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**VIOLENT SUBJECT(IVITIE)S: A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF VIOLENCE AND SUBJECTIVITY IN THE FICTION OF
TONI MORRISON, CORMAC McCARTHY, J. M.
COETZEE, AND YVONNE VERA**

PhD in English Literature

The University of Edinburgh

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work. Ideas and passages reproduced from other sources have been properly acknowledged. The thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Aretha M M Phiri

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the links between and intersections of violence and subjectivity in a comparative, transatlantic and transnational study of the fiction of four recognized international authors, namely, Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, J. M. Coetzee, and Yvonne Vera. Despite their differing geographical, temporal, cultural and socio-political situations and situatedness, these writers' common, thematic concerns with taboo topics of violence such as rape, incest, infanticide and necrophilia, situate violence as a constitutive, intimate and intricate part of subjectivity. In providing varied, and not unproblematic, renderings of the mutuality of violence and subjectivity, their novels do not just reveal the ambiguous and ambivalent character and the fragile and tenuous processes of (exercising and asserting) subjectivity; their fiction enacts and engenders its own kind of textual violence that reflects and refracts the (metaphysical and epistemological) violence of the subjective process.

Raising crucial questions about the place, role and efficacy of literature in articulating violence and subjectivity, this thesis argues that violence is meaningful to and constitutive of the subjective process in these authors' works that offer an experiential, lived appreciation of subjectivity. Providing an historical and socio-political contextualization of the novels, the thesis maintains that these authors' specific interpretations of violence in their fiction necessarily interrogates and reconfigures questions of race and culture, gender and sexuality, as well as morality; that is, it re-examines and repositions conventional interpretations of being and belonging, of subjectivity in general. In this way, their fiction reveals literature's ability not merely to disprove theory but, through its very textuality, extend and enhance it to reflect the materiality of being.

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NOTE ON REFERENCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

I have followed the MLA guide to referencing in this thesis. See Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 7th Ed. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2009.

The following abbreviations are used in this thesis:

<i>ACM</i>	<i>The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy</i>
<i>AN</i>	<i>Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation</i>
<i>BB</i>	<i>Butterfly Burning</i>
<i>CV</i>	<i>Cultured Violence: Narrative, Social Suffering, and Engendering Human Rights in Contemporary South Africa</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>Disgrace</i>
<i>DP</i>	<i>Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews: J. M. Coetzee</i>
<i>EH</i>	<i>Existentialism and Humanism</i>
<i>ER</i>	<i>J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event</i>
<i>GT</i>	<i>Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity</i>
<i>LA</i>	<i>The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories</i>
<i>OB</i>	<i>Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence</i>
<i>OS</i>	<i>Opening Spaces: An Anthology of Contemporary African Women's Writing</i>
<i>PD</i>	<i>Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination</i>
<i>PN</i>	<i>Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison</i>
<i>UE</i>	<i>Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History</i>
<i>TBE</i>	<i>The Bluest Eye</i>
<i>TI</i>	<i>Totality and Infinity: An Essay in Exteriority</i>
<i>RHW</i>	<i>Rabelais and His World</i>
<i>WN</i>	<i>Without a Name</i>
<i>WW</i>	<i>White Writing: On the Culture of Letters</i>

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INTRODUCTION

Roots of/Routes to Violence and Subjectivity

In 2008 South Africa was engulfed in a wave of violent xenophobic attacks against foreign – particularly black African – migrants. International media images of vandalised homes and property as well as displaced peoples were complemented by images of flayed and brutalized bodies.¹ Incidents of violence are by no means specific to the country and South Africa is by no means the only violent nation. Violence is a pervasive global phenomenon with universal impact. Noting that the twentieth century was one of the most violent periods in human history not just because of the First and Second World Wars, a summary *World Report on Violence and Health* conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2002 reveals that each year “more than 1.6 million people worldwide lose their lives to violence” (1).² But as one of the most violent countries statistically in the world, South Africa’s apparent propensity for (resorting to) violence, while incongruous with the progressiveness of an apparently competitive emergent ‘Third-World’ market economy, has normalized, even routinized, violence as a legitimate response to public discontent. From escalating reported figures on rape and sexual violence, from consistent narratives and images of wanton police brutality, gun and gang violence and explosive service-delivery protests, post-apartheid South Africa has seemingly become desensitized to and embedded in the aggressiveness of a socio-political culture steeped in the violence of colonial and apartheid history.³

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as the “intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (4).⁴ But while an appropriate generic definition that reflects the largely intentional and physical domain of violence, it does not adequately encompass the exploitative and manipulative, insidious elements of violence;

¹ While xenophobic violence in South Africa has abated, it persists sporadically. See Barry Bearak and Celia W. Dugger’s “South Africa Takes out Rage on Immigrants” in the *New York Times* online.

² See Krug, E G *et al. World Report on Violence and Health: Summary.*

³ Apart from increasing labour unrest evidenced and culminating in the massacre of 34 mine workers by police at Marikana platinum mine in August 2012, South Africa has seen a growing culture by lower working-class groups of protesting the lack of service delivery by the current ANC-led government. While within their constitutional rights and reflecting the democratic principles upon which the ‘new’ South Africa was founded, these protests have become increasingly violent and uncannily reminiscent of an apartheid milieu. Although I elaborate on the violent character of South Africa in the third chapter of this thesis, I discuss it briefly here in order to contextualize the motivation for the entire thesis.

⁴ See Krug, E G *et al. World Report on Violence and Health: Summary.*

that is, it does not take into account the subtle and nuanced uses and effects of coercive power and control in the infliction or experience of violence. For those who do not and have not experienced it as the “intentional use of physical force or power,”⁵ violence’s variegated, even sophisticated, character elicits abstract interpretations that highlight how profoundly it confounds understanding and escapes categorical definition. Violence in all its complexity remains, as Goran Aijmer observes, “one of the least understood fields of human social life” (1).

Yet as theorists have shown, and as I argue in this thesis, violence’s structural or systemic, psychological or psychical, socio-political or socio-economic, cultural or ideological situatedness in the contours of human existence consistently defies its elusiveness. While the (the utilization of) violence often elicits responses of shock, awe and disgust and frequently prompts the question ‘why’, suggesting that, contrary to global evidence, violence is an abnormal practice foreign to the imperatives of existentialism, violence, however it is experienced or understood, makes an impression (on the sense of self) that positions it, I argue, as a fundamentally intricate and intimate, that is, lived or material, part of the subjective process. Indeed, the image of a man set alight in broad daylight on the streets of a Johannesburg township settlement, half prostrate on the ground, his flesh and body burning as a consequence of the xenophobic attacks mentioned above, for me had an unexpectedly profound and haunting effect, not least because I, as a foreign citizen living in South Africa at this time of palpable anti-foreigner sentiment, was now reminded of my own subjective vulnerability.⁶ Evoking both curiosity and repulsion, he was a decidedly macabre representation of physical, corporeal violation and defeat – the evidence of subjectivity diminished and undermined. But there was, in my impression, also something strangely affirmative in his violation that paradoxically avowed his subjective presence, something that affirmed the facticity and materiality – the ‘weight’ – of his existence despite the obvious attempt to challenge and erase it. This ambivalence illustrates how the mechanisms of violence are not just relative but are fundamentally mysterious. As such, the ‘puzzle’ over violence, as Randall McGowen observes, “becomes an uncertainty about ourselves” (140); that is, the enigmatic character of violence has the effect of disturbing and disrupting the self

⁵ I have in mind here the growing phenomena of cyber bullying or terrorism and ‘fraping’ – where one is ‘raped’ by a Facebook ‘friend’, examples which highlight the increasingly technological deployment and far-reaching, sinister impact of violence in contemporary society.

⁶ See web images at http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/media/images/44667000/jpg/_44667723_burnt_afp466.jpg, and at http://cache.boston.com/universal/site_graphics/blogs/bigpicture/safrica_06_27/safrica6.jpg. In South Africa, black African foreigners are often referred to as “*makwerekwere*,” a derogative colloquial term used to reinforce their sense of non-belonging in the context of growing national socio-economic and socio-political inequity.

and putting the very notion of subjectivity in doubt. In this instance, the surreal, almost sacrificial, yet profoundly physical and macabre character of the violent act moved me to reflect in this thesis on the materiality of subjectivity and to consider the intricate and intimate role that violence plays in the subjective process.

Notwithstanding fundamentally biological readings of humanity as an instinctive species for which violence operates as a means of existential self-preservation or survival, various critics have pointed out that the idea of violence is a modern phenomenon that attaches significant value to reason and self-control.⁷ Georges Sorel notes that there are “so many legal precautions against violence ... that any act of violence is a manifestation of a return to barbarism” (175), and Walter Benjamin observes the “tendency of modern law to divest the individual, at least the legal subject, of all violence, even that directed only to natural ends [...] violence confronts the law with the threat of declaring a new law” (273). In spite of Sorel and Benjamin’s Marxist intonations, violence is by modern normative definition or conceptualization indubitably and definitively socially transgressive – an act of transgression that belies what it means to be legitimately human and defies the social and cultural imperatives of subjectivity. While simultaneously referring to or indicating the “impaired ability of a group or individual to become a subject or to function as such” (Wieviorka 147), acts of violence are perceived as indicative of socio-cultural existence gone awry. Violence, in effect, tears at and depletes the social fabric; it violates and renders illegitimate the ‘civilization’ we take for granted.

As an “unruly, upsetting and unsettling topic” which appears as “the very antithesis to our sense of belonging, so destructive of identity, relationship and life-world that the vocabulary of the social seems out of place” (Broch-Due17), the sensitive topic of violence does not just unnerve and unsettle but evades and exceeds the subject’s linguistic, ‘cultural’ attempts to locate it, thus registering society’s own sense of displacement or dislocation in the existential order. As such, as the discursive character of Vigdis Broch-Due’s own description illustrates, violence elicits interpretation or definition as existential symbol so that, as Sorel and Benjamin suggest above, violence as a “sign of savagery is undoubtedly overdetermined” (Harris, “Condor and Bull” 40). Indeed, to signify certain acts or practices as violent is “never to see them just as they are” (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 9); it is to impose upon them a social or cultural resonance or criteria that reinforces societal, ideological values that are at

⁷ For more of such arguments see *Reason and Violence*, edited by Sherman Stange, *The Anthropology of Violence*, edited by David Riches, Olivia Harris’s “Condor and Bull: The Ambiguities of Masculinity in Northern Potosi,” Anthony Storr’s *Human Destructiveness: The Roots of Genocide and Human Cruelty*, and Nancy Armstrong and William Tennenhouse’s *The Violence of Representation*.

times incommensurable with lived, material reality or experience. In this regard, we cannot effectively interpret or define violence without understanding our own complicity in it, without re-interpreting it in varied yet specific, lived contexts in order to reflect and understand its subtle nuances and ambivalences.

Contextualizing Modalities of Violence

Speaking within the political context of international warfare, Hannah Arendt maintains that “no one engaged in thought about history and politics can remain unaware of the enormous role violence has always played in human affairs” (8). Notwithstanding overt, military acts of aggression conducted on a broad collective scale, violence operates not just in varied typologies, but in many intricate guises, assuming different but significant meanings to different people.⁸ Indeed, as this thesis will show, violence is a complex, malleable and mutable phenomenon that in turn raises complicated, delicate and sensitive questions about moral, ideological and socio-cultural or socio-political background and affiliation.

In a definition comparable to Orlando Patterson’s description of (African-American) slavery as “social death,” Achille Mbembe describes colonialism as a “gratuitous act” of violence (189) in its psychological and social mechanisms and machinations. In his preface to Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre explains that the contradictory explosiveness of colonialism lies in the use of violence to lay claim to and deny the human condition at the same time (17). In the same text, however, Fanon notes that the process of decolonization is in turn a violent phenomenon in which violence functions as “a cleansing force,” freeing the ‘native’ from his “inferiority complex ... and restor[ing] his self-respect” (74). While reminiscent of the colonial imperative, violence for emergent postcolonial societies is by extension central to and recuperates for the indigenous population a sense of legitimate national belonging; violence is transformed into an authentic civic and subjective right and even act of righteousness. At the same time, however, cultural nationalism and its emphasis on ethnicity and gender norms in the contemporary postcolonial African landscape has created levels of “uncertainty about the legitimacy of established identities, rights and claims,” so that the deployment of violence becomes not just “formative of people’s perceptions of who they are and what values they adhere to” (Broch-Due 1-2); it functions, as

⁸ The *World Report on Violence and Health* of 2002 states as typologies self-directed, interpersonal and collective violence. For more on the anthropological character of violence see *The Anthropology of Violence*, edited by David Riches.

the period of *Gukurahundi* (1983-1987) in Zimbabwe and the Rwandan genocide of 1994 illustrate, as a means of ascertaining subjective (un)belonging.⁹

Similarly, in his discussion of ritualistic religious violence, Rene Girard argues that while objectionable, the purpose of sacrificial violence is to “restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric” (335), and observes the paradox that sacrifice is a violent act utilized as an “instrument of prevention in the struggle against violence” (344). In that violence in this instance assumes a preventative, sacred function or status as a means of re-stabilizing and maintaining the religious and communal status quo, Girard’s meditations on violence are differently applicable to historically racial or racialized cultures such as America and South Africa – countries under study in this thesis. Here, violence operates as a kind of religion or has a religious, sacred element in which violent acts constitute the expression and the preservation of self. Where race for the dominant racial group functions as a “trope of ultimate, irreducible difference” (Gates, Jr., “Writing ‘Race,’ and the Difference It Makes” 5), race becomes violent; race as violence/raced violence ensures the oppression of other races and is deployed in order to perpetuate inequality as well as to maintain racial hierarchy. But as both nations have shown – in the civil rights movement and the anti-apartheid movements, respectively, race can at the same time also be violently deployed to challenge and reconfigure the status quo; here, racial identity for the minority group functions as “the space from which resistance is launched, the stage of self-assertion” (Goldberg 110) and subjective belonging. Where ideas about race can further stimulate and exert everyday systemic and systematic violence against the ‘other’, violence becomes, as Robert Young explains, a form of “‘subaltern speech’ or expression” where no legitimate means or avenues exist.¹⁰

Ideologies about gender and sexuality can similarly encourage sexual and gendered violence. Catherine McKinnon’s description of sexual and gender violence as analogous to an “act of terrorism” (7) definitively situates patriarchy as systematic, structural violence against

⁹ In Zimbabwe, a Shona-led initiative of ethnic cleansing of the Ndebele and Shona sympathizers immediately after Zimbabwean independence, resulted in an estimated 20 000 deaths, while in Rwanda, in mass genocide of Tutsis, Tutsi sympathizers and Hutu moderates, an estimated 800 000 Rwandans were massacred over an approximate 100 day period. Although there are many examples of ethnic cleansing worldwide, I refer to the Rwandan genocide not just because the year 2014 marks its twentieth anniversary, but for the marked severity and number of casualties of violence over a relatively short period of time. The Zimbabwean situation is notable for the continued official silence around the period of *Gukurahundi* and is explored in a chapter of this thesis.

¹⁰ This comes out of the Association of University English Teachers of South Africa (AUETSA) conference hosted by the English Department at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa in July 2013 where Young was a guest speaker.

(the social category of) women.¹¹ Although it does not take into account the sexual and gender violence also suffered by men and thus potentially elides the universally affective impact of violence, her definition qualifies sexual or gender violence as a “practice or institution” that is an “affront to both autonomy and equality” (Burgess-Jackson 108). As the global (extra-) legal prohibitions on same-sex relations show, sexual and gender violence thus carry symbolic weight in determining not just who ‘legitimately’ belongs to ‘civilized’ society, but in establishing who is a human subject.¹² But while McKinnon’s deliberately masculinized terminology reflects and subverts the pervasiveness of patriarchy, it also reveals how culturally embedded concepts do not “necessarily have commensurable salience cross-culturally” (Harvey and Gow 12) or within actual lived experience. Notwithstanding variegated cultural attitudes,¹³ sex and sexuality are interlinked with and underpin existence and, falling within a profoundly intimate, corporeal realm of subjectivity which suggests a desire not just to destroy but to connect interpersonally, the concept of sexual violence/rape is simultaneously problematized as an abstract, political or politicized phenomenon.

In contextualizing the modalities, as well as exploring and highlighting the ideological, moral and cultural variability and spatial and temporal mutability of violence, I indicate not its inevitability, but the complex, meaningful character of violence, a meaningfulness that elides categorical abstractions and impositions. Neil Whitehead argues that violence “cannot be treated merely as an epiphenomenon of structural, historical, or ecological conditions” (56) that are unexplainable, and in this regard, I suggest a refracted view of violence as put forward by Slavoj Žižek in *Six Sideways Reflections*. Žižek here maintains that “to chastise violence outright, to condemn it as ‘bad’, is an ideological operation par excellence, a mystification which collaborates in rendering invisible the fundamental” (174) situatedness of violence. That is, in abstractly theorizing violence we ignore its situatedness within the subjective process itself, its profound placement in constructions of our sense of being and

¹¹ McKinnon’s analogy calls to mind and correlates with the now universal metaphor of women being utilized as “weapons of war,” that is, as politicized objects of sexual violence during times of war or (inter)national conflict. A notable example of this is the genocidal campaign of mass sexual violence against an estimated 250 000 Rwandan women and girls during the Rwandan genocide of 1994. See Nowrojee Binaifer’s *Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence during the Rwandan Genocide and its Aftermath*, and Shiva Eftekhari’s 2004 Human Rights Watch Report: “Struggling to Survive: Barriers to Justice for Rape Victims in Rwanda.”

¹² In Africa, homosexuality is largely considered an “unAfrican” phenomenon. On a continent where lesbians in particular are subjected to the growing phenomenon of “corrective rape,” Uganda and Nigeria have recently signed into law bills that effectively criminalize same-sex relationships. Despite Uganda’s Constitutional Court recently repealing the anti-homosexual bill, these countries’ attitudes reflect the fact that homosexuality is, according an Amnesty International report, considered illegal in 38 of 54 countries in Africa.

¹³ I have in mind here the complex cultural attitudes to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)/female circumcision, for example, a practice that is seen as both violating and affirming the sexual and gendered subjectivity of women.

belonging. This is not to suggest that violence is a wholly natural, innate fact of subjectivity for this would be to discount the influence of environmental aspects that contribute to acts of violence. It is to argue, however, for the instrumentalism or instrumental character of violence. It is to acknowledge that, while violence certainly harbours within itself “an additional element of arbitrariness” (Arendt 4), it operates on an existential continuum that belies its arbitrariness and grounds it in lived, experiential reality, rendering it constitutive of what it means to be a subject.

Arthur Kleinman argues that the violences of everyday life are “what create the ‘existential’.” In this view “the existential is not the result of a uniform human nature but rather emerges out of the inherent multiplicities, ironies, and instabilities of human conditions (shared and particular) in local moral worlds” (239). Imagining violence as an intricate and intimate form and part of existentialism allows for the extenuating and interpretive widening of and shift in the parameters of violence and subjectivity. As such, this thesis suggests that rather “than defining violence *a priori* as senseless and irrational, we should consider it as a changing form of interaction and communication, as a historically developed cultural form of *meaningful action*”; that is, we need to contemplate violence as an activity or action which “makes statements” of or for the self (Blok 24, 31). Indeed, while Amartya Sen identifies the global uses of violence and identity in/as the illusion of destiny, violence in my reading in this thesis grounds, gives body or substance to subjectivity as an abstract phenomenon. That is, in line with Simone de Beauvoir’s position that “violence is the authentic proof” of subjectivity and that “radically to deny this is to deny oneself any objective truth, it is to wall oneself up in an abstract subjectivity” (354), the thesis maintains that violence necessarily inflicts, or imposes upon subjectivity a material, existential paradigm that belies or challenges its abstractness.

The Violence of Subjectivity

At the same time, subjectivity itself involves different (if interrelated) forms of violence that operate within the modalities of (perceived) power and agency. Quite apart from identity, which establishes the parameters of socio-cultural and socio-political distinction or distinctiveness, subjectivity puts forward the prerogatives of existential acknowledgement and acceptance. That is, as that which asserts a legitimate sense of existential being and belonging, subjectivity is the means by which one affirms one’s humanity or socio-politically/socio-culturally-recognized and participatory human self. Subjectivity necessarily

gives weight and substance to the fact of existence. In his short but influential thesis, *Existentialism and Humanism*, Jean-Paul Sartre broadly maintains that, “*existence comes before essence*”; we “begin from the subjective” (26). In his proposal of an *a priori* subjectivity here, Sartre starts from the position of a naturally assumed or inevitable subjectivity; in Sartrean philosophy existence is (the freedom of) subjectivity or vice versa. In his purview, because the subject is “a potential meaning that can posit its own existence and produce its own trajectory” (Wieviorka 146), subjectivity comes before socio-cultural and socio-political imperatives. By contrast, Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self* notes that, “one cannot be a self on one’s own.” One is fundamentally “a self among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it” (35-36), and George Herbert Mead adds that “one has to be a member of a community to be a self” (39). Taylor and Mead propose and assert in their definition a collective, socio-communal model of subjectivity based on the self’s inevitable interrelationality or intersubjective positionality in which others definitively make up and inform (the notion of) the self.

Both arguments have merit and highlight the varied, even convenient ways in which subjectivity is interpreted depending on the interpreter’s context or agenda. But it is interesting to note that while subjectivity is envisioned in both cases as an organic process, in invoking the tension between individual and communal (notions of) subjectivity, subjectivity is itself situated within an intricately and potentially violent paradigm. Not unlike identities, subjectivities emerge and operate “within the specific modalities of power” (Hall and Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* 4) that influence, or even determine the assumption and experience of subjectivity. This, then, problematizes the notion that subjectivity is an intrinsically individual or communal state and, suggesting it as itself an embodied project of violence, positions it, rather, within a violent paradigm.

While I am not here suggesting that violence and subjectivity are necessarily and directly interchangeable phenomena, I am proposing that they are profoundly interrelated, interlinked or mutually implicated processes. This is demonstrated on a fundamentally biological level. While cognisant of the ways in which the Darwinian principle of natural selection has historically been appropriated and manipulated, on an elementary level in which humans are imagined as an instinctive species, it is recognized that subjectivity operates violently or with violence as a means of individual or cultural/communal preservation or survival. Similarly, although philosophy presumes to transcend the rudimentary, the very theoretical notion of subjectivity is premised on violence. In an ontological sense, the idea of a subjective “I” presupposes violence to and violation of an other. That is, in claiming or asserting an “I,” I

potentially erase the other's possibility of claiming or asserting his/her own "I". In this way, subjectivity is an aggressive phenomenon in which the assertion of self necessarily and invariably presumes an othering of an other in order to affirm the sense of an "I". This undermines subjectivity as a natural, organic process and reveals, instead, its fundamentally asymmetric character, and locates it, as previously argued, within the modality of power and of violence. So whichever way we view it, while not strictly interchangeable with subjectivity, violence is, I argue, profoundly constitutive of the subjective process. Violence in my reading embodies subjectivity; it gives body to the intricate workings, even intimate processes, of subjectivity. With this in mind, subjectivity and subjects are not in my thesis imagined as pre-given, *a priori* entities but viewed as active producers and users, that is, participants of socio-political culture and, more significantly, as effects of social discourses and social practices that are specified through violence.

In their study of violence and subjectivity, Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman note that, "it is necessary to consider how subjectivity—the felt interior experience of the person that includes his or her positions in a field of relational power—is produced through the experience of violence." Because the experience of violence influences and informs the ways in which subjectivity is understood and experienced and, by extension, "creates, sustains, and transforms ... and thereby actualizes the inner worlds of lived values as well as the outer world of contested meanings" (1, 5), violence is rendered instrumental in the subjective process. But Michel Wieviorka suggests that, "we must on the other hand recognize the way subjectivity influences how it [violence] is experienced, lived, observed, represented, and desired or undergone by individuals, groups and societies" (2). Here, it is subjective positionality that influences the understanding and experience of violence. The different, asymmetric emphases on violence and subjectivity here do not detract from the implication in both positions of the mutuality of violence and subjectivity or the ways in which they are mutually implicated. That is, while subjectivity is influenced by and created through the experience of violence, subjectivity simultaneously influences the experience of violence so that both are situated in a potentially explosive, but profoundly lived, material paradigm.

What Aijmer argues about violence is thus applicable to subjectivity. Subjectivity like violence "exists as an experienced reality and is not to be understood by way of some *a priori* definition, but through its incorporation in the streams of human life" and, as such, requires not just interrogation from new perspectives but a paradigm shift in the way in which we understand or interpret it (8). In view of what I have pointed out to be the largely elusive yet unsettling/dislocating impact of violence on subjectivity, this thesis takes up Aijmer's

challenge by repositioning violence as intricately related to and constitutive of subjectivity. That is, in disputing its conventional *a priori* definitions (as senseless), this thesis attempts to effectively ground or render violence meaningful within a material, lived paradigm of subjectivity. While acknowledging the significant theoretical/philosophical considerations and observations of violence and subjectivity, this thesis maintains that positioning violence within a material paradigm of subjectivity presents enhanced, because experiential, opportunities for understanding or appreciating the complex mechanisms of both phenomena.

In this regard, the inventive medium of literature presents an exciting and exacting field in which to re-envisage and re-read violence and subjectivity. It is precisely the creativity of literature, its deliberately constructed or created character, which creates a space or gap that allows for and admits the nuances, ambiguities and ambivalences of violence and subjectivity. That is, fiction's artfulness and artificiality, its imaginative materiality, allows for a malleability of vision and interpretation that is typically hindered in theoretical analyses. In positioning fiction as a necessary shift in paradigm or perspective, as an alternatively valid and viable medium by which to consider violence and subjectivity, this thesis is not concerned with disproving or dismissing established theory; while acknowledging philosophy's productive contributions to the intellectual contemplations of and meditations on violence and subjectivity, the thesis proposes literature's distinctive capacity to problematize, extend and enhance, that is, to embody or give substance to the complex mechanisms of violence and subjectivity.

Literature, Violence and Subjectivity

Vincent Crapanzano notes that violence "rarely, if ever, exists in pure form. It always has a narrative dimension." He elaborates that:

the stories we tell about it – the reports, descriptions, and confessions – or keep secret, is, we imagine, mastery in the telling of it. We distance ourselves from it. We exorcise it. We impose a grammar on it. We give it structure and shape. We incorporate it in familiar genres. We present it or, better, re-present it in images that resonate with other images – the images of past stories and tales – and through evocation of these other stories and tales we embellish or trivialize ours. We play with our stories in ways we cannot with the *violence* itself ... They [the stories] give cover to the terrifying silence of the pure act. (238)

Crapanzano here intones the subjective crisis that representing violence entails and elicits. While we have an ability to narrate violence, actual violence exceeds reportage or articulation, confronting us with, instead of actually giving cover to, the “terrifying silence of the pure act” and exposing the commensurate constructedness, rather than *a priori* character, of violence. In that violence does not and cannot then exist in pure form because it is consistently mediated within a constructed, narrative dimension, the representation of (the experience of) violence evokes the fundamental violence of representation.¹⁴

Not only is narrating violence an ‘impure’ practice or endeavour subject to the influence of pervasive socio-cultural and socio-political metanarratives, re-presenting violence diffuses and violates the subjective ‘purity,’ singularity and temporality of the event; that is, narrating violence takes away from or diminishes the experiential quality and materiality – the integrity – of the event itself. This presents further repercussions for the subjective enterprise. While narrating violence appears to foreground and give the illusion of subjectivity, the elusive, unrepresentable character of actual violence actively works to obfuscate and even elide the subject or the subjective. As such, because the interpretation or representation of violence – which simultaneously evades the subject/subjective – becomes a kind of violence to the subjective integrity of the act and, by extension, a violation of and violence to subjectivity, it presents an ethical dilemma of sorts that ‘speaks’ the complexity of violence and subjectivity.

Since violence is innately and inevitably “unspeakable,” the story of violence is in line with trauma theory’s positioning of the representation of the experience of suffering as problematic and problematical. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth delineates trauma as a truth that is not fully known or accessible to the self; far from pathological, trauma is always “the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). In this way, violence, like trauma, is not “directly available to experience” (61) because it is a truth not fully grasped as it occurs and is therefore not just existentially incomprehensible; as an inarticulate and inarticulable “story,” violence has the effect of subjective de(con)struction.

Because violence does not avail itself to the restorative, meaning-making impulses of language, language itself involves, as Žižek has argued, “unconditional violence.” In other words, “it is language itself which pushes our desire beyond proper limits, transforming it into a ‘desire that contains the infinite’, elevating it into an absolute striving that cannot ever be satisfied” (55). Language elicits an infinitely unachievable existential desire that situates it

¹⁴ For essays regarding this topic see Nancy Armstrong and William Tennenhouse’s *The Violence of Representation*.

as categorically violent. In this regard, in its inventive capacity, in its apparent refracted and protracted strain toward meaning or the point where meaning may lie, literature, as a vehicle of language, mimics the inarticulability or unspeakability violence provokes and perpetuates “unconditional” subjective violence.

But, lamenting the silences around histories of atrocity and violence, Naomi Mandel argues that the “negation performed by the ‘un’ in ‘unspeakable’ can be more accurately described as a prohibition ... which also embodies the disturbing potential of violence” (7). For Mandel, “reiterating these paradoxes of language and silence ... merely maintains an uneasy equilibrium between two uncomfortable choices while denying the problematic implications of either” (204). In not ‘speaking’ violence, in claiming language’s inarticulateness and inadequacy to represent violent experience, language becomes complicit in preserving violence. In this regard, Valerie Smith raises interesting points for consideration. She suggests that, “if we acknowledge the inaccessibility of experience except through representation, then we must admit that our best-intended attempts to understand another’s (indeed our own) experiences of suffering are always finally about language or other signifying systems.” To recognize this stimulates further questions about “how to articulate the relationship between ‘experience’ and representations of that ‘experience’ . If experience cannot help but be mediated by narrative, then we begin to ask about the politics of narrative interventions” (“Circling the Subject” 343). Yet as Smith’s own title – “Circling the Subject” – shows, and as Jacques Derrida points out, all interpretation depends upon an oppositional, “violent hierarchy” of sense-making possibilities and to “deconstruct the opposition is, above all, at a certain moment to reverse the hierarchy” (*Positions* 56-7). In this regard, it is precisely the “politics” or ambivalence of narrative or literary intervention that is significant in registering the ambiguities and nuances, the lived reality or materiality of violence and subjectivity, and that reveals the potential to reverse a “violent hierarchy” of interpretation.

Literature as narrative is generally perceived, by scholars and readers alike, as providing an imaginative and communicative ‘window’ to the world.¹⁵ At the same time, however, as Derek Attridge insinuates in *The Singularity of Literature*, literary works have a singularity, an “unpredictability” and “openness” that exceeds the socio-political and socio-cultural impositions and imperatives of the world (129-30). But while affirming the work’s inventiveness we need to “dispense with the belief that institutions of literary production and

¹⁵ See J. Hillis Miller’s *On Literature*.

evaluation are autonomous and free from the material interests and practices of the society in which they operate” (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 13). Literary works are also inevitably social acts of ‘self’ that in both reflecting and refracting the contexts of and in which they are produced, articulate the violent processes of subjectivity. The presumption of writing’s ‘pure’ efficacy is further belied by its own materiality, by its physical processes or potentially violent mechanisms. As an inventive, constructed art form or medium, writing (violence) puts pressure on ‘reality’, simultaneously engendering, embodying and even enacting the disruptive character of violence itself. In registering the tension inherent in articulating or representing violence, fictive literature makes crucial links with and bespeaks, even signifies, creatively and materially, the ambivalences of violence and subjectivity.

Indeed, if we take into account the aesthetic paradigm of literature or perceive writing as an aesthetic enterprise that operates within a socio-cultural and socio-political paradigm, then it is obvious that writing is no less politically engaged for being aesthetic. More specifically, it is uncomfortably clear that writing is both “profoundly political and impossible to make politically correct” (Johnson 86-7). So while it is significant to question, as Penelope Harvey and Peter Gow do, whether the objectification of highly charged emotional events of a violent nature is itself a form of violence in which the representational practice effaces social relations, there is comparable worth in interrogating the value and placement of literature in articulating with material integrity, the tenuous ‘cultural’ processes of violence and subjectivity.¹⁶

Arguing that “the most valuable point of entry into the question” of culture, “the one most fraught,” is its “language—its unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, disruptive, masked and unmasking language” (Morrison, “Unspeakable” 11), this thesis maintains that rather than just promote and preserve violence, the literary domain helps us to appreciate the complex processes of violence and subjectivity and the ethical implications derived thereof. In my reading, literature’s textuality is not just symptomatic of violence and subjectivity; in that language’s material processes make “manifest the rhetorical slippage between aesthetic preferences and political representations” (Wright 2), literature signifies, with integrity, the profoundly material, lived processes and mechanisms of violence and subjectivity.

¹⁶ See Penelope Harvey and Peter Gow’s *Sex and Violence: Issues in Representation and Experience*.

**Representing Violence and Subjectivity: The Fiction of Toni Morrison,
Cormac McCarthy,
J. M. Coetzee and Yvonne Vera**

This is a significant way to approach and consider the fiction of Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, J. M. Coetzee, and Yvonne Vera, important and celebrated writers in and of the American South and Southern Africa, respectively, and whose work is concerned with violence and/of subjectivity.¹⁷ While the broad vision of their works has elicited much interest and generated substantial and varied research areas, this thesis focuses on their common, thematic concern with violence and subjectivity within, as I show, historically comparable yet specific violent socio-political or socio-cultural contexts. Mindful of their categorical variedness and cognisant of the challenge of approaching their fiction from a fresh perspective, I do not here strictly classify them as authors of violence but, in focussing specifically on violence and subjectivity, maintain that their novels make interesting, even provocative case studies for considering violence's intricate interconnectedness with and placement in the process of subjectivity. Further, in that their writing innovatively, that is, textually, situates language within a similarly material, lived paradigm as violence and subjectivity, it complexly underpins and undermines the violence of the national, racial, cultural and gendered milieus and imperatives in and of which they write and allows for material, experiential re-readings and reinterpretations of violence and subjectivity.

A self-proclaimed 'black' writer, Toni Morrison in her fiction explores violence as not just systemic but structurally pervasive within a racial and cultural paradigm. In exploring the violence of white America's racialized and racist metanarratives of existence, she reveals its violent impact on an African-American society which, psychologically, culturally and socially disempowered, commits violence on its own community in a typically gendered or sexual mode. While not suggesting violence as strictly deterministic or pathological, Morrison does establish a material, lived relationship of causality between African-American violence and subjectivity that is reflected in her attitude to writing violence. In an interview with Charles Ruas in 1981, she explained that "if the action is violent, the language cannot be violent; it must be understated. I want my readers to see it, to feel it" (99), hereby inviting a

¹⁷ While Morrison is not strictly so, I situate her in this thesis as a writer in and of the American South due to her own personal, political and literary affiliation – as the geographical settings and contextualization of her novels show – with the South.

participatory, experiential re-reading and re-interpretation of violence premised on and reflecting the unorthodox character of African-American subjectivity.

In his subversion of an historical master-narrative of a transcendent and exceptional white, patriarchal and masculine American subjectivity, Cormac McCarthy's grotesque aesthetic in his fiction registers the unorthodoxy of white American subjectivity itself and speaks to the imperatives of Morrison's work. But where Morrison's novels articulate a racial and cultural agenda, McCarthy envisages violence in his fiction as an intrinsic and factual, fundamentally grounding part of subjectivity. In an interview with Richard Woodward in 1992, he asserted that there was "no such thing as life without bloodshed" and warned that the notion of the improvement of the "species" was a dangerous fiction. McCarthy's talk of violence and of humanity as a 'species' suggests that violence is itself an imperative in and of the subjective process and underlines his vision in his novels of a universally and fundamentally debased common humanity.

J. M. Coetzee's abstruse fiction and deliberately ascetic writing similarly work to resist the socio-cultural and socio-political imperatives of white and black South Africa but extend both Morrison's and McCarthy's positions by envisaging violence as an intricate and intimate part of the inner subjective process. That is, in his purview, subjectivity, like writing, is proposed as an innately violent process of othering. In conversation with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point* (1992) he explained that "[v]iolence, as soon as I sense its presence ... becomes introverted as violence against myself: I cannot project it outward. I am unable to, or refuse to, conceive of a liberating violence" (337). Because violence is primarily inward-directed in Coetzee's fictive oeuvre, it disrupts the idea of an absolute, stable self and puts forward an ethical responsiveness to and responsibility for the other and otherness that exceeds the imperatives of race and culture and of gender.

Writing of and within the (post)colonial milieu of Zimbabwe, Yvonne Vera articulates in her fiction the violence to and violation of black Zimbabwean women's (potential for) subjectivity. Not unlike Morrison, McCarthy and Coetzee, Vera presents national socio-cultural and socio-political enterprises and imperatives as violent. But in that she specifically locates this violence in/on the female body, Vera proposes in her experimental, transcendental 'bodily' writing other and self-directed bodily violence as a means of both expressing and transcending the limitations of certain, normative constructions of female subjectivity. In conversation with Ranka Primorac (2004), Vera described writing as something that "should beat. You must feel it ... You must feel it and experience it as something which transforms you" ("The Place of the Woman" 165), positioning the female

subject in her writing as both inside and transformed by a potentially explosive, material process of being.

Despite their differing geographical, temporal, cultural and socio-political situations and situatedness, Morrison, McCarthy, Coetzee and Vera's common, thematic concerns with violence transcend space, place and time and situate it as an intricately constitutive, even intimate part of subjectivity. In providing varied, and complicated, challenging interpretations of violence and subjectivity, their novels do not just reveal the ambivalent character and tenuous processes of subjectivity; their fiction enacts and engenders its own kind of textual violence that reflects and refracts the violence of the subjective process. In this respect and in line with Aijmer's call for an "overarching proposition that allows a plurality of ontologies and yet promotes some sort of correspondence in description and explanatory endeavours" (6) in order to find new ways of thinking about and considering the ambiguities of human violence, this thesis offers a comparative, transatlantic and transnational study of Morrison's, McCarthy's, Coetzee's and Vera's fiction. In examining the links between, and intersections of, violence and subjectivity in their writing, this thesis advances crucial questions about the place, role and efficacy of literature in articulating violence and subjectivity. Significantly, the thesis argues that violence is meaningful to and constitutive of the subjective process in these authors' works, which offer an experiential, lived appreciation of subjectivity. Providing an historical and socio-political contextualization, the thesis maintains that these authors' specific representation of violence in their fiction necessarily interrogates and reconfigures questions of race and culture, gender and sexuality, as well as morality; that is, their novels re-examine and reposition conventional interpretations of being and belonging, of subjectivity in general. In this way, their fiction reveals literature's capacity not merely to invalidate theory but, through its very textuality, extend and enrich theory to reflect the materiality of being.

The first chapter of this thesis is concerned with the violation and violence of African-American subjectivity in general and of the black female in particular in selected fiction of Toni Morrison. In an examination of *The Bluest Eye* (1979), *Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008), but with particular focus on the former, this chapter shows the crucial links that she establishes between violence, race and gender. In invoking violence as a structural and political term for the physical and psychosocial/cultural violation and disempowerment of black America by white America, and which manifests in sexual and gender(ed) violence in the community, Morrison does not just position whiteness as an aggressive institution and ideology; her novels textually demonstrate that subjectivity is an inevitably intimate and

dialectical, ambivalent, even grotesque, process. In situating black subjectivity within a persistently material, violent paradigm in this way, Morrison's novels articulate the failure of conventional articulations or representations of subjectivity and imply the limitations of abstract universalized theories of black female subjectivity.

The second chapter suggests connections between African-American and black Zimbabwean representations and experiences of female subjectivity in the fiction of Yvonne Vera. Offering a critical, comparative interpretation of Vera and Morrison's literary configurations of blackness, this chapter implies that Vera's novels can be read as an extension and enhancement, as well as problematization, of Morrison's vision of black womanhood. In a close study of *Without a Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996) and, most particularly, *Butterfly Burning* (1998), I demonstrate how Vera's fiction necessarily functions at the literary and political intersection of national and historical conceptions of the female body and self, but how, in its ironic articulation of body as specimen, it also suggests limitations to Vera's intimations of a liberated black female subject. Still, the chapter maintains that her transcendental 'bodily' writing which articulates the tension between attempting to embody while simultaneously striving to transcend/transform limited constructions of black female subjectivity, anticipates the emergence for women of subjective freedom.

Chapter three of this thesis offers a close reading, with particular focus on the latter, of J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Disgrace* (1999), texts which, while not strictly concerned with race, situate South African 'whiteness', like Morrison's and Vera's articulations of blackness, as a signifier of a traumatic and traumatized subjectivity in a continual state of crisis. This chapter maintains that in textually invoking the violence of subjectivity in these novels, Coetzee does not just disrupt the notion of a white self but exposes an othering from within which reconfigures violence to occupy a regenerative ethical space in the process and establishment of the self.

Similarly, the final chapter of this thesis suggests that Cormac McCarthy's focus on a violent and degenerate white America in his fiction is not to situate whiteness as racist metaphor but to render it metaphysically foreign/other within a broader degraded human existence that exceeds the structural or the systemic. In a close reading of *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973) and *Suttree* (1979), but with particular focus on the latter, the chapter argues that these novels' invocation of subjectivity is premised not on the racial, cultural and gendered agendas and imperatives put forward by Morrison and Vera, but articulates the here and now of a lived, grotesque material existence in which violence is revealed as a crude but

inevitable fact of life and which expands Coetzee's vision of violent subjectivity to significantly include the palpable other.

CHAPTER ONE

INTIMATE SUBJECT(IVITIE)S: RACE, GENDER AND VIOLENCE IN TONI MORRISON'S FICTION

African-Americanism and the Pain of Being Black

In an interview featured in *Time Magazine* in 1989, Toni Morrison argued that “black people have always been used as a buffer in this country ... becoming an American is based on an attitude: an exclusion of me” (qtd. in Angelo 255).¹ As a pariah community black national and cultural inclusivity has been consistently thwarted in a racialized and fundamentally racist America. More specifically, black subjectivity has been continuously violated and to Bessie Jones and Audrey Vinson in 1985, Morrison theorized the existential state of blacks in America as categorically grotesque: “quiet as it’s kept much of our business, our existence here, has been grotesque ... I don’t mean as individuals but as a race” (181).

In the allusion here and in her fiction to Wolfgang Kayser’s model of the grotesque as the expression of the disorder and chaos that underlies life, Morrison implies this as a condition germane to the subjective history of African-Americans.² Indeed, notwithstanding the horrific, inhumane conditions of the Middle Passage, the arrival of the first black slaves from Africa to the state of Virginia in 1617 signalled the initiation of black people into a decidedly gothic means of existence.³ Physically different and differentiated, their colour attained paramount significance “not as a scientific problem but as a social fact” (Jordan 20), so that Americans proceeded in law and in practice as though blacks were fundamentally different.⁴

¹ Without trivializing the experiences of Native Americans and other racial groups, African-Americans have historically been established as a racial yardstick, informing and determining issues of national identity and belonging. In the same interview, Morrison elaborates that “[i]f there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized ... in becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for *me*.” For critical perspectives on the workings of race in America and in general see Theodore W. Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race*, Thomas F. Gossett’s *Race: The History of an American Idea*, Richard Dyer’s *White*, and Paul C. Taylor’s *Race*.

² As critics have shown, the grotesque as well as the gothic theme/mode is prominent and interrelated in Morrison’s fiction and I elaborate on its different subjective and ethical mechanisms in the final chapter of the thesis. For other perspectives on the workings of the grotesque in Morrison’s novels see Susan Corey’s “Toward the Limits of Mystery: The Grotesque in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” and Madhu Dubey’s *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*.

³ For varied literary analyses of the Middle Passage see Mary Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Carl Pedersen’s *Black Imagination and The Middle Passage*.

⁴ For further discussion of scientific and biological theories of race at this time see John Randal Baker’s *Race*, Reginald Horsman’s *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*, and Stephen Jay Gould’s *The Mismeasure of Man*.

Through a simple racist syllogism the white mind concluded that all blacks were “degraded and contemptible” (Elkins 61).⁵

Orlando Patterson maintains that because the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his white master, slavery was concomitant with social death. As a “nonperson” alienated from “all ‘rights’ or claims of birth,” the slave did not belong “to any legitimate social order” (5) and, subjected to the obvious and sinister violence of slavery, lived consistently “on the margins between community and chaos, life and death” (5, 51). This liminal, in-between existence typified the African-American condition and it is instructive that the American Constitution which ruled African-Americans “three fifths of all other Persons” was incompatible with the Declaration of Independence in 1776 which states that “all men are created equal and independent; that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable.”⁶

With blacks regarded as a fundamentally different species of human and thus unqualified for the legal rights and moral respect incontrovertibly granted and guaranteed to legitimate subjects, independence ironically reinvigorated thoughts on race and racial inequality, with the result that America now became a consciously racist society premised on a Darwinian principle of “a struggle among races” (Gossett 174-75).⁷ In this respect, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which made it illegal for anti-slavery supporters to aid runaway slaves, is revelatory as an expedient compromise between North and South in the attempt to head off the secession that led to the Civil War from 1861-1865. Tellingly, after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 black Americans were actually subjected to increased and more overt forms of racism. The “Black Codes” were instituted in the South immediately after the Civil War and were designed to curtail the rights of newly liberated slaves; the Reconstruction period from 1865-1877 was characterized by institutionalized violence against blacks and legalized segregation typically referred to as “Jim Crow” laws, underwriting a period that constituted “the most elaborate and formal expression of sovereign white opinion” and in which the African-American “was made painfully and constantly aware that he lived in a

⁵ See also George Fredrickson’s *The Black Image In The White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*.

⁶ For the Declaration of Independence see Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia,” *Writings*, and Carl L. Becker’s *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas*. See also Article 1 of the American Constitution in *The Origins of the American Constitution: A Documentary History*, ed. Michael Kammen.

⁷ See also Arthur Riss’ *Race, Slavery and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Eric Sundquist’s *To Wake the Nations: Race and the Making of American Literature*, and V. G. Kiernan’s *The New Imperialism: From White Settlement to World Hegemony*.

society dedicated to the doctrine of white supremacy and Negro inferiority” (Vann Woodward, *Strange Career* 7, 17-18).

Continuing into the twentieth century and culminating in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and '70s, Gale Elizabeth Hale explains that segregation “depended upon the myth of absolute racial difference, a translation of the body into collective meaning, into culture” (40). That is, as a result of an historically imposed invidious group identity, African-Americans ironically became an inexorable part of the social fabric, a symbolically convenient and reliable “gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American” (Ellison, “Change the Joke” 583).⁸ Indeed, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison maintains that black Americans have been fundamentally offered up as “surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom” (37-38). Her observation intimates her own literary endeavour of ripping apart “that veil drawn ‘over proceedings too terrible to relate’” (“The Site of Memory” 70) about the unspoken trauma of African-American existence. Having herself now entered the American literary canon she critiques,⁹ Morrison’s analysis of whiteness as a sinister, violent ideology with persistent psychosocial/cultural repercussions for blacks extends upon and challenges the tradition of slave narratives which were also politically limiting and limited because primarily self-authenticating commodities.¹⁰ Premised on her belief that “the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance ... and the job of recovery is ours” (qtd. in Davis 413), Morrison’s assertion in her fiction of black visibility and voice is rooted in her conviction in a meaningful and viable black subjectivity.

In her 1989 essay, “Unspeakable things Unspoken,” she explains: “It is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves.... We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience” (9). Morrison’s vision of an independently valid black subjectivity has informed her conscious investment in “black literature” which she delineates more specifically as “village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe” (qtd. in Le

⁸ For another critical perspective on black America from the point of view of an African-American writer see James Baldwin’s *Collected Essays*.

⁹ Morrison’s literary prowess is evidenced in her numerous awards which include the National Book Critics’ Circle Award for fiction in 1978 for her third novel *Song of Solomon* (1977), the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *Beloved* (1987) in 1998, and the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. She has been the recipient of numerous international accolades, has a self-named society, and received the presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012.

¹⁰ For further reading on African-American slave literature see *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. Maryemma Graham, *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey Fisch, and James Olney’s “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature.”

Clair 374). Her precise terminology here highlights the significant sociological influences of Africa on African-American identity formation. But it can also be read as reductively Afrocentric in its suggestion of a mythical and homogeneous blackness as suggested in her essay “Rootedness” (1984) where she yearns for a time “when an artist could be genuinely representative *of* the tribe and *in* it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it” (339).¹¹ In the supposition of an authentic culture, a “pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw” (Rushdie 67), Morrison’s statements’ potentially elide the complexity, plurality and mutability of black identity with the result that some critics have accused her, Betty Fussell notes, “of a racist agenda that interferes with both scholarship and art” (295).

Paul Gilroy warns against endowing a cultural group “with a special unique ethical status” because of its past experiences (*Between Camps* 219), and while not accusing her of a racist agenda, John Duvall argues that this “kind of epistemological affirmative action,” Morrison’s assertion of a unique, authentic black culture, “has its limits” (16).¹² In this regard, Tessa Roynon’s *Cambridge Introduction* to the author cautions against the abdication of reader responsibility when approaching Morrison’s work. Indeed, the author herself acknowledges in her writing “the complex struggle and frustration inherent in creating figuratively logical narrative that insists on race-specificity without race prerogative” (“Home” 5); but as the fulcrum of American identity politics, and in the face of (contemporary, postmodern) theoretical attempts to elide it, Morrison’s thematization of race and culture seems not just politically expedient but instructive and necessary.¹³

Highlighting that white society has historically insisted on race as the determinant of human development where blacks have maintained otherwise, she argues against the current politics of race-evasion which, underpinned by the inauguration in 2008 of America’s first African-American president, Barack Obama, suggests to her a convenient and manipulative mainstream, white hegemony on subjectivity or subjective narratives (“Unspeakable” 3). Born in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931, the politics of race does matter in her writing as Morrison would during her lifetime have likely undergone and been affected by the mutable yet persistent racial classifications imposed on blacks either by legislation or by social practice.

¹¹ Barbara Christian argues that the term *centrism* “betrays the fact that Afrocentrism is generated from narrow nationalist Western thinking” and belies the fact that there are “different interpretations of history and different narratives, depending on where one is positioned” (“Fixing Methodologies” 7).

¹² For more on the political mechanisms of the past in black American fiction see Keith Byerman’s *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction*.

¹³ For other such positions see Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *Loose Canons*, and David Theo Goldberg’s *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*.

In our conversation, Morrison defended her position on “black literature” with a question: “Do people ever ask why Joyce wrote for the Irish? Or Dostoevsky for the Russians? Why is it when a black person says he/she is writing for blacks people respond in furore?”¹⁴ This gives some insight into her complicated agenda that exposes the way in and the extent to which literature is analysed through a white lens. In an ideologically and culturally hegemonic, white society and as a humanizing strategy of survival universally employed by blacks, Morrison asserts that “the question of difference, of essence, is critical” (“Unspeakable” 11) not, she states, as a pejorative but as cultural clarification.¹⁵ Arguing against the contemporary habit of ignoring race as “a graceful, even generous liberal gesture” (*Playing in the Dark* 10), her delineation and politicization of the African-American experience is not to be read as merely oppositional but as an attempt to pursue subjective and narrative possibilities not previously realized in fiction (Peach 2).

In an interview with Bill Moyers in 1989, Morrison states that historically the “chances of getting a truly complex human black person” are “minimal,” and explains that her fiction attempts to fill in the “extraordinary gaps and evasions and destabilizations” that typify conventional representations of African-Americans (264). Still, while she is concerned with examining the African-American experience and exposing the systemic violence of white America, I argue that a kind of crisis is played out and underpins in her fiction the tenuous processes of (black) subjectivity. The disjuncture between authorial intent and narrative achievement in her novels is evidenced in the fact that whiteness is often linked to, even while she attempts to establish the autonomy of, blackness. That is, rather than diametrically opposite to, whiteness is complexly dialectical with and mirrored in black subjectivity. Morrison’s reference to black existence as “grotesque” is thus not limited to white violent racism but includes black violence and highlights the problematics of achieving (autonomous) black subjectivity.

This chapter is concerned with the violation and violence of African-American subjectivity, particularly that of the black female. Through close critical analysis of selected texts, *The Bluest Eye* (1979), *Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008), but with particular focus on the former, I show the crucial links that Morrison makes between violence, race and gender. In these novels the poverty of black subjectivity is figured as a consequence of metonymic rape by white America that in turn manifests in sexualized or gendered violence

¹⁴ This conversation with Morrison took place in 2009 after a reading at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) in Paris, France, where I was a resident scholar.

¹⁵ See Judith Wilson’s “A Conversation with Toni Morrison.” For more on American cultural politics see bell hooks’ *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*.

in the community. That is, as a predominant motif in these texts, rape is a structural and political term for the physical and psychosocial/cultural violation and disempowerment of black America, which eventuates in intraracial sexual and gender violence.¹⁶ But although whiteness is highlighted as an aggressive institution and ideology that works to dispossess African-Americans, Morrison's fiction does not nullify black complicity in perpetuating violence; in proposing that violence and subjectivity are mutually implicated her fiction contends that black subjectivity is an inevitably incongruous, even grotesque process. Her novels are not in this way rendered failed novels, however, but articulate the failure of an abstract, intellectualized subjectivity. In its allusion to, but simultaneous interrogation and enhancement of, accepted models of subjectivity – in particular, Jean-Paul Sartre's influential thesis on existentialism, *Existentialism and Humanism* (1973) – Morrison's fiction does not merely suggest theory's incommensurability with black, lived reality. Following the position of contemporary black philosophers that mainstream philosophy does not “do” people of color” thus denying them the dignity of being viewed as “moral agents with morally and intellectually significant lives” (LaFrance Allen-Castellitto), her fiction complexly implies and textually demonstrates the difficulty and limitations of abstractly theorizing subjectivity by situating the mechanisms of black subjectivity within a volatile but profoundly experiential, materialist paradigm.¹⁷

The Violence of Whiteness and Black (Female) Subjectivity in *The Bluest Eye*

Published in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* was not initially well received by the general reading public and, despite being placed on the Common Core Standard's recommended reading list for grade eleven learners, the novel is still today considered controversial.¹⁸ Notwithstanding Morrison's self-confessed technical difficulties, in relaying the story of a young black girl's wish for blue eyes and her subsequent sexual violation, the novel conflates and problematizes the black political and aesthetic ideologies which characterized sixties and (early) seventies America. The civil rights movement, through the political and artistic espousal of a “black

¹⁶ While not a specifically racialized motif in *A Mercy*, the trope of rape still functions metonymically in the novel.

¹⁷ Albert Atkin similarly argues that conventional philosophy has categorically “managed to make itself something of a notable exception in contributing to debates on race.” See Nathaniel Coleman's article, “Philosophy is dead white – and dead wrong.” For another perspective on the incompatibility of theory to Morrison's literature see Naomi Morgenstern's “Literature reads Theory.”

¹⁸ As recently as August 2013, a Republican state senator in Alabama, Bill Holtzclaw, declared the novel “highly objectionable” and demanded its removal from high school reading lists. See Margaret Eby's “Alabama legislator wants Toni Morrison's ‘The Bluest Eye’ removed from high school reading lists.”

consciousness” derived from The Black Aesthetic movement of the 1920s and ’30s Harlem Renaissance, attempted the political “reclamation of racial beauty” (*TBE* iii) but proved largely ineffective because dialectically premised on the very white value system it opposed.¹⁹ *The Bluest Eye* is thus an exploration and critique of the racial self-loathing and self-destructiveness that permeates black existence and consciousness. More specifically, Pecola Breedlove’s desire for blue eyes is metaphoric for the communal and individual espousal of and subscription to a master narrative of whiteness inscribed since the nation’s founding and registered in the novel as fundamentally disabling to black people.

Set in 1940s Lorain, Ohio, *The Bluest Eye* begins in the sombre period of autumn. The ominous opening statement, “Quiet as it’s kept” (4), hints at a subject matter that implicates both the fictive and reading community. Morrison herself explains that “[t]he words are conspiratorial. . . . It is a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us” (“Unspeakable” 20). The unspeakable “secret” here exists on two levels – on the level of a historically violated black subjectivity and on the level of the sexual violation of a black female child within her own community. The novel would then seem to implicitly pronounce, “a silence broken, a void filled, an unspeakable thing spoken at last” (“Unspeakable” 22). But as the “secret” also suggests, there is interplay of voice and silence, of agency and passivity that complicates authorial intention/novelistic ambition.

In her foreword Morrison notes that initially *The Bluest Eye* had begun as a “bleak narrative of psychological murder” (ii) in which a pervasive ideology of whiteness violates a black sense of existential belonging. As the novel’s central focus, the Breedloves’ material and psychological poverty is an embodiment of generic white violence on the black community. The animated personification of their house as aggressively shabby, foisting “itself on the eye of the passerby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy” (24), illuminates the general degradation of black America. This contrasts with the idyllic image of white community which, portrayed in the lucid educational primer that opens the novel, suggests it as an authoritative meta-narrative of existence.²⁰

Robert F. Reid-Pharr notes that “the Black” has been conceptualized in modern culture as “an inchoate, irrational, non-subject, as the chaos that both defines and threatens the border of logic, individuality, and basic subjectivity” (603). But in the textual disintegration of the

¹⁹ For more information on the Black Aesthetic movement see Nathan Huggins’ *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*.

²⁰ In its representation of the Breedloves the novel makes subtle allusion to and subverts the premise of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s controversial Moynihan Report published in 1965 – “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” – which, in locating the roots of black poverty in slavery, also pathologized black family life as deviant.

Dick-and-Jane primer that prefaces each chapter of *The Bluest Eye* yet gradually becomes more incoherent, Morrison signifies upon whiteness as itself a profoundly incomprehensible and violent discursive sign for African-Americans. Like the narrator, Claudia MacTeer's, dismemberment of her white doll, she interrogates whiteness to "see of what it was made" (14). Unlike Claudia, however, hers is not a "disinterested violence" (15). Morrison demystifies and decentres whiteness, demonstrating her rejection of white standards as arbiters of the achievement or failure of the black experience (Awkward, "Roadblocks and Relatives" 59).

This counter-hegemonic stance, Gurleen Grewal argues, positions Morrison's fiction within the paradigm of "minor literature" that claims "an alternative epistemological and ethical space" (10). But although a significant and valuable theory of political and ideological "deterritorialization," Morrison's novels challenge even the categorical supposition of "minority" literature.²¹ Her own explanation about her narrative technique to Thomas LeClair in 1981 appears to corroborate this. Explaining that "[t]he primer with white children was the way life was presented to the black people," she not only exposes whiteness as a limited cultural imposition; she implies the authority of an identifiably authentic black culture. As her afterword to the novel elucidates, hers is a quest for writing that is "indisputably black" in order to "transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black-American culture into a language worthy of that culture" (169, 172).

Describing it "partly as a system, partly as a living thing," Morrison maintains that language is the "most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction" ("Unspeakable" 11), and this is most often achieved in her fiction by means of a generic hybridity which fuses literary traditions with orality (the folk-tale, prayer, field holler, hymn, and traditions of call-and-response).²² As that "*sign*" system which signifies "the difference between cultures and their possession of power" (Gates, Jr. *Loose Canons* 51), Morrison's positioning of language as a significant means of cultural expression and agency demonstrates what Michael Awkward theorizes as *denigration*, a revisionary impulse in African-American culture which, through appropriation as well as infusion of black intentionality and intonation, transforms Western cultural and expressive systems to reflect a black cultural context and subjectivity. That is, deploying language as a form of ethnic intervention and subjective placement, Morrison "denigrates" the traditional genre of the

²¹ See "What is Minor Literature?" in which Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue for minority literature's ability to deterritorialize dominant literature.

²² See Morrison's Nobel Lecture.

novel infusing it not just with specific elements; she infuses it with “the spirit” of an African-American cultural perspective (*Inspiriting Influences* 9).

Awkward’s theory here draws from the African-American literary practice of “Signifyin(g),” delineated by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey* as the revision of white narrative and subjective authority. Working to “revise the received sign (quotient) literally accounted for in the relation represented by *signified/signifier*,” signifyin(g) critiques “the nature of (white) meaning itself” and challenges “through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning” (47). But noting an implicit paradox in the attempt to posit a black subject in the very Western languages that posit blackness itself as a symbol of absence or negation, Gates, Jr. contends that signifyin(g) entails a “black act of (re) doubling” and “black double-voicedness” (51) that points to the consistent deferral of discursive and subjective autonomy.²³ Entangled in linguistic ambiguity, the black artist continuously doubles back on the original sign in a process that, signalling the entrenched and institutionalized ethnocentrism of whiteness or the white logos, simultaneously ‘signifies’ on the fact of subjective interdependency.²⁴ In this regard, Donald Gibson maintains that *The Bluest Eye* “argues with itself” (169) because while whiteness in the novel is signified as incomprehensible, blackness resonates with the (empty) presence of whiteness so that it is itself registered as a volatile yet empty sign or signifier of subjectivity.

This is evident in the Breedloves’ physical familial violence in which Cholly and Pauline Breedlove “fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism.... They did not talk, groan, or curse during these beatings. There was only the muted sound of falling things, and flesh on unsurprised flesh” (32). Their “muted” violence echoes the historical silencing of black people in dominant discourse. But the “sound of falling things, and flesh on unsurprised flesh” implies a perverted attempt at giving bodily voice to that silenced subjectivity. Described in the double negative as a “crippled and crippling family” (iv), the Breedloves are fundamentally negated – dis(en)abled by whiteness and dis(en)abling blackness in turn. In this respect, they are effectively “put outdoors” of any symbolic order. Distinct from being “put out,” being “put outdoors” is described as having “no place to go,” an existential homelessness that registers the “end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing” the African-American metaphysical condition. Being put outdoors means “the difference between the concept of death and being, in fact, dead” (11). Echoing Patterson’s theory of (black) slavery as social death and evoking the pun on subjective

²³ See also Gates, Jr.’s *Black Literature and Literary Theory*

²⁴ See Timothy Powell’s “Toni Morrison: The Struggle to Depict the Black Figure on the White Page.”

alienation invoked in the Dead's familial name in *Song of Solomon* (1977), the phrase "dead" here suggests something fundamentally more tragic. Positioned outside of the metaphysical standards of both whiteness *and* blackness, the Breedloves have no existential integrity; they accept their "peripheral existence" (11) as legitimate and evince the subjective failure thematized in *The Bluest Eye*.

The Breedloves' physical repulsiveness is thus emphasized in the novel to highlight their complicity in their own self-destruction. "[R]elentlessly and aggressively ugly" (28), they would seem to affirm Geraldine's intraracial distinction between "colored people and niggers," in which "[c]olored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (67). Having internalized the prejudicial ideologies of whiteness and having learnt "how to get rid of the funkiness ... of nature" (64), Geraldine's attitude contrasts with Morrison's own espousal of an authentic, homogeneous blackness registered in her nostalgia for a time when one was "born black" and the "shared assumptions" that entailed (qtd. in Jones and Vinson 186). But while Morrison's remark implies a metonymic biologizing of culture that "runs the risk of replacing the tyranny of racism with the tyranny of racial expectations" (Wilkins 7), *The Bluest Eye* more complexly registers an important concern with the loss of a culturally-informed, rather than culturally-essentialist, subjective integrity.²⁵ Geraldine's articulation of colourism reiterates the novel's concern with black self-perception and the ways in which the variegated, dynamic workings of blackness are undermined. Notwithstanding the influence of class and despite its subversive contemporary appropriations, to be a "nigger" is "to have no agency, no dignity, no individuality, and no moral worth; it is to be worthy of nothing but contempt" (Espinoza and Harris 443).²⁶ In the provocative invocation of racist stereotypes within the black community is the revelation not only of the ideological burden of blackness; in its emphasis on worthlessness, the term "nigger" more poignantly points to the conscious loss or abdication of self.

In this respect, the Breedloves, "niggers" even in black eyes, are a pathetic picture of blackness: "You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. 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'" (28). Morrison is clear that their ugliness "did not belong to them"

²⁵ For more on the notion of "funkiness" in Morrison's fiction see Susan Willis's essay, "Eruptions of Funk." On race as a metonymy of culture see Kwame Anthony Appiah's "The Uncompleted Argument."

²⁶ The term "nigger" also points to black people with a lower socio-economic standing. See also Randall Kennedy's *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*.

(28) and that their perception of ‘self’ is filtered through incommensurate dominant imagery and popular culture. Escaping the drudgery of everyday life Pauline Breedlove, for example, lives vicariously, internalizing and immersing herself in the destructively superficial ideals of romantic love and physical beauty which, because they thrive on “insecurity” and end “in disillusion” she, like *Song of Solomon*’s Hagar, collects “self-contempt by the heap” (95). But while visually bearing witness to whiteness as atrocity, the Breedloves’ own belief in and ownership of white logocentrism highlights, like their physical deformities, a perverted subjectivity: “they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it” (28).

The “cloak” imagery, which mirrors Pecola’s “mask” as that which conveniently “[c]onceal[s], veil[s], eclipse[s]” (29) blackness, reconfigures W. E. B. Du Bois’ metaphor of the racially divisive “veil” in its subtle reference to the nineteenth century popular culture of blackface minstrelsy. Here, white minstrel entertainers would paint their faces black and perform ‘black culture’ to the amusement of white audiences.²⁷ While necessarily denigrating, this act ironically obfuscated both black *and* white culture and blurred racial distinctions. Ralph Ellison describes minstrelsy’s function as being “to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience’s awareness of ... the human ambiguities pushed beyond the mask” (“Change the Joke” 102-3), and Eric Lott delineates it as “a distorted mirror, reflecting displacements and condensations and discontinuities between which and the social field there exist lags, unevennesses, multiple determinations” (*Love and Theft* 8).

In registering race not unlike gender as “nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 41), this representational ambiguity would seem to confirm postmodern/poststructural assertions of the fundamentally performative character of identity. The Breedloves’ appropriation of a racial “mask” here suggests an ability to represent a self through the appearance of self-negation; that is, the “mask” appears to operate as a “substitutive identity” that enables them to go “beyond what is given” while providing the “site for a new self” (Spillers, “All the Things” 580-1). But postmodern/poststructural conceptions of identity undermine the materiality of parody by discounting the ways in which reality/realism is encoded in the performative. As with minstrelsy, the power disguised by the “mask” simultaneously invokes and reinstates, in its

²⁷ For further information on the evolution and character of blackface minstrelsy see Robert C. Toll’s “Behind the Grinning Mask: Blackface Minstrelsy in Nineteenth Century America” (Diss. U of California, Berkeley, 1971), and Alexander Saxton’s “Blackface Minstrelsy.”

repressive and restrictive perceptions of blackness, the terms of a hierarchical social order.²⁸ Teresa de Lauretis' distinction between (postmodern) masquerade and (existential) mask is thus useful: while the former "is flaunted ... [and] does give some pleasure," the latter represents a "burden, imposed, constraining the expression of one's real identity" ("Feminist Studies" 17). In *The Bluest Eye* the "mask" is similarly symbolic of regressive rather than transgressive subjectivity, which, while working to veil the Breedloves' existential lacks and insecurities, also reflects their active possession of racial disempowerment and dispossession. In reducing themselves to an encoded, white symbol of black unworthiness that conveniently divests them of any moral identification with their own delinquent behaviour, their sadism becomes a perverted dramatization of blackness as a grotesque "ritual of exorcism" (Ellison, "Change the Joke" 102).

Seeing Double: Black Consciousness and Black Existentialism

In that black subjectivity is rooted in but also dialectically responsive to the psychological and material effects of whiteness, Morrison proposes black subjectivity as problematized by outer *and* inner perception, by the stereotypical ways in which African-Americans have been traditionally seen and the ways in which they consequently see themselves. In conversation with LeClair, Morrison rationalizes black hatred of whites as a complaint against "not being seen for what one is" (376), and in the novel's foreword she states that she writes, "against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating from an outside gaze" (iii). While the "outside gaze" is here highlighted as destructive, it is the internalization of racism by black Americans that foregrounds complicity in their own destruction. Because white racist ideology interprets and impacts the functionality of black social existence in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison stresses the ontological tension between perception and being and suggests black subjectivity as fundamentally traumatic.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois describes the African-American as characterized by "double-consciousness," this sense of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others [...] two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (11). The repetition of doubleness points to existential excess but here emphasizes existential liminality; a kind of schizophrenic splitting and subjective lack in which one

²⁸ See Lott's "The Seeming Counterfeit" and Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*.

ultimately has “no true self-consciousness” (11).²⁹ Morrison’s novel similarly portrays black existence as functioning traumatically through a debilitating white gaze that violently negates black (efforts at) subjectivity. In a noteworthy scene, Pecola enters Yacobowski’s store to purchase sweets and attracts his attention. His eyes “draw back, hesitate, and hover,” but at “some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see.” Pecola, in turn, “looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition” (36). Ed Guerrero describes “the look” here as a “circuit of looking relations” in which both Pecola and Yacobowski “confirm their inhuman estimate of each ‘other’ and, significantly, of themselves” (32). But while the scene points to an intersubjective process of othering, it more aptly suggests the violence to and violation of black subjectivity. The phrase “between” here implies a (spatiotemporal) void in which Pecola’s *a priori* blackness, in comparison to Yacobowski’s whiteness, precludes and occludes her being. “[A]lways-already other—always-already beheld” (DuCille, “Phallus(ies)” 445), and subject to the “normalizing disciplinary techniques of whiteness” (Yancy 108), her blackness is never actually realized.³⁰

In Sartrean existential philosophy “*existence* comes before *essence*,” but in the lived reality of the black American in white America, s/he is qualified by an *a priori* essence that precedes and negates the possibility of subjectivity; that is, the African-American does not in fact “begin from the subjective” as Sartre asserts (*EH* 26), because s/he is historically subjected to an *a priori* process of de-subjectivity. Without trivializing their significance and complexity, Morrison implies that abstract, universalized notions of subjectivity are a (white) privilege incommensurate with the lived reality and contextual specificities of blacks. In *The Bluest Eye* the white eye/“I” precedes and occludes the black “I”/eye and ironically embodies the “I” at the same time that it negates it so that Pecola inhabits that precarious, liminal site comparable to slavery, of “being” and “nothingness.” Yet in her desire for whiteness – represented in her yearning for blue eyes – she experiences her subjectivity as abjection, a condition in which, Julia Kristeva explains, “an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be me ... [and] causes me to be” (*Powers of Horror* 10). Pecola’s desire for blue eyes

²⁹ In his reading of *Beloved* in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy interprets “doubleness” as the “constitutive force giving rise to black experience in the modern world” (38). For other readings of double-consciousness in Morrison’s fiction see Denise Heinze’s *The Dilemma of “Double-Consciousness”: Toni Morrison’s Novels*.

³⁰ Through “the look” Pecola here suffers a presupposition of the self in which judgement is immanent. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*. For a similar literary position on white American perception of blackness see Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

unveils not just the void inherent in the subjective signifying process; it suggests an active investment in the usurpation of the self. In going against the grain of metaphysical “presence” in this way,³¹ the narrator elegiacally intones Pecola’s ownership of the “crack that made her stumble” (36), so that hers is registered as a “crime of innocence” (Otten) that simultaneously signals her entrance into a failed world order mirrored in the novel’s invocation of an aberrant nature.³²

Tellingly, the ecological abnormality – “no marigolds in the fall of 1941” – that marks the novel’s opening also inaugurates the unspeakable fact that “Pecola was having her father’s baby” (4). In her foreword, Morrison states that she was concerned with the “most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female” (iii), yet the ambivalent positioning of black female vulnerability *and* deviance complicates a wholly sympathetic reading of Pecola. Claudia ruminates that she “seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing. Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets. But she held it in where it could lap up into her eyes” (57). The interplay of passivity and aggressiveness problematizes Pecola’s innocence and victimization, while the erotic overtones and violent phallic inferences anticipate her sexual violation by her father, Cholly Breedlove.

Black (Female) Existential Rites of Passage

Sexual violence theorists concur that rape is not merely physical violence but the definitive violation of self and, arguing for its roots in systemic and structural violence, Catherine MacKinnon further observes that sexual violence reaffirms the patriarchal social order as an act of “terrorism” against women (88).³³ Morrison’s own woman-centred fiction also makes connections between black female subjectivity and sexual violence.³⁴ In *Beloved* (1987), the

³¹ See Sartre’s *Basic Writings* and *Being and Nothingness* in which he explains the fundamentals of existential presence. In Sartrean reading Pecola would here inhabit the state of “being-for-others” in which one’s subjectivity is mediated and eventually usurped by another.

³² Critics variedly note the influence of the blues in the novel. For more on the musical resonance of African-American fiction see Houston Baker’s Jr.’s, “Belief, Theory, and Blues: Notes for a Post-Structuralist Criticism of Afro-American Literature.”

³³ For a similar position see Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. For other, more nuanced interpretations of sexual violence see William Sanders’ *Rape and Woman’s Identity*, Julia and Herman Schwendinger’s *Rape and Inequality*, and Diana Scully’s *Understanding Sexual Violence: A Study of Convicted Rapists*.

³⁴ See also Morrison’s critical commentary on the sexual harassment charge against Judge Clarence Thomas by Anita Hill in “Friday on the Potomac,” in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*.

rape of black female slaves is a routinized exercise of white power and privilege. In *Tar Baby* (1981), insinuated sexual violence underscores Son and Jadine's turbulent relationship, and in *Love* (2003), Bill Cosey's marriage to the eleven year old Heed is described as the abuse of a black patriarchy which perpetuates women's loss of innocence and community, a condition implied also in the portrayal of the physical and sexual violence experienced by the female community in *Paradise* (1997).

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's rape significantly occurs after her physical entrance/rite of passage into womanhood: menstruation, affirming the accrued symbolism of female sexuality as polluting to, and necessarily expropriated by, the patriarchal system.³⁵ In confronting the taboo of incest Morrison here simultaneously challenges literary patriarchy, specifically revising the phallogocentric character of the Trueblood episode in Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) which critics argue trivializes and marginalizes the consequences of incest for the female victim.³⁶ But although not inaccurate observations, the position on sexual violence in *The Bluest Eye* is more ambivalent and complex than critics propose. While Morrison does necessarily challenge black masculine order, her aestheticized, almost poetic delineation of the rape scene in the novel presents problematic implications for the representation, positionality and achievement of black female subjectivity.

Interestingly, Morrison has categorically refuted participating in a "white feminist agenda" that "simply reinscribes the age-old stereotypes of black male (mis)behaviour."³⁷ In an interview with Anne Koenen in 1980, Morrison explained that while men were deserving of criticism, she found "[c]ontemporary hostility to men" bothersome and disapproved of freedom that depended "largely on someone else being on his knees" (73). In conversation with Cecil Brown in 1995, she described mainstream feminism as an exclusory ideology inapplicable to the historically complex position of black Americans and, refusing to "make choices between my sons and brothers and some white folk," she declared, "I'm not in that gender fight" (471).³⁸ Her derision of mainstream feminism would seem to align her instead with African-American womanism which, coined by Alice Walker, takes into account racial and cultural specificity and encourages allegiance to the ethnic group (Denard 172). These

³⁵ On menstruation, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argues that, "it is because femininity signifies alterity and inferiority that its manifestation is met with shame" (340). For a more in-depth analysis and version of this feminist position see Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*.

³⁶ See Awkward's "Evil of Fulfillment," and Duvall's *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison*.

³⁷ This is suggested by Stanley Crouch in an essay entitled "Aunt Medea" and published in the *New Republic* in 1987.

³⁸ On Morrison's position on African-American masculinity see Susan Neal Mayberry's *Can't I Love What I Criticize? The Masculine and Morrison*.

principles are implied in Morrison's own fiction. In *Tar Baby*, Jadine's sexual assault by Son is merely alluded to in the image of the "wrinkled sheets, slippery, gutted" in which she lies (273). Never specifically named, the silence that attends her rape is a disturbing reflection of the ways in which the sexual violence "visited upon African American women has historically carried no public name, garnered no significant public censure" (Collins 217), and of how black women's sexual assault is "framed to suggest a private possibly pathological, but non-political act" (Irving 70). In its aestheticization, Morrison politicizes and de-politicizes sexual violence and the novel, while intimating the struggle to represent the unrepresentable, simultaneously conveys a desire to keep abuse within the community in the interests of black cultural survival and continuity.

Trauma theory traditionally situates (the experience of) sexual violence within the realm of the unspeakable,³⁹ but as Sabine Sielke maintains, "those texts that explicitly employ rape in turn raise questions about their silences, their absent centers, about what they choose to obscure" (3). In *The Bluest Eye*, the representation of the rape scene raises questions both about the unspeakable intimacy of violence and the material efficacy of art in representing it. Here, a drunken Cholly staggers home and, seeing his daughter washing dishes, is so overwhelmed by his memory of a past life with Pauline, that he proceeds to rape her:

[H]e sank to his knees, his eyes on the foot of his daughter. Crawling on all fours toward her, he raised his hand and caught the foot in an upward stroke. Pecola lost her balance and was about to careen to the floor. Cholly raised his other hand to her hips to save her from falling. He put his head down and nibbled at the back of her leg. His mouth trembled at the firm sweetness of the flesh. He closed his eyes, letting his fingers dig into her waist. The rigidity 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. Surrounding all of this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her—tenderly. (128)

Albeit the emotional centre of the text, sexual violence is strangely muted, "rhetorically constructed to deny the reader's awareness" of the violence (Duvall 105). While invoked, the violence at hand is simultaneously undermined by a poetic aesthetic that functions allusively. The language employed – underwritten by the alliterated 's' – is almost seductive and implicates Pecola in her violation as the aggression and violence of rape with its attendant

³⁹ See Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* and *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Wendy Hesford's "Reading Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation," and Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber's *Race, Trauma and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*.

pain and suffering reads simultaneously as desire and pleasure.⁴⁰ In that the erotic tonality of the scene renders it uncannily pornographic, rape is voyeuristically positioned as spectacle in a mode that “en-genders” violence and, underpinned by the focus on the male perspective, reaffirms the patriarchal belief that man is by definition the “subject of violence” and social action (de Lauretis, “The Violence of Rhetoric” 249). In this way, in the disjuncture between the violent character of the act and its literary representation, art is co-opted into violence.

But Morrison’s aestheticized representation of sexual violence in the novel would also seem, in its ability to “short-circuit” or evoke the “boundary between the real and the metaphysical” (Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness* 26, 23), to make visible the aesthetic field’s relationship to socio-political ‘reality’ and thus invokes a material, experiential, that is, participatory paradigm. In response to Charles Ruas (1981) Morrison herself explained that “if the action is violent, the language cannot be violent; it must be understated. I want my readers to see it, to feel it” (99), and in “Memory, Creation, and Writing” she states that she wants her “fiction to urge the reader into active participation” in order to “subvert his traditional comfort so that he may experience an unorthodox one” (387). In *The Bluest Eye*’s rape scene, Morrison dramatizes the inevitable tension between ‘reality’ and representation in order to tease out the subtle nuances and ambiguities that attend violent activity; she thus problematizes and simultaneously renders unorthodox rape as abstraction, politicizing and humanizing violence instead. Cholly’s nostalgic image of his daughter fills him with “a wondering softness. Not the usual lust to part tight legs with his own, but a tenderness, a protectiveness” (128). Sex and sexuality are not here, as in Freudian psychoanalysis, reduced to a biological fact of existence, nor motivated, as in conventional rape theory, primarily by contempt and the desire to subjugate.⁴¹ The mixture of pathos and tenderness that underlies Cholly’s rape of his daughter challenges detached, ascetic readings of violence and reveals how violence and subjectivity are intimately interrelated or mutually implicated in a lived, material paradigm.

Angela Davis argues that “few feminist theorists [have] seriously analyzed the special circumstances surrounding the Black woman as rape victim” (173) not just historically, but

⁴⁰ In Froma Zeitlin’s analysis, Morrison would here display a Greek classical sensibility in which the erotic is “to a large extent inseparable from the notion of a coercive power and a certain attendant violence” (143). See “Configurations of Rape in Greek Myth.” For further exploration of Morrison’s classical sensibility, see Tessa Roynon’s “Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition,” and Tracey L. Walters’s *African American Literature and the Classicist Tradition: Black Women Writers from Wheatley to Morrison*.

⁴¹ See Freud’s *On Sexuality*. For contemporary theories on sex and violence see Julia and Herman Schwendinger’s *Rape and Inequality*, Penelope Harvey and Peter Gow’s *Sex and Violence: Issues in Representation and Experience*, Keith Burgess-Jackson’s *A Most Detestable Crime: New Philosophical Essays on Rape*, and John Forrester’s “Rape, Seduction and Psychoanalysis.”

within her own community. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison establishes a material relationship of causality in which the connection between violence and sexuality is the tacit outcome of societal relations and experience and thus displaces Cholly's agency in the violence. As an adolescent, Cholly is "[a]bandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father" (126) and further violently initiated into social abjection when, as a teenager, his first sexual encounter is disrupted by two white hunters who force him to simulate sex for their amusement. Rendered "small, black, helpless" (118) as a result, it is implied that despite being filtered through his perspective, Cholly's rape of Pecola does not in fact align him with the traditional, patriarchal definition of the subjective; underlined by the image of him "crawling on all fours," incest here reads as an expression of subjective impotence, as the "failure of phallic signification, not its fulfilment" (Spillers, "Permanent Obliquity" 140).⁴² Tellingly, he is simultaneously feminized in the (language of the) rape scene and it is significant that the event occurs on the kitchen floor, within a traditionally domestic, feminine space.

Although seemingly at risk of reinstating dichotomous cultural norms which once again "en-gender" violence as that which is done to the female, Morrison here appears concerned not merely with disproving historical perceptions of sex as the confirmed, pathologized "nature" of black male identity, but with eliding divisive and incommensurate stereotypes altogether. As a work that is "double-voiced in its aesthetic and cultural constituents" (Conner xxiv), the text reflects and refracts the complex mechanisms of African-American subjectivity by positioning both Cholly and Pecola as mirror images of pathos and putting forward a kind of interrelationality qualified by empathy – the exposition of oneself to the presence or reality of the Other.⁴³ As "the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her" (163), he is moved by Pecola's "young, helpless, hopeless presence," the statement of which is "an accusation" of his "burned-out" black masculinity (127). In this identification of/with Pecola as both same and Other, his violence does not just reconfigure interpretations of 'victim' and 'perpetrator'; it ironically

⁴² Morrison herself explains that "[t]his most masculine act of aggression becomes feminized in my language, 'passive'" ("Unspeakable" 23). For arguments about and explorations in the hypersexualization of the black male see Kobena Mercer's *Welcome to the Jungle* and Sandra Gunning's *Race, Rape, and Lynching*.

⁴³ For more on empathy see Peter Schmid's "Comprehension: The Art of Not Knowing. Dialogical and Ethical Perspectives on Empathy as Dialogue in Personal and Person-centred Relationships," Ute and Johannes Binder's "A Theoretical Approach to Empathy," Per-Anders Tengland's "Empathy: Its Meaning and Its Place in a Theory of Therapy," and Carl Roger's "A Theory of Therapy, Personality, and Interpersonal Relationships as Developed in the Client-Centered Framework."

acknowledges and gives body or substance to both their historical existential violations and subjective limitations, that is, to their fundamentally grotesque existences.

While provocative, Morrison proposes incestuous rape as analogous to the systemic and systematic abuse of black America by white America, which becomes a psychological and structural impediment to the achievement of black subjectivity. In conversation with Claudia Tate in 1983, Morrison urged readers to view Cholly's violence as underpinned by love; as an "embrace" which, much like Joe Trace's murder of his young lover, Dorcas, in *Jazz* (1992), is "all the gift he has left" (164). But this sympathetic depiction of Cholly is not unproblematic. As with her aestheticized representation of the rape scene, Morrison is not, as J. Brooks Bouson asserts, able to effectively gain "narrative mastery over and artistically repair the racial shame and trauma" she describes (18).⁴⁴ In Cholly wanting to "fuck" Pecola "tenderly" is the revelation of a semantic discrepancy between the vernacular physicality of the act and its erotic, almost poetic description that underpins the incongruity of the act and insinuates existential tension or rupture. In this regard, the representation of violence, not unlike the literary representation of disability, "oscillates uneasily between the aesthetic and ethical domains, in such a way as to force a [re-]reading of the aesthetic fields" (Quayson, *AN* 19) within a socio-political paradigm. That is, because (the choice of) aestheticizing violence is itself a politically engaged act, it becomes inextricable from and even co-extensive with the violence it attempts to elide.

In *The Bluest Eye* this is demonstrated in an aestheticized rape scene that gradually degenerates into the violence it initially attempts to obfuscate. The violence of the act finally subsumes the aesthetic discourse in which it is couched so that "the tenderness would not hold": "The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. His soul seemed to slip down his guts and fly out into her, and the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made—a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon" (128). Poetically seductive language assumes, in the segue to a progressively coarse diction, a sinister tenor that is here underlined by existential abjection and which, dramatized in the brutality of a non-reciprocal act that is underscored in the "dry harbor of her vagina" and in Pecola's subsequent loss of consciousness, accentuates the violence of Cholly's actions. The correlation between sexual violence and female subjective undoing renders him, not unlike Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* (1940),

⁴⁴ For other versions of the workings of the aesthetic in her fiction see Marc C. Conner's "Aesthetics and the African American Novel" and for problematically sympathetic readings of Cholly see Karla Holloway and Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos's *New Dimensions of Spirituality*, Donald Gibson's "Text and Countertext in *The Bluest Eye*," and Peach's *Toni Morrison*.

“[d]angerously free” (125), an oxymoronic phrase that points not just to his recklessness, but to behaviour that ultimately elides (the conditions of) empathy in the obliteration of the other’s specificity.⁴⁵ Because his sense of individual freedom is incommensurate with communal responsibility and accountability, he assumes the status of a “musician” who generates not harmonic symphony but existential discord; his rape becomes a “nihilistic violence” (Rapport 53) that negates and usurps Pecola’s own potential subjective song, the evidence of which is in the only sound she makes afterwards – a traumatized, “hollow suck of air in the back of her throat” (128).⁴⁶

While ambiguously subversive, feminists have delineated female silence as fundamentally problematic. In a pervasively patriarchal world order where language – the capacity to speak – is indicative of power, Adrienne Rich argues that female “silence is oppression, is violence” (*On Lies* 204), and Morrison herself intimates as such in her submission that *The Bluest Eye* does not “handle effectively the silence at its center. The void that is Pecola’s unbeing” (“Unspeakable” 22).⁴⁷ Pecola’s pervasive silencing perpetuates a patriarchal oppression that ensures that hers “remains a story incapable of transmission” (Matus 48) and, definitively scapegoated, her insanity at the novel’s end is evidence, in Michel Foucault’s observations, of her subjective occlusion and exclusion from ‘civilization’.⁴⁸ Culminating in the pitiful image of an injured bird “in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly” (162), Pecola’s madness simultaneously attempts, however, to “recover the place of her exploitation” (Irigaray 76), bearing witness to and functioning as a violent disruption of hegemonic, white existential metanarratives. In that her metaphoric representation here functions as a form of mimicry – mimicking the grotesquery of African-American existence and pointing to a universally failed world order in which her subjective “poverty kept us generous ... [and] silence[d] our own nightmares” (163) – it also reads as a cultural statement of black experience, survival and endurance.

⁴⁵ Carl Rogers warns that being empathic “is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ condition” (210-11).

⁴⁶ Rapport describes nihilistic violence as “behaviour which deliberately or unintentionally disorients others in the relationship” and prevents the interrelational subjective process by breaching “the surface of civil exchange” and breaking “shared forms of behaviour” (53). For information on female, specifically, child post-traumatic disorders see Elizabeth Waites’ *Trauma and Survival: Post-Traumatic and Dissociative Disorders in Women*, Judith Herman’s *Father-Daughter Incest*, and Carol Barringer’s “The Survivor’s Voice: Breaking the Incest Taboo.”

⁴⁷ See also Susan Bordo’s “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: Re-Constructing Feminist Discourse on the Body.”

⁴⁸ For an illuminating position on scapegoating in *The Bluest Eye* and which draws on the Girardian model see Awkward’s “‘The Evil of Fulfillment’: Scapegoating and Narration in *The Bluest Eye*.”

Haskel Frankel's 1970 review of *The Bluest Eye* bemoaned the effect of reportage that registers Pecola's undoing (3), and Stephanie Li pronounces the novel a failure because Morrison does not manage to secure intimacy between the readers and Pecola (118-9). But both critics miss how Pecola's suffering exceeds the parameters of the text and how her pathetic imaging "signifies" the failure or crisis of black female subjectivity in an already failed world order. As John Leonard's 1970 review recognized, the novel is "charged with pain and wonder" at institutionalized, cultural violence, and as 'victim' figure Pecola leaves a provocative and potent mental imprint of the violated girl child that, in putting pressure on history, reincorporates her presence in the collective consciousness and rearticulates a "thematics of the subject" (Wieviorka 65). In *The Bluest Eye*, then, subjectivity, as with language, "arcs toward the place where meaning may lie,"⁴⁹ pronouncing a compromised black female subjectivity intent on the "blue void it could not reach" (*TBE* 162). It is in her neo-slave narratives *Beloved* and *A Mercy* that Morrison explores, through women's own recourse to violence, the possibility of (the re-possession of) black female self and the transformation of the official narrative of history.⁵⁰

"Freedom, responsibility, and women's place" in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*

Published in 1987 and earning her the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, *Beloved* is indubitably Morrison's most critically read novel.⁵¹ Ironically, because of its sensitive subject matter – the horror of African-American slavery – Morrison assumed it would be the least read of all her work. Indeed, the novel was removed from a senior advanced placement English course at Louisville, Kentucky's, Eastern High School in 2008 after parents complained about its difficult content, and in 2012 it was challenged but retained in Salem (MI) High School's advanced placement English.⁵² In conversation with Bonnie Angelo in 1989, Morrison explained such anxiety about slavery as rooted in "national amnesia": it is "about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, white people won't want to remember" (257). Lonnie Bunch, director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, concurs. In a discussion of Steve McQueen's 2013 cinematic rendition of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), the memoir of a free

⁴⁹ See Morrison's Nobel lecture.

⁵⁰ For a delineation of neo-slave narratives see Ashraf Rushdy's *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*.

⁵¹ The novel was also made into a film in 1998.

⁵² According to the American Literature Association (ALA), *Beloved* ranks seventh on the list of top 100 books targeted for censorship.

black man kidnapped into slavery in the 1800s, Bunch maintains that, “slavery is still in many ways the last great unmentionable in public discourse. It today is seen as an exotic story, something that ended a long time ago and is an example of the progressive nature of America – we were once bad, but now we are good.”⁵³ But in evoking history as living memory in her novel, Morrison dispels the exoticism of slavery by suggesting the inextricably constitutive role slave history plays in modern identity formation. As a mode of “rememory” which undertakes the incredible and deliberate feat of re-membering the legacy of slavery, *Beloved* “re-describes something we have never known as something we have forgotten and thus makes the historical past a part of our own experience” (Michaels 6).⁵⁴

The novel’s contentiousness is evidenced in the varied critical responses it garnered in the year of its publication. Where established critic Harry Bloom dismissed the novel as a mainly tendentious and contrived “problematical” (1) period piece and Ann Snitow in *The Village Voice Literary Supplement* largely discredited the novel as melodramatic, Stanley Crouch’s *New Republic* review scathingly proclaimed it “a blackface holocaust novel [which] seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest.” Margaret Atwood in the *New York Times*, however, pronounced *Beloved* “a hair-raising triumph” and A. S. Byatt in *The Guardian* described it a “generous, humane and gripping novel.” Morrison explains that *Beloved* “was not about the institution—Slavery with a capital S. It was about these anonymous people called slaves” (qtd. in Angelo 257), evinced in the novel’s dedication to an estimated “sixty million and more” who suffered the trauma of slavery and in its biblical epigraph which reads, “I will call them my people, / which were not my people; / and her beloved, / which was not beloved.” The novel innovatively unveils the subjects of an historical epoch frequently reduced to rhetorical abstraction.

Published in 2008, *A Mercy* is similarly concerned, through its detailing of a developing, pre-racial institution and in its employment of varied personalized voices, with a universal humanity. At a memorial ceremony in July 2008 for the survivors and non-survivors of the Middle Passage, Morrison remarked that “African-Americans don’t own slavery” (qtd. in McQuary 2) and that *A Mercy*, set in the late seventeenth century and read as a precursor to *Beloved*, was an opportunity for her to detach ideas about race from the experience of

⁵³ See “Family’s Anger over their Slave History as Film Shocks Audiences” in *The Times*, 12 Oct 2013.

⁵⁴ This sense of embodied historical continuity is invoked also in Sethe’s house number – 124, which is the number of years between the abolition of slavery (1863) and the book’s publication (1987). Interestingly, the main actor of *12 Years a Slave*, Chiwetel Ejiofor, describes his performance of an historical period he had “never really encountered” as a “dance between sanity and insanity. That fine line between a world completely turned on its head and a reality that is so twisted that it’s almost unrecognizable as a human reality, but it was” (*Essence* 111).

slavery. Still, John Updike accuses Morrison of exhibiting a “betrayed pessimism” in a narrative that circles around a “turgid and static” vision of society, and Hilary Mantel sees in the novel “a certain authorial weariness behind the whole enterprise [...] its half-told tales leave cobweb trails in the mind like the fragments of a nightmare.”

These negative reviews ironically convey Morrison’s narrative burden and highlight her thematic concern: illuminating race as that which continues to haunt the (African-) American psyche and socio-political existence, despite intimations of a post-racial society. Evidenced in the commentary that has continued to impose race on the novel and on an African-American presidency, she describes race as a “flavo[u]rful part of America” (qtd. in Crowder 1) and intuitively the need for its consistent exposure and interrogation.⁵⁵ As a politicized “demonic parody” (Geneva Moore) of an idealized colonial narrative, *A Mercy*, like *Beloved*, is concerned with exploring race as a foundationally troublesome fixture of (African-) American socio-political existence. In specifically highlighting the exploitation of African-American women under slavery and the ways in which they attempt to articulate and assert female subjectivity in the face of its violent denial, Morrison affirms, as in all her work, her commitment to reclaiming and rearticulating black cultural subjectivity.

Set in 1873 during the Reconstruction period, *Beloved* revisits the documented story of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who, when caught, attempted to kill her own children rather than see them returned to an institution that denied black humanity. The “red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp” (213) encountered by Stamp Paid on the Ohio River tellingly alludes to the violence of whiteness. In that there “was no bad luck in the world but whitepeople” (123), the existential “jungle” (234) that black people are perceived to inhabit is subverted. In the stench of black “skin and hot blood,” the “human blood cooked in a lynch fire” (212), Morrison posits whiteness itself as terror, illuminating slavery as a haunting, gothic mode of existence for black people and highlighting the grotesquery of the experience through the specific lens of the African-American female slave.⁵⁶ As with *A Mercy*, Morrison’s use of the grotesque as that which underscores the chaos of life here extends and simultaneously problematizes the conventional

⁵⁵ In 2008 the German newspaper *Die Tageszeitung* published an article with a picture of the White House under the headline “Uncle Barack’s Cabin,” and upon his re-election in 2012, Obama was labelled the “food stamp president” and accused of trying to turn America into a “welfare state.” See Emma Brookes’ “Toni Morrison,” and Jessica Wells Cantiello’s “From Pre-Racial to Post-Racial?: Reading and Reviewing *A Mercy* in the Age of Obama.” For more on the state of race in America post-millennium see Cornel West’s *Race Matters*.

⁵⁶ For further exploration of whiteness as terror see bell hooks’ “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” and Mia Bay’s *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925*.

theme of female innocence in *The Bluest Eye* by articulating the unimaginably and incomprehensibly murky terrain of black womanhood.

All three novels are dialectically linked, but in *Beloved* and *A Mercy* Morrison progresses to the dialogic mode, traversing the silent void that characterizes *The Bluest Eye* and giving voice to black female subjectivity. In the unintelligible mutterings and “roaring” (213) of the women housed in *Beloved*’s personified 124 Bluestone Road is the vocalization of a legacy of violation, “of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons” (213). The women in here have a ‘speech’ that, as Stamp Paid witnesses, “wasn’t nonsensical, exactly, nor was it tongues,” but pronounces the “interior sounds,” the “eternal, private conversation that takes place between women and their tasks” (202-3). In privileging female interiority and articulating generational black female violation, the novel evokes the concepts of domesticity and communitarian space denied under slavery and intimates the possibility of a ‘feminine’ language in response to racial and gendered violation.⁵⁷ But where traditional feminist theory presupposes the actuality of a female subject, the women here articulate a precarious space between voice and voicelessness, between being and not being.⁵⁸ Where female slaves are raped as a matter of course, disallowed familial relations, separated from their children/mothers and treated like animals, *Beloved* and *A Mercy* centralize the socially grotesque and taboo – women’s own violence – to explore the grotesquery, that is, incongruous character, of black female subjectivity. Both novels contemplate female violence as both an affirmation of and struggle against the “nonsensical” conditions of their existence, as ultimately enacting a woman’s “task” – an unenviable but inevitable, responsive undertaking that attempts to restore subjective dignity. In this way, the novel compels meditations on the inextricability of violence in the articulation and assertion of a limited black female subjectivity.

Womanhood as Slavery: Black Female Violation and Violence

Contemporary feminist theory maintains that woman has pervaded Western thought as “devalued difference” (Braidotti 64) and that motherhood, as a central and definitive institution of gender (Chodorow 9), has “ghettoized and degraded female potentialities” (Rich, *Motherhood* 13). Womanhood and motherhood are seen as enforced identities that

⁵⁷ For further information on the history of black family life see Herbert Gutman’s *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, and Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*.

⁵⁸ I have in mind here the French feminist position of “l’écriture femme” which posits the possibility of an inherent feminine language that works against or destabilizes the authority of patriarchal discourse.

reinforce and reproduce the socio-political parameters of patriarchy. While this is historically true of white women, it also reveals the ways in which white standards and values pervade and are unquestionably viewed as constitutive of all female subjectivity.⁵⁹ Black women have typically been exploited by and excluded from dominant codes of female subjectivity.⁶⁰ This is historically acknowledged in the nineteenth-century “cult of true womanhood” which, dramatized in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), is interrogated in Harriet Jacob’s autobiographical *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), a novel in which conventional mores of sexual and moral purity are unveiled as incompatible with black women’s lived experience.⁶¹ Both biological ‘right’ and enforced identity, black womanhood/motherhood bespeaks an “impossible contradiction” under slavery (Keenan 60-1) and emerges in a grotesque void, suspended between existential absence and presence, between being and non-being.⁶²

Ann DuCille notes that “[w]here gender and racial differences meet in the bodies of black women, the result is the invention of an other Otherness, a hyperstatic alterity” (“The Occult” 22) that testifies to the unconventional, even abnormal, character of black female subjectivity. Morrison has thus maintained that black women are fundamentally different from white women. Insisting that black women consistently “defied classification” (“What the Black Woman Thinks” 18) by virtue of their varied and often extreme lived experiences, she asserts elsewhere that black women bear and are on “the cross” of existence (qtd. in Stepto 384) and, further imaging them as both “safe harbor and ship” (qtd. in Tate 161), she employs and subverts traditional, Christian iconography to reveal how black women occupy a “special place in this culture” (qtd. in Koenen 72) premised on an incongruous subjectivity. In *Beloved* the “nastiness of life” is the tension between losing a child to slavery and being consistently raped by “the lowest yet” (301), and Sethe’s violence is key to unlocking and physically enunciating this subjective and moral void. In a context in which subjectivity is characterized by violation and violence, infanticide is presented as both an extreme form of resistance and as an ultimate mode of mothering.

⁵⁹ For more on this position see Jean Walton’s “Re-Placing Race in (White) Psychoanalytic Discourse: Founding Narratives of Feminism.”

⁶⁰ This is a central argument of African-American feminism. For one such argument that speaks to the incompatibility of nineteenth century depictions of womanhood see Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*.

⁶¹ For explorations of the “cult of true womanhood” see Barbara Welters’ *Dimity Convictions*, and for a complex perspective of both white and black womanhood at the time see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. For another literary account of the systematic violation and separation of black female slaves from their children see Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave* (1845).

⁶² See Evelyn Hammonds’ “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality.”

Significantly, Sethe's infanticide is precipitated and underpinned by an act of maternal violation in which she is forcibly milked by Schoolteacher's nephews.⁶³ Having herself been denied her mother's milk as a child, her description of their action as "theft" (20-1) situates it as a crime against her maternal autonomy. As an act that is concomitant with rape, it is also a "perversion of the primal scene" which lays bare white "impulse to reject black subjectivity in order to eradicate the black roots of the white imaginary" (Moglen 208). The white men's violence against Sethe's sense of self underscores their and Schoolteacher's sense of her as a social "non-person," of her existential liminality – somewhere between human and animal (228). But her explanation to Paul D of the significance of her milk to her "baby girl" realigns her with the subjective: "Nobody was going to nurse her like me ... nobody had her milk but me" (19). The repetitive emphasis on "nobody" suggests, as her whipping by Schoolteacher testifies, slavery's physical disembodiment and subjective disavowal. Yet as the varied readings of her scarred back also imply, it is Sethe's very corporeality – her physical ability to provide sustenance – that underscores her sense of and opportunity for subjectivity.⁶⁴

As a metaphor for "nonspeech," as a "semiotics' that linguistic communication does not account for" (Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 312), Sethe's milk signifies a maternal self and articulates an intergenerational subjectivity premised on responsibility for the other.⁶⁵ But in that Denver is, when Sethe later kills Beloved, forced to take "her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister" (179), Morrison extends psychoanalytic readings of motherhood to include material matrilineal cultural resonance. That is, combined here with blood, milk invokes ancestry as "DNA" by functioning as a palpable means of cultural information and continuity. In response to Elsie B. Washington in 1987, Morrison described African-American subjectivity as qualified by responsibility to the ancestors: "They were responsible *for us*, and we have to be responsible *to them*" (238), and in *Beloved* this communal interdependency is evidenced in the image of the inter-locked three skating women and in the narratorial refrain "nobody saw them falling" (205).

Like Florens' mother in *A Mercy*, whose surrendering of her child in order to save her is registered as "a mercy," Sethe's infanticide is delineated as "a kind of selfishness" (190) underpinned by love and signals the variegated significance of black motherhood and

⁶³ See Marianne Hirsch's "Maternal Narrative: Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood."

⁶⁴ For an exploration of bodily scarring in African-American fiction see Carol E. Henderson's *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*.

⁶⁵ For more on the spiritual and psychoanalytical significance of milk see Michelle Mock's "Spitting out the seed: Ownership of Mother, Child, Breasts, Milk, and Voice in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," and Morgenstern's "Mother's Milk and Sister's Blood."

existential continuity. In claiming her right to motherhood she arrives at freedom and a place of desire unlike Pecola's – "where you could love anything you chose" (191). On seeing Schoolteacher approach to take her children, Sethe thinks "No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there, where no one could hurt them" (192). Traversing the life-and-death veil of slavery she purposively cuts her daughter's throat and enacts a "democratic violence" (Rapport 53) that, expanding Baby Suggs' gospel of "[f]lesh that needs to be loved" (104), is rooted in both self- and (m)other-love and levels the negating structure of slavery by itself negating white racist negation.

This violent repossession, the physical countering and reclaiming of historical dispossession, proposes a corporeal discourse in which Sethe's brutal action can be read as a narrative of the self that re-establishes subjective desire and intentionality in and beyond the present moment of slavery.⁶⁶ In a world in which linguistic and existential "definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined" (*Beloved* 225), Naomi Mandel concurs that it is "Sethe's *act*, rather than anything else she can *say*" (189) that fundamentally disrupts the discourse that imbues whiteness with authority and control. At the same time, the performative efficiency of the act of infanticide simultaneously annuls and enunciates, that is, 'gives body' and substance to the unrelenting closeness of the chaos and disorder – the trauma – of slavery. In this regard, the gaps in Sethe's explanatory narrative bear witness to the inadequacy of language as representation – its inability to re-present lived reality – and the ways in which it consequently unmakes the self or the subjective enterprise. Described as "spinning" (189), "circling, now she was gnawing something else instead of getting to the point," she could "never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off— she could never explain" (191-2). Language here functions as a simultaneous cursor to and camouflage of, both reflecting and refracting, lived reality, so that Sethe's attempts to recuperate a violent past are confronted with the implication that such interpretive gestures occlude and render unintelligible the moment of slavery (Boudreau 454). Similarly, in the circuitous narrative technique, in the temporal segue from present to past and between different narrative perspectives, *Beloved* makes the point that slavery and the maternal project therein defies narrative coherency and articulation and engenders, instead, the hysteria of

⁶⁶ See Kim Worthington's *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction*.

history – the subversive rather than pathological expression of that which is repressed and the enactment of political dissent.⁶⁷

In her reading of literatures of trauma, Kali Tal maintains that bearing witness is “an aggressive act” born out of a “refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience” (7). Similarly, in their consideration of the efficacy of testifying (the Holocaust) in literature and art, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub suggest that in testifying it is language that is “in process and in trial” because to testify is to “accomplish a *speech act*, rather than to simply formulate a statement. As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses what history is in *action* that exceeds any substantialized significance” (5). Because testimony bears, that is, asserts, carries and embodies the weight of the inadequacy or limits of language, testimony is here envisaged as exceeding the discursive by realigning it with the realm of action. *Beloved* and *Sethe*’s act function similarly as experiential rather than referential, vivid testimony to and survivalist resurrection of the violence of slavery. That is, the novel and the act as testimony do not present a conclusive statement of fact but, in literally asserting and embodying the depth of suffering entailed, engender the lived, inexplicable reality of slavery’s trauma as a truth which is “*not* directly available to experience” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 61).

In a further attempt to give body to the phenomenological, Morrison has *Beloved*, *Sethe*’s slaughtered baby girl and the novel’s “defining conceit” (Rody 104), return in palpable, bodily form in which actual flesh functions as a narrative bridge.⁶⁸ In the appropriation of the text by her living body, *Beloved* permits “*history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not” (Caruth, *UE11*) and articulates the profound peculiarity of slavery. Her disturbing corporeality – her ghostly flesh – not only stands in for and gives visibility and voice to what is essentially and finally unrepresentable and unspeakable; it “forces materiality back into language—a materiality that the unspeakable deliberately works to exclude—and challenges the assumption that that which is excluded from ‘speech’ is excluded from the world in which speech functions” (Mandel 28-9).⁶⁹ By announcing the murky terrain of black womanhood, *Beloved*’s bodily form, not unlike *Sethe*’s infanticide, becomes the political and politicized

⁶⁷ See Emma Parker’s “A New Hystery: History and Hysteria in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” and Mae G. Henderson’s “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogues, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition.”

⁶⁸ For more on Morrison’s phenomenological imagination see Laura Doyle’s *Bordering on the Body*.

⁶⁹ See also Susan Spearey’s “Substantiating Discourse of Emergence: Corporeality, Spectrality and Postmodern Historiography in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” David Lawrence’s “Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*,” Avril Horner and Angela Keane’s *Body Matters: Feminism, Textuality, Corporeality*, Daniel Erickson’s *Ghosts, Metaphor, and History in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and Nancy Peterson’s *Beloved: Character Studies*.

ground for black, female self-placement; as with her subsequent terrorizing of her mother and the community, she effectively gives flesh to and embodies the subjective horror of slavery, pronouncing its unrelentingly haunting historical presence.⁷⁰ Later pregnant with Paul D's child after a physical act of forced copulation that significantly enables him to access the "red heart" in the tobacco tin buried in his chest (86), *Beloved* emerges in the novel as a literal and figurative, signifying daughter/mother of African-American historical existence.⁷¹

Morrison has stated that, as its progeny, she refused to believe that slavery was "beyond art" (qtd. in Caldwell 244-5), and in *Beloved* she 'signifies' a revisionist African-American "historiography and fiction" (Rushdy 568) in imagistic mode. In her foreword to the novel she explains that "[t]o render enslavement a personal experience language must get out the way" (xiii) and in a mode not dissimilar to *Beloved*'s – she who can only "say things that are pictures" (248), Morrison foregrounds the imaginative, rather than linguistic, precisely for its ability to render alive or living – to re-member – lost subjectivity. Tellingly, Paul D muses that *Beloved* reminds him of something/some thing, "[s]omething, look like, I'm supposed to remember" (276), and Sethe explains to Denver that in her own experience her "rememory" – a "picture floating around" in the world – is "going to always be there waiting for you" as "nothing ever dies" (43-44).

"Rememory" here extends and enhances as a deliberate act the phenomenon of memory as that which unconsciously happens to the subject; as a "form of willed creation" (Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Writing" 385) by the subject, "rememory" renders and keeps history alive. As an imagistic aesthetic that invokes the political significance of re-membering history, "rememory" is thus aligned with the subjective and is at work in the twin imagery of Sethe as a bird. A prominent image also in *A Mercy*, it echoes but transforms the dejected image of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*.⁷² In *Beloved*, Sethe's imaging initially elicits the notion of maternal nurturance and protection and functions as a metaphor for a kind of transcendental existential freedom. But the image assumes a sinister tenor grounded in the excessive, material reality of slavery. The hummingbirds, which stick "their needle beaks right through her headcloth and into her hair and beat their wings" (192), signal a frenzied yet fragile

⁷⁰ For other readings of the body in Morrison's fiction see Karin Badt's "The Roots of the Body in Toni Morrison: A Matter of 'Ancient Properties,'" and Mae Henderson's "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text."

⁷¹ See Caroline Rody's "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: History, 'Rememory,' and a 'Clamor for a Kiss,'" and Rushdy's "Daughters Signifyin(g) History."

⁷² In *A Mercy*, the women are typically imaged as protective birds in a metaphoric representation of motherhood. The central bird image of the novel lies in the story of the eagle who is described, with her eyes "midnight black and shiny" and her beak "like the scythe of a war god," as "fierce, protecting her borning young" (60).

violence, and the ominous hawk inverts an idealized, psychoanalytic maternal imaging of Sethe as the “Great Mother” (Eckard 34). As a monstrous figure of abjection, she instead trespasses and transgresses motherhood so that the progressively violent imaging of her underscores as grotesque the scene that Schoolteacher and his men encounter when they arrive to capture Sethe: “a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other” (175).⁷³

Ambiguous Freedom, Rough Choices in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*

Sartre posits that because we are *a priori* free beings we “are unable ever to choose the worse [but] always the better” (*EH* 29). But as Patterson asserts and as Morrison’s novel shows, for the black slave freedom begins with the knowledge that his/her condition is *a priori* a negation of the universalized imperatives of subjectivity; that is, slavery as social death problematizes and negates the opportunity for moral choice. Friedrich Nietzsche has argued for the historicization and contextualization, rather than naturalization or normalization, of morality. As a relative and non-universalizable phenomenon, morality is “incurably *aporetic*,” premised on an irresolvable contradiction that defies reason and rationality (Bauman 10, 1). In *Beloved* – where “anybody white” could “[d]irty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore” (295), Sethe’s is a “rough choice” (212) that exceeds the moral and parallels her incongruous existential condition. Her idea of “safety with a handsaw” (193) invokes a “too thick” (192) love that is, like Baby Suggs’ ostentatious generosity, read by the community as “reckless” (162), irresponsible to the survivalist, communal cultural narrative that underpins African-American subjectivity. In response to Moyers, Morrison herself states that Sethe’s infanticide, like Eva Peace’s murder of her own son in *Sula* (1973), “was the right thing to do but she had no right to do it” (272), so that her violence carries “the paradoxical qualities of an existential victory and moral offense” (Otten 83). Because this here “Sethe didn’t know where the world stopped and she began” (164), her violent act is both transgressive and regressive as she becomes embedded in and “subject to the tyranny of history” (Perez-Torres 191).

Sethe’s claustrophobic maternal love for her daughter is not dissimilar to Florens’ obsessive love for the free blacksmith in *A Mercy*, which manifests in violence against himself and his adopted child, Malaik. Both instances indicate or are symptomatic of

⁷³ This scene recalls Paul D’s comment to Sethe: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (194). For an interesting article on motherhood as monstrosity see Rosi Braidotti’s “Mothers, Monsters, and Machines.”

“arrested development” (Wyatt 130) emanating from the maternal loss induced by slavery and dramatize the historical psychological trauma of “motherline rupture” (O’Reilly 87).⁷⁴ But albeit a form of intergenerational, female mourning, both women’s violence problematically memorializes an original, originary violence and violation.⁷⁵ Sethe’s version of motherhood in particular, rooted in racism and realized in violence, is excessive in that it paradoxically undermines her own humanity and exceeds the individual and communal imperative of and attempt at subjectivity. In violating her self and the/an other’s sense of self, Sethe effectively disrupts the African-American subjective enterprise premised on mutual reverence for an historically denied self.

Recalling and extending Pecola’s “crime of innocence,” the usurpation of self is here registered as a regressive and reductive mode of subjectivity evidenced in the novel in the gradual replacement of the central dialogic call-and-response mode with the hauntingly repetitive monologic phrase of the three central female characters: “you are mine” (256). That this self-negation or disavowal of self is envisaged as a morbid existential condition is suggested in *Beloved*’s metaphoric cannibalism in which, in her attempt to make Sethe “pay” for her own subjective loss, she “ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (295). In this misguided act of reparation, in Sethe’s ‘yielding’ of her self to another, she resembles Florens who, in existing solely for her lover, manages to undercut the survivalist symbolism of her shoes and the existential resonance of her name – to flower/flourish – as she becomes,⁷⁶ by grotesque inversion, a “slave by choice” (139).⁷⁷

Sethe’s actions repeat the (self-)violating premise of slavery and threaten to erode a communal narrative of survival invoked in the novel generally and by Baby Suggs in the Clearing in particular. In this way, in the tension between individual and communal subjectivity, Morrison gestures at an intersubjective space – a space for self within community – characterized by a communicative, relational interdependency evoked in the closing lyrical words of *A Mercy*: “Hear a tua mae” (165).⁷⁸ In the intimate restoration of the mother-daughter relationship here is the implication that the individual female ‘self’ “lies in

⁷⁴ For more on the psychological effects of mother-daughter separation in Morrison’s novels see Missy Dehn Kubitschek’s *Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists and History*.

⁷⁵ See Sam Durrant’s *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*.

⁷⁶ For an interesting analysis of the symbolism of shoes in the making of the America’s see Cathy Covell Waegner’s “Ruthless Epic Footsteps: Shoes, Migrants, and the Settlement of Americas in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*.”

⁷⁷ This theme is revisited in Morrison’s latest novel, *Home*.

⁷⁸ “A minha mae” comes from the Portuguese “my mother.” On the workings of female community in *A Mercy* see Mar Gallego’s “‘Nobody Teaches you to be a Woman’.”

blackness” (Rigney 38) in Morrison’s fiction, thus challenging mainstream feminism’s “limited assumptions about self-in-relation” (Gillespie and Kubitschek 62). In *Beloved* this is evidenced in the fact that Sethe is saved by the very community of women that initially rejects her, unveiling the interrelationality of blackness and the way in which the interior life of the individual female opens onto the anterior life of the entire community.⁷⁹ The women’s communal hollering – a ‘song’ of individuated suffering and survival, which resonates with the Greek chorus and is infused with the African-American spiritual call-and-response mode – signals the community as a powerful “psycho-political” resource (Kella 24). As a ferocious demonstration of the intercommunication and interconnection that enables cultural community, their holler enacts a “purgation ritual” (Krumholz 118) quite unlike the Breedloves’ sadistic ritual of exorcism in its articulation of a pre-discursive, pre-symbolic genesis that is at the same time future-oriented: “In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (305).⁸⁰ In preceding their horrific existence, they go beyond it to envisage what Paul D calls “some kind of tomorrow” (322), a future subjectivity dramatized in the physicality of Sethe’s rejuvenating ‘baptism’ (308) and in her redirected violence against the original (white) violence symbolized by Mr Bodwin.

While this suggests, as Heike Raphael-Hernandez argues, an “attempt to combine hope and development” (15), the refrain at the novel’s end – “It was not a story to pass on” (323) – warns against and undercuts a concrete utopian vision of blackness. The refrain ambivalently implies that although the violence to and of African-American female existence is not a narrative to be ignored for risk of repetition, it is also not a narrative to be continuously dwelled upon for risk of being psychologically inhabited. While gesturing at utopia, Morrison’s narrative ambiguity suggests that she recognizes black female subjectivity as rooted in the experiential fragility of a violent, lived existence and not in an anesthetized, abstract ideal. Tellingly, in the end, *Beloved*’s “footprints come and go” as she becomes “[d]isremembered and unaccounted for” (324), and in *A Mercy*, a Minha Mae exhorts Florens to take ownership of her subjective “wilderness” (159) because “[t]o be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal” (161).

⁷⁹ For more on black interrelatedness see Dorothea Drummond Mbalia’s *Toni Morrison’s Developing Class Consciousness*, April Lidinsky’s “Prophesying Bodies: Calling for a politics of collectivity in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” and Walter Clemons’s “A Gravestone of Memories.”

⁸⁰ For an inter-cultural reading of Morrison’s novels see Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin’s *A World of Difference: An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison’s Novels*.

Morrison implies black womanhood as occupying an unremittingly violent subjective space and, although necessarily disruptive of and providing significant intervention in conventional meditations on the violence to and of African-American subjectivity, her fiction is, faced with such existential ambiguity, seemingly “confronted with the impossible task of finding a mode of writing that would not immediately transform formlessness into form” (Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative* 6). In that it re-registers a place of absence – a persistent subjective vacuum and space of unbelonging for African-Americans generally, her writing testifies to an inability to recuperate black female subjectivity in particular. Mae Henderson notes that black women’s writing is at once “a dialogue between self and society and between self and psyche” (“Speaking in Tongues” 119), and Barbara Christian observes that in African-American women’s fiction, the female characters typically struggle “within the context of black communities, rather than in the world of women” (“Trajectories of Self” 180). This subjective tension is similarly registered in Morrison’s novels. Due to the liminal and limited space from which it is exercised and because the assertion of a self necessitates the negation of (an)other, the assertion or actualization of female subjectivity is consistently problematized as detrimental to and potentially undermining black cultural community. In its implication of the impossibility of a black self for women outside of or that exceeds communal structures, Morrison’s fiction in this way articulates “not yet imagined modes of being” (Durrant, *PN* 111), modes of being invoked, I argue in the following chapter, in Yvonne Vera’s fiction.

CHAPTER TWO

“OTHER MODES OF BEING”: EMBODYING THE VIOLENCE OF WOMANHOOD IN THE FICTION OF YVONNE VERA

Roots/Routes of Violence in Zimbabwe

In an article for the *New African* in 2007, political activist David Coltart wrote: “Zimbabwe is afflicted with a disease akin to alcoholism, namely endemic violence [...] the use of violence is now deeply embedded in our national psyche.” The analogy of violence with alcoholism implies that it has become so habitual a practice as to be entrenched in national identity, and in this regard, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni maintains the importance of making sense of violence “as a systematic aspect of the evolution of Zimbabwe from colony to nationhood and from nationhood to crisis” (203). The advent of colonialism in 1890, marked by the arrival of the Pioneer Column of the British South Africa Company (BSAC) headed by Cecil John Rhodes and which transferred power to the colonial government in 1923, certainly created the conditions for violence.¹ While they recognized and distinguished between the indigenous ethnicities, British settlers viewed black Africans as a homogeneous native race in order to better impose and manage their segregationist policies.² This politicized and solidified the sense of ethnic differences, leading to black co-option into the arena of colonial power as a subjugated subject population through a process of direct and indirect rule.³ In this respect, colonialism, comparable to African-American slavery in its evocation of a liminal, in-between existence, could be described as a form of social death, a “gratuitous act par excellence” (Mbembe 189) that ultimately denied black (historical) subjectivity.⁴

Tsenay Serequeberhan notes the irony that it is through violent confrontation that “the colonized reclaims and asserts the humanity of his existence” (243). In colonial Zimbabwe,

¹ See Paul Maylam’s *The Cult of Rhodes* for an account of Rhodes’ legacy on the African continent.

² Zimbabwe is comprised of two dominant ethnic groups – the Shona from MaShonaland and the Ndebele who occupy the southern part of Zimbabwe, Matabeleland – which have historically existed in an antagonistic relationship. For more on this see Julian Cobbing’s “The Mfecane as Alibi: Thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo,” Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s *Do ‘Zimbabweans’ Exist?*, and David Beach’s *War and Politics in Zimbabwe, 1840-1900*.

³ See Mahmood Mamdani’s *Citizen and Subject*.

⁴ Achille Mbembe’s description of colonization as putting to work “the two-faceted movement of destroying and creating, creating by destroying, creating destruction and destroying creation, creating to create, and destroying to destroy” (189) destabilizes, for me, Stephen Chan’s position that Zimbabwe does not suffer “cultural manifestations in the organisation and deployment of violence” (370). As I show in this chapter, the violence of colonialism influenced the violent phenomenon of cultural nationalism in the country.

the year 1896 was marked by the first *Chimurenga* – literally, revolution – characterized by black insurrection which, continuing into the 1900s, signalled the beginning of black civil unrest over the racist and draconian character of colonial rule.⁵ The Rhodesian government’s eventual Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from Britain in 1965, and increased centralized authoritarian state violence against a growing black consciousness resulted in a second *Chimurenga* of guerrilla warfare which, after the Lancaster House negotiations of 1979, resulted in the country attaining independence on 18 April 1980.⁶ But while national liberation is necessarily an act of culture, it can also become, as Amilcar Cabral notes, “a *determinant*” of that culture (265). In Zimbabwe, the assertion of an autonomous national identity became the determinant of an idealized national culture in which a “*signifying system*” (Williams 13) of subjective (dis)empowerment evolved into a politicized principle of nationally unified subjects. In this respect, Zimbabwean nationalism functioned as “cultural artefact,” an “imagined political community” (Anderson 4, 6) buttressing a totalitarian project that rendered ideological difference socio-politically significant.⁷

In a significant disruption of linear, absolutist theorizations of postcolonialism that reveals colonialism’s pervasive manifestation in the present, Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* points out that “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon” that mimics the colonial past (27).⁸ Noting the ironic significance of ethnicity in this regard, Vigdis Broch-Due points out that in postcolonial Africa violence is often deployed as part of a “quest to produce certainty, a means to reinforce essentialized ideas about identity and belonging” (20). In Zimbabwe, the bloody massacre of an estimated 20 000 Ndebele-speaking/-affiliated civilians and sympathizers in the Matabeleland and Midlands regions by the Shona-led, North-Korean-trained, Fifth Brigade from the period 1983 to 1987 in a process called

⁵ The initial uprising of 1896 occurred subsequent to the renaming of Mashonaland and Matabeleland to Southern Rhodesia in 1895. The most notable legislation of racial and economic segregation were the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, the Native (Urban Areas) Accommodation and Registration Act of 1946, and the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1934, all of which resulted in the industrial strike by African railway workers in 1945, the first general strike of African workers in 1948, and the Harare Bus Boycott in 1956. For more information on these see Lawrence Vambe’s *From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe* and Jon Lunn’s “The meaning of the 1948 General Strike in Colonial Zimbabwe.”

⁶ Zimbabwe’s independence was led by the two burgeoning national parties at the time: the majority Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU-PF) and the minority Zimbabwe African People’s Union (PF-ZAPU). For further information on Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle see *Soldiers in Zimbabwe’s Liberation War and Society in Zimbabwe’s Liberation War* by Ngwabi Bhebhe and Terence Ranger, and Norma Kriger’s *Zimbabwe’s Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices*.

⁷ For more on nationalism see Ernest Gellner’s *Nationalism* and Katherine Verdery’s “Whither ‘Nation’ and Nationalism’.”

⁸ For the many contemporary debates surrounding postcolonial theory itself see *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft *et al*, *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia, and *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, eds. Ania Loomba *et al*.

Gukurahundi, signified an ethnic cleansing submerged beneath a master narrative of nationalism (Alexander 4).⁹ Despite the Unity Accord of 1987, which saw the dissolution of PF-ZAPU into ZANU (PF), by the mid-1990s Zimbabwe had reached crisis point facilitated by the state's weakened administrative capacity and by rampant economic and social decline.¹⁰ By the millennium (2000) Zimbabwe had effectively entered a third *Chimurenga* in which the government attempted to quell growing civilian disaffection and opposition. The violence meted out on its citizens here signalled a "narrow interpretation of citizenship, nationalism and national unity" (Muzondidya 177-9) and is grounded, Terence Ranger theorizes, in a mythologized "patriotic history" that rejects historical counternarratives and puts dissenters "beyond the pale of humanity" (Werbner "Smoke" 197) and subjectivity.¹¹

Yvonne Vera, Cultural Nationalism and the Violation of Female Subjectivity

Significant in the deployment of cultural nationalism, to the notion of subjectivity and belonging, has been the systemic and systematic oppression of black Zimbabwean women. In his discussion of postcolonial nations, Achille Mbembe maintains that, "phallic domination has been all the more strategic in power relationships ... because it has direct, close connections with the general economy of sexuality" (13). In that sexuality is so intimately connected to power, power is itself sexualized and inscribed with gender difference and gender hierarchy. This is historically pertinent to Zimbabwe. Functioning on a primarily and typically 'corporate' model of communal interdependency (Mikell 10), in pre-colonial Zimbabwe, a premium was placed on women's bodies which ensured that their sexual, reproductive functions were, in a pre-capitalist society, economized and transferable from

⁹ The Shona expression *Gukurahundi* is traditionally associated with agriculture and means "the first rain that washes away the chaff of the harvest," but was ethnically and militarily appropriated to mean the "sweeping away of rubbish." For more on the period see Martin Meredith's *Mugabe: Power and Plunder in Zimbabwe*, Kriger's *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-war Zimbabwe: Symbolic and Violent Politics, 1980-1987*, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) and the Legal Resources Foundation (LRF) report: *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980-1988*, Elinor Sisulu's *Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980-1988*, and Ian Phimister's "The Making and Meanings of the Massacres in Matabeleland." For a literary account of the silences around pre- and post-independent violence see Alexander Kanengoni's *Echoing Silences*.

¹⁰ For more on Zimbabwe's administrative problems see Stein Eriksen's "State Formation and the Politics of Regime Survival: Zimbabwe in Theoretical Perspective."

¹¹ This period included the forced and violent appropriation of white-owned farms and violence against the formal Opposition and its members. As David Blair's biography of Robert Mugabe notes, this went against initial inclusive post-independence principles. See also Stephen Chan's *Robert Mugabe: A Life of Power and Violence*. For more on Zimbabwe's ethos and practice of "patriotic history" see Ranger's "Rule by Historiography: The Struggle over the past in Contemporary Zimbabwe."

one family to another through marriage.¹² In colonial Zimbabwe, the increased urbanity and upward mobility of Africans promised female emancipation but fostered, instead, a manipulative relationship between black and white men in which legislation was introduced that not only actively controlled women's mobility and sexuality and ultimately served patriarchy; it was compatible with and enhanced capitalist, masculinist (economic) expansion in the first half of the twentieth century.¹³

In this regard, it is telling that Benedict Anderson's description of nationalism, conceived "as a deep, horizontal comradeship" and "fraternity" (7), has decidedly masculine overtones as this helps to account for the sexist and exclusory character of Zimbabwe's national ethos post-independence. Horace Campbell notes that since its inception Zimbabwe's liberation model has been decidedly masculinist and patriarchal in ideology and approach, and Teresa Barnes maintains that "domesticity and dependence were developed into the cornerstones of acceptable female behaviour" in Zimbabwean culture (xxxvi). Despite their active role against colonial rule, after independence it was apparent that many of the assumed gains made by women during the liberation struggle "would not be automatically transferred into public policy" (Lyons xxiii).¹⁴ Indeed, notwithstanding progressive legislation emphasizing socio-economic equity, Christine Sylvester's study of women in Zimbabwean industry from the 1980s notes that in the new 'liberal' Zimbabwe, "the old question of 'women's' mobility inscribed a new set of national aspirations onto (and into) the bodies of women" (75).¹⁵ In legislating (African) women's freedom, postcolonial Zimbabwe simultaneously and effectively nationalized and recolonized women's sexuality and bodies.

Historically inscribed into and proscribed from national cultural rhetoric, Zimbabwean women have occupied an ambivalent, even traumatic position in the national consciousness. It is in this context that Yvonne Vera, one of Zimbabwe's most prominent and formidable

¹² This cultural practice, which continues today, is typically referred to as *lobola* or *roora* and initially symbolized a joining of families but has gradually become more economized.

¹³ The Native Marriages Ordinance (NMO) of 1901, amended in 1912, as well as the subsequent Natives Adultery Punishment Ordinance (NAPO) of 1916 ensured that the state paternalistically took on the task previously assumed by male relatives of policing women. Eventually, the Natives Registration Act (NRA) of 1936 and the Native Urban Areas Registration and Accommodation Act (NUARA) of 1946 restricted the movement and accommodation of African women who migrated into urban areas for employment. See Elizabeth Schmidt's *Peasants, Traders, and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939*, Teresa Barnes' *"We Women Worked So Hard": Gender, Urbanization and Social Reproduction in Colonial Harare, Zimbabwe, 1930-1956*, Nancy Folbre's "Patriarchal Social Formations in Zimbabwe," and Diana Jeater's *Marriage, Perversion, and Power: The Construction of Moral Discourse in Southern Rhodesia 1894-1930*.

¹⁴ Flora Veit-Wild's "Creating a New Society: Women's Writing in Zimbabwe" describes how in December 1983 female ex-combatants who chose not to return to traditional roles were charged with prostitution.

¹⁵ These included the Legal Age of Majority Act of 1980, the Matrimonial Cause Act and the Labour Relations Act of 1985.

authors before her death in 2005, writes.¹⁶ Born in 1964 and working predominantly in the latter half of the twentieth century, Vera writes in what is an arguably masculinist literary tradition, a tradition embedded in patriarchal ideologies and representations of the postcolonial nation (Veit-Wild 1992). While she shares with her male counterparts a similar interest in delineating the nation's rise from colonialism and is concerned with colonialism's ideological inscription onto the socio-geographical landscape of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, her work is not postcolonial in the narrow sense of being "altogether antithetical to the European," as Onwuchekwa Chinweizu's and Ihechukwu Madubuike's study of African literature asserts (4). It does not attempt a nostalgic retrieval of an authentic/originary, or homogenous, African subjectivity nor does it pretend to mimetically 'write back' to and against a colonial past or Western/Eurocentric 'centre' as Bill Ashcroft and others have theorized. Asserting that writers should "possess the courage to examine ourselves and not always go back to empire" (qtd. in Rosenthal 42), her writing attempts a methodological revisionism and critique of Western *and* African structures of knowledge and power. In this way, embedded in a postcolonial "emerging time" (Mbembe 16), Vera's fiction more appropriately exhibits what Claudia Egerer terms *postcolonial awareness*, a consciousness "[d]ependent on the interaction between postmodern and postcolonial modes of inquiry," and indicating an "understanding of its own hybridized status as well as the recognition of the necessity to develop new modes of explication" (21).¹⁷

As a black female writer concerned with articulating women's issues, Vera's fiction occupies an ambivalent, even problematic, position within the national literary and cultural landscape. In a review for the *Mail and Guardian* in 1997, Stephen Gray described Vera as the nation's "only too disturbing and plangent chronicler and critic," while Lene Bull-Christiansen notes that she "has walked a fine line between the need for a critical reckoning with the colonial past and addressing the contemporary problems of Zimbabwean society in a meaningful way" (106). In an interview with Charles Larson in 1999, Vera specifically explained that, "[t]o the extent that women still experience the highest degree of social pressure and stigmatization in Zimbabwe, and that these various aberrations of human contact affect them the most, my writing is a critique of the weaknesses of my society" (84). Both loyal to and critical of Zimbabwean gendered society, Vera assumes the position of the "ex-centric" whose narratives, while central to, fall outside of "the perspectives of sanctioned

¹⁶ Vera died of AIDS-related meningitis at the age of 40.

¹⁷ Born and raised in the Matabeleland region of Bulawayo to an ethnically Shona family, the notion of hybridity is reflected also in Vera's personal life.

historical tellings of the nation” (Quayson, *Calibrations* 87). Her debut novel, *Nehanda* (1993),¹⁸ is a patriotic work that deploys Zimbabwean historical mythology in the form of the spirit medium, Mbuya Nehanda; but, explaining to Jane Bryce that “Nehanda is really at the centre of our spiritual belief as a whole nation” (222), Vera, like Morrison, deliberately offers a female version of history which re-writes, because it asserts, the centrality of female participation in the national narrative.¹⁹ In this way, Vera’s is a revisionary, ‘feminist’ attempt to de-mythicize and politicize Zimbabwe’s national cultural narrative, as she does also in her final novel, *The Stone Virgins* (2002), which evokes the silenced bloody period of *Gukurahundi* from the perspective of two sisters in a delineation of the country’s violent, masculinist post-independent politics.

Notwithstanding the international thrust and appeal of her writing, her fiction is concerned with forcefully interrogating black women’s (un)belonging and with speaking the unspeakable *within* national, patriarchal culture.²⁰ In this respect, while Morrison’s thematic influence is evident in her novels, Yuleth Chigwedere’s assertion of Vera as a “cultural nationalist” working within the Afro-centric conceptual framework of African womanism (40-1) is debatable.²¹ At odds with African womanism’s principles of racial and cultural “complementarity, accommodation, compromise [and] negotiation” (Obiama 34), her fiction forcefully puts forward a “sexually inclusive understanding of feminist modernity” (Elder 96) that attempts to liberate Morrison’s embattled position on black female self-determination and autonomy.²² Albeit registering the concerns of African womanism and being sensitive to an ethos of cultural rootedness, her response to the socio-political position of black women is seemingly more rigorous and urgent, evidenced in her invocation of the African writer’s response to theme, event, taboo as “vital and pressing” (*OS* 5). In exhorting the woman writer

¹⁸ Vera also published a collection of shorts stories entitled *Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals*.

¹⁹ Although Zimbabwe is viewed as a masculine nation – a position underwritten in its literal Shona translation as “House of stones,” Nehanda, who together with Sekuru Kaguvi initiated the first *Chimurenga*, is often invoked as ancestral guardian of the nation.

²⁰ Vera studied for her doctoral degree at York University, Toronto, Canada, and is one of Zimbabwe’s most internationally acclaimed writers, evidenced in the translations of her fiction and her numerous literary awards including: the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Africa region) for *Under the Tongue* in 1997, the Voice of Africa Sweden (1999), the Macmillan Writer’s Prize for Africa for *The Stone Virgins* as well as the Initiative LiBeraturperei for the best novel in German translation in 2002. She was runner up for a NOMA Award and won the Premio Feronia, Italy, in the category of best foreign author for *Butterfly Burning* in 2003, and the Swedish PEN Tucholsky prize in 2004.

²¹ Ericah Gwetai’s biographical account of Vera in *Petal Thoughts* also highlights Morrison’s influence on the author.

²² While influenced by African-American womanism, African womanism is distinct in its primary concern “with the elevation of the African race” and community (Chigwedere 23). For more on this see Molaria Ogun-dipe-Leslie’s *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformation*, Susan Arndt’s *The Dynamics of African Feminism*, and Clara Hudson-Weems’ *African Womanist Theory*.

to “have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones” (*OS* 1), and in her characters’ often violent, corporeal insistence on and assertion of autonomy, Vera suggests that she conceptualizes the black female as a gendered subject in and of herself and not as a national cultural repository.²³ While she, like Morrison, views mainstream, Eurocentric feminism with caution, Vera would seem to recognize, as a character in fellow Zimbabwean author, Tsitsi Dangarembga’s, aptly entitled novel *Nervous Conditions* does, that the “business of womanhood is a heavy burden” (16). Urging that the position of women in Zimbabwe “be reexamined with greater determination and [as] a forceful idea for change” (qtd. in Larson 84), her woman-centred fiction of violated and violent women becomes a place from which to uncover and liberate black female subjectivity.

This chapter entails a transatlantic, as well as transnational and transcultural, reading of Vera and Morrison’s fiction and implies connections between African-American and black Zimbabwean assertions of female subjectivity. Comparisons of Vera and Morrison typically highlight the similarities of their content and form and only Ashleigh Harris has, to my knowledge, identified a “complex web of trans-Atlantic” understanding of blackness, “an associative form of reading in which the history of black Atlantic systems of meaning is implicit, but not constitutive” in and of the two authors’ fiction (7-8).²⁴ The chapter is an attempt to extend Harris’s thesis by offering a critical, comparative interpretation of their literary configurations of blackness, but suggesting, nevertheless, that Morrison’s influence is implicit in but not constitutive of Vera’s position. My comparison of the two authors, who write in different socio-geographical and temporal milieus, is to reveal how Vera’s work, in its ambitious articulation of “new modes of explication” (Egerer 21) and of “not yet imagined modes of being” (Durrant, *PN* 6) for black women, can be read as an extension and enhancement, as well as problematization, of Morrison’s culturally and communally entrenched vision of black womanhood.

In the following readings of *Without a Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996) and, most particularly, *Butterfly Burning* (1998), I will look to demonstrate how Vera’s fiction necessarily functions at the literary and political intersection of national, historical conceptions of the female body and self. However, by paying attention to her fiction’s

²³ My reading here deviates from Chigwedere’s assertion that Vera’s women identify themselves “within a nationalistic framework” (29), and is more in line with Elleke Boehmer’s reading of Vera’s fiction as putting forward an interactive subjectivity which, while proffering alternative modes of being for women, remains “nationalist in certain key respects” (“Beside the West,” 190-1).

²⁴ For another comparison of the two authors see Lizzy Attree’s “Language, Kwela Music and Modernity in *Butterfly Burning*.”

paradoxical articulation of body as specimen – in its graphic portrayal of abortion and its physical effects on the body, I will also suggest limitations to Vera’s intimations of a liberated black female subject; limitations which mean her writing is invariably at risk of recolonizing the female body and self. In this way, her writing articulates the tension between striving to embody, while simultaneously attempting to transcend/transform, the limitations of prescribed, normative constructions of black female subjectivity. Still, in her unconventional treatment of the major feminist concerns of the body and sexuality, Vera’s fiction envisions the radical possibility of black female individuation and individuality and anticipates the promise of subjective freedom even while suggesting the impossibility of freedom for the black Zimbabwean woman and the failure of attempts at resistance. Woman, in her fiction, is complexly figured as “an indeterminate subject status and continually ‘becoming’ identity” (Sylvester 24-5) that continuously signifies on an “emerging” postcolonial subjectivity.

(En)Gendering Violence and the Body in *Without a Name and Under the Tongue*

Without a Name (1994) and *Under the Tongue* (1996) delineate, in a deliberately non-linear, incoherent mode, the lives of physically abused and psychologically scarred women. In the former novel, the protagonist, Mazvita, is raped by an unknown liberation soldier and later finds herself pregnant by her boyfriend. In the latter, a young girl, Zhizha, is the victim of incest by her father. Echoing Morrison’s thematic concern with the sexually taboo and read consecutively, the novels’ titles imply that the lack of (female) identity/subjectivity presaged in the first novel is confirmed by the lack of (female) voice in the latter, and finally express what I argue to be a limited but validating experiential, bodily subjectivity explored in *Butterfly Burning* (1998), the primary text of this study.

Set in 1977 in pre-independent Zimbabwe and at the height of native guerrilla warfare, *Without a Name* employs the journey motif to trace the migration of Mazvita from the rural enclave of Mubaira to Harari Township in the urban landscape of colonial Harare. The novel suggests an analogy between her migratory status and the disillusionment surrounding the advent of independence. With no ties to the land, the young and independent Mazvita, whose name means “to give thanks” in a communal or ancestral sense, is not characterized by the serene contentment or sentiment of gratitude her name invokes. Instead, she is “restless,” with “no fear of departures” (39). Her quest for subjective “truth” and progress (40) is in

contradistinction to ancestral ways of knowing and being and she is typified by what Morrison delineates in her own fiction as cultural homelessness or rootlessness.

Lawrence Vambe's biographical description of the city of Harare as "an overpopulated bedlam of untidiness, filth and noise" (146) is matched and personified in the novel in the city's commitment "to a wild and stultifying indifference" (22). It both underlies and belies Mazvita's desire for existential and gendered freedom, for "someone new and different, someone she had not met" (67). Lacking an existential centre, hers is, like the people's immersion – pre-independence – in "fine Afro hair" and *Ambi* shops with "prepared Afro wigs," an "inchoate independence" characterized by superficial desires (55). The reference to the skin lightener *Ambi* here echoes Morrison's own concern with black rejection of 'authentic' "funkiness" in *The Bluest Eye* and implies black desire for symbols of whiteness as a kind of racial self-loathing. In that "Black had never been as beautiful as when it married slavery with freedom" (55), the emptiness, rather than vibrancy, of blackness is registered, and Mazvita, who wilfully espouses this ideology, epitomizes, not unlike Pecola, the (sense of) dispossession of the Zimbabwean people that is enacted in the war for liberation. The war makes "the people willing accomplices to distortions," but reality changes "everything, even the idea of their own humanity" (88). Echoing the sombre tonality of Morrison's debut novel and foreshadowing the violent post-independent period of *Gukurahundi* in her own, Vera intimates that (the anticipation of) true subjective liberation, is like the war, a "mask. A carnival" of "tentative promises quickly betrayed" (32, 21) and is as ephemeral as Mazvita's relationships with Nyenyedzi and Joel. Her deed of infanticide after she is raped therefore parallels the nation's disillusionment and is a suggestively symbolic act: "the sabotage of the national family at its root" (Boehmer, "Beside the West" 195).

Mazvita's infanticide is central to and disruptive of the cultural narrative on women's sexuality and gendered norms, and functions as the wilful rejection of the violence of an oppressive patriarchal national culture symbolized by the unidentified soldier who rapes her. Ironically described as "determined to discover parts of her that were hidden to herself" (97), the soldier's brutal physical violation of Mazvita echoes Cholly's rape of his daughter, Pecola, in the suggestion that it is fundamentally underlined by empathy and intimately parallels her own metaphysical search for self. The intimate, interrelational character of violence is here reinforced in the rapist calling Mazvita "*Hanzvadzi*," a deliberate term of identification that positions her as familial, cultural "sister" (35). In this way, in her fiction's oral and aural inflections – its specific cultural and idiomatic cadences, Vera, like Morrison, implies a causal relationship in which the violation of African women registers colonialism's

concomitant violation of African men in their cause for nationhood, and suggests rape – the violation of self – as a universally familiar, intimate metaphor for black Zimbabwean existence.

But the soldier's ironic, manipulative tone of voice here complicates the assertion that African orature indicates and affirms a unified "cultural space where authentic black identities are indisputably formed" (Vambe, *African Oral Story-telling Tradition* 2) by also locating, particularly for women, black cultural inauthenticity.²⁵ In this regard, it is telling that the omniscient narrator mediates the male perspective and that the soldier himself persists in turning away and keeping his face hidden from Mazvita. In foregrounding and centralizing her physical pain and violation, the novel does not only highlight his act as abusive; it implies the fundamentally destructive character of a gendered – patriarchal – national, cultural narrative: "He tore at her dress, pulled her legs away from her. He removed her legs from her body, and she lay still, not recognizing her legs as her own" (97). Illustrated in exacting vocabulary as physical dismemberment, the brutality of rape more profoundly points to Mazvita's metaphysical and ontological disabling and is thus situated as a crime of extreme, that is, existential, violence. As a result, her name is transformed to register the "barrenness" and "silence" (36) of her being and anticipates her infanticide when she finds herself pregnant with her partner, Joel's, child.

Read as the sexual and bodily betrayal of her opportunity at subjectivity, Mazvita's pregnancy is viewed synonymously with rape as an act of violence upon and violation of the woman's ability to attain individual selfhood. In this way, Vera revisits but revises in the novel the theme of motherhood in *Beloved* by unambiguously positing motherhood as a form of slavery – enslavement to the dictates of patriarchal national culture. For Mazvita, maternity is "figured as an uncanny return of a repressed history" (Palmer 43) of patriarchal terror and, disavowing traditional and archetypal notions of motherhood, her infanticide signals, not unlike Sethe's murder of her daughter Beloved, the "permutations of her misery" (WN 43):

She stood with the baby balanced on one arm. She took a black tie from a rack in a corner of the room and dropped it over the child's neck ... She drew the bottom end of the tie across the baby's neck ... She had managed a constricting knot from which the child could not survive. She felt the neck break and fall over her wrist. She felt the bone at the bottom of the neck tell her that the child had died. The bone broke softly.

²⁵ For an interesting comparative reading on the challenges of black culture and its particular impact on African-American, female subjectivity see Kevin Everod Quashie's *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)Becoming the Subject*.

The sound of it lingered long after she had heard it. The neck was broken. Still, she held the knot firmly between her fingers, for a while longer. She released the knot. The head swung back and fell onto her palm, because she had broken it. She had broken the neck of her child. (109)

The detailed, yet strangely tender account of infanticide is here quite different from Morrison's descriptive brevity and emphasis on the act's grotesquery in *Beloved* and suggests more profoundly the ironic intimacy of the violent process. The image of mother and baby evokes the ritual of maternal community, underpinned by the intimacy of the vulnerable child in the presence of its mother. Ironically, its silent "cooperation" (108) and trusting willingness directs the focus and reinforces the novel's emphasis on "she," Mazvita, who, in actively taking the life of her passive child, asserts her agency by conducting a "ceremony" of self-freedom (108). Her metamorphosis into the image of a bird, "winged and passionate" (109) is, as in Morrison's work, symbolic, but suggests, in contrast to *Beloved's* ambivalent imaging of the black female, a more sensitive, personal statement of woman's right to her own individual subjectivity, her "design to be free" (74). Through her violence, Mazvita is able to access (an)other, transcendental realm of female existence, "a completely new horizon" of womanhood, a space of "brave pronouncements still" (108, 111).

Robert Muponde here reads Mazvita as an "archetypal martyr in the struggle against a national culture" ("Land" 1), and Felicity Palmer, who notes the "deliberate elegance and beauty" of the description of infanticide, argues that the scene reflects Vera's "utter empathy with and investment in her characters' desires" (43). But although she, like Morrison, deliberately employs a lyrical language which ironically aestheticizes and complicates conventional perceptions of violence, its simultaneously emphatic candour does not "anaesthetize the reader into an a-critical reading" of her work (Muchemwa 3).²⁶ Like the musical sound of the mbira which permeates the novel as a sign of the promise of freedom, the lyrical persuasion of Vera's language dies "in slow undecided rhythms," as the poetic "notes collapse" (80) from a seductive, elusive depiction of violence, into heavy, weighted sentences that simultaneously unveil the brutality of that violence.

This suggests, then, the dissolution rather than achievement of Mazvita's subjectivity.²⁷ With the emphasis on "she" taking on a progressively sinister, accusatory tone, the novel registers her state of trance-like "madness" (107) in which she sees "nothing of the wildness

²⁶ Lizzy Attree, for example, notes that Vera shares with Morrison "a flexibility and dexterity with language that intentionally creates fluctuations in meaning" (65).

²⁷ The mbira is a common traditional instrument in Zimbabwe and is made of hollow wooden gourd with metal protrusions played predominantly between the thumb and the forefinger.

in her actions, of the eyes dilating, of her furrowed brow, of her constricted face, of her elongated arms, of her shoulders stiff” (109). Reminiscent of Sethe when she commits infanticide, this monstrous image of Mazvita implies, as does the ambivalent tone of awe and revulsion in the narratorial voice, that her action is rooted in vulnerability and premised on (irrational) desperation – a kind of abjection – rather than being indicative of any sense of subjective empowerment. In that the description of her here takes on an animalistic tenor, the novel hints at her own de-subjective process. Moreover, while she renders her child dead object, its death lives, hauntingly, in the shadows of what she perceives as her burgeoning subjectivity so that the scene’s emphasis on fragmentation at the end does not just refer to the macabre image of a child’s broken neck, but signifies on the incongruity of Mazvita’s own subjectivity.

In this fragile positionality she is, not unlike Sethe, “responsible for some horrible and irreversible truth concerning her actions” (110) which reveal the violence of autonomy to responsible interrelational subjectivity. But her assertion of subjectivity does not carry the racial-cultural resonance or weight that Sethe’s does in *Beloved*. Mazvita is essentially characterized by an existential vacuity that is all the more tragic because located in her individual, gendered being. Hers is “a silence that she held tightly within her body” (34) and in which “the hollow spaces within her remained hollow” (70). Without a name and rootless, she does however, have a “burning on her tongue” of something “large and unrecognizable” (110). Her existential ‘silence’ becomes an empowering space of and for subjective (r)evolution (35) and coincides with her return to her village which, albeit a traditionally female communal space, more aptly symbolizes the place of her subjective “beginning” (116). In this way, the (r)evolutionary adult Mazvita anticipates the voiceless and vulnerable female child in *Under the Tongue* who marks that place and space of subjective beginning.

‘Speaking’ Violence, ‘Speaking’ the Self in *Under the Tongue*

Under the Tongue delineates the traumatic effects on a young girl, Zhizha, of incestuous rape by her father, Muroyiwa, whose name in Shona idiom tellingly means “cursed” or “bewitched” (156) and implies not just his own existential misfortune but indicates his deleterious effect on his daughter’s subjectivity. Yet Muroyiwa is also associated with delicate butterflies and is, like Cholly Breedlove, feminized as a victim of his pre-independent milieu. In the colonial black township, social impoverishment and human degradation parallel the horrors of the liberation war in which “[o]ne had to be unremarkable,

somehow, silent as death ... It was the similarity between voices that was crucial to living, to creating a landscape spoiled with fear, made pure with desires” (167-8). As in *Without a Name*, *Under the Tongue* highlights dispossessed (individual) subjectivity as connected to the violent struggle for nationhood. But while sympathetic to male plight, Vera is careful not to repeat the obscurantist, potentially corrosive mantras of a patriarchal national discourse in which “chants are not words, they are part of the camouflage which buries words ... and make identities difficult to discover” (168). Like Morrison, Vera here humanizes nationalized masculinity; but she more pointedly articulates the vulnerability and desires of women as gendered subjects within a national economy, highlighting how the political becomes personal, and vice versa, within the parameters of forcibly sexualized subjectivity.

In *Under the Tongue*, the female perspective is again centralized and the female community, which is situated generationally and genealogically, expresses a lineage of pain and sorrow; it is also, however, regenerative, as signalled in the feminized and sexualized natural images of water and moon (130-33). In proffering a Kristevan-like ‘semiotics’ of womanhood, the novel suggests that women inhabit subjectivity differently from men: “We are women. We belong together in the ancient caress of the earth. We are full of giving like the parting of clouds, gently falling, carrying the promises of growth, of a season serene with maturation.” (132). As the text’s central character, Zhizha, whose name lyrically recalls “the soft fall of rain after harvest” (136), nominally reinforces the idea of female continuity in the novel. In a scene that echoes the communitarian premise of *Beloved*, she articulates the connectedness of womanhood: “Mother’s name is me. Runyararo is the name of my grandmother because she gave the name to my mother. Mother carries Grandmother’s name for her. I am mother.... Zhizha, I say. That is also my mother. I am mother” (136).

While Vera arguably risks essentializing and mythologizing woman here, she equally asserts an African, contextual specificity, rather than advocates a particular mode of being. Nature does not here represent “transcendent beneficence”; in its fluid representation it reflects the world or life “through its contradictions and antagonisms” (Shaw, “The Habit of Assigning Meaning” 26). While a symbol of hope and promise, the moon also represents, in their sexualisation and acculturation, women’s “departing innocence” (133) and the burden of womanhood: “The woman on the moon is bearing a load on her head. She has travelled through the sky. She has seen all the pain of the world” (132). Similarly, the ambivalence of the notion of womanhood is revealed in the fact that although the dialogic triad of female voices recalls the community of female voices in *Beloved*, they do not here dissolve into circumscribed monologue. Zhizha also sees her mother’s individuality: “mother. My mother

not me my mother Runyararo ... This is the name of birth and I must return the name to her where she can find it” (135). Together with the largely first-person narrative voice and the focus on interior monologue, *Under the Tongue* suggests, instead, the significance of articulating individual, differentiated, female subjectivity within female community.

The central image of the tongue, then, symbolizes not merely the speech act itself but, in the case of the generically silent and silenced female, signifies voice as a mode of survival and a necessary means to autonomous subjective life: “A tongue which no longer lives, no longer weeps. It is buried beneath rock” (121). As *The Bluest Eye* insinuates, the silent or silenced female is here “the opposite of life ... the distortion of birth” (226), an aberration that simultaneously precedes and precludes her attainment of subjectivity. The tongue’s physicality and its personified orality here emphasize its metaphysical, subjective resonance and Zhizha muses: “I know the word begins with me. I hold the word between my fingers. I hold tight and the word grows deep under my tongue. The word cannot be forgotten” (161). Unlike the chorus of women in *Beloved* who articulate a pre-discursive/pre-symbolic subjectivity, the stress on the tactility of “the word” suggests the authority and agency of (verbal) language/discourse.

Recalling her own account of being “consumed by” the writing process (qtd. in Mutandwa 1), Vera here demonstrates a Bakhtinian “artistic consciousness” which “fully realizes itself within its own language ... directly without mediation” (*Dialogic Imagination* 285). That is, hers is a genuine belief or artistic investment in the political power of language and its ability to illuminate, express and give substance to female subjectivity, evidenced in the novel in Zhizha’s depiction of her rape by her father:

I hear breathing, violent, breathing, on rock. A rigid silence.
Father ... between my legs.

Wet between my legs. Blood-wet wetness. Not flowing wet. Slippery.
Not so loud.
He put mucus here, and blood...
Quiet.
He put mucus between my legs...
Quiet.
Am I going to die?
Quiet.
He broke my stomach... (228)

Carolyn Shaw has described Vera’s writing as packing “such an emotional wallop” (“Turning” 38) and in the delineation of child rape above, her descriptive candidness images

words as “weapons,” evoking at the same time that they invoke the violent, material character of black African female subjectivity (*OS* 5, 2). In that it does not facilitate healing from violence or provide “tonic” (Nyathi 111) for a tormented subjectivity, her fiction does not exhibit quite the same remedial cadence or ambiguously utopic quality as Morrison’s. In this sincere, personified depiction of Zhizha’s rape – “Wet between my legs. Blood-wet wetness. Not flowing wet. Slippery,” Vera attempts to linguistically inhabit and emphasize the female child’s physical and psychic vulnerability and violation; the aberrant character of the act is implied also in the narrative gaps: “Father ... between my legs,” which is punctuated by literal and metaphoric silence: “Quiet.” In this way, Vera’s writing functions within a pervasively patriarchal culture as a political and embodied expression that reflects and refracts the violent power dynamics of society, necessarily and aggressively confronting and interjecting in culturally “stifled space,” forcefully opening it up for the inclusion of women and their subjective experiences (Hikwa 103).

The novel’s predominant motif, however, as its title suggests, is an ambiguous silence, and in its circuitous and disjointed plot structure, as well as in its temporal disjuncture and non-chronological, faltering narrative voices, is the simultaneous implication of language’s ambivalence; an inability to perform a cohesive and coherent subjective narrative that can articulate the taboo of incest and its traumatic effects. Tellingly, Zhizha’s sexual abuse, like Pecola’s, is never explicitly mentioned in the novel only aesthetically inferred, for to ‘speak’ in this context is not just a political, cultural risk; it is to commit self-violence and self-dissolution: “It is death when such things are told” (229). As such, while suggesting that literature as a creative medium offers particular prospects for communicating and transforming psychic trauma as it is frequently experienced by victims of violence, the novel also suggests in its narrative obscurity “the absence of language and meaning such experiences originally provoke,” and thus puts forward a “specifically vulnerable system of values and meanings” (Kopf 243, 245).

While signifying black female trauma, Vera’s lyrical language, her generically dense use of metaphor and symbolism which acts as a substitute for verbal articulation, becomes so allusive in its aesthetic attempt to represent and even transcend lived experience that it becomes obscure; it fails to adequately unmask the “many unspoken things ... the things of inside, not spoken” (151). In utilizing such a “vulnerable” referential signifying system, her signification of violence becomes as “slippery” as the act itself. Like the (news) paper thrown into the fire by grandfather in frustration, Vera’s opaque words/sentences “curl, curve, break,

and collapse” (164) onto themselves to leave epistemological breaches that parallel Zhizha’s divested subjectivity, her physical and ontological disembodiment.

In this regard, the novel’s silences, which ironically seem to correspond with the deviant tonality of the sexual act, cannot be read, as Bettina Weiss argues, in a “quite liberating way” (66).²⁸ Albeit potentially subversive, the oppressive character of silence to the subjective project simultaneously situates it within the domain of violence. While attempting to mirror the trauma of the event itself, the act of writing here becomes, as Meg Samuelson notes and as evidenced in Zhizha’s permanently interior monologue, “a potentially traumatic event [that] threatens to settle into an even more all-encompassing silence” until language is “brought into the realm of the female body” (19-20). That is, contending that “the place of the woman” is limited to “the place of the imagination” (qtd. in Primorac, “The Place of the Woman” 160-63), Vera’s writing simultaneously assumes a tactile quality or tonality rooted in the materiality of the female body and functions as a kind of transcendental ‘bodily’ language that attempts to articulate while transcending the culturally-encoded strictures of black female subjectivity. Tellingly, the rape scene is here – with the emphatic imagery of forcefully parted legs and a broken stomach, like Mazvita’s rape, described in acutely physical terms that emphasize Zhizha’s corporeality. Later articulated in a stream of consciousness mode, language assumes a more urgent, tactile quality, effectively deteriorating, breaking down, to reflect, embody the physical trauma of Zhizha’s sexual abuse: “My bones are broken and crushed ... A sudden shove, brutal and repeated. My knee breaks, slides sideways, contracts. My elbows are bruised and broken” (230). The accent on the corporeal does not imply the body’s anteriority or superiority to language, but positions language and body as interchangeable in Vera’s vision; that is, the body here gives ‘voice’ to and attempts to transcend the silent nuances of the self.

The female body is situated, like Zhizha’s mother, Runyararo’s, tactile craft of mat-making, as “both a record of adversity and limitation as well as an empowering form of communication” (Hemmings, “How All Life is Lived” 236).²⁹ Echoing the distinctly female craft of quilt-making in *Beloved*, *Under the Tongue* more pointedly suggests symmetry

²⁸ Weiss argues that silence embodies the unspeakable and therefore functions as a form of agency. While not incorrect that silence functions as an alternative mode of language, I argue that silence, especially in the case of (the narrative of) a child or adolescent, cannot function effectively as an “option to overcome oppression, violation, and traumatic experiences” (54), as this affords the child /adolescent with a cognisance and agency I believe incompatible with its limited lived experience; silence in this instance is situated, rather, within the field of trauma and violence.

²⁹ For more on the function of craft in Vera’s fiction see Hemmings’ “The Voice of Cloth: Interior Dialogues and Exterior Skins.”

between Runyararo's craft as embodied "record" and "empowering form" and Vera's literary art: "It was the making of the mat which was important, the symmetry of mats, not their material" (189). In deliberately resisting a linear structure and in disrupting narrative coherency in this novel, in abandoning the traditional protocols of language for her own experimental form of writing, Vera signifies, as Jessica Hemmings notes, "her desire to write beyond and outside preconceived structures and ways of knowing" ("How All Life is Lived" 249) and being. This desire to both embody and exceed culturally-determined epistemological and subjective imperatives is demonstrated in *Butterfly Burning* where her protagonist's symbolic act of self-immolation registers the limited but validating experience of black female subjectivity while simultaneously articulating, for the emergent black female, a persistent, affirmative desire for self-creation or self-actualization.

Emergent Subjectivity in *Butterfly Burning*

Published in 1998, *Butterfly Burning* is arguably Vera's most widely read and critically acclaimed novel. The text utilizes a relatively simple plot that makes for more accessible reading than Vera's previous work but does not detract from the seriousness of her thematic concerns and the depth of her inquiry into the experiences of black female subjectivity. In the *Complete Review* Adele Newson described *Butterfly Burning* as "[r]ichly poetic while also brutally realistic," and Charles Larson concurred that it left "an indelible impression on the reader" (2). Mandivavarira Taruvinga's review in the *Independent Extra* in 1999 proclaimed it a novel of "deep insight and understanding" in its celebration of "womanhood in all its vicissitudes and intensity of living" (14), and in the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* in 2003 Michelle Cliff lauded Vera's attempt at presenting women who long "to decolonize themselves" (3). In this instance, the decolonizing impulse is located within and exacerbated by a patriarchal, masculinist (modern, urban) colonial economy and ideology that ironically informed the nation's liberation struggle and directed its increasingly prescriptive and restrictive cultural discourse.

Set predominantly in the 1940s, the novel provides a vivid portrayal of black colonial township life as universally degraded and destitute. Crucial to this is the image of the seventeen hanging insurrectionaries killed during the first liberation struggle – *Chimurenga* –

of 1896.³⁰ Described as “silhouettes” (12), the image of the men invokes the notion of racially denied subjectivity in which blackness, black masculinity in particular, is characterized by profound dispossession: “The work is not their own: it is summoned. The time is not theirs: it is seized” (5). The novel here suggests parallels between colonialism and African-American slavery as it is depicted in *Beloved* – as “social death”. Yet *Butterfly Burning* is not merely an indictment of colonialism or “an urgent call to confront the effects of white terror,” as Maya Vinuesa states (1). Not dissimilar to Morrison’s “black” fiction in that it attempts the recovery of a black identity and subjectivity, Vera’s postcolonial critique of colonialism is “intrinsic, never intrusive” (Cliff 1); where Morrison deliberately establishes a causal relationship between American whiteness and the poverty of black subjectivity, Vera’s reference to the (negative) impact of colonial whiteness on black Zimbabweans is often subtle and opaque.³¹ The novel’s lyrical representation of the men as a “dark elegy,” and the poetic image of “[t]he feet of dancers who have left the ground” (11), presents a complex celebration of the ambiguity and tenacity of black life in which black people take ownership of their “fate” (5) in an historically pivotal spatial and temporal milieu characterized by a growing black political consciousness evidenced not least in the national railway strikes of 1945 and in increased migration to the city of Bulawayo.

Established in 1894 as an exclusively white city with strict regulations on race relations and black movement, Bulawayo’s proximity to the black township ironically problematized and blurred the obvious lines of racial and cultural demarcation. Ranger notes in *Bulawayo Burning* that the city was “in reality very much a shared creation of whites and blacks” (25) and Tsuneo Yoshikuni explains that as a result, “its agglomeration very much resembled ... the ‘dual town’ possessing within itself both colonial and indigenous elements” (117). In *Butterfly Burning* the city is “like the train. It too is churning smoke in every direction ... it too is moving” (53), its chaotic energy mirroring a decidedly hybrid and fluid diasporic space characterized by the interplay of traditional Ndebele culture and modern colonial tenets. The novel captures a transitional, vibrant moment in Zimbabwe’s history and uses it as an exploration for the possibilities of black national, but especially, individual self-formation.

Underpinning the significance of the novel’s urban setting is the variegated architectural character of Bulawayo city, which demanded of black people “totally different self-images and patterns of behaviour and adaptation” (Kaarsholm 242). The city’s ability to construct

³⁰ These historical figures recall the hanging of Mbuya Nehanda by the colonial government and became a symbol for the Zimbabwean revolution. Their imaging here also echoes and mirrors the black “boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world” (7) in *Beloved*.

³¹ Significantly, Vera’s doctoral dissertation is entitled *The Prison of Colonial Space*.

“infrastructures of the self” (Nuttall, “Inside the City” 178) results in vibrant and affirmative, albeit somewhat traumatized, black subjectivities. Despite their restricted movement and persistent surveillance, black people live and work “within the cracks. Unnoticed and unnoticeable,” exhibiting remarkable subjective dexterity, the ability to “vanish,” to “move through the city with speed and due attention, to bow their heads down and slide past walls, to walk without making the shadow more pronounced than the body or the body clearer than the shadow” (6). Living in the interstice, in the metaphoric shadow of racism generally and of whiteness in particular, recalls the African-American situation depicted in *The Bluest Eye* but which in this instance necessitates and underscores the reinvention and chaotic agency of black subjectivity within the urban colony. Here, black “bodies long for flight, not surrender” and black survival is premised on obstinate desire, a “pulse” (8) encapsulated in the ambiguously passionate, migratory sounds of Southern African Kwela music – “loud, and small, lively, living” (5) – described as emanating from an adaptable, emotionally nuanced, word which replicates a variegated black existence and which evokes black capacity for endurance.

(En)gendering Female Subjectivity

Indicatively, the city is positioned as a definitively masculine space and economy. Koni Benson and Joyce Chadya’s study of gender and sexual violence in colonial Bulawayo observes a high prevalence of rape in the city, an occurrence directly linked to the fact that it was an androcentric space. But although of limited, gendered access, the city also offered varied economic and social alternatives, as well as signified enhanced sexual mobility for black Zimbabwean women. Benson and Chadya note that African women “fought to have a say in defining city behaviour especially when men tried to cast women as sexual objects” (603). Despite the legislative and cultural attempts – highlighted in the introduction to the chapter – to contain them, the patriarchal colonial system ironically became a site of liberation for black women and contributed to the redefinition of social relations on female terms. In the articulation of a “feminized urban culture” (Ranger, *Bulawayo Burning* 131), women constructed their freedom and resistance subversively around their bodies as “weapons for surviving in the cracks inherent in the gendered economy” (Musila 58). Within a restrictively racialized and gendered colonial enterprise and at a time of a simultaneously burgeoning masculinist cultural national discourse, then, it is significant that the women in

Butterfly Burning live daringly “in the alleys and cloistered night bars”; they no longer have the “strength” (56-7) for subservience.

The notion of female liberation is thematized in the novel through the protagonist, Phephelaphi, whose ambition is to become the city’s first black nurse. She is a “woman who chose her own destination and liked to watch the horizon change from pale morning to blue light” (63). Despite this romanticization and in spite of their different aspirations, Phephelaphi is, in her decisiveness, reflected in the iconic, fearless fifty year-old prostitute, Deliwe, whose eyes “held scorpions” (61) and who runs a shebeen, a dwelling from which she illicitly sells alcohol and for which she is brutally punished. In her persistent defiance of Rhodesian law and its subjective strictures, Deliwe is envisioned as “some kind of sun” to Phephelaphi’s own “horizon” (63) and signals the young protagonist’s “mad” hope (61) for subjective fulfilment; as does Zandile, Phephelaphi’s biological mother, who is a vendor of cosmetic products and whose impenitent sexuality offers “the feel and texture of desire” (94). It is “the movement forward—the entrance into something new and untried” that marks Phephelaphi’s female subjectivity (71). Her metaphoric association with water – rising out of the river in an almost mythologized manner – signals her existential mutability, a condition reflected in her name which onomatopoeically invokes the notion of flight or the fluid movement of butterfly wings. Her failed relationship with the older, traditional Fumbatha underlines her desire for individuality, for a sense of belonging which does not rest “on another’s wondrous claims” but emanates from “within her own land, from her own body” (81).

Phephelaphi’s conflation of land and body here reveals the socio-political stakes involved for women in received, customary representations of the body which have the capacity to confirm gender/sexual difference and hierarchy; she thus hints at while simultaneously rewriting stereotypically sexualized and gendered, patriarchal national representations of the land as female or feminized object of appropriation. In intimately appropriating her own body as land, Phephelaphi divests it of any iconic, maternal signification and reclaims her human, female self. The body becomes an emancipatory locus that is undermined when she finds out she is pregnant with Fumbatha’s child. As a pregnant woman, she is “nothing but a shallow substance” (110); the alliterated oxymoron – “shallow substance” – highlighting how, as with Mazvita, pregnancy does not for her symbolize subjective fulfilment. In this regard, it is interesting that Phephelaphi’s subsequent act of abortion, which indicates the death of her child and the destruction of her body, simultaneously signifies her metaphysical, subjective (re)birth. Moreover, it is significant that the violent act occurs on and is intimately connected

with the land so that the female body is simultaneously materialized and politicized as the rejection of a mythical, patriarchal national ideology of female maternalism. The physical violence of abortion renders it a kind of ‘body politic’ or political statement of a similarly abortive and aborted (by women) cultural narrative.

This conflicts with the traditional Afro-centric, Africanist position that African women “find empowerment from their children and families” (Nfah-Abbenyi 24) and destabilizes the assertion that “motherhood in African literature peripherizes violence” by women (Nnaemeka 11). Calling to mind and extending Buchi Emecheta’s ironically entitled *The Joys of Motherhood*, in which the protagonist, Nnu Ego, comes to view maternalism in pre- and post-independent Nigeria as a complicated “chain of slavery” (209) characterized by the woman’s self-sacrifice, Vera’s *Butterfly Burning* resists the biologizing and acculturating impulse of African womanism by centralizing motherhood as itself a violent process or state of desubjectivity. Phephelaphi, with purposeful resilience, procedurally and symbolically uses a rudimentary thorn from a nearby bush to deploy violent resistance to an imposed national cultural narrative in a scene described in twelve pages of relentlessly vivid, gory detail, the cumulative effect of which, as Eva Hunter notes, “is to function as an assault, one that gains its own symbolic weight, upon ‘the culture’s’ beliefs surrounding the iconic maternal” (240):³²

Push. She has pushed it in. Sharp and piercing. No fear. No excitement. This must be. In and out of a watery sac. Slowly she receives it as though this motion will provide an ecstatic release. Her hand is steady inside her body. Her own hand inserting an irreversible harm ... Her body accepts each of her motions, her legs spread open, wider, both knees now raised higher and higher into the forever light of day, listening for the tremor she anticipates, and she feels it ... A hurt lingers. Wave after wave and the lukewarm warmth is thickening and brave. It is her own vessel filled to capacity. It is herself, her own agony spilling over some fine limit of becoming which she has ceased to understand, too light and heavy. It is she. She embraces it, braces for the tearing. Her body breaks like decayed wood. Deep in the near deep of her, so close it is so deep and near in the same instant. She dares not look at her own harm. It is too near and new ... The pain is more than she imagines. It is cutting. (115-6)

In the proliferation of short and precise, almost “cutting” sentences Vera again images words as “weapons” which reflect the profoundly horrific physical violence of the act of abortion. Yet the attentive detail to female biology and the intimate tonality of her language simultaneously situates violence in the field of intimacy. Her exacting and familiar language

³² As a part of that – nature – which is symbolically conflated with African womanhood, Phephelaphi’s use of the thorn here functions as a symbolic subversion of and assault on mythologized national cultural narratives.

here underlies the female subject's determinedness to defy culturally prescribed narratives of womanhood in the reclamation of her body and her self. Dorothy Driver and Meg Samuelson note how "[b]oldness of theme" is served by a concomitant "boldness of technique" in Vera's writing (175), and Robert Muponde recognizes the "sheer energy and brutality of her poetic prose" ("Shattering the Taboo" 17) which invigorates and revivifies female subjectivity in a tenor quite dissimilar to Morrison's in its vitality. Vera herself described writing to Ranka Primorac as something that "should beat. You must feel it ... You must feel it and experience it as something which transforms you" ("The Place of the Woman" 165), and in "Writing Near the Bone" she explains that "[t]he woman I am is inside the writing, embraced and freed by it." In her musically intoned, vibrant terminology and in positioning writing as central to articulating both the lived reality and the desires of women, Vera envisages writing as a purposively emotive, affecting tool and exercise from which to "uncover the emotional havoc" of the experience of female subjectivity (558) and at the same time relay the urgency of female desire. .

Imaging the body as "vessel" to her self, as a veritable anchorage in and way of expressing the female world, Vera here recalls Morrison's imaging of African-American women as both "safe harbor and ship" (qtd. in Tate 161). But where Morrison's double metaphor stresses the incongruity and fundamental ambiguity of black women's subjectivity, Vera's analogy suggests existential assuredness in which her body is "herself." Her emphasis on the physicality and temporality of the violent act above is precisely to enforce the experiential presence of women within national patriarchal culture. As a simultaneous mode of resistance, it also signals a metaphysics of the body; it marks a return "to the body-as-corporeal" where conventional discourses on gender relations persist in advocating for interventions for the empowerment of women at the discursive level (Musila 54). As with Morrison's proposal of a corporeal discourse in *Beloved*, Vera's thematization of female corporeality in her novel is a literary intervention that, in unveiling the ways in which the discourse of cultural nationalism is inscribed onto the female body, interrogates and undermines reductive and restrictive representations of women by situating womanhood in the very materiality of woman's physical self. That is, Vera suggests that it is here, at the site of the violated and violent body – the body in pain, that woman is able to emancipate her metaphysical/ontological self while sabotaging a national cultural narrative.

The Body in Pain: (Em)bodying Female Subjectivity

In *Butterfly Burning* body and metaphysical desire are suggestively interchangeable and in the destruction of her own body, Phephelaphi attains metaphysical substance, repossessing and taking ownership of her body in order to acquire her self. The narrator explains: “She has to accept her own pain in order to believe it, to live in it, to know its true and false nuances, for she desires desperately what is beyond the pain ... Just to be” (116). The interchangeability of body and (the expression and achievement of) self is implied also in “Writing Near the Bone” where Vera invokes the feminist, postcolonial resonance of “writing the body” in her description of using her own body as “a writing surface” when a child: “The words formed light grey intermingling paths that meant something to our imagination and freed us ... We felt the words in gradual bursts of pain ... pulsating still, unable to be quiet” (559). In the literal, tangible translation of the word into bodily pain, Vera here and in the novel transforms the experience, as Zoe Norridge argues elsewhere, into “more than a ‘memory’, a ‘wound’, or a ‘theory’, instead lending to hurt the immediacy and poignancy of the present” (1) and situates black female subjectivity within a materialist, lived and living paradigm. Rendering the body more than just a national cultural narrative and investing it with palpable, “pulsating” subjective resonance, the body in pain substantiates female subjectivity; in embracing the pain, “[d]eep in the near deep of her, so close it is so deep and near in the same instant” (*BB* 116), woman’s physicality is necessarily constitutive of and regenerative in the subjective process.

In this regard, Vera’s female bodies (in pain), as Judith Butler claims in *Bodies that Matter*, indicate “a world beyond themselves” (ix) which includes their embodied reality but is not reducible to it, and Vera utilizes a kind of transcendental ‘bodily’ writing that simultaneously evokes and invokes the experiential quality, without containment, of black female subjectivity. That is, in the attempt to represent or inhabit women’s experiences without repressing or inhibiting their subjective aspirations, Vera’s writing engenders the *materializing* of possibilities for women.³³ Tellingly, the descriptive emphasis in Phephelaphi’s violent act is on ‘she’ rather than the child so as to establish a correlate between her physical violence/self harm and the validation of her subjectivity. Her consequent bodily dissolution “in the true substance of pain” thus ironically affirms “the weight of her own suffering, the weight of courage” (118). Her body in pain is a performance

³³ See Butler’s “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay on Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.”

or act “of self-retrieval” (Muponde, “Shattering the taboos” 17) demonstrated in her associative transformation from fluid and tenuous water into triumphant, potent “fire and flame,” an apotheosis that marks her achievement of and ascension to a higher plane of subjectivity as the figuratively poetic image of “riotous release” (125) – a “butterfly burning.”

In her interview with Jane Bryce in 2000, Vera explained that one of her main goals was “to bring the reader as close as possible to an experience ... without crudity, with a certain elegance, so you feel you can still endure it and see beauty” (222-3). This echoes Morrison’s own delineation (to Charles Ruas) of her depiction of violence as unorthodox and purposively affective. Similarly, the metaphoric description of Phephelapi’s abortion as a “butterfly burning” affectively reflects the impulse behind and intimacy of the subjective process. But notwithstanding the incongruity of the image of a butterfly burning, there is a disturbing discrepancy between the physical accent of the violence of the act and its aestheticization that disrupts its efficacy. Elaine Scarry has argued that physical pain does not simply “resist language but actively destroys” or negates it and, warning that much “is at stake in the attempt to invent linguistic structures that will reach and accommodate this area of experience normally so inaccessible to language,” she contends that ‘the story of *expressing* physical pain eventually opens into the wider frame of *invention*’ (4-6, 23). Because physical pain harbours its own paradoxical specificity – it occurs within oneself but it is at once identified as outside oneself and is thus constituted by and experienced as negation of the self – it evades and cannot be adequately or appropriately articulated in language; that is, the body in pain has a specificity that actively works to obfuscate and exceed, while simultaneously grounding, the subjective enterprise. With no referential content and concomitantly doing violence to the subjective, the body in pain can find no genuine and authentic, substantive expressible outlet within a linguistic paradigm and thus forces the writer into a ‘superficial,’ exaggerated realm of creativity. Vera’s writing is not exempt. Terence Ranger has described Vera as prone to linguistic “embroidery” which not only heightens the “frustrating, quite indigestible” quality of her writing, but in its extravagance says something about the limits of language in articulating lived physical experience.³⁴ What is imagined as a profoundly physical act is given, because it is heavily aestheticized, a lyrical, sentient quality at odds with its materiality.

Rosemary Jolly argues, however, that the “difficulty with placing pain outside language is that it involves a concomitant, implicit tendency to assume that language and the imagination

³⁴ This interview was conducted with the professor at his home in Oxford in June 2012.

are not involved in constructing the conditions in which humans inflict bodily harm” (*Cultured Violence* 22). As Morrison’s delineation of rape in *The Bluest Eye* reveals, aestheticized language certainly risks further inflicting and perpetuating violence; in this instance, Vera’s placement of pain inside language ironically compromises its effectiveness by creating conditions that impose subjective harm. That is, in the excessive poetic imaging or aestheticization of violence the emphasis shifts to visualising the gruesome act and envisioning the body in pain and, because now situated within a cognitive realm, has the paradoxical effect of obfuscating the materiality of Phephelaphi’s experience and disrupting her subjective project. This then registers the poignant irony that violence is violent or violating because, exceeding the exigencies of the subject and the subjective, it “disrupts the possessive grammar of claiming any such experience as our own” (Kilby 9). Because the violated or violated body retains within itself “the memory as well as the marks of violence,” it elides the discursive and erases the subject out of the equation by transforming s/he into an “object inseparable from the body” (Chandra 35-6). Vera’s linguistic, aestheticized focus on the violent experience of the body here has, in much the same way, the odd and paradoxical effect of rendering Phephelaphi a spectacle of violence and thus recolonizes woman into the realm of symbolic object.

Primorac tellingly observes that in Vera’s fiction women “lack the power to fully possess their own bodies” in the subjective process (“Blood on the Sand” 14). This is because the body presents an existential dilemma. Because it is inevitably inscribed and marked by external and internal social pressures – it exists within and inhabits the social – the body is rendered an historical cultural artefact. Notwithstanding its acculturation, however, the body exists also on its own irreducible terms apart from the self and that exceed the subjective; that is, bodies have a concreteness and specificity separate from and that persistently evades subjective imperatives so that the “‘treatment’ of the body as a figure of speech violates the body by translating it into a term in a representative scheme” (Jolly, *Colonization* 8). This demonstrates the difficulty or limits of articulating or placing subjectivity through and in the body. Vera’s linguistic, aestheticized treatment of the violated or violent body as (symbolic) expression of ‘self’ does not just violate the body (and its own imperatives); by placing it within a restrictive representative schema it appears to exceed and thus defer woman’s possibility of metaphysical/ontological subjectivity. In this regard, her utilization of an ambiguous transcendental ‘bodily’ writing, her emphasis on both female creativity and corporeality, invokes the ambivalence of black female subjectivity, yet itself becomes an endeavour at risk of destabilizing the subjective project of the black female.

Detecting a “pattern of symbolization compulsion” in her novels, Ato Quayson suggests that Vera’s fiction be interpreted “as an *acting out* rather than a *working through* entrapment within the experiential structure” of patriarchy (*Calibrations* 90); in symbolically acting out or enacting a violated and violent female subjectivity, she paradoxically (and unwittingly) works within and underwrites the gendered parameters of a national patriarchal cultural discourse. Operating within the confines of already established directives, Vera’s focus on woman as a gendered self fails to adequately deconstruct the normative imperatives of gender itself; her linguistic articulation of ‘woman’ misses how this gendered category problematically rehearses and therefore perpetuates its institutionally and discursively constitutive and prescriptive dimensions.

It is telling in this respect, that the question of sexuality has, albeit intrinsically linked to issues of citizenship and subjective (un)belonging, typically been shrouded in silence and secrecy in African literature.³⁵ Largely considered “unAfrican,” unconventional, ‘deviant’ sexuality has typically had violent repercussions. From the escalating “corrective” rape of primarily black African lesbians in South Africa, to the more recent (extra-) legal criminalization of same-sex relations in Uganda and Nigeria, non hetero-normative sexuality is viewed as not just undermining national cultural imperatives, but as disrupting human, subjective norms.³⁶ In this regard, Vera’s (aesthetic) emphasis on woman as a naturalized gendered subject perpetuates, by omission, the silence around the question of sexuality and reveals itself (unwittingly) embedded in and reinforcing national cultural, that is, patriarchal ways of knowing and being. While articulating a radical purview for women, her writing operates, not unlike Morrison’s, within a conservative framework.

Vera’s focus on the female body (in pain) thus ironically induces it to become a (performative) sign or metaphor that simultaneously objectifies and imprisons woman in her sex/gender and in the differentiating impulses and hierarchical imperatives of patriarchy.³⁷ Henrietta Moore warns that “the enactment of subject positions based on gender provides the conditions for the experience of gender and gender difference, even as those positions may be resisted or rejected” (142), and Eleni Coundouriotis concurs that in this instance the protracted delineation of suffering/pain anchors Phephelaphi’s experience and “seems to

³⁵ See Veit-Wild and Naguschewski’s “Introduction: Lifting the Veil of Secrecy” in *Body, Sexuality, Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literatures 1*.

³⁶ For instance, despite the longstanding existence of the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) society, Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe has publically denounced homosexuals as “lower than dogs and pigs” and undeserving of human rights.

³⁷ My reading is here influenced by, among other feminists, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and Butler’s “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay on Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.”

place her back in a predictable, repetitive, and frustratingly stagnant narrative of woman's subjugation to patriarchy" (65-6).³⁸ As such, 'female' subjectivity, and the textual achievement therein, is suspended in the novel, replaced by "a pause. An expectation" as "meaning collapses under the weight of words" (3, 53).

This tension, this lack of therapeutic closure, is registered in the aftermath of her abortion wherein Phephelaphi is characterized by subjective liminality or opacity of being: it is "not clear if she has parted from death or life. Folded into two halves, one part of her is dead, the other living" (127). Subsequent to discovering her betrayal, Fumbatha's rejection of her causes her to enter a nihilistic space in which "she became nothing" and the potent image of the butterfly burning is reversed as she dies "like a spark of flame" (142). Her actual self-immolation by fire at the novel's end cannot then be read as an act of self-assertion congruent with her pursuit of individual fulfilment through total self-determination, as Katrin Berndt argues (193). Phephelaphi's violent action is steeped in an ambivalence that appears to negate her gendered existential objective. Although she seeks "a death as intimate as birth" (149) and her act transforms and elevates her metaphorically to "a bird with wings spread" (150), the aesthetic beauty and intimacy of self-immolation is tempered by the physical, sensorial grotesquery of the process. The grotesque bird imagery here recalls the representational inversion of Sethe's maternalism after her infanticide and parallels Pecola's pathetically imaged "futile effort to fly" (*TBE* 162) after she is raped and descends into madness. Phephelaphi's suicide is similarly registered as abjection and, recalling the atrocities of Zimbabwe's liberation war and its aftermath, it becomes a "spectacle of severe horror" permeated by "[p]utrid darkness and a memory of torture" (148-50) in which, subjectively deflated, she finally "feels nothing except her wings folding. A bird landing and closing its wings" (151).³⁹

Kizito Muchemwa maintains the need to recognize the "strengths and weaknesses in the creation of a new discourse to re-inscribe women's identities" ("Language, Voice and Presence" 3-4), and in *Butterfly Burning* empathy with Phephelaphi's act of self-definition and self-determination is circumvented because it is articulated, like Sethe's infanticide, as

³⁸ Interestingly, this appears to parallel critics' readings of J. M. Coetzee's rendering of female subjectivity in *Disgrace*. As I show in the following chapter, however, in this novel the motif of the suffering body or body in pain is given an ethical dimension which problematizes gendered readings of subjectivity.

³⁹ Resonating with Scarry's description of physical pain as always miming death: as "the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject" (35), Phephelaphi's grotesque suicide particularly echoes *Gukurahundi* narratives "of physical and psychological torture, rape and other forms of sexual abuse, starvation of the population, burning of homes and granaries, disappearances, bodies thrown down mineshafts and murders" (Sisulu xv).

excess(ive), as beyond or outside subjective (and moral) reference. It is precisely in Vera's linguistic strivings that the tension between representation and 'reality' is registered as a form of violence to subjectivity. Tellingly, the novel is narrated in the third person and it is only at the end that the reader gains access to Phephelaphi's conscious 'I', affirming (the sense of) subjective deferral. In this respect, the central metaphoric image of the butterfly burning – significantly expressed in the continuous present tense – no longer suggests her subjective regeneration but begins to draw attention, like Vera's language, to its own tenuous artificiality by continuously evading resolution; that is, both become symbols that resist actualization or fulfilment.

The Alterity of the Black Female Self

Butterfly Burning finally suggests that despite Vera's attempt at a representative literary intervention, in a world in which "a woman only has a moment in which to live her whole life" (129), the achievement of black female subjectivity is transient. This does not, however, as an anonymous review in the *Complete Review* of 2003 claims, render it "ultimately, a novella of miscarriages, of clumsy painful abortions" (3). In its linguistic ambivalence, the novel underlines the complex process of achieving black female subjectivity within a patriarchal national culture. Figured here as a continuous process of becoming and not a static mode of being, it proposes the black woman's subjective position as an inherently volatile, conflicted space, inevitably and invariably "precarious and explosive" (Miescher *et al* 5).

As a practice situated at the intersection of subject and history/culture, "writing the body" is, as Minha-ha Trinh argues, the "abstract-concrete, personal-political realm of excess not fully contained by writing's unifying structural forces," and as such, becomes "a way of making theory in gender, of making of theory a politics of everyday life" (44). Vera's transcendental 'bodily' writing similarly en-genders the process of female becoming, theorizing and politicizing an emergent postcolonial female subject. It suggests that it is in the process of attempting to access black female subjectivity – in the very collapse of linguistic structures – that new modes of explication and not yet imagined modes of being are invoked. In its incongruity, her fiction ironically underpins the fraught potential in and possibilities of individuated and individual black female subjectivity wherein between the textual and gendered strictures "something precious has been discovered," a "new sound is freed" (53). Even while suggesting the impossibility of freedom for the black Zimbabwean woman within patriarchal national culture and the failure of attempts at resistance, in putting

forward the linguistically or subjectively ‘inauthentically’ dynamic rather than prescriptively normative as a “part of things that are growing” (55), Vera determinedly anticipates that, “no matter when, no matter how, she [woman] will eventually rise into her own song” (150).

While limited, the achievement of Vera’s fictive opus in comparison to Morrison’s is that it offers a “moment of intervention” (*OS* 3) that opens up “expansive visions of freedom and ever-widening paths of resistance” (Lewis 5). In its assumption of a transcendental ‘bodily’ writing, its ambivalent positioning between creativity and corporeality, it posits prospective ‘realities’ for black Zimbabwean women that exceed time or place. While her writing compels an othering of the female self within (the strictures) of language, it also provides a means, albeit limited, of accessing (an)other female self within language; that is, her fiction finally illustrates the paradox that while a linguistic attempt at the embodiment or transcendence of subjectivity insists on alterity, it also continuously gestures at the possibility of subjective actualization.⁴⁰ In this way, her fiction pre-empts what I argue and explore in the next chapter to be the premise of J. M. Coetzee’s concern with the alterity of white South African gendered subjectivity, the violence of which is complexly figured in his novels as an othering from within that facilitates openness to a different frame of reference – openness to the otherness of self.

⁴⁰ See Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*.

CHAPTER THREE

“VIOLENCE AGAINST MYSELF”: THE ETHICS OF VIOLENT SUBJECTIVITY IN J. M. COETZEE’S FICTION

A History of South Africa: The Violence of Whiteness

Political commentator Rob Nixon observes that “South Africa has been singled out as a uniquely offensive society” (34), a sentiment underwritten by a Human Rights report of 1995 which revealed that South Africa “has the highest per capita figures for violent death recorded in a country not at war” (18).¹ With the tenth highest murder rate according to a 2011 report by the United Nations office for Drugs and Crime, underpinning its reputation as one of the most violent nations in the world is the country’s history of systemic and systematic colonial and apartheid violence. Initially, the arrival of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) on Western Cape shores in 1652 did not herald (an attitude of) violence against native populations. Founded in 1602 and the most important trading company in the world at the time, historians variously argue that early contact between the Dutch East India Company and varied African tribes was characterized by reciprocal trade relations. In his study of the genesis of racial ideology in South Africa, Timothy Keegan argues that although a colour prejudice existed at the Cape under the Dutch, “it did not constitute racial ideology” (24-5). With distinctions based largely on imported religious, Christian credo, there was not an immediately coherent racist ideology. But the lack of formalized discrimination did not disguise the racialized socio-political and socio-economic structure of early Cape society, and by the end of the eighteenth century the trading company’s move towards a colonial economy prompted the beginnings of the dispersal and dispossession of South Africa’s native inhabitants.

The appearance of British colonists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries transformed an inherent European ethnocentrism into the notion of racial and cultural superiority and justified the “imperial subversion” of indigenous populations by military means (Keegan 5). Martin Legassick and Robert Ross maintain that the aggressively capitalist outlook of British settlers “brought the radically new idea that African societies should be subjugated and ruled

¹ While the report is undoubtedly linked to post-1994 election violence, South Africa has continued to be engulfed in ubiquitous societal violence. For more on the violent state of the nation see Mamphela Ramphele’s “Teach Me How to Be a Man: An Exploration of the Definition of Masculinity,” and the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) at www.csvr.org.za.

in the interests of the colonial economy” (314). British imposition of ‘civilization’ was universal and prompted the movement from 1836 to 1854 of Dutch descendants into the frontiers.² Viewed as a key formative event in Afrikaner nationalism, this highly symbolic and culturally mythologized Great Trek signalled increasing resentment of British imperial militarism of the frontier regions and, in part a rebellion against British policies, resulted in the final conquest of African chiefdoms in the 1890s and in the bloody Anglo-Boer war between the Boer (republics) and British (colonies) from 1899 to 1902.³

But following a pervasive philosophy of whiteness that had emerged by the 1840s, both British and Afrikaner colonists united “on a common understanding of the efficacy of new means of social control over the colony’s subordinate peoples” (Keegan 168), a move precipitated by the discovery of diamonds in Kimberly and gold in Johannesburg in the 1860s and 80s respectively. The country’s increased industrialization and urbanization resulted in a more pronounced and rigidified form of racial order and, with ownership of the means of production concentrated in the hands of a white middle class, the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910 served to reconcile the Boers with the British in order to consolidate white rule and power at the expense of the majority black population.⁴

A particularly patriarchal Calvinist brand of whiteness occasioned the Afrikaners’ split from the British and resulted in the formation of the Afrikaner-based National Party in 1914, however. Hermann Giliomee somewhat apologetically maintains that the growth of Afrikaner nationalist identity needs to be viewed as ethnic mobilization at a time of economic struggle in the nineteenth century and at a time of increasing ethnic marginalization and insecurity in the twentieth century (190). Nonetheless, the tension between the Party’s “emphasis on a broad racial identity and its stress on a narrower ethnic nationalism” (Maylam 197) sowed the seeds for an intense Puritan individualism and authoritarianism that in turn fomented the ‘segregation era’ in the first two decades of the twentieth century, a period characterized by a series of restrictive legislations which sought to legitimize social difference and economic inequity in all aspects of life (Beinart and Dubow 4).⁵

The election of the National Party in 1948 and the subsequent implementation of apartheid helped sustain this inequitable racial order and to reinforce the subjugation of blacks through

² Descendants of the Dutch who arrived at the Cape are known as Afrikaners but are also called ‘Boers’ in South African discourse, a (derogatory) colonial term meaning ‘farmer’.

³ For an account of the mythological resonance of the Anglo-Boer war to the Afrikaners see David Harrison’s *The White Tribe of Africa*.

⁴ See Harold Wolpe’s “Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa.”

⁵ These included the Native Land Act of 1913, the Native Urban Areas Act of 1923, the Mines and Works Amendment Act of 1926, and the Native Administration Act of 1928.

a number of degrading laws that effectively defined and legitimized the Afrikaner cause in an ideological discourse of white supremacy.⁶ Described as “the brute, unmediated legislation of human inferiority” (Crapanzano 23), and pronounced in the 1998 report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as a categorical crime against humanity, apartheid guaranteed that the dignity of blacks “was not just rubbed in the dust. It was trodden underfoot and spat on” (Tutu 99-100).⁷

Maintained by an institutionalized culture of violence, apartheid ensured that blacks experienced life as a constant struggle to survive, and this contributed to their eventual mobilization and militarization which, after a period of violent political unrest, saw the birth of a ‘new’ South Africa led by the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in 1994.⁸ Despite its relatively late attainment of independence on the African continent and its ambiguous postcolonial status, the proudly ‘new’ South Africa has made heady claims to being a non-racial ‘rainbow nation’ premised on ‘unity in diversity’.⁹ But as one of the most inequitable countries globally, insistent crime, rampant violence and persistent racial divisiveness belie such euphemisms and testify, instead, to a “crisis of citizenship” and to ubiquitous societal woundedness.¹⁰

J. M. Coetzee, “Literature in Bondage” and (Dis)Placing Whiteness

Such societal woundedness has infiltrated even South Africa’s literature which is still today, albeit inexplicitly, allocated into categories of ‘black’ and ‘white’ writing, thus

⁶ These included the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), Population Registration Act (1950), Immorality Act (1950), Group Areas Act (1950), Bantu Authorities Act (1952), Separate Amenities Act (1953), and Bantu Education Act (1953). The creation of Bantustans/Bantu nations – African ‘homelands’ – imposed upon black South Africans a rural primitiveness separate from an urbanized, ‘civilized’ white population, effectively excluding them from citizenship. See also Deborah Posel’s “The Meaning of Apartheid before 1984: Conflicting Interests and Forces Within the Afrikaner Nationalist Alliance.”

⁷ The controversial TRC was set up in the aftermath of South African independence from National Party rule as a means to address and redress the violence of apartheid. For more on the controversial processes of the TRC see Terry Bell and Dumisa Ntsebeza’s *Unfinished Business: South Africa, Apartheid and Truth*.

⁸ The formation of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912 and the establishment of Black Consciousness (Movement) in the late 1960s/early 1970s, for example, fomented militant black resistance which occasioned the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 and the Soweto uprising of 1976, which in turn led to a series of states of emergency in the mid- to late- 80s. See Leonard Thompson’s *A History of South Africa*.

⁹ For debates on South Africa’s ambiguous postcolonial status see Annamaria Carusi’s “Post, Post and Post. Or, Where is South African Literature in All This?” and Nicholas Visser’s “Postcoloniality of a Special Type: Theory and Its Appropriations in South Africa.”

¹⁰ See Mamphela Ramphele’s article, “Walking over the Wounded.” On the problems of achieving transformation and reconciliation in South Africa see Ramphele’s *Laying Ghosts to Rest: Dilemmas of Transformation in South Africa* and Bronwyn Harris’ “Arranging Prejudice: Exploring Hate crime in post-apartheid South Africa.”

epistemologically rehearsing the totalitarian violence of the former national state apparatus.¹¹ Notwithstanding apartheid censorship laws which regulated literary content, it is significant that J. M. Coetzee should describe himself at the 1988 *Weekly Mail* Book Week in Cape Town, as “a member of a tribe threatened with colonisation” in the demand for realist literature. Echoing but subverting Toni Morrison’s anthropological, racialized metaphor for belonging, Coetzee lamented a socio-politically overdetermined condition of cultural production and further delineated the South African literary establishment as analogous to a prison in its generation of “a literature in bondage... [a] less than fully human literature” (“The Novel Today” 2-3).¹²

Ideologically circumscribed, South African literature has in an actual sense been held hostage to the historical structures and strictures of race and is a space concomitant, for Coetzee, with a “battlefield” (“The Novel Today” 3). As a white writer whose whiteness is peculiarly marked as simultaneously privileged and unprivileged in both the black and white imaginary, his literature betrays a “veiled unfreedom” (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 97) reflected in the common themes of cultural homelessness/rootlessness and subjective exile. Quite different from the mechanisms of American whiteness, Melissa Steyn explains that white (English and Afrikaner) South Africans “never experienced their whiteness and the advantage it afforded them as invisible” (122). As ‘settlers’ their white visibility and otherness was reinforced to mark them as “aliens” instead of “unproblematic nationals” (Farred, “Bulletproof Settlers” 72) and shifted the field “from the politics of conquest and subjugation to the politics of negotiation and belonging” (Nuttall, “Subjectivities of Whiteness” 118).¹³ As such, in his candid perception of ‘white writing’ as historically “white only in so far as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, yet not African” (*White Writing* 11), Coetzee echoes Malvern van Wyk Smith’s delineation of the white South African English writer as inhabiting a terrain “both familiar and unknown, welcoming and hostile,” a place in which s/he senses an “utter strangeness” (2-3) of being.¹⁴ Embedded in the liminal sense of (un)belonging and (dis)placement that pervades white English writing in South Africa, Coetzee inhabits an ambivalent, interstitial subjective

¹¹ In “A Country of Borders” Lewis Nkosi argues against the idea of a South African literature. See also *Black/White Writing: Essays on South African Literature*, edited by Pauline Fletcher.

¹² While never actually banned, Coetzee’s work was subject to apartheid censorship, an exercise he again describes as analogous to the protocols of imprisonment. In *Doubling the Point* he states: “Being subjected to the gaze of the censor is a humiliating and perhaps even enraging experience. It is not unlike being stripped and searched” (299-300). See his essays on censorship in *Giving Offense*.

¹³ As *Disgrace* shows, this shift in whiteness to the “politics of negotiation and belonging” was pronounced post-1994.

¹⁴ The colonial fiction of Olive Schreiner comes to mind in this regard.

positionality that Nadine Gordimer in *The Essential Gesture* locates as the “interregnum,” a space/place within but “without structures” (226).¹⁵

Born in 1940 to anglicised Afrikaners, John Maxwell Coetzee is indubitably South Africa’s most successful and recognized contemporary literary export and émigré.¹⁶ He is, however, a controversial writer whose fiction has earned him much criticism for its apparent incommensurability with the exigencies and lived reality of a South African socio-political landscape. In 1984 Paul Rich’s critique of *Waiting for the Barbarians* dismissed Coetzee’s exercise in “literary postmodernism in a postcolonial context as South Africa, burdened by cleavage of race and class and the historical inheritance of Western imperialist control” as a “moral dead end” (389). Peter Knox-Shaw concurred, complaining in his review of *Dusklands* that Coetzee practices an “existentialism of the armchair” (117), while Michael Vaughan declares his novels pretentious, “symptomatic of [his] liberal petty bourgeois class position and self-identification” (65). Van Wyk Smith contends that ingenious as Coetzee’s fiction is, it does lay itself open to the charge of turning literature into “elitist and obscurantist discourse, aimed at evading rather than confronting the root causes of South African social justice” (128).

But echoing traditional white English writing’s “haunted and introspective, urgent and compulsive” literature (Lazarus 131) – its “troubled inwardness” (van Schalkwyk 11), critics miss how Coetzee’s abstruse work betrays a genuine interest in the tenuous workings and machinations of the subjective process and so registers, ironically, a material or experiential, rather than socio-politically- or culturally-determined concern with subjective integrity. In this respect his fiction betrays a “deliberate analytical unsettledness” which “deconstructs, rather than assimilates to, any South African literary tradition, or any South African ‘sense of place’” (Barnard, “Dream Topographies” 38). Complaining against an ideological superstructure that forced and continues to force on him “the fate of being a ‘South African novelist’,” Coetzee’s disinterestedness in “a kind of realism that takes pride in copying the ‘real’ world” (qtd. in Morphet (1983) 460, 455) indicates his scepticism at the very notion of

¹⁵ Similarly, Njabulo Ndebele famously decried the English-speaking white South African liberal (writer) as existing in a “no-man’s land” (26). See “Memory, Metaphor, and the Triumph of Narrative.”

¹⁶ Notwithstanding his critical output, Coetzee has produced an outstanding corpus of fiction for which he has received numerous national and international literary awards including the Mofolo-Plomer and CNA Prizes for *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the CNA Prize for *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), the Booker Prize and the Prix Femina for *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), the Jerusalem Prize in 1987, the *Sunday Express* Book of the Year Award for *Age of Iron* (1990), the *Irish Times* International Fiction Award for *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), a Lannan Literary Award for Fiction in 1998, and the Booker Prize for *Disgrace* (1999). He received the Nobel Prize for literature in 2003 and the South African state honour of the Order of Mapungubwe in 2005.

a universal and stable, uncontested metanarrative of existence. In refracting or evading socio-political specificity, Coetzee simultaneously signifies upon South Africa's realist culture and eschews the restrictive imperatives of national and socio-cultural being and belonging.

Exhibiting a *postcolonial awareness* comparable to Vera's in that his fiction makes use of postmodern, poststructural and postcolonial modes of inquiry, Coetzee, however, seeks not to "develop new modes of explication" (Egerer 21), but works to undermine the fundamental tenets of subjectivity.¹⁷ His fiction would seem to resist *any* ideological and teleological (im)position, including his own. In conversation with Tony Morphet in 1987, he expressed "hope that a certain spirit of resistance is ingrained in my books" (464), and in *Doubling the Point* he explains that his "difficulty is precisely with the project of stating positions, taking positions" (204). For Coetzee the very act of writing supposes the loss of (self-)control and renders him, as author, posterior and peripheral to the book itself; he presents this as a liberating space in which the "feel of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility to something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road" (*DP* 18, 246). This apparently irresponsible (dis)position is different from both Vera's and Morrison's charged desire for subjective self-affirmation through writing or words. In his riposte: "who writes? Who takes up the position of power, pen in hand?" (qtd. in Morphet (1983) 462) is the apparent relinquishment of subjective authority and control, evidenced in a fiction "calculated to draw attention to the fact that acts of narration are always also, necessarily, acts of violation at the figurative level" (Jolly, *Colonization* 2).

Drawing attention to its own artificiality or constructedness, Coetzee's metafictional "criticism-as-fiction or fiction-as-criticism" (Dovey, "J. M. Coetzee" 2), challenges subjective relations of dominance and puts forward a regenerative space of alterity. That is, in that they textually engender the process of being consistently violated or other(ed), his novels enact the problems or violence of subjectivity. The simultaneous othering or violation of the writing and subjective process is underpinned by Coetzee's own liminal positionality as an ethnic Afrikaner writing in English. In a racialized South Africa the language one speaks and writes is, Jane Kramer observes, "a weapon" that assumes "a kind of brute synecdochic power" (qtd. in Crapanzano 28) of identity and ideology but in which metaphoric elasticity

¹⁷ For the specific workings of postmodernism in Coetzee's fiction see Teresa Dovey's *The Novels of J M Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*, Anton Leist and Peter Singer's *J M Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*, and Michela Canepari-Labib's *Old Myths – Modern Empires* which explores the intersections of postcolonialism and postmodernism in his novels.

and human vitality and resonance is lost.¹⁸ Admitting an affinity for “the genetic diversity” afforded by the English language (qtd. in Sevry 2), while also approaching English “as a foreigner would, with a foreigner’s sense of the distance between himself and it” (“Homage” 7), Coetzee, however, manages to retain in his writing the subjective vitality and integrity that Kramer bemoans.

For Coetzee writing engenders and expresses subjective contradiction: it “is not free expression. There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them” (*DP* 65). Recalling but subverting Vera’s exhortation for the writer to “feel” and “experience” language (“The Place of the Woman” 165) as something that both embodies and liberates the self, Coetzee’s “artistic consciousness” here differently exhibits a pointed yet vulnerable, self-reflective and self-reflexive, appreciation of the writing process as a space of continuous subjective othering. This idea of an other(ed) self is evinced in his fictionalized memoirs or *autre*-biographies.¹⁹ In *Boyhood* (1997) the young narrator “thinks of himself as English” (124), and in *Youth* (2002) the emigrated author-narrator muses that he “would prefer to leave his South African self behind” (62), a position repeated in *Summertime* (2009) by an adult Coetzee who “feels soiled” (4), complicit in his hybrid white South African identity. Coetzee here, as in his fiction, intimates alienation from self – an otherness within. In this regard, his resistance to settling for a particular identity he should “feel most uneasy in,”²⁰ marks him as Albert Memmi’s “colonizer who refuses,” who “lives his life under the sign of contradiction which looms at every step, depriving him of all coherence and all tranquillity” (20). Engendering in this way a stubborn “will to remain in crisis” (*DP* 337), Coetzee’s fiction demands serious engagement with the difficulties and responsibilities of writing that opens a space for (an)other and for otherness within the subjective process.

Alfred J. Lopez argues that “relatively little space has been devoted to the dominant colonial cultures as racial and ethnic imperatives” (5), and Sarah Nuttall concurs that the emphasis in (the study of) South African culture “has been more on racism than on race, and this has tended to foreclose a complex investigation into how race works” (“Subjectivities of Whiteness” 119). In view of the general dearth of nuanced engagements with race, this chapter offers an examination of the workings of whiteness in Coetzee’s fiction. The chapter

¹⁸ South Africa has 11 official languages reflecting the official ethnic groupings of the country and English ranks only fifth. Tellingly, like Afrikaans under apartheid, English was met with resistance during colonial rule.

¹⁹ The term *autre*-biography derives from the French ‘other’.

²⁰ As told to Peter Randall, editor of Ravan Press, in their correspondence of 1974. See also Cherry Clayton’s “White Writing and Postcolonial Politics.”

maintains that although whiteness has historically operated with violent impunity in South African culture and Coetzee's fiction is concerned with violence against a palpable racial and gendered, marginalized Other, critics often miss or ignore how his novels imagine whiteness itself as occupying a violent space of othering, of subjective (un)belonging or (un)homeliness. Benita Parry and Derek Wright, for example, take Coetzee to task for his representation and perpetuation of racial Others and otherness; and while Coetzee scholars Derek Attridge and Mike Marais focus on the ethical otherness of self, their analyses tend too much to the philosophical.²¹

Lucia Felona notes that "otherness and violence, from the point of view of the Inside, are one and the same" (232) and Coetzee's vision of violence as similarly "introverted ... against myself," (*DP* 337) does not trivialize the lived, socio-political experience of violence but makes intimate links between violence and subjectivity that propose subjectivity as an innately violent process of othering. Primarily inward-directed in Coetzee's fiction, violence necessarily and ethically puts, as Emmanuel Levinas suggests elsewhere, "the I into question" (*Totality and Infinity* 195). In this way, his novels conceive an in-between subject position in which the rendering of existential othering puts forward (the notion of) an affirmative subjectivity in which the *a priori* existential space of whiteness as subjectivity is persistently undermined. That is, in his fiction the 'white' self is presented as intricately othered within precisely to disrupt the idea of an absolute, stable self. Further, Coetzee's concern with an interior subjective violence typically precipitated by violent contact with an external racially and sexually/gendered Other engenders, in a Levinasian sense, a responsiveness to and responsibility for the other and otherness that inscribes the exteriority and materiality of being "in its [subjective] essence" (*TI* 196) and creates a space from which to contemplate and negotiate that genuine liberating, communitarian relationship striven for in Morrison's and Vera's work but that exceeds the imperatives of race and culture.

In a close study of *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Disgrace* (1999), but with particular focus on the latter, this chapter attempts a necessary move beyond a view of whiteness "as simply a trope of domination" (Giroux 296) and positions whiteness in these novels as, rather, a signifier of a traumatic or traumatized subjectivity in a continual state of crisis. Making reference to a Levinasian theory of ethical subjectivity and evoking trauma theory, I suggest that Coetzee invokes white subjectivity as a "wound that speaks" (Caruth, *UE* 8) its own metaphysical violence and violation. In putting

²¹ See Parry's "Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J. M. Coetzee" and Wright's "Black Earth, White Myth: Coetzee's *Michael K*".

the subjective “I” into question, he exposes not just an other(ed) self but puts forward, I maintain, an ethical space premised on the intrinsic placement of violence in the process and establishment of the self.

Crises of Subjectivity: *In the Heart of the Country* and *Life and Times of Michael K.*

Commenting on Coetzee’s first novel, Dominic Head remarks that in some ways *In the Heart of the Country* is Coetzee’s “most difficult and forbidding novel. It is a disruptive and disturbing book” (49).²² This is demonstrated by the mixed, largely negative, reviews it received upon publication in 1977. One anonymous reviewer dismissed the novel as having “little plot, less purpose and much confusion” and described the writing style as “ponderous and oppressive, even clumsy” (*Publishers Weekly* 73). In a similarly dismissive vein, Reg Rumney pronounced the text “most unsatisfying” for Coetzee’s “manipulating the interminable philosophical cum theological gropings of his character” (5), and Tony Paulin felt that “on the level of individual psychology, the story is unconvincing” (89). Tony Morphet complained that the “theme itself suffers some confusion” because the novel does not have the capacity “to register the layers and relativities of the consciousness” (“In the Heart” 13), and Merwe Scholtz described it a “dark, densely woven and therefore exceptionally difficult novel to access” (qtd. in Kannemeyer 298). Yet Phil Cohen’s review lauded the text’s ability to be derivative of an international (poststructuralist/modernist) literary tradition and praised Coetzee’s thematic and contextual originality (26), while Jean Marquard celebrated his linguistic brilliance and experimental skill in creating a new direction for the South African literary tradition (2).

In the Heart of the Country presents life on a colonial South African Karoo farm from the point of view or consciousness of Magda, a lonely white woman living with her unaffectionate father and their indifferent workers. The novel’s title alludes to and invokes nostalgia for the rural idyll associated with the South African, Afrikaner settler way of life imaginatively represented in its literary tradition of the *plaasroman* – a writing derivative of the English farm novel or pastoral. In this fiction is the romantic appropriation of a harsh African landscape as a symbol of subjective progress and civilization where none presumably exists. Echoing Morrison’s critique of canonical American white writing in *Playing in the*

²² Ironically, this was one of the reasons it received foreign sponsorship to be made into the film *Dust* (1985). See J. C. Kannemeyer’s *A Life in Writing*.

Dark, in *White Writing* Coetzee describes this pastoral genre as “essentially conservative” in its mythical elaboration of a “dream topography,” of the garden-farm “as bastion of trusted feudal values or cradle of a transindividual familial/tribal form of consciousness” (6, 4). But despite its intimations at communitarian values and communal sense of belonging, in that it is used to “buttress Afrikaner patriarchalism” (83) and deliberately occludes the presence of the native inhabitants, Coetzee pronounces it a categorical “literature of failure,” a “failure of the historical imagination ... to imagine a peopled landscape” (9).

Coetzee thus subverts and rewrites the premise of the traditional South African farm novel by presenting the land in *In the Heart of the Country* as indifferent, even inhospitable, to subjectivity in general and to female subjectivity in particular. The archetypal stony desert landscape that pervades his text is, he explains, “about a lack of society and a lack of a shared culture, a feeling of anomie, a feeling of solitariness, a feeling of not having human ties with the people around you” (qtd. in Watson, “Speaking” 22). Reiterating this sense of emptiness, Magda muses that the harsh arid landscape challenges the possibility of human relationships: the “farm, the desert, the whole world as far as the horizon is in an ecstasy of communion with itself” (53), exerting a kind of subjective violence that parallels her relationship with patriarchy. Coetzee’s postcolonial reconfiguration of the land as masculine here lays bare the fallacy of nationalist mythological representations of white womanhood as the repository of white Afrikaner culture.²³ As if in dialogue with Vera’s work, his novel inverts a colonial and nationalist patriarchal narrative by unveiling how it underpins women’s sexual vacancy and subjective unbeing.

Female sexuality and subjectivity are intimately interrelated in the novel. As a spinster Magda is the sexually repressed “O” (45), the echo of patriarchy’s oppressively negating “eternal NO” (18). Self-described as “[l]abouring” under her father’s weight (11), her peculiar relationship with him evokes Freudian Oedipal theory of the fantasy of “childhood rape” (4), realized in her relations with the man-servant Hendrik, for whom she harbours fantasies of rape and by whom she is seemingly raped. In ‘actuality’, Magda is rejected by her father (and Hendrik) for his young coloured bride, Klein-Anna – who is also his second wife – and starved of affection and attention; she is so intimately isolated from her surrounding community that she takes to “intercourse with the wilds, with solitude and vacancy” (51). In this analogous desert-scape, in “the heart of nowhere, in this dead place”

²³ Susan VanZanten Gallagher notes that as *vrou en Moeder* – wife and mother – the mythology of the Afrikaner woman emphasizes her “purity, martyrdom, and central role as progenitor” (858). For more on the position of women in Afrikaner culture see Vincent Crapanzano’s *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa* and Kobus Du Pisani’s “Puritanism Transformed: Afrikaner Masculinities in the Apartheid and Post-Apartheid Period.”

(120), she is subjectively “absent ... a zero, null, a vacuum towards which all collapses inward, a turbulence, muffled, grey, like a chill draft eddying through the corridors, neglected, vengeful” (2). In that hers is a mind “quivering with violent energies” (43) and “mad enough for parricide and pseudo-matricide” (11), Magda assumes the Freudian figure of the hysterical female who attempts subjectivity through a “gory festival” (85) of (repeatedly) violent physical encounters with the sexual/gendered and racial Other – her father and Hendrik.²⁴ Suggestively, then, her violence and her cerebral yet visceral monologue is an attempt to challenge, even expiate, the dominance of both her father and Hendrik while determining to “be the author of her own life” (68); hers is an endeavour to narrate or ‘write’ herself violently into historical culture, into existence: “I *am* I” (78).

Coetzee’s psychoanalytical depiction of his female protagonist has, as a result, courted varied feminist readings. Drawing on the alleged interracial rape of Magda by Hendrik and Magda’s supposed madness, Head views Magda’s representation as anti-feminist in that she seemingly has no agency: “she is obliged to support a hierarchical system not of her devising, to which her own identity must be subordinate. The phallogentrism is presented as a kind of rape from within, and the devouring is a silencing of the female voice” (55). Laura Wright, however, views *In the Heart of the Country* as profeminist, suggesting that Coetzee identifies with, even inhabits, the marginal white female subject in an attempt to “resurrect a feminine ethos [and voice] repressed by patriarchal colonial politics” (16). Similarly, Chiara Briganti reads Magda’s insanity as gender subversion, “a masquerade that enables her to parody the male gaze” (87), and Joan Gilmer claims that she is representative of the feminine principle with “access to the world of emotional experience that the patriarchal intellect has despised and repressed” (112). Arguing that Magda’s is an attempt to break out of a traditionally hierarchical Afrikaner identity, Susan VanZanten Gallagher concurs that, “[c]onfined by language, she nonetheless attempts to go beyond language, to capture the instinctive pre-verbal realm of the semiotic within the symbolic,” so that, on the linguistic level, “she gives birth to the text” (108-9).

However, these varied critical emphases on female sexuality and a ‘feminine’ ethos miss what is Coetzee’s interest in the (female) “colonial writer’s psychic struggle with identity” (Poyner 33) and thus undermine his literary concern with the (textual) instability of gendered subjectivity. The masculine, colonial overtones of Magda’s voice cannot be disregarded. Her largely circuitous and incoherent discourse, while superficially intimating female hysteria,

²⁴ See Susan Hill’s “*In the Heart of the Country*” for an elaboration of this position.

also appears calculated, self-conscious and self-contained – “full of [the] common purpose” of patriarchy (22). Her sterile imperialist attitude, reminiscent of and comparable to that of Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands* (1974), avows her patriarchal heritage: “born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father-tongue. I do not say it is the language my heart wants to speak, I feel too much the pathos of its distances, but it is all we have” (106). Despite her efforts, Magda’s voice and perspective suggestively operate within the parameters of the phallogocentric Symbolic so that she, like *Foe*’s (1986) Susan Barton who endeavours “to be father” to her story (123), desires entry into patriarchal cultural narrative and the subjective cohesiveness symbolized therein – she desires “a beginning, a middle, and an end, not the yawning middle without end” (46).

In an interview with Joanna Scott in 1997, Coetzee himself remarked that, “the language of *In the Heart* ... is not soft, not rounded. So some of the more obvious marks of the feminine that might have been worked into it just aren’t there” (91). While seemingly at risk of essentialism in his commentary here, Coetzee appears in his fiction to be challenging narrow assumptions and interpretations of gendered subjectivity. That is, Coetzee suggests in his representation of Magda that subjectivity is not a coherent, stable state, but an invariable process of othering and being othered from within – the occupation by an other self. She significantly confesses: “The law has gripped my throat ... How can I say, I say, that these are not the eyes of the law that stare from behind my eyes, or that the mind of the law does not occupy my skull ... How can I say that the law does not stand full grown inside my shell, its feet in my feet, its hands in my hands, its sex drooping through my hole” (91-2).

The sexualized rendering of patriarchal discourse above speaks to the idea of the violent yet intimate inner othering of Magda’s self, and her otherness is evidenced also in her ambiguous sexuality, in her desire to penetrate Klein-Anna. Desiring to “climb into” her body and spread herself “inside her” (118), Magda is inhabited/embodyed by and inhabits/embodyes otherness. Elleke Boehmer describes this ‘doubleness’ elsewhere as the exhibition of a “queer consciousness” (“Queer Bodies” 128), and Lucy Graham suggests a “textual transvestism” at play that endows Coetzee’s characters generally with a kind of performative agency (“Textual Transvestism” 217). But the poststructuralist sense of agency afforded Magda in these interpretations is arguable. While regenerative, her (fantastical) desire for, and assumption of, otherness situates her as androgynous. That is, rather than assertively transcending or subverting her subjective state, she vulnerably inhabits (an)other world and (an)other self from within the self/ “I”, a subjective entanglement demonstrated in her metaphoric narcissistic mirror imaging (23-24). This suggests her white female self as fragile,

not just in a psychoanalytic, Freudian sense, but on fundamentally existential terms that premise subjectivity on a violent othering.

The Otherness of Self

Magda occupies an at once liminal – “a ghost or a vapour floating at the intersection of a certain latitude and a certain longitude” (19) – and negated state – “incomplete ... a being with a hole inside” (10) that cries out to “be whole” (44). She is enmeshed in what Vera’s protagonists come to discover, that desire for subjective fulfilment functions at the interstice and is premised on subjective liminality. She reflects: “I am exhausted by obedience to this law, I try to say, whose mark lies on me in the spaces between the words, the spaces or the pauses, and in the articulations that set up the war of sounds” (91). Magda exists at the point of rupture, at the attempted articulation – “between the words” she tries to say – of subjective desire. Teresa Dovey explains that she is “trapped in the ongoing dialectic in which the self is dependent for its existence upon an object (the linguistic utterance) which is other than the self” (*Lacanian Allegories* 177), and Brian May concludes that “so entirely is Magda’s consciousness constituted and circumscribed by words that often she seems to turn from an agent, an ‘I’ who creates, into language’s own passive creation, the objective ‘me’ bereft of all agency” (894). The point here is that her attainment of cohesive subjectivity, because it operates in an other, discursive space, is constituted by continuous deferral. Contrary to Vera’s protagonists’ desire for self-constitution through words, Magda muses that “[w]ords are coin. Words alienate. Language is no medium for desire” (28).

Yet language at the same time provides space and opportunity for regenerative, creative self-invention – “I make it all up in order that I shall make me up. I cannot stop now” (79). Caroline Rody reads this statement politically and maintains that Magda displays a narrative presence that “rises to awareness of its own entrapment, and revolts” (160). But Rody misses how her “revolt” is invariably a continuous form of self-disruption rather than some kind of subversive power or subjective fulfilment. Notwithstanding her profoundly obscure and chronologically disjointed narrative, as the novel’s first-person narrator, Magda is decidedly unreliable, replete as her story is with “all these suppositions” (87). Her descriptions of crucial events, such as her murder of her father and her rape by Hendrik (which may not actually have occurred), are frequently revised and retold with the provisos “perhaps” and “or,” suggesting that she, like her narrative, is “full of contradictions” (43).

Coetzee here enacts a subversion of psychological realism in which Magda as the “poetess of interiority” is “lost in the being of [her] being” (38), and the novel parallels her subjective inconsistency in its own textuality or deliberately artificial form.²⁵ Her authorial narrative of self is undermined in the 266 numbered sections that, circumventing chronological continuity and coherence, underscore narration as palpable construction and allows an examination of “the psychology of writing, the economies of authorship” (Glenn 131). Brian Macaskill describes Coetzee as “‘doing-writing’ in the middle voice” (67), employing Magda as the narrator/writer to mirror his own narrative/writing as tellingly self-conscious and self-reflective. This practice of ‘engaged otherness’ recalls the original version of the novel which, albeit written in English, conveys dialogue between characters in Afrikaans dialect; pointing to Coetzee’s own technical and cultural subjective middle voice here, the literary exercise reinforces the notion of an internal dialogic community of and within the self.²⁶ As the narrative’s ‘author’, Magda’s monologue is structurally belied by her inner dialogic “countervoices” and, “embarking upon speech with them” (*DP* 65), consistently confronts the discourses/discursive space it inhabits and betrays her ‘self’s’ intimations of and desire for (some kind of) otherness. Struggling “to give life to a world” but seeming “to engender only death” (11), she, like the text, is characterized by existential and epistemological contradiction, an indeterminable opacity signalled in her own and the novel’s generic unintelligibility. In a statement that echoes Coetzee’s perception of violence as introverted and non-liberatory (*DP* 337), she muses that all is “turned uselessly inward, what sounds to you like rage is only the crackling of fire within” (110). Speaking to the sky gods at the end, Magda desires subjective reconciliation – “in me the contraries should be reconciled” (145) – but must contend with existing liminally in the interstice that is “neither/nor” subject.

Existential “unsettledness” in *Michael K*

In its invocation of an existential vacuum, *In the Heart of the Country* anticipates *Life and Times of Michael K*, a novel about a seemingly insipid and vacuous, largely enigmatic character who is, quite unlike the loquaciously philosophical Magda, (un)concerned with the bare business of existence. A homeless traveller on the move after his mother’s untimely

²⁵ Replying to a question about the unreliability of Magda as a narrator, Coetzee explained that in focusing on her inner consciousness, he was attempting to subvert psychological realism. See Kannemeyer’s *A Life in Writing*, 278.

²⁶ My reading is here influenced by and extends Derek Attridge’s observation of how “otherness is engaged, staged, distanced, embraced, how it is manifested in the rupturing of narrative discourse” in the novel (30-31). See *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*.

death, Michael K's "nomadic unsettledness" (Barnard, "Coetzee's Country Ways" 390) is underlined by the inhospitable landscape he traverses and the unwelcoming communities he encounters from the Western Cape Province to the Karoo. Violence is both subliminal and pervasive as indicated in the novel's epigraph – "War is the father of all and the king of all" – and its futuristic South African context in which the civil war, not unlike that in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), proffers an objective contextualization to the text's thematic concern with the war of merely being.

Like *In the Heart of the Country*, and because of its textual and subjective evocation of existential nothingness, *Michael K* has been the recipient of mixed reviews that generally intimate Coetzee's ideological violence. Upon its publication in 1983, the *Washington Post*'s reviewer Jonathan Yardley protested against both the novel and the character, complaining that, "there's too much of the symbol in [Michael K], too little of the individual. *Life and Times of Michael K* is a protest novel, but more protest than novel." D. J. Enright in the *Times Literary Supplement* concurred: "With *Life and Times of Michael K* we are conscious of a palpable design, while the nature of the design remains impalpable: as it were, a symbol without a referent, a fable without a moral" (1037). Perhaps most notably, Nadine Gordimer castigated the author for his failure to grant political agency to his protagonist and the people he represents, and concluded that Coetzee "does not recognize what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves" ("The Idea of Gardening"). Declaring this a "challengingly questionable" stance for a South African writer to take, Gordimer reads *Michael K* as a political allegory of 1980s South Africa when black insurrection against white minority rule was at its height, and imposes on Michael K a racial categorization befitting the socio-political situation. In a similar reading of Michael K as "non-white," Derek Wright accuses Coetzee, as a white writer, of an artistic and political paternalism (un)befitting the particular milieu of/in which he writes.²⁷

But these reviewers' and critics' search for socio-political import and moral value betrays more about their own agendas, their own need for existential camps and institutions that the novel resists. Certainly Michael K's status as a barely educated thirty-two year old gardener forced into the work gang at Jakkalsdrif camp and whose charge sheet when interned at the military hospital reads "CM" – Coloured Male (70), situates him as "one of a multitude in the second class" (136), racially marginalized populations of South Africa. His harelip, as well as

²⁷ See "Chthonic Man" and "Black Earth, White Myth."

his partial designation as ‘Michael K,’ intimate physical and mental disability that seem to echo the novel’s intertextual Kafkaesque references.²⁸ And his association with the maternal – his mother, Anna K, and a proverbial Mother Earth – suggests, psychoanalytically, a kind of sexual/gender impotence in keeping with his absent father and which locates him outside the patriarchal/masculine Symbolic. However, it is important to note that Coetzee employs contextually and existentially familiar markers that simultaneously undermine normative assumptions and obfuscate reductive readings of his protagonist. Definitively outside the norm, symbolically othered, Michael K elides gendered and sexualized interpretations or appropriations. Similarly deploying but subverting a racially encoded apartheid law and ideology, in refusing to name Michael K racially, the text resists and problematizes societal and representational authoritarianism, or indeed totalitarianism. Coetzee himself declared that, “I’m not sure Michael K is black, just as I’m not sure that I am white” (“Don’t Cut Ties”), suggesting a belief in the fundamental ambiguity of the self.

“Exile within oneself”

As a non-representative, undecipherable figure, Michael K inhabits an androgynous, in-between positionality similar to Magda’s, but underscores the right to subjective alterity in his wilful habitation of this interstitial space. A being wittingly other(ed) in his “indifference to life” (152) and in his willed isolation and idleness, he is represented in terms that stress his individuality and singularity.²⁹ In this regard, his self-imposed starvation while at Jakkalsdrif camp and at the Karoo Mountains is not the articulation of “the hunger for ontological meaning, for a sense of purpose in a time of historical crisis,” as Jane Poyner argues (89), but a ceding to the dictates of base, fundamental existentialism. That is, Michael K is constituted by desire for pure, unalloyed existence that simultaneously exceeds being – socio-politically prescribed. His subjectivity articulates “at bottom, not a desire for some idealized transcendence, but for life in its simplest, most ordinary form” (Hewson 154).

“[U]ntouched by doctrine, untouched by history” (151), with “[n]o papers, no money; no family, no friends,” Michael K is pronounced the “obscurest of the obscure, so obscure as to be a prodigy” (142) by the medical officer who attends to him at the military hospital where

²⁸ Coetzee himself has resisted critics’ suggestions that Michael K is premised on the figure of Joseph K in Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*. In a statement to Morphet (1983), he states: “I don’t believe that Kafka has an exclusive right to the letter K” (457).

²⁹ See Dick Penner’s *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J. M. Coetzee* for more on this position.

he is detained when he falls ill. Further, in his resistance to narrating his life-story – his refusal to “yield” to the officer’s exhortations to “*talk*, make your voice heard, tell your story” (140), he evinces “how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (166), avoiding the (conscious) assumption of a subjective position of mastery. That is, his silent protest manages to signify without (conscious) signification, thus exposing the ‘self’ to an alterity that is “irreducible to its power,” an otherness that “cannot be reduced to a correlate of intentionality” (Marais, “Literature” 108, 119). Michael K’s is a silence evocative of existential/subjective homelessness and that allows him to subvert and escape the imperializing dictates and demands of history and culture. In deploying silence in this way, Coetzee problematizes assertions that he is guilty of extending the silences of those racially othered and perpetuating their historical de-subjectivity (Parry 158), for Michael K’s silence controverts, as with Friday’s severed tongue in *Foe* (1986), the traditional, colonial script in which correlation is made between voice(lessness) and subjective authority or assertion.

This silence does not entirely negate Michael K’s constitutive dimension of subject-centred intentionality, however.³⁰ His wilful silence is a still a self-conscious act of self-constitution that paradoxically performs mastery over (the desire for) existential nothingness. Michael K’s refusal to speak ironically intones an agency that engenders a kind of subjective “affirmation-in-negation” (Dovey, *LA* 202) and belies constitutive unintentionality. That is, Michael K does actually achieve nothingness because he is affirmed in the intention of or will to silence, which thus reinforces his subject positionality. The scene in which he takes to gardening is telling, even pivotal, in this regard. Michael K’s image of himself as literal gardener, and the reader’s of him as metaphoric gardener, is uncannily pastoral and not unproblematic. Despite intimations at minimalism, the idea of gardening, like farming, is a profoundly cultured, domesticated, socialized, even ‘civilized’ act that, recalling the Afrikaner *plaasroman*, does not establish a relationship of equity with the land but re-enacts the appropriative precepts of colonization and finally contextualizes and historicizes his existence; the garden is not here quite the “site of *resistance*” (594) that Kai Easton argues it is. Quite apart from Michael K’s troubling essentialist and anthropomorphic references to the earth and its elements as mother, brother, sister, which imply egalitarianism but also infer cultural assimilation, Coetzee himself warns against forgetting “how terribly transitory that garden life of K’s is: he can’t hope to keep the garden because, finally, the whole surface of

³⁰ For this argument see Marais’ “Languages of Power: A Story of Reading Coetzee’s Michael K/*Michael K*” and “Literature and the Labour of Negation: J. M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*.”

South Africa has been surveyed and mapped and disposed of” (Morphet 1983, 456). Michael K is not, then, strictly speaking, a “free agent”; he is not actually free from the “oppressive structures of the system” (Dovey LA 268). Indeed, the novel is populated by numerous and varied “camps” from which Michael K himself, in withdrawing from society and in the ideological deployment of a Romantic aesthetic here, does not and cannot escape.³¹

Despite his idyllic positioning in relation to the land – burrowing in the “heart of the country” (104) in a mountain cave beyond the Visage estate, it is essentially indifferent to his existence. In the land’s shift from utopic to dystopic dimensions, Michael K becomes progressively emaciated and disoriented; the notion “that he might not be fully in possession of himself” (119) does not just imply his physical and mental unhinging, but also suggests that he is fundamentally a social and socialized being whose attempt at subjective freedom is persistently deferred and finally elusive. In his ridiculous gesture at the novel’s end of gathering water from a well with “a teaspoon and a long roll of string” (184-5) is the revelation of an ironic, ambiguous freedom underlined by the ultimately carnivalesque materiality of existence.³²

The novel thus proposes a de-centering of subjectivity premised on the fundamental ambiguity or otherness of self. Michael K is essentially an exile within the self whose oppositional existentialism is not achievable; there is no ‘other’ realizable mode of being because he is already constituted by otherness. This suggests subjectivity as a quintessentially violent, ambiguous process that eludes comprehension. Tellingly, his ‘actions’ are driven by ambivalence that questions and even negates cultural imperatives or epistemology: “Do I believe in helping people? he wondered. He might help people, he might not help them, he did not know beforehand, anything was possible” (48). Not unlike Magda, for Michael K there is ultimately “no story to be had” (141): “[a]lways when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness, before which his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it” (110). A fundamental “stranger” or “ghost” to himself (120), he is marked from within by an otherness that consistently disrupts and dispels, that is, violates existential meta- and counter-narratives in a way that anticipates *Disgrace*, a novel that proposes violence as a kind of ethical responsibility to the other(ed) self.

³¹ Noting that Michael’s “inability to function in society, however, does not preclude his desire to belong” (83), my argument correlates with Glennis Stephenson’s supposition that the novel proposes an ambiguous freedom. See “Escaping the Camps.”

³² While not overt here, this theme of the carnivalesque materiality of existence features prominently in Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree* and is analysed in the following chapter of this thesis.

An Ethics of Violence/An Ethical Subjectivity in *Disgrace*

Published in 1999, five years after the end of apartheid, *Disgrace* is the story of 52 year-old white, male divorcee, David Lurie, “adjunct professor of communications” at the Cape Technical University in the Western Cape Province (3) – an “emasculated institution of learning” (4). Disgruntled with the state of education in the country, he supplements his unfulfilling profession with a seedy existence visiting ethnically ‘exotic’ sex workers, finally sleeping with one of his female scholars, Melanie Isaacs. He is expelled from his employment and escapes to the Eastern Cape where he is viciously assaulted and becomes privy to the rape of his lesbian daughter, Lucy, by at least one of three young black men. The novel earned Coetzee a second Booker Prize and was made prescribed reading for Grade 12 learners in the matriculation syllabus of the Independent Examinations Board (IEB) for 2002-2003, demonstrating, quite unusually for his work, its accessibility and socio-political resonance. Indeed, *Disgrace* seems vaguely like a commentary on a contemporary milieu of declining socio-political and educational standards and of endemic societal violence. More significantly, it invokes two ‘unspoken’ yet persistently troubling national concerns – interracial and gender/sexual violence.

Generally read as Coetzee’s most controversial and disturbing contribution to South African literature as a result, the novel earned him the ire of commentators in varied quarters.³³ In a statement submitted to the Human Rights Commission Hearings on Racism in the Media in April 2000, the ANC complained that *Disgrace* was racist in its stereotypical representation of post-apartheid black men as inherently savage and violent, as well as in its insinuated encouragement of white emigration.³⁴ Notwithstanding Coetzee’s own subsequent emigration to Australia, the furore the novel generated elsewhere was exceptional. Bonny Schoonakker’s headline in a 1999 review for the national *Sunday Times* claimed that Coetzee had “inspired an image of a country headed for disaster” (33), and in the same year Anna Christensen stated that the novel had left her “feeling suffocated by dark clichés and preconceptions about South Africa” (1). In 2000, an infuriated Beverley Roos lambasted the author for feeding off national paranoia and described *Disgrace* as having the “effect of an

³³ This is likely to be one of the reasons that the novel was made into a film in 2008.

³⁴ See the Statement of the ANC at the Human Rights Commission Hearings on Racism in the Media 5 April 2000, 1-9. Similarly, from the president’s office, Professor Jakes Gerwel, deploring the representation of “coloured characters as whores, seducibles, plaintiffs and prosecutors-with-attitude,” lamented “the bleak view it [*Disgrace*] projects of the social decline, moral disintegration and fraying of the national fabric of South Africa.” See Kannemeyer’s *J. M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, 530-31.

emery board” on her senses, and playwright Athol Fugard pronounced the novel’s insinuated philosophy of white exculpation through black violence a depressingly “morbid phenomenon, very morbid” (qtd. in Goodwin 5). Further afield, in 1999, Michael Pye, in the *Scotsman*, berated the text as a study in disillusionment and pessimism and concluded that *Disgrace* “has a wretched, sour taste as a result,” and in the *London Independent* the following year, Salman Rushdie regretted the novel’s inability to “shine new light on the news” of the supposed darkness of South Africa.

Colin Bower concurs and, in his description of Coetzee’s novel as “a contrivance, something invented in order to demonstrate ... a personal insistence that life is grotesquely horrible,” dismisses the author’s work generally as fundamentally “dishonest and fraudulent” (7). Bower’s reference to the grotesque underwrites critics’ and commentators’ general perception of and distaste for Coetzee’s fiction, so much so that Regina Janes has questioned how one is to admire a writer who “turns over our lives, our politics, our traditions, our literature, who fingers our ... culture, our common humanity ... and says—is that all?” (103).³⁵ But some critics have advocated the merits of *Disgrace*’s forbidding plot, offering more sophisticated, nuanced readings that emphasize its ethical premise. Jane Taylor’s 1999 review for the *Mail and Guardian* recognized the “failure of imagination” as being at the heart of the novel and described it a “nuanced and pained exploration of the impossibility of ethical action” (25). The following year and for the same publication, Marais read *Disgrace* as espousing “respect for the other person’s specificities” (27), a sentiment endorsed by Elizabeth Lowry in her contribution to the *London Review of Books* in 2000 where she described the text as promoting the recognition of “some kind of selfhood in others” (7).

James Meffan and Kim Worthington observe, however, how Coetzee himself “continually resists the simple collapse of ethics into politics” (132), and Michiel Heyns warns against both the “ethical abstractionism and political reductionism” (58) common to most readings of Coetzee’s novel. My reading of *Disgrace* identifies a skilful blending of both the ethical and the political in which Coetzee proposes that an ethical subjectivity is achieved in the violent, political/politicized encounter with the Other or other(ed) self. That is, rather than offering a purely philosophical, abstract position or putting forward a social realist, political tract, the novel registers a profoundly materialist tenor premised on an engagement with the contradictions or contradictoriness of the self, highlighting sensitivity to the notion of the self as invariably other(ed). Enhancing Levinas’ position that violence has a theoretically

³⁵ The grotesque aesthetic and theme anticipate and feature more prominently in the fiction of Cormac McCarthy and are the focus of study in the next chapter of this thesis.

“positive structure” in the subjective process (*TI* 197), Coetzee’s text invokes a material paradigm of violence in order to confront the violent machinery yet ethical situatedness of the self.

Roots of /Routes to Disgrace

Disgrace begins by delineating the main character, Lurie, who lives an ascetic life, “within his income, within his temperament, within his emotional means” (2), despite his impassioned intellectual immersion into the fictional worlds of the Romantics, Wordsworth and Byron. Rigid, self-absorbed, emotionally disconnected and sexually exploitative, it is his claim to enlightened individualism that allows him to resolutely resist the demands of the university’s inquiry committee into his sexual abuse of Isaacs. The hearing directly references and parallels the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Committee in its intonations of confession and repentance, the sanctity of which Lurie challenges by arguing the incommensurability of the religious and the secular.³⁶ Pronouncing himself “a servant of Eros” (52), his belief that repentance “belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse” (58) and his aestheticized exploitation of Isaacs – he seduces her by telling her “a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone” (16), feeds into his Romantic sensibility, with the Greek, classical resonances and aestheticization of sexual assault here situating Lurie outside of contemporary cultural mores.

But while recalling Morrison’s own rendering of sexual violence in *The Bluest Eye*, his self-awareness is contrary to Cholly’s causal lack of self and thus elides sympathetic identification. Lurie is consequently publicly disgraced, subsequently expelled from institutional life and, leaving Cape Town, arrives in the Eastern Cape town of Salem and to his daughter stubbornly unrepentant and firmly disaffected: with “a prejudice that has settled in his mind, settled down. His mind has become a refuge for old thoughts, idle, indigent, with nowhere else to go. He ought to sweep the premises clean. But he does not care to do so, or does not care enough” (72). *Disgrace* suggests that at this point he is not just socially and morally alienated; in that he does not care, in that he does not do battle with himself and his actions, he is estranged from, or dead to, that which constitutes the self – its own unsettling otherness. Lurie cannot and does not see that “to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness” (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 44).

³⁶ For an account of the allegorical character of the TRC in the novel see Jane Poyner’s “Truth and Reconciliation in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.”

The novel implies that his insensitivity to otherness is also based on an urban or metropolitan outlook incommensurate with the communal way of life in rural Salem, and his perspective extends to those around him, in his attitude to his lesbian daughter and her unorthodox, ‘hippy’ friends and colleagues.³⁷ Robert Morrell points out that in South Africa race and class “are of major importance in determining how men understand their masculinity, how they deploy it, and in what form the patriarchal dividend comes to them” (10). In this regard, Lurie’s attitude is not just the exercise of white privilege – of psychosomatic habits constituted by “mental and physical patterns of engagement with the world that operate without conscious attention or reflection” (Sullivan 4); his is a masculinist commitment to seeing and being in the world “whitely” (Taylor, “Silence and Sympathy” 230).³⁸ As the epitome of privileged white patriarchy, Lurie’s is thus an account of white masculinity gone awry, set adrift in an alienating post-apartheid milieu.³⁹ His conscience consistently calls up the past, suggesting that it is awash with the cultural detritus of colonial and apartheid South Africa and is embedded in an archaic mode of being. Lurie’s despondency with the contemporary state of the nation is demonstrated in his persistent use of the perfective that, “signifying an action carried through to its conclusion. How far away it all seems! I live, I have lived, I lived” (71), registers subjective finality – the “dead end of consciousness” (Attwell, “Race in *Disgrace*” 339).

His designation of Lucy’s smallholding as a “farm” (200) betrays his romantic leanings toward an idealized, pastoral past and evokes one of the principles of the *plaasroman*, which is to elide the Other’s existence. This is demonstrated in his imaging of his daughter, despite her European heritage, as a “solid countrywoman, a *boervrou*” (60), and reinforces his own situatedness in a particularly sexist, proprietary mind-set. Lurie’s is a “failure to imagine a peopled landscape” that belies his intimations at subjective Enlightenment and is reflected in his hostile attitude to a changing racial and socio-political landscape in which a black man, Petrus, can be co-proprietor with a white woman, Lucy. No longer an “old-style kaffir” (140), Petrus, for Lurie, both underwrites and undermines historically traditional, racialized norms in his status as a “peasant, a *paysan*, a man of the country” with his recently acquired land

³⁷ See Katherine Hallemeier’s *J. M. Coetzee and the Limits of Cosmopolitanism* for further exploration of this position.

³⁸ Taylor explains “whiteness” as tending to “involve a commitment to the centrality of white people and their perspectives.” Here, the way whites “see the world just is the way the world is, and the way they get around in the world just is the right way to get around” (230).

³⁹ For more on the changing state of white South African masculinity see Michael Titlestad’s “Whither White Men?”, Kobus Du Pisani’s “Puritanism Transformed: Afrikaner Masculinities in the Apartheid and Post-Apartheid Period,” and Georgie Horrell’s *Post-Apartheid Disgrace: Guilty Masculinities in White South African Writing*.

affairs grant and part ownership of the land (117). Lurie's disillusionment with the current socio-political milieu is registered in his belief that "[t]he more things change the more they remain the same. History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein" (62); the 'new' South Africa repeating and continuing the same appropriative, colonizing instinct of old. His remark that "[i]n the old days one could have had it out with Petrus. In the old days one could have had it out to the extent of losing one's temper and sending him packing" (116), does not simply reveal, as American whiteness studies have theorized, a "possessive" investment in whiteness – a subconsciously "poisonous system of privilege that pits people against each other and prevents the creation of common ground" (Lipsitz vii, xix). Buttressing his hostility to the new socio-political dispensation and indicating his ideological entanglement in an outdated, racist apartheid discourse embedded in violence, Lurie's attitude implies, inversely to the American experience, racial segregation in South Africa as having reached "its logical end point: [violent] disintegration" (Perry 5).

It is not coincidental, then, that *Disgrace* is set primarily in the Eastern Cape, a province that historically marks the violent, bloody frontier between colonial advancement and native resistance and thus has political and subjective resonance for white and black South Africa.⁴⁰ Situated on that site where "race, racism and race relations are most deeply embedded, most resistant to being reconstructed," Grant Farred argues that Coetzee in the novel "establishes the border as a liminal space where certain transgressions are endured, if not endorsed" ("Back to the Borderlines" 17-18). In its dystopic frame, the Eastern Cape country-landscape exudes an "indifference, hardheartedness" (125) that simultaneously parallels and challenges Lurie's subjective state, and in his encounter with a ubiquitous otherness here, the novel would seem to disrupt the narrative authority of the *plaasroman* and its evocation of white, subjective belonging. In this regard, it is significant that the 'ethical' action of *Disgrace* – Lucy's rape and Lurie's violation – occurs at this intersectional site because, recalling South Africa's own violent colonial and apartheid history, it is here, both textually and subjectively, that the novel offers an intervention in which Coetzee puts forward a politicized, material ethics of violence which allows for a conscious, material othering of the self. That is, through his novel, Coetzee deploys violence as a means of pushing back the frontiers of (racialized) subjectivity.

⁴⁰ For more information on the history of the Eastern Cape Frontier see Gareth Cornwell's "*Disgraceland: History and the Humanities in Frontier Country*," Timothy Keegan's *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order*, Martin Legassick's "The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography," and Robert Ross's *Beyond the Pale: Essays on the History of Colonial South Africa* and "Khoesan and Immigrants: The Emergence of Colonial Society in the Cape, 1500-1800."

Lucy's rape specifically calls to attention the urgent prevalence and alarming embeddedness of gender-based, particularly sexual, violence against women in the country. Notwithstanding the high occurrence of reported violent attacks on women that has earned South Africa the title of "global capital of rape,"⁴¹ a 1995 report by the Human Rights Watch, estimating that "one in every three South African women will be raped" (2), highlighted that sexual assault "continues to be one of the most under-reported—and therefore unpunished—crimes" according to police statistics (51).⁴² Lurie's smug observation that it "happens every day, every hour, every minute ... in every quarter of the country" (98) is therefore poignantly telling as it speaks to the prevalence of sexual violence in the country as a pandemic.⁴³ But *Disgrace* additionally races sexual violence, calling up the historical trope of 'black peril' and the country's intimate interracial legacy. The taboo history evoked is here compounded by Lucy's revelation that the experience was "so personal ... It was done with such personal hatred" and in her imaging of the perpetrators as "debt collectors" (158). That black male violence on a white woman – the mythologized cultural repository of the race – is represented both as an intimate, personal act and as the ascetic, alienated collection of a debt, suggests the ambivalent, violent character of subjective assertion and projects us, as Rita Barnard observes, into a "wholly new and discomforting ethical frame" (*Apartheid and Beyond* 40).

This awkward ethical framing of the exculpation of white racist (subjective) violence through black racist (subjective) violence plays on the reparative imperatives of a contemporary South African dispensation, on the talk of a one per cent wealth tax on whites and of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) which, referencing the historical socio-economic benefits to whites of black subjugation, seek to redress social inequity.⁴⁴ It also

⁴¹ In a BBC feature entitled, "Will South Africans ever be shocked by rape?", Andrew Harding, citing a figure of 60 000 reported rapes each year, describes South Africans as "unable to muster much more than a collective shrug in the face of almost unbelievably grim statistics." See also Melanie Judge's "Changing the Language of Prejudice" at <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-06-12-changing-the-language-of-prejudice>, and also a report on rape in South Africa at <http://rapecrisis.org.za/rape-in-south-africa/>.

⁴² See Nowrojee Binaifer and Bronwen Manby's report for the Human Rights Watch in *Violence Against Women in South Africa: State Response to Domestic Violence and Rape*.

⁴³ This dire situation has been affirmed even in the rhetoric of national politics. President Jacob Zuma, who was himself accused and acquitted of rape in 2005, launched a national "Stop Rape" campaign in 2013 to rid the country of this "scourge, to cure our nation of this sickness," and Lindiwe Mazibuko of the official opposition party, Democratic Alliance (DA), has described rape in South Africa as "a silent war" against women. See Michelle Faul's "South Africa Violence against Women Rated Highest in the World." About the novel's representation of violence in South Africa as mundane see Farred's "The Mundanacity of Violence: Living in a state of Disgrace."

⁴⁴ Echoing but inverting an African-American colloquial notion of "the black tax" in which black Americans have been viewed as having to work harder to achieve the subjective privileges automatically afforded to white Americans, in 2011 Desmond Tutu suggested that a one per cent tax on whites might go some way to redressing previous injustices against black South Africans. This follows on from the country's implementation of BEE, a move by the government to redress socio-economic inequities and that has helped generate a population of

speaks to and expands the growing phenomenon of “corrective” rape. Despite having one of the most progressive constitutions in the world aimed at securing freedom from discrimination and the equal rights of all including that of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) peoples, South Africa has, according to a 2011 Human Rights Watch Report, experienced increasing levels of extreme sexual violence particularly against black lesbians and transgender men post-1994.⁴⁵ While the revelation itself could reflect a more transparent government, it more properly suggests, as I have argued earlier, a national cultural intolerance for nonconformity. In this regard, “corrective” rape – the term applied to the “erroneous myth that heterosexual rape will have a ‘healing’ effect on a lesbian woman and turn her ‘straight’ again” – is aligned with and implies the normativity of heterosexuality/heterosexual practises.⁴⁶ Registering Lucy’s own sexual, and therefore subjective, otherness as a lesbian, Coetzee extends in the novel the violation of sexual orientation to include racial orientation; that is, while on the one hand Lucy’s rape functions to “correct” her sexual (dis)orientation, the rape of a white woman by black men also serves as a “corrective” of past racial injustices through the deliberate (dis/re)positioning of her white subjectivity. Lucy’s talk of the “personal hatred” of her black rapists thus uncannily echoes Morrison’s justification of black historical hatred of whites as a complaint against “not being seen for what one is” (qtd. in LeClair 376) by configuring their actions as a kind of “hate crime,” a fundamentally unjust attack on one’s felt or lived, rather than socially allocated or prescribed, subjectivity and motivated by personalized/experiential racialized prejudice.⁴⁷

Disgrace thus locates violence at the interface between or intersection of individuals and society; as, Lurie caustically ruminates, part of a morbidly “vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect” (98). As his interpretation of the rape as “history speaking through them” (156) suggests, the novel evokes the inevitability of violence in and the inexorable violence

(upper) middle-class ‘black diamonds’ while widening the socio-economic divide. For an article on Tutu’s controversial suggestion, see Leonard Praeg’s “1% Tax, 100% Forgiveness.”

⁴⁵ In 2006, the Civil Union Act was signed into law, underwriting Section 9 of the South African constitution that guarantees equality and prohibits discrimination on grounds including gender, sex, and sexuality. See Dipika Nath’s “*We’ll Show You You’re a Woman*”: *Violence and Discrimination against Black Lesbians and Transgender Men in South Africa*.

⁴⁶ See the 2013 report by the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa entitled: “Corrective rape, hate crimes, and the law in South Africa.”

⁴⁷ While not a legally recognized offense in South Africa, “hate crimes” are acknowledged by theorists as actions motivated by hatred and prejudice and, because typically realized in violence, warrant classification as a criminal offence. See Bronwyn Harris’ “Arranging Prejudice: Exploring Hate Crime in post-apartheid South Africa.”

of the recuperation and reclamation of subjectivity. But while Lurie's invocation of history as inheritance – “[i]t came down from the ancestors” (156) – recalls Morrison's own evocation of the link between black ancestral history and African-American subjective belonging and cultural continuity in her own work, it here alludes to the notion of sexual violence as a protraction of the (de)colonizing impulses of the nation and, by extension, serves as a generic metaphor for the violence of black subjectivity (to white sense of belonging and continuity). While its critique of the postcolonial nation echoes somewhat Vera's critique in her fiction of black cultural nationalism, the novel also illustrates “the process by means of which discriminatory cultural codes continuously reaffirm their legitimacy and hence remain capable of providing a rationale for discriminatory systems” (Stratton, “Imperial Fictions” 99). That is, *Disgrace* invokes and provokes those racialized discriminatory structures it attempts to elide. So although David Attwell asserts that “the *blackness* of the black characters is the least significant feature of their representation,” his observation that Lurie “recognizes that the violence of black rape has an historical character which the violence of white rape may lack” (“Race in *Disgrace*” 335, 337) reveals the troubling, murky waters in which the text plunges, referencing racial binaries that underpin racism in order to subvert it.⁴⁸

The novel's provocative stance also has problematic implications for the socio-political positionality of women. Notwithstanding rendering her the object rather than subject of sex and sexuality,⁴⁹ the normativity of violence against women is compounded by Lucy's own refusal to speak about the rape. Her determination to accept her violation as a “purely private matter” in this place, South Africa (112) underwrites, because it en-genders, violence; that is, in what seems to be an act ‘self-policing’, women are confirmed as the acquiescent and perpetual ‘private’, domestic casualties of violence within a predictably hostile male public structure. Indeed, a South African Demographic and Health Survey conducted by the department of health in 1998 revealed that statistically only one in nine women who had been raped reported the matter to the police, while more recent data from a 2010 Gauteng community-based survey by Gender Links and the Medical Research Council found that just one in twenty-five women raped by their intimate partners, compared to one in thirteen women who had been raped by a non-partner, reported the incident to the police.⁵⁰ Lucy's

⁴⁸ For a similar position to Attwell's see Andrew Van der Vlies' *J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace*.

⁴⁹ I refer here specifically to her dual positioning as a woman and a lesbian.

⁵⁰ The results of the South African Demographic and Health Survey influenced the one-in-nine campaign designed to raise awareness about the prevalence of and silence around rape, silence that is partly influenced by a distrust of public structures – the police force and the government – that are largely dismissive of what are

silence on rape thus reads as capitulation to and “the playing out of a socio-cultural script” (Sanday 85). Reading this as another instance in which “over the body of the woman silence is being drawn like a blanket” (110), Lurie interprets Lucy’s silence as humbling “herself before history” (160), thus aligning the personal with the political and leaving her no recourse for subjective redress. The unspeakability of female suffering/pain here silences not just the pained/suffering body but, as Morrison’s and Vera’s fiction differently reveals, compromises and negates, that is, does violence to the entire subjective enterprise.

As such, critics have objected to the existentially and textually ambivalent, seemingly vacuous positioning of Lucy. Josephine Dodd expresses frustration at what she views as a typically sexist representation of women and questions Coetzee’s use of women’s bodies for “discussions of socio-political issues like racism or aesthetic inquiries into the nature of creativity” (127). Meg Samuelson concurs that the literary script of rape here “distorts the realities of sexual violence in order to direct attention away from the violated female body” (“The Rainbow Womb” 88). Similarly, Elleke Boehmer reads *Disgrace* as delineating “women as circulating objects within the new system” as Lucy embeds “in herself, her body, the stereotype of the wronged and muted woman, the abused and to-be-again-abused of history” (“Not Saying Sorry” 349). Lucy Graham thus questions whether it is possible to read her rape “outside of the phenomenon of historical silencing” (“A Hidden Side” 15), and Myrtle Hooper, offended by the novel’s “quietism” – its literary accommodation of violence, concludes that to read *Disgrace* without distaste “requires elisions that shut one’s eyes to what is there; narrative compliance that forecloses scruples” (129, 131). In these readings, Coetzee differently practices the same aesthetic obscurantism as Morrison does in *The Bluest Eye* and Lucy attains the same subjective and textual victim status as Pecola, here paying the penalty for whiteness and the sacrificial price for “staying on” (D158) in a violated and violent society.⁵¹

“Yielding nothing”: Subjective and Textual Alterity

But Lucy’s refusal to speak is not her way of “trying to put an end to the cycle of violence” (104), as Hania Nashef maintains. In this regard, Giti Chandra warns against “any trope that

seen to be ‘domestic affairs’. For more statistical information see Lisa Vetten’s “Bullard vs Solomon and the unwritten rules for speaking about rape.”

⁵¹ Lucy’s position here complexly speaks to Thandeka’s argument in *Learning to be White* concerning the “wages for whiteness” (77) in which being white becomes a “matter of survival, not a privilege but a penalty” (8).

seeks to transform victimhood into a species of heroism or agency,” for historically the aesthetic appeal of this trope offers an inaccurate representation of and falsifies the actual political power allotted to women (3). Chandra suggests that the trope of silence can be misread as giving agency to women that eludes and undergirds their subjugated positionalities within a patriarchal order. Yet Lucy’s silence goes against and beyond the political reductionism and ethical abstractionism read into the novel by critics and commentators alike. She insists on not being politically objectified as “an object of crime” (111) and on not being philosophically analysed or (mis)read in “terms of abstractions” (112), but in terms of the incomprehensible and material singularity of her experience. Her position here affirms Lisa Vetten’s analysis of the narrow and exclusionary rules that govern discourse on or speaking about rape. Asserting that “rape survivors do not exist for our personal edification and when they speak it cannot be only to tell us reassuring stories about the triumph of the human spirit,” she proposes that instead of hurrying to opine, judge and prescribe, we listen to and recognize “the complex array of feelings these accounts evoke.” Vetten’s utilization of the trope of ‘listening’ and Lucy’s of ‘reading’ here correlate to suggest a sensorial and psychical, experiential dimension that underwrites Lucy’s resistance to being culturally encoded and decoded, and the repetitive emphasis on Lurie’s failure to “understand” her decision not to take action against the men precisely highlights Lucy’s refusal to being situated within an historically generic existential metanarrative. She asserts: “What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have it is the right not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself” (133).

Her position recalls Lurie’s own refusal to ‘confess’ at his sexual assault hearing. But Lucy’s resistance is not based on an *a priori*, privileged (white, (fe)male) subjectivity. Hers is an “inward-directed project” (Vice 324) that asserts, rather than capitulates to, an ethical and, by extension, experiential situatedness in the violence of (white) subjectivity. Herewith, if to speak is “above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of civilization” (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 17-8), then Lucy’s refusal to speak (violently) undermines and rejects the (white) imperatives of “culture” and “civilization”. In “[y]ielding nothing,” Lucy’s resolute silence, which is the “complement to the *other’s voice*” (Taylor, “Silence and Sympathy” 239), problematizes or renders problematic her (white) subjective status and asserts her affected status as a “dead person” (161) renouncing any claim to subjectivity.⁵² While

⁵² Lucy’s status as a “dead person” here interestingly echoes, but subverts and extends, Patterson’s theory of (African-American slave) “social death” in that she exercises choice and agency, opting out of normative ‘civilization’.

seemingly endorsing sexual violence theorists' assertions that rape includes ritual humiliation and is categorically violence against the self, her silence is not unlike and extends Michael K's in that it is at the same time a paradoxical "affirmation-in-negation" which here affords her access to an other(ed) subjectivity. That is, unlike the child figures Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* and Zhizha in *Under the Tongue*, Lucy's conscious, adult muteness exceeds signifying subjective undoing or inadequacy and instead allows her to preserve her fundamentally anterior status. In making a claim for the specificity and survival/endurance of her other(ed) self, Lucy's stance problematizes the culturally communal and gendered imperatives put forward by Morrison and Vera while also interrogating the rigidity of prevailing power structures and positions.⁵³

Significantly, then, the reader, like Lurie, is not actually witness or privy to her sexual violation, to the morbid event of rape. Despite all the markers of a traumatic physical encounter – donning a bathrobe afterwards “her feet are bare, her hair wet” (97), the incident is not actually named or represented in the novel. While similarly evasive, Coetzee's fictive enunciation and execution of the event is, quite unlike Morrison's and Vera's, dispassionate, in keeping with his austere aesthetic and sparse writing technique. James Wood consequently complains that there is “a point beyond which pressurized shorthand is no longer an enrichment but an impoverishment, and an unnatural containment. It is the point ... in which fiction is no longer representing complexity but is in fact converting complexity into its own too-certain language” (3). For Wood, Coetzee's linguistic economy is a kind of aesthetic ‘masturbation’ or authorial self-indulgence that politically and affectively impoverishes the event.

Maria Lopez, however, questions to what extent “literary interpretation and literary writing constitute an act of illegitimate intrusion” (xix). Put differently, to what measure does the literary endeavour of representing and ‘reading’ violence engender and perpetuate the subjective violence it attempts to elide? In narrowly interpreting or representing violence, we deny the imaginative dimension, simultaneously confirming by resisting the modification of established cultural norms. In this way, we do not just do violence to the text, impoverishing it of its singularity and otherness; we do violence to and impoverish the subjective experience of the event itself.⁵⁴ In refusing to linguistically articulate Lucy's rape *Disgrace* would seem to bespeak while highlighting the violence of writing and interpretation. That is, in remaining

⁵³ See Marais's “The Hermeneutics of Empire: Coetzee's Post-colonial Metafiction.”

⁵⁴ For similar arguments see Katy Iddiols' “Disrupting Inauthentic Readings: Coetzee's Strategies” and Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* and *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*.

silent, the novel makes violence all the more palpable for its rhetorical absence. Its lack of symbolic or referential detail is effective and affective in forcing subjective presence into narrative absence and in putting forward a creative ethical response. In this regard, while a “*dispassionate* conceptual development of the typology of violence must by definition ignore its traumatic impact,” *Disgrace*’s cold, sterile analysis of violence precisely “reproduces and participates in its horror” (Zizek 3), forcing us to confront the profoundly elusive materiality of that violence.

In this way, Naomi Mandel’s caution against the performative, aesthetic evocation of the unspeakable which she argues masquerades as an ethical practice but is actually an ethical investment in the limits of representation (12-13), is challenged as the novel appears to turn its gaze upon the ethical or ethically limited practice of representation itself. With the event shrouded in silence, *Disgrace* endows the “textual body with an ineradicable dimension of secrecy” (Lopez xvii) and violates normative assumptions about discursive referentiality as language here fails to provide access to a material reality that exceeds mere words. On various occasions, David reflects that English “is an unfit medium,” lacking the specificity and the aptitude to reflect the cadences of changed and changing life in South Africa: “language has stiffened” (117), it is “tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites” (129).⁵⁵ Similarly, Lucy’s rape resists articulation in the absence of linguistic referentiality, just as Lurie’s subsequent decline into music at the novel’s end establishes the discordant, raw materials of discourse.⁵⁶ In the novel’s own refusal to ‘speak’ violence, it is not just language that is rendered “tired, friable”; we are made “stiff” and uncomfortable and, rendered helpless, propelled into an awkward ethical frame that in turn renders violence meaningful (Blok 24) in that it situates violent action as all the more unnatural for our inability to perceive it.

The silence of Lucy’s rape is thus registered as a trauma that returns to haunt the (other(ed)) self as “the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (Caruth, *UE* 6). Not faced with an embodied spectral figure of subjective trauma as in *Beloved*, nor subject to the tactile imaging of subjective terror as with *Butterfly Burning*, Lurie is forced to envision the horror of an act that elides linguistic representation and interpretation. During the incident, a “vision comes to him of Lucy struggling with the two in

⁵⁵ Previously, Lurie muses that his foreign language skills will not “save him here in darkest Africa” and sarcastically suggests language’s geopolitical ineptitude as illustrative of the inversion of colonizer to colonized (95).

⁵⁶ For an exploration of music as (non) language in the novel see Michael Holland’s “‘Plink-Plunk’: Unforgetting the Present in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.”

the blue overalls, struggling against them. He writhes, trying to blank it out” (97). His imaginative evasion here highlights the bounds of what Lurie is “capable of imagining” (140). Admitting that after all, “he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?” (160), the novel suggests the limits of sympathetic imagination. Because the attempt, much like empathy, is a projection of the self that takes away from and elides the other’s individual experience, the possibility of reconciliation lies in his ability to sympathize in spite of himself or his self, in an ethical relation to the material.⁵⁷

Abdicating the Self: Violence and Subjective Abjection

Interestingly, juxtaposed with the paucity of detail surrounding Lucy’s rape is the gory account of Lurie’s own physical assault by the young black men. Splashed from head to toe with methylated spirits and set alight in the toilet, “all that is left of his hair, coats his scalp and forehead. Underneath it the scalp is an angry pink. He touches the skin: it is painful and beginning to ooze. One eyelid is swelling shut; his eyebrows are gone, his eyelashes” (96-7). A macabre picture of subjectivity here, Lurie’s self-reliance is further undermined when, days later, he is rendered “weak as a baby, and lightheaded too,” suffering the “ignominy of being helped out of the bath, helped to dry himself, helped into borrowed pyjamas” by Bill Shaw, Lucy’s neighbour and friend (103). The self-conscious repetitive emphasis on being “helped” suggests not just his infantilization, but highlights his physical vulnerability. More significantly, it is evident that Lurie is psychically “disturbed,” haunted by his daughter’s assault (127):

A grey mood is settling on him. It is not just that he does not know what to do with himself. The events of yesterday have shocked him to the depths. The trembling, the weakness are only the first and most superficial signs of that shock. He has a sense that, inside him, a vital organ has been bruised, abused – perhaps even his heart. For the first time he has a taste of what it will be like to be an old man, tired to the bone, without hopes, without desires, indifferent to the future. Slumped on a plastic chair amid the stench of chicken feathers and rotting apples, he feels his interest in the world draining from him drop by drop. It may take weeks, it may take months before he is bled dry, but he is bleeding. (107)

⁵⁷ See also Marais’s “The Task of the Imagination.”

Lurie's physical trauma – “the trembling, the weakness” – correlates with his psychological and psychical undoing and unlike his previous, characteristic disinterest with the wellbeing of others, the event of Lucy's violation articulates in him a subjective woundedness, a “bleeding” in which he is traumatically othered, abjected from himself/his self to confront the “brute indigestible materiality” of suffering (Durrant, “Bearing Witness” 460).

Levinas considers the register upon which the ethical imperative impacts or stimulates subjective alterity not as a “cognitive sensibility, but as sensuality, susceptibility to being affected” (*Otherwise than Being* xxix), an openness to being made experientially vulnerable. In the distressed, suffering body, Coetzee puts forward an affirmative ethics of violence characterized by responsiveness responsibility to otherness, in which a radical loss of cognitive subjectivity “approximates (brings one closer, more proximate to)” (Durrant, *PN* 27) the experience of being (an)other. In *Doubling the Point*, he explains that the body “with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt ... it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power” (248). The body here is not as in *Beloved* a purposive, political means of subjective embodiment; *Disgrace* articulates what Vera's characters come to discover in her fiction, that the body in pain exerts its own specificity or being that both precludes and provides the conditions for (an)other(ed) subjectivity. Its materiality renders the subject open and susceptible to an otherness that undermines subjective assurance/stability, so that Lurie's violation, his suffering body is a “response to the other facing” (Levinas qtd. in Lingis xix) – a necessarily responsive and responsible ethical gesture.

In the same way that Lucy's subsequent pregnancy betrays her physical vulnerability, Lurie's pained body conveys a susceptible, ungrounded subjectivity held “hostage” – as an “authentic figure of responsibility” (*OB* xx) – to otherness. This does not render his experience of suffering approximate or equal to Lucy's, however, but implies that in being violated – both physically and in Lucy's refusal to speak – Lurie is able or forced to understand that he cannot possibly comprehend the experience of and what it means to be (an)other. In this regard, the novel's direct paralleling of Lucy's rape with Lurie's sexual exploitation of Melanie as well as, intertextually, Byron's exploitative relationship with his mistress, Teresa Guiccioli, intuits Lurie's otherness in the bankruptcy of his white masculine self and his relations with others. Initially, he does not conceive his aggressive seduction of Melanie as “rape, not quite that.” But, conceding that it was “undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (25), he does in fact rape, and it is a violence equivalent, Lucy insists, to “murder” (158), demonstrated in Melanie's physical response – as “though she had

decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration” (25). Lurie’s failure to acknowledge Melanie’s otherness here is a betrayal of his ethical responsibility to (an)other.

Lucy’s rape thus restores a kind of experiential integrity to Lurie’s sense of being. Tellingly, after the incident, he and she become like “strangers in the same house” (124) and Lurie’s renewed relationship with Lucy is characterized by “[v]isitorship, visitation” (218), a relationship that does not, as Barnard surmises, strictly “express the hope of some new annunciation” (“Coetzee’s Country Ways” 390); while the novel intimates the possibility of “a new footing, a new start” (218), it puts forward a practical, rather than abstract or idyllic, ‘resolution’ that requires a degree of distance from and even reverence for the other’s otherness. Although it is typically observed that “[p]roximity is the realm of intimacy and morality; distance is the realm of estrangement and the Law” (Bauman 83), Coetzee would seem to assert and endorse here the ethical efficacy of the “‘strangeness’ of strangers” precisely to underscore “our feeling of being lost, of not knowing how to act and what to expect” (Bauman 149) – of feeling and being perpetually violated. At the same time, in Lurie’s retrospective perception of the rapists as “visitors” (*D* 159) is the suggestion of a kind of (Derridian) hospitality based on recognition of and responsiveness to the fact that Lucy and the rapists are foreign to him yet are also “lives all entangled with his” (192).⁵⁸ The repeated refrain, “above all Lucy” (96), thus undercuts while highlighting the romantic and religious, transcendental resonance of her name, and acknowledges instead the facticity or materiality of her otherness; more significantly, it indicates a kind of humility or disavowal of the self in which Lurie’s subjective, principle “I” is disrupted and rendered “obscure and growing obscurer. A figure from the margins of history” (167).

Under these conditions, Lurie’s intricate and intimate discovery of self is at the same time the revelation of and exposure to the other as a freedom that confronts his (Sartre, *EH* 55). But *Disgrace* further registers and extends subjectivity as a profoundly intrasubjective process and experience that suggests the principle subjective ‘I’ as ‘freely’ inhabiting an already unstable, communal state of otherness. Certainly the ironic tone of the novel’s narrative voice, which is at odds with that of the focalizer, Lurie, engenders “countervoices” that presuppose subjectivity as a contradictory or contrary, fundamentally enigmatic, process.⁵⁹ The inscrutability of subjectivity is evidenced in his relationships with music and animals in which he is consumed and marked by something other than himself. The bond he

⁵⁸ For an exploration of the workings of hospitality in Coetzee’s fiction, which draws on Derrida’s *Of Hospitality*, see Marais’ *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee*. For an examination of the concept of visitation see Maria Lopez’s *Acts of Visitation: The Narrative of J. M. Coetzee*.

⁵⁹ See also Carrol Clarkson’s *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices*.

acquires with the two Persian sheep is inexplicable: “suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him” (126). Similarly, Lurie assists Bev Shaw who works at the local Animal Welfare clinic to put down dogs at the kennels but “does not understand what is happening to him. Until now he has been more or less indifferent to animals. Although in an abstract way he disapproves of cruelty, he cannot tell whether by nature he is cruel or kind. He is simply nothing” (143). With his ego deposed, he is estranged from and strange(r) to his self, becoming a liminal “dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a *harijan*” (146); recalling but de-politicizing Petrus’s own self-description as “the dog-man” (64), Gareth Cornwell speculates that Lurie’s redemption begins here, in the recognition of the “value of the lives of animals,” in seeing his image “reflected in the eyes of the lowest of the low, lower even than the lowest human being” (“The Recovery of Grace” 254).⁶⁰

In that the novel through Lurie (and Lucy) puts forward humiliation/shame – the affective articulation of the disjuncture between what one is and what one ought to be – as fundamentally connected to (the process of) being, it illustrates how “[s]ubjectivity is subjection,” how subjection can constitute and ironically enable subjectivity (Lingis xix). But while Lurie is “[I]like a dog” (205), his ‘redemption’ is not motivated by any particular sentiment or moral rationale; Lurie must, like Lucy, start “at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity” (205). Somewhat reminiscent here of Michael K as an “affirmation-in-negation,” Lurie’s palpable subjective negation is further affirmed in his failure to compose the chamber opera, *Byron in Italy* which, performed on a ridiculous “seven-stringed banjo bought for [Lucy] on the streets of KwaMashu when she was a child” (184), is reduced to a comic production, a material, raw “[p]link-plunk-plonk” (185) that goes “nowhere” (214).

Fragile Subjects, Fragile Subjectivities

Lurie’s sense of self is, like Magda’s, mediated, held hostage by something other than or anterior to himself and the novel’s punning on his state of disgrace indicates, Attridge suggests, the “arrival of the unexpected in unexpectedly beneficent form” (“Age of Bronze”

⁶⁰ Petrus’s own self-description as “the dog-man” has racial connotations which echo African-American historical subjective positionality as somewhere between human and animal. But although referenced here, the racial connotations are exceeded in Lurie’s experience and process of subjective alterity. Coetzee is concerned here not with re-articulating racist metaphors, but with exploring the way in which subjectivity entails subjugation, and the prevalence of animals in the novel and in Coetzee’s fiction generally has in this regard generated much interest. For Coetzee’s own provocative position on animals see *The Lives of Animals*.

112). But Susan Arndt takes issue with the manifestly occidental, Christian, and enlightened intonations of the term which, for her, negatively put forward a “rhetoric of ‘race-evasiveness’” which contributes to “a new crisis of *whiteness* in post-apartheid South Africa” (178) that re-centralizes white subjectivity. But Arndt’s concern again brings to the fore the issue of reading that the novel consistently problematizes. Despite its transcendental inflections, (dis)grace in the novel suggests something incomprehensible, beyond or other than the racialized or gendered self and situates subjectivity itself in crisis. That is, as the ambivalent “partner and opposite of grace” (Azoulay 39), disgrace is constituted syntactically by an “interminable quality” generated “without term” (Sanders 371) so that the emphasis is on whiteness as subjectivity in crisis. Working within and in opposition to a subjective cultural narrative proffered during colonial and apartheid South Africa, Coetzee resists negotiating “postcolonial white guilt” (Horrell 2) in a novel that elides epistemological healing or restitution and instead persistently dispels metanarratives that approximate subjectivity with whiteness.

Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson observe that Coetzee has become “literature’s ‘elsewhere’, producing a body of work ... for which there is as yet no recognised definition” (4), and *Disgrace* puts forward a ceaseless state of alterity in which white subjectivity lacks definition and is itself sketched tenuously. In its display of an apparent commitment to the teleological and textual disruption of the notion of the subject, the novel suggests the intrinsic fragility or other(ed)ness of subjectivity, a (dis)position at odds with prescriptive socio-cultural/socio-political modes of being and belonging. In the continual violation of the subjective “I”, Coetzee’s fiction elides the racial, cultural or gendered imperatives towards which Morrison’s and Vera’s fiction gesture and speaks, rather, to Cormac McCarthy’s evocation of American white male subjectivity as grotesque, a mode McCarthy utilizes to undermine and render incongruous the subjective norms of America generally and of the American South in particular.

CHAPTER FOUR

GROTESQUE SUBJECT(IVITIE)S: EXISTENCE IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S SOUTHERN FICTION

The American South: The Embodiment of National Violence.

As previously discussed, and not unlike the other nations examined in this study, British-European colonial founding of the United States of America in 1492 was predicated on violence. While the movement to the Americas initially intimated freedom from a religiously restrictive and socially oppressive Old World to a liberating New World, its corollary was the deliberate dispossession of indigenous populations. The 'civilization' proffered by the Pilgrim Fathers was fundamentally undermined by their racialized and often racist ideologies regarding the innate inferiority of native inhabitants. Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop's, Puritan image in 1630 of the nation as a 'city upon a hill' functioned in contradistinction to the "moral vacuum, a cursed and chaotic wasteland" that America initially symbolized in Western imagination and presented the opportunity for violently "enlightening darkness, ordering chaos, and changing evil into good" (Nash 24).¹ Americanism necessarily had at its core an exclusory white ethnic ideology.²

In addition, nationhood was a profoundly gendered economy. British-European attitudes toward America in the early seventeenth century grew out of a colonialist rhetoric that looked to the New World not just as a land to be conquered by male explorers and adventurers but as one "potentially pregnant" with material possibilities (Grant 33). This analogy of the "land as woman" (Kolodny 4) allowed for the simultaneous and ambivalent pastoral imaging of America as a paradisaical garden and evoked the notions of progress, metamorphoses, and rebirth. The Declaration of Independence of 1776 further entrenched American androcentrism and frontier expansion westwards in the 1840s saw the coining of the term 'Manifest Destiny' which, predicated on the myth of American exceptionalism and based on the ironic principle of "democratic capitalism" (Madsen 47-8), buttressed, not unlike South Africa's own frontier wars, the nation's violent makeup. The effect of the Civil War not only

¹ For arguments on the intersection of religion, environment and racism in national ideology, see Alan Heimert's "Puritanism, the Wilderness and the Frontier," and Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Savages of America*.

² Drawing on the ethnocidal 'Indian Wars' of the 1870s and 1880s, Howard Zinn reveals how "[t]otal control led to total cruelty" in the establishment of the nation, making a mockery of the "pretense ... that there really is such a thing as 'the United States'" (*A People's History* 6, 9).

realigned America's national identity with war, it betrayed its predisposition to "regeneration through violence" (Slotkin 5), evidenced in the persistent regional confrontations between North and South.³

Richard Brown contends that violence has systemically been "a determinant of both the form and substance of American life" (4), and critics maintain that this culture of violence is nowhere more apparent than in the American South. Following its defeat in the Civil War, the (idea of the) South was underlined by a "siege mentality" premised, Sheldon Hackney observes, on "a feeling of persecution at times and a sense of being a passive, insignificant object of alien or impersonal forces" within the nation's socio-political landscape (924-5). In the secession of eleven Southern states and in the formation of a confederacy, the American South asserted its ideological independence and reinforced its rustic image as a typically agrarian society antithetical to the effects of the modern practices of industrialism and urbanization as well as to the concomitant ideals of immigration and democratic individualism, for instance.⁴ As a collection of essays by twelve influential Southerners entitled *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) indicates, the fundamental precept of the South was to defend and extend the notion of Southern self-determination and to resist the 'cultural degradation' associated with a 'progressive' American era.⁵

But while highlighting its cultural provincialism, fraternal communitarianism, sentimental African-American paternalism and Southern gentility, this romanticized expression of an alienated region was persistently undermined by a regressively hostile religious, Protestant conservatism, racial and ethnic intolerance, and a strident separatism and individualism. This is evidenced, not least, in the prominence of chattel slavery as an increasingly mechanized and highly profitable industry for bourgeois Southerners and which effectively "dispossessed the garden of the [entire] Western pastoral imagination" (Simpson 51).⁶ Slavery's violence underpinned, not unlike South Africa's colonial and later apartheid violence, the particularity

³ American "regeneration through violence" is also evidenced in later internal and international confrontation. With entry into World War One in 1917, and despite growing immigration and global expansion and innovation, America was characterized by increasingly regressive and repressive laws including, the Espionage Act of 1917, the Sedition Act of 1918, and National Prohibition, which took effect in 1920. This criminalization of the American public underlined the nation's growing imperialist attitude which, with its entry into World War Two in 1942, realigned America's national identity with war as demonstrated in the establishment of the House of Un-American Activities Committee in 1945, its involvement in the Cold War from 1947 to 1991, the Korean War in the 1950s, the Vietnam War from 1961, and in its declaration in 2011 of a global "war on terror."

⁴ For an example of initial research on the New South see Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South*, and for more recent criticism see *The New South: New Histories*, edited by J. William Harris and Martyn Bone's *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction*.

⁵ These twelve Southerners were also known as the Agrarians for their advocacy of Southern agrarianism.

⁶ The Western pastoral imagination generally, and the Southern pastoral imagination in particular, resonate with J. M. Coetzee's description in *White Writing* of the Afrikaner pastoral/*plaasroman* as a mythical elaboration of a "dream topography" but that exhibited a failure to "imagine a peopled," human landscape (6, 9).

of post-bellum Southern violence, a region synonymous with stringent segregation and the sexualized phenomenon of lynching.⁷ The emergence in 1866 in Tennessee of the infamous Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist extra-legal, vigilante organization, undermined American Reconstruction by eliciting, instead, a period of prolonged “guerrilla warfare” against African-Americans (Degler 109). In its bloody assertion that the South “shall remain a white man’s country” (Phillips 31) was the exhibition of a mental rigidity John Cash famously analysed as ‘the mind of the South; the temperament, John Reed maintains, of a “violent sadistic people” (429).

In *The Burden of Southern History*, however, Vann Woodward rationalizes the South’s reputation for violence as symptomatic of the incongruous character of national ideology. He argues that the experiences of evil and tragedy “are parts of the Southern heritage that are as difficult to reconcile with the American legend of innocence and social felicity” (21). Sacvan Bercovitch adds that the supposedly anomalous structure of the Southern mind is nonetheless entangled within a particularly sordid national legacy of a Puritan vision of a “prophetic universal design” of the American self (151).⁸ In this respect, the South’s violent ethos may be distinct but is not discontinuous with the foundational ideological violence of America as a whole, and in *The Southern Mystique* Howard Zinn maintains that the South, far from being the great national enigma, is really the distorted “essence of the nation” (218). Indeed, a reading of Southern literature suggests that it is here that the incongruities of American subjectivity are honestly and brutally highlighted. While not implying Southern whiteness as homogenous, an exploration of Southern fiction typically reveals the South as a region where the chaos and angst of white masculine subjectivity is most extensively played out.

Writing the American South: A Regional ‘Horror’ Story

The pace at which Southern literature rose to prominence in the American literary canon was hampered by its higher regional illiteracy and poverty rates relative to the North. Southern fiction was initially considered aberrant.⁹ But while critics have historically argued the political and ideological constructedness of the South and debated its ‘representative’

⁷ Occurring from 1889 to 1945 and with about two hundred a year in the 1890s, lynching typically entailed the castration of the male victim in order to exorcise the ‘seeds’ of blackness. For more information see Sandra Gunning’s *Race, Rape, and Lynching*, and Trudier Harris’ *Exorcising Blackness*.

⁸ For another reading of the Southern mind see Allen Tate’s *Essays of Four Decades*.

⁹ See Richard Gray’s *Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region*.

regional literature, Southern fiction has proved symptomatic of the national character.¹⁰ As a vital component of modern American literature, Southern fiction has made a decent and convincing argument that to know the South was crucial to understanding America and the “negative ideal of democracy” (Lawrence 5-8).¹¹ Mark Twain’s boyhood adventure narrative, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), for example, is an implicit critique of the moral depravity of white (Southern) adult society that often runs contrary to its foundational Christian ethos. Similarly, William Faulkner’s portrayal of the financially, socially and sexually degenerate Compson family in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is an indictment of Southern romanticism in particular and testifies to the moral and ideological depravity that has underlined American subjectivity in general. Faulkner in particular anticipates the first stage (1920s-1930s) of the Southern Renaissance, an era which, in reaction to the culturally decadent effects of modernity, was marked by nostalgia for and recovery of history and memory and laid the foundation for the American (Southern) Gothic genre characterized by an ethos of existential darkness. But where the first stage emphasized the utopian restoration of ‘civilization’, the second stage – post-Second World War onward – reinforced the ugly truth of existence by highlighting society’s continual degradation. Writers here gravitated toward the intensely personal struggle of the individual to find some meaning in an absurd and inscrutable world.¹²

As an anti-bourgeois, primitivist refraction of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries’ English Gothic, the American Gothic of the early nineteenth century accentuates the terrific and terrifying. Initiated by Charles Brockden Brown and preoccupied with the taboo, its writers consciously or unconsciously focussed on the margins of the socially acceptable and worked to push the boundaries of cultural and psychological frontiers. While traditionally oppositional, the American Gothic is not merely escapist literature. As seen in the works of that important and innovative Gothic writer of the mid nineteenth century, Edgar Allan Poe, it is an imaginative expression of the fears and prohibited desires of Americans and serves to expose “what is hidden, unspoken, deliberately forgotten” in the lives of individuals and in cultures (Crow 1). It also specifically recalls Morrison’s delineation of the tragic and depraved history of African-Americans in her influential essay “Unspeakable things Unspoken” and in her fiction. As with Morrison’s evocation of the return of the

¹⁰ See Michael Kreyling’s *Inventing Southern Literature*.

¹¹ See Michael O’Brien’s “The South in the Modern World” And Matthew Guinn’s *After Southern Modernism: Fiction of the Contemporary South*

¹² For more information on the Southern Renaissance see Malcolm Bradbury’s *Renaissance in the South*.

repressed in *Beloved*, the gothic in American literature, Leslie Fiedler asserts, is an artistic mode deployed “to confront the horrifying image of the [American] self” (125).

Attentive to the emotion of fear and the pathology of guilt, the American Gothic imagines the recurrence of suppressed desires at the same time that it offers a universal critique of America’s ideological and moral landscape. This resonates with the Southern Gothic. Here, despite its intraregional heterogeneity, the notion of degeneracy abounds. David Punter explains that the worlds portrayed are ones “infested with psychic and social decay, and are coloured with the heightened hues of putrescence. Violence, rape and breakdown are the key motifs; the crucial tone is one of desensitised acquiescence in the horror of obsession and prevalent insanity” (3). As a picture of chronic existential disorder, the Southern Gothic is a deliberately distorting magnifying lens, a fractured mirror of a warped American subjectivity.

Cormac McCarthy’s Gothic Aesthetics and Materialist Ethics

In its particular emphasis on the violent, the taboo and the recurrence of repressed desires, Cormac McCarthy’s fiction is unarguably at home in the American Southern Gothic genre. Reviews and criticisms of his work intuit this with suggestively ominous titles such as “Inner Dark: Or the Place of Cormac McCarthy” and “Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction.”¹³ A leading contemporary writer in and of the American South whose writing exhibits formidable thematic and stylistic character, it is telling that he is frequently compared to that iconic Southern author whose writing contains elements of the gothic, Faulkner. But although an intellectual heir to his Modernist ancestor, his fiction is not narrowly gothic. In pushing even further the generic acculturated boundaries established with Modernism, McCarthy departs from his paternal literary heritage, avoiding a nostalgic and melancholic evocation of the past. He invokes the atavism of humanity, problematizing founding, orthodox notions of American civilization and subjective truth and reinterpreting the patriarchal, masculinist Southern narrative.¹⁴

Born Charles Joseph McCarthy in 1933 to a family of six children of Catholic Irish extraction, his attitude to paternalism generally is suggested in the change of his name to Cormac, the Gaelic equivalent of ‘son of Charles’. This name change interestingly registers both subjective universality and specificity and indicates an ambivalent sense of subjective (un)belonging) and (un)settledness that is thematized in his novels and hinted in his personal

¹³ See papers by Mark Royden Winchell and Richard B. Woodward, respectively.

¹⁴ See Matthew Guinn’s “Ruder Forms Survive: Cormac McCarthy’s Atavistic Vision.”

life.¹⁵ His literary forays as a student writer, however, finally resulted in the publication of his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, in 1965 and a succession of works preceded the publication of his fifth and probably most critically read novel, *Blood Meridian, Or Evening Redness in the West* (1985). Despite his aversion to the literary fraternity and exhibiting reclusiveness comparable to Coetzee's,¹⁶ McCarthy is typically acknowledged in the literary establishment as an 'American' writer.¹⁷ In 2008 the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction recognized the "qualities of excellence, ambition and scale of achievement over a sustained career" that placed him in the highest rank of American literature, a sentiment confirmed in the first comprehensive criticism of McCarthy's work, Vereen Bell's *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (1988). Literary critic, Harold Bloom, hailed McCarthy as one of the major American novelists of his time, and Stanley Booth proclaimed him "America's greatest writer."¹⁸

But bemoaning the "death of the culture which produced the southern renaissance, decline of regionalism itself as reality and therefore as literary source," Walter Sullivan famously denounced *Child of God* (1973) as "clear evidence of the plane of madness to which our art has finally descended," and concluded that McCarthy is an "artist not merely bereft of community and myth; he has declared war against these ancient repositories of order and truth" (70-72). Albeit conveniently overlooking the nuanced, idiomatic flavour of McCarthy's fiction, which underpins a localized, varied Southern culture, Sullivan's moralistic argument ironically highlights the thematic significance of McCarthy's novels. His work is occupied with pervasive violence and, in its transgressiveness, brings to the fore while simultaneously challenging the mythopoeic character of American, Southern exceptionalism and its historically dogmatic and exclusory cultural narrative of 'order and truth'.

¹⁵ In 1937 the McCarthy family moved from Providence, Rhode Island to Knoxville, East Tennessee where, after time in the U.S. Air Force (1953-57), the author later enrolled and re-enrolled at the University of Tennessee from 1957-60, but without ever graduating.

¹⁶ Much has been said about McCarthy's elusiveness. He has only ever given three official interviews in his career, two with journalist, Richard Woodward and a television interview with talk show host, Oprah Winfrey.

¹⁷ His subsequent novel, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), earned him renowned public affection, evidenced in its high sales and in his reception of the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award in the same year. This novel became the first book in what is known as The Border Trilogy and includes *The Crossing* (1994) and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). His next novel, *No Country for Old Men* (2005), was succeeded by the post-apocalyptic journey narrative, *The Road* (2006), for which McCarthy was awarded the coveted Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2007. Throughout his career McCarthy has received numerous prestigious writing fellowships and has written many plays including "The Stone Mason" (1994) which was made into a successful TV drama. Like Morrison, he has a self-named society.

¹⁸ See reviews on the back sleeve of *Child of God* published by Picador in 1989.

Allen Tate's description of the traditional Southern rhetorical mode as presupposing "somebody at the other end silently listening" (583) is rejected in McCarthy's corpus for a specifically dialectical and therefore dialogical mode in which he conducts a brutally honest 'conversation' with America in general. Although relatively inattentive to African-American subjectivity, McCarthy's writing is responsive to the black American condition in that it challenges, in its unflinching and unceremonious representation of white 'folk', the historical meta-narrative of American whiteness, a bourgeois subjectivity that is taken as norm and which his fiction is at pains to belie. In his focus on a violent and degenerate whiteness, however, McCarthy is not concerned with substantiating whiteness as racist metaphor, as Morrison's work asserts; he is interested, like Coetzee, with marginalizing and alienating it, rendering it metaphysically foreign/Other within a broader degraded humanity. Subverting Duane Carr's indictment that he generates "some of the most blatant stereotypes of Southern 'rednecks' in contemporary fiction" (2), McCarthy's invocation of whiteness complexly and perceptively articulates the spiritual darkness that underpins it.¹⁹

Based primarily in the South West, his later novels speak specifically to America's frontier history, to the illusion of a manifest destiny, and to a decadent contemporary and future America as evinced in the post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road* (2006).²⁰ Yet his early Southern writing, no less concerned with violence, is an equally illuminating meditation on the universal metaphysical state of the nation.²¹ *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973) and *Suttree* (1979), including *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), are set in the Appalachian South in the state of (East) Tennessee whose rural setting is of structural import. A predominantly mountainous area, the Appalachian South is distinct from the Delta South, a region normally associated with the cotton, tobacco and sugar cane (slave) industries. V.O. Key explains that politically, as a border state divided by the Civil War, East Tennessee was Unionist even before the War and slavery was here "both unprofitable and displeasing to the people ... [who] could take no stock in the theory of slavery as a divinely ordained institution" (75). Whether through moral misgivings with slavery and racism or because of its geographical positioning and landscape, this 'outback' or 'backwoods' setting is exposed in McCarthy's fiction for its feral exclusoriness. In his shadowy, wild Appalachia, the macabre history of

¹⁹ For another, more nuanced, critical reading of whiteness and subjectivity see Karissa McKoy's "Whiteness and the 'Subject' of Waste: The Art of Slumming in *Suttree*."

²⁰ For a consideration of the thematic significance of landscape in McCarthy's (South) Western novels see Megan McGilchrist's *The Western Landscape in Cormac McCarthy and Wallace Stegner: Myths of the Frontier*.

²¹ For an introductory reading of McCarthy's Southern fiction see Christopher J. Walsh's *In the Wake of the Sun: Navigating the Southern Works of Cormac McCarthy*.

America generally and of the South in particular is dramatized, and the folkloric wandering and solitariness of the white male is emphasized as flight and rootlessness, ironically paralleling historical delineations of African-American subjectivity and countering the Southern sense of place and its communitarian ethos.²²

Yet McCarthy's vision of white American subjectivity in his fiction does not harbour a definitively "antimetaphysical bias," as Bell argues (*ACM* 2), nor is it categorically cynical. This chapter maintains that McCarthy's insistence on violence that exceeds the structural or the systemic significantly embeds white subjectivity within a fundamentally cosmological or Darwinian worldview in which human beings exist "at some undefined point in a coarse evolutionary process" (Guinn, "Ruder Forms Survive" 108). In an interview with Richard Woodward (1992), he asserted that there is "no such thing as life without bloodshed" and warned that, "the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea." McCarthy's talk of violence and bloodshed and of humanity as a 'species' points to the fact that violence is at some level always a demand for recognition at a fundamentally biological level and, purporting to the shedding of biological origins, underlines his fictive vision of a debased common humanity.²³ In a close reading of *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973) and *Suttree* (1979) but with particular focus on the latter, I argue that his novels' invocation of subjectivity is premised, not on the ambiguously utopian cultural community Morrison's fiction proposes, neither do they offer the transcendental 'bodily' vision of being evoked in Vera's novels. Employing a Bakhtinian model of the grotesque, this chapter reveals how McCarthy is concerned with articulating the here and now of a lived, grotesque material existence, and suggests that violence – ideological, epistemological and physical – is not only ontological violence from within as conceived in Coetzee's work, but is registered in his fiction as a crude and inevitable fact of historical life.

Gothic and Grotesque Masculinities in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*

Edwin T. Arnold has maintained "a definite Christian sensibility" (215-6) in McCarthy's novels and John Cant reads him as "a religious writer in a Godless world" (113). Certainly there is the suggestion in *Outer Dark* (1968) and *Child of God* (1973) of a spirituality that guides McCarthy's vision, underlined by the religious intonations and archaic rhetoric of his

²² See Brian Evenson's "McCarthy's Wanderers: Nomadology, Violence, and Open Country."

²³ See Adam Parkes' "History, Bloodshed, and the Spectacle of American Identity in *Blood Meridian*."

fiction. Yet, notwithstanding McCarthy's evocation of alternative 'religions' in his fictive world, the ironic timbre of his religiosity that consistently thwarts all grand narratives. While his writing betrays a Modernist sensibility in its search for existential meaning or value, subjective, metaphysical resolution or reconciliation is consistently undermined by a gothic existential condition in which 'man' exists in a continual state of darkness and is characterized by a fundamental sense of metaphysical unknowing.²⁴ Tellingly, the taboo themes of incest and necrophilia dominate *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* but are relayed in a strangely non-judgemental, matter-of-fact way. This suggests that while McCarthy is interested in violence, he is also concerned with excavating a universal, almost genetic crudity to which all humanity is prone. That his male protagonists exist in dark, fatalistic spaces is not to condone their actions but to evoke a gothic sense of inescapability and at the same time expose the violence of socio-culturally constructed moral codes while unveiling white American male subjectivity in crisis.²⁵

Outer Dark, which thematically echoes Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), presents the story of two siblings – Culla and Rinthy Holmes – who are involved in an incestuous relationship, the evidence of which – a male child – Culla attempts to dispose.²⁶ The ambiguous geographical and temporal locale underlines the text's haunting quality, a quality reflected also in its parabolic mode. The novel takes its title from chapter 22: 1-14 of the Book of Matthew wherein a story is relayed of an invitation by a king to specific countrymen to attend a wedding feast to celebrate his son's marriage. With none attending, the king opens the invitation to all his countrymen, one of whom appears in inappropriate apparel. He is banished from the celebration and cast into outer darkness where "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (13).²⁷ The notion of existential responsibility is here invoked and the consequential proverbial hell – "that pit of hopeless dark" (6) – for those who fail is personified in Culla's dream-nightmare at the text's opening.

In its deviant re-enactment of the biblical nativity play, *Outer Dark* appears, as Kenneth Lincoln highlights, "allegorically Gothic" (40), a notion reinforced generally in the novel by

²⁴ Contrary to Vereen Bell's reading of the nihilistic strain of McCarthy's work, my reading correlates somewhat with Christopher Metress' argument for a reading of "apophatic theology" or *via negativa* premised on the "incomprehensibility rather than emptiness" of life, and in which "nothingness and darkness are not antithetical" to McCarthy's metaphysical vision (149). See "Via Negativa: The Way of Unknowing in Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*."

²⁵ For more on the gothic as narrative technique see Ruth Weston's *Gothic Traditions and Narrative Techniques in the Fiction of Eudora Welty*.

²⁶ The complementary themes of existential darkness and sexual sin in *Outer Dark* significantly, because historically embedded, resonate with another American classic, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

²⁷ A similar parable is told in Matthew 25: 14-30.

an atmosphere of everlasting darkness and by the specific presence of the “grim triune” (133) whose violent march against humankind intertwines with and calls forth Culla’s own clandestine violation of his sister and violence against their child. This grotesque inversion of the magi sent to herald the birth of the son of man but who instead signal the impending death of Culla’s son, underlines the depth of his malevolence not merely as incest but as subjective abjuration.²⁸ When their paths cross at the end of the novel and he is indirectly accused by the triune of ‘sinning’ with his sister, Culla denies it with an earnestness that echoes the Apostle Peter’s denial of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Spiritually bankrupt, his failure to help the hog-drovers herd their wayward wild pigs similarly symbolizes, for them, a metaphysical irresponsibility of biblical proportions and foreshadows his denial of and failure to save his own son/brother from the cannibalistic violence of the grim triune at the novel’s end.

An ineffective ‘saviour’, Culla echoes but subverts a Christian typology that has governed American masculinity.²⁹ There is nothing exceptional about McCarthy’s protagonist and his (in)action is tantamount instead to a kind of existential sin underwritten by the hog-drover’s diagnosis of Culla as being “plumb eat up with the devil in him” (230). As unclean as the hogs he fails to save, this pronouncement echoes prior references to his “sickness” and suggests that Culla is metaphysically depraved.³⁰ Indeed, he persistently responds to the pervasive questions, “Where you from?” (47) and “Where was you headin?” (188) with a negative rejoinder that implies that he is qualified by subjective negation. A “solitary figure in that warm and breathing dark, shadowless and unwitnessed” (150), like the corpses for which he digs graves at Preston Flats, Culla comes from “dead stock” (145).

His oppressed subjectivity subtly recalls representations of the state of blackness in the previous chapters of this thesis and specifically mirrors the oppressive quality of the novel’s backwoods setting, tenor, characterization and plot. This has prompted Vereen Bell to read it as being as “brutally nihilistic as any serious novel written in this [twentieth] century in this nihilistic country” (*ACM* 34). Yet, while *Outer Dark* evokes nihilism, there is a hint of ambiguous optimism in McCarthy’s purview that complicates Bell’s leanings toward the “ambiguous nihilism” of McCarthy’s fiction.³¹ The novel significantly ends with Culla’s encounter with the blind man whose articulation of his own dream recalls Culla’s dream-

²⁸ For a perspective on the biblical reconfigurations of the grim triune see William Spencer’s “Cormac McCarthy’s Unholy Trinity.”

²⁹ For more on the religiosity of Americanism see, for example, Sacvan Bercovitch’s *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* and W. J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South*.

³⁰ The interpretation of the hogs’ symbolic uncleanness is relayed in the Bible.

³¹ See “The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy.” For his part, James Giles argues that “nihilism and something like religious affirmation are at war” in the novel (*Spaces of Violence* 23).

nightmare at the novel's opening. Both dreams invoke the vision motif and suggest Culla's own metaphysical blindness that is mirrored in the man's physical blindness. But where Culla exists in an existential void, the blind man "seems to wander instead in an obscure metaphysical abundance" (Metress 152), evidenced in his rhetorical response to Culla: "What needs a man to see his way when he's sent there anyhow?" (250), and which implies an acceptance of the absence of a grand ideological or existential narrative. So although portraying self-reflexive vision or knowledge, the blind man himself subsists "in a dark parody of his progress" (251) amid a world of pervasively "darksome ways" (250) and that belies or mocks the notion of existential transcendence. He is not fundamentally different from Culla who, in his initial dream-nightmare is attended by a "delegation of human ruin ... with blind eyes upturned and puckered stumps and leprous sores" (5) that, in a grotesquery underpinned by the apocalyptic imagery of the sun "on the cusp of eclipse" (5), testifies to an enveloping societal sickness. Culla consistently encounters a humankind prone to "meanness" (198), exhibiting a callousness reflected also in the insidious workings of the law which would have a man "plead guilty" to a crime he did not commit in order to avoid prolonged incarceration (209). McCarthy is not in this way concerned with "the problem" of evil (83), as William Spencer argues, however. Evil is exposed as the predetermined fate of all humanity and, because profoundly pervasive, it elides moral imperatives.³² Rather than an aberrant, particular condition, Culla's inner darkness illuminates, or shines a light on, an outer societal wilderness – an outer dark.

Culla is thus ironically saviour-like in his unjust persecution and the image of him as "some dark other self in chemistry with whom he had been fused traceless from the earth" (20) echoes Coetzee's rendering of subjective otherness in his fiction. Yet Culla's otherness correlates with and extends to otherness from without and implies a universal aberrance that evokes reader sympathy. His fragile, fated representation here belies the notion of McCarthy as an androcentric 'male's author' and problematizes critics' arguments for the latent narrative misogyny of his work.³³ Complicating Ann Fisher-Wirth's Kristevan, feminist reading of Rinthy as "a story of the Other who/which has been abjected, upon whom/which

³² See also Hanna Boguta-Marchel's *The Evil, the Fated, the Biblical: The Latent Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy*.

³³ This is, as I point out in the previous chapter, a similar accusation levelled at Coetzee's *Disgrace* in particular, and that is, as in *Outer Dark*, complexly subverted. For a somewhat nuanced position on McCarthy's narrative misogyny see Nell Sullivan's "The Evolution of the Dead Girlfriend Motif in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*," in which Sullivan notes that while her "characterization is sometimes vexed with misogynist details," Rinthy's Lacanian desires "create a sense of personalization and particularity, but also a sense of agency at odds with the mechanical nature of her depiction" (68, 71).

so much terror, loathing, and desire have been projected by the (male) subject” (132-3), Culla’s narrative of loss and homelessness, as well as the various ways in which he is himself violated, intimately intertwines and is interlinked with his sister’s who, albeit associated with light, also journeys as a “lone acolyte” (55) through darkness. Beleaguered with guilt at his sister’s “silent and inarguable female invective” (3) – which ironically also implies her (sense of) agency – and haunted by his child’s “nativity wail on wail” (18), he is not without feeling and is himself subtly feminized in the novel. In a decidedly oppressive natural landscape where trees “close him in, malign and baleful shapes that reared like enormous androids provoked at the alien insubstantiality of this flesh colliding among them” (17), his masculine subjectivity is cosmically troubled, progressively infantilized and finally rendered insignificant. Reflected also in the macabre image of his mute, violated and cannibalized progeny at the novel’s end, Culla’s masculinity here reveals, as with Cholly’s incest in *The Bluest Eye*, the “failure of phallic signification, not its fulfilment” (Spillers, “Permanent Obliquity” 140).

McCarthy’s focus on the white male, on the gendered, exclusory economy of Americanism, unveils an existentially, materially undermined (Southern) machismo. Going against the heroic premise of the frontiersman/yeoman, his fiction speaks instead to the discordant character of the white American male self, evinced in the typologically wandering figure that, evoked in Culla’s directionless search for his abandoned son, consistently destabilizes the American quest motif. The contrasting motif of flight suggests an existential condition premised on displacement rather than rootedness and emphasizes a persistent liminality in which the white male self is experienced as a constant “crossing of borders” (Gray, *Southern Aberrations* 444). This notion of border-crossing significantly points to McCarthy’s worrying of (the borders of) perceived subjective norms and of grand American narratives of white masculinity in his succeeding novel through, not just a gothic aesthetic, but in the specific invocation of the grotesque mode.

Lester Ballard: “Child of God much like yourself”

Set in 1960s Appalachian Sevier County, Tennessee, *Child of God* is the story, loosely based on actual events, of a local twenty-seven year old man, Lester Ballard, who is exiled from his home and lives a depraved, isolated life outside the community, murdering and engaging in

sexual acts with the corpses of his female victims.³⁴ As with other ‘cultures’ examined in this thesis, in Anglo-American culture sex/sexuality is generally problematic terrain. In that there is an ambiguous yet intimate interfusion between and interlinking of sex/sexuality and existence which means that existence pervades sex/sexuality and vice-versa, sex/sexuality dramatizes the incongruity of the human, subjective enterprise: “straining for sublimity, we ape the beasts” (Harpham 13); as a kind of violation of transcendent ‘cultured’ behaviour or mores, sex/sexuality as a fundamentally physical, material project presents the dilemma of sex as violence. As such, because violence is typically excluded from normative behaviour by virtue of its anti-social character, and sex/sexuality by its positioning in a deeply personal, individual space of corporeality, sexual aggression or violence is typically associated with the transgressive individual – “that aspect of self that emerges through lack of control” (Harvey and Gow 2).

Topically provocative, then, Ballard’s necrophiliac violence is especially disturbing because it exceeds the existential violence of death.³⁵ Because death is the definitive attack of the flesh and on the body, in eroticizing his violation of the dead, his actions are especially macabre. As Gary Ciuba explains, his is the “conjunction of violence with violence. Having overseen its violent end, Ballard violates the body of the victim, which itself is undergoing the internalized violence of decay” (“McCarthy’s *Enfant Terrible*” 96-7). But in this conflation of violence with violence is the exposition of universal – self and Other – decadence, a theme significantly in line with McCarthy’s deployment of the grotesque form/mode, the principle of which, as Mikhail Bakhtin’s study of medieval folk culture points out, is degradation, “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in indissoluble unity” (*Rabelais and His World* 19-20). In fusing the dead, violated body and the living, violent self in a materializing degradation, McCarthy employs a transgressive aesthetic to highlight the depravity of white American male sexuality and to emphasize white American subjectivity in crisis.

In his 1974 review for the *New York Times*, however, Richard Brickner, objecting to Ballard’s depiction and to the novel’s taboo theme of sexual degeneracy, dismissed *Child of God* as a novel that “no matter how sternly it strives to be tragic is never more than morose.”

³⁴ For more information on the ‘real’ Lester Ballard see Diane Luce’s *Reading the World*.

³⁵ Made into a film in 2013, in October 2007 *Child of God* stirred trouble at a High School in Tuscola, Texas when a mother of a student complained about its inappropriate content. See Doug Myers and Kyle Peveto’s “Teacher Could face Charges over Book.”

Echoing Walter Sullivan's initial distaste for the novel, Kenneth Lincoln describes it as "[l]ow dark satire and soiled medieval caricature ... a ragged mutt of a fiction" and views Ballard as a "paleo-lithic freak and human gargoyle" (52, 55). These readings are ironically telling of the genre employed by McCarthy, however. Philip Thomson (1972) highlights the grotesque's association with the abnormal and Bernard McElroy links it to aggression in human nature. McElroy explains that the grotesque "distorts or exaggerates the surface of reality in order to reveal a qualitative truth about it" (5), driving home the point, Kathryn Hume clarifies, "that our conventional ideas about meaning are inadequate ... [the grotesque] exists to break patterns, in particular the pattern of what it is to be human" (166).

This is in line with the novel's titular positioning of the degenerate Ballard as a "child of God much like yourself perhaps" (4); which points to the general ambiguity of the human condition and to Ballard's complex, liminal subjectivity in particular. The invocation to "see him" (4, 156) echoes the Biblical phrase "ecce homo" which, translating into "behold the man," sympathetically underwrites the universality as well as specificity of his humanity. In this regard, it is significant that Ballard's heinous acts are underlined by a particularly traumatic childhood in which he is abandoned by his mother and left destitute by a father who commits suicide by hanging himself, as well as precipitated by his forced removal from home and his dispossession by the community. Left prey to a desensitized society not unlike that delineated in *Outer Dark* and which thinks nothing of putting out a young orphaned boy from his home because there "is no sounder investment than property" (6), his abjection – a key gothic trope – is underwritten by the civilization in which he exists. Diane Luce reads in this "a naturalistic story of society's creation of its own scapegoat villains" (*Reading the World* 134) and David Holloway sees here "the occlusion of community by capital" (128).³⁶ But, reminiscent of Cholly Breedlove's own racial and communal dispossession, Ballard's removal is broadly symbolic of a cultural and "national loss of innocence" (Brewton 66).

Indeed, while the narrating community's – including the central narrative voice – discussion of Ballard in a folkloric tenor that makes use of both oral and aural modes suggests his ideological inclusiveness, its superficial, superfluous timbre actually points to his marginal, peripheral positionality.³⁷ McCarthy's vision of American, cultural home, his depiction of the fragility of domestic and communal spaces, is not unlike that invoked by Morrison. But where she portrays African-American (male) flight as paradoxically and

³⁶ For another version of this position see Christine Chollier's "'I Ain't Come back Rich, That's for sure,' Or the Questioning of Market Economies in Cormac McCarthy's Novels."

³⁷ There is an interesting play on Ballard's name in this regard that invokes but subverts the communal tonality of the musical ballad or folk song.

intimately tied to the need for cultural and communal rootedness, McCarthy presents an interminable metaphysical disconnectedness and existential unhoming that affirms the Southern male's fundamental experience of overwhelming loneliness and attests to a pervasively decadent world.³⁸ The actions of the vigilante White Caps, a "bunch of lowlife thieves and cowards and murderers" (165), the dumpkeeper's incestuous relations with his daughters (26), and the palpable presence of his idiot grandchild – a "hugeheaded bald and slobbering primate" (77), imply that Ballard's sadistic violence is not finally pathological but symptomatic of a broad societal malaise.³⁹

While this does not strictly point to McCarthy's anti-pastoral outlook, Ballard's flight from the trauma of pastoral dispossession centres the tension, Georg Guillemin suggests, "between the wilderness as an ideal and as a source of horror" (44). Certainly his habitation of the caves in the ruinous mountain landscape on the community's outskirts, a place where he keeps and sexually assaults the corpses of murdered women, signals a grotesque underworld not entirely different from, if not representative of, the gothic civilization from which he flees. In Ballard's extreme depravity, however, McCarthy fuses the gothic with the grotesque to make him, more so than Culla, embody the archetypal wandering/nomadic and transgressive figure, a simultaneous "symbol of the severance of communication, of wholeness" and "living evidence of the terror at the heart of the world" (Punter 116).

As a source of terror the threat that Ballard transmits is of "the wholesale disturbance of the natural order" (Punter 116) and to prescribed, normative modes of being. Pronounced the "sullen reprobate" (56), a "practitioner of ghastriness, a part-time ghoul" (174), he emerges with his victim after one murderous incident fittingly described as a

crazed mountain troll clutching up a pair of bloodstained breeches by one hand and calling out in a high mad gibbering, bursting from the woods ... Ballard howled curses until he was choking and then he knelt and worked her around onto his shoulders and struggled up. Scuttling down the mountain with the thing on his back he looked like a man beset by some ghastr succubus, the dead girl riding him with legs bowed akimbo like a monstrous frog. (152-3)

In this representation, Ballard not only disturbs but personifies his terrifying natural surroundings. A "misplaced and loveless simian shape" (20) and monstrously animal-like, he resembles that notable Western grotesque – Quasimodo. But if the scene's arcane tonality

³⁸ For more on the themes of home and flight in McCarthy's fiction see Jay Ellis's *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*.

³⁹ For more on the Whitecaps see Joseph Cummings' *Community, Violence and the Nature of Change: Whitecapping in Sevier County Tennessee During the 1890s*.

suggests in him a mythological quality, it is an implication undercut by the precise literal description of his physicality. McCarthy's language has an equanimity of tone in which his similes seem designed, as Dana Phillips observes, "to increase the intensity and accuracy of focus on the objects being described rather than to suggest that they have double natures or bear hidden meanings" (35-6). That is, his use of metaphor – Lester is described as a "crazed mountain troll" – and simile – Lester is "like a man beset by some ghastr succubus" while his victim is "like a monstrous frog" – here work reductively to fundamentally equalize and materialize subjectivity. Recalling somewhat Coetzee's ascetic aesthetic, McCarthy does not so much relinquish authorial sovereignty but, in reducing or stripping words back to their primordial process of "autonomous signification," enacts "optical democracy" (Holloway 163-4); in a language that is prior to or that exceeds the inscription of the subject or the subjective enterprise, McCarthy flattens out the illusion of existential transcendence and implies the materiality of existence through the literality or literalness of words.⁴⁰

Ciuba's Girardian reading of Ballard's sadism as the fulfilment of a kind of sacred violence in keeping with the novel's title is thus debatable.⁴¹ Arguing that his violence confers upon him the sovereignty that he has been denied in the cosmic order, Ciuba maintains that each of Ballard's murders "disorders the world in order to reorder it as a dominion according to his own desires" (*Desire* 176). Albeit registered in the novel as the community's scapegoat and notwithstanding his observation of cosmic and societal turmoil – "[d]isorder in the woods, trees down, new paths needed," Ballard's feeling that given charge he "would have made things more orderly in the woods and in men's souls" (136) does not in fact confer upon his violent acts a sacred quality, nor does his violence render him "god-like ... to the extent that he seems most ungodly," as Ciuba suggests ("McCarthy's *Enfant Terrible*" 94).⁴² Ballard's sexual violence is, like Cholly's rape of his daughter, indicative of and rooted in subjective disorder and powerlessness rather than sovereignty or transcendence. As an expression, rather than preservation, of self (and community), Ballard's violence strangely dehumanizes and humanizes him at the same time, emphasizing his liminal,

⁴⁰ Holloway describes optimal democracy in McCarthy's fiction as the "abandonment of language conceived of as a network of relatively autonomous signs capable of making relatively determinate statements about the world," thus affirming "the retrieval of a heterogeneity in the world that exists prior to (or after, beyond) the spurious equivalence of all things in the nexus of bourgeois exchange" (155-6, 169). For more on the literariness of words in McCarthy's fiction see Beatrice Trotignon's "Detailing the Wor(l)d in *Suttree*."

⁴¹ Ciuba's reading of the novel generally, and of Ballard in particular, is influenced by Rene Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*.

⁴² Elsewhere, arguing for an American 'religion' of violence, Tim Parrish maintains that American violence does not quite fit Girard's formula "because our acts of violence—in our fiction and in our history—have constituted the expression, as opposed to the preservation, of self" (67). See "The Killer Wears the Halo: Cormac McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor, and the American Religion."

profoundly material and largely ineffective subjectivity. While his actions are undeniably lurid, the dark humour in which they are couched oddly undercuts the (impression of) violence and diminishes his (impression of) godliness.

Thomson points out that “the extreme incongruity associated with the grotesque is itself ambivalent in that it is both comic and monstrous” (5), and Ballard’s horrific necrophiliac violence is laughable precisely in order to “degrade and materialize” the subject (Bakhtin, *RHW* 20). McCarthy’s ability to “relentlessly strips away the thin covering of decency and dignity in which we humans dress ourselves” (Hall, “The Human Comedy of Cormac McCarthy” 61) is evidenced in many of Ballard’s sadistic exploits, which have a degree of tragicomic pathos. Notwithstanding the above scene, in one instance he struggles to lift the corpse of one of his victims into his attic. She ironically exerts a power over him even in death that undermines his complete subjugation of her: “She was too heavy for him ... He sat heavily on the floor with her, his breath exploding whitely in the cold of the room” (95). His fragile human agency is demonstrated also on his sojourn on the creek. Wading knee-deep in water, he curses aloud, a “vitriolic invocation for the receding of the waters” (155). But, overpowered, his biblical, Moses-like quality is undermined and he appears more “like some demented hero or bedraggled parody of a patriotic poster come aswamp” (156). Severely undercutting iconic, transcendental depictions of American manhood, it is his fiery, disastrous wrath (158), his friable subjectivity that “seemed to buoy him up” (156), and so delicately human is he here that “you might have said he was half right who thought himself so grievous a case against the gods” (189).⁴³

Ballard’s ‘case’, his problem is, like Culla’s, an inability to ‘see’. His “dark and huge and vacant” (107) eyes invoke the vision motif and are a metaphor for his metaphysical blindness. This is tellingly signalled in his indifferent attitude to the ironsmith’s craftsmanship (72-4) and in the nostalgic image of his younger, innocent self (191) that, consistent with narcissism, highlights his immaturity and even infantile character. This is implied in his descent into the maternally-imagined cave which, “with wet and bloodred mud” (135) indicating a regressive state of being, reconfigures interrogations of fate and responsibility by exposing Ballard’s complicity in his own subjective regression.⁴⁴

His regressive humanity is underpinned by an equally fragile masculinity. Ballard typically carries a rifle on his person, an act that, inviting comparisons with South Africa’s

⁴³ Contemporary iconic figures of American manhood typically stem from (mythological) narratives/figures of the frontiersman which include, for example, Daniel Boone and William (Buffalo Bill) Cody.

⁴⁴ For a similar argument see Dianne Luce’s “The Cave of Oblivion: Platonic Mythology in *Child of God*.”

(white) masculine gun culture, symbolizes in America a mass popular culture that carries subjective, patriotic significance. Indeed, in compliance with the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution that protects the right of individuals to keep and bear arms, Ballard's rifle signifies on the tenets of a masculinized American democratic ideal.⁴⁵ Recalling founding mythological narratives of the heroic frontiersman, Lester's rifle also beckons intimate memories of his father and connects him sensitively with (absent) patrimony. But as a symbol of masculine potency, it also has disturbing echoes of violent patriarchy. It is telling that the rifle frequently hangs "in his hand as if it were a thing he could not get shut of" (41) and that he wears it "on his neck like a yoke" (25-6).⁴⁶ Thus, although his manhood is affirmed in his remarkable shooting skills, the gun also signifies white American masculinity as burden, as a kind of enslavement to an established cultural norm whose onerous nature puts Ballard's manhood into crisis. Significantly, in trying to assert his masculinity – his sovereignty over (dead) women, Ballard also actively performs female gender in a manner that gestures at Coetzee's notion of subjective androgyny. On one occasion, sitting with his corpse, Ballard "brushed her hair with the dimestore brush he'd bought. He undid the top of the lipstick and screwed it out and began to paint her lips" (102-3). It is an uncannily intimate scene that suggests Ballard's own need for intimacy and community.⁴⁷ But when he whispers "[y]ou been wantin it" (102-3) before sexually assaulting the corpse, he reveals how his sexuality or "sexual deviance" is not innate or pathological but, socially constructed or influenced, "originate[s] in the imagination" (Storr 89) and indicates how his actions speak from the "abyss of violence, transgression, and disorder itself" (Frye 46-7), from the depths of grossly clichéd and fundamentally incongruous notions of sex/sexuality and gender.⁴⁸

Victor Seidler observes that where a "sense of masculinity is built upon a systematic denial of 'feminine' qualities, men are left in a continuous and endless struggle with

⁴⁵ Despite increased incidents of 'domestic' death by gunfire and increasing gun-control/firearm legislation, the National Rifle Association (NRA) has consistently defended Americans' civil right to keep and bear arms. Paul Harris notes that, "since the killing of John F Kennedy in 1963, more Americans have died by American gunfire than perished on foreign battlefields in the whole of the 20th century." See "Guns take pride of place in US family values."

⁴⁶ In its representation of guns and masculinity the novel here speaks to and critiques America's historical national identity with war in general and the South's identity with violence in particular.

⁴⁷ This incident recalls another tender moment in which Ballard sleeps with his corpse before the fire with "the blanket over them" (92) in what appears to be the enactment of domesticity or domestic fulfilment. For more on domesticity in McCarthy's novels see Terri Witek's "Reeds and Hides: Cormac McCarthy's Domestic Spaces."

⁴⁸ This recalls the episode in which, when he is falsely accused of rape and imprisoned, Ballard claims to his fellow inmate that all his troubles are caused by "whiskey or women or both"; but in the narrator's qualification: "He'd often heard men say as such" (53), is evidence of Ballard's subscription to and performance of an established, masculinized cultural narrative.

themselves” (99), and Adam Parkes observes that in McCarthy’s work “the mobile theatricality of identity . . . lays bare the seams of historical and cultural constructions of American masculinity” (110-14). This unsettled subject position is demonstrated in Ballard’s cross-dressing. Having “long been wearing the underclothes of his female victims,” he “took to appearing in their outerwear as well. A gothic doll in illfit clothes, its carmine mouth floating detached and bright in the white landscape” (140). In this gross caricature of the feminine, which recalls how women are characterized in McCarthy’s fiction generally, Ballard loosely enacts Judith Butler’s assertion in *Gender Trouble* of gender’s “parodic repetition of ‘the original’” and becomes testament to how “the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiply contested sites of meaning” (41,43). Ballard’s representation, his gender-bending, here shatters the (politically-correct) rules that govern gender norms and undercuts an essentialized white American masculinity (and femininity).

Ballard’s subsequent institutionalization in the state hospital therefore exposes a fragile community/society to which, reflected in his proclamation “I’m supposed to be here” (192), he actually belongs. Upon his death his body is shipped to the state medical school and is subjected to invasive violence not unlike that he inflicted on his victims. But the violence executed on him is more aggressive for its asceticism. He is “laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and the brains removed. His muscles were stripped from his bones. His heart was taken out” (194). Systematically rendered a mere configuration of flesh, Ballard is here reduced to base corporeality, to subjective nothingness and, interred in a cemetery outside the city, his grotesque end mirrors and accentuates the gross materiality of his existence, a theme fleshed out in the somewhat epic narrative, *Suttree*.

Fragile Manhood and Subjective Wilderness in *Suttree*

Set in early 1950s Knoxville, Tennessee, *Suttree* (1979) is the titular novel for McCarthy’s most complex and intellectual character yet, Cornelius (Bud/Buddy/Youngblood) Suttree, this despite a mundane profession as a fisherman and continuous violent exploits which position him with McCarthy’s other dead-beat, wandering or aimless protagonists.⁴⁹ A particularly large and dense novel, Madison Smatt Bell describes *Suttree* as a “sloppy, baggy, shaggy and fundamentally unfinished” (7) piece of writing, and Mark Royden Winchell

⁴⁹ *Suttree* is both semiautobiographical and fictional, suggesting an affinity with the author’s own life while Suttree’s exploits are said to be taken from the tomfoolery character of Sut Lovingood in George Washington Harris’s *Sut Lovingood: Yarns Spun by a ‘Nat’ral Born Durn’d Fool’*.

complains that it “seems particularly lugubrious and overwritten” (303). Having begun writing it before his first three published novels, *Suttree* certainly betrays an apprentice (Modernist, Faulknerian) style. But, ornately descriptive and echoing the epic quality of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), it is the most ambitious of McCarthy’s Southern fiction for its meticulous and sensitive exploration of human existence. The novel’s narrative intimacy and granular texture is juxtaposed with a directionless episodic plot which, underpinned by the absence of obvious climactic denouement and a resistance to linear meta-narratives, mirrors the banality of existence and testifies to McCarthy’s concern with the base yet dynamic nature of life and humanity or human life. In its concern with mortality, *Suttree* is finally a novel about living in and with the presence of death and advocates a materialist metaphysics that accentuates the present-ness of being.

Quite unusually, the novel takes place primarily in the city; yet in its invocation of an urban wilderness, it is coterminous with McCarthy’s previous rural settings. The city is a wasteland that echoes T. S. Eliot’s poetic depiction of modern desolation in “The Wasteland”. Here, we encounter infrastructural, physical putrefaction, “the slow cataclysm of neglect,” in which the buildings “stamped against the night are like a rampart to a farther world forsaken, old purposes forgot.” This city is “constructed on no known paradigm, a mongrel architecture reading back through the works of man in a brief delineation of the aberrant disordered and mad” (3). Notwithstanding consistent ironic references to it as a “city on the hill” (411), *Suttree*’s biblical vernacular and archaic tonality directly recall and subvert the Puritan image of an idyllic white America initially put forward by the Pilgrim Fathers. In this place, old “teutonic forebears with eyes incandesced by the visionary light of massive rapacity” are usurped by “wave on wave of the violent and the insane, their brains stoked with spoorless analogues of all that was” (4). With people subjected to a purposively industrialized, commercialized and materialistic masculine economy post-World War Two, the novel presents a derelict, grotesque-carnival landscape – a metonym for failure, for a dawn not gleaned, a birth never truly realized.⁵⁰ Here is the ironic continuation of America’s (and the South’s) violent founding narrative.

⁵⁰ Ironically recalling Southern (Agrarian) resistance to the ‘cultural degradation’ associated with a ‘progressive’ American era, this description of the city of Knoxville is also factual. In a volume of *Inside USA*, John Gunther described Knoxville in 1946 as “the ugliest city” he ever saw in America, “one of the least orderly cities in the South” and leading every “other town in Tennessee in homicides, automobile thefts, and larceny” (61-2). See Bruce Wheeler’s *Knoxville, Tennessee: A Mountain City in the New South*.

The 'Nature' of Life

Even nature provides no reprieve from a fallen, Babylonian world. While central, the River does not here symbolically imply, as in *Huckleberry Finn*, masculine adventure and moral and subjective regeneration – significant literary themes of a burgeoning American civilization. Described as perennially “bearing along garbage and rafted trash” which includes animal – “[a] dead sow pink and bloated” – and human – “a dead baby. Bloated, pulpy rotted eyes in a bulbous skull and little rags of flesh trailing in the water like tissuepaper” (306) – flesh, the Tennessee River is presented as profoundly sordid and grotesque. A latter-day Styx, it is the sickly receptacle of decay and death, contaminated by the city’s effluence and populated by animal and human ‘litter’. More significantly, as a twin metaphor for a hardened and impoverished civilization – a “world within the world” (4) – and a purgatorial “[e]ncampment of the damned” (3), the River, with its “viscid quality” (9) and “granular lubricity like graphite” (8), is a symbol, as James Giles observes, for “the intellectual and spiritual waste of a life that prohibits, until the end, any clarity of vision or understanding” (*Violence* 89).⁵¹

Karissa McCoy’s reading of trash or waste as the structuring trope of *Suttree* links this with whiteness or white subjectivity in particular (85). While not inaccurate, considering McCarthy’s invocation of whiteness as degenerate, it is more generous to read the novel as putting forward, as Guillemin argues, a “vision of a bleak pastoral” (99); that is, in its insistence on a universal existential wilderness, *Suttree* can be termed a pastoral novel of sorts because it ironically articulates the “failure of the pastoral dream” (Grammer 30). As such, initial (1979) reviews of the novel are instructive. Jerome Charyn in the *New York Times* described the book as “coming at us like a horrifying flood. The language licks, batters, wounds—a poetic, troubled rush of debris [...] McCarthy has little mercy to spare.” In the *Washington Post*, Edward Rothstein pronounced *Suttree* “a homologue of hell itself” in which McCarthy has “through a verbal virtuosity that runs to bloated excess ... left nothing innocent.” But Walter Sullivan’s review of the novel takes issue with its excessive, over-determined imaging of society. He argues that “[i]n his almost exclusive concern with the grotesque McCarthy offers a distorted view of creation, fragmented and debauched though that creation now may be” (“Model Citizens” 343). Yet McCarthy’s engagement with the

⁵¹ Giles’s reading of the River as a metaphor for the “spiritual waste” of life here resonates with the “spectral waste” of the swamp which rises up “in a vulvate welt claggy and sucking” in a “landscape of the damned” (251) in *Outer Dark*.

grotesque – fused with and transformed into the carnivalesque – is structurally and thematically important for inverting and subverting cultural and subjective hierarchy or elitism. In *Suttree* is an instance of “a generalized economy of transgression and the recoding of high/low relations across the whole social structure” (Stallybrass and White 19) and, in line with a Bakhtinian definition of grotesque realism, McCarthy provides a ritualistic “indissoluble unity” (*RHW* 20) of degradation in order to accentuate the crude materiality of existence.

City and nature in *Suttree* dialectically combine to emphasize absolute decadence, evoking thus a sense of human impotence and reinforcing the “deathward trend” of socio-psychological arcs (Ellis 277). The notion of existential fatality and futility in the face of an engulfing physically and spiritually violated, ultimately abject world affirms Bell’s observation of there being “hardly any sense conveyed of a specifically *human* evil” in the novel (*ACM* 83) and highlights the materiality of being. As if to underline a universally peripheral, under-class existential positionality, the novel presents the “refuse of civilization” (Canfield, 762) in which every other face is “goitered, twisted, tubered with some excrescence” (67). Here, *Suttree*’s alcohol-induced brawls and frequent incarcerations, despite his middle-class, private school and university-educated, Catholic upbringing, render him ‘brother’ of disaffected “fugitives and mistried felons” (384), communicant with miscreants.⁵² As McCarthy’s “[r]eprobate scion of doomed Saxon clans” (136), *Suttree*’s lifestyle undermines an immanent privileged white positionality; like his fellow men, he is “little more than yet another artifact leached out of the earth and washed along” (306), and his solitary, alienated existence on his houseboat at the city’s periphery highlights not just his rejection of conventional white civilization; it reveals a ubiquitous existential “barrenness, this fellowship of the doomed. Where life pulsed obscenely fecund” (23).

The depravity of life is underlined by endemic, and at times gratuitous, senseless violence. The city’s pervasive, architectural and physical violence is reinforced by the verbal assaults of the “viperous evangelist” who sits at his window and hurls invective at passers-by. Comparable to the host of “vendors and beggars and wild street preachers haranguing a lost world with a vigor unknown to the sane” (66), his animalistic depiction, however, with “his elbows cocked and goats eyes smoking” (106), provides an interesting inversion of speciesism, another instance of McCarthian ecological “optical democracy” in which humans

⁵² For an interesting reading of the workings of ideology and class in *Suttree* based on the Althusserian model of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), see Louis H. Palmer’s “‘Encampment of the Damned’: Ideology and Class in *Suttree*.”

fall prey to the principles of survival that govern the urban jungle.⁵³ Indeed, in a world characterized by scavenging children “scurrying among the rancid cans like rats and as graylooking” (102), humankind is reduced to and exhibits behaviour similar to that of wild animals. Here, anthropocentric, hierarchical distinction between ‘man’ and animal is persistently undermined. Nature is not only violated, as country-mouse -come-city-rat Gene Harrogate’s sexual abuse of watermelons reveals (34-5), but, as Suttree’s solitary sojourn into the Appalachian mountains after learning of the death of his son highlights, itself commits existential violence that underwrites the ‘nature’ of life in Knoxville as a fragile wilderness.⁵⁴

The scene initially proliferates with inferences to the sublime. Watching the sun rise in an autumnal setting, Suttree “was moved by the utter silence of it. He turned his back to the warmth. Yellow leaves were falling all through the forest and the river was filled with them, shuttling and winking, golden leaves that rushed like poured coins in the tailwater. A perishable currency, forever renewed” (283). His experience of the natural surrounds of Gatlinburg, which offer a reprieve from city life, reads like a religious experience of sorts in which he “looked at a world of incredible loveliness ... He scarce could tell where his being ended or the world began nor did he care” (286). Evoking the classical wilderness genre with its emphasis on (spiritual) transcendentalism, Suttree, seemingly Christ-like, is moved “to discourse with the birches, with the oaks” (286) and sees “with a madman’s clarity the perishability of his flesh” (287).

Unveiling his interior being and hinting at the American tenets of individualism and exceptionalism – this “subtle obsession with uniqueness” (113) – the episode recalls Suttree’s emphatic insistence that he is not “like” anyone else (18) and underlines his specific repudiation of domestic, family life and his general denunciation of the intimacy and permanence of relationships. Having disavowed the conventional communitarian ethos implied in the patriarchal dictates of his father and in the maternal affection of his mother, the scene provides yet more evidence of his solipsism. Noting Suttree’s general “loss of connection with the possibilities of intersubjectivity,” Thomas D. Young Jr. argues that his “self-absorption undermines his efforts at outwardness.... The possibility of true outwardness, of the unfettered life of the instincts is, for him, always retained within the all-comprehensive brackets of the self” (108, 114-17). But the episode also accentuates the

⁵³ Holloway similarly notes the ecological strain in McCarthy’s style of writing which reifies the human and non-human world by reducing all that is “animate and inanimate to the dead level of equivalence” (135).

⁵⁴ Obviously modelled on and experientially paralleled with Lester Ballard, Harrogate’s exploits comically recall the themes of violence and sexuality that permeate *Child of God*. Yet despite their sexual depravities, Harrogate is more sensitively portrayed to emphasize the sense of his profound human innocence, despite his non-human, derogatory appellations.

“gothic loneliness” that pervades Suttree’s sense of subjectivity (50). Resembling Michael K in his isolation at the Karoo Mountains, Suttree becomes “a hermetic figure” presiding over “the high vast emptiness”; “His beard grew long and his clothes fell from him like leaves.... He had begun to become accompanied” (284-5) by an ‘otherness’ not unlike that articulated in Coetzee’s fiction.

The Materiality of Being: “Death-in-Life and Life-in-Death”

William Spencer argues that Suttree’s altered state of consciousness here is indicative of a “newfound cosmic or mystic superconsciousness” that enables a move to “a sense of universal unity” (“Altered States” 92), and Elisabeth Andersen maintains that his reformation is born out of a “mystical insight” that underwrites McCarthy’s advocacy of the possibility of other truths (79-80). Yet the novel, in which no meaningful consciousness is achieved, problematizes even the potential of such ‘other’ epistemologies. In what is a progressively tragicomic scene, Suttree becomes increasingly unhinged. Degenerating into existential madness in which he had “come to feel that another went before him and each glade he entered seemed just quit by a figure who’d been sitting there and risen and gone on. Some doublegoer, some othersuttree eluded him in these woods” (287), this picture of serenity descends into dark craziness:

Illbedowered harlots were calling from small porches in the night in their gaudy rags like dolls panoplied out of a dirty dream. And along the little ways in the rain and lightning came a troupe of squalid merry-makers bearing a caged wivern on shoulderpoles and other alchemical game, chimeras and cacodemons skewered up on boarspears and a pharmacopoeia of hellish condiments adorning a trestle and toted by trolls with an eldern gnome for guidon who shouted foul oaths from his mouthhole and a piper who piped a pipe of ploverbone and wore on his hip a glass flask of some smoking fuel that yawed within viscid as quicksilver. A mesosaur followed above on a string like a fourlegged garfish heliumfilled. A tattered gonfalon embroidered with stars now extinct. Nemoral halfworld inhabitants, figures in buffoon’s motley, a gross and blueblack foetus clopping along in brogues and toga. Attendants attend. (287-88)

The litany of words that permeate the description, buttressed by panoply of metaphor, simile and alliteration, here read more like and suggest more of epistemological and metaphysical assault – “a dirty dream” – than spiritual transcendence or mystical insight. The scene’s chaos and discord, camouflaged in a chimera of words, resembles the “gay parody of official reason” that typifies the folkloric carnivalesque (Bakhtin, *RHW* 39) but is underpinned by a

somewhat apocalyptic tone. While the arcane words and primitive images evoke the mythological, this is not indicative of otherworldliness but, reductively, of a primal world prior to or that exceeds ‘civilization.’ The primordial references – “a mesosaur followed above on a string like a fourlegged garfish” – are similarly rooted in the biological/ecological in order to affirm the materiality of existence.

The experience is not unlike others that punctuate the novel. Suttree’s vision of judgement day – “of the archetypal patriarch himself unlocking with enormous keys the gates of Hades” (457) – in another hallucinatory scene suggests not logocentric or spiritual enlightenment but reductive, interminable metaphysical darkness. Descriptively weighted and with an arcane timbre, his dream of “simmering sinners with their cloaks smoking carry[ing] the Logos itself from the tabernacle and bear[ing] it through the streets while the absolute prebarbaric mathematick of the western world howls them down and shrouds their ragged biblical forms in oblivion” (458), plays on the “the narrow seriousness of official ‘truth’” so that Suttree’s ‘madness’ is aligned with the grotesque rather than with mysticism (Bakhtin, *RHW* 39). In another instance he is bewitched by Mother She and ‘sees’ many things from his past, yet the event does not inspire metaphysical enlightenment or transcendence. Instead it presents an absurd and comically material moment in which her spiritual “laying on of hands” feel like “dry claws divesting him,” as her elderly, decaying body – “rending ligaments, dry bones dragging in their sockets” – reeks of “aged female flesh, a stale aridity” that so offends in its corporeality that Suttree “flailed bonelessly ... he screamed a dry and soundless scream” (426-7); through the abject or experience of abjection, he is abjected from himself.⁵⁵

This grotesque scene of Suttree’s ‘suffering’ here echoes Lurie’s own abjection from self when he is physically disturbed and haunted by Lucy’s assault in *Disgrace*; but from the omniscient narrative point of view, abjection is here dissolved or transformed into the subversively carnivalesque.⁵⁶ In its function of liberating “from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (Bakhtin, *RHW* 34), (crude rather than folkloric) laughter becomes the predominant mode. J. Hillis Miller points out that laughter “repeats the transgression from which it would protect us, while at the same time holding the transgressive at a distance” (28) thus violating abstract norms and conventions and unveiling instead “the material bodily principle in its true meaning” (Bakhtin, *RHW* 94); that is, laughter significantly returns us to,

⁵⁵ While Ann Fisher-Wirth reads the feminization of abjection in *Outer Dark* as further evidence of McCarthy’s latent misogyny, McCarthy here shows how abjection exceeds gender and is a universal human condition.

⁵⁶ See Douglass Canfield’s exploration of both abjection and the carnivalesque in the novel in “The Dawning of the Age of Aquarius.”

and grounds us in, the bodily ‘truth’ or materiality of existence. Suffocating under Mother She’s oppressive weight, Suttree flails “bonelessly in the grip of a ghastr black succubus,” absurdly feeling his “spine sucked from his flesh” and fall “cluttering to the floor like a jointed china snake” (427). Similarly, as a result of his experience in the mountains, he becomes the picture of lunacy, fearful that he would finally be “neither mended nor made whole but rather set mindless to dodder drooling with his ghostly clone from sun to sun across a hostile hemisphere forever” (287). In this assault on his very sense of unified being, Suttree has a materializing experience reminiscent of Coetzee’s eponymous Michael K whose own sojourn to the Karoo Mountains results in sickness and, like Suttree’s, does not provide an intelligible explanation for the violent, chaotic life he has lived but affirms a fundamentally crude, physical existence.

Rapture, then, is replaced by rupture and the novel’s stress on doubleness/otherness insinuates a subjective lack or limitedness which resonates with the Du Boisian notion of a racially informed, African-American double consciousness or divided psyche, and gestures at what I have argued as Coetzee’s notion of a metaphysical otherness within. But it also implies some ‘thing’ concrete beyond or outside of (the scope of) the metaphysical self and that points to an irreconcilable state of being. That is, *Suttree* puts forward an experiential, palpable otherness from without that continuously informs Suttree’s sense of subjectivity despite his insistent philosophizing/intellectualizing of existence and his nostalgic turns to alienation and solipsism. Contrary to Robert Jarrett’s supposition that this idea of the split or double self in the novel suggests that it “must somehow be merged or reincorporated” into a unified self (58), Suttree’s anxiety or struggle with his self, I argue, gestures at a persistent existential awareness of an embodied Other. Inferences to existential ersatz – Suttree and his Antisuttree self (28) – are outweighed by palpable, recurrent images of doubleness: Suttree and his stillborn twin, Suttree and his surrogate son, Harrogate, the identical twins Vernon and Fernon and even the city and the River intersect to suggest a concrete, physical otherness that affirms Suttree’s sense of a contradictory self. This belies Bloom’s pronouncement that the self’s freedom for Cormac McCarthy, “has no social aspect whatsoever” (8) and undermines Young Jr.’s categorical condemnation of Suttree’s solipsism. McCarthy puts forward in this novel the theme of subjectivity-in-community, a concern not unlike that advocated by Morrison in her fiction. But where Morrison’s idea of community is suggestively cultural and ambiguously gestures at utopian subjectivity, McCarthy proffers an

instinctive intersubjective solidarity precisely premised on and achieved through a common degraded humanity whose proximity to death nullifies difference and is definitive.⁵⁷

Suttree's typically violent associations with men and seemingly vacuous dealings with women are testament to a fragile masculinity operating within a tenuous subjectivity which subsists on "an elemental primitivism" (Guinn 111) – the consistent awareness of death's imminence. When he states at the novel's end that "there is one Suttree and one Suttree only" (461), his is not finally a supplication for or homage to an ethos of American transcendental exceptionalism or individualism; his is an evocation of the ultimate mundaneness and essential solitude of (a) life in which "all souls are one and all souls lonely" (459). Suttree's is a concern with mortality revealed in the novel's proliferation of dead bodies generally and pronounced in the ragpicker's grotesque end specifically. With "his eyes shut and his mouth set and hands ... clenched at either side" (421), the ragpicker's body mirrors the rotting, moulding corpse Suttree 'sees' in his cabin at the end of the novel: "A snarling clot of flies rose ... Caved cheek and yellow grin. A foul deathshad bald with rot, flyblown and eyeless ... A mass of yellow maggots lay working in one ear and a few flies rattled in the flesh" (465). D. S. Butterworth reads this emphasis on physicality negatively, as McCarthy's dehumanizing "geological view of mankind" (95), but in the body's base grotesquery, in its fundamental corporeality, McCarthy emphasizes the materiality and present-ness of being. With an emphasis on bodily functions such as defecating, urinating, vomiting, and copulation, *Suttree's* (ungendered and unpoliticized) vision of bodily subjectivity is not simultaneously transcendental as Vera's fiction intimates; the body is an inevitably crude part of and grounded in (socio-political) existence. The body in its profoundly wretched, abject imaging here "swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world" (Bakhtin, *RHW* 317), affirming the "mathematical certainty of death" (295) and testifying to the absolute certainty of all 'men's' mortality.

For all its concern with mortality, however, *Suttree* is not finally "a novel about transcending death," as Bell argues (*ACM* 68), nor is it simply preoccupied with the "[m]etaphysics of death," as John Longley Jr asserts.⁵⁸ With its twin images of death and life, *Suttree* is a novel about death-in-life and life-in-death. In its assertion of the dialectical interrelatedness of life and death, of living in or with the pervasive presence of death, the novel puts forward a materialist metaphysics that emphasizes the present-ness of being.

⁵⁷ McCarthy's differing vision of subjectivity here recalls his interview with Woodward in which he envisions humanity as a primal "species" rather than a cultural and therefore transcendental entity or enterprise.

⁵⁸ See "Suttree and the Metaphysics of Death".

Suttree reads like a lyrical tribute to an existence in which life and death “comingle everywhere, assuming each other’s appearances, aping each other’s molecular composition” (Josyph 13-14). In this regard, Suttree’s violent, physical subjectivity is a state of death-in-life which provides him the impetus to live-in-death and is finally regenerative. Significantly, the representation of Knoxville’s decay is penetrated by motifs of life. In a seemingly mundane scene, Harrogate, now released from the workhouse and searching for Suttree, stumbles upon a junkyard replete with abandoned vehicles and other debris. But the yard is described in a prose prolific in its perceptiveness of the physical surrounds: Among the “rank and steamy foliage” and “lush waste” of wrecked cars bloom “flowers and shrubs” – “[w]ild datura with pale strange trumpets and harebells” – pregnant with life, and the air, “rich with humus,” intoxicates with possibility (93).

Described in a sensual tenor conveying more of fragile promise than absolute desolation, this depiction of urban detritus is analogous to Suttree’s own relationship with Knoxville’s squalor and equally squalid inhabitants. Ubiquitous violence is infiltrated by tender, intimate moments of communal generosity and affirmative solidarity. Suttree’s relationship with the adolescent Wanda, for example, is suggestively manipulative because of the emphasis on her experiential innocence – “her child’s breath, an odor of raw milk” (352), but is leveraged by his sense of failed adult responsibility, his cognisance of a relationship qualified by “obscene delight not untouched by just a little sorrow” (352). In his persistent rescues of Ab Jones, that black nemesis of white law who reads like Suttree’s surrogate father figure (440), and in his own particular care for Harrogate who “was not loveable” but in whom he sees “something so transparent, something vulnerable” (54), Suttree reveals the ability to recognize “incipient good will” (42).⁵⁹ His rejection of his mother’s maternalism when she visits him in the workhouse and his withdrawal from his tumultuous relationship with the emotionally schizophrenic prostitute, Joyce, is not further evidence of his (and McCarthy’s narrative) misogyny; it is a generous act premised on the “the anguish of mortality” (61) – the knowledge of a common degraded humanity and, as David Lurie comes to learn, a failed existential responsibility to/for another that exceeds racial and gender(ed) imperatives.

⁵⁹ McCarthy’s delineation of Suttree’s relationship with Ab Jones (and his wife) complicates readings of an “undernarrated” racial subtext in the novel. As I argue in the introduction to the chapter, McCarthy’s “undernarration” of race is simultaneously indicative and subversive of America’s historically racialized and racist metanarrative. For a reading of racial subtexts in *Suttree* see McKoy’s “Whiteness and the ‘Subject’ of Waste.”

The Depravity of Existence, “the simple human heart within”

Suttree is himself often the recipient of uncanny communitarian generosity culminating, significantly, in the life-giving water he receives from the waterbearer at the novel’s end. He is rejuvenated by this regenerative, because symbolic, act of munificence and he leaves Knoxville not in pursuit of any particular thing, but taking “for talisman the simple human heart within him” (468). This existential responsiveness complicates critics’ readings of sentimentality in the novel and it especially disproves John Aldridge’s general conclusion that McCarthy “possesses an extremely narrow vision of the human condition and almost no vision at all of the subtler complexities of human feeling and thought” (97).⁶⁰ Despite exhibiting a deconstructive, postmodern sensibility comparable to Coetzee’s, McCarthy’s vision is contrary to Coetzee’s asceticism and belies postmodern irreverence and indifference. He puts forward, rather, a kind of fatalistic, material existentialism grounded in lived experience and the ‘simplicity’ of McCarthy’s vision reverberates with a complexity that betrays a solemn, genuine sensitivity to and even biological sympathy with the inexplicable yet fundamental materiality of existence.

While metaphysically inclined, Suttree, not unlike McCarthy’s other protagonists, makes no pretensions to moral grandeur. No unlike Coetzee’s David Lurie, Suttree’s ‘morality’ functions in so far as he problematizes and even rejects it; it exists in so far as he is knowledgeable of and sensitive to his own subjective limitations. In his rhetorical interrogations – “Am I a monster, are there monsters in me?” (366) – Lydia Cooper observes that Suttree “is moral only because he contends internally with his own immorality” (15), but she misses how interiority is extended to (an awareness of) exteriority in *Suttree*. A literal and metaphorical “fisher of men” (14), Suttree does not finally attain the spiritual ascendancy of (a) Christ but echoes somewhat Ballard and Holmes as a “[c]hild of darkness, and familiar of small dooms” (149) who lives in communion with Knoxville’s “complement of pariahs and endless poverty” (296). He is authentically mired in the squalor of his reality, breathing “the fetid air and walk[ing] amidst the filth” of existence (Rothstein, “Homologue”), and his pronouncement at the novel’s end to “[f]ly them” (471) is his reconciliation with the base materiality of his world, affirmation of the sheriff’s proviso that “[a] man lives his life, he has to make that important” (157).

⁶⁰ For readings of sentimentality in *Suttree* see Luce’s *Reading the World*, and Mark Royden Winchell’s “Inner Dark: Or, the Place of Cormac McCarthy.”

Recanting subjective “vanity” (414), Suttree discovers that “[d]eath is what the living carry with them” (153) and “[a]s it was then, is now and ever shall” (381). McCarthy puts forward a present-ness of being based on the supposition that “we live in this moment and this world only, because this moment and this world is all that we will ever have, and all that we have ever had” (Holloway 57), and Suttree’s is a fundamental recognition of the crude materiality and banality of existence even while agonizing or attempting its transcendence. Bakhtin argues that “[d]egradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth” (*RHW* 21) and Suttree is continuously re-birthed and affirmed in the depravity of his existence. An experiential, existential “son of Grace” (432), his is a fragile manhood and a subjective wilderness that resonates with Lurie’s in whose debasement – his disgrace – is the revelation of an uncanny grace. But McCarthy’s earnestness of tone and vision as well as integrity of characterization suggests an urgent, material existentialism premised on the temporality and facticity of existence;⁶¹ Suttree’s continuous internal anxiety with the self is based on his persistent awareness of and failed responsibility to another’s existence, underwriting McCarthy’s material existentialist vision in which the physical/palpable other is always co-extensive with the self.

⁶¹ Even two of McCarthy’s most unlikeable characters, *Blood Meridian*’s Judge Holden and *Child of God*’s Lester Ballard, have a humanity and integrity in their sordid acts that is linked, in the case of Holden, to his violently discursive idea of humanity, and in Ballard’s, to his profound sense of homelessness.

CONCLUSION: “not a story to pass on”

In her 1993 Nobel Lecture in Literature, Toni Morrison relays the story of an old, blind but wise woman who is visited by a group of young people who attempt to disprove her clairvoyance by asking her to tell them whether the bird they have in hand is dead or alive. In this folktale Morrison opts to analogously interpret the bird as language and the woman, herself, as a practiced writer who can only divine language’s significance and efficacy in the world. While acknowledging the simultaneous limits of language and the exploitative measures for which it can be and is used, Morrison definitively states: “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” That is, while language can (only) “limn” life and can never “pin down” reality, its vitality, its “force, its felicity, is in its reach toward the ineffable.”

In her reading of Morrison’s fiction, Naomi Morgenstern maintains that “literature reads theory” and that literary texts “demand that theory tell us more” (826). I have sought to extend Morgenstern’s position in this thesis by arguing that literature, as a mode of and vehicle for language, ‘does’ violence and subjectivity in a way that philosophy or theory cannot and does not by offering specific and radical means to communicate and transfigure the mechanisms and machinations of violence and subjectivity. In a provocative article entitled “Philosophy is dead white – and dead wrong,” Nathaniel Coleman, Britain’s first research associate in the philosophy of “race” at University College London, argues that mainstream philosophy does not ‘do’ blackness because it considers itself to be “regally above researching blackness.” While the perception of philosophy’s tacit racial elitism is regrettable, the point/premise of this thesis has not been to disprove or dismiss theory; nor has it been to deny its significant contributions to the meditation of the phenomena of violence and subjectivity. Far from putting forward a position of perspectival hierarchy or even suggesting or offering a new philosophy, the thesis has proposed that literature, as a “story” of violence and subjectivity, be seriously taken into consideration as a valuable and viable medium for articulating the precarious and complex character of violence and subjectivity.

In recognizing the fundamentally elusive and difficult character of violence and subjectivity and arguing against *a priori*, definitive definitions that occlude understanding, the focus of this thesis has then been twofold: showing how violence necessarily inflicts upon subjectivity an existentialism that challenges (the idea of) its abstractness, and locating literature’s role, place and efficacy not just in articulating or interpreting but in re-presenting

– endowing with material presence – violence and subjectivity. In this regard, in highlighting its simultaneous creativity and constructedness, its artfulness and artificiality, that is, its profound textuality, the thesis has proposed literature as a paradoxically imaginatively constructed art form that does not just put pressure on ‘reality’, it precisely signifies (on) the ambivalence that attends violence and subjectivity. As such, this thesis has argued that literature necessarily problematizes, extends and enhances philosophy to embody and animate what is generally perceived to be abstract ideas about violence and subjectivity. That is, as a substantive measure of its nuances, ambiguities and ambivalences, literature, as the thesis has shown, allows for fundamental re-readings of and perspectival shifts in understandings and interpretations of violence and subjectivity within a distinctly lived, and living, material paradigm.

In this regard and in line with Goran Aijmer’s call for an “overarching proposition that allows a plurality of ontologies and yet promotes some sort of correspondence in description and explanatory endeavours” (6), I have offered a comparative, transnational and transatlantic examination of selected fiction by Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, J. M. Coetzee, and Yvonne Vera, celebrated writers concerned in their work with violence and subjectivity or the violence of subjectivity. Taking into account their historically varied contextual situations and situatedness, this thesis has maintained that rather than condone or work to preserve or promote violence, their novels sophisticatedly interrogate how it influences and impacts subjectivity. While not strictly interchangeable with subjectivity, violence in their fiction is fundamentally interlinked with and embodies and even enacts subjectivity; here, the subject, and indeed subjectivity itself, is specified through (acts of) violence. Albeit differently articulated in their fiction, violence is profoundly instrumental to subjectivity, constitutive of and mutually implicated in the process of subjectivity, and their writing, I have argued, functions provocatively to give body to the intricate and intimate, that is, violent workings of the subjective process.

In *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison exposes and illustrates in her writing how whiteness operates systemically and structurally as a violent existential metanarrative that manifests in violence within the black community and with specific impact on the female. But in her writing’s ambiguously poetic, utopic strain – in the gap between linguistic art/aesthetic representation and lived reality, I have maintained that Morrison’s fiction suggests the inarticulability of African-American existence and simultaneously registers the persistent absence, the insistent subjective vacuum and space of unbelonging that characterizes African-American subjectivity.

In its suggestion that violence and subjectivity are in continuous need of interrogation, I have argued that Morrison's fiction is also finally unable to imagine, as Yvonne Vera's does, "other modes" of being in the world. In this regard, in a close study of *Without a Name*, *Under the Tongue* and *Butterfly Burning* (1998), I have shown how Vera problematizes, extends and enhances Morrison's position on the violation and violence of black women in Africa. Illustrating the violent attempts of black women to resist the subjectively prescriptive and restrictive imperatives of Zimbabwe's cultural nationalism, Vera here utilizes a transcendental 'bodily' writing which, while articulating the tension between attempting to both embody and transcend/transform the experience of black female subjectivity and while anticipating the emergence of subjective freedom, suggests the impossibility of freedom for the black Zimbabwean woman and the failure of attempts at resistance.

The ironic efficacy of language in Vera's fiction is mirrored also in the ascetic writing of J. M. Coetzee, writing that works against the politically overdetermined racial and gendered imperatives of a South African (reading) public. In a reading of *In the Heart of the Country*, *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*, then, I have argued that Coetzee's writing textually invokes the violence of subjectivity itself not just to destabilize the established notion of a white self; it exposes an innate othering from within which situates violence within an ethical, affirmative space premised on the lived reality or experience of subjectivity.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I have argued that Cormac McCarthy extends Coetzee's ethical notion of othering from within in his fiction to include the palpable other in a universally and fundamentally degraded human existence. In a study of *Outer Dark*, *Child of God* and *Suttree*, I have shown how McCarthy's invocation of the violence of subjectivity is based not on the racial and gendered agendas that Morrison and Vera appear to advocate; through utilizing a grotesque aesthetic in his novels, McCarthy renders violence and subjectivity crude and inevitable facts of existence in which subjectivity is read as violence and vice versa.

In this way, in their comparative yet distinctive interpretations and representations of violence and subjectivity, all four authors signify in different ways on a fundamentally failed world order. But this does not serve to nullify existence or diminish the significance of interrogating violence and subjectivity. Their writing, in its complexity, vitality, and vibrant textuality, situates violence and subjectivity within a fundamentally lived, material paradigm that accentuates the present-ness of being, a present-ness that belies abstract and universalized theories of existentialism. Their fiction in this way 'does' or gives life to

violence and subjectivity, reconfiguring it with an experiential integrity that allows for a paradigm shift in understanding and permits its re-reading/re-interpretation from consistently new, novel and, most importantly, provocative materialist perspectives.

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