to the status quo. The focus of May’s discourse is on forward movement: women are being ‘urged’ outside of their traditional comfort zone in order to forge new ‘paths’ beyond ‘the stifling constraints’ of the home as the locus representing political and social exclusion. The image here portrayed is an almost militant one, in which women are seen as literally and figuratively leaving the confines of domesticity to embrace a ‘new feminist movement.’ May provides a forceful acknowledgement of Friedan’s merits, identifying within the narrative of *The Feminine Mystique* more than the mere claims of accessibility of information made by Coontz. Friedan’s work is revisited by May as a manifesto for the feminist revival, a call to action for the suburban housewife.

Although May's recognition of Friedan's transformative discourse is certainly a step forward in terms of analysing the effects of Friedan's work on the feminist movement of the 1960s, her admiration for *The Feminine Mystique* is also partly misplaced insofar as it seeks to attribute to Friedan's book the forwarding of a form of radical collective activism that is far from the text's fundamental focus, and that is rather problematic in terms of the book's equation of womanhood to the middle-class, privileged, white experience of only a few. In fact, rather than promoting collaborative and inclusive efforts as a way to face collectively significant female issues, Friedan looks to focus on individual and personal development: 'it would be quite wrong,' she states, 'for me to offer any woman easy how-to answers for this problem' (Friedan 277). A woman should ask herself 'what do I want to do?' (Friedan 274)—and not, as May seems to suggest 'what should we do?'—and 'find her own answers' (Friedan 274). At its core, *The Feminine Mystique* presents a narrative of self-help whose concern is not with social mobilisation and inequality, but with an exploration of female personal identity as independent and capable of desire:

The mystique would have women renounce ambition for themselves. Marriage and motherhood is the end; after that, women are supposed to be ambitious only for their husbands and their children. (Friedan 289)

Rejecting the mystique is, for Friedan, a private act that all women—all white, middle-class, privileged women—can separately achieve by fulfilling 'an ambition of their own' (Friedan 289) and by working 'at top capacity' (Friedan 289). Moreover, the realisation of female desire in no way signifies the rejection of domesticity that is implied by May. On the contrary, 'marriage, homes, children' all contribute to help women build 'growing links with the community' and achieve the 'sense of being complete and fully part of the world' (Friedan 290). Friedan goes out of her way not to deny the female tie to motherhood, wifedom, and the home, nor does she recognise that these institutions may assume drastically different meanings in accordance with

the racial, financial, geographical, social, and cultural circumstances of the women in question. Instead, Friedan chooses to focus on the ways in which social ties can be rendered more fulfilling by initiating a process of personal discovery that would enlarge the boundaries of the world women occupy. Each woman undergoes this project privately, by and for herself, her only negotiations occurring within her immediate sphere of personal contacts.

Yet, if the transformative strength of Friedan's work does not lie within the sphere of the public and political; if Friedan's book did not, in fact, 'launch the movement that eventually transformed women's place in American society' (Coontz, *A Strange Stirring* 139); if *The Feminine Mystique* was indeed 'not ahead of its time' (Coontz, *A Strange Stirring* 145), then what could explain its enduring influence, its shockingly vitalising qualities? The answer lies, it seems, as much in what the book does as in what it does not. For the white, middle-class, suburban women that were the subjects of Friedan's research, *The Feminine Mystique* was surely a way, albeit, as mentioned, imperfect, to gain access to the debate on female issues, to notice and openly be allowed to discuss the fact 'that bowling alleys and supermarkets have nursery facilities, while schools and colleges and scientific laboratories and government offices do not' (Friedan 306). It served as an entry point to the wider discussion, and as such it was valuable in engaging a wide range of otherwise disenfranchised women who had, up until Friedan, harboured their remonstrances as insular cases of personal discontent. In this way, *The Feminine Mystique* figuratively spoke to April Wheeler of Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (1961), Dottie Renfrew, Kay Strong, and Libby MacAusland of McCarthy's *The Group* (1963), and even, to an extent, to Maria Wyeth of Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1970), and gave them the space and means to voice their struggles, to tell their stories. Yet, in exclusively centring the discourse of female liberation around one social class, and one set of cultural, racial, and social circumstances, Friedan also sparked outrage by omission. *The Feminine Mystique* did not speak—could not speak—to Sophie Portnoy as one of the sources of Alexander Portnoy's

infamous ‘complaint,’ to little Marguerite in Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), or Pecola and Claudia in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970). As women at the junction of a variety of power structures all aimed at the oppression of one or more of their identities, these characters are not simply ‘handicapped by [their] sex’ (Friedan 307)—they are the products of multi-layered levels of control whose existence demands a collective effort towards dismantlement. Friedan’s omission of difference resonates loudly in these women’s accounts, and serves as a springboard for the recognition of more diverse discourses as both essential to the validation of diverse female identities, and, at the same time, crucial to the creation of a unified ‘women’s movement’—one that accounts for the multiplicity of female experience and employs it as a strength.

### **An introduction to the theoretical background**

If historically, then, the 60s were a time of reckoning in terms of both shedding light on the existence of deep-seated gender inequalities and understanding the necessity of inclusivity for female perspectives, culturally these concepts seemed to collide with the exploration of three fundamental thematic concerns: the sociological implications of physical environments, the limitations of language and traditional semiotics, and the crippling effects of intersectional power centres. In different ways and to different degrees, these three elements blend together in the narratives that comprise this project, and the challenges that female characters pose to traditional understandings of these ideas form the basis for the destabilisation of patriarchal authority and the initiation of processes of personal and collective identification and liberation. The following pages provide a closer look at the ways in which these thematic concerns are theorised, and how they will prove useful to an analysis of the narratives in question.

### *Environmental circumstances*

In 1962 George Gallup and Evan Hill published a study aimed at analysing the ‘American female—to find out what she does, what she thinks, what she worries about and what she wants’ (16). The results of the research are summarised by the authors as follows:

[The American woman] is 35 years old, happily married for 14 years to only one husband, and has slightly more than three years of high-school education. She has two children and wants one more. She is a full-time housewife and mother; she is not employed outside the home. (Gallup and Hill 16)

The picture painted by Gallup and Hill’s study describes a stereotypical image of womanhood whose only avenue for expression resides within the confines of wifedom and motherhood as symbolically represented by the ‘home.’ The American woman is shown not as a living, dynamic individual, but as a generalised archetype whose characteristics simultaneously serve to codify behaviours and deny alternative paths: ‘she is 35,’ never ageing, always fertile, and always pregnant; and her sole purpose in life is that of being ‘someone’s keeper’ (Gallup and Hill 26), the guardian and carer of the family life. Paradoxically, while the idea of a ‘keeper’ may awaken, in the social imaginary, thoughts of control and a certain measure of authority, here the phrase seems to solidify notions of female entrapment—the American woman, the study states, ‘is not employed outside the home,’ an assertion that, by exclusion, implies that she is indeed employed within the home. Her role as ‘keeper’ does not grant her freedom and independence, for, in its essence, it relies on some sort of external ‘employment,’ a contractual devolvement of power on the part of a higher authority—a boss, or, in this case, a husband. Moreover, the role of ‘keeper’ binds the woman to the home. Her contractual obligation is to remain in place, to serve not just the family, but the house itself; to keep clean, tidy, and safe the space that is both private residence and, at the same time, workplace.

The idea that there might be some sort of statutory obligation in the function of womanhood, an unspoken yet binding contract, is interesting insofar as it helps explain the social and familial dynamics of the 60s in relation to the larger political landscape of the US:

Political and economic relationships came to be organized around the contractual rights of equal, independent individuals; only gender and family relationships remained organized around personal needs, individual differences, and dependence. (Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* 44)

The simplistic reduction of womanhood to the functional expressions of wifedom and motherhood—the roles of carer and nurturer—is intrinsically political, not because of any subversive action it might inspire, but because the perceived survival of the financial, social, and civic status quo depends upon it. This gendered division of spaces and tasks assumes ideological ramifications when certain social ‘values’ are attributed to said spaces and tasks. If the ‘female’ as an idealised concept is located within the private sphere of the home, and its practical duties involve raising children, feeding the husband, and caring for the family’s dwelling, then the woman becomes the carrier symbol of love, nurture, and modesty as opposed to the typically male qualities of power, individualism, and dominance. This dichotomy of values structures the social order and establishes an unmovable hierarchy:

The so-called feminine virtues, polar opposites of public ones, are recognized as important [...], but they are clearly secondary virtues which must be sacrificed to maintain the public life now in place. Thus, femininity helps sustain dominant values by providing an alternative system that rescues society when its dominant values fail. The feminine alternative reinforces the private/public split because it permits a set of dominant values to function without acknowledging the hard choices that put them in place. (Baker 49)

The male dominant group's survival is ensured by devising a subordinate order whose principal function is that of catering for the private needs of the public man. It is only when those primary, private needs are fulfilled that the public man can indeed become public and ensure his own success in the public sphere. This system of social subordination is reflected in the suburban location of family homes as opposed to the office blocks of city life, a differentiation that allows for the physical removal of womanhood from the public space of collective productivity and decision-making. This has the effect of enabling the public man both by providing easy satisfaction for his basic desires, and by allowing him to 'put a moral gloss on behaviours or life choices that otherwise might make them uncomfortable' through the use of the 'legitimate male defence' of the 'I did it all for you' (Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* 56). In this male dominated landscape, women are reduced simultaneously to the role of carers within the home and that of dependants in the wider world, entrapped in a social structure that denies them mobility and emancipation. That this hierarchical value system quickly became an internalised precept for women is clear in Friedan's unpacking of the idea of the 'feminine mystique':

The new feminine morality story is the exorcising of the forbidden career dream, the heroine's victory over Mephistopheles: the devil, first in the form of a career woman, who threatens to take away the heroine's husband or child, and finally, the devil inside the heroine herself, the dream of independence, the discontent of the spirit, and even the feeling of a separate identity that must be exorcised to win or keep the love of a husband and child. (Friedan 31)

The passage is laden with religious references commonly attributed to the Christian tradition: the language of sin and expiation is a rhetorical attempt to communicate, exemplify, and clarify the feeling of guilt and inadequacy that the American woman is subject to when she struggles

to define herself outside the limited confines of her functional existence within the larger space—and system—of a capitalist state.

The system within which the women described by both Friedan and Gallup and Hills live is a system based on the existence of ‘uniquely female duties associated with the doctrine of separate spheres for men and women’ (Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* 41), a doctrine that is fundamental to the success of the capitalist state: ‘the cult of the Self-Made Man required the cult of the True Woman’ (Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* 53), and the cult of the True Woman can only exist in relation to the cult of the Home. The terms ‘doctrine’ and ‘cult’ as employed by Coontz in this context are particularly significant, for they demonstrate how the political implications of the socially constructed ideal of womanhood are described not in terms of civic and legal discourse, but, once again, as a form of spiritual, almost religious, calling. In this sense, the home becomes a sanctuary, a sacred space whose existence should be revered as the emblem of all that is socially important and all that needs to be protected. The physical removal of the home from the political and financial worlds is thus justified as an act of devotion, a way to preserve what is truly valuable and shelter it from the roughness of the ‘outside world.’ The woman, crystallised as the ‘keeper’ of the home as the sacred space, becomes a fundamental part of it, the cross-bearing symbol without which the whole institution would collapse as meaningless. The notion of blind faith associated with religious language of this kind denies the possibility for debate, while simultaneously legitimising the claims to a gendered division of spaces and tasks by invoking a higher, impalpable, and, thus, unassailable, authority.

It is important to notice, however, that if this particular reality of suburban spacial discrimination holds true for the middle-class, married women that form Friedan’s subject pool, this is not, by any means, a universal condition. As McNair Barnett suggests,

even while suffering the daily indignities heaped on them by their location in the structure of society, many southern Black women were much more than *followers* in the modern civil rights movement; many were also *leaders* who performed a variety of roles comparable to those of Black male leaders. (McNair Barnett 162-3)

Where the white women in Friedan's accounts were cast aside, geographically and architecturally separated from the centres of political action, Black women 'initiated protests, formulated strategies and tactics, and mobilized other resources' (McNair Barnett 163), effectively taking full part in the political landscape of the 60s. McNair Barnett talks of these women as occupying a variety of social and physical spaces—they are 'sharecroppers, domestic and service workers, schoolteachers, college professors, housewives, beauticians, students, and office secretaries' (McNair Barnett 163). Their participation in the local workforce dislocates them from the traditional space of the household and allows them to create networks that transcend familial boundaries, so as to be able to connect more effectively with the collective issues affecting the different social groups they belong to, and perform 'roles that by any standard would merit their being considered "heroes"' (McNair Barnett 163). Yet, the fact remains that, despite covering leadership positions, these women 'have remained anonymous, a category of invisible, unsung heroes' (McNair Barnett 163)—rather than being praised for their exceptionality, their actions have gone undiscussed, their achievements uncelebrated. Why is this the case? The answer is, of course, multi-faceted, but one thing is certain: if the circumstances in which the suburban housewife lives are not and could never be universal ones, they still remain prevalent in the collective imaginary as the ideals to which all women—regardless of age, ethnicity, geographical location, financial circumstances—should aspire. The way in which Gallup and Hills present their 'findings' leaves no question as to the truth of this matter—they are speaking of the 'American woman' as a generalised category, a romanticised and glamourised figure whose perfection is enviable and whose standards of living should serve

as a memento of what a woman should be. The socially aware, politically active women operating outside of these terms are portrayed as anomalies, or not portrayed at all. The all-American housewife may be just a type, and one not particularly representative of the majority of American women, but her ideological reach far outweighs her actual prevalence, making her an archetypal symbol of normative patriarchal success that social groups across the board of American experience can all strive to achieve.

### *Language and semiotics*

The American housewife is, then, the patriarchal standard according to which all women are judged, and against which they are required to measure themselves. The question remains, however, of how such an idealisation could have taken hold of the collective imaginary in such powerful terms as to virtually erase all other legitimate possibilities for female expression. The answer to this question, I will argue, lies in the language employed to construct such an image. Addie Bundren's discourse on the unreliability of language serves as something of a preface to this discussion, for it introduces the idea that language is gendered, and that, patriarchal authority being the dominant force controlling the communal process of meaning-making, gendered language is by its own nature biased against women.

At the root of this semiotic injustice is, at least partly, the framing of womanhood as indissolubly linked to wifedom and motherhood, and of wifedom and motherhood as the sacrificial relinquishing of female selfhood in favour of someone else's wellbeing, whether it be a husband or a child. As Friedan frames it, 'the problem that has no name' (Friedan 9) stems from the desperation to adhere to a normative standard of 'feminine fulfilment' that disregards all attempts at individuality and autonomy:

If the secret to feminine fulfilment is having children, never have so many women, with the freedom to choose, had so many children, in so few years, so willingly. If the answer is love, never have women searched for love with such determination. (Friedan 18)

The patriarchal equation of wifedom and motherhood to the underlying identity of 'female' and 'feminine' denies the possibility for real fulfilment, for it limits womanhood to serve a functional role within a highly imbalanced social order. 'The women who suffer' from 'the problem,' Friedan argues, 'have a hunger that food cannot fill' (Friedan 15), or, in other words, a desire for an identity that cannot be neatly categorised within the existing semiotic system. This language void is exactly where 'the problem that has no name' stems from, where the feeling of dissatisfaction and abjection experienced by a large portion of suburban housewives in the 60s comes into play. Indeed, the rhetoric surrounding the 'feminine mystique' seems to equate denial of the mystique to a denial of selfhood itself: 'the root of women's troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature' (Friedan 29). Through the invocation of 'nature' as a 'mysterious and intuitive' force whose workings can never to be understood by 'manmade science' (Friedan 28), the 'feminine mystique' seeks to transcend the realms of linguistic reasoning by claiming the existence of an overarching narrative outside the boundaries of human comprehension and yet essential to personal-'feminine'-fulfilment. In this narrative, a woman is forced to blindly accept her role in society by 'having babies' (Friedan 30), by existing 'only for and through her husband and children' (Friedan 32). On the one hand, the 'feminine mystique' generates a semiotic crisis that leads to the loss of identification with ideas of womanhood and to the adoption of the limited functional roles of wifedom and motherhood; on the other hand, however, the mystique itself is structured so that the search of a new definition of womanhood can only ever be perceived as a failure, for it is only through the performance of stereotypical images of femininity—the bride, the wife, the mother—that womanhood is allowed to exist. The 'problem

that has no name' is, therefore, twofold: firstly, it represents the thwarting of all attempts at gaining a female sense of selfhood outside the confines of a strictly gendered division of tasks and values by evoking an almost religious faith in established social structures and ideologies; and, secondly, it involves the lack of a specifically female form of semiotics that can express the feelings of abjection that this division generates in women, and can address the definition of womanhood in a manner that allows for the recognition of personal selfhood.

Indeed, the pressures of adhering to an externally produced 'mystique' that is so 'strong' as to 'make its own fiction fact [...] seep into every corner of the culture' (Friedan 43), and deny the possibility for the female voice to generate an autonomous definition of personhood and selfhood: the 'feminine mystique' represents the complete annihilation of female identity in favour of a devout faith in the almost sacred mythology of 'finding a husband and bearing children' (Friedan 6). The women interviewed by Friedan cannot recognise themselves except in terms of male generated and superimposed labels: 'the problem,' one woman tells Friedan, 'is always being the children's mommy, or the minister's wife and never being myself' (16). Yet, when asked how to define their identity, or how to articulate their feelings, these women appear incapable of doing so: 'I begin to feel I have no personality' (Friedan, 10), 'I feel like crying without any reason (Friedan 10), 'I feel empty somehow' and 'I feel as If I don't exist' (Friedan 10) are only but a few examples of the inability, on the part of the American woman, to establish a coherent language for and assured image of her own self. 'Women feel rejected from the language and the social bond' (Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul* 213), and this rejection signifies the impossibility to break free from the boundaries that the social bond and its language impose.

Friedan's focus on desire in this context is crucial, for it shows that in a 'symbolic discourse' that equates femininity with care for the other—the husband, the child, the home—a

situation of impasse arises, where ‘women cannot want anything’ (Baker 46) for they are seen—and see themselves—only as providers, and never as demanders.

Politically, this destroys women’s abilities to negotiate because the system is based upon persons who seek to pursue their own interests, happiness, and desires, persons who have desires. (Baker 46)

The denial of desire—or, in Friedan’s words, ‘fulfilment’—automatically excludes women from political discourse by depriving them of any personal and individual motivation. The husband and the child become, in this context, the only legitimate desires ‘because the feminine mystique says there is no other way for a woman to be a heroine’ (Friedan 30). The narrative of the American woman’s life in the 1960s is one that does not afford space for individualism and self-expression, for the “‘I” in pursuit of some human goal or dream’ (Friedan 39) can only truly aspire to the fulfilment of someone else’s aspirations. It is, before even being an identity issue, a language issue: the pervasive force of the ‘feminine mystique,’ which ‘makes certain concrete, finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity’ (Friedan 29), results in a language void where the essential condition of womanhood is substituted by a restricted number of functional subcategories—the mother, the wife, the carer. The oversimplification of tasks and values, with the terminology attached to these, leaves the individual unable to appreciate and communicate, often to even contemplate, the larger spectrum of identity.

Yet, if Friedan demonstrates concern with the way desire is expressed, or, in this case, repressed, through gendered discourse, her concern is based primarily on ideas of self-actualisation as the highest level of human satisfaction, and is related more to intellectual and moral identity than to primary avenues of self-fulfilment. The deeper causes of the inequality that plagued the language of desire in the 1960s, however, can be found within the physical dimension—the limitations imposed by language as semiotic sign in terms of female self-

representation (the possibility, for example, of being other than a mother or a wife) are mere consequences of a form of more primal control that has to do with the inscription of female bodies as subordinate to male authority. Indeed, Gilbert and Gubar see the systematic semantic oppression of women as a result of men's anxiety over the possibility of losing their dominance not only in the context of language-making and interpretation but also, and primarily, in that of 'eroticism', adding that this male state 'seems to involve a fantasy about acquiring a female—not a woman, but a sextoid—whose essential femaleness confers essential maleness' (Gilbert and Gubar 333). With the shift in focus from 'ambition' to 'eroticism,' the language assigned to the female sphere completes the process of dehumanisation. The woman is no longer a person in herself, but, rather, a sort of mechanical function whose role is that of fulfilling man's ego by providing an avenue for pleasure and fertility. As a result, another language dichotomy appears that further signifies the female's exclusion from public discourse:

The politics of this symbolic construction make 'woman' passive, elusive, a mysterious object, an inspiration and goal. She does not act, she merely inspires men's actions. In the realm of modern politics, which depends upon the actions of its citizens for its life, she has only a background role. 'Her' power resides in her ability to move, to motivate 'him.' (Baker 43)

The discourse about desire is complicated by the male necessity for a physical dominance that mirrors the linguistic power he wields, so that 'female' becomes in itself not a self-representational sign, but, rather an expression and manifestation of male power. 'Femininity' exists only in oppositional terms to 'masculinity,' and, as such, when taken out of the patriarchal context its communicative power is deprived of all meaning. 'Woman,' then, can only be read as a symbolic representation of the desired, while 'man' is the active carrier and fulfiller of said desire. 'Man' is dynamic; 'woman' is static. 'Man' is functionally central; 'woman' is relative.

In this light, the semiotic problem does not differ in nature from the social problem, and, instead, reflects and amplifies its central issue:

The [language] network creates meaning by forming series of oppositions, similarity and genera. [...] We know that 'woman' and 'man' are related as subsets of a category "human," yet are opposites. It is not surprising then, that many men are concerned with the redefinitions of 'woman' offered by feminists. To change the meaning of one of the sets of oppositions is to change the meaning of the other. (Baker 35)

The traditionally accepted social functions of 'man' and 'woman' are 'a clear displacement of the original double standard' (Brooke-Rose 15) that is based on the binary system of oppositions that characterises language as such. In the 1960s, the language network saw 'man' and 'woman' as co-dependent signifiers living in a relationship of unbalance in which man is the speaker, and, therefore owner, of meaning. In order to engage in any form of discourse, therefore, a woman must accept the male definition of language, for it is only so that society can see language as assuming any meaning. Conversely, 'for man to exercise his sovereignty nothing must arise as equivalent to his word [...] that maintains her in obedience, so the male imagination constructs a mute ideal' (Brooke-Rose 14). As Friedan recalls,

one woman told me that she gave up her job in television to become 'just a housewife' because her husband suddenly decided his troubles in his own profession were caused by her failure to play the 'feminine role'; she was trying to 'compete' with him; she wanted to 'wear the pants.' (Friedan 286)

Significantly, in this account of the silencing of female desire, the woman holds a position in the media: her function outside the home makes her dangerous not only because it subverts what is conceived as the natural order of values, but because it places the woman into contact with a platform that is concerned with speech and images as signifiers and carriers of communication. In these circumstances, the threat that the husband detects is not only a threat

to the social hierarchy of the sexes, but, also, a threat to the language hierarchy that grants man primacy over the process of assigning meaning. Interestingly, the husband proves exactly this point by making use of language to try to dehumanise the wife, attacking her alleged desire to ‘wear the pants’: outside of the socially accepted functional roles of mother and wife, the woman is semantically associated with the male sphere, and this in-between status that excludes feminine satisfaction while simultaneously scornfully denying access to the ‘male’ sphere of language ‘reduces the woman to silence’ and, therefore, ‘powerlessness’ (Debax 33–tr. Brooke-Rose).

Trapped in this vicious circle, the American woman of the 1960s experiences a ‘vacuum of ideas’ (Friedan 39) in which ‘there is no way she can even dream about herself, except as her children’s mother, her husband’s wife’ (Friedan 45). As argued by Kristeva,

motherhood [is] the sole function of the ‘other sex’ to which we may confidently attribute existence. [...] We live in a civilization in which the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is subsumed under maternity. (Kristeva, ‘Stabat Mater’ 133)

The female sex is here doubly ‘other’: it is ‘other’ for men, because depictions of femininity must stand, by necessity, in opposition to male affirmations of personal and social identity; and it is ‘other’ for women, for it is based on gendered assumptions that can only be recognised as external, and never fully representative. Motherhood and wifehood in this context are not portrayals of femininity, but performative acts established by the ‘social contract’ that is enforced by a male-dominated ‘civilization’: ‘Lately,’ tells one of Friedan’s interviewees, ‘I look into the mirror, and I’m so afraid I’m going to look like my mother. It frightens me, to catch myself being like her in gestures or speech’ (Friedan 55). It is not by accident that the interview focuses on the recurrence of speech and gestural patterns, for it is within this repetition that the nature of historical performativity linked to motherhood is expressed. This

recognition of the performative nature of gender roles is essential in the process of liberation, for it establishes the first step towards abandoning inauthentic incarnations of traditional femininity in favour of a certain individuality of expression—it is only by actively addressing the superimposed terms of the performance that the system can begin to be dismantled.

Yet, where the conscious acknowledgement of and challenge to the idea of performative functionality is fundamental to the process of liberation, Manne argues that this can only stem from a redressing of the ‘conceptual’—and, thus, linguistic—framework within which the idea of performativity is generated:

Ameliorative (or ‘analytical’) projects [...] require actively making decisions about what to mean with our words. Familiarly, if we want to change the world, we may need to conceptualize it differently. (Manne 42)

As Friedan herself suggests, ‘part of the strange newness of the problem is that it cannot be understood in terms of the age-old material problems of man’ (Friedan 15). On a superficial level, this statement refers to the conventional thought-systems of the 1960s that saw women’s complaints about their circumstances dismissed as irrelevant for disproportionate to the obvious privileges—the very evident lack of ‘poverty, sickness, hunger and cold’ (Friedan 15)—that characterised the life of the all-American housewife and whose impact on the section of society analysed by Friedan should signify, in traditional patriarchal terms, happiness and satisfaction. Yet, Friedan’s use of language suggests that there might be a deeper significance to her argument: ‘the problem that has no name’ cannot be analysed, explained and discussed ‘in terms of’—or, in other words, ‘in the language of’—‘man’ and the predominantly male social discourse. It needs, in Manne’s words, to be ‘conceptualised differently.’ At its core, this is a semiotic matter: ‘the problem,’ Friedan explains, ‘was dismissed by shrugging that there are no solutions: this is what being a woman means’ (13). The widespread identification of the

female 'signified' with predetermined roles becomes codified in common language usage, and therefore indisputable:

What semiotics has discovered is the fact that there is a general social law, that this law is the symbolic dimension which is given in language, and that every social practice offers a specific expression of that law. (Kristeva, 'The System and The Speaking Subject' 124)

In the 1960s, the American 'general social law'—that is, not the reality of lived life, but the idealised version of it that formed the patriarchal system of aspirations—established that the 'symbolic dimension' given to 'woman' is 'childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies and home' (Friedan 23). The narrative thread that pervades the popular culture of the time, exemplified by Friedan through the editorial contents of an issue of McCall's magazine (Friedan 22), is one that perpetuated the definition of womanhood according to parameters that exclude 'the world of thought and ideas, the life of mind and spirit' (Friedan 23) in favour of menial, mundane and contained—both physically and ideologically—functions. Yet, Kristeva asks,

since we no longer wish to be excluded from [the social] order, and we are no longer satisfied with our perpetually assigned role of maintaining, developing, and preserving this sociosymbolic contract as mothers, wives, nurses [...], how might we appropriate our own space, a space that is passed down through tradition and that we would like to modify? (Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul* 212)

Interestingly, Kristeva conflates spatial and linguistic concerns as attributes of the 'sociosymbolic'—i.e. performative—nature of female social functionality. The contractual and semiotic obligations of women can be physically located within the confines of normative feminine 'spaces': the home, the kitchen, the bedroom, the female body itself. In order for women to escape the cyclical repetition of their performative and social functions, whose

legitimation is ‘passed down through tradition,’ women need to relocate their position within the wider stage of public and collective discourse, while simultaneously re-appropriating and redefining normative definitions of traditionally feminine spaces. Where normative semiotics denies the female expression of desires and ambitions, the imaginative reworking of the female performance and narrative can pave the way for a position of greater empowerment. Indeed, in describing symbolic representations of motherhood in the Christian image of the Mater Dolorosa, Kristeva argues that Mary’s most powerful form of communication lies primarily in two bodily elements: milk and tears. ‘Both,’ Kristeva adds, ‘are metaphors of a non-language, of a semiotic that does not coincide with linguistic communication’ (Kristeva, ‘Stabat Mater’ 143). The way to escape the ‘sacrificial logic of separation,’ (Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul* 213) in both physical and functional terms, that excludes women from participating in the linguistic process of assigning meaning and, therefore, in the ‘social bond,’ is not to create a ‘female language’ (Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul* 213), but, rather, to create a new ‘semiotic’ of representation and performativity through which it might be possible to challenge the status quo.

#### *Diverse experiences of womanhood*

Friedan’s examination of female desires, the radical rejection of traditionally female avenues of self-expression—i.e. gender-biased language and performativity—and the proposal of a new ‘semiotic’ system that places the physical space at the core of the identity-making process are all important steps toward the abandonment of the ‘feminine mystique’ in favour of more open, varied, and pertinent representations of womanhood and femininity. In an attempt to cater for the idea that ‘there was more than one problem—or at least the problem seemed different depending on who you were, how old you were, where you lived, and what you wanted’ (Chafe 538), this particular branch of feminist thought, which social historians have identified as

'liberal' feminism, proposes an individualistic approach in which each woman, though starting 'from different places' and having 'different goals' (Chafe 554), can succeed for herself in fulfilling her subjective desires. Yet it is crucial to remember that, as many have pointed out, Friedan's assumptions on the 'feminine mystique' and its potential subversions rely on data that is, in itself, biased:

Each suburban wife struggled with [the problem] alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slip-cover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question: 'Is this all?' (Friedan 5)

As suggested earlier in this introduction, Friedan's research clearly demonstrates a tendency to focus on the suburban housewife as the prototype of the American woman, equipped with all the consumer comforts that her social status can provide, and stuck in a sequence of menial tasks that leave her floating on the surface of personhood. Friedan's premise is that the women in question would have, if only they tried, the means and opportunities to fulfil their 'ambitions;' that the only obstacles that they face are those presented by the social prescriptions typically attributed to femininity. In this portrayal of the American life, no space is afforded to the depiction of women whose life develops, whether by choice or necessity, outside the common framework of social acceptability. Gallup and Hill's research makes this point even clearer:

Although the divorcée, the childless wife, the working mother, the old maid, the widow are parts of womankind, they are not typical; they concern the sociologist because they are unusual in a society that is not geared for them. This survey was not a sociological examination of the extremes among the American women. It was an attempt to look at American women in toto. (Gallup and Hill 16)

These social ‘anomalies’ are marginalised as existing ‘in a society that is not geared for them’ and, that, as a consequence, is freed of responsibility with regards to their success. The middle-class family is constructed as the core of social aggregation, the essential building block through which the complex system of infrastructures and bureaucracy of the state can come into existence and to whom the community as a whole has to respond. The ‘divorcée, the childless wife, the working mother, the old maid, the widow,’ and, as Coontz and others point out, the woman of colour, do not belong to this order of things, and their welfare is thus irrelevant. Indeed, Coontz’s indignation at Friedan’s lack of diversification particularly echoes the words of McNair Barnett by pointing out the simple fact that Friedan ‘portrayed all women in that era as passive and preoccupied with their homes’ (Coontz, *A Strange Stirring* XIX) while so many were concerned with social struggles that included, but were not limited to, ‘standing up to racist mobs and police brutality’ (Coontz, *A Strange Stirring* XIX). This is a crucial issue, for it serves as a springboard for the exploration of the merits and limits of Friedan’s work, as well as of what possibilities for female liberation there might exist beyond Friedan’s attack of the ‘mystique.’

In a 1963 review of *The Feminine Mystique*, Silvia Fleis Fava criticises Friedan’s ‘psychological approach’ (Fava 1054) as insufficient while at the same time recognising that ‘Friedan has put the finger on the key problem of American women today: recognition as individuals’ (Fava 1054). Though only partially developed, Fava’s stance is particularly relevant to this project, for it places emphasis on two fundamental aspects of Friedan’s work. On the one hand, *The Feminine Mystique* locates itself within a larger linguistic and semiotic process promoting a crucial redefinition of the way womanhood and femininity are conceived and communicated. Despite its shortcomings, this semantic and systemic re-evaluation cannot be lightly rejected, for although Friedan employs a restrictive idea of the American woman, her template for liberal feminism, a template that begins with the re-coding of female desire, marks

a foundational stage in the process of female liberation. Nevertheless, Coontz and Fava's objections signify the necessity for a fundamental second stage that transcends Friedan's liberal, 'individual-rights based' vision to reach 'a justice-based vision for social change' (Thompson 337). Indeed, a closer focus on marginalised groups of women reveals how Friedan's proposal 'neglects that the changed attitudes and plans must be acted upon in the context of the total society' and that 'the woman who develops the new life plan will find few institutionalised channels by which it can be put into effect' (Fava 1054). Women, particularly women of colour and those belonging to the working class, cannot see the expression and fulfilment of personal desires as the solution to their problems because their struggles are multi-faceted: the issue, for those women, is not simply relatable to gender oppressive social conventions, but it presents a number of interlinked layers of social oppression. Friedan's idea of liberal feminism, in which the primary focus lies with 'fighting for the individual advancement of women' and 'abolosh[ing] sex as a category for treating women and men differently under the law' (Chafe 555) fails to recognise the need of marginalised women to fight a system of discrimination that is composite and complex. 'Defin[ing] equality as an end to male-dominated institutions shaped by 'masculine' values of competition and winning' (Chafe 554) is misleading in this context, for it bars prejudice based onto other non-gendered factors to be part of the feminist discussion even when these non-gendered factors have considerable impact on women's lives.

The need for a social justice-based stage to female liberation is exemplified by Thompson's analysis of certain popular feminist slogans:

Both popular and scholarly interpretations of second wave feminism typically link two well-known principles to the movement—'Sisterhood Is Powerful' and 'The Personal Is Political.' From the point of view of multiracial feminism, both principles are a good start but, in themselves, are not enough. (Thompson 346)

The idea that ‘Sisterhood is Power’ cannot work in a white-dominated context where segregation is still a reality, because it automatically renews ties to exclusion and segregation. If women of colour and white women are separate social groups with less in common with one another than with the male members of their respective groups—with whom they share environmental, financial and affective links—then the strong, familial ties that should be evoked by the idea of feminism as a form of ‘sisterhood’ are severed by racial distinction. In the public imaginary, white and black women cannot be ‘sisters,’ for the former do not share in the latter’s struggles and vice-versa. It is for this reason that the feminist system ‘requires women to add another level of awareness—to stretch the adage from “The Personal Is Political” to [...] “The Personal Is Political and The Political Is Personal”’ (Thompson, 347). The individualistic drive described by Friedan must be supported by a communal challenge to all forms of gender-based discriminations, even those that only directly affect a particular sub-group within the category ‘woman’: ‘if the only issues that feminists deem political are those they have experienced personally, their frame of reference is destined to be narrowly defined by their own lived experience’ (Thompson, 347) and therefore limited to forms of personal gain that can never achieve complete fulfilment within the wider spectrum of social activity. As Manne puts forward,

both the content of the norms themselves and the mechanisms of enforcement may vary widely, depending on the overall social position of differently situated girls and women. This may also have an important effect on either the experience or impact of misogyny, given forms of disadvantage or vulnerability that may be mutually compounding.

(Manne 13)

Not only is the patriarchal system only one of a number of power centres whose influence affects women’s lives, it in fact relies, at least in part, on the ‘mutually compounding’ impact of different ‘forms of disadvantage and vulnerability’ whose combined consequences collide

to amplify the oppression of misogynistic ‘norms.’ The patriarchal social order is, in this light, part of a bigger system that seeks to place the white male at the top of the social hierarchy, and, as a result, is bound to uphold different degrees and typologies of oppression as a way to support the persisting dominance of the ‘ruling’ class. Where feminist thought ignores the diversity inherently pertaining to the notion of womanhood, it directly plays into these dynamics by strengthening the forms of control that make oppression possible in the first place, and allowing the ‘enforcement’ of the patriarchal social norm to persist. In other words, while the experiences of the woman of colour—or the working class woman; the non-cisgender, non-heterosexual woman; the disabled woman—are dismissed as anomalous and excluded from the branches of mainstream feminism, the patriarchal structure that sees the white man as the top of the social ‘food chain’ can never be fully dismantled. It is only by acknowledging the complex systems of oppression employed by the misogynistic normative rules of social aggregation in order to perpetuate the existing social order that the process of social restructuring, with the linguistic and environmental ramifications that come with it, can truly begin.

### **The criteria behind the stories**

If ‘whiteness and maleness are implicit’ and ‘unquestioned’ (Criado Perez 23); if ‘they are the default’ and ‘go without saying’ (Criado Perez 23), then the process of liberation requires first and foremost that these become ‘said.’ The first half of this research project, then, explores the personal, intimate, and ultimately private effects of patriarchal authoritative oppression. The three novels that comprise this section—Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*, Mary McCarthy’s *The Group*, and Joan Didion’s *Play It as It Lays*—are concerned primarily with the individual’s understanding, experience, and rejection of gendered discrimination, set against the different backgrounds of, respectively, the suburbs, the city, and the road. These narratives will be read with a look at analysing how space as both a physical environment and a social construct affects

what Judith Butler calls ‘gender regulations’: how does the intersection of private and public spaces influence the development of personal identity? How do the communities, the homes, the offices and the streets that women inhabit shape their behavioural patterns and contribute to the continuation or subversion of gender stereotypes? How can these stereotypes be challenged within the confines of structured social hierarchies?

The answers to these questions will then be cast into the context of more complex social structures in order to offer a nuanced and complex view of the gendered forms of oppression and discrimination identified. The narratives that comprise the latter half of this project—Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*—will be analysed with an eye to the process of collective ‘saying,’ and a concern for ensuring that the ‘compound’ dominance of racial and gendered discrimination will be explicitly addressed. Through these stories, the patriarchal structures of control that base their efficacy on the compound burden of race and gender will be examined under a wider social lens that takes account of those ‘whose needs and perspective are routinely forgotten’ (Criado Perez 23), and whose experience of discrimination makes it evident that the ‘political’ is, indeed ‘personal.’

The juxtaposition of personal and social/collective experiences that these two sections, and these authors, bring about will serve as a reflection on the ways in which feminist projects must—and indeed can—overcome ‘intersectional’ boundaries—the boundaries of class, space, race, and, of course, gender performativity that ‘intersect in the lives of real people’ (Crenshaw 1242)—in order to fulfil a potential for liberation that can succeed across the scope of the diverse experiences of womanhood. The chapters will look specifically at female identities as affected by multi-layered systems of codification and oppression, systems in which a number of different power centres intersect to determine the ways in which pre-existing linguistic and cultural norms work to generate barriers that seek to alienate and ostracise female selfhood,

and how these barriers can be dismantled through the adoption of alternative semiotic strategies.

*Chapter I*  
**‘Being an Instance of the Norm’: Women, Surveillance and Guilt  
in Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road***

In the early 1960s, as Betty Friedan was conducting her preliminary interviews for *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), she encountered the testimony of ‘a twenty-three-year-old mother in blue jeans’ (Friedan 11) who explained:

I often ask myself why I’m so dissatisfied. I’ve got my health, fine children, a lovely new home, enough money. My husband has a real future as an electronics engineer. [...] It’s as if since you were a little girl, there’s always been somebody or something that will take care of your life [...]. Then you wake up one morning and there’s nothing to look forward to. (Friedan 11)

As a young mother, the woman seems to possess everything that she is supposed to desire. She is privileged with the comforts of a stable and decorous income, and she is secure in her position as the member of a respectable family unit. She is the prototype of the successful white middle-class American, and, yet, she is ‘so dissatisfied.’ She has ‘nothing to look forward to,’ no stimulus that will propel her toward further personal development and growth. She has no desires outside the ones that she has been conditioned to accept as her own, and she is not alone in this. On the contrary, as *The Feminine Mystique* demonstrates, she is a representative of a specific cross-section of America in response to which she seems to voice a series of concerns—concerns with regards to social status, consumerist instincts, and self-actualisation—that permeated the social structures and shaped the cultural landscape of the time. The mother of Friedan’s recollection is, essentially, a spokesperson for a generalised feeling of social paralysis and anxiety that seems to characterise early-1960s’ middle-class America as a social milieu occupying a liminal space between utopia and dystopia.

Exploring the contradictions, limitations and struggles of this particular social milieu has been a primary aim for the fiction of Richard Yates. As Jennifer Daly argues, ‘as a writer, Yates was primarily concerned with what he saw as the flawed American Dream’ (1). Burdened by the ‘stifling conformity and artificiality’ (Daly 1) that the dream engenders, Daly continues, American ‘citizens’ become in Yates’s fictions centres of tension where the dream is both ‘atrophied’ and, simultaneously, ‘still holds power over almost every aspect of life’ (Daly 1). That the ‘flawed’ dream—which Daly identifies as the ‘struggle to [...] be content to conform to the social and cultural mores of the time [...] without compromising’ a certain ‘sense of individuality’ (Daly 1)—is inextricably linked to environmental circumstances is evidenced by the attention placed by most scholarly readings of Yates’s work on the idea of the suburb as the setting that ‘defly reveals the mechanisms of social control that drive these conformist environments, and thereby exposes the illusory nature of freedom and autonomy existing therein’ (Wilson 14). Indeed, the vast majority of criticism concerned with Yates’s *Revolutionary Road* (1961) places the novel steadily within the sub-genre of suburban fiction, and addresses, to varying degrees, the effects of suburban development on its characters and storylines. Jessica Mayhew speaks of ‘the frightening aspect of this environment’ as one that ‘is difficult to articulate because it is concealed in blandness’ (618), while Andrew Slade suggests that ‘April and Frank live in a constricted space where the possibilities for action appear progressively limited’ (671). Wilson, Mayhew and Slade all point to the physical design of suburban developments as directly impacting the psychological and social progression of Yates’s characters, rendering the Revolutionary Hill Estates an active agent in the process of identity formation. In this context, then, suburbia functions as a locus that both offers a physical representation of the ‘stifling conformity’ imposed on the characters, and, at the same time, enacts a reinforcement of the social structures from which such concept of social conformity stems. Indeed, if, as Beuka suggests, ‘the development and subsequent expansion of suburbia

entailed the construction of [...] new psychic and emotional landscapes' (4), these seem to work in Yates's fiction in a symbiotic relationship with the strategic planning of the suburban town and its houses, so as to establish suburbia 'as a place that reflects both an idealised image of middle-class life and specific cultural anxieties about the very elements of society that threaten this image' (Beuka 7).

Yet, if the impact and symbolic value of suburbia in *Revolutionary Road* has been widely analysed and debated, there still appears to remain a certain degree of ambiguity over the highly gendered connotations that the suburban town and house bear for the characters in the novel, and for the wider social landscape. On the one hand, there is no doubt about the structural normalisation of gendered roles that is embedded within the suburban landscape. As Kim England underlines,

post-war residential suburbanization was hinged on the notion of dichotomous spheres.

The 'private' sphere of consumption/reproduction, home, family, and domesticity being the domain of women, and the 'public' sphere of production, waged work and political activity being associated with men. (England 25)

In this light, female characters in the novel are regularly depicted in critical assessments as representations of 'the myriad unfulfilled housewives of the post-war years, confined to their homes and gendered roles' (Wilson 20), or 'the suburban housewives and mothers' that were 'of central importance as the symbol[s] of the new domesticity even as [they] found [themselves] increasingly estranged from society at large' (Beuka 152). On the other hand, however, this reading of the gendered prescriptions embodied by suburban developments is employed to portray an uncomplicated image of womanhood in the novel by essentially generating an ulterior gendered code wherein all suburban housewives are encompassed by one archetypal character-type subjected to limiting standards of gender identity, and, as such, devoid of personality and individuality as an emblem alternatively of female repression or

masculine dissatisfaction. As Wilson suggests, Frank Wheeler is ‘Yates’s protagonist in *Revolutionary Road*’ (15), while ‘the Wheelers exemplify falsehood, duplicity and inauthenticity’ (Wilson 19). There is either no distinction between April and her husband, or, if a distinction is identified, it is only so that April might serve as a counterpart to Frank’s ‘protagonist’ struggles. Moreover, in the same article, John Givings as the madman of Foucauldian heritage is described as ‘forc[ing] his family and neighbours to confront the ruptures in the dominant ideology of the time’ (Wilson 28), while April Wheeler is portrayed as a mere victim of social circumstances beyond her control, a slave to the ‘traditional gendered behaviours demanded of her by the postwar context’ (Wilson 27). Similarly, McGinley argues that, within the realm of the suburban home, only Frank is able to realise ‘that he is playing the role of the prototypical suburban husband,’ becoming thus compelled ‘to shatter the image by breaking the picture window’ (McGinley 36) while April remains unaware of her condition, a meek player in a suburban social performance solely orchestrated by patriarchal authority.

Where many have recognised the gendered nature of suburban structures and social mores, the significance of singularly female struggles and expressions within *Revolutionary Road* has often been either overlooked or widely misread as the exclusive result of patriarchal operations of power. What this chapter proposes to address in the first instance, then, is an analysis of the ways in which the pre-existing gendered codes embedded within the structural design of suburban towns and houses serve to enforce a mechanism of social control exercised by women over women. This mechanism, it will be argued, leads to a seemingly unbreakable cycle of surveillance and guilt over the performance of certain prescribed gender roles aimed at the preservation of the social status quo. The question of whether and how the novel seems to present avenues for the examination, manipulation, and subversion of such roles will then be raised in an attempt to demonstrate what agency remains available to the female characters presented by the narrative. The first section of the chapter will focus primarily on the language

employed in Yates's description of the suburban landscape, so as to highlight the gendered dynamics at work in the connection between the physical structure of the suburban town and its social hierarchies. The second section will highlight the impact of said characteristics onto the suburban community, by examining the ways in which the instances of social performance encouraged by the suburban design deprive female characters of a viable audience for the expression of personal desire. The chapter will conclude with a suggestion that an alternative form of extra-linguistic semiotics may be available to the female characters in *Revolutionary Road* as exemplified by April's death at the conclusion of the novel.

### **Dream Houses and Suburban Consumerism**

As the main site of narrative action, the Revolutionary Hill Estates are initially presented in the novel via a carefully planned introduction orchestrated by the town's estate agent, Mrs Givings. In describing Frank and April's soon-to-be family home, the woman praises its neat and tidy appearance, placing emphasis on its rigorously structured spaces with the 'prim suburban look' of a 'symmetrical living room' (Yates 30), 'corners' that 'made right angles,' and 'floorboards' that 'lay straight and true' (Yates 30). The language Mrs Givings uses to describe the house gradually shifts in conversation with the Wheelers, from a strictly architectural register to one concerned with rather more moral and symbolic issues, prompting the idea of the suburban home as the focal centre of social status and emblem of honesty and respectability. What Mrs Givings implies in her presentation is the idea that the choice of dwelling for the Wheeler bears far wider ramifications than the practical aspects of family living. The scriptural language employed to describe the physical space denotes an almost religious belief that the regulated and hierarchical order of the suburban landscape can give meaning to an otherwise confused and hazy concept of personal and social identity, a characteristic that even the Wheelers cannot help but find 'undeniably appealing' (Yates 30). The choice of a proper and 'prim' suburban

home grants a feeling of social affiliation that signifies the willing adoption of the suburban social code, thus rendering the values associated with the social norm a commodity that can be acquired for the improvement of one's personal circumstances. Mrs Givings as an estate agent in this context, then, is significant beyond the contents of her discourse for she is representative of the notion that suburban ideals possess a certain consumeristic quality, an idea that is reinforced by Frank Wheeler's own latent attitudes towards suburban living. Indeed, in his attempt to align himself with a social structure that sees him as the intellectual guide of his familial life, Frank goes so far as to rewrite entire conversations and scenes of his life to create, in his mind, a TV advertisement of what his future is supposed to look like:

All afternoon in the city, stultified at what he liked to call 'the dullest job you can possibly imagine,' he had drawn strength from a mental projection of scenes to unfold tonight. Himself rushing home to swing his children laughing in the air, to gulp a cocktail and chatter through an early dinner with his wife; himself driving her to the high school, with her thigh tense and warm under his reassuring hand [...]; himself glowing and dishevelled, pushing his way through jubilant backstage crowds to claim her first tearful kiss [...]; and then the two of them stopping for a drink in the admiring company of Step and Milly Campbell. (Yates 13)

Frank's constructed image of the idyllic family life—the 'children laughing,' the 'cocktail and chatter,' April's 'tearful kiss,' and 'the admiring company of Shep and Milly Campbell'—speaks of an individual whose sense of personal achievement is deeply connected to his compliance with normalised standards of suburban 'happiness': the 'mental projection' that gets Frank through his day is a pre-packaged dream, a spectacularly presented interlude that he actively pursues in an attempt to 'sell' the utopic suburban vision to both himself and his wife, and whose crystallised existence, however, is at odds with the complexities of a reality that is far from the imagined.

In a social environment that equates housing circumstances to happiness and morality, being able to provide a suburban house for his family becomes for the male character a rite of passage, a way of showing he has earned the status of manhood. As John Cheever suggests in his novel *Bullet Park* (1969):

The stranger has left his wife in the Hotel Plaza, watching television. The search for shelter seems to him to go on at a nearly primordial level. Prices are high these days and nothing is exactly what one wants. (Cheever 4)

The satisfaction of a primary need such as the ‘search for shelter’ is equated in the suburban context to the acquisition of commodities that bear little connection to survival and are, instead, to be considered as emotional tokens of personal success. As Berger explains, ‘the suburbs were rich with ready made visible symbols: patios and barbecues, lawnmowers and tricycles, shopping centers, station wagons, and so on’ (Berger 82) and ‘such symbols were readily organizable into an image of a way of life that could be marketed’ (Berger 82) not only by businesses seeking financial gain, but also by single individuals in promotion of their supposed self-actualisation. The reference to the hunter-gatherer spirit that is embedded in Hammer’s ‘search for shelter’ demonstrates how identity has become a transaction closely linked to consumerist drives, in which the prosperity of the family unit is granted by the fulfilment of prescribed roles: a husband who is willing to embrace the ‘primordial’ struggle to provide for his family, and a wife who ‘gathers’—by ‘watching television’—the social codes and is capable of enacting them. This ‘commercial quality’ (Cheever 100) is exactly what distinguishes the suburban effort: the symbolic possession of commodities for the man is not constrained to objects of everyday use, nor to his dwelling and his wealth. Rather, it extends to encompass, as the ultimate signpost of his achievements, his family, for it is the family that becomes representative of the values to which the suburban community attributes importance. Ownership of the physical landmarks of respectability—the ‘patios and barbecues, lawnmowers

and tricycles'—in itself is not enough to grant male satisfaction, for the symbolic power of said articles needs to be reflected in the behavioural patterns of those who wield the objects. In this light, the acquisition of the familial home becomes more than a commercial investment and is charged with allegorical meaning: 'The house or the flat that he looks for, he knows, will have to have appeared at least twice in his dreams' (Cheever, 4). There is a spiritual quality to the 'search for shelter' insofar as its completion seems to mark, for the man, a development from boyhood into manhood.

The issue is, of course, markedly different for female characters, for whom two contrasting forces are seen at play in the geographical plan of *Revolutionary Road*. On the one hand, the design of the home as the normative female space seems to reflect a need for the projection of an outward appearance whose accomplishment defines the woman's—and, as a reflection, the family's—success within the suburban community. On the other hand, the physical isolation of the Revolutionary Road houses from the wider landscape of productive activity—agricultural, industrial, or tertiary—also imparts limitations on ideas of femininity by precluding female characters from partaking in occupations of financial and political interest. It is, thus, no surprise that the objection that April Wheeler finds to the property presented by Mrs Givings is that, 'Of course it does have the picture window' (Yates 29). With its similarity to a permanently open stage curtain or an always-on TV screen, the picture window represents the social scrutiny to which the woman as the centre of the house is subject, and emphasises the need for a sort of theatrical '(re)production' of motions and tasks as a way of expressing allegiance to the predetermined role and satisfying the prying viewers. April's understanding that 'I guess there's no escaping that,' (Yates 29) and Frank's assured response that 'I don't suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities' (Yates 29) foreshadow an essential thematic concern for the entire novel: the fact that the notion of female 'entrapment' is mystified by its being embedded in a project of architectural reconstruction that

symbolises a social discourse whose primary manufacturer is patriarchal authority. Frank's dismissal of April's objection to the 'picture window' that characterises suburban life is symptomatic of a wider attitude that seeks to establish female desires and anxieties as secondary, irrational, and unimportant in the broad scheme of things. Read alongside a contemporaneous female-centred—and female-authored—novel, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) for example, *Revolutionary Road* exhibits a conscious effort to depict the totalitarian nature of the male discourse within the suburban community. Indeed, the response of Esther Greenwood, Plath's heroine, to the intrusiveness that windows represent demonstrates a sharp contrast in perspective:

Ours was a small, white clapboard house set in the middle of a small green lawn on the corner of two peaceful suburban streets, but in spite of the little maple trees planted at regular intervals around our property, anybody passing along the sidewalk could glance up at the second storey windows and see just what was going on. (Plath 111)

Where April's complaint with regards to the picture window is presented as being only a minor glitch that can easily be conquered by Frank's self-assured stance, Esther's insistence on the contrast between the 'two peaceful suburban streets' and the 'glance' that, at any moment, can 'see just what was going on' underlines the constant violation of female personhood that the suburban standard of living imposes upon women.

[Mrs Ockenden] had called my mother up twice about me—once to report that I had been sitting in front of the house for an hour under the streetlight and kissing somebody in a blue Plymouth, and once to say that I had better pull the blinds down in my room, because she had seen me half naked getting ready for bed one night when she happened to be out walking her Scotch terrier. (Plath 111)

The two instances of intrusion that Esther Greenwood chooses to recall describe the lack of privacy that the suburbs offer to women and are thus significant insofar as they speak of an

entrapment that is not merely psychological, but bodily. The acts of kissing and undressing are denounced by the community as unbecoming for they do not conform to the wholesome ideals of femininity as pure—before marriage—and motherly—after marriage. The female body is controlled by the community insofar as its uses are prescribed by the same social codes that affirm men as providers and women as carers, and the only role open to female characters as participants in the suburban social performance becomes that of the ‘suburban housewife.’

It can be argued, then, that the male patriarchal authority is able to find its own self-actualisation through the provision of a satisfactorily ‘suburban’ familial home. His female counterpart, however, is either infantilised or subdued by the physical space she is forced to occupy. This is particularly evident in Yates’s treatment of Milly Campbell and Mrs Givings, where both characters seem to live in an almost symbiotic relationship with their home, so much so that their identities become fused with the social significance of the buildings they inhabit. Milly Campbell’s bedroom, for example,

was a room that might have been dreamed by a little girl alone with her dolls and obsessed with the notion of making things nice for them [...] and whose quick, frightened eyes, as she worked, would look very much like the eyes that now searched this mirror for signs of encroaching middle age. (Yates 143)

The aspirations of ‘little girl’ Milly are reflected in the design of the bedroom, whose mirror, in turn, projects an image of adult Milly, fighting ‘encroaching middle age’ and yet somehow still stuck in an immature fantasy of what her life should be. The house is an extension of Milly’s desires—or lack thereof. The childlike obsession with ‘making things nice’ for her ‘dolls’ develops into an adult representation of a woman that ‘could live in an ugly, efficient suburban house like this and know why and how it had to be apologized for in terms of the job and the kids’ (Yates 142), and all through this, nothing of Milly is ever explored outside her relation to the house and the family that inhabits it. The home becomes the place where female

identity is realised not as a personal choice, but, rather, as a conventional association. The segregated nature of suburban life grants no space for female expression outside the home, and yet, the ‘regulations’ that familial life abides to limit the scope of independent agency for women even within the narrow confines of their assigned habitat. The desires of the female caretaker are equated to those of the community insofar as they seek to uphold externally dictated standards of respectability.

If Mrs Givings, the real estate agent, could be read as a character in defiance of this oppressive strategies—she is the only married female character in the novel who occupies a productive role as a member of the suburban workforce—yet it has to be noted that her efforts are limited by the fact that her pattern of financial production demonstrates a repetitiveness that seems to point at the futility and vanity of her project as devoid of all economic and political significance. ‘Helen had a way with houses,’ Yates writes, ‘She could buy one in a rundown condition, move in, vigorously improve its value and sell it at a profit, to be invested in the next house’ (Yates 152). Rather than utilising her profits—and her business acumen—to accomplish professional goals and establish her independence from male-dominated work environments, Mrs Givings’s talent seems to be reduced to a recreational interest in manual labour that provides a superficial satisfaction ‘against the pressures of marriage and parenthood’ (Yates 155). Moreover, even Mrs Givings’s feeling of self-actualisation outside the prescribed roles of mother and wife is eventually understood as delusional, for the only looming prospect that the working woman can aspire to is that of eventually settling into her family life. This is what her latest house represents for Mrs Giving, and ‘her ability to love this house, she truly believed, was only one of many changes in her nature these past few years—deep, positive changes that had brought her to a new perspective on the past’ (Yates 154). As with Milly, the house gradually becomes a reflection of Mrs Givings’s state of mind, and the woman’s deep bond with her physical surroundings talks of a ‘change’ that encourages a ‘dwindling of her fixation

on work' (Yates 156) and a 'long-delayed emergence into womanliness' (Yates 156), where 'womanliness' is equated to domestic contentment and maternal care. In both Milly Campbell and Mrs Givings's narratives, the female character whose actions are dictated by the suburban milieu assumes the shape of her environment, generating a cult of womanhood as domesticity, nurture and maternal instinct; or, as Friedan would later call it, the cult of a 'feminine mystique.'

### **Gender Performance, Motherhood and Surveillance**

With its detailed and insightful depiction of the physical space of suburbia, therefore, *Revolutionary Road* offers a glimpse into the private and public workings of the 'regulations' to which gender identity is 'subjected' (Butler 41): as Judith Butler asks her readers, 'Is there a gender that pre-exists its regulation or is it the case that, in being subject to regulation, the gendered subject emerges, produced in and through that particular form of subjection?' (Butler 41). In the context of Yates's novel personal identity is indissolubly tied to social norms of decorum and decency that dictate highly gendered behavioural patterns and whose existence is validated by the subject's willing adherence. The desire to participate in and be accepted by the suburban community leads to the birth of a gendered 'norm' that 'has no independent ontological status' and 'is itself (re)produced through its embodiment, through the acts that strive to approximate it, through the idealisations reproduced in and by those acts' (Butler 48).

As Richard Ford notes in his introduction to *Revolutionary Road*,

none of the characters glimpsed in *Revolutionary Road* has much of a clue about who it is they are. [...] All are walking paths laid out by forces and authorities other than their own personal sense of right and wrong: Convention. Habit. Disengagement. (Ford XVIII)

Ford's emphasis on the idea of being—of 'who they are'—is interesting, for it delineates a distinction between the characters' existence and their actions, where the former becomes undefinable because its only means of expression—action—is determined 'by forces and authorities' that are 'other' and, therefore, unrecognisable. 'It's as if,' Frank himself admits, 'everybody'd made a tacit agreement to live in a state of total self-deception. The hell with reality!' (Yates 65): the suburban existence is not 'real' insofar as its dynamics are shaped by 'convention' and 'disengagement,' and bear no relation to the 'beings' that inhabit them. Thus, when April asks Frank to be let out of a commitment with the Campbells, Frank is forced to lie to the couple: 'It was the first lie of its kind in the two years of their friendship, and it caused them all three to look at the floor as they labored through a halting ritual of smiles and goodnights; but it couldn't be helped' (Yates 17). Both the Campbells and the Wheelers realise what the lie is hiding, and yet, the lie 'couldn't be helped' for with its delivery the 'ritual of smiles and goodnights' that accompanies the traditional ending to an evening can be taken to its rightful completion. The integrity of the suburban interaction is restored beyond April's distress for her acting failures, and the momentary awkwardness of the lie is a small price to pay for the fulfilment of the social norm. Yet, as Butler suggests,

the norm is a measurement and a means of producing a common standard. To become an instance of the norm is not fully to exhaust the norm, but, rather, to become subjected to an abstraction of commonality (Butler 50)

If adherence to the social 'ritual' allows the characters to perform in compliance with suburban standards of decorum, the reproduction of the ritual is what generates and reinforces the norm itself. Moreover, the superficial satisfaction of the 'common standard' reduces and impedes personhood in favour of 'an abstraction of commonality.' Despite their loud complaints against the constraints of suburban life, the Wheelers's actions denote an ever-fading sense of selfhood and a voluntary subscription to suburban regulations. By senselessly abiding to the social code

that requires him to lie to the Campbells, Frank annihilates all instincts of personal expression in favour of an obedient replication of conventional gestures, thus adopting upon himself a pre-made model of personhood that comes to absorb his entire existence.

Throughout his novel, Yates demonstrates repeatedly how, circumscribed by the confines of their suburban interactions, his characters acceptingly renounce the idea of an autonomous and individual identity. Even as protagonists, they become satirical stock figures in a scripted sequence of appropriate behaviours—‘Mrs Givings, the ungenerous real estate agent; Shep, the bird-dogging neighbor; [...] the implicitly grubby Ms Grube; even the reeling Wheelers themselves, spinning out of kilter and down the road to disaster’ (Ford XIX). The use of evocative names that express ethical judgements recalls medieval morality plays and generates a claim to suburbanity as a faith whose dogmas establish personal identity as a form of controlled agency that denies free will. There is a sense of predestination that pervades the community of characters populating *Revolutionary Road*, as if, from the very beginning, their paths to success or failure have been established in their relation not to the idea of selfhood, but to that of the authoritarian ‘norm’ of suburbia. April Wheeler with her ‘patrician kind of beauty,’ her perpetual claim to ‘the shyly sensual grace of maidenhood’ (Yates 7), and a name that recalls ideas of spring and rebirth, is bound to become pregnant and thus repeat the ‘natural’ cycle of social entrapment. The paradoxical nature of the suburban existence is thus brought to light in satirical tones as an appraisal of the fact that a recognition of forms of subjection to social norms does not lead to a break with conventional standards, but, rather, to a reaffirmation of the same social patterns that the characters claim to be struggling against. There is no personal identity that precedes the social codes of suburban interplay, for the characters’ very existence depends upon their interaction with the norm: as Yates suggests, ‘[Frank] couldn’t even tell whether he was angry or contrite, whether it was forgiveness he wanted or the power to forgive’ (Yates 31). Deviation from the norm—as in the case of a

husband and wife falling into a violent fight—cannot lead to liberation, for it leaves characters in a state of numb confusion in which, unable to fulfil the role they have been assigned by suburban regulations, they cannot achieve a resolution. Frank’s line of thought constantly leads him back to what is expected of him, and no interiority or personal drive is found in his efforts to deal with his circumstances.

In Cheever’s *Bullet Park*, the character of Nellie clearly and consciously delineates the way this mechanism works in terms of gendered understandings of personal identity:

[Nellie] was going home and she would, in the space of an hour, be able to close the door on that disconcerting and rainy afternoon. She would be herself again, Nellie Nailles, Mrs. Eliot Nailles, honest, conscientious, intelligent, chaste, etc. (Cheever 32)

The act of ‘closing the door’ represents the symbolic separation between independent will and traditional gender performance, with the former pertaining to an outside world that is afforded no place in the home and in the female construction of selfhood. The woman, whose name dangerously reads like an abbreviation of her husband’s name, sees the familial residence as a refuge from forces that would lead her to stray from the established role that she performs within her household and her community. Cheever’s ironic use of ‘etc.’ underlines both the impersonality and the omnipresence of the qualities that Nellie lists as her own. There is nothing in this depiction of womanhood that can be attributed to an autonomous ‘essence’ the way Ford describes it, because any instance of female selfhood can only recur within the boundaries set by the suburban code of conduct.

Moreover, it has to be noted that the architectural structure of the familial residence regulates gender dynamics not only by demanding that women occupy certain prescribed spaces but also that specific tasks are associated with such spatial constraints, and that the degree of proficiency with which said tasks are completed will be carefully judged by an audience of peers:

Large windows, open-plan settings, fireplaces, and gallery kitchens added to the visibility of housework, enforcing high standards of cleanliness and neatness. Essentially the design of suburban communities and houses reinforced the notion that women's place was in the home doing 'housework' and raising children. (England 26)

If the home is private in the sense that it is excluded from the political and social discourse, its privacy is threatened by the endlessly scrutinising eye of the community, and the woman is therefore never able to shed the role of perfect 'housewife' without permanently compromising her social status and that of her family. The seemingly voluntary performance of gender-appropriate roles for the benefit of an outside audience creates a type for womanhood that is so embedded in its own environment as to become a model for the continuous replication of the norm. As the character of Mrs Givings demonstrates, the gendered code becomes in *Revolutionary Road* a consciously female concern to be passed on from woman to woman. Indeed, not only is Mrs Givings, in her own private understanding of self, giving in to the pressures of suburban gender regulations, but, through her work, she is able to implicitly encourage other women to follow in her footsteps by replicating the 'change' that she herself has experienced, and thus becoming a vehicle for the '(re)production' of established gendered norms. Because Mrs Givings's role as a respectable suburban woman is juxtaposed with her role as an estate agent, she becomes a spokesperson for the gendered suburban ideal she is programmed to 'sell.' Mrs Givings is aware of the 'charm' (Yates 28) that the suburban house, built 'right after the war' by 'little local builders' (Yates 29) exercises over 'so many city people' (Yates 28), and she is willing to overemphasise this charm to reach her goals. Mrs Givings's description of the Wheelers' property is telling in this regard: 'It's really rather a sweet little house and a sweet little setting,' she states, 'Simple, clean lines, good lawns, marvellous for children' (Yates 29). The assumption is that a married couple of Frank and April's age and social status would want to have children, and that the house—the neat, 'clean,'

dignified house—would serve the purpose of shielding the mother as the head of familial care-taking from the ‘cinder-blocky, pickup-trucky places’ of ‘plumbers’ and ‘carpenters’ (Yates 29). The overly-emphatic, repetitive, child-like language employed by the real estate broker—‘a sweet little house and a sweet little setting’—recalls the rhythmic cadence and alliterations typical of nursery rhymes, and points to a certain conventionally ‘motherly’ behaviour on the part of Mrs Givings. The Wheelers are, at this point, extraneous to the suburban community and landscape, social ‘newborns’ that Mrs Givings seeks to educate by employing certain speech-patterns that project a biased image of suburban life, simultaneously establishing the implicit ‘regulations’ governing it and normalising the notion of ‘dichotomous spheres’ expressed by England.

The presentation of the Revolutionary Hill Estates through the eyes of a woman who not only willingly adheres to, but also actively seeks to impart the gender hierarchy that the design of the suburbs recommends is a crucial mark of how ingrained within personal identity the notion of a gendered separation of roles might be, and negates the existence of a personal identity that is distinguished from the social performance that the suburban community collectively agrees to fulfil. Mrs Givings’s discourse, influenced by suburban ideas of happiness and self-satisfaction, is persuasive insofar as it is capable of exploiting the romantic notion of suburbia to affect her clients’ decisions. She is, at heart, a businesswoman, and, as such, her efforts are focused on some form of personal gain. As she herself complains, she cannot ‘waste’ (Yates 28) her time, for she has a goal to achieve. However, where the aim of Cheever’s male real estate agent, Hazzard, is that of pursuing financial profits, Mrs Givings’s efforts seem to be driven by different motives. In describing the ‘great hulking split levels, all in the most nauseous pastel’ (Yates 29), her only mention of commercial value—‘and dreadfully expensive too’ (Yates 29)—comes as an afterthought, an appendix to the real, moral issue that is at stake in her personal line of business. With her donations of sedum (Yates 40), her

insistence that the Wheelers ‘call her Helen’ (Yates 41), her taking ‘a little trouble, even in the low price bracket’ (Yates 28), Mrs Givings seems to assume upon herself the part of maternal caretaker of the suburban social order, in which all houses present beautifully arranged flower beds, and neighbours share in each other’s lives both through affected courtesy and unreserved judgement. ‘For Mrs Givings the time after April’s death followed a pattern of shock, pain, and slow recovery’ (Yates 333): like the community she inhabits and represents, Mrs Givings cannot come to terms with the disruption to social structures that April’s decision has brought upon her suburban reality. ‘At first, she could think of it only in terms of overwhelming personal guilt, and so was unable to discuss it at all. [...] This, then, was what came of good intentions’ (Yates 333): not only does Mrs Givings fear the subversion of the stereotypical roles that she has willingly chosen to adopt and endorse; she also feels guilty at not having been able to pass down to April as a daughter-figure the idea of ‘change’ as a settlement into pre-disposed duties.

The only way that the shock and pain caused by April’s death can be overcome is by restoring the theatrically idyllic and static nature of the suburban community. ‘I simply cannot tell you how pleased I am about the little Revolutionary Road place’ (Yates 335), Mrs Givings tells her husband once a new couple of her selection has taken possession of the property. The restoration of the house—‘I drive past it and it gives me such a lift to see it all perked up and spanking clean again’ (Yates 336)—represents the symbolic recreation of the family unit as the basis of suburban society, and of feminine care-taking as the core of familial survival. Mrs Givings’s ultimate aim is that of ‘improving’ her little suburban community by keeping it clear of the ‘impossibly rude people whose children ran tricycles against her shins’ (Yates 153), a sort of social crusade that Yates veils with ironic hyperbole. ‘The demands of the working day might take her deep into the ever-encroaching swarm of the enemy swamp’ (Yates 152), the narrator explains, drawing a satirical comparison with the heroic endeavours of some ancient

Greek demi-god descending into hell. The alliterations, the assonances, the rhythmic cadence of the sentence, all point to some sort of epic narrative and add to the humour of Yates's portrayal. Mrs Givings's fight for 'the clean scent of cedar and floorwax' (Yates 153) is what drives her business efforts, but the contrast between the woman's first impression of the Wheelers—'it is so refreshing to deal with people of that sort' (Yates 28)—and the denouement of the Wheelers' storyline points at the futility of the woman's strive for social decorum. As depositories of 'the home,' suburban women are ironically depicted by Yates as the 'moral' centres of social interaction, and yet their efforts to diverge from the norm are always shown as destined to fail. Encapsulated in Mrs Givings and April Wheeler is, essentially, the idea that adherence or deviation from the standardised roles of loving mothers and wives both loosen the fabric of the community, the former by vesting it in ridiculous effacements, and the latter by leading it to tragedy.

### **Guilt, Confession, and the Potential for Female Self-Determination**

Where Yates takes a satirical approach toward the performative demands placed upon his female characters, however, there still seems to remain throughout the novel a conception of femininity as embedded within archetypal images of womanhood. As Charlton-Jones argues,

Yates's fictional representations of females appear to fall into two categories: young women struggling to communicate with the men in their lives, with whom we generally sympathise, and older women, mothers, who restrict their sons and daughters, unequivocally damaging them in the process. (Charlton-Jones 501)

This separation between 'younger' and 'older' women—the latter, by necessity, 'mothers'—bears some critical insight insofar as it addresses the archetypal ideals of motherhood and wifehood not as mere private practices, but as social acts with ramifications for the entire community. Yet, at the same time, Charlton Jones's analysis fails to address the possibility of

alternative readings of Yates's portrayal of femininity, where the responsibility of failed 'communication' and enforced 'restrictions' lies beyond female culpability for it depends on the systemic misinterpretation and misrepresentation of female-dominated discourses. Indeed, it could be argued that *Revolutionary Road* presents, through the character of Maureen Grube, a clear depiction of how an alternative reading of urban femininity can shed light on the pitfalls associated with conventional understandings of female suburbanity. As an unmarried, satisfactorily employed, young woman who shares a city flat not with a family of her own, but with a peer and a 'mentor' (Yates 95), Maureen could not be further removed from the suburban life in which April feels trapped. In fact, with her administrative job, her freedom of movement, and, even, her not-so-secret affairs, Maureen quite plainly represents the life that April imagines for herself in Europe. Maureen Grube's 'all girl orthodoxy of fun' (Yates 95) allows the female character to shed the suburban roles of wife and mother and explore a more varied and liberal narrative. If April's life is characterised by its resemblance to the constraints of a stage play, Maureen's set recalls a 'confectionery Hollywood romance of bachelor-girls in Manhattan' (Yates 96): despite the still recognisable signs of action as performance—'her overuse of "fabulous" and "appalling," her wide-eyed recitals of facts concerning apartment maintenance, and her endless supply of anecdotes' (Yates 95)—Maureen's life is afforded the freedom of expression and extension that April's lacks. Nowhere in her suburban setting is April able to encounter the 'sweet little Italian grocers and sweet little Chinese laundrymen and gruff but lovable cops on the beat' (Yates 95-6) that enrich Maureen's stories and give depth and variety to her background. The 'stock of supporting actors' (Yates 96) that populates Maureen's tales may account for nothing more than romanticised fantasies and exaggerated caricatures of real people, and yet it serves to put the woman at the centre of her own story, making her a protagonist in a self-produced narrative that defies external definition.

Of course, the problem remains that, just like April with her European dream, Maureen is only partially able to accomplish her imagined narrative. In fact, as Frank notes, ‘much of [Maureen’s] talk rang false’ and ‘so many of its possibilities for charm were blocked and buried under the stylized ceremony of its cuteness’ (Yates 95). The focus on the woman’s ‘stylized’ discourse and the ‘quality of play-acting’ (Yates 103) carried by her voice points to a re-writing of personal history that is purely fictionalised and cannot concretely come to fruition within the social realities in which these women find themselves. If Manhattan, with its endless potential for discovery and development, offers a more imaginative and freeing environment for a re-writing of personal history, this rewriting ‘seems to speak [...] to some romantic abstraction’ (Yates 103). The fault in Maureen’s fictionalisation of her character is not in the narrative itself, but in the impossibility of matching her ideal audience with her current interlocutor, and the ‘stylized ceremony’ of ‘cuteness’ that Frank despises masks a clumsy attempt to adapt the female performance of independent personhood to what is, essentially, a hostile system of–male–listeners. As Butler proposes, ‘deviance from normalisation results in a form of social guilt that manifests itself through confession’ (Butler 162-3), a confession that in the case of both April and Maureen is not based on a past deed, but, rather on an intended form of agency with no potential for actual realisation. If the confession as a performative act is employed by women in an attempt to overcome the structural impasse in the process of female identity-making, yet its existence within an ideology reliant on imbalanced gender regulations signifies its impending failure. In fact, the unwillingness on Frank’s part to meaningfully hear both April’s and Maureen’s confessions attests to the existence of a semiotic system whose process of assigning meaning lies beyond the female field of agency and whose effect is that of nullifying the female communicative effort.

The forms of oral storytelling that both April and Maureen adopt as avenues of self-expression are thwarted by the patriarchal lens through which these performative acts are read

and analysed, and speech and audience become fundamental in the representation and actualisation of gender stereotypes both within a suburban and an urban environment. Quite significantly, where male speech is characterised by a structure closely resembling free indirect discourse—'[Frank] went that far without any idea how the matter was going to be taken in hand, if at all; but [...] soon he was intoning one smooth sentence after another' (Yates 122)—, women are often pictured 'stalking' the scene, and speaking 'in an odd, stifled voice,' as if they have 'rehearsed [their] speech several times without allowing for the fact that [they]'d have to breathe while delivering it' (Yates 49). Even within their own project of storytelling, women are limited in their freedoms and conditioned by the 'regulations' that apply to all gender dynamics. In the realm of performance, male characters can draw on experience to successfully deliver improvised monologues, while female characters, whose only source material is imagination, are limited to rehearsed conversations whose effectiveness is undermined by their own nature as fiction. The semiotic patterns underscoring male and female discourses speak of a highly gendered hierarchy that sees performative and narrative acts as successfully persuasive only where they demonstrate to be embedded within the current cultural rhetoric, and thus favour the patriarchal authority as the social entity that is charged with dictating the rules of said rhetoric. The expression of a female desire that exceeds the boundaries of domestic contentment cannot be contemplated as a 'logical' and 'sensible' (Yates 226) form of agency, for its realisation would contradict the very speech norms that allow for its existence.

The idea of female self-actualisation is undermined by semiotic regulations that mirror the gendered codes of social interaction and preclude hypothetical statements of alternative agency from being realised. Where 'her speech is supposed to underscore her own sovereignty,' Butler states, 'something else is revealed. Although she uses language to claim her deed, to assert a "manly" and defiant autonomy, she can perform the act only through embodying the norms of the power she opposes' (Butler 167): because the language sign-system is the domain

of patriarchal signification, the female confessor is by default precluded from finding liberation in her speech. Rather, following her confession April Wheeler is presented as ‘damaged’ insofar as her behaviour deviates from the standards of what ‘intelligent’ and ‘thinking’ (Yates 20) people would assume as normal. ‘Wasn’t it likely, after all, that a girl who’d known nothing but parental rejection from the time of her birth might develop an abiding reluctance to bear children?’ (Yates 225) Frank asks rhetorically. Against her will, April becomes the subject of a personality study that seeks to disengage her from her desire for freedom and self-actualisation by attributing its roots to some traumatic experience that disconnected the woman from her own ‘femininity.’ ‘I guess your aunt always really seemed like your mother, though, didn’t she? [...] She must have given you a certain feeling of—you know, love, and security and everything’ (Yates 38-9), Frank tries to suggest. His interest in the ‘motherly’ as the source of ‘love’ and ‘security’ is crucial in this context, for it shifts the responsibility of parenting from a shared duty to a form of deranged motherhood, and makes April’s ‘problems’ a result of an exclusively female lineage of ‘emotional difficulty’ (Yates 226). The pseudo-psychiatric jargon employed by Frank in this context seems to resemble more closely that of a court of justice than that of a helpful, open, and constructive, session of dialogue and interaction, and the woman finds herself in need of creating a line of defence—‘But I’ve had two children. ... Doesn’t that count in my defence?’ (Yates 225)—not to assert her will—for no space is left for that—but to ensure her social survival.

In addition, in April’s discourse the feeling of ostracism that is elicited by the fracture between the woman’s expected behaviour and her personal desires becomes an internalised state that creates a fragmentation of the female consciousness. ‘Don’t “moral” and “conventional” mean the same thing?’ (Yates 222) April asks Frank. Subjected to the pressure of sacrificing her own aspirations in order to achieve the image of ‘happiness’ that her husband and children have grown accustomed to, April becomes incapable of distinguishing between

what society requires of her and what is right for her personal development. The ‘regulations’ to which April must obey are seen as the realisation of a social hierarchy that is the epitome of ‘morality,’ and by failing to accept the normative behaviours codified by the suburban landscape, April automatically poses herself as an exception, an error that needs to be rectified. ‘Maybe it means there’s something awful the matter with me’ (Yates 223), she says. The incapability on April’s part of denying ‘what I feel’ and ‘what I’ve got to do’ (Yates 224) is coupled with a sense of guilt at the understanding that this marks her, not only to her audience of judgemental peers and to her husband, but also to herself, as an anomaly. Frank doesn’t need to voice his anger at April’s ‘way of denigrating’ what he considers ‘every half decent human value with some cute, brittle snobbish little thing to say’ (Yates 222), because it is exactly in the inconsistency of April’s expression of discontent and her intense conviction that ‘how am I supposed to get over it?’ (Yates 225-6) that her interior struggle lies.

April is, thus, subjected to an encroaching feeling of abstraction and guilt that determines her existence as a woman, in a process that is clearly exemplified in the novel by the only chapter narrated from April’s perspective. The chapter opens with a vision of familial life as observed from a distant and objective position. April is depicted from the outside as the perfect housewife, watching ‘her husband’s face withdraw,’ ‘hugging her arms against the morning chill, while he started up the station car and brought it rumbling out into the sunshine’ (Yates 300). This short portrait of idyllic domesticity is described with clinical impartiality, and yet its presence at the beginning of the section points to a displacement of the woman’s sense of identity in which April cannot reconcile her notion of self with the scene that occurs before her eyes. Although she casually participates in the scene, then, April is also left to watch its unfolding as if she were extraneous to the role that her body plays. Even in her most intimate manifestations of emotion—‘her gums were sore from too many cigarettes, her hands were inclined to shake and she was more aware of her heartbeat than usual; otherwise she felt fine’

(Yates 301)—April finds herself incapable of untangling her physical symptoms from a social psychology that seeks to impinge on her personal perceptions, and she is therefore left to enact a process of analytical rejection of the self that leads her to a detachment from independent personhood. The female consciousness cannot exist for itself within the context of this social background, and, yet, all attempts at diverting from the background are thwarted by the mechanical reproduction of gender ‘regulations’ that are ingrained within the female mind. As Esther Greenwood tries to externalise, ‘if Mrs Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe, or a round-the-world cruise, it wouldn’t have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat [...] I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air.’ (Plath 178). The suburbs are not just a physical environment, nor a social group that shapes the norms of that environment. Instead, they symbolise within the woman a state of mind hinged on a series of limitations that pervade all avenues for self-expression and shape the female characters’ personal identities.

Yet, on closer analysis, certain details of April’s life and, more importantly, her death, seem to suggest that reducing the female character to the role of the victim might overlook the narrative signs that help portray a more nuanced picture of femininity. It does not appear correct to simply state, as Butler does, that ‘although [the confession] reads as an act of defiance, it seems in fact to be a suicidal act propelled by an obscure sense of guilt’ (Butler 170), nor does it automatically follow that ‘the confession produces a set of consequences that in retrospect illuminate a desire for punishment’ (Butler, 170). As an unsuccessful ‘act of defiance’ the confession certainly comes to shape April’s ultimate decision to abort her unborn child, but the claim that this abortion might be fuelled by ‘a desire for punishment,’ much like the claim that April’s death might merely be read as the tragically unfortunate result of ‘a late-term home abortion attempt’ (Wilson 27), subtracts intentionality from April’s act and fails to appreciate her understanding of and rebellion against the social persona she is forced to impersonate.

Indeed, in the context of her strictly controlled suburban environment, April demonstrates insight and clarity beyond all other characters in *Revolutionary Road*. April is painfully awake to the fact that her attempted abortion is likely to result in her early demise, so much so that her preparations involve devising what can be essentially read as a suicide note, and it is with this awareness that April transforms her death from the tragic denouement of an anti-heroic epic to an act of defiance in the face of constriction and ostracism. As a suicidal act, April's abortion bears invaluable political ramifications: by choosing to die, essentially, of motherhood, April commits an act that is fundamentally representative of a reluctance to relinquish a sense of independent selfhood and succumb to gender regulations. The impossibility of achieving a successful confession, thus, does not result in a defeatist abandonment to the gendered discourse laid out before the character, but, rather, it propels April towards the search for an alternative semiotic system outside the control of patriarchal authoritative codes. In this light, the 'suicidal act' can be read not as an attempt to assuage a form of social guilt derived from deviance, but, rather, as an expression of self-determining personhood in the face of male-centred processes of signification. The intentional nature of April's gesture is denoted by her final message to Frank:

Dear Frank,

Whatever happens please don't

blame yourself.

From old, insidious habit, she almost added the words I love you, but she caught herself in time and made the signature plain: April. (Yates 310)

April's insistence that Frank should not 'blame' himself is not an act of kindness and wifely affection toward her husband, but a reclaiming of personal agency. April's note is a declaration of intent whose function is primarily that of asserting responsibility and control over the

rhetoric surrounding her decision to end her pregnancy and her life. The fact that April is consciously ‘catching’ herself before adding ‘the words I love you,’ and thus before falling into the codified behaviours conventionally associated with the roles of wife and mother, is indicative of a desire to break with normalised ideas of femininity and disrupt the semiotics that characterise these. By ending the note on her ‘plain’ signature, April is erasing the social pressures that would see her perform a role she perceives as foreign and alienating, effectively fabricating a liberating language void—represented on the page by Yates’s use of punctuation—around her presence and existence. If April’s speech acts throughout the novel designate her as a woman unsuccessfully trying to negotiate a semiotics that is too entrenched in traditional discourses of gender dynamics—and, therefore, both restrictive and inaccessible—her final, free choice seems to suggest the possibility, however minimal, of a new kind of semiotics beyond language.

Indeed, in what might be read as a further attempt at distancing herself from stereotyped suburban codes, April also actively involves herself in an intentional break from the singularly female line of inherited limitations that distinguishes the suburban rhetoric of *Revolutionary Road*.

‘Have you thought it through, April?’ Aunt Claire used to say, holding up one stout, arthritic forefinger. ‘Never undertake to do a thing until you’ve thought it through; then do the best you can.’ (Yates 302)

April’s recollection of her aunt’s words at the beginning of the chapter mimics the conventional pattern of female interaction that the suburban communities represented by Yates adhere to: the older, wiser motherly figure imparts advice upon the younger, less experienced woman, drawing from a catalogue of preconceived ideas whose purpose is that of maintaining the status quo. Through this pattern, the concept of female identity is codified within the social fabric as a form of care-taking that simultaneously reinforces the gendered standards and suggests their

benignity. Yet, rather than unquestioningly identifying with Aunt Claire's words, April seems to challenge their validity. In reporting her aunt's advice in the form of direct speech, April creates a distance between herself and the behavioural patterns that she is socially required to follow, and her subsequent return to the idea of advice as an impulse that shapes the cultural landscape of the community is telling of a new maturity of judgement:

But she needed no more advice and no more instruction. She was calm and quiet now with knowing what she had always known, what neither her parents nor Aunt Claire nor Frank nor anyone else had ever had to teach her: that if you wanted to do something absolutely honest, something true, it always turned out to be a thing that had to be done alone. (Yates 311)

The equivalence that April draws between 'advice' and 'instruction' marks a system that April recognises as constricting and in which the notions of functional personhood encouraged by the community have been transformed into social obligations beyond which no space is left for individual thought. April's rejection of her pregnancy within this framework is not merely a rejection of the ways in which giving birth might change her life and personal identity, but, rather more significantly, it becomes a rejection of motherhood as a social institution whose reach extends far beyond the familial nucleus, and whose existence serves as the basis for the suburban social aggregation. The idea that 'if you wanted to do something absolutely honest, something true,' as April tells at the end of her chapter—and her life—'it always turned out to be a thing that had to be done alone' (Yates 311) points to a form of self-actualisation in which the only way personal desire can be accomplished is through the realisation of a cultural and social vacuum that excludes external intervention.

Because the scrutinising action of the suburban community, facilitated by the structural design of the home and fervently endorsed by the social group, serves as a regulating body that both promotes adherence to the norm and continuously reaffirms its legitimacy, the suburban

realities explored by Yates delineate a social and political background to 1960s' American life that is based upon mutual surveillance. The environmental circumstances of the suburban landscape, with its focus on the home as the centre of superimposed moral codes and behaviours, creates a fertile soil over which the gendered code that sees men as providers and women as carers can flourish, and each and every character in this setting acts both as a player in the contractual obligations dictated by social convention and as an enforcer of said obligations, thus generating a chain of behavioural patterns that becomes impossible to break without risking social and personal alienation. This imposes vast limitations and unbearable pressures upon female characters, whose only options in this landscape are either compliance with the rule or expulsion from the social group. However, an a-critical depiction of female characters as victims only serves to reinforce certain cultural stereotypes that limit female agency to functional viability. If it is indeed true that social pressures result in a fracture that sees women both as alienated from the social discourse—for they do not possess the language to influence it positively to their own advantage—and from their own ideas of selfhood—for they cannot imagine themselves as anything other than their functional roles without experiencing feelings of guilt and estrangement—it is also important to notice how forms of awareness and attempts to reclaim autonomous selfhood beyond the superimposed social codes are still present in Yates's narrative—primarily in the form of April Wheeler—and serve to complicate the notion of an archetypal understanding of womanhood.

*Chapter II*  
**Narration, Control and the Privacy Paradox  
in Mary McCarthy's *The Group***

Yates's *Revolutionary Road* introduced 1960s' readers to the idea that there might be a canonical gender imbalance in the way female narratives, both self-expressed and reported, might be perceived and interpreted. Both April and Maureen's speech acts are clearly subjected to forms of misinterpretation and censorship that derive from the idea that language is inherently a male-dominated arena, and space for female self-identification is limited and controlled by a semiotic norm that relies on the segregation and subordination of what it means to be 'female.' As argued in the previous chapter, April's abortion represents an attempt on the part of the woman to regain some form of control over her own representation by re-appropriating herself of a body that she sees as violated by her pregnancy. Yet, if this offers April a way out of the confines established by her social milieu—albeit one whose denouement result in April's death—it is important to notice how forms of bodily representation—and, in turn, bodily liberation—are themselves regulated by the way we define and describe them. As Eva De Clercq explores in her book *The Seduction of the Female Body: Women's Rights in Need of a New Body Politics* (2013), 'the indifference of [...] early anatomists toward the biological differences between men and women' highlights the fact that the perception of the body itself is, at least partly, a product of linguistic representation. Indeed, De Clercq explains that 'up until the end of the seventeenth century [...] there were no special terms for women's reproductive organs: anatomists saw the vagina as an interior penis, the labia as foreskin, the uterus as scrotum, and the ovaries as testicles' (62). This linguistic vacuum in which the male and female bodies 'were presented as two forms of one essential sex' (De Clercq 62), was, according to De Clercq, prompted by a 'social and political' panorama in which 'there was little notion of individualism and social mobility' (63). In essence, in a social order in which

status was ‘established by birth and sanctioned by *divine* order’ (De Clercq 63), the notion of sexual difference seemed, if not entirely unnoticeable, at the very least irrelevant to the rules of social aggregation.

Yet, while De Clercq does not seem to attribute particular importance to the implications of this ‘indifference’—she is, rather, concerned with exemplifying the ways in which the initial indifference gradually turned into ‘an abundance of scientific literature supporting [a] two-sex model’ (De Clercq 62)—this lack of ‘special terms’ to determine the anatomical features of the female body, and, even more significantly, the conflation of female reproductive organs with variants of male ones, is crucially relevant to any discussion of bodily representation in literature. Indeed, the semiotic ramifications of the absence, in a socially constructed form of public language, of terminology apt to the expression of the female physical existence raises profound questions with regards to the narrative strategies afforded to the account of female experience: how can the material implications of bodily occurrences be accurately characterised in a context that lacks a distinguished descriptive language? What does this engendered ‘indifference’ towards linguistic and narrative distinctions tell us about the social construction of women’s subjectivities? In what ways and to what extent is the adoption of an alternative male diction a form of oppressive representation? In De Clercq’s seventeenth-century example, the implications are clear: women and women’s bodies, though ‘seen, by and large, as built on the same architectural plane as men’ (De Clercq 62) are manufactured in these terms as subordinate, and established as the counterpart to an original standard that is, categorically, male. What is essential, here, is not so much the specificity of the circumstances, but, rather, that fact that the form of scientific storytelling built by the seventeenth-century anatomists relies on tools—the words that comprise it—that render its unfolding, necessarily, male-dominated. What the narrative demonstrates is that the cultural understanding of female bodies is inextricably bound up with notions of narrative possibility,

and its limitations. It is precisely this interplay of narrative opportunity and constriction as connected to the representation of the female body that is at the core of Mary McCarthy's 1963 novel *The Group*. Described by Norman Mailer in *The New York Review of Books* as a novel in which the characters 'will come from one class and make no heroic journeys to other classes, they will not look to participate in the center of the history which is being made, and they will be the victim of no outside passion,' and in which none of the heroines 'will [...] be made sufficiently eccentric to separate clearly' from the Group, McCarthy's narrative refuses to settle into expected narrative patterns to explore, in meta-literary terms, the ways in which these patterns can be utilised for the portrayal of female bodily experiences.

This chapter will, firstly, look at the ways in which control of conventional narrative practices is employed by patriarchal authority to secure dominance over female bodies and identities and their representation within the cultural imaginary. Reactive tendencies on the part of female characters will then be examined, with particular attention paid to the ways in which the presence of a sympathetic audience of peers—represented by the Group's dynamics—allows female identities to initiate a process of narrative re-appropriation, leading to new strategies for female forms of self-representation. Finally, the question will be raised as to the ways in which the privacy paradox generated by the demand for group participation and the contrasting desire for autonomy affect the female modes of expression differently according to the socio-economic status of the speaker.

### **Male narratives and female bodies**

In one of the most cited chapters of her novel, McCarthy brings us an account of Dottie Renfrew's considerations on the acquisition of a pessary at the request of her lover:

Kay repeated to Dottie what Harald had said of the etiquette of contraception. [...] No man of honor [...] would expect a girl to put up the doctor's fee, plus the price of the

pessary and the jelly and the douche bag unless he planned to sleep with her long enough for her to recover her investment. (McCarthy 60-1)

The doubly removed reporting of ‘the etiquette of contraception’ is significant in a context in which decisions deeply connected to the experience of the female body are constantly extracted from their intimate and personal context to become matters of patriarchal public authority. The linguistic field of business as associated with the acquisition of the pessary extends beyond the confines of the practical realities of doctor appointments and fees and begins to encompass the male-female relationship so as to reframe it in a way that results convenient for the dominant male narrator. Regardless of Dottie’s wishes and feelings, the restructuring of human contact into a transactional operation guarantees Dick’s claim to detachment and nullifies all attempts on the woman’s part to claim control over the circumstances. The claim that Dottie will ‘recover her investment’ concludes the negotiation, precluding any possible objection. This association of control over female bodies with the spinning of different narrative and linguistic frameworks is made even more evident a few paragraphs later, when McCarthy revisits Dottie’s relationship with Dick by stating that, ‘So as long as the lover had charge of the pessary, like a medieval knight with the key to his lady’s chastity belt, he could feel that she was true to him’ (McCarthy 62). Here McCarthy shifts the diction of male-female sexual relationships from one concerned with the language of business transactions to one associated with the more romantic—in the Medieval literary understanding of ‘romance’—terms of loyalty and nobility of spirit. In doing so, the novel establishes two fundamental narrative tropes. On the one hand, it presents a concept of the female body as detached from female identity, and as a product of a patriarchal discourse that is mutable, manipulative and always at the service of the dominant male narrative—McCarthy addresses the ways in which the vast realm of narrative practices is often employed against women to persuade, coerce, and conquer, through whichever linguistic means might be available. On the other hand, by equating patriarchal control over women’s

bodies with the Medieval literary conventions of courtly love, the novel also condemns the ways in which archetypal representations of the female physical experience dismiss womanhood as a subplot to the wider male-centred narrative that shapes social interactions and participation. As Miller suggests, ‘The intimate experiences that writers [...] historically have seemed most concerned with protecting and exposing bear the mark of gender, for they are located, concrete, enfleshed’ (Miller 176). In a literary panorama dominated by male-authored stories, both Miller and McCarthy seem to tell us, there is no place for the honest discussion of the ‘enfleshed’ experience of women, for their ‘exposure’ would threaten the unbalanced power-dynamics that see male as the dominant gender.

It suffices to look at the ways in which Priss’s experience of breastfeeding is portrayed throughout McCarthy’s novel. The decision of whether breastfeeding is indeed a sustainable option for the new mother is always outside of Priss’s control. Whether it be Dr Turner or Priss’s husband, Sloan, the discussion surrounding this intimately female act is always directed by a male voice, to the extent that Priss refuses to participate in the conversation for fear of ‘find[ing] herself stammering and using some sickly euphemism’ (McCarthy 278). The strictly scientific diction employed by the male doctors to address the issue of breastfeeding—Sloan refers to it as an ‘experiment’ (McCarthy 280)—de-humanises female physical experiences and denies Priss the right to exercise her own judgement with regards to how her body is employed. Even the competent, ‘earnest’ (McCarthy 278) nurse, Miss Swenson, despite having seen ‘a great deal’ (McCarthy 275) of mothers and babies, is undermined in her professional authority by the dominant male narrative when Sloan states:

When a child gets an ounce of formula, without half trying, from a bottle, he stops nursing so easily from the breast. Why should he? [...] Then they give him another ‘supplementary bottle.’ Then another. Within a week he’s getting a bottle with each breastfeeding. (McCarthy 278)

Where Miss Swenson, both as a fellow woman and a qualified medical professional, recognises how Priss has proven herself ‘exceptionally brave’ (McCarthy 275), Sloan is ready to imply that she has put no effort in her breastfeeding attempts, that she is not ‘even half trying.’ The rhetorical implications of Sloan’s speech have little to do with the well-being of the mother and the child, and are instead focussed on an effort to place blame upon the woman so as to generate a feeling of guilt over her inability to do ‘the most natural thing in the world, suckling her young’ (McCarthy 284), and thus submit her body to the desires of her male counterpart. It is no matter, to Sloan, that Priss sees the continued breastfeeding effort as being ‘completely unnatural, strained and false, like a posed photograph’ (McCarthy 284), for what he needs is to exploit Priss’s body to validate his professional opinions. Where Miss Swenson is able to understand and empathise with both the physical and emotional challenges of breastfeeding—‘With the supplementary bottle,’ she explains to a despondent Priss, ‘we may even be able to train him [...] to sleep right through to six in the morning, so that you’ll have an unbroken night’ (McCarthy 276)—Sloan refuses to engage in any meaningful manner with the struggles experienced by Priss.

Yet, Sloan’s narrative voice is so overpowering that Priss finds herself ‘nodding meekly’ (McCarthy 279) to agree to his demands:

She seemed to have no mind of her own. In no time, he had convinced her that it would be all over with her nursing if they gave Stephen the bottle. Why, it would be like starting him on drugs or liquor, right away, he would get a taste for it. (McCarthy 279)

By relinquishing her breastfeeding body to the wishes of her husband, Priss ends up losing her ‘mind,’ too. The moment she abandons her convictions with regards to how her maternal body should behave, Priss also becomes incapable of exploring her thoughts as independent from those of her husband. Instead, she proceeds to repeat Sloan’s words as if they were her own, equating the bottle to ‘drugs or liquor’ to recall the way her husband had suggested that giving

their baby a bottle would only call for a cycle of more and more bottles. All of Priss's and Miss Swenson's collaborative communicative efforts are nullified with Priss's decision to abandon her body to the control of her husband, and what remains at the end of the conversation is a feeling of detachment from the female bodily experience. 'They were all talking about her nursing,' Priss says, 'and pretending that it was exciting, when it was not, except as a thing to talk about' (McCarthy 284). Rather than being something viscerally connected to her intimate participation in the physical aspects of motherhood and womanhood, breastfeeding becomes in this context something 'to talk about,' an alien and alienating scientific process open for debate and yet ultimately decided by the patriarchal authority in charge of its development. Forced on her by her husband, breastfeeding is read by Priss as an 'unnatural' act, an artificially superimposed weapon of oppression that, supported by a system of social conventions aimed at creating demanding expectations of female bodies, serves to isolate the woman from her own consciousness. Instead, Priss is required to become a 'posed' version of herself, an image of propriety and deferential acceptance to project onto the world.

### **Storytelling, female identity, and audience engagement**

If, then, McCarthy represents male narrative authority as capable of continuously reframing the cultural discourse, so as to exert control over possible female mental and physical autonomy, the question remains as to whether any avenues of repossession might be open to the female characters in the novel, and what these may be. To answer these questions, it is crucial to proceed with an analysis of the meta-literary dimension of narrativity as employed by McCarthy. As Miller suggests,

McCarthy's [...] novels challenged what literary types interested in critical reception like to call the 'horizon of expectation.' They surprised and even shocked readers by

their experimental form and by the unexpected appearance on the page of [...] private information dispensed by women writers. (Miller 177)

The quality of McCarthy's writing, Miller says, lies in its ability to unveil layers of female experience that had previously been forgotten or censored. Miller's use of the verb 'dispense' is critical here, for its medical connotations point to a vision of these texts as remedial to the male dominated 'horizons' of literary production. Storytelling becomes a cure against the debilitating aggression of patriarchal narrative authority. Yet, what Miller's analysis misses is the way these dynamics work not only beyond McCarthy's narrative in response to the desolated landscape of patriarchal publication, but also within the narrative itself as tools that allow the women-protagonists to control the expectational playing field, and allow for the notion of 'private information' to become part of a narrative sphere that is controlled by the women to whom the 'information' pertains. If McCarthy 'surprises' and 'shocks' her readers, she does so because her heroines are granted the ability of affecting their audiences in the same manner. The 'challenge' McCarthy poses is to see her female characters not as narrative objects, but as narrating subjects, and to recognise the limits to which this narrative repositioning still needs to adhere within a powerfully patriarchal context: 'Whatever Dick might say,' Dottie reflects with regards to her affair, 'the fact remained that he had sent her here, to be wedded, as it were, by proxy, with the 'ring' or diaphragm pessary that the woman doctor dispensed' (McCarthy 57). Certainly, where Dick can freely employ terms such as 'sperm' and 'ovum' (McCarthy 40) which would be appropriate in these circumstances, Dottie's speech is riddled with euphemisms, leaving the woman incapable of expressing with exactness her relationship to her lover. Here, however, McCarthy seems to purposefully exploit the social taboos linked to female sexuality by referring, instead, to the diction of matrimony as a tongue-in-cheek metaphor for the foreseen erotic encounters that the pessary will facilitate. Though the language of sexual anatomy or desire remains unavailable to Dottie as a woman

whose physical experience is linguistically and narratively denied by social etiquette, McCarthy's ironic deployment of marital diction seems to highlight the narrative paradox that equally allows Dottie to be a sexual object for Dick's manipulation, and yet denies her the possibility of becoming a sexual subject of her own.

The idea of emancipation explored by McCarthy in the novel, then, is not one based on the dismantling of stereotypical feminine roles, but one which comes to fruition in relation to the concept of narrative authority and its constant process of (re)location. McCarthy's women are deeply concerned with matters of storytelling and their varying degrees of narrative freedom are what determines their social and personal identities. Rather than presenting womanhood as a set of standardised and, often, idealised performances, McCarthy leans on established literary tropes to offer a view of female selfhood as stifled by the confines of conventional—and conventionally misogynistic—plot 'types.' McCarthy's heroines are not defined by their character traits. They are, instead, the victims of the strangling storylines that seem to have been designated as the sole paths open to them as women:

As the book opens, Kay's decision to live with Harald before marriage, to marry him at all given his limited prospects as an actor and playwright, and to marry him in what is, to the group, an unconventional ceremony are signs of all that makes her an outsider, and suggest that she will remain unconventional. However, her marriage to Harald forces her to play the typical roles of the perfect housekeeper, the amanuensis to his 'genius,' and the betrayed wife. (Marsh 311)

The 'typical roles' that are available to Kay—the 'perfect housekeeper,' the 'amanuensis' to Harald's 'genius,' the 'betrayed wife'—exist in a relation of co-dependence with those assumed by the male protagonist, whose narrative arc determines the development of the storyline. Given her status as supporting character in a story dynamic geared toward male self-actualisation, Kay is precluded even the possibility of being an 'outsider': not only are her

actions and her denouement pre-determined in accordance to typically male plotlines, but even her potential for existing beyond the limits of this patriarchal narrative is denied to her. After all, as Gus LeRoy argues, 'Publishing'—and, by consequence, storytelling—'is a man's business' (McCarthy 229), and its aims are, therefore, those of preserving patriarchal authority. Because the discovery of Harald's infidelity, for example, is 'edited' so as to exclude Kay from participation in both the narrative action and the process of storytelling, Kay becomes an object of scorn, for her attempts at personal narration are overshadowed by the existence of a wider, more meaningful context of which Kay is utterly unaware. That is why, when Helena Davison accidentally discovers Harald's affair with Norine Blake, rather than feeling 'pity' for Kay's circumstances, she relays 'a certain sympathy for Harald's present discomfort,' and a 'form of acute embarrassment' at Kay's oblivious chatter 'about wedding presents' (McCarthy 131). Although, given the situation, Kay is supposed to be regarded as the wronged party, she becomes instead a source of shame in Helena's eyes insofar as her excision from her own storyline signifies the triumph of typically male plots. Because Kay's existence is essential for the realisation of Harald's project of self-effacement, her marriage comes to represent a gradual yet inexorable descent from the 'unconventional' to the 'typical,' from the personal to the publicly controlled.

More than that, this predominantly male realm of storytelling makes it so that the progression from the socially and literary 'unconventional' to the 'typical' begins to appear so natural as to encourage, in its female victims, an unquestioning attitude. When Harald loses the first of a string of theatre jobs, Kay reflects that if she 'could only write, she could have sold the story of it to the New Yorker' (McCarthy 81); however, as writing seems to be a prerogative of her dominant husband, what follows is, instead, an account of events that, though interspersed by the occasional appearance of Kay's tonal and stylistic traits, nevertheless rings like the faithful reporting of Harald's own self-justifying machinations:

The producer did not make clear the different spheres of authority; the way Harald analyzed it, it was because of an inner conflict. [...] So he was using Harald as a guinea pig. [...] The authors were a hundred percent on Harald's side, but the producer, when appealed to, would just vacillate. (McCarthy 83)

This combination of narrative voices –the marriage of Harald's ingenious re-structuring of his failure, and Kay's delighted retelling of her husband's version of the events– echoes Priss's approach to breastfeeding, and clearly demonstrates the dynamics of power in the process of personal narration, wherein Kay's initial feelings of 'irony' and 'rising furies' (McCarthy 81-2), are quickly subsumed by the more favourable terms in which Harald paints himself. Kay's repetition of the sympathetic images that Harald seems to evoke in his 'analysis'–the vision of Harald as 'guinea pig,' the lack of clarity in 'the different spheres of authority,' the 'appealing' tone employed by her husband–represents, even more forcefully than in Priss's case, the abandonment, on Kay's part, of her right to narration, and the adoption, instead, of a diction and narrative signification that alienates the woman from her own perception of reality. Kay's demanding and even, at times, capricious tendencies–her arguing 'that the economists said you were supposed to count one-fourth of your income for rent' (McCarthy 82) and her suspicion that Harald 'had lost [his job] as a *pretext* for not moving into the apartment' (McCarthy 82)–are quickly erased as Kay's narration seamlessly shifts into one dominated by Harald's terms and voice, and what is left is the impression of an anonymous–a 'typical'–wife defending her husband's honour for the benefit of his peers. As McCarthy puts it, at least 'at first,' Kay is, in effect, 'Harald's echo' (McCarthy 87).

If Kay's 'unconventionality' is inescapably turned into a form of literary 'typicality' from which she cannot escape, there remain, nevertheless, certain moments of lucidity where, by detaching herself from her own narrative output, the woman can critically observe the dissolution of her own storyline.

Kay sat, nodding, in the cute red apron with white appliqués her mother had sent her, while Harald paced the living room, re-creating the scene in the theatre. Every now and then, she interrupted to ask a searching question, which she tried to make sound casual. Before she wrote her parents, she wanted to be sure that he was telling her the whole truth and not just his own partial view of it. (McCarthy 84)

The act of writing a letter to her parents, an isolated and private moment of personal narration, prompts Kay to ask her husband ‘searching questions.’ By reclaiming for herself both the ability to tell a story and her responsibility for honest expression, Kay is able to see through Harald’s façade and can then begin to re-evaluate her role within the narrative structures at play in her life. As Marsh suggests, the ‘inner disjunctions’ that the ‘questioning of herself’ and ‘of Harald’ brings about seem ‘a potential step toward escaping the roles into which [Kay] continually allows herself to be forced’ (311). It is only by taking charge of the writing process that Kay can recognise her descent into typicality—the typicality, in this case, of a loyal and obedient wife—as a product of Harald’s continued claim to narrative authority and as a limitation posed on her experience of selfhood. That this moment of recognition comes about through storytelling, both signifies the importance of narration as a tool for personal identification and highlights the novel’s attitude toward gendered norms as reflected in and conditioned by the techniques and devices of literary production.

The process of narrative re-appropriation, then, becomes fundamental for the women in McCarthy’s novel, as it is through this process that the members of the Group, to varying degrees, can gain greater freedom to explore their abilities and desires, and thus become enactors of a recovery project that seeks to re-establish female centrality within the storylines presented. When Libby MacAusland, for example, receives Mr LeRoy’s recommendation that she abandon the publishing business for the pursuit of more ‘feminine’ occupations, she responds by doubting the legitimacy of his suggestion:

It dawned on [Libby] that she was just tamely accepting her dismissal without having heard one adequate reason. He was only talking in generalities, not telling her frankly where she had failed, so that she could have a chance to correct it. (230)

Libby does not limit herself to protest against the treatment she receives. Instead, she analyses her interlocutor's speech and is able to identify its fallacies with accuracy and eloquence. If LeRoy's discourse is aimed at depicting Libby as the silly, entitled type who, though 'more persevering' than the 'anonymous hordes' (McCarthy 231) who walk his offices, just does not 'have the knack' (McCarthy 229) for publishing—or, judging by the condescension in his tone, for life—Libby's remarks that 'he was only talking in generalities' and had not given her 'one adequate reason' resonate in the passage as 'evidence' of LeRoy's gender bias. The comment that, presented as such, this bias becomes unassailable—Libby laments not being given 'a chance to correct it'—once again points to the absurdity and injustice of the circumstances in which Libby as a woman is inscribed, and enforces a distinction between the dominating patriarchal narrative and the female alertness to its pitfalls. In this light, Libby's acceptance of a new position as the assistant of a literary agent, 'reading manuscripts and writing to authors and having lunch with editors' (McCarthy 231) can be read not as a defeat, but as an attempt on Libby's part to construct an alternative narrative for herself, one in which her skills and intelligence may be valued regardless of her gender. The use of terms such as 'snazzy' (McCarthy 231) and 'lo and behold' (McCarthy 231), in this instance, seems to ironically mimic LeRoy's expectation of 'feminine' language to suggest that, beneath the frivolous and giddy appearance, lies a calculating and capable woman. Libby is able to 'cheat' the patriarchal system to achieve her goals and gain self-satisfaction. The fainting 'kerplunk into Mr LeRoy's arms' (McCarthy 231), the apparent interest in LeRoy's marital status, the affected 'shock and confusion' (McCarthy 231) all appear, in this context, as performed acts of typicality that Libby is capable of exploiting to her own advantage. In effect, rather than overtly fighting the

crystallisation of character that LeRoy unwittingly employs to halt Libby's professional and personal development, Libby chooses to spin these traits to gain access to better prospects for herself.

Similarly, Kay is eventually also able to transform her husband's conceited attempts at controlling her narrative into an opportunity for self-actualisation. Indeed, as Harald commits her to a mental institution, an initially horrified Kay is soon given the chance of recovering her narrative voice by giving her own, first-hand account of the events that led her to being admitted to Payne Whitney Clinic:

'It was Harald,' said Kay dully. 'He beat me when he'd been drinking. When was it? It seems so long ago, but it must have been yesterday morning. Yes, yesterday morning. [...] He'd been out all night. When he came in at seven in the morning, I accused him of being with a woman. I know it was silly of me, to accuse him when he'd been drinking. I ought to have waited till he was sober. [...] Instead, I confronted him. [...] Then he knocked me down and kicked me in the stomach. What should I have done, Polly? Picked myself up and waited for him to be sorry the next day? I know that's the right technique, but I haven't got the patience. (McCarthy 359)

Kay's act of storytelling begins tentatively, as the woman does not seem to remember the day, or the time of day, that the events occurred. If her initial words appear to come across as unreliable, both in terms of establishing factual clarity and in terms of producing a polished, well 'edited' account of plot—her narration is defined as 'dull'—yet the initial hesitancy might be read as a cunning rhetorical device aimed at creating an empathic connection with her audience by rhetorically exploring the consequences of her traumatic circumstances. Indeed, as the story progresses, Kay's voice gains increasingly greater confidence, first by plainly yet surely recalling the action as it transpired, and, then, by expressing her opinions and feelings about its denouement. By the end of the narration, Kay sounds not only convincing, but also

sympathetic, and her reactions look both comprehensible and justifiable in light of Harald's behaviours. What renders Kay a rather less 'dull' character than what was originally expected—and than the identity she herself assumes at the start of the novel as a consequence of her marriage—is certainly her newly acquired awareness not only of Harald's betrayal, but also, and more importantly, of the narrative expectations that her 'wifely' duties dictate. As Kay comments that 'it was silly of me to accuse him when he'd been drinking' her ironic stance is picked up by her audience through Polly's analysis, which, in the form of interior monologue, alerts the reader to the fact that 'Kay's self-criticism was always revealing' (McCarthy 359). While rebuking herself for failing to push forward the 'faithful wife' storyline, Kay, then, is actually condemning the social and narrative systems that seek to define her available plots, systems that she proceeds to challenge by stating that 'instead, I confronted him.' The simplicity of Kay's rebellion against the prescribing storylines designed by Harald throws her once again into the realm of 'unconventionality.' The use of the term 'instead' at the very start of the sentence marks the stark detachment from typicality that Kay has achieved through her self-narration and serves as a signpost for a new path of non-compliance. Kay's insistence that she knows 'wait[ing] for him to be sorry the next day' is 'the right technique,' speaks of her understanding of the way her plotline is supposed to develop in the grand scheme of patriarchal narratives, but the idea that 'I haven't got the patience' liberates Kay from the prescribed outcomes associated with her apparent storyline and gives her new narrative power. As Harald asks Kay whether she denies 'having attacked him with a butcher's knife' (McCarthy 361), she finally takes full control of her story by pointing out that 'it was a bread knife' (McCarthy 361). Though, as Harald mentions, this may seem 'a small point' (McCarthy 361), it nonetheless rings as an extremely significant point, as Kay steps forward to take full possession of her narrative and defy Harald's attempt at re-directing its definition and advancement.

It is important to underline that Kay is aided in her project of re-appropriation by the presence, embodied by Polly, of an exclusively female audience. In witnessing Kay's narration, Polly enacts all of the appropriate reactions at the correct times: she sighs 'Oh, poor Kay!' (McCarthy 360) when Kay mentions she 'couldn't stop' crying (McCarthy 360), she catches her breath (McCarthy 360) in response to Harald's conversation with the police officers, she marvels when Harald 'quote[s] Shelley' (McCarthy 360). In all respects, Polly is the ideal listener. She never interrupts Kay if not to reinforce her commitment to engage favourably with her story, and she affords Kay an unprecedented degree of credibility. Kay and Polly are presented as being in a symbiotic narrative relation, one that suggests both empathy and understanding and allows for the realisation of honest self-expression. The dynamics of female narrativity that the interaction depicts, then, point to a fundamental feature in the women's possibility for narrative production: the necessity of a shared cultural and personal experience. If exposure to the struggles of womanhood certainly forms the basis for this, for Kay and Polly—and for all the members of the Group—this shared experience also necessarily translates into their participation in the cultural landscape of Vassar College as the alma mater that initiated, shaped, and fostered their narrative impulses. It is no coincidence that, at times of narrative insight, all the Group seems to refer back to their past as Vassar students. As an illustrious women-only institution, Vassar represents the perfect breeding ground for these aspiring narrators, for it provides them with the means through which to perfect their storytelling so as to be able to produce effective forms of female communication. In fact, it is Kay that suggests that 'the big thing they taught you at Vassar' was to 'keep your mind open and always ask for evidence, even from your own side' (McCarthy 84). As a shared background of intellectual relevance, Vassar offers the Group the opportunity of testing out their narrative powers on each other and experiencing the possibility of constructive criticism. Being a Vassar alumna signifies participating in a singularly female cultural background that challenges the

assumption of narration as a patriarchal tool of control, and actively encourages dialectic exchanges as a means of building narrative confidence. It is thanks to their Vassar past that the members of the Group possess insight into the processes of narrative questioning and editorial decision-making, and can, therefore, present themselves as women in control of their own storylines. A Murphy argues,

each of these young women perceives life filtered through the terms of a running narration, which is either her own rehearsal for performing for the Group, or the group's composite voice running in her head. (Murphy 84)

The collegiate atmosphere of Vassar College achieves the invaluable result of rendering these women—through a constant process of writing and rewriting, of editing and revising, of debating and arguing—well-versed storytellers. Narrators by training, they have been instructed to appropriate, modify and re-arrange real-life material for their communicative purposes.

McCarthy herself makes this qualification explicit as she depicts the characters' struggles to compose and refine their narrative output:

What Libby meant was that the quaint life of Polly's rooming house was all very well to dilate on to other girls, when you were having a bite alone, but a man [...] wanted to imagine that you were courted by all sorts of glamorous rivals... Libby frowned. No, that was not exactly her thought. What was it about those roomers, about the brownstone house itself [...] that Libby's feminine instinct told her would cook a girl's goose with the opposite sex? As though a visit to that house would betray something horribly personal, like a smell, about Polly. The smell of poverty? But Gus LeRoy might like that. No; the smell of having seen better days. That was it. (McCarthy 248)

The passage highlights some crucial aspects of the forms and aims of female storytelling that the Vassar alumnae have internalised. Firstly, it suggests an acute awareness of the necessity to adapt narrative materials to one's audience. Libby is clear about defining the appropriateness

of certain narrative discourses in accordance with the expectations of certain audiences, as she mentions 'Polly's rooming house' as a quaint topic 'to dilate on to other girls,' or as she suggests that 'Gus LeRoy might like' Polly's apparent state of poverty. Yet, it is important to notice that this disquisition on appropriateness does not necessarily stem from a superimposed system of social values to which Libby is simply submitting; rather it seems to coincide with a desire to best prime the audience for a favourable reception of personal narration. In other words, Libby is aware of how editing her own or Polly's storylines to accommodate the tastes of their interlocutors might prove a profitable strategy, insofar as it might signify a more open response. Rather than silencing one's own narrative voice, Libby argues for adaptation and editorial discernment in the disclosure of personal information. On the other hand, though, Libby remains greatly concerned with the necessity of clarifying, at least in her act of self-narration, the terms of her story. Her continuous questioning of her own attitudes and feelings towards Polly's situation speaks of a narrator who is deeply involved in a project of accurate personal description and signification. Libby constantly re-writes her understanding of facts in a never-ending attempt at expressing her point of view with exactness and eloquence. The final 'that's it' suggests a sense of achievement and self-satisfaction that reinforces the idea of narrative expression as a means of self-actualisation. Finally, Libby's mention of what she defines to be her 'feminine intuition' in this context of narrative production once again suggests the indissoluble bond between the all-female Vassar education and the women's current practice of self-expression. What Libby identifies as 'feminine instinct' is nothing other than the result of her affiliation with the Vassar values of 'open-mindedness' and 'evidence-seeking,' values that she continuously enacts as she self-consciously seeks to construct a coherent narrative of her personal views. The act of narration becomes, then, a trigger for the renewed ownership of female characterisation. These women-educated, entitled and confident to a fault-will not allow anyone to dictate the direction of their narratives, for they have been

brought up to establish their own instances of storytelling as crucial moments of acute self-awareness and personal strategising. They have the confidence, acquired through training alongside an exclusively female—and thus sympathetic—audience, to speak up for themselves and redefine the terms of their characterisation within the wider story-space that they occupy.

Yet, the presence of an exclusively female, exclusively Vassar audience also presents its pitfalls. As Kay mentions, the fact that Harald might visit Norine Blake's house after the fight makes her 'jealous' not because of any fear of further marital betrayals, but because it would give 'Norine a chance to tell everybody that Harald had come to her because at home I didn't give him any rest' (McCarthy 362). Kay is utterly uninterested in what Harald might do with Norine, or what he might tell her. What she fears, instead, is Norine's own power of narration, her ability to speak to 'everybody' and disclose details that Kay would rather keep hidden. The 'everybody' to whom Kay refers, a disembodied source of social anxiety, is, in this context, not a patriarchal force, but rather the collective eye of the Group intended not solely as the seven Vassar girls, but more widely as the collection of women whose shared stories and social ties form a network of cultural significations beyond the control of the individual. Where Marsh argues that 'the power of the group is foregrounded in the narrative voice' (310), it is also true that within that same voice lies the potential for stereotyping, scrutiny, and, even, ostracism. Indeed, as Marsh suggests, the storytelling capacity of each individual woman is only ever available as a branch of 'a collective voice that is the expression of a type: the wealthy young Vassar graduate of 1933' (Marsh 310). If the women in McCarthy's novel are able to resist the narrative typecasting proposed and endorsed by the patriarchal authority, then their reliance on the approval of exclusively female audiences to further their process of self-actualisation brings forth the necessity to adhere to a different, but similarly constricting, set of behavioural and social norms that serve to guarantee the support

of the Group. This is why, confronted with the need to enlist Kay's support, Dottie cannot help having reservations about consulting her friend:

Then Kay would discuss her with Dick. This was the thing Dottie shrank from most; she could not bear the idea of Kay dissecting and analyzing her and explaining her medical history and Mother's clubs and Daddy's business connections and their exact social position in Boston, which Kay greatly overestimated. (McCarthy 51)

Kay's 'dissecting,' 'analysing,' and 'explaining' disturb Dottie's sense of self assurance, for they seem to make evident the discrepancy between Dottie's own understanding of her circumstances and the way these are perceived by the social Group. The fact that Kay 'greatly overestimated' Dottie's financial and social privilege, though highly subjective on either side of the argument, becomes an object of quiet contention whose existence requires the readdressing of personal characterisation and presentation. In order for Dottie to successfully achieve her aim, then, she is forced to navigate the fine line between fulfilling her idea of personhood while, simultaneously, showing herself as appropriately covering the social function that the Group requires her to perform. Because of the social positioning that she is assigned by the Group, Dottie is not allowed to spontaneously and thoughtlessly pursue premarital intercourse the way Kay, 'the iconoclast and scoffer' (McCarthy 4) would be expected to do. Instead, she needs to show herself, in accordance with her perceived status, to be adequately hesitant and troubled. The idea of Dottie 'shrinking' from the unforgiving scrutiny that Kay places on her is particularly significant in this context, for it underlines the necessity on Dottie's part to preserve some form of integrity by seeking at all costs to avoid being fully incorporated into the Group's mentality. As Marsh suggests, 'the question of whether performance is indeed separable from real action' can certainly be read as 'a source of anxiety' (Marsh 304) for McCarthy's women, insofar as their project of personal narration is

continuously subjected to ‘editorial’ choices that are dictated by the Group’s overarching understanding of their social network.

Though the contents of the women’s narratives, then, are left essentially intact—Dottie does indeed get access to contraception—their style and form are constantly subjected to scrutiny both on the part of the storytelling women themselves, and on the part of the very audience whose presence allows for the existence and expression of this female narrative power. At the basis of this ‘editorial’ process of revision is, again, the Group’s shared vision of their Vassar experience. Indeed, if on the one hand, as Norine Blake suggests, being ‘formed as an intellectual by Lockwood and those other gals’ allows the woman to become ‘conscious of a yawning abyss’ between her own sense of selfhood and the patriarchal expectation of performing the role of ‘a Hausfrau’ (McCarthy 398); on the other hand the communality and shareability of the Vassar social milieu and intellectual configuration marks the women as active and willing participants in a consolidated system of both literary and behavioural regulations from which they cannot detach themselves without dismantling the very fabric of their own narratives. In other words, if being a ‘Vassar girl’ affords the women to be seen ‘by the world at large’ as a ‘symbol of superiority’ (McCarthy 27) and, thus, as a force capable of positively and actively shaping their own storylines, this act of voluntary attachment to the codified norms that define the social group of ‘Vassar girls’ comes with conditions whose validity requires to be constantly interrogated:

‘You really feel our education was a mistake?’ Priss asked anxiously. Sloan had often expressed the same view, but that was because it had given her ideas he disagreed with.

‘Oh, completely,’ said Norine. ‘I’ve been crippled for life.’ (McCarthy 399)

Despite their vast financial, social, political and personal differences—as Norine puts it in a conversation with Helena Davison, ‘You people were the aesthetes. We were the politicals. [...] We eyed each other from across the barricades’ (McCarthy 142)—Norine and Priss identify

themselves as fundamentally connected through their affiliation to the Vassar system of 'education,' and it is, in fact, in the face of these differences that their common questioning becomes even more poignant. Where Priss is able to dismiss her husband's hostility toward her alma mater as a disingenuous attempt on his part to exercise control over her right to an opinion, she cannot discount Norine's statement that Vassar has 'crippled' her 'for life,' for this speaks to concerns, social and personal, that all members of the Group battle with. Indeed, in vocalising the features she associates with the Group—'Poise. Social savvy. Looks. Success with men. Proms' (McCarthy 143)—Norine openly expresses what represents a fundamental issue of the women's Vassar affiliation, the idea that 'if you rolled the whole group into one girl, she would be what Norine said' (McCarthy 143). Despite the fact that Norine, Helena—who insists she 'had no particular looks and had never been to a college football game' (McCarthy, 143)—and Priss—'whose personality was confessed to be rather colorless' (McCarthy 257)—all stand firm in claiming their distinction from the Group as an enclosed and complete entity, their diversity seems to gradually evaporate as their protests adopt similar narrative patterns. Indeed, even in their insistence on personal difference, characterised by the negation of positive attributes—popularity for Norine, beauty for Helena, and strength of character for Priss—the women appear to follow parallel formats, employing stylistic choices that unwittingly reflect the overarching influence of the Group's socialisation. It is no coincidence, then, that as Norine points to the limitations imposed by their association with the Group, both Helena and Priss are left, essentially, speechless. As Helena declares that 'she could not begin to correct' Norine's 'view of the group' (McCarthy 143) and Priss 'looked at her watch' to suggest 'it was time [...] to leave' (McCarthy 399), their retreat from the conversation rings as the acceptance of a social characterisation that, though constricting, remains necessary to their private project of personal survival.

### **The privacy paradox, privilege, and inequality**

By presenting female narrative power as a self-affirming practice and yet subjecting this same practice to strict social regulations, then, McCarthy's novel manifests the idea of a privacy paradox, wherein personal identity can only be fully realised through externalisation, and yet, by becoming public, it immediately allows for the social to impinge on the private and modify its expression. If Miller suggests that 'it was as though public and sexual were two concepts that could not be combined in single women' (175), the sexual as a token of the most taboo, private desires becomes a metonymic representation of female selfhood. The notion that this selfhood is only validated through an externalising narrative project, but also simultaneously stifled by the forms of editorial censorship that the Group as audience applies, becomes, then, the dilemma with which all women in the novel are constantly forced to negotiate. In this light, even the free-spirited, unconventional Kay, who Marsh suggests seems to 'resist the lure of the group' (Marsh 311) by clinging onto her 'difference,' appears to become, instead, a victim and perpetrator of the privacy paradox. In commenting on Dottie's decision to book her doctor's appointment under her own name, Kay reflects:

A lot of people who would not be shocked at her for sleeping with Dick (that could happen to anybody) would look at her askance if they could see what she was up to this minute. The things you did in private were your own business, but this was practically public! (McCarthy 65)

In order for Dottie to successfully achieve the fulfilment of her private desires—in this case, her sexual desires—she has no other choice but to make these desires somehow public, for their disclosure is a necessary step toward the achievement of her project of self-actualisation. Dick himself urges Dottie to 'ask your friend Kay' (McCarthy 53) about getting a pessary, and 'publication' of certain details—of Dottie's relationship with Dick to Kay, of her personal information to the doctor's office—is inevitable as a result of this externalisation.

Where Dottie's desire becomes manifest, then, so must her personal history, so that the realisation of the narrative conclusion that Dottie wishes to reach is dependent on the reluctant release of private details that the narrator would rather keep hidden. Kay's censorial assessment of Dottie's narrative and personal choices reflects the scrutiny to which Dottie's release of information is subjected. What is interesting in this assessment is the fact that it is not Dottie's plan to indulge in extramarital relations in itself that might cause 'people' to 'look at her askance,' for, as Kay mentions, 'a lot of people [...] would not be shocked' by this. Rather, it is Dottie's crossing of the boundary between private and acceptably public that disturbs and upsets Kay's perception of the issue. The fact that 'Dottie insisted that birth control was perfectly legal and above board' (McCarthy 66) is of no relevance in this context, because the censorship to which Dottie is subjected is one that does not involve action in itself so much as it focuses on narration as the vehicle for the expression of female selfhood. It is here that the privacy paradox comes to its full effect. The freedom that comes with the ability to express oneself within this female community, also signifies a system of intertwined storytelling that threatens the idea of female privacy and, as such, begins to exercise a certain control over the women who partake in it. Unable to entirely free themselves of the requirements of social participation, these women are constantly torn between the need to share their personal identity through storytelling, and the desire to protect personal autonomy by appealing to a sense of privacy that, as Miller argues, is the refuge 'women cling to when they want to express their freedom to choose' (186). Because 'the category of intimate, female experience was perceived to be a zone of propriety, a domain meant to be protected from the public eye' (Miller 177), Dottie's act of externalisation marks her narration as outrageous; yet, without this impulse to personal publication, Dottie's desire would remain unexplored, and the potential for narrative power as a means of self-actualisation would fail to come to fruition. Dottie's—and Kay's—conundrum is not one that might offer a simple resolution. Because affiliation to the Group

serves as the instrument through which self-expression can become manifest and desires fulfilled, an open challenge to its standards of propriety might result in alienation and loss of power. Yet, the repression of personal instinct that is at times required by adherence to the Group's collective identity in itself marks a defeat of the terms by which the Group might empower its members to personal narration.

As a result of this privacy paradox, then, Dottie and Kay are placed in the impossible position of choosing between two paths that require qualitatively different, yet quantitatively equal, personal sacrifices. In effect, the women's reactions as presented in this episode embody two opposite poles of the individual's negotiation with the Group's socialised standards of behaviour and expression. Where Dottie, though hesitant, is finally willing to challenge expected narrative norms in order to answer to her desires, Kay instead advocates a form of necessary self-censorship as a way of maintaining the support of a social group whose approval is essential to the continued potential for the expression of a female narrative selfhood. That the basis for this polarisation is, without a doubt, a matter of class and status is evidenced by the Group's treatment of Kay:

Now, in the chapel, [the girls] rearranged their fur pieces and smiled at each other, noddingly, like mature little martens and sables: they had been right, the hardness was only a phase; it was certainly a point for *their* side that the iconoclast and scoffer was the first of the little band to get married. (McCarthy 4)

The collective voice of the Group—highlighted by McCarthy's use of the plural pronoun 'they'—emerges in the passage as the standard against which Kay's character is measured. The patronising notion that 'the hardness was only a phase' marks Kay's difference as the stubborn manifestation of a personality that has yet to become fully formed. Kay's attempt at singularity of thought and behaviour is regarded as a momentary lapse, the eventual disavowal of which signifies a growth into the normalised visions of femininity that the Group endorses. Marriage

as the symbol of this personal growth becomes meaningful in this context not for the institutional subordination of Kay as a woman to her husband, but, rather, as a representation of the codes of behaviour that rich society women are expected to follow in order to maintain the support of their female community. In other words, though temporarily endearing, Kay's identification as 'the iconoclast and scoffer' is, in the long term, an obstacle that she needs to overcome in order to be granted full access to the clique of 'little martens and sables' whose social connection is so strong as to require only a 'smile' and a 'nod' to forge effective communicative bonds. For Kay, 'the proud daughter of an agnostic doctor and a Mormon mother' (McCarthy 7) with 'only a \$10 wedding' (McCarthy 9), subordination to the Group's expectation becomes an imperative sacrifice to gain support for her narrative project of personal identification. Indeed, because her lower middle-class social background marks Kay, fundamentally, as an outsider, she is continually treading the line between a difference that makes her an interesting token of the Group's liberal views and a form of acquiescence that allows her to be seen not as a threat, but rather as a 'project' that the Group's influence might ameliorate.

If the wedding establishes Kay as an outsider whose only hope for acceptance is to play to the Group's desires, it also determines the hierarchical structures that are at play within this female community. Indeed, right from the outset Dottie Renfrew is portrayed as the opposite of Kay in terms of her relationship to the Group. Where Kay is constantly described in terms of opposition—if benevolent—to the standardised image of the Vassar girl, Dottie's characterisation is almost non-existent, as she seamlessly blends into the choral mode of identification that defines the Group as a whole:

Libby MacAusland had a promise from a publisher; Helena Davison [...] already had a job sewed up at a private nursery school; Polly Andrews [...] was to work as a technician in the new Medical Centre; Dottie Renfrew was slated for social work in a Boston

settlement house [...]. And elsewhere in the class, [...] they could point out girls of perfectly good background who were going into business, anthropology, medicine, not because they had to, but because they knew they had something to contribute to our emergent America. (McCarthy 10-11)

Carelessly introduced as part of a string of other Vassar girls who all seem to pursue, though in different fields and to different degrees of success, the same type of indolent interest in occupational ventures, Dottie is clearly designated as one part of a wider, more significant ensemble of which she is to be a spokesperson and a symbol. The combination of a 'perfectly good background' and the confidence that this privilege instils of having 'something to contribute' marks Dottie as a rightful member of a social class whose norms she does not need to forcefully adopt, the way Kay does, for they are imbued within her upbringing and sense of self. If Kay, then, lives in constant fear that her eccentricities might cost her the possibility of access to the Group's collective narrative authority, Dottie's perceived 'typicality' seems to entitle her to an inalienable right to participation and engagement. As the differences between the various members of the Group gradually dissolve in favour of the communal 'they' that can appropriate 'America' as 'our,' Dottie becomes permanently embedded in the Group's collective conscience as an instance of the broader social significance of the conventional Vassar girl.

Dottie's position within the Group is secured beyond her behaviours, for she shares in the values of self-assurance and proactive social engagement that the Group identifies as fundamental to their project of female survival. In contrast to Kay's observed contrariness, whose externalisation need always be kept in balance by the Group's mitigating assessments, nothing Dottie could do might possibly result in disownment, for she is always expected to act within the boundaries that pertain to her innate understanding of social interaction and

classification. In fact, even when Dottie impudently disregards all of the Group's rules, she remains protected by her status, for, as Dottie herself notes,

The group would never believe, never in a million years, that Dottie Renfrew would come here, to this attic room that smelled of cooking fat, with a man she hardly knew, who made no secret of his intentions, who had been drinking heavily, and who was evidently not in love with her. (McCarthy 34)

Dottie's depiction of her circumstances in visiting Dick's flat seems to taunt her audience, an audience that, as established, is by necessity composed of members of the very same 'group' she feels would 'never believe' her transgression. The progressively more outrageous facts included in Dottie's list of misdemeanours suggest an attitude of daring disinterest in the possibility of social ostracism, for she knows that regardless of how 'crudely' (McCarthy 34) she speaks, she will still maintain her privileged status. In fact, so unconcerned is Dottie with the potential for exclusion, that, only a few lines after her narrative challenge to established social codes, she is able to wistfully exclaim with regards to her innermost thoughts, 'If only the Group could hear that!' (McCarthy 34). If Kay is engaged in a process of constant self-censoring, Dottie's unfiltered interior monologue speaks of a different hierarchical positioning that allows the woman-narrator to contextually bring forward her personal narrative while remaining under the protective influence of the Vassar elite.

Because in Dottie's case the transgression is one that begins from a position of entitlement, its judgement is diametrically opposed to that of Kay's 'difference.' There is no need, given Dottie's 'perfectly good background' (McCarthy 34) to 'make the best' (McCarthy 14) of 'using' (McCarthy 14) her the way the Group needs to do with Kay. There is, effectively, no need to sanitise, suppress, and abridge her narrative the way Kay's is. Instead, in light of Dottie's privilege, her narrative can be spun to the Group's favour in a manner that Kay's could never achieve:

She and Mother had talked it over and agreed that if you were in love and engaged to a nice young man you perhaps ought to have relations once to make sure of a happy adjustment. Mother, who was very youthful and modern, knew of some very sad cases within her own circle of friends. (McCarthy 25)

In Kay's case 'the knowledge, shared by them all, of Kay's having "lived with" Harald' fills the Group 'with a sudden sense of the unsanctioned' (McCarthy 8), to the point where they expect 'an unknown presence to rise and stop the ceremony' (McCarthy 9). Dottie, instead, is able to quite comfortably advocate in favour of exactly the same transgression that makes Kay 'so unconventional' (McCarthy 14), so 'blunt, natural, unconscious' (McCarthy 14) that her 'faults' need constantly be forgiven and her incapacity to 'realize the little social nuances' (McCarthy 13) that mark her as different—and precarious—corrected. In Dottie's mouth, 'living with' a man before marriage ceases to be an act of social misdemeanour, and becomes, rather, a signpost for the 'youthfulness' and 'modernity' that characterise the Group as a self-pronounced 'radical' (McCarthy 11) community that believes 'experience was just a question of learning through trial and error' (McCarthy 11). Kay as an instance of class diversity becomes, in this light, a necessary building-block in the Group's process of image-making, one whose existence is simultaneously a constant reminder of the possibility for a 'radical' challenge to normative social rules and a landmark of the necessity for the Group to maintain the projected image of being 'a different breed' (McCarthy 10), of possessing the distinction, superiority and entitlement that is at the very bases of their narrative authority. In effect, both Kay and Dottie are in pursuit of the fulfilment of similar desires, and both seek the Group's approval as validation of their personal identities. Yet, the different manners in which the two women present their case, as well as the stark contrast in their original social milieux, mark a dramatic difference in the ways the externalisation of these desires is perceived by the Group. By actively, and in open contradiction to accepted standards of female socialisation,

‘counseling premarital experiment and the scientific choice of a mate’ (McCarthy 3), Kay demonstrates, at least to the judgmental eye of the Group, all the ‘lack of fastidiousness and consideration’ (McCarthy 13) that the narrative structure of female discourse should present in order to achieve its self-actualising aims. By contrast, Dottie’s rationalisation of ‘experimentation’ as part of the all-American pursuit of a ‘happy adjustment’ reframes the narrative of female sexual desire in a manner that both accounts for the propriety necessary to effective communicability, and nonetheless allows for the achievement of personal freedom. Relinquished from the limitations—both circumstantial and self-imposed—that a lack of financial and social status impose on Kay, Dottie is at liberty to pursue whichever avenue of self-expression she sees fit, in the conviction that, regardless of how seemingly inappropriate her behaviours might appear, their theorised and liberalised expression will inevitably feed into the Group’s own discursive strategy to further the project of narrative self-effacement that forges the Vassar girl’s privileged identity. After all, privilege, social and financial, is the force that allows for the Group’s narrative effort to challenge standardised patriarchal storylines and successfully produce literary imaginations of female personal selfhoods.

Maintaining this privilege, then, is a matter of survival for the Group, for it establishes a sense of credibility that allows female narration to retain its already limited authority. Where privilege is lacking in the female narrative voice, her storytelling becomes weak, easily manipulated and, ultimately, abortive in its attempts at expressing any truthful or helpful representation of personal identity. This is the case, for example, of Norine Blake’s involvement with the sympathy strikes and the press surrounding them, which Mrs Davison judges as follows:

No man, whatever his politics, Helena, is going to put on a tuxedo to go out and sympathy-strike, or whatever they call it, unless some artful woman is egging him on. To get her picture in the paper. (McCarthy 170)

Norine, who, just like Kay, is both part of the Vassar cultural landscape and simultaneously, as the wife of a man who ‘has started an independent fund-raising organization for labor and left-wing causes’ (McCarthy 110), an outsider, is deprived of all narrative power. The protest in which she is engaged is only portrayed impersonally through a newspaper cutting, and, even so, her name does not appear anywhere on the page. The only proof of Norine’s involvement in the scene comes from her appearance ‘in the centre of the picture, facing the camera, wearing what appeared to be a low white satin evening dress and a jewelled tiara, as though she were in a box at the opera’ (McCarthy 167), and yet this ‘blurry’ (McCarthy 167) image is enough for Mrs Davison to draw all sorts of conclusions on the matter and on Norine’s character. As Norine becomes an ‘artful woman’ who can spin a narrative so as to ‘egg on’ her husband, her imagined acts of storytelling are actively vilified by Mrs Davison, as the potential for the overt manifestation of narrative force in such an individual seems to represent the ultimate threat for the collegiate understanding that female narrative authority should remain the domain of the privileged Group. This is reinforced by Mrs Davison’s enquiries as to Norine’s educational background:

‘What was her field at college?’ ‘English,’ said Helena. ‘She did her main work for Miss Lockwood. Contemporary Press.’ Mrs Davison smote her forehead. ‘Oh, my prophetic soul!’ she said, nodding. (McCarthy 170)

Though in all effects a Vassar girl, Norine’s association with the ‘contemporary press’ marks her as a liability. In fact, as a typically male-centred domain—the same type of editorial domain, indeed, to which Libby is also precluded access—the press is not, as Mrs Davison’s ‘prophetic soul’ seems to perceive, the correct repository for women’s stories. On the contrary, as the reading of Norine’s picture suggests, the press is a realm for constant female misinterpretation and misrepresentation.

In this light, Norine's attempts at infiltrating this public editorial domain, both through her college career and through her attempts at 'get[ting] her picture in the paper,' rather than representing a radical advancement in female emancipative practices, are seen by the Group as dangerous and unattractive, and only achieve, for Norine, the effect of furthering her ostracism. In the essay 'Settling the Colonel's Hash,' McCarthy herself discusses the process of writing news by positing that

in any account of reality, even a televised one, which comes closest to being a literal transcript or reply, some details are left out as irrelevant (though nothing is really irrelevant). The details that are not eliminated have to stand as symbols of the whole, like stenographic signs, and of course there is an art of selection, even in a newspaper account: the writer, if he has any ability, is looking for the revealing detail that will sum up the picture for the reader in a flash of recognition. (McCarthy, 'Settling the Colonel's Hash' 71)

McCarthy focuses on the writer's selective authority as the signpost of an ability to communicate the truth of a singular instance by deploying an array of carefully redacted descriptive language. This descriptive language is, in turn, imbued with evocative powers that can successfully summon a more or less accurate picture of reality. For this process of signification to achieve its full communicative potential, however, authorial selectivity alone is insufficient. Indeed, the act of selection in itself is only relevant in this context where it entails the existence of a pre-established pool of descriptive norms and meanings that audience and author share, and that determine the cultural, political, and social plane onto which the 'flash of recognition' can come to fruition. The importance that McCarthy places onto the idea of detail as 'stenographic sign' tells of a process of codification in which reality can only be fully understood in relation to a conventionally accepted sign-system whose regulations have been accepted and assimilated by the reading public. Where the public sign-system of news

writing is located in a landscape dominated by patriarchal authority, no accurate signification of female identities can occur:

What this fracas reminded me of was the old suffragette demonstrations. Chaining themselves to lampposts, and that young woman, Inez Something Something, Vassar she was too, who rode a white horse down Fifth Avenue to demonstrate for the vote. Dressed to kill. It was all in the papers then. [...] But those suffragette shindigs were all staged too. [...] With the press invited ahead of time. (McCarthy 169)

Mrs Davison conflates Norine's newspaper appearance with that of the suffragette protesters, and in doing so she both deconstructs Norine's identity and, at the same time, undermines the importance of public feminist protest acts. The 'facts' of Norine's engagement in the sympathy strikes and of Inez Milholland's feminist activism are re-shaped by Mrs Davison's interpretation in accordance to her understanding of how the press will depict these, and they thus become both unreliable in their characterisation of the particular women in question, and harmful to the potential for expression that the identity of the Group so carefully seeks to sustain and promote.

What emerges from the judgement of Norine's engagement with the press is a picture of female narrativity as an exercise in carefully crafted and strategically disclosed communicative practices. The battle for female self-expression, the dynamics of the Group seem to suggest, is not to be fought in plain sight, on the wider, public platforms of national and international interest, but, rather, on a smaller scale, through personal narration and characterisation: letter-writing, oral storytelling, and confidential exchanges, though intrinsically private acts, assume a political value insofar as they become repositories for a female effort of resistance to prescribed storylines and superimposed narrative tropes. By rejecting traditionally male modes of identity construction and world-building, the women in McCarthy's novel are able to construct a tight network of shared experiences that allows them

to pursue wishes and desire through the support of an audience receptive to their expression. Despite the flaws and limitations that the Group's exclusivity and collective judgement enact, these communicative practices yet serve to foster the expansion of the 'narrative horizons' for female storytellers, and thus engage the female subject in a process of re-appropriation and self-determination.

### Chapter III

#### Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays*: Here, There and Nowhere

Where the women in McCarthy's *The Group* largely benefit—though to different extents and in at times problematic manners—from their socialisation as part of a supportive system of female storytellers and audiences, the relative unavailability of this type of system for the majority of female characters—be this due to geographic location, prescriptive forms of social aggregation, cultural stereotyping, or political and financial segregation—signifies a shift from a collective understanding of female desire and expression to more individualised modes of emancipation. In other words, if the women in McCarthy's novel can rely on one another for the identification and recognition of personal desire, the isolation that faces most other women marks the need for alternative strategies of self-actualisation, strategies whose creation requires complex responses to the unique challenges of patriarchal oppression. In light of this, Friedan suggests that

to face the problem is not to solve it. But once a woman faces it, [...] once she asks herself 'What do I want to do?', she begins to find her own answers. Once she begins to see through the delusions of the feminine mystique, she often finds the solution much easier than she had anticipated. (Friedan 274)

The answer Friedan identifies to 'the problem with no name' is one that relies exclusively on self-analysis, the assumption being that a latent form of female identity can be activated, at will, upon rejection of the 'mystique.' As this chapter will go on to discuss, however, this assumption is misguided, both in terms of the way in which Friedan reads the dynamics shaping the workings of the 'mystique,' and in terms of theories of (female) subjectivity. Friedan depicts the feminine mystique as a fixed and discrete unit that, once recognised and eradicated, would 'easily' reveal the female's true selfhood. 'Facing the problems' represents, for Friedan, the initial stage in the process of liberation, not because identification of the problem can be

equated to resolution, but, rather, because alternatives to the ‘feminine mystique’—alternatives that have the faculty of fulfilling an authentic expression of selfhood—are readily available to women. Indeed, Friedan’s portrayal of the ‘feminine mystique’ seems to be based on what Grimshaw designates as an ‘Aristotelian’ view of ‘autonomy,’ in which ‘autonomy’ itself ‘is defined as acting in accordance with *desire* (or intention)’ for ‘there is no problem [...] about the “autonomy of desires”’ (Grimshaw 330). As a result, Friedan’s woman merely necessitates ‘a new life plan’ (Friedan 276) that would satisfy her ‘in terms of her own abilities, a commitment of her own to society, with which her commitments as wife and mother’—commitments as, it should be added, ‘woman’—‘can be integrated’ (Friedan 279) in order to reach personal and social satisfaction. ‘What,’ however, ‘of the desires themselves?’ (Grimshaw 330) What of the forces that influence the woman’s understanding of her own ‘abilities’ and chosen ‘commitments’? ‘Are there desires (or intentions) which are not ‘autonomous,’ which do not originate from ‘within’ the self, which are not authentic, not really “one’s own”?’ (Grimshaw 330) These are the questions that Friedan’s discourse lacks, and that this chapter seeks to address.

In hailing the rejection of the ‘feminine mystique’ and the pursuit of ‘the image of what the American woman can be’ (Friedan 307), Friedan fails to recognise the multi-layered, complex nature of the social conventions and gendered norms that comprise the feminine mystique, and their far-reaching effects on the female consciousness. Yet, as Grimshaw suggests, ‘the female self, under male domination, is riddled through and through with false or conditioned desires’ (Grimshaw 330), desires which are so ingrained in the fabric of personal identity as to make the rupture envisioned by Friedan impossible. Maria Wyeth, the leading character of Joan Didion’s *Play It as It Lays* (1970), offers an appropriate means to investigate the issue further. The following pages will look at the ways in which social representations of femininity and of the individual woman act upon the female consciousness to determine a set

of pre-established responses, and how Maria's reaction to these pressures—a reaction of resistant abandonment—leads to a female understanding of personhood as disconnected from a spatial and cultural context that is both highly public and deeply judgemental. Didion's novel introduces the idea of female liberation as linked to an expression of identity that can only exist within a social void in which no expectation is placed upon the woman to perform a specific role. This idea, it will be argued, can only come to fruition through the passive acceptance of ostracism, and, thus, signals the final fault of Friedan's theory: the notion that each woman can create emancipation for herself is refuted by Maria's exclusion from the social discourse, an exclusion that calls for new modes of female liberation.

### **Fluid subjectivities, image-making, and the re-coding of personal experience**

A fallen-from-grace Hollywood actress in a failed marriage with a moderately successful director, Maria constantly walks the line between performing her expected social role and offering glimpses into her own awareness of the social performance her relationships seem to embody:

‘You going to stay here?’ she said.

He rubbed his knuckles across the stubble on his chin. ‘All my things are here, aren't they?’

Maria sat down across from him. She wished she had a cigarette but there were none on the table and it seemed frivolous to go get one. Carter's saying that all his things were in the house did not seem entirely conclusive, did not address itself to the question.

Quite often with Carter she felt like Ingrid Bergman in *Gaslight*, another frivolous thought. (Didion 40)

Throughout the interaction, Maria is acutely aware of the requirements that the social performance places on her. She understands that reaching for a cigarette ‘seemed frivolous’

given the gravity of the conversation, and she acts according to that expectation. Yet, she also acknowledges both the futility of these prescriptions and the possibility of diverging desires when she points out that, where Carter's 'things' are in the house, that does not seem to be 'conclusive' evidence of his staying. The implied dynamics of Carter's thinking are that social regulations require him to reside in his familial home, regardless of his desires. By exposing this logic, however, Maria openly addresses the potential existence of personal instincts that seem to contradict the social norm. Despite the fact that neither herself nor Carter feel at liberty—due to their social conditioning—to follow those instincts, Maria's acknowledgement signifies a personal awareness that 'self-knowledge' and self-expression 'can never be a matter of easy and immediate introspection' (Grimshaw 336), for their realisation is always tied to some form of social 'mystique.' That the 'mystique' is, at least for Maria, tightly tied to gendered norms is evident in Maria's mention of the film *Gaslight* (1944). In aligning her personal relationship to the cinematic representation of a husband-wife narrative of male domination and female subjection—*Gaslight* tells the story of a husband manipulating his wife into believing she is becoming mentally unstable—, Maria sheds light onto her personal circumstances as a woman whose subjectivity is deeply embedded within a controlling patriarchal environment from which complete detachment is unattainable.

Maria's dismissal of the thought as frivolous serves to highlight the impact of socialisation onto female 'intention': who judges Maria's feeling of subjugation as 'frivolous'? Is it Maria as an independent subject, or is she merely a vehicle for the expression of the social codes that limit her judgement? The answer has to be, according to Grimshaw, somewhere in the middle:

There is no original wholeness or unity in the self, nor a real self which can be thought of as in some way *underlying* the self of everyday life. The self is always a more or less precarious and conflictual construction out of, and compromise between, conflicting

and not always conscious desires and experiences, which are born out of the ambivalences and contradictions in human experience and relationships with others.

(Grimshaw 336)

It is exactly in the idea that ‘discourse about femininity [...] is by no means a homogenous or stable thing’ (Grimshaw 335), then, that lies a second fallacy in Friedan’s argument, for, as Grimshaw addresses, there cannot exist a woman whose subjectivity isn’t by necessity connected to and shaped by the social circumstances that she inhabits. As Maria tells Carter:

‘I mean I thought we were kind of separated.’ That did not sound exactly right either.

‘If that’s the way you want it.’

‘It wasn’t me. I mean was it me?’ (Didion 40-41)

Maria’s indecision with regards to her own free will stems from the impossibility of discerning an essential, autonomous desire that is separate from her relationship with Carter and the wider social environment she inhabits. She is, by necessity, contradictory, both rebelling against the ties that see her limited to a superimposed identity, and, simultaneously, conscious of the influence that her circumstances exercise on her personal expression. Maria’s ‘thought’ that her and Carter ‘were kind of separated’ does not ‘sound exactly right’ because its origin is embedded within an idea of selfhood that is constantly re-negotiating its position in relation to the social norm.

Where the prospect of autonomous identity, then, is denied by identity’s own nature as a social experience, it follows that the process of identity-making cannot be equated to the ‘humanist’ paradigm of an ‘individual’ that is ‘unitary, rational and centred’ (Davies et al. 89), but, rather, it has to be read as the acquisition of a flexible subjectivity that can adapt to the challenges and overcome the obstacles posed by conventional forms of socialisation. The question remains, however, how the female subject, besieged by the ‘Gaslight’ dynamics that

would seek to manipulate her expression, can develop an individual subjectivity. According to Davies et al.,

the shift [from humanist to poststructuralist individual] takes place through the insertion of new ways of thinking and being into the disciplines and professions through which we are monitored and through which and in relation to which we go on becoming subjects. (Davies et al., 89)

The construction of an individual subjectivity is brought about, in this view, by a re-shaping of the subject's sign-system, in which social and personal meaning is re-assigned in accordance with the subject's own hierarchy of values. The categories of socialisation 'through which we are monitored'—for example gender, class, race—need to be reassessed not as all-encompassing representations of selfhood, but, rather, as functions of the subject's process of self-definition, functions whose meaning is not universal and fixed, but rather personal and dynamic. In this light, Maria's assertion that 'I have trouble with *as it was*' (Didion 7), often taken to symbolise a lack of historicism that leads to the detrimental loss of personal and collective values, can be re-examined, instead, as a freeing, transformative experience that allows for the possibility of a 'fluid' subjectivity 'with more open boundaries' and 'in which contradictions can be embraced' (Davies et al. 87-8). When Maria reminds Benny Austin that 'there is no Silver Wells today' (Didion 6), she is not denying the existence or importance of Silver Wells to her past, but, rather, she is re-coding that experience—the experience of being 'brought up to believe what came in on the next roll would always be better than what went out on the last' (Didion 5)—to signify the fact that she 'no longer believe[s] that' (Didion 5). Maria never suggests that she is 'creating herself' (Davies et al. 89) anew from a historical, social, and cultural void. Yet, the shift in her perspective from passive signified to active signifier allows her to re-interpret her external circumstances and thus bring awareness to the nature of her experienced

limitations not as the result of ‘a bad hand’ (Didion 9)—the way Maria’s father would have it— but as the products of her socialisation.

The term ‘monitored’ as employed by Davies et al. (89) is particularly relevant to Maria’s process of subjective signification, for the idea of constant surveillance it evokes becomes tied to that of the ‘monitor’ as the screen onto which Maria’s life as an actress is projected, and that provides her with her livelihood and lifestyle:

Carter’s original cut ended with a shot of the motorcycle gang, as if they represented a reality not fully apprehended by the girl Maria played, but the cut released by the studio ended with a long dolly shot of Maria strolling across campus. Maria preferred the studio’s cut. (Didion 19)

The monitored—controlled and projected—character played by Maria assumes different shapes according to the ‘image’ that different signifiers choose as representative of her essence. In this context, visual representation is integral to female subjectivity, for one complements the other and neither can exist if not in a state of symbiosis. It is the choice of image that determines the type of subject the woman in the picture is allowed to be, and it is a choice over which Maria has no practical control. Indeed, it is very early in the novel that Maria establishes ‘images’ as the ‘discipline’ through which her selfhood comes into existence as a socially determined projection. It is no coincidence that Maria’s name is inextricably linked to the image of the ‘eye,’ for the narrative engages with ideas of ‘seeing’—and ‘perceiving’—as fundamental to the process of external identification and personal alienation that Maria undergoes. ‘Let me stick to certain facts,’ Maria says,

what happened was this: I looked all right (I’m not telling you I was blessed or cursed, I’m telling a fact, I know it from all the pictures) and somebody photographed me and before long I was getting \$100 an hour and \$50 from the magazines. (Didion 8)

Maria's only understanding of her own body does not derive from personal observation. She 'looked all right' not because she had inspected herself and decided so, but because 'somebody photographed' her and the images—the externally manufactured images, filtered through someone else's literal and allegorical lens—suggested so. Maria's knowledge of her physical space is separated from her sense of self and defined by a foreign 'arbiter' that both generates and dictates its representations and assigns value to its existence. That in Maria's mind her externally appreciated looks become 'a fact' asserts the fallacy of 'facts' as a mode of identity creation: the scientific objectivity that Maria assigns to 'facts' in this instance—they are sharply distanced from the emotional responses that would see beauty as a 'blessing' or a 'curse'—is at odds with their creation and the ways in which they are socially employed to shape the individual's own representation of personhood as part of a system of collective social judgement. In this light, it is only through a process of critical and/or imaginative re-interpretation of images that Maria can be inscribed as the individual seeking to resist the limitations imposed on her subjectivity by the conventional—'humanist'—notion of selfhood.

As part of a poststructuralist and postmodern literary tradition, Maria as a subject is then required to address and articulate the idea of a so-called 'crisis of representation,' a crisis that, according to Seidman, 'proposes that the central binary oppositions which underpin western thought [...] are arbitrary, unstable and reversible' (8-9):

Since early morning she had been trying to remember something Les Goodwin had said to her. When she was not actually talking to him now she found it hard to keep him distinct from everyone else, everyone with whom she had ever slept or almost slept or refused to sleep or wanted to sleep. It had seemed this past month as if they were all one, that her life had been a single sexual encounter, one dreamed fuck, no beginnings or endings, no point beyond itself. (Didion 68-9)

In a psychological landscape where one lover turns into another in an ‘indistinct’ aggregation of experiences, and where ‘sleeping’ with someone, or ‘almost’ doing so, ‘or refusing to,’ or ‘wanting to,’ all come to signify the same intimate response, real life events and personal desires assume the same emotional and cognitive value, thus erasing the social ‘difference’ that would see them as diametrically opposed. By dismissing the possibility of a ‘beginning’ and ‘ending’ to her ‘sexual encounters,’ Maria dismantles ideas of acceptance and rejection, loyalty and infidelity, love and hate. The dichotomies that are embedded within the social consciousness become obsolete in a state of mind that refuses to recognise clear and precise boundaries between instances of experience, thus depriving said instances of cultural and individual meaning. The ‘fact’ that Maria ‘looked’ alright, in this context, loses its power of signification over female subjectivity, for, rather than asserting an unquestionable truth, it points to the impossibility of obtaining absolute authority, even in matters pertaining one’s own identity.

Indeed, in opening her narrative by explaining her current circumstances within a mental institution, Maria sets down to discredit the reliability of ‘facts’ as a mode of identification:

So [the doctors] suggested that I set down the facts, and the facts are these: My name is Maria Wyeth. That is pronounced Mar-eye-ah, to get it straight at the outset. Some people here call me ‘Mrs. Lang,’ but I never did. (Didion 4)

It is clear from the very beginning that despite the doctors’ desire that Maria ‘set down the facts,’ no such thing exists in Maria’s experience. The only ‘fact’ that Maria is capable of offering is that her name is indeed ‘Maria,’ and yet even this statement is quickly rendered neglectable by the notion that it is also a ‘fact’ that for ‘some people here’ she is not ‘Maria,’ but, rather, ‘Mrs. Lang.’ Maria’s own existence as herself is questioned, for the truth, a truth that Maria deftly identifies with the presentation of what she perceives as the misnomer ‘Mrs.

Lang,' is that she does not have one individual and universal identity. Instead, her identity is fractured into the tens, even hundreds of perceptions of her 'self' that exist within the consciousnesses of those with whom she comes into contact. Maria's insistence on 'getting straight' the pronunciation of her name simultaneously seems to suggest an attempt on her part to maintain a certain control over the image she projects, while also highlighting the implicit potential for misrepresentation that is contained within the name itself.

In other words,

the newly transforming subject is aware of its own messiness, its own vulnerability to the process through which it is subjugated and governed, aware that reason 'is produced within discourse in which certain statements are privileged and others are silenced or excluded" and that "reason is always situated, local and specific, formed by values and passion and desires." (Davies et al. 90)

By employing what Hutcheon identifies, in her book-length study *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), as a common thread within the diverse landscape of postmodern art—'postmodern representational practices,' Hutcheon says, 'refuse to stay neatly within accepted conventions and traditions and [...] deploy hybrid forms and seemingly contradictory strategies' (35)—Didion evidences the ontological uncertainty identified by Davies et al. and characterising the process of identity-making in the context of 1960s' America. It is only thanks to the experience of anxiety and alienation—textual, representational, and conceptual—that the thinking subject can initiate the movement toward a more complex system of signification and a more accurate perception of subjectivity:

By the end of a week [Maria] was thinking constantly about where her body stopped and the air began, about the exact point in space and time that was the difference between *Maria* and *other*. She had the sense that if she could get that in her mind and

hold it for even one micro-second she would have what she had come to get. (Didion 170-1)

There is a sense of urgency in Maria's quest for self-definition signified by the scarcity of punctuation in the passage. The blurring of boundaries between 'Maria' and 'other' throws the character into a state of anxiety for it is posed into stark contrast with the 'exactness' of 'the point in space and time' that, if found, would bring clarity to Maria's status as a person. The parallel structure of the sentence—syntactically, 'exact point' is to 'difference' what 'space' and 'time' are to 'Maria' and 'other'—combined with the deeply contrasting meanings associated with the two sides of this grammatical analogy seem to point to the absurdity of Maria's pursuit. She can never 'have what she had come to get' because 'what she had come to get,' that moment of autonomous self-determination beyond social pressures, is perceived as an oxymoron. Rather than serving simple literary purposes, the 'hybrid forms' and 'contradictory strategies' individuated by Hutcheon offer insight into Didion's novel as an artistic endeavour that seeks to portray a fractured social and personal consciousness. This, coupled with the use of a limited third person narrative voice that both gives access to Maria's sensibility while simultaneously underlining her own remoteness from it, highlights the ways in which the 'accepted conventions and traditions' to which Hutcheon refers are here employed by Didion, at their core, as political questions of individual and collective relevance, questions about ideas of selfhood and social aggregation. The discussions regarding perception and appearance that are explored in *Play It as It Lays* generate a rupture in conventional systems of thought and lead to an investigation into ideas of mimesis and authenticity.

### **Performance, commodification, and the shattering of the frontier dream**

As a result of this rupture, Maria is regularly depicted throughout the novel as a character—possibly the only character—mindful of the intrinsic possibility for misinterpretation that the

notion of subjectivity—both in the sense of being an agent, and in the sense of being the subjective existing within someone else’s consciousness—bears, and thus constantly seeking to reassert her authority over the process of her own signification. Indeed, Maria’s personal project seems to entail the systemic destabilisation of the constructed images of her selfhood as portrayed by external agents:

Still, there remained some fatal lack of conviction in her performance, some instant of flushed inattention that would provoke them finally to a defensive condescension.  
(Didion 125)

The ‘Mrs. Maria Lang to whom the lawyers referred’ and that ‘seemed to Maria someone other than herself, an aggrieved wife she might see interviewed on television’ (Didion 108), becomes a weapon for the dismantlement of pre-conceived notions of subjectivity, where the socially constructed images of ‘woman,’ ‘wife,’ and even ‘actress’ become undone by a ‘lack of conviction’ that is ‘fatal’ to the ‘performance’ of the social norm as the universal standard of identity-making. If, as Rhodes suggests, ‘much of the novel is about how consistently [Maria] is simply misrecognized, how often she is taken for someone she is not’ (138), the newly aware Maria—for whom Silver Wells has lost its original meaning, and gendered limitations cannot be simply ascribed to a ‘bad hand’—is involved in a process of strategic demystification that brings attention to her own existence as a constructed subject.

Maria’s dismissal of her parents’ continuous search for social and financial betterment, therefore, becomes a rebuttal not simply of past naivety, but also of another seminal ‘image’ in Maria’s life, one that takes the shape of the ‘frontier’ as the ‘pursuit of the dream’ that ‘is a dominant theme in both American literature and film’ (Edington 63):

My mother’s yearnings suffused our lives like nerve gas, *cross the ocean on a silver plane*, she would croon to herself and mean in, *see the jungle when it’s wet with rain*.  
(Didion 7)

Maria's memory of her relationship with her mother, Francine, is one that is inextricably linked to ideas of 'crossing' as the rite of passage that has the ability of initiating one to improved social circumstances, and, as a result, an improved sense of self. Yet, for Maria the dream has been spoiled, becoming instead a nightmare-inducing 'nerve gas' where the advertising campaign language signifies the existence of a stock-image sort of reality of which she is inevitably part and from which she can find no escape. Hollywood as 'the location of the film industry' (Edington 63)—the glamourised, image-producing film industry—and the space for the ultimate 'westward expansion' (Edington 63) becomes the exemplary representation of both Francine's 'dream,' and Maria's nightmare:

My mother thought being an actress was a nice idea, she used to cut my hair in bangs to look like Margaret Sullavan, and my father said not to be afraid to go because if certain deals worked out as anticipated he and my mother would be regular airline passengers between Las Vegas and New York City, so I went. (Didion 8)

Maria's move to New York City, so expressed, is not a product of ambition or personal desire, but, rather, a failing on Maria's part to summon an individual form of subjectivity able to contradict the dominant frontier narrative that sees participation in the symbolic value of Hollywood as the ultimate achievement. By cutting Maria's hair 'in bangs to look like Margaret Sullavan,' Francine discards Maria's potential for a chosen identity to encourage, instead, conformity to socially defined standards of beauty and success that entrap Maria into a system of projections suppressing personal expression. The cutting of the hair and the pursuit of images of success—for example, the much desired 'flying' to which both Francine and her husband regularly refer—means, in essence, the beginning of a form of commodification of Maria's image.

There is, indeed, a type of indirect exploitation that threatens Maria throughout the entire novel: 'She had once heard that students at UCLA and USC talked about using her the

way commercial directors talked about using actresses who got a million dollars a picture' (Didion 20). The female body as the expression of certain idealised and idolised values becomes a consumer good to be exploited in a capitalist race to social recognition, where status is gained through the trading of female identity in favour of images of fame and success. 'The look' that the USC and UCLA students give Maria is one that is 'dutifully charged with sexual appreciation' not due to the recognition of Maria's beauty as an individual—'meant not for Maria herself,' the way she thinks of herself—'but for Carter Lang's wife' (Didion 23) as the signpost of professional and social patriarchal gratification. Maria's chosen identity is not only insignificant in this context, but, in fact, is to be considered as an irritating character flaw that might even drive the male capitalist agents to a 'defensive condescension'. By pointing at the ways in which being 'Carter Lang's wife' renders her image appealing to the young male students trying to break the 'frontier' of Hollywood directing, Maria sheds light on the exploitative nature of the 'dream' as a fabricated image that helps reproduce gender imbalance through the appropriation of female representative and expressive means on the part of a male social narrative underpinned by individualistic impulses. That this is not a casual occurrence, or a singularly Hollywoodian phenomenon, but, rather, a manifestation of systemic oppression, is evident in Griffin Wolff's analysis of Maria's mother:

[Francine] had been a good cook; cooking had been one of her ways of giving comfort to her daughter. But the men have other notions about the use to which Francine's talents should be put. 'Franchises, you rent out your name and your receipt,' Benny says; 'Franchised services, that's where the future lies.' Nourishment, care—these are no longer in the picture. Clipped Hemingway prose becomes perfect advertising copy in a world where "Francine" can be so quickly transformed into 'Franchise.' The mother's moral and emotional concerns must yield to the father's monied dreams. (Griffin Wolff 484)

Just like Maria, Francine is only recognised by her male counterparts for her potential to expand their reach and success, only valuable insofar as she can be profited from. Once again, the proper name as the traditional carrier for personal identity—it suffices to see how Carter Lang’s name is employed to symbolise status within the Hollywood community—is misinterpreted in the context of female subjectivity to equate the woman to her function in the patriarchal mindset.

Of course, the fact that Francine as a woman and mother chooses to perpetuate the commodification of femininity—by cutting Maria’s bangs to look like a Hollywood actress—points to a form of hereditary responsibility that the social norm imposes on the female character, where acceptance of the functional role is passed down from one generation to the other. As Griffin Wolff asserts, this process is reproduced in Maria’s relationship to Kate:

[Maria’s] summonings of Kate’s memory, for example, are always tainted with the rosy images of advertising copy: they will do some canning in the kitchen and sell the products of their labor—Maria’s way of fulfilling both her mother’s and her father’s ambitions for her. (Griffin Wolff 489)

Indeed, it is Maria herself to suggest, when she catches herself thinking that ‘there might even be a ready market for such canning’ (Didion 201), that ‘you will note that after everything I remain Harry and Francine Wyeth’s daughter and Benny Austen’s godchild’ (Didion 210). In pointing out the possibility for commercial use, Maria aligns herself with a familiar tradition that is well placed within the boundaries of the frontier dream as the ultimate existential goal. Yet, if Griffin Wolff is correct in pointing out Maria’s attachment to the idea of ‘commodity’, it is possible to read in Didion’s text the opportunity for a re-codification of the capitalist instinct for Maria in feminist terms. Maria’s self-reflection is, in fact, underpinned by three fundamental features that allow for her interest in canning to be re-interpreted as fundamentally different from the financial exploitation associated with Francine’s franchising and Maria’s

own image-selling. Firstly, by directly addressing the issue of the hereditary of the burden of financial betterment, Maria is able to take ownership of her own actions. She is no longer the tool to a consumeristic end, but, rather, the producer and beneficiary of a good whose sale would serve as the funding of her own life project. Secondly, the idea of ‘canning’ only comes third in Maria’s list of priorities, thus re-defining the existing system of values—as passed on by Francine—to return the mother-daughter relationship to a position of primacy. This makes it so that, thirdly, the notions of ‘nourishment’ and ‘care’ symbolised by the ‘sweetness’ and ‘summeriness’ (Didion 201) of Maria’s chosen fruits can assume a more prominent role in Maria’s own hierarchy of values. Rather than dreaming ‘of a tabula rasa existence in an ideal world innocent of history, a place where no past flaw will touch her’ (Brady 464), therefore, Maria is seen as actively and consciously engaging with her past and its ‘mystique’ to begin a process of deliberate distancing and detachment from established social codes. Maria is ‘summoning,’ for herself and her daughter, an imagined future that does not require the adoption of a functional existence and the abandonment of individual subjectivity. The price for Maria’s unique ‘dream’—as opposed to the frontier ethics that characterise her family and her social setting—is a process of continual and progressive alienation, not only from forms of superimposed behaviours, but also from personal experiences of socialisation.

The hereditary continuation of the dream, with its established pitfalls and benefits, is reproduced in Kate and her complete separation from the realm of socialised existence that continually threatens Maria’s liberty. In fact, Kate herself seems to proclaim the triumph of alienation as a liberating force when, in one of the only scenes in which the little girl appears in the flesh, she ‘smashed the Victorian doll Felicia had given her against a large mirror’ (Didion 99). The scene is fraught with symbolic meaning: the smashing of the ‘Victorian doll’ a rejection of the traditional standards of feminine accomplishment as proclaimed by what is, in all effect, a backward form of social signification; ‘the polished floor covered with shards of

broken mirror' (Didion 99) a clear denunciation of the power that collective image-making exercises over female individuality and the potential for personal expression; and the 'screaming' little girl a loud, vocal, undeniable breaking of the normalised codes of behaviour that would see womanhood as a quiet, demure, and malleable entity. Where Maria dreams of rebellion and re-codification, Kate appropriates herself of the violence that characterises oppression to explicitly realise the dream—by performing the unacceptable, Kate is able to distance herself from the society of those who would seek to control her, in a process that allows for the realisation of her more personal and intimate desire of spending 'all that night the two of them' holding 'each other with a dumb protective ferocity' (Didion 99). The form of aggressive difference embodied by Kate takes Maria's dream further by realising its potential for liberation against social stereotypisation.

### **Evasive practices and the endurance of the female self**

Throughout the novel, then, Didion strives to demonstrate how, by offering an exploration of systems of dichotomies that impart pressures upon both individuals and social interactions, the dynamics of the 'crisis of representation' can be employed to give life to a new form of female consciousness. By rejecting the constrictive action of standardised sign-systems, this new consciousness allows for the re-examination of personal and collective values as relative and contingent rather than absolute and universal, thus achieving a freeing effect upon the female processes of self-representation and expression, and allowing for the examination, evaluation, and, at times, subversion of the forms of female cultural institutionalisation that are at play within the social space of the novel. Indeed, where Schlosser argues that 'as [Didion] sees it, to support their disavowals of the failings and human costs of the American dream, Americans engage in various forms of fantastical evasion' (32), Maria's singularly female 'evasion' has little to do with matters of self-deluding 'narratives of progress and development' (Schlosser

32), and much more with ideas of liberation from forms of cultural stereotyping that seek to limit female personal development and affirmation. 'Just so,' Maria says, 'I am what I am. The look for "reasons" is beside the point' (Didion 3): Maria's refusal to 'look for "reasons"' in this light is not, as Hinchman advances, a 'struggle,' on her part, to 'disclaim moral responsibility, preferring to see herself as powerless and therefore blameless' (460), but, rather, an acknowledgement of the unchangeable nature of the social circumstances that shape the way she comes to be perceived, and, equally, a conscious effort to distance herself from said perceptions by accepting that their expectations can only be met at great personal cost. Maria's embracing of her personal 'crisis of representation' may appear to Hinchman and Schlosser as the self-serving pursuit of (un)ethical abandonment, but questions must arise as to whether the acceptance and exploitation of personal alienation should instead be conceived as an alternative form of agency and the sole viable option for the female character within the American social landscape. The fact that Maria is capable of pointing at her own 'remote sense that everything was happening exactly the way it was supposed to happen' (Didion 54), does not necessarily warrant attacks on Maria's attitude as defeatist, for her seemingly nihilistic reaction to this revelation masks a more profound moral questioning. Maria's moment of self-recognition should thus be taken as a climactic flash of consciousness, where her understanding of her own estrangement—an estrangement that renders her unable to influence or even, to a certain extent, recognise her own personal experience as such—leads to the search for new avenues of expression.

The female consciousness emerges within the narrative from a rebuttal of the claims that narrative itself is 'a human-made structure' implying 'a structuring process that imparts meaning as well as order' (Hutcheon 59): Maria's insistence that 'nothing applies' (Didion 4) is a springboard for the recognition that traditional 'evasion' through ordered ideas of 'progress and development' is unsuitable to satisfy the needs of a female subject who sees her subjectivity

constantly impinged upon by externally produced stimuli and norms. As such, Didion's choice not to adopt a linear organising of events, and to employ instead a photographic style that best captures the fragmented nature of female existence as dependent on the social judgements of multiple actors, strives to give voice to the female 'crisis of representation' as a crisis of conventional values and meanings. 'By failing to deliver a smoothly flowing narrative, Didion seems to be denying that discrete experiences can be aggregated into a logically satisfying whole' (Hinchman 460) the way that normalised forms of 'evasion' would require in order to maintain a perception of social health and stability. Expressed through a 'mutilation of verbal structures' that 'renders the moral starvation of society' (Griffin Wolff 483), Maria's story becomes a landmark of a different notion of 'evasion,' one focussed not on escapism but, rather, on personal emancipation, for the character herself rejects the proposition that some universal value can be attributed to her intimate, personal struggles.

'They will misread the facts, invent connections, will extrapolate reasons where none exist, but I told you, that is their business here' (Didion 4), Maria says of the staff at the hospital where she is institutionalised for her mental disorders. By drawing a distinction between 'them' and herself, Maria performs the embodiment of the fractured consciousness: her refusal to dissect 'the facts' of her existence to 'invent connections' or 'extrapolate reasons' not only once again reflects the ambiguity of 'facts' themselves, whose external analysis can only lead to unreal, manufactured, and therefore unhelpful conclusions, but also serves to de-construct the established system of representative practice in order to dismantle the apparatus of demands—and the limitations derived from such demands—that violates female personhood. In order to find release from the external pressure of being 'who she is,' Maria thus turns to 'driving the freeway' (Didion 15) as the symbolic locus of social ransom, where anxieties with regards to the consequences of adherence—or non-adherence—to social norms can be placated by the 'willing abandon of the freeway driver to the "rhythm of the lane change"' (Brady 464),

and where ‘no choice or act seems irrevocable and no sin finally culpable’ (Brady 463). As ‘the organism which absorbed all her reflexes, all her attention’ (Didion 17), the freeway may be read as indicating a willingness on Maria’s part to participate in the culture of self-deception and external appearance that she condemns as the cause of her alienation, and yet Didion’s use of the term ‘reflexes’ suggests that what the freeway actually represents for the female character is a removal from the instinctual pitfalls that an ingrained belief in the ‘feminine mystique’ requires of her.

Before the rational—the ‘looking for “reasons”’—comes into play, it is the innate response to social compulsions that Maria ‘evades’ on the freeway:

Sometimes at night the dread would overtake her, bathe her in sweat, flood her mind with sharp fresh images of [...] the irrevocability of what seemed already to have happened, but she never thought about that on the freeway. (Didion 18)

The social spaces that Maria inhabits are marked by references to the realm of water as an overpowering force that symbolises ‘the irrevocability of what seemed already to have happened,’ of the codes and regulations that dictate social behaviours and require participation in the social performance. Social responsibility ‘bathes’ Maria’s body and ‘floods’ her mind, enveloping her in a vision of what she is supposed to be and forcing her to yield control. In contrast, the ‘freeway,’ with its imagery of sailing and expertise—Maria ‘drove it like a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents’ (Didion 16)—defies these expectations and thus renders different future outcomes plausible, if not possible. By escaping the ‘dread’-inducing ‘irrevocability’ of her community, Maria is not ‘disclaiming moral responsibility.’ On the contrary, she is accepting that in order for her to exist beyond the limitations of what Didion terms the ‘dreamwork’—the American constructed ‘fantasies of prosperity, international humanitarianism, and good governance’ (Schlosser 28)—, she needs to explore her selfhood beyond external perceptions and obligations. In this light, Maria is capable of composing an

alternative narrative that sees her successful not within the framework of collective imaginary—be it Didion’s ‘dreamwork’ or Friedan’s ‘mystique’—but, rather, *beyond* it. Where April Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road* sees ostracism as a desirable form of social void that empowers her to nullify gendered norms through the denouement of her own self, Maria utilises her fractured understanding of personhood to construct, within that desirable void, a landscape in which she is capable not only of escaping social pressures, but to build an existence with no ontological links to that imagined by the collective consciousness.

As Maria’s past and present are gradually unveiled, the concept of social pressure as a ‘violation’ of this imagined personal space becomes more and more integral to Maria’s own interpretation of her narrative and the constraints that it experiences. In exploring her feelings with regards to Carter’s ‘first picture,’ Maria once again chooses to focus on the idea that ‘facts’ can be manipulated in order to generate what society perceives as a meaningful truth beyond the singular perception of its direct subject:

The other picture, the first picture, the picture never distributed, was called *Maria*. Carter had simply followed Maria around New York and shot film. It was not until they moved to California and Carter began cutting the film together that she entirely realised what he was doing. (Didion 20)

In this context, Carter’s intrusive shooting of film results in a composite presentation of Maria’s life that generates a false image offered as reality even when it so evidently cannot depict Maria’s personal understanding of said reality. Through the blend of different cuts selected by Carter—‘Maria doing a fashion sitting, Maria asleep on a couch at a party, Maria on the telephone arguing with the billing department at Bloomingdale’s’ (Didion 20)—Maria becomes a superficial reflection of herself, a hologram fitting the standard of Hollywood actress and successful model, whose consciousness is deprived of all depth. Carter appropriates Maria’s identity for the purpose of his own artistic expression, ‘cutting together’ her persona so as to

align it with his vision of existence and fuel his self-aggrandising instincts. Carter's utter disregard for Maria as an individual is evident not only in his exploitation of her image, but in his reaction to her protests with regards to the film: 'You don't understanding anything' (Didion 21), Carter tells Maria when she questions BZ's motives for 'running the picture' (Didion 21). Transposed into film, Maria's physical space, her movements, her voice, her acts, become something other than her, something that she not only does not recognise, but cannot, in Carter's own words, 'understand.' This is the ultimate fracture, the complete disjunction of consciousness and outward existence. Maria's identity is violated by Carter to an irreparable degree, so much so that even the potential for an identity in itself begins to be questioned. Indeed, Maria admits that 'she never thought of [the picture] as *Maria*. She thought of it always as that first picture' (Didion 21).

If, to those who watch—BZ, Helen, even Carter—what can be seen on the screen becomes 'Maria' the person, Maria's own sense of personhood distances itself from the picture to the point where they both become meaningless. The cinematic experience serves to shed light on Maria's condition: 'It came to her that in the scenario of her life this would be what was called an obligatory scene, and she wondered with distant interest just how long the scene would play' (Didion 50). Maria's clinical distance from 'the scenes' that comprise her real life is symptomatic of a form of selfhood that is alert to the subtle and gradual loss of identity that participation in the social performance brings about. The 'distant interest' that Maria seems to feel towards the 'obligatory scene' is the rejection of all opportunities for agency in a constructed reality whose rules preclude independent expression. Where Schlosser sees this as 'an impasse in any effort to understand the self without the supportive but evasive framework of a dreamwork and an impasse within a polity allured by such dreamworks and unable to free itself from political myth entirely' (Schlosser 44), Maria's acceptance of the 'impasse' and her refusal to participate in it can instead be read as a rebellion against the 'evasive framework'—

or, in Friedan's words, 'the feminine mystique'—that dictates the dreamwork and its implications for the female self. Indeed, it is important to notice that Maria's alienated response, just like her 'driving the freeway,' is not simply to be read as a justifiable retraction from social existence, but rather, it is representative of a critical appreciation of the female character's social circumstances: 'It occurred to Maria that whatever arrangements were made, they worked less well for women' (Didion 46).

The fact that 'it was not until they moved to California and Carter began cutting the film together that [Maria] entirely realised what he was doing' is particularly significant in this light, for it underlines two fundamental issues as identified by Maria: firstly, it presents the idea of 'cutting' something 'together' as an oxymoron onto which all social existence is based, and, secondly, it recognises this non-consensual 'cutting together' as 'a form of rape' (Griffin Wolff 488).

Carter was assembling and reassembling 'Maria,' putting her together so that he could exhibit her. Not a person anymore, Maria has become a property: anybody can look at her whenever he wants - speed her up, slow her down, run her backwards. Most of all, this notion of "the cut" denies any intrinsic order to Maria's identity; the film, 'Maria,' can be 'cut' many different ways, whatever makes for good box office, Carter would say. The girl herself counts for nothing. (Griffin Wolff 488)

Griffin Wolff's recognition that the picture 'can be cut many different ways' is fundamental to the reinforcement of the idea that all 'facts' are, effectively, 'fiction,' insofar as they can be shaped to adapt to a variety of representational needs. Yet, Griffin Wolff's analysis falls short of furthering this thought to encompass, at its core, Maria's existence as the focus of the picture. The question posed by the 'crisis of representation' as to how one can make sense of the relation between a thinking subject and a thought object is expanded in this context to contain the idea that subject and object may, at times—as in the case of Maria and *Maria*—be one and the same,

and that Maria's agency throughout the process is denied by a blurring of boundaries that renders personal representation altogether unattainable and unimaginable. As a result, alienation as a form of separation of the consciousness from externally represented experience becomes the only means of self-preservation for the female perception of personhood. Indeed, Carter's picture does not merely 'cut together' the scenes to create a coherent whole. Rather, it effectively chisels away at Maria's identity so as to present her not as what she is, but as what she should be. The implicit idea is that in order for Maria to come 'together' as a viable human being in her social context, aspects of her personality and selfhood need to be 'cut' so as to accommodate the norm that dictates social behaviour. 'Maria,' Carter states, 'has never understood friendship, conversation, the amenities of social exchange' (Didion 13) and this shortcoming marks her undoing. The 'cutting' represents for Carter an attempt at saving Maria from her own self, at establishing an identifiable model of conduct for Maria to follow. That this model is generated without consent on Maria's part is no matter to Carter, for she is, at least in his eyes, incapable of understanding what is required of her.

Yet, what Carter takes to be Maria's incapability to follow the rules of social performance serves only to identify the male-generated stereotype and highlight Maria's own awareness of the performance and its hazards. The act of 'leav[ing] the house after the titles' (Didion 21) is equivalent for Maria to exiting the social stage and rejecting the demands that that space as a male-dominated sphere imposes. Moreover, Maria does so not by instinctually walking away from the site of her 'violation,' but by critically acknowledging her reasons for doing so. 'The girl on the screen in that first picture,' Maria asserts, 'had no knack for anything' (Didion 21). In fact, she has even less personality than the fictional character Maria plays in Carter's second picture, a character who has 'a definite knack for controlling her own destiny' (Didion 20). Where Rhodes argues that 'Maria is not terribly troubled by the discrepancy between her felt sense of self and the self reflected in the mirror image of the film. What she

likes is that the simulation of herself has agency' (Rhodes 139) and that 'Maria prefers the image that is more of her Ideal I, a "truer" because more fantasy-based version of herself' (Rhodes 139), it is exactly in the process of producing a 'fantasy-based version of herself' that Maria is able to retain a certain authority over her own subjectivity. Where 'images' are indeed the 'disciplines' that 'monitor' Maria's life, the selection of one preferred image over another—particularly where the potential for image-creation is, as in this case, a singularly male occupation—becomes a subversive act through which individual identity can be expressed by its interpretative power. Not only that, but if the fictional character is more appealing to Maria than her own 'mirror' image, that is because, while the girl in the second film can act within the boundaries of her fictional realm independently of Maria—'neither time did [Maria] have any sense that the girl on the screen was herself' (Didion 19)—the Maria that Carter depicts in his first film is deprived of agency by the crystallising influence she exercises—or attempts to exercise—on her real-world counterpart. Maria's refusal to watch the film and recognise herself in it signifies, therefore, not a simple rejection of Carter's art, but the conscious and willing rejection of the performance of selfhood that the picture portrays as the only acceptable mode of female experience. Maria's alienation—be it on the freeway, or 'outside on the beach smoking cigarettes and fighting nausea for seventy-two of the seventy-four minutes' (Didion 21)—is, for all intents and purposes, a form of voluntary ostracism wherein assuming the role of 'the outsider'—literally and metaphorically—becomes a desirable position insofar as it denies the influence of social obligations.

Maria's attempts at escaping the social circumstances that seek to limit her identity, then, grow increasingly self-conscious and aggressive. So does, however, Carter's controlling stance, for the undoing of his patriarchal authority marks the end of the 'ordered,' 'patterned' (Didion 14) existence that he 'composed' in his mind 'as if for the camera' (Didion 14). In particular, the idea of 'cutting' as related to notions of identity 'violation' recurs at various

points within the novel, and, most poignantly, begs for the association of Carter's filmmaking with the work of 'the only man in Los Angeles County who did clean work' (Didion 54), the man whose 'scraping' (Didion 83) takes care of Maria's pregnancy. In fact, it is Carter himself that threatens Maria so as to force her to contact the doctor:

'All right, don't do it. Go ahead and have this kid.' He paused, confident in his hand.

She waited for him to play it through. 'And I'll take Kate.' (Didion 54)

Carter utilises female existences—that of Maria as much as that of her daughter—as bargaining chips in a game where he, by default, can always be 'confident in his hand,' for his stakes are much lower than those of his wife. The 'win all, lose all' philosophy of the gambler renders all potential agency meaningless for Maria as she realises that the either/or choice offered by Carter precludes the possibility of ever actually 'winning all.' Maria's use of the gambling diction is significant in this context for it underlines the imbalance of power in the male/female relationship, where the woman is forced to play a game in which, she already knows, the man will have the upper hand. As a grown-up woman with a newly acquired capacity for social critique, Maria demonstrates with her use of language her ability to look back on her past and mock her own naivety at her belief in her father's suggestion to not 'let them bluff you back there because you're holding all the aces' (Didion 9). Within her conversation with Carter, Maria depicts the inequality of the gendered social codes, wherein Maria's father, as a man, is able to believe in the positive potential of a gambling game—'what came in on the next roll would always be better than what went out on the last' (Didion 5)—while Maria is forced to recognise the limits of her circumstances. Maria's internal diction thus reflects her rejection of her father's optimism and her view of the outside world as incomprehensible and unassailable. Maria embraces the nihilism of gambling and her lack of potential agency leads to an experience of dislocation that simultaneously allows her to 'keep on playing' (Didion 214) and desensitise her of the cause-effect relations that carry social meaning and significance.

It is only through her process of desensitisation that Maria can overcome the dread of the violence that is thrust upon her and imagine an existence beyond it:

If she could concentrate for one more minute on that shed [...], those were two minutes during which she was not entirely party to what was happening in this bedroom in Encino.

Two minutes in Silver Wells, two minutes here, two minutes there, it was going to be over in this bedroom in Encino, it could not last forever. (Didion 81)

Maria's own representation of her forced abortion designates alienation as a survival strategy, wherein distance from the non-consensual abuse of both her body—on the doctor's part—and her mind—on Carter's part—signifies the evasion that allows for the female consciousness to overcome 'what was happening in this bedroom in Encino' by reminding itself that 'it could not last forever.' The four walls of the bedroom cannot contain Maria's consciousness, whose ability to 'drive' her imaginary 'freeway' becomes synonymous with defiance. As the culmination of both physical and psychological forms of 'violation,' the abortion showcases the power of endurance that Didion attributes to the female character. Indeed, rather than portraying Maria, as Brady suggests, as a woman acting 'from within the confines of a deliberately limited self consciousness,' and whose 'decision to live in a truncated present causes life to become two-dimensional, or "thin"' (Brady 463), Didion attributes to her a remarkable capacity for self-preservation. In suggesting that 'the floor of the bedroom where it happened was covered with newspaper' (Didion 80), Maria connects her circumstances in the doctor's operating room to a 'disaster':

There was something else to be done with newspapers, some emergency trick [...]. In times of disaster you could baste newspapers to both sides of a cotton blanket and end up with a warm quilt. She knew a lot of things about disaster. (Didion 80)

Maria's 'knowledge' of disaster, her awareness of the critical condition that she, as a woman, occupies, is what empowers her to persevere in the face of a crisis. Spending 'two minutes in Silvers Wells, two minutes here, two minutes there,' is not, as the doctor would have it, thinking about the abortion as 'induced menstruation' (Didion, 82), but rather, the equivalent of basting 'a newspaper to both sides of a cotton blanket.' Although the possibility of changing her personal 'disaster' is precluded to her, Maria sees herself as being equipped with alienation as a means to protect herself from the 'violation' committed against her, just in the same way that a newspaper blanket can protect a victim of disaster from the cold.

### **Mutilated bodies: violence and survival**

In equating her social position to a catastrophic event, and alienation to a means of physical survival, Maria draws a line that connects the psychological violence of a stunted subjectivity to a bodily violence that tears the flesh, in a parallel where both conditions seem to be particular to the existence of 'woman'. Indeed, women's lives—and, particularly, Maria's and Francine's—appear to belong to a specific form of materiality where the dissolution of personal identity is permanently tied to the dismemberment of the body as the symbolic locus of female subjectivity. As such, the doctor tells Maria:

'That should be the sound of music to you... don't scream, Maria. [...] Better to get it all now than do it again a month from now... [...] Now I'll tell you what's going to happen, you'll bleed a day or so, not heavily, just spotting, and then a month, six weeks from now you'll have a normal period, not this month, this month you just had it, it's in that pail.' (Didion 83)

The doctor's violent and bloody removal of the foetus from Maria's body represents an attempt on the part of the patriarchal authority that governs Maria's life—embodied by Carter—to deprive Maria of her identity as a mother, an identity that is seen as unfitting to the image of the

decadent Hollywood star she is expected to portray and is indeed portrayed in Carter's second picture. What resides 'in that pail' is not, simply, the remnants of a failed pregnancy, but the potential for motherhood that is literally torn from Maria's own body. The suggestion that the removal of the foetus 'should be the sound of music' covering Maria's 'screams' implies an attempt to manipulate and socialise Maria's personal desires, a manipulation that is reinforced by the doctor's reference to the return of the woman's 'normal period' as the natural bodily function to which Maria should aspire and whose cyclical repetition represents the perpetually unfulfilled possibility for motherhood that is required of Maria. The physical violence performed over Maria's body is not only significant in its traumatic ramifications for the female consciousness, but it also assumes value for its function as an instrument of subjugation and control in the hands of the conventional patriarchal sign-system. The semiotics of physical violence is one that seeks to erase the female ability for self-expression and self-actualisation by mutilating the very bodily functions that would render these possible.

Similarly, Francine's death is described in terms of the brutal dismemberment of her corpse:

The night my mother ran the car off the highway outside Tonopah I was with a drunk rich boy at the old Morocco, as close as I could figure later: I didn't know about it for a couple of weeks because the coyotes tore her up before anybody found her and my father couldn't tell me. (Didion 8)

Francine ceases to exist as she is 'torn up' by coyotes, her subjective identity as a nourisher and carer assuming a literal capacity when her body is transformed into food for wild beasts. Just as Francine's personal tendency toward cooking as an act of nurturing is translated by her male counterparts into the potential for a capitalist enterprise, so her flesh, discarded in the wilderness, becomes symbolically the sustenance and nourishment in a lesson on the triumph of the strongest. The implication of the imagery of bodily violence employed in this passage

is, thus, that the exploitation of female bodies and abilities is to be read as a process as natural as the coyotes' struggle for survival, therefore justifying and legitimising the patriarchal behavioural code. Interestingly, Maria's reaction to her mother's violent death mirrors her reaction to the abortion—'when I hit the fact in the middle of the second paragraph I began to scream' (Didion 9)—a reaction that is, once again, suppressed by the intrusive and regulating voice of what is to be considered, in terms of social standing, the male authority. As a result, Maria's father's declaration that 'God if there is one [...] never meant [Francine's death] to set you back in your Plans' (Didion 9) menacingly echoes the doctor's welcoming of a return to the 'normal' cycle, insofar as both assertions are willing to disregard female reactions to trauma and, instead, disguise physical violence against female characters as a blessing that will encourage the continuation of the status quo.

The use of natural language related to human bodily functions and to the animal kingdom—especially if coupled, as in Maria's father's case, with religious references—determines the male authority as the rational, logical force that is capable of steering the irrational, 'screaming' female consciousness towards more suitable pursuits and socially acceptable standards of operation. In this light, then, Maria's questioning of the laws regulating natural phenomena can be charged with more specific significance:

Why should a coral snake need two glands of neurotoxic poison to survive while a king snake, *so similarly marked*, needs none. Where is the Darwinian logic there. You might ask that. I never would, not anymore. (Didion 3)

The question of why a coral snake should be equipped with greater weapons than a king snake, a reptile 'so similarly marked,' echoes Maria's own observation that 'whatever arrangements were made, they worked less well for women' (Didion 46), insofar as neither of the two circumstances seems to bear a 'Darwinian logic.' By directly referring to the lack of scientific, natural or rational reasons for biological differentiation and its consequences, Maria attacks the

basis of the gendered hierarchy of behaviours through which she herself has been socialised, depriving it of its language and influence over the process of identity-creation, and denouncing the feminine mystique as the arbitrary product of an unjust and inaccurate sign-system. The fact that, as Edington notes, ‘to protect herself against pervasive evil, Maria has not The Bible, but The American Red Cross Handbook, which her mother has given her to teach her how to treat rattlesnake bite’ (67), read together with Maria’s own understanding of the use of newspapers in moments of disaster, points to the possibility of an alternative female narrative that bears the potential for emancipation through the systemic demolition of archetypal gendered ideas whose mystique lies within their own existence as irrational and unexplainable. The adoption of the Red Cross Handbook as a new Bible signifies a detachment from the patriarchal rhetoric exemplified by Maria’s father, and symbolically equips Maria with the linguistic and theoretical means for the recognition of the mystique and the understanding of her own position within its language system.

It is Maria’s experience of alienation from the social code, and from her own self as perceived and depicted by those who adhere to said social code, that allows her to develop a critical appraisal of the sign-system that regulates her existence, and, thus, enact an active rejection of the mainstream narrative of femininity that her social context embodies:

Something real was happening: this was, as it were, her life. If she could keep that in mind she would be able to play it through. Do the right thing, whatever that meant.

(Didion 41)

The possibility of ‘something real’ and of a ‘life’ that belongs to its subject become, for Maria, mantras that she needs ‘to keep in mind’ so as to be able to ‘play through’ an identity that is personal and self-appointed. If autonomy is denied in light of the constant process of reciprocal influence exercised by separate identities over one another—Maria cannot entirely dispense with her father’s gambling diction, even though she recognises its pitfalls—yet Maria sees the

opportunity for a more representative negotiation with the narrative she inhabits. The idea that doing ‘the right thing’ cannot bear a fixed or universal meaning, in this context, serves to validate Maria’s view of personal expression, wherein ‘the right thing’ becomes ‘whatever that meant’ to the individual subjectivity in possession of its own power of agency. ‘If Carter and Helene want to think it happened because I was insane,’ Maria tells of BZ’s suicide, ‘I say let them’ (Didion 203).

In Maria’s view, it is Carter’s and Helen’s prerogative to believe that Maria is ‘insane,’ yet it is also Maria’s own prerogative to not adopt that label for herself, to explain ‘that there was no carelessness involved’ and that she ‘knew precisely what BZ was doing’ (Didion 203). Being believed by Carter and Helen, being understood the way she would like her subjectivity to be understood, becomes a secondary if not dismissible thought, for what is important for Maria is her own recognition of herself as different from what Carter and Helen ‘believe.’

Fuck it, I said to them all, a radical surgeon of my own life. Never discuss. Cut. In that way I resemble the only man in Los Angeles County who does clean work. (Didion 203)

By reclaiming the language of violence that seeks to deny her own subjectivity, Maria is able to perform her own type of ‘clean work,’ eradicating external judgements from her understanding of selfhood. ‘Discussing,’ attempting to persuade, projecting a studied image, all become obsolete practices, for they rely on the receptivity and judgements of external sources of appreciation. Instead, being ‘a radical surgeon of my own life’ signifies cutting ties with the images of Maria designated by those external sources and returning to an appreciation of personal subjectivity as a chosen rather than imposed identity. In alienating herself from her own various representations, Maria regains a sense of independent personhood and womanhood outside the boundaries prescribed by the social bond.

*Chapter IV*  
**Testimony and Power in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint***

With *Play It as It Lays*, Didion introduces the idea of representation as essential to the processes of identity formation that characterise the struggle for female independence. In this context, Carter as the patriarchal power centre in charge of determining the terms of Maria's representation demonstrates the ways in which narrative authority plays a crucial role in the creation of a form of imbalance that Miranda Fricker defines as 'testimonial injustice,' which 'occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word' (Fricker 1). In other words, because the patriarchal social order establishes Carter as the authorial voice that carries the greater measure of 'credibility,' then it follows that Maria's own attempts at a narrative output are to be read as subordinate and, in many cases, invalid. The gendered bias against the female voice excludes women from participation in the determination of both personal and intimate forms of representation, and of womanhood as a collective experience. It then becomes crucial to ask, when this bias becomes compound, when the limitations that it imposes are added to limitations dictated by other forms of 'prejudice,' what happens to the women who are the subjects of these representations? How does the intersectional nature of these 'prejudices' affect the ways in which these women can identify themselves? And in what ways can they escape the trap of a patriarchal interest in continuing the oppression of testimonial forms of injustice?

This chapter seeks to address the complex narrative structures embodied by the dichotomous presence of a highly self-centred patriarchal narrator and the social pressures of contrasting power centres, and the ways that this dichotomy affects the representation of female identity in the cultural and social imaginaries that form the basis for gendered representation. The following pages will focus on Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) to explore these

thematic concerns. On the one hand, they will investigate the ways in which the male narrative voice shapes the construction of female identities as supplementary to the patriarchal agenda, with shifting roles whose functions adapt to the specific requirements of the male consciousness as the centre of linguistic, epistemic, and testimonial power. The use of language, bodies, and silences will be analysed to show how female experience is depicted in a relation of subordination to the dominant male narrative. On the other hand, the chapter will seek to address cultural and social claims to the female body that transcend the gendered discourse to find realisation in stereotypical representations at the intersection of class, sex, and, particularly, race. Through an analysis of Alex Portnoy's mother and his lovers, the issue will be introduced of how the female body assumes value in relation to and because of the context that it inhabits, and is, therefore, to be read not as a personal and private expression of womanhood, but, rather, as a social commodity signposting the specific cultural values associated with its physical traits. Yet, even though Alex constantly tries to portray women as exclusively linked to sexual behaviours and acts, it will be argued that it is important—in fact, it is crucial—to notice that these women exist outside sexual relations: they read, they eat, they have families, obligations, jobs, and desires beyond the sexual. Reading Alex's encounters with the women in the novel beyond his constant process of sexualisation is essential in understanding the positioning of these women within the cultural and social context, and 'against the grain' (Kaplan 70) of Alex's biased narration.

### **Americannes, Jewishness, and the Male 'Dilemma'**

A number of critics have discussed Alex Portnoy's struggles for personal independence and authority, his attempts at discarding the stifling influence of various perceived centres of control, and his descent into amorality as, alternatively, a result of or a tool against the pressures of social processes of normalisation. Levine refers to Alex Portnoy's 'frantic and perverted

attempts to gain sexual gratification' in terms of his claustrophobic relationship with 'his cannibalistic Jewish mother' (166), 'the caricature to end all caricatures' (166), while Colson sees in Alex's 'sexually experimental nature' the desire, though misplaced, to 'liberate himself through sexual difference' (131). 'Much of the scholarship surrounding the novel has focused on Portnoy's liberation—from his domineering mother, his religious upbringing, and his own sexual cravings' (Colson 131), and, yet, in doing so it has unwittingly contributed to the erasure of female identities from the patriarchal narrative. Spearheaded by Alex's own attitudes and narrative strategies, most of the criticism surrounding Roth's novel has adopted a vision of female personhood as either obstacle to or instrument for Alex's project of emancipation, thus discarding the potential for female experience as capable of expressing even a limited degree of agency and selfhood. At best, Alex's 'complaint against his mother' is dismissed not as a complaint against the woman as an active participant in social institutions, but, rather, 'a complaint against being Jewish' (Gross 168). Though acquitted by Gross of the crime of excessive mothering, Sophie Portnoy remains, in essence, a function of her son's consciousness, the symbolic representation through which the young male Jew can voice his frustration at the regulations he perceives as unjustly shaping his upbringing and transition into adulthood.

Nevertheless, the brutal aggressiveness with which Alex as the representative of a marginalised racial minority seeks access to his idealised codes of American normativity manifests into a double burden for the Jewish woman, who is simultaneously subjected to the oppressive practices of both of these cultural and social contexts. Though this is in itself a significant observation, what makes the social dynamics represented in *Portnoy's Complaint* even more interesting has to do not necessarily with the inherent conflation of gendered and racial discrimination—this will be discussed in later chapters with Angelou and Morrison—but rather with the singularly masculine burden of American cultural signification, the tension this

creates in the context of racial minority, and the consequences it bears for female characters as expressions of this masculine struggle. As Kaplan explains ‘it seems [...] that Roth dramatizes Portnoy’s dilemma in ways that illuminate at least some of the problematic expectations of masculine culture and its desires’ (75), where these expectations are radically entwined to forms of cultural stereotyping that seem mark Americanness and Jewishness as fundamentally incommensurate. Kaplan recognises this cultural clash as essential to processes of identity making and even admits that ‘just because the Jewish joke extends to the main male character, that does not mean that the representations of women are without major pitfalls’ (69). Yet, Kaplan’s reading falls short of attending to the ways in which the hypersexualisation that dominates Alex’s ‘romantic’ conquests, rather than remaining a simple feature of Alex’s own dysfunctionality as a man, leads to dramatic consequences for women as the vehicles for Alex’s project of affirmation. Thus, the juxtaposition and coexistence, within Alex’s consciousness and identity, of the American and Jewish standards of masculinity does not signify a ‘dilemma’ for Alex alone. Instead, they become a crucial feature of female representation in the novel by creating a social landscape in which women are examined through a variety of opposing and contrasting moral standards that set impossible expectations. If Alex, then, only has to contend with his perceived ostracism as an American Jew, the women in his narrative, both *shikse* and Jewish, find themselves at the crossroads of competing models of codification that try to impose on them, simultaneously, different and often conflicting archetypal forms of femininity. The enthralling nature of Alex’s therapeutic monologue, then, hides in its silences, in its obvious misgivings, and in its ironic failings, a more complex story about the ways in which masculine anxieties as exacerbated by diverse concerns tear at the core of female identities to set unachievable standards.

Before delving deeper into the issue of female identity in this male-dominated cultural and literary environment, it might be worth looking at the ways in which the male narrator,

despite his obvious faults, is capable of creating, through stylistic and thematic choices, a form of personal representation that dominates the power structures of the novel, and can thus guide critical evaluations towards his own gratification. Indeed, the difficulty of analysing female characters in *Portnoy's Complaint* lies exactly in Alex's skill at presenting his voice as the reliable, self-critical, and still ultimately benign guiding motif of the story. Alex's consciousness is not merely central to the narration; thanks to shrewd strategising, it also serves as an apparent compass for the determination of the analytically viable and critically valuable. Alex's narrative style seems to be greatly indebted to that offered by Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) insofar as both narrators coax their audiences into forgetting, and even, at times, justifying, their degraded behaviours through the use of rhetoric devices aimed at depicting their 'sins' as the result of circumstances outwith the individual's control. Both Alex and Humbert picture themselves as victims rather than culprits, and they do so by appealing to the idea of an overpowering sense of temporality whose influence shapes the present experience in inescapable ways:

And all at once it happens again, I am impaled again upon the long ago, what was, what will never be! The door slams, she is gone—my salvation! my kin!—and I am whimpering on the floor with MY MEMORIES! My endless childhood! Which I won't relinquish— or which won't relinquish me! (Roth 250)

Alex perceives the potential social judgements of his peers as unjust, for his actions as he depicts them are a direct result of 'the long ago' that becomes an 'endless childhood' whose grip on the individual's consciousness is indissoluble. Just like Humbert, who 'leaf[s] again and again through [his] miserable memories,' and who 'keep[s] asking [him]self, was it then, in the glitter of that remote summer, that the rift in my life began; or was my excessive desire for that child only the first evidence of an inherent singularity?' (Nabokov 12), Alex is trapped—

‘impaled’—in a reading of past experience that he sees as outside his control and yet a determining factor in his present behavioural patterns:

I might have learned something [...]. If I could learn something! If I could somehow sprung from this obsession with fellatio and fornication, from romance and fantasy and revenge—from the settling of scores! the pursuit of dreams! from this hopeless, senseless loyalty to the long ago! (Roth 202)

Alex attributes all of the behaviours that his social group would find repulsive—his ‘obsession with fellatio and fornication,’ ‘revenge,’ and ‘the settling of scores’—to a sense of ‘loyalty’ to the education he received and the cultural influences of his immediate social milieu. In doing so, he is able to transform his misinterpretations and misrepresentations of traditional Jewish American and white American families and female social roles from the fruits of his narcissistic consciousness to the results of a noble attachment to his roots.

Alex’s faults are disowned as the products of a superimposed system of codification to which the individual has been trained to adhere, and as such, they need not only to be justified, but also to be understood as the acceptable manifestations of the hierarchical social systems that structure social aggregation. It is no coincidence that both Alex and Humbert imagine themselves as standing in front of a hypothetical jury, for both attempt to control the processes of social scrutiny that would determine their verdicts. ‘Had I come before myself,’ Humbert tells the readers of his journals, ‘I would have given Humbert at least thirty years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges’ (Nabokov 352). By assuming the presence of a jury as their ideal audience, the narrators simultaneously seem to accept their guilt and are able to free themselves from it by creating a body of judgement that will see their voluntary subjection to trial as duly remorseful, accept their justifications of inevitability, and absolve them of culpability. ‘It makes me want to *scream*,’ Alex explains, ‘the ridiculous disproportion of the guilt!’ (Roth 252). The confession becomes a weapon for the proclamation of innocence, for it

displaces individual responsibility by rendering it both the result of social influence and a punishment for the singular perpetrator.

Yet, if, as Humbert Humbert suggests in *Lolita*, ‘you can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style’ (7), the fact that Alex’s ‘fancy prose style’ invites the reader to blindly accept his perception of social roles, and particularly his characterisation of womanhood, as indebted to long-established social structures, should be considered with suspicion. Regardless of Alex’s claim to innocence, there remain doubts—or there *should* remain—as to whether Alex’s self-serving narration may hide a whole different set of regulations aimed at governing the existence and representation of his female counterparts, and what possibilities for female self-expression are offered within the narrative. In asserting his own motives, Alex himself betrays his biases:

Do I exaggerate? Am I doing myself in only as a clever way of showing off? Or boasting perhaps? Do I really experience this restlessness, this horniness, as an affliction—or an accomplishment? Both? Could be. (Roth 94)

The admission that Alex’s behaviour as a sexual predator could as easily be read as ‘an accomplishment,’ rather than ‘an affliction,’ blurs the line between the socially accepted and the secretly desired, shedding light on a system of female objectification that goes beyond the normative construction and implementation of traditional gender roles to encompass the existence of femininity as an instrument for the self-actualisation of the male consciousness, regardless of the legitimacy—even in a deeply patriarchal understanding of the term—of the means for the achievement of said self-actualisation. In other words, like Humbert, Alex appeals to the established system of patriarchal judgements to exploit—and thus unveil to the critical reader—a deeper structure of ‘mystification,’ a structure in which the functional roles of female behaviour that Friedan sees as representing the basis of the patriarchal social hierarchy become subsumed, instead, by symbolic roles through which individual male authorities can

gain self-recognition within a variety of different centres of power. Crystallised in this male-centred system of signification, Portnoy's women are incapable of finding liberation through a simple abandonment of 'the uneasy denial of the world outside the home' (Friedan 198), for their self-realisation is hindered not by the cyclical performance of menial practical tasks, but by their existence as signifiers of a semiotics that they do not control and whose meaning is shaped by the concurrence of an articulate network of institutional powers.

What *Portnoy's Complaint* represents, in essence, is a narrative structure in which female characters are subjected to a form of 'identity power'—the way Miranda Fricker intends it as 'an operation of power that depends in some significant degree upon agents having shared conceptions of social identity' (14)—that simultaneously controls them and misrepresents them. The fact that Alex's exercise of patriarchal power chooses to operate in alternation between different stereotypical concepts of social identity—racial, religious, cultural, gendered to name but a few—depending on the particular aims of his discourse, exacerbates the limitations posed on female characters, for they are transformed, through Alex's process of imaginative exploitation, into parts of speech whose cultural significance is constantly re-categorised to adhere to the specific circumstances that the male narrator envisages at work at distinct moments of signification. The 'mystique' as described by Friedan is thus reinforced by the impossibility for female experience to be holistically comprehended and represented. Rather, the fractured nature of the power exerted over the female subject results in a fractured understanding of selfhood that denies agency, while this subjection, highly dependent on a language sign-system in which 'the shared imaginative conceptions of "social identity" are expressed' (Fricker 14), generates a mistrust in traditional semiotics as a form of structural power that both fails to represent its female subjects in their complexity, and subjects them to forms of testimonial injustice that deny their identities as such. This is evident in Alex's discussion of what he perceives as being man's 'primal' instincts, their connection with his

philosophical understanding of ‘America,’ and their repercussions on the characterisation of female identities as tools.

### **Female Subjectification and Male Idealisation**

A clear link is made throughout the novel between ideas of motherhood, food and sexual pleasure seen as representative, respectively, of the narrator’s need for attention, nourishment and self-actualisation. Food in particular plays a fundamental role in shaping Alex’s psyche, for it is the figurative quality of food that creates a point of contact between the world of the marginalised Jewish American home—maternal care as invariably associated with the space of the house (particularly the kitchen)—and that of the white all-American pop culture that the *shikse* girls as sexual objects of desire seem to portray. The acts of preparing and eating food come to life as symbolic expressions of social and emotional processes, ritualised experiences that serve to establish the signifiers of the social landscape as perceived by Alex. Women—Sophie as the nurturing mother, the Pilgrim as the instrument of triumph over perceived marginalisation, the Monkey as the collapse of ideological ‘imprisonment’—occupy a central position within the spaces of signification that determine Alex’s view of his world, and, as such, their individuality is stunted in favour of a narrative that determines female existence as an allegorical function of the male consciousness. As Cohen suggests, for Alex Portnoy, ‘the motifs of identity and its aspects of castration, annihilation, death and blood are associated with food and with standards of behaviour’ (Cohen 165) whose perception is delineative of status and social positioning. This stance on Alex’s part is made apparent in his treatment of Sally Mulsby:

Here was a girl who [...] knew how to eat her dessert using two pieces of silverware (a piece of cake you could pick up in your hands, and you should have seen her manipulate

it with that fork and that spoon –like a Chinese with his chopsticks! What skills she had learnt in far-off Connecticut!). (Roth 219)

In listing Sally's many accomplishments, Alex chooses to focus specifically on her manners at the dinner table. In Alex's views, Sally does not simply 'handle' her food, but, rather, she is seen as 'manipulating' it. The act of eating—and eating elegantly—is perceived by Alex not as a mere function of existence, but as a deliberate effort to communicate adherence to certain social standards that determine class and community aggregation. The inherently negative connotations attached to the notion of 'manipulation' point at Alex's unfavourable judgement of Sally's social milieu as insincere and affected. There is something intrinsically malignant about Sally's behaviour as dictated by her cultural environment, so much so that even a slice of cake becomes a victim to be moulded and controlled for her pleasure. The fact that her use of silverware is likened to that of Chinese chopsticks—the Chinese being the only people whose judgement Sophie Portnoy is not concerned with, for they are considered somewhat inferior due to their even more prominent marginalised status—seems to suggest an attempt, on Alex's part, to bring discredit to these social circumstances, circumstances that, regardless of his efforts, Alex is destined to be excluded from.

In this light, Sally is portrayed as a mere symbolic sign, a semiotic representation of Alex's sense of exclusion:

What Sally couldn't do was eat me. To shoot a gun at a little quack-quack is fine, to suck my cock is beyond her. She was sorry, she said, if I was going to take it so hard, but it was just something she didn't care to try. (Roth 220)

Sally's refusal to 'eat' Alex comes as an affront not merely because it denies Alex the possibility of taking his own sexual pleasure in the manner he prefers, but because this denial marks to him the definitive ostracism from the 'quack-quack' shooting, food 'manipulating' society that he imagines as being truly 'American' due to its white hegemonic control over a

mainstream culture that Alex sees himself denied as a result of his incumbent Jewishness. Sally, whose activities ‘partook of the exotic and even the taboo’ (Roth 219), cannot be afforded the freedom of rejecting Alex on her own personal terms, because everything she says and does is only valuable to Alex insofar as it is characteristic of the ‘other,’ the world of the domineering and liberated white Americanness that Alex aspires to and yet does not seem to be able to reach. Sally’s insistence that ‘it was just something she did not care to try’ is lost in its simplicity between the layers of cultural and social signification that Alex poses over the ideal image of a *shikse* girl ‘eating’ him as she would, with the elegant poise of the white all-American princess, a piece of cake. Sally’s sense of personal identity and individual will is, thus, annihilated in favour of the male-centred narrative of victimisation that Alex has created for himself.

As Franco argues, ‘erotic satisfaction for Portnoy results from his ability to manipulate not just women, but also the very narratives that would seem to control and structure his relationship with them’ (Franco 103). Interestingly, Franco’s choice of words—the term ‘manipulate’ this time applying to Alex’s practice of narrative revision—points to the irony of Alex’s predicament, the idea of being manipulated while simultaneously utilising the process of storytelling to recall and rewrite the experience of his sexual partners for the benefit of his own mechanisms of identity-making. While Alex declares himself, in the presence of Sally, ‘wowed [...] as Desdemona, hearing of the Antropapagi [sic]’, yet it is his act of narration that leaves his female counterpart in an epistemic void in which her testimonial as individual is irrelevant to the narrative dynamics woven by Alex as the primary—indeed, the sole—voice of the story. Franco’s argument that it is only with this ‘manipulation’ that Alex is able to achieve ‘erotic satisfaction’ is only valuable if ‘erotic satisfaction’ is not read as being, in and of itself, the aim of Alex’s project, but rather, a result of the satisfaction of a much greater need: that of

generating for himself—the unhappy Jewish American man ‘marked like a road map from head to toe with my repressions’ (Roth 114)—a personal semiotics of self-actualisation.

For Alex, Sally is an icon of both desire and repulsion, a token of his relationship to the social circles she inhabits. Her existence within Alex’s narrative is purely metaphorical, the material representation of a social condition that Alex perceives as impinging on his desired liberties. Sally’s identity as a *shikse* is what interests Alex, for it allows for the creation of rhetorical scenarios that fulfil his own delusions of persecution and grandeur. If Sally’s white American presence is necessary for the realisation of Alex’s self-victimisation, though, so is the Jewish American presence of Hannah Portnoy. As ‘the only sane person in that lunatic asylum whom I can talk to’ (Roth 82), Hannah’s rational voice offers a threatening counterweight to Alex’s egotistic tantrums:

But you are a Jew, my sister says. You are a Jewish boy, more than you know, and all you’re doing is making yourself miserable, all you’re doing is making yourself miserable, all you’re doing is hollering into the wind... (Roth 70)

By pointing out to Alex that being a Jew is part of his existential condition—just, it could be added, like being female is part of her own existential condition, and like being a marginalised American is part of both—Hannah underscores the inevitability of social categorisation and, thus, demonstrates an understanding of the composite burden of social power that Alex does not possess. As a Jewish American woman, Hannah is aware of the fragmentation of subjection that characterises social classifications and understands the importance of acknowledging this as an unavoidable part of personal experience. What Hannah is arguing for is the existence of a decentralised form of social power that should be interpreted as a multilayered structure that is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. [...] One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name

that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. (Foucault *The History of Sexuality* 93)

As a complex ‘strategical situation,’ the social powers that influence Hannah’s and Alex’s lives are understood by Hannah not as centralised and single-minded institutional constraints, but, rather, as intricate networks of expectations and performance. An awareness of the sources of social power that govern one’s life becomes, in Hannah’s reading, crucial to a cognisant resistance to and demystification of the ‘shared conception of social identity’ that determines said power.

What Hannah voices is, essentially, a practical response to ‘Portnoy’s complaint,’ one that takes into account the social circumstances of her brother’s—and her own—socialisation and seeks to find a way to adapt and reshape these so as to interrupt the cycle of misrepresentation. Just as Alex’s renunciation of his own Jewishness will not, in Hannah’s eyes, alleviate his feelings of misrecognition, so Hannah’s search for intellectual freedom, her ‘reading a paperback book with a greenish cover called *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*’ (Roth 70) will not detach her personal understanding of selfhood from the signification imposed over it by her social milieu. Rather, a response that embraces the inevitability of ‘being a Jewish boy’ or, in Hannah’s case, of being the carrier of ‘the size and smell of her brassiere and panties’ (Roth 70), while simultaneously pointing at the complexity of personal experience as singular, particular and diverse, should be adopted, Hannah seems to suggest, as the default approach to social interaction.

Yet, if speaking eloquently of such matters determines Hannah as ‘the only sane person’ in Alex’s world, this does not grant her any extraordinary authority, but, rather, it serves to further alienate her from the potential for emancipation. Indeed, because Alex refuses to abandon his preferred narrative of unjustly smothered and derided selfhood—a narrative that operates as a cover-up for his socially repulsive desires—Hannah’s mediating vision of social

identity as a negotiable and fluid construct becomes, in Alex's eye, a threat that needs to be silenced. To do so, Alex does not simply question Hannah's words in themselves, but, rather, chooses to undermine the existence of the woman as a sentient being:

You know, I can really come up with no more than a dozen memories involving my sister from those early years of my childhood. [...] It is as though she is someone we see maybe once or twice a year—for a night or two she visits with us, eating at our table, sleeping in one of our beds, and then, poor fat thing, she just blessedly disappears. (Roth 82)

The depiction of Hannah as a guest in her family's lives, whose disposable existence goes, at best, unnoticed, and, at worst, has to be read as burdensome—the eating the family's food and sleeping in their beds symbolising an exploitative relationship—works to create a prejudicial image of the woman as insensitive and irrelevant, thus invalidating her words. If, as Fricker suggests, 'prejudicial dysfunction in testimonial practice' can both result 'in the speaker's receiving more credibility than he otherwise would have—a "*credibility excess*", and simultaneously be instrumental 'in [the woman] receiving less credibility than she otherwise would have—a "*credibility deficit*"' (Fricker 17), then Hannah becomes, in this context, the object of a double injustice. On the one hand, Hannah's testimony is constantly undermined by a form of testimonial prejudice that sees Alex as the object of a 'credibility excess' afforded to him both by the characters within the narrative—it suffices to look at the way in which Sophie Portnoy continuously refers to Hannah as a 'child' who 'is no genius' even though she 'applies herself to her limits' (Roth 2)—and by most critical appraisals of the novel—for which, as Schweitzer argues, "'Hannah" is nowhere in sight' (72). On the other hand, since both Alex and his audience operate on a 'credibility deficit' towards the women Alex encounters, Hannah's speech acts as an expression of a female voice fail to be read as authentic and significant, while female experiences come to be considered solely as dependent on Alex's own understanding

of his social circumstances. The woman's refusal to share in and confirm the male narrator's vision of the world renders her epistemologically irrelevant to the narrative, and her understanding of the experiences that shape her own life as much as that of the narrator is nullified as either naive, narrow-minded or unintelligent.

In Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Holden Caulfield tells Sally Hayes to 'Open your ears. [...] You don't see what I mean at all' (143-4). In one single utterance, Sally becomes both deaf and blind, incapable of participating in experiential discussion, as her perceptions, depicted as differing from the accepted norm, detach her from the reality that Holden is building through his narrative act. Both Alex and Holden are characters whose understanding of selfhood and social roles is built upon the creation of a series of self-delusions that rely on a patriarchal semiotic authority granting them the ability to redefine ideas of epistemic worth and testimonial power. Just as Hannah's rational negotiation of subjection is undercut by Alex's depiction of her as someone who can 'obligingly allow herself to be swallowed up by the wall' (Roth 82) and abandon her own personhood, so Sally's objection to Holden's dream of escape, the idea that 'You can't just *do* something like that' (Salinger 143) is deprived of significance by Holden's own assertion that 'she wouldn't have been anybody to go with' anyway (Salinger 145). In both cases, the female speakers are attacked in their capacity as signifiers, and turned, instead, into semiotic voids that are physically represented by their absence from the very imagined scenarios of male self-satisfaction that their personal expressions would threaten. Thus, where Sally is excluded from Holden's fantasy of going 'somewhere West where it was pretty and sunny' (Salinger 213) and meeting 'this beautiful girl that was also a deaf-mute' (Salinger 214)—the muteness of the girl assuring the persistence of Holden's imaginary narrative—Hannah's image is forced to recede into the background of existence while Alex is 'being carried around the house like the Pope through the Streets of Rome' (Roth 82).

Contrary to Carter Lang, neither Holden nor Alex see the need of employing violence—either linguistic or physical—to achieve their goals, for they as the singular narrative voices have been able to build a system of signification that is biased in their favour. As Foucault suggests in his discussion of power,

[disciplines] were different from slavery because they were not based on a relation of appropriation of bodies: indeed the elegance of the discipline lay in the fact that it could dispense of this costly and violent relation by obtaining effects of utility at least as great. (*Discipline and Punish* 137)

The narrative and semiotic disciplines employed by Alex, Holden, and, even, Humbert ensure the transformation of female attempts at independent subjectivity—particularly where these are posed in direct contrast with male idealisation—into expendable, and even laughable, attempts at rebellion against a male-centred norm that is codified by the male narrative voice as the only logically acceptable depiction of the personal and social circumstances presented in the novels. Instead of carrying the potential for debate, negotiation, and a changeable perspective, the ‘utility’ of female self-expression lies in its capacity to act as a counterpoint that can be employed to confirm the male-generated conceptual threads onto which the narrative as a product of male personhood is built.

### **Castrating Motherhood and the Woman-Goddess Paradox**

If the concept of semiotic discipline, then, is adopted by Alex to determine Hannah Portnoy’s expulsion from the realm of narrative relevance, its reliance on credibility excesses and credibility deficits can be seen as working throughout the narrative not only to discredit female objections to Alex’s self-centred patriarchal discourse, but also to provide arguments in favour of its acceptance. Indeed, if Hannah is relegated by Alex to the role of a disappearing consciousness so as to silence her, Sophie Portnoy, as Hannah’s counterpart in Alex’s

recollection of personal development, is heralded, instead, as the symbolic carrier of the oppressive and persistent scrutiny of repressive social judgements. Just as Hannah's exclusion from the narrative scene is essential to the success of Alex's delusions, so is Sophie's suffocating 'devotion,' a devotion that, as Alex sees it, 'is just in her blood' (Roth 9) and whose ubiquity serves to substantiate Alex's claim to repression. In fact, Sophie is so instrumental to Alex's understanding of his circumstances that he recalls her as being 'so deeply embedded in my consciousness that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise' (Roth 1). Sophie is depicted by Alex as omnipresent, an embodiment of a complex yet constant system of surveillance that seeks to impose limitations over the boy's development by trying to 'find out the kind of little boy I was when I thought she wasn't around' (Roth 1).

Rather than affording Sophie a greater degree of agency, however, the superpower that Alex assigns her seems to dilute her identity and lessen her selfhood so much so that she is capable of 'making herself emerge, limb by limb, out of an invisible state and into her apron' (Roth 1). By conflating Sophie with every single woman he has ever met, Alex de facto nullifies her existence in favour of a vision of motherhood as ever controlling and encroaching. The fact that in Alex's imagination Sophie can make herself 'emerge' directly 'into her apron,' ready to perform the conventional motherly duties expected of her, further limits Sophie's possibility for agency, rendering her already de-personalised presence a mere function of familial life:

It was my mother who could accomplish anything, who herself had to admit that it might even be that she was actually too good. And could a small child with my intelligence, with my powers of observation, doubt that this was so? She could make jello, for instance, with sliced peaches *hanging* in it, peaches just *suspended* there, in defiance of the law of gravity. She could bake a cake that tasted like a banana. (Roth 9)

Sophie is depicted as extraordinary in her achievements, and yet these achievements simply serve to reinforce the exploitation of femininity as the domestic centre of nurture and care. Food plays, once again, a fundamental role in the characterisation of womanhood, becoming here the tool of Sophie's magic, the proof of an exceptionality that awes Alex and condemns Sophie to a life of constraints. Alex's casual remark that Sophie 'herself had to admit that it might even be that she was actually too good;' interpreted by Alex as a confirmation of his view of Sophie as domestic goddess, points to Alex's tendency to negligent misinterpretation or appropriation, and suggests Sophie herself might be aware of her complicity in the performance of the purpose she is allocated both in Alex's and in the collective imaginary.

For all intents and purposes, Sophie *is* the prototypical Jewish American housewife who, as 'a proven fact' would give her son 'the food out of her mouth' (Roth 61) and whose family's life would be 'unthinkable [...] without her to cook for us, to clean for us, to... *everything* for us!' (Roth 61). However, regardless of Friedan's assertion that there was 'massive evidence of psychological damage done to boys and girls by frustrated mothers who devoted all their days to filling children's needs' (Friedan 155), and despite Alex's own perceived fight against what Cohen terms 'emotional castration by his mother' (Cohen 167), 'Sophie's laws' cannot, as Cohen argues, be simply considered 'nonsensical and unpredictable' (165), but, rather, they should be judged as a product of certain societal pressures imposed upon women. Sophie's behavioural patterns, which Cohen compares, in terms of foolishness and insanity, to those of the Queen of Hearts in Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) (Cohen 166), are not her own, for they stem from stereotypical impersonations of motherhood as established by the male-dominated system, and it is only when the male subject finds failure within the system that their presentation—a presentation that, in *Portnoy's Complaint* is orchestrated by the patriarchal voice offered by Alex—seeks to retroactively find fault in them. After all, as Friedan herself suggests, 'with all the reverence and lip service she is paid, mom

is a pretty safe target, no matter how correctly or incorrectly her failures are interpreted' (Friedan 164).

If this is true, nevertheless, Roth's presentation of what Alex remembers as being a particularly scarring episode of his childhood seems to suggest the necessity for a more nuanced reading of Sophie:

How can she rise with me on the crest of my genius during those dusky beautiful hours after school, and then at night, because I will not eat some string beans and a baked potato, point a bread knife at my heart?

And why doesn't my father stop her? (Roth 14)

There are two fundamental points to investigate within Alex's accusation. Firstly, the paragraph here presented comes as the conclusion of a lengthy, self-aggrandising passage, in which Alex details his 'genius', his being 'the star actor of my class,' without whom every school play would become 'decidedly second rate' (Roth 14). The hyperbolic nature of Alex's soliloquy in praise of his dramatic talents is only a prelude to the big climactic moment in which the hero—Alex seeing himself as the hero of his own tragic epic—finds his own mother 'pointing a bread knife at my heart.' Stylistically, the passage is rife with the rhetorical questions, exclamations, invocations that characterise tragedy and look to create a sense of immediacy and intimacy between the speaker and his audience. Yet, the over-dramatised, exaggerated nature of Alex's speech patterns, coupled with the frivolity of the subject matter—a boy being told off for not eating his 'string beans and baked potato'—as compared to epic materials or the great Greek tragedies generate an ironic undertone that undermines Alex's depiction of the incident, and makes the reader doubt, in the first instance, the legitimacy of the accusation, and, in the second, its gravity.

In addition, it is also important to notice how, despite Alex's emphasis on the supposed absurdity of Sophie's behaviour, the paragraph, and indeed the entire section, ends not on Sophie, but on Alex's father Jack. What Alex finds truly unacceptable in this context is not Sophie's behaviour, but Jack's (lack of) reaction to it. It is what he perceives as his father's emasculation that Alex condemns, more than his mother's aggression, which works, as Sally's refusal to 'eat' Alex did, only as an instrument for the display of male fallacies. Schweitzer suggests that

[Alex's] overwhelming masculine narcissism does not allow him to accept vitality that is not angry, rebellious, alienated, and individualistic. Given this gendered limitation, he has to render his older sister—and indeed, every woman—as pallid and pathetic or, its opposite, monstrous or merely a 'cunt,' in order to beef up his own self-presentation and flagging self-esteem. In other words, Alex is a reliably unreliable narrator. (Schweitzer 76)

All we hear about Sophie, both in this passage and in the larger project of Alex's recollections, is second-hand material, filtered by Alex's 'overwhelming masculine narcissism,' and, thus, 'reliably unreliable.' Roth's stylistic choices indeed point again toward the possibility of a double testimonial injustice wherein relying on Alex for a truthful depiction of his familial circumstances would both afford him a greater degree of credibility than deserved, and deprive his subjects—and, more specifically, his female subjects—of personality. Just as Sally's assertion that there are things 'she just didn't care to try' cannot be easily dismissed on the basis of Alex's biased reading of her circumstances, so Sophie cannot be found guilty of, in Friedan's words, 'producing incipient neurosis' (159) solely as a result of Alex's skewed and inflated impression of an episode that other mothers within Sophie's social circle find perfectly acceptable —'and none of them apparently finds this tactic of hers at all excessive' (Roth 38).

This is not to say that ‘pointing a bread knife’ at one’s son is a universally acceptable form of parental caretaking, but, rather, that Sophie acts so in fulfilment of certain social expectations externally generated and placed upon her. How can she, then, be credited with ‘producing incipient neurosis’ when her behaviours are respondent to standards she has no control over? Even while conforming to the idea of Jewish American mother that Alex himself imposes on her with the assignment of her superhuman powers, Sophie still remains an object of criticism. Where female characters such as April Wheeler in Yates’s *Revolutionary Road* (1963) or Maria Wyeth in Didion’s *Play It as It Lays* (1970) are ostracised due to their refusal to perform normalised visions of femininity, Sophie is condemned for what Friedan terms the ‘mistaken choice’ that makes her ‘fit the very image of the feminine mystique’ (Friedan 153). In this light, Sophie experiences the ultimate process of de-humanisation. She becomes, in all effects, less and simultaneously more than a person: less, because her selfhood is denied over and over again, so much so that even her acceptance of the ‘feminine mystique’ becomes meaningless; but more, because her presence as ‘Mother’ in the social landscape is heralded as the dominating influence on Alex’s life:

This is what I prayed and wept for: that she should come out at the other end of the operation, and be alive. And then come home, to be once again our one and only mother.  
(Roth 61)

The incidence of ‘prayers,’ coupled with the locution ‘one and only’ as associated with the term ‘mother,’ strengthens the idea of motherhood as a form of divinity that can administer, alternatively and without reason, favourable or unfavourable displays of power.

Throughout the novel, Sophie is constantly oscillating in Alex’s recollections between the idealised, super-human embodiment of perfect grace and wisdom, and the nagging and controlling drives of the frustrated Jewish woman. On the one hand, she is able, just by exhibiting her own vitality, to shine a light on the beauty of the world:

Memories of practically nothing—and yet they seem moments of history as crucial to my being as the moment of my conception; I might be remembering his sperm nosing into her ovum, so piercing is my gratitude—yes, *my* gratitude!—so sweeping and unqualified is my love. Yes, me, with sweeping and unqualified love! I am standing in the kitchen (standing maybe for the first time in my life), my mother points, ‘look outside, baby,’ and I look; she says, ‘See? how purple? a real fall sky.’ The first line of poetry I ever hear! (Roth 24)

The speech act that Sophie bestows on Alex as a baby resonates through time and ‘flashes’ into Alex’s ‘mind with such poignancy, that momentarily I am not down in the subway, or at my office, or at dinner with a pretty girl, but back in my childhood’ (Roth 24). The infantilising powers of these maternal memories take hold of Alex’s mind to instil sentiments of ‘sweeping and unqualified’ love not unlike those generated by religious faith. In this vision of motherhood, even the most depraved of adult men is able to ‘hear’ the ‘gratitude’-inducing ‘poetry’ of nature and find peace in ‘everything I remember with pleasure’ (Roth 23). Even the mention of sexual intercourse is purged of its erotic connotations in this context, for its value lies in its power to elicit feelings of gratefulness. Of course, that the specific sex-act Alex chooses to purify coincides with that leading to his own birth speaks of the narrator’s narcissistic instincts, and thus, once more, undermines the ‘holiness’ of his reformatory experience.

Indeed, if Alex is capable—and willing—to elevate Sophie to the status of almost cathartic agent, he is, nevertheless, also quick to de-construct this image in favour of one that sees the mother as monster. Representing both the ‘Red’ woman of Alex’s sexual fantasies—whose ‘erogenous zones’ are, according to Alex, on display ‘around the house’ (Roth 38)—and the austere ‘mouthpiece’ (Roth 82) of the Jewish God, Sophie assumes the quality of chastiser.

The pairing of desire and repulsion that Alex experiences in his relationship with his mother undermines Alex's sense of manhood and distorts his view of his own self:

Once I saw her menstrual blood [...] saw it shining darkly up at me from the warm linoleum in front of the kitchen sink. Just two red drops over a quarter of a century ago, but they glow still in that icon of her that hangs, perpetually illuminated, in my Modern Museum of Gripes and Grievances. (Roth 38)

Sophie's 'menstrual blood,' a clear symbol of femininity, becomes a metonymy for the woman as a whole. In Alex's eyes, Sophie is inextricably linked to both enticing sexuality and violent motherhood—'Also in this icon is an endless dripping of blood down through a drainboard into a dishpan. It is the blood she is draining from the meat so as to make it kosher and fit for consumption' (Roth 38). The 'abject' feeling that this combination evokes in the male mind, rather than allowing for growth and development, serves as a refuge from the necessity of facing the misconceptions born by this depiction of womanhood. Sophie's outward manifestation of singularly female bodily functions becomes a function of Alex's consciousness, generating a definition of motherhood as 'on the one hand so insensitive to my shame, and yet on the other so attuned to my deepest desires!' (Roth 39). Even with her menstrual blood, Sophie lacks the capacity for agency, and her existence is instead secondary to that of her male narrator.

Though depictions of Sophie change to accommodate Alex's moods and needs, what remains constant throughout the novel is Alex's investment in the project of depicting motherhood as a power controlling male existence, so as to be able to justify his own 'being an enemy and flayer of myself' (Roth 229), to find a balance beyond 'the disproportion of the guilt' (Roth 252) he experiences with regards to his impulses. In an attempt to defend Alex's attitude towards Sophie, Gross argues that Alex sees his mother as 'monstrous because he measures her against American criteria and American standards' (Gross 172). While this

explanation is helpful in locating Sophie as a female character whose existence can only be evaluated at the intersection of racial and gendered stereotypes, it could be argued that the liminal space occupied by Sophie in *Portnoy's Complaint*, far from providing a rationale for Alex's misogyny, serves to exemplify the ways in which reading femininity through codified modes of perception falls short not only of granting personal identity to female individuals, but also of appeasing male unease with ideas of masculinity.

Indeed, Alex's discussion of his father Jack takes the exploitation of Sophie as symbol even further. While where Alex himself is concerned, Sophie is depicted as affecting behaviours and choices that, nonetheless, retain a certain degree of independence and self-affirmation—Alex's sexual 'exploits' being perceived almost as a 'rebellion' against what he understands as his mother's influence—she assumes, with Jack, a different role, becoming in effect an external representation of Jack's personality, the physical manifestation of his inability to fulfil the male standard as Alex imagines it:

If my father had only been my mother! and my mother my father! But what a mix-up of the sexes in our house! Who should by rights be advancing on me, retreating – and who should be retreating, advancing! Who should be scolding, collapsing in helplessness, enfeebled totally by a tender heart! And who should be collapsing, instead scolding, correcting, reproving, criticizing, fault-finding without end! Filling the patriarchal vacuum! (Roth 37)

According to Gross, 'the American world in which Alexander Portnoy has been socialized defines the male and female roles, the paternal and maternal roles, much differently, much more narrowly, than the Jewish world does' (172), and it is this imbalance in the cultural and racial diversity of gendered expectations—a 'mix-up of the sexes'—that generates Alex's adverse reaction to what he identifies as a reversal of roles. With his 'enfeebling,' 'tender heart,' Jack Portnoy does not adhere to the idealised 'popular culture' references that see 'cars and sports'

as ‘rites of passage,’ and generate the white ‘American definition of masculine’ (Gross 173) as violent and competitive.

In this light, Alex’s fantasies of male liberation from female control—and Jewish Americana liberation from marginalisation—assume brutal tones:

Stick up for yourself now, like a man! Tell her, tell her: ‘That’s right, Sophie, I slipped it into the *shikse*, and what you think and don’t think on the subject don’t mean shit to me. Because the way it works, in case you ain’t heard, is that I am the man around here, and I call the shots!’ And slug her if you have to! Deck her, Jake! Surely that’s what a *goy* would do, would he not? (Roth 80)

Alex seems to conflate the racial injustice perceived by Jack with what he understands as his father’s psychological dependence on his wife—‘why do we have to have such guilty deference to women, you and me’ (Roth 81)—, and in doing so he links racial and social vindication to an assertion of sexual authority. In Alex’s visions, the male-female dichotomy is portrayed as a struggle that bears strong corporeal connotations, both erotic and violent. To assert control over his life, Jack needs to achieve two milestones: firstly, he needs to cheat on his wife, and not simply cheat, but do so with a ‘*shikse*,’ the Holy Grail of social retaliation; secondly, he needs to physically punish his wife, to ‘deck her,’ so as to prove that he is ‘the man.’ Sophie—the caring, beautiful, Jewish American wife—is seen in this context as both an enemy to be defeated, and an obstacle to be overcome on the way to masculine emancipation. Only by asserting his power over his wife can Jack be initiated on the path to the domineering power of white Americanness, and as such Sophie becomes in herself a rite of passage for the Jewish American man, her submission a necessary task whose accomplishment becomes a requirement for social survival.

The idea that ‘that’s what a *goy* would do,’ presented by Alex as the legitimisation of violent behaviour and seeking to forge a connection between *goy* and Jewish that would foster

a sense of belonging and community, is at the basis of Alex's thinking. In order to achieve success in a world that he sees as hostile—for dominated by *goys*—Alex sees it as necessary to find an avenue for the demonstration of his own—and his father's—potential for dominance:

What I'm saying, Doctor, is that I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds—as though through fucking I will discover America.

*Conquer America*—maybe that's more like it. (Roth 217)

The physical savagery of sexual 'conquest' is equated in Alex's imaginary to that of social self-affirmation, for it signifies the possibility of participating in what he recognises as a trait of American masculinity. In this light, Sally Maulsby becomes 'just something nice a son once did for his dad' (Roth 222), an expression of Jewish manhood against the castrating exclusion from white American high society. Similarly, the fantasised submission of Sophie comes to stand for the renunciation of Jewish domestic values in favour of the 'goy' way of understanding femininity. Because Sophie's influence over Alex's life is perceived as a violent violation of his right to manhood, so the imagined response to his symbolic castration requires an equally violent image of male conquest that will redress the balance of gender powers as expected by social codes and by Alex himself. The struggle that Alex envisages against the control exercised by Sophie—and, to a certain extent, by Hannah and Sally as well—is a primal struggle whose stakes lie in the normalisation of the white American social landscape as a space in which maleness can only survive—and thrive—in relation to its expression of dominance over femininity.

### **Hypersexuality, Holiness, and the Dismantling of Narrative Oppressions**

Where Alex feels the need to belittle and demonise his encounters with the Jewish American women in his life—encounters that he misguidedly perceives as evidencing his dependency on female standards, and thus placing him in the position of perpetually defeated masculinity—he

is also able to vindicate himself and his father through his erotic involvement with *shikse* women, and particularly with Mary Jane Reed as his sole long-term partner. Mary Jane becomes in Alex's view a response to Sophie, and, as such, simultaneously, the object of and audience for his fantasies of male conquest. 'There I was,' Alex explains, 'going down at last on the star of all those pornographic films that I had been producing in my head since I first laid a hand upon my own joint' (Roth 145). Even as an erotic conquest, Mary Jane is an idealised fantasy, the 'star' of 'pornographic films' that fills not only Alex's own imagination, but that of an entire—young, male, and powerful—social circle. In contrast to Sophie, Hannah, and, even, Sally, whose sexual signification can never come fully to fruition, Mary Jane represents the fulfilment of a rite of passage that sanctifies Alex's position within the community of publicly pious and privately perverted Americans to which Alex's father, having failed to 'slip it into the *shikse*' and to 'deck' Sophie, is denied access.

If the sexual conquest allows Alex to be initiated into white, 'male Americanness,' however, its function is exclusively that of a means to an end, the end in question being that of achieving social recognition beyond the limited Jewish American background that Alex sees as hindering his personal development. In this light, Alex's intellectual interest in Mary Jane assumes greater importance than his depictions of sexual exploits, for it is in his attitudes towards Mary Jane's consciousness as a person—rather than a body—that Alex's dream of success is fully expressed. Indeed, it is through his relationship with Mary Jane that Alex is finally able to portray himself not as the victim of volatile female desires, but as the benevolent creator and capable bestower of socially valuable lessons. As such, Alex has the presumption of believing he can recommend a book that will 'speak to [Mary Jane] of her own early life' (Roth 192), an early life that Alex assumes he is objectively able to know better than Mary Jane herself:

How earnest I was compiling that reading list! Boy, was I going to improve her mind!

[...] Simple, I thought, keep it simple, but educational, elevating. (Roth 192)

Alex's 'earnestness' in 'compiling the reading list' much like a teacher to a student speaks of the perceived sanctity of the 'educational' and 'elevating' task he chooses to undertake. The unquestioning expectation of superiority that Alex places on himself, especially if coupled with his nicknaming Mary Jane 'the Monkey'—the comparatively unintelligent, lowly animal sibling of the human being—casts Alex in the role of the male 'saviour' and determines his duty as social superior to foster the promotion and advancement of his female counterparts, whose intellectual liberation can, apparently, be achieved exclusively through his philanthropic interest in their personal development. Alex's effort bears certain colonial echoes, insofar as the female subject is identified as an inexperienced and malleable entity to be modelled with affected leadership in accordance with imbalanced behavioural and social standards that unfairly favour the—male—coloniser's interests.

Alex's self-effacing desire to guide female development, masked as a genuine interest in female welfare, marks thus a further step towards the annulment of female agency and the glorification of male desires as the only valuable insights into the process of social structuring. Once again, the standardised visions of wifhood, motherhood and womanhood generally considered as the norm are exploited by Alex to both inspire female subjection—Mary Jane herself tells Alex that she is 'killing [herself] to be something more than just somebody's dumb and stupid piece of ass' (Roth 123) for his benefit—and yet simultaneously reject the responsibility that said subjection would require of him:

Now she's thirty, wants to be married and a mother, wants to be respectable and live in a house with a husband [...], but it does not follow that just because she imagines herself victimized and deprived and exploited (and may even be, taking a long view

of her life), that I am the one upon whom they are going to pin the rap. *I didn't make her thirty years old and single.* (Roth 124)

Despite the fact that Alex is 'supposed to be the superior intellectual' (Roth 123), and that he himself chooses to assume the role of mentor and guidance, he continuously seeks to switch his semiotic register so as to maintain the upper-hand within a male-female dichotomy that he sees as constantly threatening. Just as with Sophie, Mary Jane's willing adherence to the normalised standards of femininity determined by her race, status, and age—she a white, middle class woman in her early thirties—cannot grant her the security of social acceptance, for, despite being a by-product of Alex's own project of female moral improvement, her renewed desire for a respectable family life does not conform to the 'pornstar' fantasy that made her an initial target of male conquest. That is not to say that Alex rejects Mary Jane's wish to 'live in a house with a husband' for it would tamper with his erotic desires, but, rather, the idea of Mary Jane's move into the realm of 'respectability' represents a threat to Alex's projections as an ethical and intellectual guide. In order for Alex to realise his vision of himself as male conqueror, Mary Jane is required to remain within the scope of the socially perverted and intellectually inarticulate, so as to perpetually augment the male ego's sense of achievement. Mary Jane's exclusion from the realisation of the 'mystique' is based solely on linguistic terms, wherein she cannot 'imagine herself victimized and deprived and exploited' for that is the exclusive prerogative of her male counterpart who, even as he denies her access to said language, is making his own claim to it by pleading his innocence with regards to her unfortunate social standing.

Nowhere more than with Mary Jane Reed is it clear that Alex's sexual struggles are, indeed, semiotic struggles, where the determination of language and its employment bear much greater significance than the gratification of erotic yearnings. What Alex strives for is the systematic and strategic undermining of women in their capacity of knowers and signifiers, a

form of testimonial injustice whose continuously shifting prejudices destabilise all grounds for female reaction and expression. In his discussions with Mary Jane, Alex goes so far as to declare, ‘Skip the fight. It’s boring’ (Roth 129), thus entirely disposing of the female voice. What Mary Jane has to claim in her accusations towards Alex is edited out of the narrative altogether, and if Alex paints this as an act of kindness towards an imagined audience that is being spared irrelevant and ‘boring’ details, the absence of Mary Jane’s speech becomes instead an act of female silencing that cannot be ignored, and one that epitomises the female condition as semiotic void. Yet, Alex’s encounter with the woman he defines as his ‘final downfall and humiliation—Naomi, The Jewish Pumpkin, The Heroine, that hardy, red-headed, freckled, ideological hunk of a girl’ (Roth 238) seems to suggest that there might still exist a certain potential for the breakdown of the semiotic terms of Alex’s postulated elimination of female autonomy—a breakdown that, as Naomi demonstrates, begins with the disconnection of female bodies from the perceived cultural value assigned to them:

Spread your chops, blood of my blood, unlock your fortressy thighs, open wide that messianic Jewish hole! Make ready, Naomi, [...] I am about to change the future of the race! But of course I couldn’t. (Roth 247)

Naomi’s body is depicted by Alex as the ultimate simulacrum of the Jewish man’s redemption, its conquest equated, in Alex’s view, to the cathartic purging of sins that only its ‘messianic’ features can achieve. The claim that ‘I am about to change the future of the race’ posits Alex as the devotee in a position of centrality and of power—where the woman symbolically represents the values and morals that the man should aspire to, it is only through male consumption that these values and morals come into effect as active models for ‘change.’

In a Christ-like manner, female physical space in this instance transcends the social dimension of status that was associated with Mary Jane’s ‘pornstar’ image to reach a spiritual

degree of signification that crystallises femininity into a symbolic expression of wholesomeness and wellbeing. As Alex suggests,

I don't want movie stars and mannequins and whores, or any combination thereof. I don't want a sexual extravaganza for a life, or a continuation of this masochistic extravaganza I've been living, either. No, I want simplicity, I want health, I want her!  
(Roth 239)

If Mary Jane's erotic appeal signifies Alex's induction to the consumerist landscape of the white American social hierarchies, Naomi's austere appearance comes to stand for the prosperity associated with a more simple, pious way of living. Naomi's refusal to yield to Alex, then, is not simply a sexual rejection, but also, and more importantly, a rebuttal of the projected identities that Alex seeks to pin on her selfhood at various moments throughout their interaction. 'But who was there to rescue me? My *shiksas*? No, no, I rescue *them*. No, my salvation is clearly this Naomi!' (Roth 239), Alex explains in his delirious attempts at regaining linguistic control of the narrative. By pointing to Naomi as his 'salvation'—his, significantly, Jewish 'salvation'—Alex attempts to reconnect with the forms of semiotic signification that have led to his as of yet untainted strain of victories over the idea of a potentially independent female consciousness.

Yet, as Alex's speech acts become more and more verbose and his grammatical organisation loosens to give way to a markedly disconnected and unstructured stream of consciousness, Naomi's clear, measured, and sparse interjections establish themselves as powerful counterpoints that shed light on Alex's oppressive project:

You seem to take some special pleasure, some pride, in making yourself the butt of your own peculiar sense of humor. I don't believe you actually want to improve your life. (Roth 244)

By simply pointing out the core strategic device onto which Alex bases his narrative project, Naomi is able to dismantle Alex's entire constructed idea of both selfhood and cultural signification. No longer shrouded in alternately self-aggrandising or victimising expectations, Alex's crude linguistic intentions are exposed as mechanisms that are instrumental not to the 'improvement' of male self-knowledge and intellect, but, rather, the belittling of female personhood. Regardless of the cultural values he seeks to negotiate at various points in his story, Alex's exploitation of the stereotypes associated with various intersecting centres of social power is uncovered as a self-serving narrative form aimed at counterfeiting his own omnipotence to the detriment of the women he encounters. Naomi's poignant observation opens Alex's speech to more subtle social scrutiny, and thus achieves the possibility of re-imagining female consciousness as more complex, nuanced, and capable than Alex would have the audience believe. Alex's attempt at responding to Naomi's testimony with ironic self-deprecation—'When she finished I said, "Wonderful. Now let's fuck"' (Roth 245)—and making both himself and Naomi as 'the butt of [his] own peculiar sense of humour,' cannot, in this instance, accomplish Alex's goal, for its deployment as a linguistic shield against Naomi's objective observation, rather than resulting in an understanding of female judgement as worthy of ridicule, seems to express Alex's anxiety at the unmasking of his semiotic design of abuse and control.

Due to their liminal status as representatives of specific cultural backgrounds and values, Alex Portnoy's women are crystallised by the coincidence of multiple concomitant power centres that all operate to place often contrasting demands on the female consciousness. On the one hand, women are the victims of a characterisation that delineates specific functions outside of which they cannot exist; on the other hand, and due to their adherence to or even rebellion against said functions, they are stigmatised and debased to the role of sacrificial victims whose subjection fulfils the male need for a sense of control and success. As emblems

of certain social and cultural stereotypes, these women are, essentially, not human characters, but tokens of male anxiety with regards to his participation in the wider cultural landscape. Moreover, Alex's fundamentally unreliable definitions of both 'Jewish' and 'American'—unreliability demonstrated by Alex's contempt, for example, of Jewish American motherhood and by his interactions with Sally Maulsby—further restrict female agency by creating boundaries that are not based upon the unbiased observation of, or, even better, participation in, the values and codes of the social environments they seek to define, but by the stereotypical idealisations that popular culture has to offer. As a result, Alex's judgement of his female counterparts is misguided not only insofar as the sign-system employed to make such judgement is inappropriate to the objects being judged, but also because that same sign system represents in itself an epistemic fallacy. The fact that said epistemic fallacy comprises the core of Alex's narrative highlights the inadequacy of the narrator as a self-serving and egomaniacal voice. Whether Alex's women are judged by the codes of white American popular culturalism, or those of Jewish American overbearing holiness, then, they are wronged in their capacity of human beings, for their essential complexity as active consciousnesses is denied to them in favour of stock visions of femininity. The continuous shifts between different forms of normalised understandings of womanhood—as discussed, Sophie is variously portrayed as the sexual temptress, the nagging mother, and the domestic goddess—amplify the injustice of Alex's discourse on gender by exposing its absurdity and thus reducing it to a comedic sketch deprived of serious social meaning.

## *Chapter V*

### **Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: Radical Feminisms at the Intersection of Race and Gender**

Alex Portnoy's attempts at bridging the gap between the masculine perceptions of his inherited Jewishness and his sense of Americanness demonstrate the toxic effects of hierarchical identity politics not only on the patriarchal agents that seek to fulfil their often contrasting expectations, but also, and more intensely, on the women who become the vehicles for this type of male affirmation. The ordering in Alex's—and society's—viewpoint of Americanness as socially and culturally superior to Jewishness signifies both an idolisation and a rejection of the Jewish cultural identities assumed by his female counterparts—followed by a condemnation of the cultural norms that define Jewishness as such—while simultaneously enacting a vilification of the American woman as the object of dominance whose submission will affirm the Jewish man as quintessentially American. The competing patriarchal interests that lie at the intersection of the two separate cultural identities complexly impinge on both American and Jewish women's right to self-representation and expression and dictate a coercion into liminality and compliance as necessary to the accomplishment of patriarchal self-actualisation.

In this sense, the network of interlocking social and cultural standards that characterises Alex's existence as a Jewish American reflects, in some ways, the more topical debates on intersectionality within feminist thought and theory, and the implications of different group identities for marginalised women. There are parallels to be drawn between the composite power structures that relegate Hannah Portnoy to silence and the experiences of women across the spectrum of different personal and social identities. See, for example, what Kimberlé Crenshaw, the Black American lawyer and scholar who first theorised the

idea of intersectionality, has to say about racism and instances of Black intraracial domestic violence:

Racism is linked to patriarchy to the extent that racism denies men of color the power and privilege that dominant men enjoy. When violence is understood as an acting-out of being denied male power in other spheres, it seems counterproductive to embrace constructs that implicitly link the solution to domestic violence to the acquisition of greater male power. The more promising political imperative is to challenge the legitimacy of such power expectations by exposing their dysfunctional and debilitating effect on families and communities of color. (Crenshaw 1258)

Just like prejudice against stereotypical ideas of Jewishness serves as both an invitation to and justification for Alex's misogynistic behaviours, the 'denial of power' enacted by the collective cultural anti-Blackness that pervades the American patriarchal social order makes it so that 'domestic violence' becomes, in an intraracial context, an expression of power where interracial power is denied. As such, the 'power expectations' dictated by racist understandings of masculinity have profound effects not only on the men on whom these racialised expectations are placed, but also, and more powerfully, on the rights of the Black women whose double marginalisation is both racially motivated and powered by misogynistic understandings of the social order. In discussing the hearings that preceded Clarence Thomas's appointment to the US Supreme Court in 1991, bell hooks comments on the reception of Anita Hill's allegations of sexual harassment by stating,

Clarence Thomas evoked this image of white males controlling black manhood, and it was most effective. In the popular imagination of white and black folks alike, he represented the black male standing up for his right to participate fully in patriarchy, in the culture of the phallus. He became a heroic symbol of sexist black male resistance to being controlled by the white man. [...] After all, Thomas, even in the act of

attempting to sexually coerce a black female, was only acting as white men have acted with impunity in white racist society. And in choosing to marry a white female (whose image was always behind his during the hearing), he was also expressing his allegiance to white supremacist patriarchy. (hooks, *Black Looks* 82)

With her reading of the Clarence Thomas hearings, hooks offers a powerful example of the ways in which the double threat of ‘the culture of the phallus’ and a ‘a white racist society’ erases the Black woman’s capacity for self-affirmation, social respect, and, even, legal justice. In this context, Anita Hill’s accusations fall on deaf ears, for they are countered on multiple fronts by a cult of patriarchal selfhood that has the right to ‘sexually coerce’ and to do so with impunity, and by an understanding of Black womanhood as the lowest rank of the social hierarchical pyramid.

Needless to say, the consequences of this multifaceted type of oppression for the woman at the intersection of diverse power dynamics mark a significant shift in the understanding of womanhood as a category in itself, and of the ways that different group identities blend to affect the social constructs that define freedoms and limits. The final two chapters of this thesis explore the work of Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison in relation to the notion of intersectionality—theorised by Crenshaw as ‘a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics’ (Crenshaw 1296)—to explore the politics of feminist liberation in the American 60s. How did the experience and appreciation of intersectional burdens shape the identity politics of the women subject to them? Where did the liberation strategies advocated for by white feminism fall short of protecting marginalised women? And in what ways did intersectional feminist understandings of selfhood and female identity shape the movement? In answering these questions, the chapters ahead will focus on a particular type of intersectional paradigm, one that Moya Bailey terms as ‘misogynoir.’

What, then, is misogynoir and why is it important to provide this definition? On the creation of the word, Bailey explains, ‘I was struggling to find a way to talk about the racial visual violence I was seeing in popular culture throughout history’ (Bailey and Trudy 762). In defining the ideation of the term as such, Bailey taps into three fundamental concerns that characterise the experiences of the Black American women who are the objects of the oppressive practices of misogynoir: this is ‘racial’ discrimination, where the identity politics of Blackness are just as significant as those of gender; it is a ‘visual’ experience, meaning that the body as a vehicle for the signs and symbols of personal and social identification is central and meaningful; and, finally, it is a form of psychological, emotional, and, often, physical ‘violence,’ one that deeply affects the Black woman’s ability to participate in the social dynamics of her separate identity groups. That this type of experience is particular to Black womanhood is clear in Trudy’s words,

misogynoir is a word used to describe how racism and anti-Blackness alter the experience of misogyny for Black women, *specifically*. It alludes to specifically Black women’s experiences with gender and how both racism and anti-Blackness alter that experience diametrically from White women and [...] differently from non-Black women of colour [...]. [...] ‘Misogynoir’ is not expandable and consumable under the term ‘women of colour.’ ‘Black women’ and ‘women of colour’ overlap as identifiers only because Black women can be considered women of colour (in addition to other non-Black women of colour) and because Loretta Ross, a Black woman no less, and her work, is why the phrase ‘women of colour’ exists. ‘Black woman’ and ‘woman of colour’ are not synonyms to be used interchangeably. (Trudy, ‘Explanation of Misogynoir’)

Trudy’s explicit characterisation of misogynoir as a ‘specifically’ Black experience is essential not only in the discussion of misogynoir as an oppressive power centre, but also in the

understanding of intersectionality on a broader spectrum. What Trudy rejects is the idea that all intersectional struggles can be defined as analogous, and that all experiences of women of colour share similar traits. This is crucial in any conversation on intersectional feminisms. Rather than serving as a blanket term to suggest the oppression of a variety of different groups or even individual women—and thus causing the erasure of said women’s particular and specific struggles—intersectionality should point at the vastness and fluidity of identities that can fall under the umbrella of ‘womanhood’ and affect the ways in which womanhood is translated into lived experience. In this sense, the following chapters do not claim to explore the entire spectrum of intersectionality—specificity is key in appraising and analysing intersectional identities, and it would be reductive and counterproductive to claim that particular intersectional experiences may encompass the full variety of struggles and burdens that act on different groups and individuals.

Instead, the specific intersectional burden presented by the notion of misogynoir will be investigated in its original context of Black American womanhood to discuss the ways in which, as Layli Phillips suggests,

Black women and other women of color have been at the bottom of every social hierarchy created by man, particularly during the four centuries of the modern era, and multiply so, based on the interaction of race, class, and gender hierarchies and systems of identity. Black women and other women of color have come to understand what it means to live in the margins of multiple communities simultaneously and function, even thrive, in the ‘in-between,’ interstitial spaces of other people’s structures. (Phillips XXXIX)

Through a reading of Angelou’s first memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), this chapter will analyse the ways in which misogynoir determines the ‘interstitial spaces’ occupied by Black women, and how these spaces impact the female understanding of personal identity

as related to the physical dimension. The interracial and intraracial approach to Black female bodies will be discussed in relation to the signifying signs—both visual and linguistic—employed to describe these, in an attempt to raise the question of ‘what it means to live in the margins’ and how this living can lead to a reassessment of feminist aims from the individualistic drive of the liberal forms of white feminism to the more inclusive efforts of a radical feminist restructuring of established white hegemonic and patriarchal social orders. By drawing from her cultural heritage as both a woman and a member of the Black community, it will be shown, Angelou manages to offer an alternative form of semiotics based on the idea of ‘voice’ not as an instrument for verbal expression, but, rather, as a means of non-verbal empowerment and connection that transcends cultural and racial boundaries to forge bonds that encompass entire communities.

### **‘The razor that threatens her throat’: Black female narratives of displacement**

Angelou begins her memoir by underlining the influence of society as a cultural group onto young Marguerite’s understanding of white womanhood as opposed to her own Blackness:

I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody’s idea of what was right in the world. [...] And when people saw me wearing [the dress] they were going to run up to me and say, ‘Marguerite [...], forgive us, please, we didn’t know who you were.’ (Angelou 4)

Marguerite sees her Blackness as a curse cast by ‘a cruel fairy stepmother’ who ‘had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number two pencil’ (Angelou 5) and whose physical appearance betrays her existential position as a mistake, something which must be seen as fundamentally ‘wrong,’ diametrically opposed to ‘the sweet little white girls’ who uphold ‘everybody’s idea of what was right in the world.’ Marguerite’s ideas of race and femininity are not her

own, but that of her immediate social group: the ‘everybody’ who sees white girls as the epitomes of perfection is the same ‘everybody’ that would ask Marguerite for forgiveness after having re-assessed and re-defined her presence and existence. Even in her own fantasy, Marguerite is a passive spectator in a process of becoming that is located not within herself, but in the imaginary of her community, and her complex individual identity is abandoned in favour of a feeling of connection to the category of Blackness as the dominant defining force in Marguerite’s environment.

Under such pressures, Marguerite’s encounter with the clerk at the streetcar office signifies, for the author, a moment of recognition, where the woman consciously begins to identify and critique the systemic attempts at separating the Black woman from her white ‘sister.’

In the street I saw the receptionist and myself going faithfully through paces that were stale with familiarity, although I had never encountered that kind of situation before and, probably, neither had she. [...] The miserable little encounter had nothing to do with me, the me of me, any more than it had to do with that silly clerk. [...] I went further than forgiving the clerk, I accepted her as a fellow victim of the same puppeteer. (Angelou 286)

In this passage, Angelou employs linguistic choices that seem to give her words a very clear political undertone. Firstly, the author points out that, just like the gendered oppression derived from ideas of a feminine mystique, racial segregation relies upon performative acts: the two women are ‘going through the paces’ of a behavioural pattern that they are conditioned to accept as legitimate, even though it bears no significant relation to their own personal experiences. Neither of the women holds any emotional or rational connection to the socially acceptable way in which they are trained to treat one another, and yet, both choose to adhere to the ‘mainstream’ narrative of racial discrimination in order to position

themselves within their immediate communities. Moreover, and most importantly, they both choose to do so ‘faithfully’: the religious acceptance of social norms as performed by Marguerite and the receptionist echoes Friedan’s description of the feminine mystique insofar as it represents oppression as a superimposed model that requires the blind repression of personal desires. Whatever potential connection might have sparked between the two women is crushed by the weight of the guilt/duty combination that loyalty to the community requires.

Angelou’s story is deeply personal and private, and yet, it simultaneously grows to encompass a whole community of women who share in the author’s sense of injustice at the composite burden of being female. ‘If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl,’ Angelou tells her reader, ‘being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens her throat’ (Angelou 6). Angelou situates her liminal existence in exact terms: she is ‘Southern’, ‘Black’ and a ‘girl’, occupying a small cross-section of three separate groups whose co-existence seems to be unlikely if not impossible. Yet, it is not the displacement in itself to place Angelou in most danger. Instead, it is her ‘awareness’ of her own condition to pose the most horrible threat: the ‘unnecessary insult’ (Angelou 6) that results from Marguerite’s displacement is a product of her fragmented subjectivity, of her exclusion from both the wider setting of white American culture and the power-struggles of Black culture.

Angelou writes her life story with an acute awareness of her situatedness in the cultural imagination as a person who is both black and female. This Black woman, positioned at the interstices of race and gender, being non-white and non-male, becomes for the purposes of the hegemonic order, the Other of the Other. (Manora 364)

Rather than being enriched by her different social allegiances, the Black American woman— but also, though differently, the Latina, the Chicana, the Native woman, the non-binary

and/or non-heterosexual woman, the transgender woman, the disabled woman—becomes hyper-reliant on superimposed categories of existence to define her position in the world she inhabits, and this reliance pushes her into an increasingly tight space of expression that denies personhood and exacerbates the ‘problem with no name’ to the point where she is only able to express her selfhood in a negative language, where she is only able to tell what she is not. In a way, just like the white, middle class women interviewed by Friedan, Angelou sees herself deprived of her own autonomous existence as a category of language dependent upon a dominant narrative that she cannot engage in. It is only in her examination of space and race that Angelou is able to actualise the shift from liberal to radical feminism. The feminist system ‘requires women to add another level of awareness,’ or, in other words, ‘to stretch the adage from “The Personal Is Political” to [...] “The Personal Is Political and The Political Is Personal”’ (Thompson 347). In equating herself and the office clerk to the role of ‘victim[s] of the same puppeteer,’ the author bridges the divide between Black and white women to turn the attention on the social dynamics that force them to see each other as separate. As Angelou’s personal narrative of double oppression demonstrates, the individualistic drive described by Friedan must be supported by a communal challenge to all forms of gender-based discriminations, even those that only directly affect a particular sub-group within the category ‘woman’—in this case the Black woman seeking a job with the San Francisco streetcar company. In order for the feminist movement to fulfil its potential for social change, the ‘silly girl’ at the reception of the streetcar offices needs to burst out of the racial bubble of ‘difference’ in order to create a form of more authentic and profitable communication with her Black counterpart, for ‘if the only issues that feminists deem political are those they have experienced personally, their frame of reference is destined to be narrowly defined by their own lived experience’ (Thompson 347) and,

therefore, limited to forms of personal gain that can never achieve complete fulfilment within the wider spectrum of social activity.

As Manora argues, 'Angelou's critical project' lies in 'the disruption of the narrative and social sites of her displacement and the crafting of a more socially liberating and psychically integrated discursive and experiential space' (362). In order for the Black woman to dismantle the systemic 'segregation' to which she is subjected, a rearrangement of existing narrative structures becomes a fundamental requisite. In describing Zora Neale Hurston's approach to autobiographical narration in *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), James Krasner takes the idea of Hurston's 'visions' as the fundamental device through which thematic and structural concerns are addressed by the author:

It is the emotional strength garnered from the transformation of a life into a series of self-generated narratives which empowers the young Zora. [...] By showing that the visions are true, but that by the time they become true they are too unimportant to mention, Hurston places her emphasis fully on the generation of narratives rather than on their completion. (Krasner 115)

The fact that Hurston's life narrative relies on 'visions' as the imagined pathways that might present themselves to the Black woman signifies the positioning of Black womanhood as conditional on circumstantial patterns that are well-established in both the author's and the readers' consciousnesses. It is no wonder that the subject matter of the visions is of no importance to Hurston's readers, for the subject matter can, in this context, be taken for granted. The focus lies not in the content of Hurston's autobiographical project, but, rather, in its realisation as a literary effort. The insistence on Hurston's visions as 'true' denotes a critical interest in the generic conventions of memoirs as accurate representations of the author's life, and, yet, this interest is overwhelmed by Hurston's continuous challenges to the established order of things. The 'true visions' and the conventional literary and social

patterns that they represent are inconsequential in terms of Hurston's own rearranging and interpretations of the fact of her own life, and what becomes of the uttermost importance is analysis rather than exposition.

Hurston plays a fundamental role in influencing Angelou's approach to storytelling, and by rejecting Friedan's supposedly objective and detached outlook on the life of 'the American woman' as a generic prototype in favour of a deeply intimate representation of womanhood, she paves the way for a renewal of the literary form she inhabits. In Krasner's analysis, Hurston's shifting narrative focus does not necessarily characterise her story with a lack of literary and emotional fulfilment, but, rather, it points to the existence of autobiographical narratives as a means of exploring the ways in which the formation and development of female personal histories becomes in itself a subversive act that 'empowers' and liberates the author. According to Krasner, this etiological approach to female narratives produces a new 'emotional strength,' for it allows the speaking subject to actively participate in the creation of a curated identity based on the autonomous and independent selection of a certain personal mythology that builds the author's character through an act of self-reliant narration. That this process of curation is far from an attempt at reaching an existential representation of selfhood is made clear in Hurston's fiction: 'Women,' Hurston writes in the first pages of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), 'forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly' (Hurston 1). The personal histories of these women are not a direct and necessary product of a process of experiential development, for the female experience is limited by the power exercised by the 'mules and other brutes' that 'sat in judgement' and 'made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs' (Hurston 2). Rather, Hurston's women, and particularly Janie, are capable of picking and mixing at their will from the episodes of their lives like they would from 'a great tree in

leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone' (Hurstons 11), and by doing so they are able to continuously revise and adapt their narratives and their selves. 'For women, any conjunction between subject and object is transient and artificial. Their histories are manifestly fictional; their stories describe the construction of fictions' (Krasner 113), and yet it is within these fictions that ideas of female personhood as a shifting, independent and nuanced category can be explored.

### **Dynamic femininities and the countering of archetypal identities**

At the level of genre classification, both Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* could be placed in the liminal space between memoir and coming-of-age fiction. Both authors consciously choose to inhabit said space in order to illustrate two fundamental points: firstly, that 'in creating him/ herself as an object, the protagonist must undergo a process of alienation in order to achieve self-consciousness' (Lazzaro-Weis 27); and, secondly, that a 'challenge' must be posed to 'the idea of a coherent feminine self that a patriarchal society attempts to impose upon women,' a challenge that can only be achieved 'by representing the protagonist engaged in multiple roles and formulating multiple self-definitions' (Lazzaro-Weis 18). Angelou refuses to conform to a standardised narrative that would see her as the Black female subject in contrast with the white world, just as much as she rejects the possibility of living as an outcast within a Black community that she feels as her own. Her experience of race and gender is complex, existing outside the normative sign system that regulated American life in the 1960s. When placed in the position of needing to adhere to certain superimposed social codes, Angelou the author intervenes in the narrative of Young Marguerite to reassure her reader that 'I hadn't so much forgot as I couldn't bring myself to remember. Other things were more important' (Angelou 3). This emphasis on remembrance as an act of free will distinctly

recalls Hurston's position, and addresses the generic ambiguity of the text by reminding the reader 'that she or he is reading a constructed past' (Krasner 115). It is thanks to this act of 'construction' that Angelou is able to both re-shape her personal identity and distance herself from the literary and social codes that seek to dictate the forms of acceptable personhood.

Marguerite's development may be unique in the particulars of her personal story, but her struggle to realise her selfhood outside the confines of gender and race transcends both the canonical convention of the memoir and the coming-of-age story as predominantly male and white literary genres, and the hegemonic status of Friedan's feminism, in order to re-code existing avenues of expression into more inclusive and liberating semiotic symbols:

As Angelou writes it, that story of subject formation is one fraught with tension between the subject in the process of becoming and those external forces that would define the possibilities of her being. (Manora 360)

Angelou re-directs the feminist discourse by discarding the traditional system of binary oppositions—male/female, black/white—and focussing instead on the much more pertinent idea of 'being' and 'becoming', where the former represents stereotypical models of female existence and the latter personhood and identity as fluid notions. In order to realise her 'critical project,' Angelou seeks to illustrate the dangers of presenting selfhood as a fixed, objective value, and does this through her depictions of Grandmother Henderson and Vivian Baxter. Indeed, the two women occupy, within their respective communities, diametrically opposite spaces of existence, each bearing specific sets of social expectations and accepted behaviours, and each relating to some archetypal image of womanhood. Grandmother Henderson 'with her solemn determination' (Angelou 233) and her 'commandments [...] upon which hung our total salvation' (Angelou 29) is seen as a moral pillar, a mother figure not only for her grandchildren, but for her entire social circle. She is a portrayal of stoic resistance to oppression, whose body 'seemed to have turned into stone' (Angelou 34) at the

threat of violence, and whose dignity ‘touches’ the girl and the community ‘as mothers of the church “lay hands on the sick and afflicted”’ (Angelou 35). Her association with religious singing and prayer consigns Grandmother Henderson to an almost superhuman dimension that sanctifies her existence as confined to her ‘holiness.’

Grandmother Henderson is everything that Vivian Baxter, ‘too beautiful to have children’ (Angelou, 65) and ‘earn[ing] extra money cutting poker games in gambling parlors’ (Angelou 76), is not. ‘I had never seen a woman as pretty as she who was called “Mother”’ (Angelou 65), Marguerite tells of her first encounter with her biological mother. Though partaking in the physical act of giving birth, Vivian is excluded from the realm of motherhood, for her beauty and her ‘gaiety’ (Angelou 233) preclude her from the possibility of authority and morality, confining her existence to one of frivolous enjoyment. Yet, despite their radical differences, both women share in the experience of seeing their personhood defined as immobile and constant:

As the dominant culture consigns Black women to the hypofeminine and hypersexualised images of the Matriarch and the Jezebel, respectively, it excludes them from other realms of female subjectivity. (Manora 370)

As with Friedan, motherhood and wifehood are essential elements in the social construction of female identity. Yet, if for the white women of Friedan’s work these merely represent prescribed functional roles, in Angelou’s evocation of a system of double segregation they assume a moral dimension that turns functionality into grotesque stereotyping. In this context, Angelou’s focus on static versus dynamic notions of womanhood can be read as expanding on Friedan’s attempt to dismantle ideas of motherhood and wifehood as the only representative functions of womanhood by overtly criticising the trend to associate femininity with archetypal roles that bear value judgements and, thus, serve to define social status. In order for a woman to become a fully realised and liberated ‘being,’ Angelou

argues, expressions of personal desires cannot be the ultimate solution. Instead, a new awareness of the multiplicity and changeability of the female experience within the social landscape needs to be raised. 'Rather than a complacent composition, the Black female subjectivity that Angelou forwards turns upon the potential for a resistant hybridity' (Manora 366), a hybridity that challenges social norms, allowing for a radical rediscovery of the female role in negotiating effectively between multiple different communities.

As the vehicle for Angelou's literary 'project,' language plays a fundamental part in the establishment of this new female identity as shifting, articulate and adaptable; and as with her generic subversion, Angelou seems to follow in Hurston's footsteps to achieve this. Indeed, if Krasner depicts Hurston's etiological interest as a merely structural device, this analysis falls short of noticing how this interest also works on a semiotic level to disengage the concept of 'word' as the basis of speech from that of 'meaning' as the necessary condition for the understanding of speech, thus placing emphasis on the social etymology of language. In particular, Hurston seems focussed on demonstrating the inherent fallacies that lie within the process of assigning meaning:

[Janie] was back and forth to the pear tree continuously wondering and thinking. Finally out of Nanny's talk and her own conjectures she made a kind of comfort for herself. Yes, she would love Logan after they were married [...]. Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant. (Hurston 28)

Hurston seeks to illustrate how, derived from received traditional sources—'Nanny's talk'—young Janie's understanding of 'marriage' as an institution is based on a syllogistic association that is, at its bases, corrupted by the social circumstances that create it.

The narrator allows us to see the mechanism of misinterpretation at work in Janie's mind. By adopting the socially sanctioned metaphor that the state of marriage or legal unions bears an actual, rather than simply a conventional, relationship to spiritual

union, Janie adopts another equivalence into her metaphoric vocabulary: pear tree = marriage = love. (Krasner 120)

In Krasner's words, the 'misinterpretation' of which Janie as the language user is a victim is not an isolated incident; rather, it is part of a well-organised 'mechanism' that seeks to perpetuate certain standards of perceived moral behaviour as codified by the conventions of accepted social norms. Hurston's engagement in the effort to show language associations as derived from faulty assumptions on the nature of humanity as a homogenous category serves to mark language as unreliable, and therefore inappropriate as a means of personal expression, particularly where its assigned meaning is externally produced by authoritative sources whose experiences of personhood are vastly different from that of the speaking/thinking subject.

It is from this starting point that Angelou's analysis of language and meaning begins, in an attempt to depict the ways in which the initial production of certain speech patterns limits the powers of personal representation afforded to the female black author.

Momma intended to teach Bailey and me to use the paths in life that she and her generation and all the Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones. She didn't cotton to the idea that whitefolks could be talked to at all without risking one's life. And certainly they couldn't be spoken to insolently. In fact, even in their absence they could not be spoken of too harshly unless we used the sobriquet 'They.' (Angelou 51)

In describing the ways young Marguerite is taught to behave, Angelou presses the idea that there is a sense of cultural inheritance that impairs self-expression by favouring pre-established modes of communication. The 'sobriquet "They",' with which Marguerite is supposed to discuss white people, and the reference to 'cotton' as a symbolic association with ideas of slavery—both physical and intellectual—stifle the possibility of linguistic

independence and mark language as a superimposed power. Marguerite is simultaneously aware of her condition as the subject of a sign system that is not representative of her identity, and yet, incapable of escaping it entirely: ‘the man’s dead words,’ she tells of Mr Donleavy’s graduation speech, ‘fell like bricks around the auditorium and too many settled in my belly’ (Angelou 193). The description of Mr Donleavy’s words as ‘dead’ defines Marguerite’s understanding of superimposed language as unmovable and, therefore, inappropriate to her representation, and yet, the social weight of said language—marked by the image of ‘bricks’ as the essential building blocks of social aggregation—cannot be escaped.

Even insolence, an act of rebellion that brings solace to Bailey’s struggles and allows him to gain some measure of control over speech and over Marguerite’s verbal abusers (Angelou 24), is denied to Marguerite herself, for her status as a female member of society requires her to ‘hold my laugh, bite my tongue, grit my teeth, and very seriously erase even the touch of a smile from my face’ (Angelou 24). Where Bailey as a boy is afforded a certain freedom of speech, if only within the confines of his community, Marguerite is subject to the double censorship applied to Blackness and womanhood, and as ‘a product (is “victim” a better word?) of the Southern Negro upbringing’ (Angelou 303) she is required to unquestioningly accept the language and meanings established for her, with the conviction that she ““would understand it all better by-and-by”” (Angelou 303). The use of reported speech within Marguerite’s own words reflects a detachment from the traditional language sign system, articulating Angelou’s ironic judgment on the expectations placed upon her younger self and consequently pointing to the author’s attempt at reclaiming a form of personal expression.

In the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, young Marguerite Johnson cannot call up the words she is supposed to say in the Easter pageant; at the scene's end, she runs

from the church, looking (to herself) a ridiculous figure in lavender taffeta, wetting her pants, laughing to be free from the agonizing turmoil of having to depend on the words of others. (MacKethan 59)

In the scene described by MacKethan, Marguerite is incapable of pronouncing ‘the words of others,’ for her disconnection from their origin and their meaning renders them ‘a wadded-up handkerchief, sopping wet in my fists, and the sooner they accepted it the quicker I could let my hands open and the air would cool my palms’ (Angelou 3). By letting go of her responsibility to remember and reproduce pre-existing patterns of expression, Marguerite chooses to detach herself from the very word-meaning system that thwarts her attempts at personal representation, and begins instead to adopt the idea of sound-silence as her preferred form of semiotics:

I discovered that to achieve perfect personal silence all I had to do was to attach myself leech-like to sound. I began to listen to everything. I probably hoped that after I had heard all the sounds, really heard them and packed them down, deep in my ears, the world would be quiet around me. (Angelou 94)

Renouncing conventional speech allows Marguerite to ‘listen,’ in an act that, rather than presenting itself as passive reception, becomes a form of active resistance that ‘quietens’ the disrupting interference of the world ‘around.’ In applying Hurston’s approach to her analysis of language, and especially the language available to a Black woman, Angelou takes Hurston’s initial narrative subversion a step further, de facto dismantling the entire system through which female stories are conventionally expressed and re-appropriating both herself and the feminist movement of verbal communication by directly addressing the failings of the dominant sign-system.

### **Semiotic signification and the deconstruction of oppressive meaning-making**

Yet, the written and spoken word are renewed in Angelou's work not by the invention of a separate, feminist, semiotics, but, rather, through the deconstruction of standardised associations of word and meaning. Language as employed in conventional terms becomes for Marguerite a form of limited performance that seeks to determine appropriate and accurate meanings, whilst simultaneously masking the social and cultural implications of the process of definition. Marguerite remarks on the 'exactness' of Mrs Viola Cullinan's house as 'inhuman': 'It took me a week,' the author explains, 'to learn the difference between a salad plate, a bread plate and a dessert plate' (Angelou 114). The hyperbolic reference to the amount of time needed to conform to what the rich and white consider the 'exact' naming of the object serves here to underline the absurdity of the language-performance: each quasi-identical plate has a separate name and a separate role within the context of the dining experience, yet, in Marguerite's eyes, they are all one and the same. By such insistent demystification of language and meaning, Angelou illustrates the issues that relate to the process of assigning meaning not only as a social practice, the way that Friedan and Hurston seem to perceive it, but also a rhetorical act that paralyses the signified and disrupts its development and evolution. Definition is static, unmovable, and therefore, by default, inaccurate in a world where the defined subject undergoes continued and radical transformations. Marguerite's understanding of the plates seems to mirror the process of racial, class, and gender oppression, and, thus, amplifies the displacement of the Black American woman as anomalous insofar as she cannot be clearly categorised. Just like the definition of Mrs Cullinan's plates, the existence of the Black American woman confuses pre-existing boundaries, and therefore calls for a reassessment of socially accepted conventions.

The failure on the part of language to address Marguerite's anxieties about her existence as a Black woman is even more evident in the young girl's assessment of the changes experienced by her body. Unsure about her own femininity and sexuality, Marguerite seeks the help of the one person she sees as representing the idealised feminine visions of her community:

'Mother...My pocketbook...'

'Ritie, do you mean your vagina? Don't use those Southern terms. There's nothing wrong with the word "vagina." It's a clinical description.' (Angelou 296)

By urging Marguerite to reject 'those Southern terms' that carry with them the weight of traditional expectations and repressions, and instead embrace 'a clinical description' of female bodies, Vivian Baxter seeks to separate language from its social connotations, thus somehow 'purifying' it of the externally produced and hereditary limitations that accompany its collective understanding.

Her fingers guided my eyes to VULVA. I began to read. [...] It was all very clear and normal sounding. She drank the beer as I read, and when I had finished she explained it in everyday terms. My relief melted the fears and they liquidly stole down my face. (Angelou 298)

The act of looking words up in a dictionary represents for Vivian a re-connection with their 'clear' meaning, thus allowing for new linguistic formulations to emerge in the form of explanations 'in everyday terms'. However, if this re-appropriation of language generates a temporary 'relief' in Marguerite, its effects are short-lived:

After a thorough self-examination, in the light of all I had read and heard about dykes and bulldaggers, I reasoned that I had none of the obvious traits—I didn't wear trousers, or have big shoulders or go in for sports, or walk like a man or even want to touch a

woman. I wanted to be a woman, but that seemed to me to be a world to which I was to be eternally refused entrance. (Angelou 300)

Neither the 'clinical description' found in the dictionary, nor Vivian's explanation in 'everyday terms,' succeed in relieving language of its cultural weight, as everything that Marguerite 'read and heard' bears, thanks to repetition and social conditioning, more long-lasting effects on the girl's evaluation of language in relation to her body and her selfhood. In Marguerite's community, the idea of how a female body should look and move is heavily policed by societal expectations, and the distinct 'description' of different female 'parts' advocated by Vivian in itself becomes insufficient to satisfy the girl's appetite for personal identification, for it does not account for the overpowering impact of the abstract and unscientific existence of 'woman' as both a social and a linguistic construct.

In light of this, Marguerite's own existence within her body becomes a form of entrapment, precluding her from participating in what she is prepared to believe femininity is supposed to be. The system of value judgements applied to female bodies, therefore, not only characterises Marguerite's social group but also affects her perception of selfhood as equated to outward presentation:

It was during this reflective time that I noticed how heavy my own voice had become. It droned and drummed two or three whole tones lower than my schoolmates' voices. My hands and feet were also far from being feminine and dainty. In front of the mirror I detachedly examined my body. For a sixteen-year-old my breasts were sadly undeveloped. They could only be called skin swellings, even by the kindest critic. The line from my rib cage to my knees fell straight without even a ridge to disturb its direction. Younger girls than I boasted of having to shave under their arms, but my armpits were as smooth as my face. (Angelou 294)

Sexuality is linked in Marguerite's mind to physical appearance, and, as such, its effects on personality and the possibility for social success are inescapable. Marguerite's seemingly detached—almost 'clinical'—examination of her body demonstrates the ever-pressing attachment to conventional ideas of femininity that even the 'kindest critic'—in Marguerite's case, her own 'self'—needs to inevitably adhere to. The language employed by the girl to describe her own body is far from neutral or impartial, relying instead on a series of adjectives that are specifically used to categorise certain bodily traits and functions as markedly feminine. In this context, the female 'hands and feet' are required to be 'dainty,' the female shape is not supposed to 'fall straight,' the female hairs need to be 'shaved.' All of these attributes—attributes that Marguerite sees her own body as lacking—point to the ways in which 'normalised' femininity is depicted as having to be physically embodied within certain parameters of acceptability, beyond which there necessarily exist a series of 'dysfunctional' behaviours. Body, language and agency—particularly sexual agency—become in Marguerite's mind one and the same, and perceived 'difference' from the standardised language of feminine beauty must therefore be identified with a form of moral deviance.

By drawing a connection between the established sign-system and its influence on public perceptions of personal identity, Marguerite initiates a mechanism of critical analysis that, though incomplete due to individual insecurities, can be further developed on a social scale. Marguerite's journey within the narrative might thus be read not as a journey of personal development, as the traditional coming-of-age story would have it, but as a journey of linguistic awareness that begins with a conscious questioning of the conventional social semiotics and its political effects upon personal and collective notions of social placement. Marguerite's further examination of the female body and the social pressures to which its

construction is subject plays a fundamental part in deconstructing the accepted validity of the current sign-system:

But true freaks, the ‘women lovers,’ captured yet strained my imagination. They were, according to the book, disowned by their families, snubbed by their friends and ostracized from every society. This bitter punishment was inflicted upon them because of a physical condition over which they had no control. (Angelou 293)

In analysing widespread approaches to female sexuality, Marguerite draws the fundamental conclusion that ‘normality’ is to be defined as a ‘bitter punishment’ that is ‘inflicted upon’ the female body by the collective imaginary. Despite the existence in Marguerite’s view of separate ‘societies’—the ‘families,’ the ‘friends,’ and the wider social group—reactions to the ‘true freaks’ is unified and given for granted as the only acceptable behavioural pattern in response to a linguistic labelling that requires value judgements to be applied to the ‘women lovers’ as the examined objects. While Marguerite is hindered in the fulfilment of her linguistic dismantlement by the emotional weight of the examination of her own body, the discrepancy between what she understands as the ‘faultlessness’ of the ‘women lovers’—they have ‘no control’ over their sexual instincts—and the perceived deviance of their ‘physical condition’ marks, for the girl, the first step toward a growing awareness of the injustice of a sign-system that, in assigning meaning to the female body, precludes it from existing of its own volition outside the boundaries of pre-established social schemes.

Indeed, Marguerite is careful to emphasise that the sexuality of ‘women lovers’ must by necessity be depicted—and verbally described—as an externally induced fallacy, in order for it to fit within the standardised gender narrative. ‘It was impossible to determine,’ Maya reflects, ‘whether lesbians budded gradually, or burst into being with a suddenness that dismayed them as much as it repelled society’ (Angelou 295): the ‘women lovers’ are deprived of agency even in the context of their own sexual expression, which sees them

become simultaneously victims of a process of social blaming and participants in that same process. Because they cannot escape the language sign-system that determines their existence as anomalous, these women are forced to not only accept it as the normative code defining their existence, but as the ideal model to which they should aspire and from which they are, by their own nature, perpetually excluded. In shining a light on the ‘dismay’ of these women, Marguerite commits to underlining the deception of the established linguistic system, a system that requires its users to deny their own nature in order to survive within its social jurisdiction.

What happens, then, when coherent and conclusive speech acts become obsolete means of perpetuating oppression? What avenues of expression are open to Angelou’s subject? Certainly, Marguerite’s tendency to adjust her use of language to fit her own subjective perception of the reality surrounding her can be seen as an act of radical re-assignment that seeks to breach the oppression of the existing language codes. In discussing her friend Louise’s life, Marguerite states:

Her mother lived in reduced circumstances, but she was genteel, and though she worked as a maid I decided she should be called a governess and did so to Bailey and myself. (Who could teach a romantic dreamy ten-year-old to call a spade a spade?) (Angelou 152)

In her innocence and confusion about the hierarchic language system at play within her social group, and in the incapability of reconciling socially constructed—and negative—connotations with the complexities of personhood as individually perceived, Marguerite demonstrates the impossibility of language exactly rendering truth; and she inadvertently advocates for a fluidity of expression that mirrors the fluidity of existence Angelou seeks to portray. The parenthetical authorial voice intruding into Marguerite’s discourse serves here to underline the self-conscious effort on the part of Angelou to highlight the failings of the

established sign system, failings that even ‘a romantic dreamy ten-year-old’ is able to perceive and correct. Calling ‘a spade a spade’ is something that needs to be taught, a superimposed model of reasoning that defies the instinctive need for a flexible approach to language and meaning. ‘Exactness’ in this context becomes a fallacy, for it cannot encompass the wider spectrum of existence to which Louise’s mother—and the Black woman in general—belongs.

In addition, Clarence Nero suggests that learning and education might constitute a further step toward the realisation of a more representative language:

Mrs. Flowers became the catalyst that gave Angelou the courage to transcend her muteness and begin speaking once again, an illustration of language and education as a discursive medium establishing identity and worthiness. (Nero 64)

Indeed, Nero’s focus on Marguerite’s ‘muteness’ and her release from it as fundamental to the development of Angelou’s project is not misplaced; for it is exactly in reacting to the social order that had silenced her that Marguerite starts to form social bonds and connections that both influence her process of becoming as an individual and alter the social discourse to which she belongs. Mrs Flowers’ essential role in initiating this reaction is also rightly identified by Nero, who credits the woman for becoming, ‘just by being herself’ (Angelou 103), the ‘catalyst’ for a new phase in Marguerite’s life.

However, Nero’s focus on Mrs Flowers as an embodiment of the positive use of language seems inaccurate, for it celebrates the ‘discursive medium’ offered by the woman as one that is primarily based on meaning, and fails to recognise Marguerite’s own fascination with Mrs Flowers’ speech act as a product of sound and voice rather than words and language.

Her voice slid and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing.

I wanted to look at the pages. Were they the same that I had read? [...] I knew from

listening to a thousand preachers that she was nearing the end of her reading, and I hadn't really heard, heard to understand, a single word. (Angelou 108)

Angelou's description seems to give the human voice a physical dimension. The intricate movements of Mrs Flowers speech enchant her listener beyond the need for words and offer a concrete representation of the self. Comprehension is not based on a semiotics of language, but on the understanding of sound and voice and the empathy they are able to provoke. 'Words mean more than what is set down on paper,' not because of their linguistic possibilities, but because they are spoken by a 'human voice' that can 'infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning' (Angelou 106). Even though Marguerite hasn't 'heard, heard to understand, a single word,' she is able to feel the significance of Mrs Flowers' speech-act as an assertion of identity and as the basis for self-representation. Similarly, Grandmother Henderson's singing as a response to the verbal abuse received by the 'powhitetrash' girls produces in Marguerite a reaction of strong emotional connection:

She stood another whole song through and then opened the screen door to look down on me crying in rage. She looked until I looked up. Her face was a brown moon that shone on me. She was beautiful. Something had happened out there, which I couldn't completely understand, but I could see that she was happy. (Angelou 35)

Grandmother Henderson's expression of dignity in the face of insult and offence does not require words, and yet generates awe and respect on the part of Marguerite, who is able to tap into a non-verbal level of communication to reach not an 'understanding' in the negatively traditional sense of the term, but, rather, a form of fervent recognition of her grandmother's interior struggle and her victorious feelings. The two women do not need to verbally convey to each other their mutual acknowledgement and acceptance either, for looking at each other's faces is enough to create that connection. Throughout the entire passage, verbal communication is not only absent, but depicted as utterly unnecessary in a

context that sees sound and movement as the dominant tools to achieve successful self-depictions.

Yet, where the importance of voice as a means for extra-linguistic expression may seem to provide a perfect avenue for Friedan's theory of personal desire to develop as the ultimate feminist assertion of selfhood, Angelou seeks to take the issue further by forging links between the singular voice and the rhythm and sound of an entire community. Indeed, Angelou's memoir is replete with references to singing as a form of collective expression. Singing becomes, for the oppressed minority, a way to satisfy communal ties and affirm a social identity beyond stereotypes. This is evident in Angelou's treatment of anti-racist efforts: after Mr Donleavy's racist address at Marguerite's graduation, the Black community starts singing 'the song every Black person I knew called the Negro National Anthem' (Angelou 190). In this act of defiance, Angelou explains, 'we survived' (Angelou 198). 'I was no longer simply a member of the proud graduating class of 1940,' the author adds in hindsight, 'I was a proud member of the wonderful beautiful Negro race' (Angelou 198). Singing in this context signifies resistance to language-based oppression, a response to Mr Donleavy's verbal attack on the Black community. Singing is what allows the 'Negro race' to re-appropriate themselves of their own identity through a process of telling that is physically represented by a collective use of voice, and deeply rooted into forms of oral tradition that are representative of the social group. In this light, Mrs Flowers' original encouragement that Marguerite should 'listen carefully to what country people called mother wit' (Angelou 108) sets the basis for the creation, in the girl's mind, of the possibility of a shared identity that does not exist independently of and above personhood, but is, rather, comprised of the spontaneous aggregation of autonomous identities into a larger, communally generated whole. 'In those homely sayings,' Mrs Flowers suggests, 'was couched the collective wisdom of generations,' (Angelou 108) and, as such, they become

sources of a shared experience whose sign-system can be modelled and shaped to adapt to, express, and represent the personal in a more uninhibited manner.

Although Angelou does not directly extend the metaphor of ‘song’ to her feminist rhetoric, her celebration of ‘Black known and unknown poets’ whose ‘auctioned pains’ have ‘often sustained’ (Angelou 198) oppressed Blacks sheds light on the ways in which radical change for any social group needs to be maintained, supported and promoted through the communal cultural ties that are generated by the collective use of voice. In order for any community to form, the participating members need to find a point of shared origin in their process of creation and expression, and it is in this context that storytelling manifests itself as the basis for a more radical type of feminism to develop. ‘It may be enough,’ Angelou tells her readers, ‘to have it said that we survive in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets’ (Angelou 198): the oppressed minority can only resist annihilation by relating back to a catalogue of values and meanings that have been forged specifically for the purpose of its survival, as manifested by Marguerite’s experience of life in the car park:

After a month my thinking process had so changed that I was hardly recognizable to myself. The unquestioning acceptance by my peers had dislodged the familiar insecurity. Odd that the homeless children, the silt of war frenzy, could initiate me into the brotherhood of man. After hunting down unbroken bottles and selling them with a white girl from Missouri, a Mexican girl from Los Angeles and a Black girl from Oklahoma, I was never again to sense myself solidly outside the pale of human race. The lack of criticism evidenced by our ad hoc community influenced me, and set a tone of tolerance for my life. (Angelou 272)

The policy of ‘unquestioning acceptance’ that Marguerite’s community adheres to, in this context, serves as the basis for the formation of improbable and yet invaluable connections that change the girl’s ‘thinking process’ from one that is enshrined within conventional

narratives of acceptability into one of ‘tolerance’ not only for the difference of others, but for that of the self. The cast of ‘outsiders’—the same ‘outsiders’ that Friedan does not deem as important enough to impact her study of the ‘feminine mystique’—respond to the creation of stereotypical images of femininity by favouring the aggregation of seemingly incompatible ‘types’—the ‘white girl from Missouri,’ the ‘Mexican girl from Los Angeles,’ and the ‘Black girl from Oklahoma’—into a harmonious and cooperative group that relies upon democratically established ‘rules’ and traditions (Angelou 271) to grant its continued endurance.

Once more, however, it is not language that serves to cement this mutual agreement, but movement:

Juan, the Mexican boy, was my [dance] partner, and although he couldn’t dance any better than I, we were a sensation on the floor. He was very short with a shock of straight black hair that swished around his head when he pivoted, and I was thin and black and tall as a tree. [...] The dance we performed could never be duplicated or described except to say that the passion with which we threw each other around the small dance area was similar to the zeal shown in honest wrestling matches. (Angelou 272)

Angelou purposefully establishes radical differences between the two dance partners, differences that span from the physical to the cultural and racial. Yet, these perceived differences lose their meaning when faced with the act of dancing. The fact that the ‘dance’ as recounted by Angelou ‘could never be [...] described’ is a direct attack on the powerlessness of language to encompass the liberating force that is derived from movement and song as non-canonical—and thus unregulated—forms of personal expression. Through dance, Marguerite is capable not only of establishing a connection with someone she is originally conditioned to see as remote and distant, but, also, of coming to terms with her

‘thin,’ ‘black,’ and ‘tall’ body as a means of externalising her emotions—in this case, her ‘passion’—and her thoughts.

It is precisely through her depiction of voice and movement as powerful avenues of expression that Angelou realises the conclusive fulfilment of a radical feminism. In her presentation of the encounter between Grandmother Henderson and Vivian Baxter, ‘Angelou uses images of fluidity, of “rushing water” and “merging and melting” to suggest the way these women, so seemingly different, flow into each other’ (Manora 273). The socially imposed gap that exists between the Matriarch and the Jezebel is almost physically bridged by the way their voices and bodies interact with one another and form meaningful and lasting links. By reclaiming the idea of ‘performance’ not as a way of gaining social acceptance but as an oral and physical representation of the self, the women in Angelou’s story are able to transcend their superimposed roles—Vivian as the ‘Jezebel,’ Grandmother Henderson as the ‘Matriarch,’ and Marguerite as the potential ‘woman lover’—and abandon superimposed archetypes of femininity to embrace self-expressed stories of origin and survival. In doing so, they not only recognise the existence of a personal semiotics beyond the dominant language sign-system, but become capable of sharing said semiotics in order to forge profitable links that defy the very boundaries of class, race, and gender that seek to limit their existence.

*Chapter VI*  
**Visual identities and Imaginative Rewritings  
in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***

Angelou's first memoir begins the project of intersectional liberation by attempting to dismantle archetypal imaginings of Black American femininity and rejecting standardised representations of both Blackness and womanhood. In a process essential to the creation of a hybrid and dynamic form of feminist resistance, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* foregoes the primacy of language as the essential core of communicative practice and recognises its power as an oppressive tool—where meaning is held in the hands of a highly hierarchical power group with patriarchal and white hegemonic interests, the narrative suggests, such a tool can provide no effective liberation. Additionally, when this tool is employed to produce standardised images of Black femininity, the images themselves need to be exposed as untrustworthy expressions of the kyriarchy that oppresses those who inhabit the 'interstitial spaces of other people's structures' (Phillips XXXIX). By attacking the idea that stereotypical understandings of the Jezebel, the Matriarch, the Strong Black Woman, the Mammy, and so on, can ever fully represent the complexities of personal and collective expressions of Black womanhood, Angelou initiates a process of re-coding of intersectional personhood. This process of re-coding also lies at the core of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970)—Morrison's attention to the visual cultures that saturate the world that the little Black girl inhabits forms the basis of a re-examination of interracial and intraracial dynamics of control and oppression, and encourages the production of imaginative rewritings of Black female identities.

Situating Morrison's novel in its literary and cultural context is essential to understanding the ways in which the little Black girl is characterised differently depending on the different critical perspectives that Morrison inspires. A large portion of the early literary debates surrounding *The Bluest Eye* revolved around the novel's stylistic approaches,

especially in terms of their associations to a number of different genres, both literary and otherwise. In particular, the ‘Blues aesthetic’—the combination of themes, structures and rhythms that characterise the Blues as a musical genre—was often described as a fundamental influence on both Morrison’s literary choices and her understanding of the Black communities that form the core of her novels. As Cat Moses suggests,

the catharsis and the transmission of cultural knowledge and values that have always been central to the blues form the thematic and rhetorical underpinnings of *The Bluest Eye*. The narrative’s structure follows a pattern common to traditional blues lyrics: a movement from an initial emphasis on loss to a concluding suggestion of resolution of grief through motion. (Moses 623)

In such a reading, Claudia performs as the Black Blues artist, ‘singing’ Pecola’s story to enact ‘the transformation of lack, loss, and grief into poetic catharsis’ (Moses 629). The translation of the ‘pattern common to traditional blues lyrics’ into an organising narrative structure allows Claudia—and Morrison—to ‘cast the hitherto nonexistent into a compelling existence, to bring the hitherto invisible into full view’ (Roye 212). The little Black girl is in this context invested with ‘Blues power’—‘the power wielded by charismatic performers and registered by audiences in their bodies and souls’ (Gussow 46)—and, through this aesthetic power, she is capable of becoming the centre of her own narrative while simultaneously attracting a sympathetic audience.

Even more than that, the ‘devices’ borrowed from Blues compositions ‘guarantee that no matter what they take from the process of textual analysis and performance, performers and their audiences cannot remain passive’ (Small-McCarthy 191), thus enacting a system of collective meaning-making that requires the integration of the little Black girl into her community as active participant. If, as Moses argues, ‘much of the critical discourse on the novel has focussed on the relationship between voice and empowerment,’ and ‘on the

problematics of a narrative that silences its dispossessed protagonist while seeking to empower the dispossessed' (Moses 623), Claudia's participation in the processes of signification that characterise the language of the Blues seems to allow for the coexistence of a subject that is at the same time alienated and yet powerfully in conversation with the culture/community that enacts said alienation. Insofar as the captivating movements of the Blues aesthetic are seen at work in the novel, then, this line of enquiry seems to suggest that they provide the terrain onto which a previously dismissed subject—the little Black girl who is seen as 'insignificant to the extent of being "invisible"' (Roye 212)—can make her claim as an epistemic agent whose 'cultural knowledge and values' are deserving of narrative expression.

However, while much valuable insight is to be found in this type of analysis—the centring of Claudia as an epistemic subject, the movement from abjection to recognition, the affirming authority of the Blues language patterns for Black female identity—the predominance of these discourses in early critical responses to the novel served to obscure or elide other compelling features of the narrative. More recent critical attention has been given to the relationship—or lack thereof—between *The Bluest Eye* and the bildungsroman as a literary genre: can Morrison's novel be read as an iteration, albeit atypical, of the traditional 'coming-of-age' trope? Or should it instead be considered as a form of 'anti-bildungsroman'? These questions have been at the forefront of recent research around Morrison's first novel, informing the ways in which the characters of both Claudia and Pecola are seen to interact with the cultural and social landscapes that they inhabit.

Within this critical context, Pecola is read as progressively 'becom[ing] mentally grounded in the experiences of a degenerative childhood' and as 'never leav[ing] adolescence' (Mahaffey 156): the epitome of the failed heroine, she is the protagonist of a stunted narrative of development, a narrative whose course is first abruptly interrupted, and then reversed so as to represent a state of regression and abjection. According to such a reading, the very structure

of the novel is geared toward highlighting the impossibility of Pecola's growth, with Morrison's choice to divide the narrative arc into seasons enacting a fragmentation that defies advancement:

Each season breaks with the preceding narration, and each promises a new beginning which, the subsequent narrative shows, offers no change. The problem with this design is that it severs events from their causes and holds back the possibility of recovery.

(Dittmar 148)

In Dittmar's view, Morrison commits to the 'anti-bildungsroman' genre by breaking down the conventions of the coming-of-age story and employing an organising structure whose sole aim is that of emphasising how the passing of time and the progression of the narrative 'offer no change' for the development of Pecola's identity. What is highlighted in Dittmar's analysis is a sense of hopelessness; a feeling that regardless of her personal agency Pecola's circumstances are such that there can be no alterations to the plain and simple fact that 'quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941' (Morrison 3) and that she will, undoubtedly, 'experience' the 'loss of adolescent innocence' (Mahaffey 157).

Nevertheless, the 'anti-bildungsroman' that is portrayed with Pecola's demise, though tragic, is also depicted as fundamental to Claudia's narrative, and is said to offer a counterpoint against which Claudia can formulate her own coming-of-age as a Black female subject. As someone with the 'remarkable' ability to gather a 'wealth of understanding' from the 'seemingly passive act of observation' (Rokotnitz 385), and who is able 'in later life to articulate, with subtlety, sensitivity and captivating poetry, the constellation of events that lead to the tragedy recounted in *The Bluest Eye*' (Rokotnitz 386), Claudia is in this sense the structural opposite of Pecola: where Pecola's connection to reality and the social structures governing her community is gradually destroyed, Claudia's increased sense of 'understanding' tightens her ties to her social group, while also granting the Black girl an avenue for personal

development. By ‘observing’ Pecola’s tragedy, Claudia participates in the ‘process ... of self-construction’ (Rokotnitz 386) that typifies coming-of-age narratives, her story seemingly the incarnation of a Black female bildungsroman.

Once again, although the focus on generic conventions and the attention to the rhythms and structures of the novel allow for the exploration of certain important thematic matters—the helplessness of the little black girl as the subject of a restrictive narrative trope, the thwarted development from girlhood into womanhood, the power of testimony as a tool for personal growth—these seem limiting in terms of conjuring a fuller picture of the experience of Black girlhood as portrayed by Morrison. While these readings reflect usefully on the rhetorical features of Morrison’s writing, they can also reduce Claudia and Pecola to the status of literary tools serving a wider narrative strategy; and the social and cultural forces that operate on them are at times overlooked in favour of an emphasis on the technical detail of the written work. This chapter, then, seeks to address the ways in which the novel engages with visual culture as the vehicle through which Claudia’s consciousness and her awareness of racial, gender and class biases are built; rather than with the sounds and rhythms of literary and musical genres, its ‘Blues aesthetic.’ Ideas will be explored around the relation between a distinct social emphasis on sight as the dominant perceptive means and the structures of oppression that mark the growth and development of the female Black subject from childhood into adulthood. Focus will fall on the ways in which Claudia’s instinctive rejection of archetypal visual stimuli shapes the dynamics of discrimination, alienation, and subordination that characterise the normative trajectories available to little Black girls as the primary identity centres of Morrison’s narrative. Indeed, it will be argued that, where Rosenberg goes so far as to suggest that ‘thematically, *The Bluest Eye* consists of a stipulative definition which radically redefines beauty’ (439), it is evident that visual culture plays a fundamental role in understanding the strategies of liberation and development that Morrison identifies as essential to the construction of Black female

identity. As such, an exploration of the ways in which ‘sight’ and the ‘seen’—or, even, the ‘unseen’—are depicted will become essential to negotiating the terms into which the novel inscribes the Black female experience. The chapter will then analyse the processes that characterise the creation and mutations of Black female girlhood, and the ways in which the sense of ‘otherness’ that stands as a fundamental pillar of the Black physical experience affects these processes.

As Rosenberg suggests, ‘because being dark meant never being considered beautiful, being other became a canonical part of Black women’s literature’ (439), and it is in this process of alienation and reconciliation that Morrison’s project of representation and inscription for the Black female voice comes fully into being. In other words,

in refusing the terms of the dominant culture’s patterning of experience, one is in a position to restate the familiar, that is, to retrace the particular contours of one’s own experience, to regain the practice of one’s own narrative. (Wong 473)

Because the ‘patterning of experience’ that is signified by the blue-eyed Baby Doll that haunts Claudia’s and Pecola’s lives is one that aims to ostracise the little Black girl from her own sense of selfhood and from the value of her experience, the rejection, on Claudia’s part, of these standards of ‘beauty’ comes to represent the first, fundamental step toward the possibility for a form of personal narrative creation that stands at the basis of the process of identity formation. The acts of appreciation, evaluation, and rejection of the dominant visual culture that Claudia inhabits can thus be read as the springboard for the production of a Black female testimonial that, though borrowing stylistically from the literary and cultural traditions that populate the social landscape it inhabits, still speaks of a desire for intellectual and personal independence from normative modes of signification.

## **Visual cues and White hegemonic representations**

Before delving deeper into the effects of the rejection and demystification of traditional visual patterns, however, it is worth noting the ways in which Morrison depicts these, and the ways in which they are introduced into the lives of the little Black girls. In fact, Morrison's interest in material and visual culture is immediately evident in the novel's opening, which presents a snapshot of suburban domesticity in the form and language of a nursery book:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play.

(Morrison 1)

The Dick-and-Jane narrative represents 'the world' of the conventional 'first-grade basic reader—middle-class, secure, suburban and white, replete with dog, cat, non-working mother and leisure-time father' (Klotman 123). It is a world from which Morrison's little girls—Frieda, Claudia, and, more poignantly, Pecola—are excluded; it is also a world that they cannot help but desire and aspire to. It is a world that is both capable of inspiring comfort and, simultaneously, one that suggests a deep sense of unsettlement. It is the world of difference that they see between themselves and the Shirley Temples, or even the Maureen Peal in their lives; a world that, presented in stark terms at the start of the novel, serves as a clear reminder

that both the lovingly warm and the devastatingly hurtful experiences of the Black girl are atypical, abnormal, other.

Thus, the Dick-and-Jane prologue functions as the premise for the alienating, dehumanising force of conventional narratives, doing so by signposting the all-important role played by visual culture in the creation of the white mythology that Morrison's characters struggle to both fulfil and reject. It is in the combination of these two elements—the partiality of linguistic and narrative structures, and the value attributed to outward appearance—that the complex system of oppression operating on the little Black girl comes fully to fruition as the destabilising force that affects her ability to simply exist. There is no doubt that the propriety of the scene depicted in the Dick-and-Jane vignette has to do with its visual appeal: as the reader is continuously invited to 'see,' there exists a constant reminder that physical attributes—what appears to the eye, rather than what is felt, or thought—play a crucial part in allocating roles—the father, as the head of the family, is 'big and strong'—and defining the standards of favourable social reception. The 'first-grade basic reader' is assaulted with a burst of colour: the beautiful 'green-and-white house' is dominating the scene to set the terms for what a family should look like, and Jane, the little girl in the 'red dress' matching the 'red door,' is placed at the centre of this idyllic setting, as if to imply that she not only belongs there, but is in control of her surroundings—she is the reason for their existence, and the focus of their comforts. Where Jane actively 'lives' in the house, Pecola and Claudia are 'merely pointed out. Like, here is the bathroom; the clothes closet is here; and these are my kids, Frieda and Claudia; watch out for this window; it don't open all the way' (Morrison 13). The relation to the house is drastically different for the little Black girls. They are not, as Jane is, owners entitled to express their desire 'to play' and thus be visible. Rather, they are mere architectural features; insignificant background elements whose existence is barely acknowledged, and mostly as somewhat of a nuisance. The message is clear: it is the difference, as Claudia explains, between being the

standard and being ‘a minority in both caste and class,’ being forced to move ‘about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment’ (Morrison 15). By setting up the ‘garment’ that is the Dick-and-Jane narrative, Morrison also opens the space within its folds for examination, and this examination begins with the undoing to the garment’s own seams.

It is not surprising, then, that Morrison enacts in her reproduction of the Dick-and-Jane narrative a disintegration of traditional language structures that leads the reader from the ‘clear, straight, [. . .] correct and white’ version of the story to firstly one that is ‘less clear yet still comprehensible,’ and, finally, one that resembles ‘one long collection of consonants and vowels seeming to signify nothing’ (Klotman 123). The three iterations of the Dick-and-Jane episode represent the progressive dissolution of ties between the prim, middle class, white existence and the lived experiences of Morrison’s African American communities, wherein the rigorously regulated tranquillity presented by Jane and her family fails to produce any form of effective signification. That this progressive failure of signification is closely tied to the disintegration of linguistic structures is crucial in the context of Morrison’s novel, for it serves to delineate right from the very beginning what *The Bluest Eye* is all about: that the life, the desires, the sufferings, and the joys of the little Black girl cannot be articulated within the controlling semiotic landscape of the patriarchal, wealth-oriented, and culturally segregated American ‘dream.’ Where the intersecting power structures that control Roth’s Jewish women lead them to charged silences, Morrison attacks the ways in which language is visually represented—its spelling, its structuring, its logical arrangement—to portray the constraints that these prescriptive measures enact on the ways narratives are told.

The fact that Morrison’s dismemberment of language in the Dick-and-Jane passage is not strictly syntactical, nor necessarily semiotic, is an essential feature of Morrison’s understanding of oppression. The dissolution of linguistic tropes is not, here, a product of

meaning-making necessarily in linguistic terms, but rather a condemnation of the power of the visual symbolic sign to determine ‘correctness’ and alienate all that deviates from the established norm. In this light, Morrison’s reproduction of the Dick-and-Jane story can be read as an iteration of the deceitful nature of visuals, insofar as what Morrison removes from the page—the in-between spaces, the capitalisation, the punctuation—serves to establish the shortcomings of particularly the written language as a universal means of expression. If the regulating authority for linguistic signification lies in the Dick-and-Jane narrative with its clear-cut edges, neat images, and tidy relations, all exemplified on the page by the carefully regulated display of punctuation, Morrison seems to suggest, then there is no written language that can fully, truthfully and effectively communicate the story of Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, at least not in traditional terms.

In fact, the traditional visual narratives that populate Morrison’s novel are constantly depicted as tools aimed at hindering any form of self-affirmation for the Black little girl by rooting its potential in unrealistic standards of beauty:

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, ‘You are ugly people.’ They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. ‘Yes,’ they had said. ‘You’re right.’ (Morrison 37)

The narrative that the collective imaginary of the little girls’ Black community accepts ‘without question’ is not one that is self-generated. It is, instead, provided by ‘some mysterious all-knowing master,’ a seemingly superior and overpowering force whose authority is reinforced by ‘every billboard, every movie,’ and ‘every glance’ and whose overarching message is that Blackness equates to ‘ugliness.’ Once more, Morrison conflates linguistic and narrative forms of identification with expressions of visual culture, this time directly drawing a connection

between the oppressive weight of ‘ugliness’ and the acts of visual storytelling enacted by ‘movies’ and ‘billboards’ as representatives of the dominant cultural and social codes of acceptability. The negative connotations of ‘Blackness’ as an existential condition appear in this context to be neither directly moral nor explicitly political. They are, instead, linked to external appearance as the evident mark of difference, a mark that serves to shape perceptions and establish norms:

Movies are the centrally destructive force in the novel not only because of the values they present—perfect white bodies and romantic love—but because of the way they present them: as flawless Archetypes above and outside the shadowy world of everyday life. (Fick 11)

Detached from the ‘world of everyday life’ and the gestures, acts, and relations that make them human, the bodies on billboards and in movies become depersonalised, and, as such, their categorisation into ‘Archetypes’ acquires a validity that seems unquestionable.

In other words, because the images in movies and on billboards operate, just like the Dick-and-Jane primer does, as a dehumanising force aimed at erasing the lived experiences of their Black observers, they enact a process of othering that seeks to crystallise Blackness as the counterpoint for the ‘flawless Archetype’ of whiteness. The symbolic positioning of billboards as a looming presence ‘leaning at’ the Black community from ‘above and outside’ accentuates the idea of an unassailable, predetermined ‘ugliness.’ There is nothing to ‘contradict the statement’ of Black ‘ugliness’ because the white narrative represented by ‘movies’ and billboards’ has already established the ‘cu-ute’ Shirley Temple as the one standard worthy of ‘adoration’ (Morrison 17). It is the gap between the idolisation of the image of Shirley and the perception of the Black body that begins a process of self-vilification in which ‘no one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly’ (Morrison 36). The ‘relentlessness’ and ‘aggressiveness’ of the experience of physical difference, however, speaks

both of the perceived moral implications imposed on this visual narrative, and, at the same time, of the power of the internalised struggle associated with it.

### **The thing(s?) to fear: marigolds, dolls, and metaphors**

It is for this reason that Morrison is also careful not to qualify the ‘master’ narrator of this difference as one specific centre of power or another, choosing, instead, to rely on their ‘mysterious’ quality of cumulative influence: as Claudia herself affirms ‘the *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made her beautiful, and not us’ (Morrison 72), and the ‘Thing’ is not a focalised, easily identifiable entity or force, but a composite terrain made up of multiple centres of oppression. The ‘Thing’ is both the ‘fifty-two-year-old white immigrant store-keeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth’ who displays, in looking at Pecola, a ‘vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge’ (Morrison 46) and the Black adults whose ‘clucking sounds’ tell Claudia that ‘the big, the special, the loving gift’ that is the ‘big, blue-eyed Baby Doll’ represents ‘what they thought was my fondest wish’ (Morrison 17-8). Both of these ‘Things,’ though in different ways, set out the terms of signification to which the little Black girl is supposed to adhere: the white shopkeeper determines, through his disinterested gaze, the irrelevance of the Black experience in the wider, white-dominated social landscape, while the Black gift-givers project onto the girls, and reproduce for them, impossible standards of conventional beauty in the form of the ‘blue-eyed Baby Doll.’ Neither Pecola nor Claudia have any say in their narrative construction as operated by their intersecting communities, and, as such, Claudia’s questioning of ‘what was I supposed to do with it?’ (Morrison 18) transcends her direct relation to the doll to address the sense of entrapment that the Dick-and-Jane narrative tradition imposes over the little Black girl where her existence is constantly invalidated by her failing to meet requirements that are, from the outset, not designed for her.

In this context, Jane Kuentz argues:

Morrison literalizes the novel's overall conflation of black female bodies as the sites of fascist invasions of one kind or another, as the terrain on which is mapped the encroachment and colonization of African-American experiences, particularly those of its women, by a seemingly hegemonic white culture. (Kuenz 421)

It is the 'seemingly hegemonic white culture' that produces the shopkeeper's indifference as much as it commands 'ugliness' as the dominating feature of Blackness. Represented by the 'blue-eyed Baby Doll,' the supremacy of white systems of identification and signification pervades the connected yet separate communities that the little Black girls navigate, and makes it so that 'Black girls stepped aside when [Maureen Peals] wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids' (Morrison 60). As per Kuentz's analysis, both the 'stepping aside' and 'genuflection' can be read as acts of resigned acceptance which highlight the nature of the 'encroachment and colonisation' experienced by the Black girls as located within the 'body,' and, as such, suggest the inescapability of these terms of oppression as inherent to the existential condition of being Black.

Similarly, in discussing the marigold metaphor that serves as a framing device for Pecola's narrative, Dittmar suggests that

there are several problems with this metaphor: it leaves the barrenness unaccounted for; it situates social and psychological oppression in the community that receives them (the 'soil' in which the seeds were sown); it presents racism as an inescapable atavism; and it provides no means of recovery. In fact, when one surveys the tale of inhumanity *The Bluest Eye* unfolds, it is hard not to question the ideology of its thematics. Readers worry that the microcosm Morrison locates in her Ohio town includes few venues for anger directed beyond the black community and almost no potential for regeneration within it. (Dittmar 140)

Once again, there seems to be a scholarly understanding that the narrative created by Morrison is one that victimises its Black subjects in a way that renders them complicit in their own victimisation. The ‘inescapable atavism’ of racism that Dittmar diagnoses in *The Bluest Eye* suggests a vision of the novel as somehow defeatist, and the lack of ‘anger’ as directed to a clear, identifiable, and accountable oppressor operates, in Dittmar’s view, as a failure of self-expression and affirmation on the part of both the Black characters and the Black author. Dittmar’s accusation of acquiescence resonates even more strongly than that offered by Kuentz and speaks of a hopelessness whose roots are in the racist dynamics of internalisation and community discrimination. There are, however, two major problems with both Kuentz’s and Dittmar’s analyses. On the one hand, they seem to suggest a form of powerless resignation on the part of the Black community, wherein the oppressive stimuli of white ‘hegemonic’ ‘invasions’ remain ever unchallenged, and, thus, unassailable. At the same time, the complexity of the circumstances that seem to paralyse, though differently, both Claudia and Pecola as the subjects of repressive practices is waived in favour of a system that sees Blackness as the sole cause and reason for discrimination and social alienation. Indeed, even where Kuentz makes an effort to specify that this is particularly significant for the ‘experiences’ of Black ‘women’ and ‘Black female bodies,’ the specific ramifications of the intersection of Blackness and womanhood are never satisfactorily explored, nor are the consequences of youth and inexperience fully taken into account.

Yet, it is precisely the marigold metaphor, read by Dittmar as a problematic expression of some imagined pitfalls of Blackness itself, that instead introduces the reader to the multi-layered dynamics enacted by the novel’s representation of systems of oppression. As Claudia explains,

so deeply concerned were we with the health and safe delivery of Pecola's baby we could think of nothing but our own magic: if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right. (Morrison 3)

The 'magic' required for the blossoming of the seeds is, in Claudia's and Frieda's minds, inextricably linked to Pecola's destiny. If it is true that 'our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did' (Morrison 3), yet that is of no consequence to the little girls, because their specific ritual has little to do with the general success of the Black community, and everything to do with the singularly female experience of pregnancy and childbirth. The linking of the sprouting seeds to the safe delivery of 'Pecola's baby' clearly designates the blossoming of the marigolds not merely as a racial issue, but, and possibly more importantly, as a particularly female one, and one whose tragic resolution is a result of the combined effects of composite circumstances.

In fact, Claudia directly links her own and Frieda's planting of the seeds 'in our own little plot of black dirt' to 'Pecola's father' dropping 'his seeds in his own plot of black dirt' (Morrison 2): the 'earth itself' that 'might have been unyielding' (Morrison 1) becomes in the girls' mind a translation of Pecola's body, and, as such, points at the manifold violences that are enacted on it. Just as the seeds, planted 'too far down into the earth' (Morrison 1), violate the soil, so Pecola's father, with his 'lust and despair' (Morrison 2) exercises a form of physical brutality on Pecola's body. The references to Pecola as a 'plot of black dirt' certainly speak of a violence that is justified by the notion that Pecola's perceived Black 'ugliness' renders her identity and humanity insignificant. Yet, the patriarchal exercise of control over Pecola's body is only fully understandable when seen through a gendered lens. That the savagery of Pecola's father is gendered in nature is evident in the fact that Pecola's potential for bearing 'fruits' is the crucial trigger for the process of 'dropping' the seeds, and, in this light, it is exclusively within the merging of racial and gendered processes of de-personification that Pecola can

become the victim of such an unspeakable act. Pecola's curse is, in essence, the curse of being both Black *and* a woman.

Contrary to Dittmar's assertion, then, Blackness alone cannot account for the failure of Pecola's narrative, nor for Claudia's own disappointment at her inability to protect Pecola. Similarly, and as a result of this, Blackness is also not, as Dittmar would have it, the sole 'venue for anger' available to the little Black girl. Indeed, if, as Claudia tells the the reader, 'It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds' (Morrison 1), yet, this admission brings with it a new acknowledgement of the complex nature of the girls' inhabited communities:

Now when I see [Pecola] searching the garbage—for what? The thing we assassinated? I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. The soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. (Morrison 204)

In Claudia's speech, the death of Pecola's baby as much as Pecola's own descent into tragedy, are not easily classifiable: they are both a Black community responsibility, and, at the same time, the result of external forces beyond the community's control. As such, Pecola's tragic fate is portrayed as the collation of multiple failures that stem from different power centres and are elicited by different power tensions.

It is, however, important to recognise that Claudia discounts her feeling of personal responsibility, stating 'I did not plant the seeds too deeply.' By relinquishing, as a fellow Black woman, her own sense of guilt, Claudia operates on two crucial levels to explain the experiential contradictions to which both herself and Pecola are subjected: on the one hand, the

idea that Pecola's baby might be something that 'we assassinated' speaks of the sense of kinship that Claudia as a fellow Black woman feels toward Pecola's experience of violence and loss. It is as if, Claudia seems to be saying, their roles could easily be reversed, as if she can imagine herself as the victim, and the body—'the plot of black dirt'—that killed the baby could have belonged to either one of the two Black girls, indistinctly. The first-person plural pronoun links Claudia and Pecola in the experience of violation and culpability and forges a shared terrain that highlights the threats latent to the existence of the Black woman. On the other hand, Claudia also distances herself from a Black community that she sees as at least partly responsible for the harrowing denouement of Pecola's narrative. 'It was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town,' she argues, rather than the fault of the Black woman. It was the fault, in short, of the prejudices associated with womanhood and Blackness as assimilated by the 'town,' prejudices that preclude all avenues of success for both Pecola and Claudia.

Most importantly, perhaps, Claudia does not conclude her reflection with the simple accusation that the Black social organisation repeatedly and consistently fails the little Black girl. On the contrary, even where blame is at least partly situated in the 'social and psychological oppression' operated by 'the community that receives' Pecola, Claudia also strives to trace the origins of this blame, and, with the power of hindsight, recognises it as derived from a wider context of complex categories of social exclusion and discrimination. 'I even think now,' Claudia says, 'that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year': zooming out from her immediate surroundings, Claudia addresses the cultural landscape of America as being 'bad for certain kinds of flowers' insofar as they cannot fit neatly within categorical distinctions. Because Pecola is young, Black, and female, Claudia seems to suggest, her existence is problematic. The ugliness that the 'white hegemonic' background projects onto the Black identity, the predatory power of patriarchal authority represented by Cholly, the perceived disobedience of the young girl whose naive questioning appears to challenge the

social norm – ‘What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what?’ (Morrison 72)–all conflate into Pecola’s unfair treatment as a reaction to the perceived threat to normalised hierarchical codes that the girl’s resilience embodies. In this light, Pecola’s liminal individuality, the unique conformation of her particular struggle as deriving from the operation of a disparate set of power centres, both condemns her in the eye of the community –the immediate Black community as much as the wider American community– as an anomaly that cannot be ‘nurtured’ for fear of upheaval, and at the same time affirms the girl’s right to survival. Claudia’s definition of Pecola as a ‘victim’ clearly positions the little Black girl at a disadvantaged condition, but the admission that ‘we are wrong’ to think that she ‘had no right to live’ also relieves the victim of responsibility and points at the injustice of her circumstances. The collective ‘we’ employed by the adult-Claudia as the retrospective narrator of Pecola’s story is again a composite subject, representative of the different properties of the ‘land’ that ‘kills of its own volition,’ the different biases of the social context that rejects the existence of the little Black girl as autonomous, relevant, and precious.

By condemning the victimisation of Pecola, then, the adult Claudia challenges the stigmatising systems that operate to coerce and threaten the little Black girl’s life. By the end of the novel, Claudia is able to articulate the multi-layered burden of oppression in an eloquent, articulate and effective manner. Yet, this is not, for Claudia, a sudden revelation, but rather a refinement of feelings and ideas that already existed within the child-Claudia with whom the novel opens. In fact, the idea of passive acceptance that both Kuentz and Dittmar seem to identify as characteristics of Pecola’s and Claudia’s responses to oppression is continuously put to the test throughout the novel by the girls’ interactions with the stereotypical contexts that they are required to face. Claudia’s reaction to the blue-eyed Baby Doll is telling in this regard:

I was physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair. [...] I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see

of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. [...] I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly white teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. (Morrison 18-9)

The doll's image is deformed in Claudia's view, its traditionally appealing traits isolated and distorted to display their malignant effects onto the doll's owner. The 'pearly white teeth' that 'stuck out like two piano keys,' the 'glassy blue eyeballs,' and the 'yellow hair' are no longer the delicate, charming features that make Shirley Temple and Maureen Peals the idealised portraits of beauty, but become, instead, representations of a form of white monstrosity that requires being 'picked at,' 'poked,' and 'twisted' to highlight its shortcomings.

Similarly, the doll's function is questioned by Claudia, who asks herself: 'What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood' (Morrison 18). If the physical appearance of the doll serves to reject the idea of a 'white hegemonic' power, so its practical uses are attacked by Claudia as representative of a patriarchal authority that requires women to be 'mothers.' Both by its looks and by its purpose, the blue-eyed Baby Doll represents an open assault on the little Black girl's freedom of self-determination and self-affirmation, and, as such, its existence cannot be quietly tolerated. The visceral, violent response that Claudia showcases, the impulse to 'dismember it,' indicates an active attempt to dismantle the stereotypical power relationships that the doll represents. Indeed, as Fick explains, 'though fueled by hate for the icons that usurp her family's admiration, Claudia is rational and resolutely empirical in her quest for understanding' (14): Claudia's admission that she 'could not love' the doll is significant in this sense, for it highlights the fact that its existence also signifies the affirmation of codes of conduct that

require the little Black girl to always be a lesser, more easily controllable form of personhood whose identity is dictated by external circumstances. Claudia's impulse to 'examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable,' not only demonstrates a clear awareness of the doll's allegorical power and the need for a 'resolutely empirical' attempt at understanding; it also implies a desire, on Claudia's part, to be rid of the doll's influence, to change social perceptions of racial and gendered roles, and to redress the power imbalance that characterises her existence.

It is exactly this same desire that drives Pecola's obsession for 'the bluest eye' as the symbolic representation of white feminine beauty, and, thus, of a form of social acceptance and participation. Indeed, as she plays an imaginary conversation in her mind, Pecola reflects:

Oh yes. My eyes. My blue eyes. Let me look again.

*See how pretty they are.*

Yes. They get prettier each time I look at them.

*They are the prettiest I've ever seen.*

[...]

Prettier than the sky?

*Oh yes, much prettier than the sky.*

Prettier than Alice-and-Jerry Storybook eyes?

*Oh, yes. Much prettier than Alice-and-Jerry Storybook eyes.* (Morrison 199)

If culturally-scripted 'ugliness' condemns the Black woman to the horrors of a 'peripheral existence' (Morrison 15) in which 'there is nothing to see' (Morrison 46) and which 'creates the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes' (Morrison 47), then Pecola's yearning for blue eyes becomes a yearning for 'prettiness' as the tool that will, in the girl's view, allow her to break free of the composite prejudicial ties that limit her personhood. The repetition of the term 'pretty' throughout the passage, coupled with the continual questioning of its truthfulness,

points at Pecola's feelings of instability and insecurity in her process of self-identification and affirmation, wherein the little girl constantly requires the approval of an ideal interlocutor that will affirm and confirm her desires as valid and achievable. Therefore, if, as Dittmar suggests, 'the verbal abundance in which this writing glories is tinged with scepticism' and if 'its "overflow" touches off a feeling that meanings are unstable, at once elusive and in formation' (Dittmar 137), then Pecola's fractured speech act—almost exclusively her only speech act throughout the novel—articulates this feeling of instability by portraying Pecola's efforts to anchor herself on the concept of 'prettiness' as a saving means of signification.

At the same time, the repetitions that characterise Pecola's discussion also highlight the firmness of Pecola's belief that the definitive achievement of prettiness through blue eyes—a feature that, once appropriated, 'would last forever' (Morrison 191)—signifies a decisive step toward liberation and, as a result, happiness. That this is the case, at least in Pecola's imagination, is further confirmed by the reference in the passage to the 'Alice-and-Jerry Storybook eyes.' As a surrogate for the Dick-and-Jane framing narrative, the Alice-and-Jerry Storybook represents for Pecola the ideal setting within which the little girl is allowed to thrive. According to this view, the blue eyes place Pecola within this setting as a legitimate participant, one whose existence can neither be ignored nor questioned, and whose renewed sense of belonging betrays the need for social acceptance and participation as essential to the process of identity formation.

### **Commodification, imagination, and rewriting**

There remains, however, a gap between Pecola's understanding of the path to self-realisation—a path that, in Pecola's view, involves the unrealisable assumption of white traits—and the community's understanding of the futility of Pecola's effort. As Pecola herself describes it,

can you imagine? Something like that happening to a person, and nobody but nobody saying anything about it? They all try to pretend they don't see them. Isn't that funny? ... I said, isn't that funny? (Morrison 193)

The bitterly ironic divide between what Pecola sees as discrimination in terms of her newly acquired beauty and power –‘just because I got blue eyes, bluer than theirs, they're prejudiced’ (Morrison 195)– and the community's sense of guilt at the horrifying circumstances that have led to Pecola's ostracism, serves to highlight the misguided forms of signification that different members of Pecola's social group attribute to symbolic visual signs, be those the ‘blue eyes’ of beauty or Pecola's pregnancy as something for which ‘she carry some of the blame’ (Morrison 187). It is within this communicative gap that ‘the horror at the heart of [Pecola's yearning]’ becomes, in Claudia's words, ‘exceeded [...] by the horror of fulfillment’ (Morrison 202): the intertwining of Pecola's warped viewpoint and the community's prejudiced perceptions suggests that the desirability of the ‘blue eye’ is not only a delusion, but it is also, and more significantly, a malignant trap that accelerates the fall of the little Black girl.

Just as her pregnancy alienates Pecola from her community, so does the ‘blue eye,’ for both are seen as a foreboding sign of the implications of gendered and racial bias for the development–or lack thereof–of the Black female selfhood. That this faith in the power of the ‘blue eye’ is misplaced, is further evidenced by Soaphead's reaction to Pecola's request:

He thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. [...] Of all the wishes people had brought him–money, love, revenge–this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. (Morrison 172)

Once again, terms of gendered and racial oppression are conflated in Soaphead's speech, a speech that sees Pecola as both ‘an ugly little girl asking for beauty’ for she is lacking in terms

of feminine standards of perfection, and, at the same time, as ‘a little black girl’ seeking to ‘rise up out of the pit of her blackness,’ where blackness is symbolically placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy. If Soaphead terms Pecola’s ‘petition’ as ‘the most fantastic and the most logical’ that ‘he had ever received,’ yet it is evident that it is also one petition that is destined to fail spectacularly in its intent. It is for Soaphead himself to recognise this when he addresses God by saying, ‘I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl and I loved her. I played You. And it was a very good show!’ (Morrison 180). The notion that Soaphead’s ‘miracle’ is also ‘a very good show’ undermines the success of the enterprise as a purely self-effacing exercise that does more for Soaphead’s own desire to ‘create’ than for the subject of said ‘creation’ (Morrison 180).

More importantly, the fact that Soaphead identifies his act of creation in opposition to God’s own universal creation suggests that giving Pecola ‘the eyes’ might, in fact, be an unnatural distortion of the realities of girlhood and Blackness, one unlikely to allow Pecola to ‘live happily ever after’ (Morrison 180). Rather than achieving for Pecola freedom from controlling social standards, the ‘blue eye’ is, then, an abomination of the little Black girl’s identity, a sign whose symbolic value is designed to satisfy Soaphead’s self-aggrandising wishes while simultaneously and constantly disappointing Pecola’s expectations of release. For their ultimate social purpose is that of always marking her as different, strange, inferior, the ‘blue eyes’ fail to achieve the liberating potential that Pecola attributes to them. In fact, by its mere existence, the ‘blue eye’ as an allegorical image existing in the collective imaginary—the significance of which, as Soaphead’s interior monologue demonstrates, need never be explained—is, just like the Dick-and-Jane narrative, an expression of that which seeks to determine the subordination of little Black girl’s existence to social norms and visual codes that constantly detract from her individuality and value as a human being.

This violation of individuality is what Claudia perceives as ‘the horror’ in the ‘fulfilment’ of Pecola’s wish, the abandonment of personhood in favour of archetypal images of suitability. More importantly, though, it is the purpose of this suitability—or, in the case of Pecola and her baby, unsuitability—that horrifies Claudia, for the dynamics of social acceptance as Claudia understands them are so deeply rooted into an overarching consumerist agenda as to dehumanise their subjects to the status of purely utilitarian tools. As Claudia suggests,

more strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals. (Morrison 188)

What the ‘white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals’ have in common, and what Pecola and her baby do not have, is an innate capacity for marketability. The ‘gift of dolls’ (Morrison 17) at Christmastime just as much as the ‘blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup’ (Morrison 17) are not representations of a form of femininity that is freer than the one experienced by the Black little girls. Instead, they are rarefied reproductions of crystallised images of female perfection as signified by the patriarchal authority whose consumeristic ends encourage the exploitation of the gender bias for profit. The process of image production that is identified by Morrison in both the billboards and the objects of everyday use is one that seeks to affect the public perception of femininity and beauty so as to gain financial and social power over the bodies it controls, whether they be Shirley Temple’s ‘silhouette’ (Morrison 17) or the ‘high-yellow dream child’ (Morrison 60) that is Maureen Peal.

Claudia recognises this fallacy when she ‘thought of the baby everybody wanted dead, and saw it very clearly’ (Morrison 188):

Its head covered with great O’s of wool, the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living, breathing silk of black

skin. No synthetic yellow bangs suspended over marble-blue eyes, no pinched nose and bowline mouth. (Morrison 188)

By rewriting what reads like advertising copy for Pecola's baby, Claudia seeks to redress the imbalance of social prejudice that wants it 'dead' insofar as its existence cannot be deemed profitable. The unborn black baby becomes for Claudia an alternative to the blue-eyed Baby Doll, and the features traditionally associated with Black 'ugliness' are revisited by the little Black girl in a recognition of beauty beyond conventional, superimposed standards. As Morrison suggests in her 'Afterword' to the novel, 'beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could *do*' (205), and Claudia actively chooses to engage with this idea when she describes the baby's eyes as 'clean,' their lips as 'kissing,' their skin as 'silk.' If Soaphead feels justified in 'selling' the false idea of the 'blue eye' to Pecola, Claudia rejects the consumerist values that are imbued in the discriminating features of gendered and racial discourses, and, instead, chooses to 'do' Beauty, to define its terms and present its merits in the way that best fits her personal understanding of it. This is why when Claudia sees Maureen's 'long brown hair' she equates her braids to 'two lynch ropes that hung down her back' (Morrison 60): the hair represents a standard that works as a noose for both Maureen and Claudia, for it equally entraps the two girls into a system that strangles their autonomous aspirations to selfhood in favour of a pre-packaged image of what is to be 'beheld' with admiration and never challenged.

In this light, society's focus on symbolic images, positive or negative, becomes the centre of Morrison's critique, with the idea of 'seeing' coming to represent a mode of existence whose regulations need to be constantly negotiated for the achievement of personal selfhood. As Fick argues, for example, 'Pecola's longing for [...] cosmetic change expresses her deeper need to reform the world by reforming the way she sees it' (11). Claudia seems to share this 'need,' her desire to understand the secrets of the blue-eyed Baby Doll and its attractive powers

a clear indication of her 'commitment to right seeing' (Fick 13). Yet, Claudia's acute understanding of the traps of consumer culture also allows her to seek different avenues of satisfaction. Rather than praying for the 'Blue eyes that epitomize everything desirable in White American culture' (Fick 11), then, Claudia is interested in her own process of myth-making, in creating her own images to resist the archetypal narratives that thwart her being. She is engaged, as Morrison would have it, in her own personal process of 'doing Beauty' for herself. Claudia counters the 'the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encounter the Maureen Peals of the world' (Morrison 19) not simply by 'destroy[ing] those dolls' (Morrison 19) but also by recognising that 'nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas' (Morrison 19) and attempting to rectify what she sees as a form of discriminating injustice.

Where the Black girl is constantly being 'forced to deny the particular in herself' (Fick 17) by externally produced images whose objectives seem unassailable, Claudia's fight lies in her own power of imagination:

The real question would have been, 'Dear Claudia, what experience would you like on Christmas?' I could have spoken up, 'I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.'

The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama's kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of the music, and, since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterward. (Morrison 20)

Claudia rejects the significance of the blue-eyed Baby Doll by composing an alternative scenario that expresses her understanding of 'Beauty.' Significantly, Claudia's dream is not one that is exclusively based on sight, but instead one which relies on all five 'senses' to be 'engaged' in order to generate meaning. Claudia yearns for the 'security and warmth of Big Mama's Kitchen,' the 'smell of lilacs,' the 'taste of a peach,' and the 'sound of the music' when

‘Big Papa play[s] his violin’ as symbolic representations of the sincerity and affection that she recognises as crucial to her development as a child, a member of the black community, and a young woman. In contrast to the sterile representation of familial life portrayed by the Dick-and-Jane narrative—Mother ‘laughs,’ and Father ‘smiles,’ but no one plays with Jane—Claudia’s conjuring of a domestic environment that is ‘for me alone,’ or ‘made for my body’ speaks of the little girl’s understanding that her project of self-affirmation is closely tied to the construction of a landscape that will be receptive of, and even actively foster, her growth into an individual worthy of both respect and care. Rather than ‘reform[ing] the world by reforming the way she sees it’ then, Claudia is involved in the project of reforming the way the world sees her, of establishing herself firstly as a subject, and, secondly, as a subject whose existence is valuable and, indeed, valued just as it is, without the requirements of adherence to externally produced socio-cultural norms.

Differently from Maureen, Shirley, and even Pecola, then, Claudia is in the unique position where, having recognised that she is an outsider, she is able to embrace ‘the particular in herself’ and provide a pattern for the possibility of emancipation. In this sense, the singularity of her experience as a little Black girl is what allows her to transcend the models of difference that are constantly enacted in her community—the difference between herself and Pecola, those between the little Black girls and Maureen Peals, or Shirley Temple, between Pecola and the white shopkeeper—and explore, instead, a sense of commonality in the process of self-growth and development.

What makes this exploration possible, however, is not merely the girl’s imaginative power, but rather a system of signification that relies on the existence within the novel of two separate and distinct iterations of Claudia: child-Claudia, who instinctively repudiates and ‘dismembers’ the blue-eyed Baby Doll but can never quite fully understand its ‘desirability;’ and adult-Claudia, who, owning powers of both hindsight and insight, recognises the ‘mere

metal roundness' (Morrison 19) at the core of the blue-eyed Baby Doll as 'revealing' that there is 'nothing substantive' to support the 'ideological construction' (Wall 798) of race. It is this latter iteration of Claudia that Wall argues can be read 'as a figure for the Black feminist critic' (798) and her presence becomes essential to the full development of Morrison's narrative project: it is exactly in the distance that exists between the two Claudias that the novel's message can fully come to fruition, for it is the encounter of testimony and interpretation that allows for the critical assessment and transformation of the racial and sexist stereotyping to which the little Black girl is subjected. In other words, if child-Claudia 'bears witness,' as Moses suggests, 'through the oral tradition of testifying, to the community's lack of self-love and its transference of this lack onto the abject body of Pecola' (624), adult-Claudia is able to reflect on this witnessing and explain its significance:

All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humour. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. [...] We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength.

And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved.  
(Morrison 203)

Where child-Claudia is capable of seeing the 'fragments of talk' (Morrison 188) that coloured the conversations of her community and feel 'embarrassed for Pecola, hurt for her, and [...] sorry for her' (Morrison 188), adult-Claudia pushes the conversation further. As a grown woman, Claudia becomes capable of seeing herself as a fully assimilated member of the Black community—Claudia's use of the plural first person is here a clear indication of her participation

in the community's collective agency—and from this position as an active contributor to the process of communal narrative creation she condemns the archetypal tropes that the community employs to demonise Pecola and release itself of responsibility.

Claudia's purposeful inclusion of her own self in the 'fantasy of strength' that characterises the discourse around Pecola underlines the responsibility of each individual to continually enact a process of dismemberment in which the pre-established, white-hegemonic notions of race and gender can be challenged. Adult-Claudia takes her childhood embarrassment, hurt, and compassion and articulates their terms in light of the community's behavioural patterns, advocating for a restructuring of the systems of collective identity creation that will account for the humanity of the little Black girl beyond the normative understandings that have, up until this point, characterised her existence. Only within such terms, Claudia—and Morrison—seems to suggest, can there be a move toward the self-acceptance and inclusivity that would save Pecola, that would allow for marigolds to bloom.

*Conclusion*  
**Violence, Resistance, and Radical Change**

*'Unless we go to the very centre of the sexual politic and its sick delirium of power and violence, all our effort at liberation will only land us again in the same primordial stews.'*

Kate Millett

In writing her introduction to the 2000 edition of *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millett reflects on the period preceding the publication of her work as one in which the liberation effort for women was primarily developed in conversation with new ideas of the public and the political. 'When I finished *Sexual Politics* in 1970,' Millett muses, 'feminists were still so intent on a reasonable civil rights argument that it seemed almost "shrill" to look very far into domestic violence and rape,' adding that 'only later did we become aware that there was a normative element in patriarchal violence' (Millett, 'Introduction to the Illinois Paperback'). What Millett suggests with this analysis of the movement is that the argument in favour of increased legal and civil protections and liberties seemed to have overcome, during the 60s, the more personal aspects of patriarchal oppression, disassociating the private violence of domestic and community abuse and mistreatment from the wider landscape of social and political advancements. Violence, Millett suggests, was in this context read as a personal matter, for its enactment eluded the broad visibility of 'civil rights arguments' and was instead played out in the 'domestic' sphere and/or the dark corners frequented by rapists whose 'behaviour' was to be deemed 'aberrant' (Millett 'Introduction'). In other words, violence was contemplated as an anomaly, and, as such, excluded from the wider debate surrounding the question of women's liberation.

Yet, as Millet admits, there is much to be gained from exploring the ‘normative element’ that characterises ‘patriarchal violence’—when patriarchal violence is reframed to be viewed not as aberrant and exceptional, but rather as a systematic instrument for control, the key intersections of private and public socialisation come under scrutiny as essential to the processes of identity-making that shape ideas of female personhood and political participation. This thesis, then, traces the path of violence as it disturbs the experience of womanhood on both a physical and mental/emotional level. This violence, performed equally by both individual patriarchal agents and by large systemic and institutionalised powers, serves as a springboard for the discussion of the forms of hegemonic supremacy that characterise the narratives, both real and fictional, that fail to recognise the humanity of ‘woman’ as a legitimately self-defined identity category.

Violence presents itself in *Revolutionary Road* in the form of a social programme of surveillance—and self-surveillance—wherein divergence from standardised behaviours leads to ostracism and emotional manipulation. As explored in Chapter 1, the novel employs a number of different social encounters and relationships to explore these dynamics, though they are probably best illustrated by Frank’s recoding of April’s desires as deplorable:

She herself, he reminded her, had suggested the presence of something ‘neurotic’ in her wish to abort the first pregnancy, on Bethune Street—and all right, all right, of *course* the circumstances were different this time. But wasn’t it just possible that something of the same confusion might still exist in her attitude? Oh, he wasn’t saying this was the whole story—‘I’m not qualified to say that’—but he did feel it was a line of reasoning that ought to be very carefully explored. (Yates 225)

Frank has refined the art of ‘gaslighting’—he can take April’s own words and spin them to his advantage, he concedes he may be wrong while simultaneously proclaiming his opinions as an objective ‘line of reasoning that ought to be very carefully explored,’ and he makes use of a

form of Socratic maieutic to elicit April's agreement with his personal worldview. Though he admits that his is not 'the whole story,' the implicit message of his rhetorical questioning suggests that it is still the only story that matters within both the private sphere of marital conversation and the social context of the novel at large. Despite not being physically abusive, Frank's actions are nonetheless violent, for they strip April of an autonomous sense of selfhood and exclude her from participation in decisions regarding her own life and body. In order to conform to the patriarchal expectation, April has no choice but to accept her pregnancy, and the ethically charged diction employed by Frank—he accuses April of wishing to 'commit a crime against your own substance' (Yates 218)—coupled with his violent interior monologue—he admits to himself that 'he could have hit her in the face' (Yates 222)—explicitly design this as a patriarchal attempt to maintain a status quo of control and power. After all, Frank himself acknowledges this when he asks, 'how much [...] would his prime of manhood be worth if it had to be made conditional on allowing her to commit a criminal mutilation of herself?' (Yates 217-8). The violence of Frank's thoughts and words is a reaction to the feeling of unpredictable change that derives from April's attempt at breaking away from the structural disadvantages that would entrap her in pregnancy. However cleverly presented, Frank's argument is an argument in favour of the established patriarchal order, regardless of the cost this might have for his wife.

Where in the conversation between April and Frank, and in much of *Revolutionary Road* as a whole, the language of surveillance and of social control is veiled with euphemisms and moral applications, this language and practice become more apparently hostile and aggressive in the all-girls city environment explored in Chapter II with McCarthy's *The Group*. If the sense of female camaraderie that marks the Group as a social entity makes the expression of specifically female concerns more open and unrestricted, in fact, this is countered on the part of patriarchal authorities by an even stronger appeal to violence. Just as in *Revolutionary Road*,

this violence has profound psychological implications for the women who are subjected to it. Yet, where the physical aspects of the violence remain, for Frank, a mere imaginative exercise that is never fully realised, they do indeed turn into assault for at least one couple in *The Group*. In a scene rather analogous to the one between April and Frank, Kay and Harald share a dispute about Harald's promiscuity, a dispute that results, for Kay, in bodily, psychological, and social harm:

'Harald said he was tired of my dirty mind, and he hit me. You know, I saw stars, the way they do in funny papers. It was silly, but I hit him back. Then he knocked me down and kicked me in the stomach. What should I have done, Polly? Picked myself up and waited for him to be sorry the next day?' (McCarthy 359)

By calling Kay's mind 'dirty,' Harald subscribes to the same type of gaslighting approach endorsed by Frank—the attempt is that of portraying independent female intellect and emotions as deviant and, thus, unreliable. In fact, Harald goes as far as having Kay sectioned, but not before he has fulfilled his fantasy of physical possession and control. Kay's refusal to subscribe to the patriarchal standards that would see her 'pick myself up and wait for him to be sorry the next day' only exacerbates Harald's violence: Harald 'knocks [Kay] down,' physically forcing her to his feet and 'kicking [her] in the stomach' to demonstrate his—in his view unassailable—power. Because Kay 'hit him back,' thus placing herself on the same physical and authoritative plane as her husband, Harald's performance of dominance escalates into a fully fledged assault designed to establish and reinforce his position of privilege. In this sense, Harald's expression of force betrays the weakness of its foundations—since Kay, aided by her social education of female solidarity, attempts to escape the strategies of control onto which patriarchal hegemony is based, the only viable response for Harald is that of leveraging his greater physical strength. Violence is normalised in the patriarchal order as a form of 'justice' aimed at restoring the male-female relationship as one of, respectively, power and submission.

By the time Didion published *Play It as It Lays* in 1970, then, a switch had occurred in the perception of violence as a means of control. If in *The Group* Kay downplays Harald's acts of physical aggression—'Maybe it would help to get away from Harald for a little while, though he could come in the afternoon and make cocktails' (McCarthy 364)—and Priss is satisfied with contending that the debate over her breastfeeding is mainly a theoretical matter—'Sloan was quite forward-thinking, but he was enamoured of his own theories, which he wanted to enforce [...] regardless of the human factor' (McCarthy 281)—in Chapter III we witness with Maria a repeated and coercive commodification of the female body that refuses to ignore the psychological and social ramifications linked to physical aggressions. Maria's narrative is fundamentally a narrative of rape that involves equally an understanding of consciousness and the struggle for control over the female body. Towards the end of the novel, Maria is coerced into intercourse with one of her former lovers, Ivan Costello. On seeing Maria resist his advances, Ivan states, 'All right. [...] Fight me. You'll like it better that way anyway' (Didion, 181). The dismissal of Maria's reluctance and the assertion that she will, in fact, 'like it better that way'—'that way' being the way of rape—removes the idea of consent from the interaction, and suggests that Maria does not have ownership over her own body. The female consciousness in this context becomes detached from its physical experience, for the experience is both at odds with any expression of selfhood and yet inevitable as controlled by the external patriarchal authority.

'What did you come here for,' she repeated.

'I didn't come here to hurt you, if that's what you mean.'

She said nothing.

'Oh Christ,' he said. 'Baby. I just came to make you remember.'

'I can't remember.'

'You remembered alright the last three hours.'

She wrapped her arms around her bare shoulders. ‘That hasn’t got anything to do with me.’ (Didion, 181)

In retrospective, the experience of the forced sexual encounter becomes for Maria an experience of alienated selfhood, one that she cannot recognise as her own—that she ‘can’t remember’—because the only way to survive it is for Maria to release possession of her body as something that ‘hasn’t got anything to do with me.’ Maria’s act of ‘wrapp[ing] her arms around her bare shoulders’ acknowledges the existence of the body as something precious and worth preserving, while simultaneously establishing the fragility of the relationship between selfhood and physicality as one that is continually broken by the intrusion of violence as enacted by a male counterpart.

In Chapter IV, the types of sexual violence practiced by Frank, Harald, and Igor become, through Alex Portnoy’s ‘complaint,’ fully legitimised outcomes as the natural rites of passage that designate belonging and participation in patriarchal manhood and the dominant public authority. ‘Shit, Sophie, just *try*, why don’t you? Why don’t we *all* try!’ Alex exclaims, ‘Because to be *bad*, Mother, that is the real struggle: to be bad—and to enjoy it! That is what makes men of us boys, Mother’ (Roth 114). Being ‘bad’ is, for Alex, not something to be ashamed of, but rather a badge of honour, a symbol of complete and perfect integration within a social order that dictates participation into the ideal of ‘manhood’ need be accomplished through repression of the other. Where Alex is othered by normative white hegemonic discourses because of his Jewishness, the natural site for his expression of manhood becomes, then, the oppression of ‘womanhood’ as the binary opposite whose existence seems to be purely in service of the male desire for the exercise of control. Because male identity is inexorably linked to being ‘bad,’ and because Alex’s only claim to power lies in the gendered relationship, then aggression and assault towards the women in his life—both his family members and his sexual ‘conquests’—is to be read not only as a legitimate pursuit, but as a demonstration of

success in fulfilling the most basic expectations of manhood. Rape and gender-based violence are, in this context, tools for the climbing of the social ladder—just as much as money, titles, and political influence—and as such they are normalised as means of public authority.

This process of legitimised rape gains even greater political significance with the assaults of the little Black girls in both Chapters V and VI. Morrison in particular describes Pecola's rape in *The Bluest Eye* from Cholly's perspective as a way to examine the social ramifications of the private act of incestuous sexual violence. Morrison's choice to frame the events of Pecola's rape through her rapists' eyes is partly a way to provide a plausible explanation of—though certainly, contrary to Alex Portnoy's attitude, not a justification for—Cholly's abominable behaviour. The rape is the climactic end to a torturous relation between sexual desire and the feeling of being lesser than, hopeless, and despicable—'What could his calloused hands produce to make her smile? What of his knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her?' (Morrison 159). Partly, however, Morrison's decision to relieve Pecola of the duty to report her own rape seems to represent a form of defence for Pecola's own consciousness—the act is so unfathomably violent that the only way to contemplate it is for the little Black girl, and for her readers, to become detached from the experience of such violence. In this context, then, Cholly's words portray not only the way in which physical aggression can lead to personal alienation, but also, and more significantly, the ways in which the psychological assault is strategically designed to take away female selfhood:

He closed his eyes, letting his fingers dig into her waist. The rigidness of her shocked body, the silence of her stunned throat, was better than Pauline's easy laughter had been. The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, giving it length, and softening the lips of his anus. [...] He wanted to fuck her—tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. (Morrison 160-1)

Cholly's act of 'clos[ing]' his eyes, the 'mixture of memories' that conflates Pauline and Pecola into one body and one personhood, and the 'forbidden' nature of the 'thing'—the unnamable, unspecifiable act of rape—all point to Cholly's desire to obfuscate the truth of Pecola's existence as a thinking, feeling human being. Pecola is turned into Cholly's mind into an object imbued of significance only insofar as this is derived from the patriarchal consciousness. Only moments before sexually assaulting Pecola, Cholly himself explains his being overtaken by a different impulse—'He wanted to break her neck—but tenderly' (Morrison 159). The peculiar syntactical construction of this impulse as repeated in the act of 'fucking' Pecola clearly traces the arc of violent expression, and the mirror design of the statements speaks of the indisputable relation between the 'breaking' of Pecola's 'neck' and that of her personhood as related to her existence as female. When the term 'tenderly' as ascribed to the impetus for murder is translated into the sexual act, the effect is dehumanising—there is no 'tenderness' that can 'hold,' for the 'tenderness' is a fantasy that Cholly is holding onto in order to come to terms with a behaviour he himself recognises as brutalising.

Where Pecola, divested of personhood and reduced to vehicle for the expression of patriarchal frustrations, is unable to articulate her experience of her rape, in Chapter V, Angelou's memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* employs the conventions of coming-of-age fiction—an older narrative voice reflecting on past experiences of change and, eventually, growth—to eloquently reflect on the traumatic effects of sexual violence and rape for the little Black girl:

In the first weeks my family accepted my behaviour as a post-rape, post-hospital affliction. (Neither the term nor the experience was mentioned in Grandmother's house [...]). [...] Then came the last visit from the visiting nurse, and the doctor said I was healed. That meant I should be back on the sidewalks playing handball or enjoying the games I had been given when I was sick. [...] For a while I was punished for being so

uppity that I wouldn't speak; and then came the thrashings, given by any relative who felt himself offended. (Angelou 94)

Contrary to the detached alienation portrayed both by Didion and Morrison, Angelou is careful to directly connect Marguerite's 'affliction' to a 'post-rape, post-hospital' form of trauma that has affected the way she is able to interact with the world around her. The pointing out of the fact that 'neither the term nor the experience was mentioned' speaks of Angelou's refusal to obfuscate the circumstances that led to Marguerite's detachment from her environment, and the difference Angelou draws between the being physically 'healed' and the little girl's capacity for emotional healing reiterates the bond between the female body and the female consciousness as a crucial relation in the experience of womanhood. If both Maria and Pecola, though recognising their assaults as violent intrusions into their own personhood, choose to protect themselves by remaining distanced from their physical perceptions, Angelou reclaims the physical as a fundamental iteration and expression of the psychological. As such, Marguerite cannot 'be back on the sidewalk playing handball,' for that manifestation of youthful light-heartedness would contradict the emotional weight of trauma as she experiences it. By refusing to speak, and refusing to perform the role of the happy little girl, Marguerite asserts her personhood and seeks to make a statement that her suffering cannot be brushed off, no matter how 'offended' her social circle might be of its existence.

It then follows that, insofar as it shines a light on the 'normative element in patriarchal authority' that necessitates the otherness of womanhood in order to assert its control, the investigation into violence and the traumas that derive from it must be read as a powerful political statement that forms the basis for feminist analyses of the social and institutional orders that determine womanhood. Yet, none of the narratives explored throughout this research project is satisfied with merely underlining the issues related to and arising from gender-based violence and marginalisation. Indeed, it would be reductive to consider these

stories as exclusively portraying the despair that derives from being subjected to systemic gendered oppression. On the contrary, despite the prevalence of aggressive practices of patriarchal domination, these are narratives of survival and persistence in the face of seemingly insurmountable systemic hurdles. While the texts find it imperative that the role of violence in perpetuating patriarchal control be underlined, they equally depict female characters who refuse to be defeated by such forms of control. As a result, the thesis also traces the stories of resistance that the women in these narratives attempt to materialise by making use of the personal, social, and political tools that remain available to them. These tools are not always perfect—they are, in fact, at times counterproductive, and often deeply flawed—but they do speak of a drive to dissent that is fundamental to the project of female liberation, and whose different incarnations can provide insight into the strengths and weaknesses of a social group characterised by diversity, and a political movement marked by constant readjustments and developments.

Each chapter, then, deals not only with the pressures employed by the patriarchal system in its efforts to control the definition of womanhood, but also with the broad categories of thought and action that inform the gendered capacity for resistance as embodied by female characters. On the one hand, a ‘liberal’ approach can be identified, wherein the prominence of personal desire and expression is designed as a signpost for female personhood. As feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar puts it, ‘the main thrust of the liberal feminist’s argument is that an individual woman should be able to determine her social role with as great freedom as does man’ (6-7). The focus is on an ‘individual’ approach that works within the existing system to secure the rights of self-definition and actualisation and promotes equality as a type of civil liberty granting women the ability to dictate their own function in a context that is established by the social order. This is represented, for example, by April’s staunch defence of her freedom of choice, her need to do ‘something absolutely honest’ (Yates 311), and her insistence that her

resolve need not be judged as ‘earnest and sloppy and full of pretension and all wrong’ (Yates 304) the way that most social interactions are. April’s decision to end her pregnancy is, in this light, a declaration of intent to speak her truth despite the socially induced urge to do otherwise, and an assertion of personal independence in the face of a severely limited availability of options.

Similarly, Maria’s decision to ‘talk to no one’ and ‘concentrate on the way light would strike filled Mason jars on a kitchen windowsill’ (Didion 214) speaks of her refusal to succumb to the demands of a society driven by profit and the necessity of building appealing images for an audience. Maria appropriates both the American capitalist drive to production and the typically Hollywoodian obsession with aesthetically pleasing presentation—the image of light striking Mason jars—to determine a new pathway for her own development and personhood. The instinct to ‘talk to no one’ is the self-preservational instinct to detach herself from a social system that sets out narrow parameters for female expression, but the observation that ‘I know what *nothing* means, and I keep on playing’ (Didion 214) is an acknowledgement that, despite normative social attempts at repossessing her womanhood for functional purposes, Maria chooses to exist and construct her own version of selfhood.

While April’s and Maria’s liberal feminist drives are based on the individual impulse to achieve personal gains in their private lives, however, the narratives that make up this thesis also engage with ideas of structural and systemic change. On the other hand, then, it is possible to examine the notion of radical rebuilding as associated with a necessary shift in conventional semiotics and a project of redefinition of womanhood as such. This is evident, for example, in *The Group*, when Dottie Renfrew visits a (female) doctor to acquire contraception. The doctor tells Dottie that ‘the women who come to me [...] have the right to expect the deepest satisfaction from the sexual act’ (McCarthy 77), adding that

any techniques [...] that give both parties pleasure are perfectly allowable and natural.

There are no practices, oral or manual, that are wrong in love-making, as long as both partners enjoy them. (McCarthy 78)

The simplicity of the statement made by the doctor speaks of what she considers to be a perfectly acceptable and reasonable medical stance. Yet, this assertion of equality in ‘love-making’ leaves the patient deeply uncomfortable—‘goose flesh rose on Dottie’ (McCarthy 78)—for, in social terms, the idea that ‘women’ might have the audacity, let alone the ‘right,’ ‘to expect the deepest satisfaction from the sexual act’ seems blasphemous and, at its core, radically subversive. Dottie’s reaction, coupled with the understanding that ‘as everybody knew from the newspapers, the doctor herself had been arrested only a few years before, in a raid on a birth-control clinic, and then been freed by the court’ (McCarthy 76), speaks of the divide between the achievements of the liberal rights-based system and the practicality of benefitting from said achievements. The doctor being ‘freed by the court’ is a clear indication that, from a legal perspective, advocating in favour of birth control and sexual liberation is to be considered as a legitimate and even socially useful occupation. However, the socially produced scandal generated by the idea of female pleasure hinders the completion of the liberal project, and asserts the requirement for a radical act of social transgression—in this case, the doctor’s open and candid conversation—in order to establish new terms of expression for female personhood.

In this light, these two different approaches to female liberation—the liberal and the radical—provide a framework within which change can occur on both a private and public level. Yet, what is possibly more important is the fact that they need not be considered as mutually exclusive. Indeed, where traditional feminist theory would see liberal and radical categories of thought as conflicting and irreconcilable approaches, this thesis demonstrates that, in fact, these different dynamics can only exist in a system that sees their separate ideological stances in

continuous conversation with one another. Angelou demonstrates this by recalling a significant interaction:

Recently a white woman from Texas, who would quickly describe herself as a liberal, asked me about my hometown. When I told her that in Stamps my grandmother had owned the only negro store since the turn of the century, she exclaimed, ‘Why, you were a debutante.’ Ridiculous and even ludicrous. But Negro girls in small Southern towns, whether poverty stricken or just munching along on a few of life’s necessities, were given as extensive and irrelevant preparations for adulthood as rich white girls shown in magazines. (113)

Though refusing to condone the insensitivity and self-centred/white-centred thoughtlessness of the ‘liberal woman from Texas,’ Angelou acknowledges the common ground that exists between them in their shared experience of womanhood. If the thought that a poor, Black girl could be coded as a ‘debutante’ rings ‘ridiculous and even ludicrous,’ still there remains the possibility that there might be value in re-exploring and re-defining the ‘liberal’ idea that there is something performative—something akin to the performance of a ‘debutante’—about being female within a patriarchal social discourse. However different ‘the training’ (Angelou 113) received by ‘Negro girls in small Southern towns’ might be from that of ‘rich white girls shown in magazines,’ they do share in the social conditioning that normative patriarchal practices within their respective communities seek to enact. The ‘liberal woman from Texas’ is certainly misguided in assuming that the rite of passage signified by being a ‘debutante’ may exist as a category of experience that can encompass the lived realities of the Black girl. In fact, in assuming as much, the woman enacts a form of oppression, for she inadvertently causes the erasure of meaningful and important female struggles purely because she does not—and cannot—partake in them. Yet, Angelou’s radical re-coding of the woman’s remark makes it clear that by enlarging the particular and the private to encompass wider social dynamics of control—such

as the idea of ‘training’ women for particular roles—meaningful discussions can occur even between apparently diametrically opposed views of the female experience. It is the conversation between the ‘white girls’ who ‘learned to waltz and sit gracefully with a tea cup balanced on their knees’ and the Black girls who were ‘learning the mid-Victorian values with very little money to indulge them’ (Angelou 113) that is of paramount importance in this context, for it both underlines the significant differences in the private experiences of these girls while also allowing them to see the common denominators that made their upbringings so ‘irrelevant’ to their respective interpretations of female personhood.

What the existence of and conversation between these two ideologies tell us is that there needs to be a balance between the understanding of individual difference within the group ‘women’ and the creation of points of shared experience that can help generate a sense of solidarity and communal direction. As Claudia examines the denouement of Pecola’s story, she remarks:

We were embarrassed for Pecola, hurt for her, and finally we just felt sorry for her. [...] And I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened for the one who would say, ‘Poor little girl,’ or, ‘Poor baby,’ but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils. (Morrison 188)

Morrison’s work in *The Bluest Eye*—and, in fact, in all her novels—is culturally specific. The experiences of horror and pain that characterise Pecola’s and Claudia’s lives are not universal female experiences—they have to do with a social order established through anti-Black violence and domination, intersecting interracial and intraracial patriarchal control, and the social, cultural, and emotional marks of historical oppression. Yet, through her exploration of these particular circumstances, Morrison makes a crucial statement with regards to the efficacy and

success of cross-racial and intersectional feminist politics—that what is required in order to allow for the self-definition of ‘womanhood’ is a social environment in which the concept of freedom becomes plural and multi-faceted in response to a complex network of interlocking power centres. Claudia and Frieda, though sharing in Pecola’s conviction of ‘ugliness’ as a superimposed form of anti-Black social violence, are also widely different from Pecola. Pecola is the product of a broken family, and a criminal father. Claudia and Frieda belong to a familial unit led by a respectable, pious mother, who fiercely defends their right to be girls. What the social order of the community dictates, is that Claudia should recoil from Pecola, that she should be as ‘disgusted, amused, shocked’ as the remainder of the social group is. Instead, the two girls choose to empathise. Rather than placing ‘veils’ to unsee the difference in Pecola’s circumstances and struggles and blame her for her condition, Claudia and Frieda ‘decided to change the course of events and alter a human life’ (Morrison 189). In advocating for a restructuring of existing systems of identity creation, then, Claudia and Frieda promote the dismantling of the symbolic resonance of oppressive discourses—those, for example, of the woman as subordinate to patriarchal control, or of the little Black girl as ‘ugly’ and unimportant—that have been the chief cultural biases of white hegemonic patriarchal socialisation. The liberal and the radical come together within Claudia’s discourse to highlight the particularity of Pecola’s circumstances while also acknowledging her participation in the social group, and the recognition that Pecola’s liberation—the ‘altering of a human life’—is a collective effort redefines the necessity of a feminist project that is inclusive in its address of diverse struggles.

In discussing the idea of oppression, editor in chief of online publication *BLK INK* Casira Copes states that,

when I think about my identity, I often describe myself in terms of the areas in which I experience the most marginalization. ‘I am a Black queer woman.’ This is true and

often affects the way I am viewed and treated in the world. But I could also describe myself like this: ‘I am a cisgender, able-bodied, middle-class woman.’ Both statements encompass parts of my identity, but when separated like this they tend to seem at odds with one another.

Very few of us walk the line of totally privileged or totally marginalized. The cultural conversation around privilege rarely branches outside of race, gender, and sexuality. But there are far more facets of identity that influence one’s privilege. There’s religion, citizenship status, neurodivergence, and many other things that can also be circumstantial or contextual. (*An Injustice!* – [medium.com/an-injustice](https://medium.com/an-injustice))

Cope’s analysis explicitly verbalises an important concern of this thesis—that the number of ‘circumstantial’ and ‘contextual’ factors weighing onto a woman’s experience of patriarchal oppression are as different and disparate as there are women on the planet. This thesis, then, does not seek inclusivity by claiming to be representative of all, or even most, experiences of womanhood. We cannot—and indeed the thesis argues *should* not—lump together all patriarchal biases, all racial biases, all ableist biases, for this would detract from the depth and variety of the intersectional discourse and perpetuate violent erasures. In this sense, it is important to acknowledge what is missing and what the thesis does not explore—different sexualities, different class divisions, different degrees and forms of disability, different racial stereotypes (think, for example, of the model minority myth as associated with East Asian heritage people), and so on. Yet it is even more important to acknowledge that the aim is not, and cannot be, that of universality—the point is not to discuss all combinations and avenues of intersectional oppression. Instead, the point is rather to explore the ways in which we can speak of feminism in an intersectional context, and how an analysis of the representation of womanhood within a number of different backgrounds and social milieux can problematise the ways we speak about female identity, feminist theory, and liberation politics at large. The texts explored in this thesis

represent a variety of political leanings and social systems of aggregation and normativity. They discuss different semiotic strategies and point at the failings of overly generalised statements of purpose, where these dismiss the valid concerns of those whose voices are often, due to a variety of factors, unheard. The aim is to make the issue more complex, and to discuss the ways in which oversimplification and the erasure of difference weakens the female effort for authentic, independent representation and self-actualisation. The aim is to demonstrate that by problematising rather than simplifying, we can have far more inclusive and effective conversations.

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