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## Reconceiving Self-Abnegation: Female Vulnerability as Embodied (Un)Sovereignty

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RECONCEIVING SELF-ABNEGATION: FEMALE VULNERABILITY  
AS EMBODIED (UN)SOVEREIGNTY

by

Renee Lee Gardner

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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Renee Lee Gardner, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2013

Liberal feminism views vulnerability as weakness and dominance as strength. This binary parallels nationalistic assertions of sovereignty. Within militaristic responses such as the U.S. retaliation to 9/11, however, we see the cost of refusing to acknowledge our vulnerability. In my analysis of eleven novels arising from eight distinct nation-states and representing historical moments from the final decades of slavery through the early post-9/11 years, I use alternative (queer, postcolonial, Islamic) feminisms to read power in vulnerability. I explore female characters who deliberately self-abnegate – sacrificing their lives, bodies, voices, and children – but whose actions can be read as empowered if viewed outside of the mandates of self-protectionism. I argue that such sacrifices reveal alternative modes of being that undermine aggressive practices done in the name of national sovereignty. At a moment when Western measures of success are being called into question, we are well positioned to examine the prevailing logic that privileges success over failure and dominance over submission. My goal is to unravel the terms by which we understand these concepts and to undermine the limitations they enforce by considering anew the widespread and long-held tradition of female self-abnegation. The characters I explore are citizens of different nations. They react to different political structures and self-sacrifice in different ways. Yet putting their narratives into conversation with one another exposes a pattern of gendered behavior that allows us to

read their actions outside of particular cultural distinctions, disrupting both assumptions about definitions of strength and the reductive binary divisions between East and West. My hope is that – in reading female sacrifice not as evidence of weakness, but as an alternative source of power – I might contribute to a growing, interdisciplinary effort to subvert the oppositionality that undergirds our polarizing, academic gaze.

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For my mom,  
who made all of this visible to me.

And for Jax,  
who has become alongside me that most precarious of things:  
a parent.

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The years I spent with this work offered no shortage of lessons in vulnerability. I began drafting during a pregnancy that ended with our tiny daughter in our arms but not breathing, wrote my way through the worries of another pregnancy (my wife's body this time) and that first year of parenting wherein the precarity of loving someone *that much* is almost unbearable, and began to revise as a newborn was placed in our family, only to be taken back by his birth mother a month later. As I started my final round of revisions, I got pregnant again, and my dad died the next day. Then – as I compiled these chapters – we lost that baby too, as well as our beloved boy-cat. Though I've come to say that one shouldn't write in vulnerability studies, I am grateful for this work and the community that upheld me through it: I did not live the vulnerability of this project or these years alone.

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Renee Lee Gardner



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## INTRODUCTION: RECONCEIVING SELF-ABNEGATION

I am urging us to indulge – [because] we love justice but don't know what it is – in the hedonics of critique. To do that we...have to be willing to Take a Break from Feminism. Not kill it, supersede it, abandon it; immure, immolate, or bury it – merely spend some time outside it exploring theories...inhabiting realities, and imagining political goals that do not fall within its terms.

~ Janet Halley, *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism*

There is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing...all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner. Let's leave success and its achievement to the Republicans, to the corporate managers of the world, to the winners of reality TV shows...The concept of practicing failure perhaps prompts us...to fall short...to take a detour, to find a limit, to lose our way.

~ J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

Dominance is privileged over vulnerability. This is true in all national ideologies, and it is true, as well, in most counter-ideologies. Despite our devotion to dominance, however, the cost of ignoring vulnerability is immense, and the danger profound.

Resistance to precarity has led to no end of historical disasters, not least the war-filled years since the attacks of September 11, 2001. In my analysis of eleven novels arising from eight distinct nation-states and representing historical moments from the final decades of slavery through the post-9/11 years, I attempt to read power in vulnerability. The characters I explore deliberately self-abnegate, sacrificing their lives, bodies, voices, and children in heartbreaking and deeply traumatic ways. Yet those acts of self-destruction reveal alternative modes of being that stand to undermine aggressive practices done in the name of national sovereignty. My goal is to unravel the prevailing logic that privileges dominance over submission by considering anew the widespread and long-held tradition of female self-abnegation. The characters considered here are citizens of different nations. They react to different political structures and self-sacrifice in different ways. Yet putting their narratives into conversation with one another allows us to

consider them globally, at a remove from particular cultural distinctions. In doing so, I hope to contribute to a relatively new but growing body of research that asks us to shift our frame of reference: to refuse the binary of empowerment versus vulnerability such that we might see anew the merits of sacrifice.

I focus on well-reasoned acts of self-destruction. In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler discusses vulnerability's inherency, arguing that the "fundamental dependency on anonymous others" cannot be "will[ed] away," and that "no security measure will foreclose [it]," just as "no violent act of sovereignty will [overpower it]" (xii-xiii). Rather than resisting precarity as a liability, then, Butler asks that we find an escape from the mandates of sovereignty dictated to us by virtue of our position as citizens. She suggests that when "national sovereignty is challenged," we should struggle not to sustain it, but to "dislocat[e] from First World privilege": to "imagine a world in which" our "inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community." Though *Precarious Life* is a call to action, Butler remains uncertain as to "how to theorize [the] interdependency" she seeks (xii-xiii). Though critics have largely read the characters explored here as victims – perceiving their performance of precarity as indicative of weakness – I claim that their sacrifice is self-imposed and politically generative, inviting the "interdependency" for which Butler calls.

I argue that in the characters of this project, the political power of self-abnegation manifests on three levels: first in terms of "being," when female submission functions according to state-dominated ideology; secondly, in terms of "unbeing," when women resist such ideology through various forms of self-destruction; and lastly – though this is not always accomplished – in terms of "re-being," when women construct an identity

outside of state structures, thereby resisting the enforced dominance that comes with all claims to sovereignty. In my exploration of these phases of submission, I make use of J. Halberstam's term "shadow feminism," which she argues exposes "the limits of a feminist theory that already presumes the form that agency must take" (6). Critics tend – because of liberal feminism's influence over academic notions of power – to perceive women only as agents when they resist, challenge, or subvert authority, thereby pursuing actions translatable as "liberating" in nature. Halberstam calls for an approach to feminism by which we might come to see within such un-liberated acts as "masochism, sacrifice, [and] self-subjugation" not "failed masculinity," but success in new terms (4). She asks: "can we find feminist frameworks capable of recognizing the political project articulated in the form of refusal?" (4). Alongside Butler's examination of precarity, then, I use shadow feminism to expose the long-ignored potential of self-abnegation. Via these lenses, the sacrifices explored here demonstrate a profound – if ironic – level of agency, and are demonstrative moreover of an acceptance of vulnerability that is not marked by men in these texts, nor stereotypically by men in the cultures they represent.

I likewise use Audre Lorde's metaphor of the master's house to explore the generative use of self-abnegation. While "the master's tools" may not be useful in "dismantl[ing]" his house (112), those tools – in this case oppression, subordination, and subjugation – are perfect for dismantling the self. What becomes interesting, then, is the degree to which a dismantled self is positioned to destroy the house in ways that outward aggression never could. I argue that the weight of self-abnegation's power can be found in its effect over the self – in *unbeing* and, when achieved, in *re-being* – because the destruction of the self is itself meaningful in cultures that demand the protection of the

self at any cost. Yet the destruction of the self is likewise a powerful external tool, as it stands to undermine either privileged individuals who witness acts of unbeing, or the nation-state, or both. As Butler asks: “could the experience of a dislocation of First World safety not condition the insight into the radically inequitable ways that corporeal vulnerability is distributed globally?” (*Precarious* 30). This, then, is how I measure the impact of self-abnegation: the degree to which it undermines and potentially rebuilds the self, the privileged, and the state. Tracy Isaacs contends that “oppression” – which she describes as “the natural order of things rather than as a situation of injustice” – renders “subordination invisible” (138), the logic of which she uses as a call for a visible resistance to oppression. The characters I discuss often make their oppression highly visible, but not by resisting it. Butler defines precarity as “exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know” (*Frames* 14). These characters own that “exposure,” and they do so in ways that make invisibility impossible. They “dismantle” themselves, and in so doing, they model a form of dismantling that stands to undermine the oppressor.

This external ability to subvert relies on proximity to people with traditional forms of power. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Gayatri Spivak explores the degree to which “the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self’s shadow” (2197), asserting that the well-intentioned “narrative of imperialism” fails in its attempt to give voice to “the Other,” largely because the ““subjugated knowledge”” the privileged have of the other is “inadequate to their task” (2197). Far from condemning intellectuals’ attempts at understanding the subaltern, however, Spivak applauds their efforts in light of their unavoidable failure, highlighting the extent to which such efforts operate less as a process of learning the other, and more as a process of “unlearning”

privilege. She writes, “no contemporary metropolitan investigator is not influenced by [the masculine-imperialist ideological formation]. Part of our ‘unlearning’ project is to articulate our *participation* in that formation” (2204, emphasis mine). What we often consider *giving voice* (to colonized literary characters, for example) might more accurately be described as questioning our own privileged voice: learning to *see*, via the subjugation of others, our own privileged participation in structures of dominance. This, I argue, is the first external manifestation of self-abnegation’s power: its ability to reveal to the privileged the system of privileging that sovereignty obscures. When it achieves that, it is well positioned to undermine the nation-state at large, as once their privilege has been exposed, people in positions of authority within sovereign systems are more likely to subvert those systems. And in the narratives I include here, they often subtly do so.

### Enlightenment, Liberal Feminism, and National Sovereignty

In recent years, critics struggling with the limitations of liberal feminism have laid the groundwork necessary to perceiving the kind of power I explore here. In *Split Decisions*, Janet Halley discusses the way in which theories that help us understand structures of power likewise restrict the depth with which we might do so, contending that “theory produces reality not only by making it visible...but by shifting the available terms for consciousness” (4). With regard to the “terms [of] consciousness” initiated by third-wave critics, Halley argues that “feminism as it is practiced in the United States today is dedicated to thinking in terms of male and female (masculine and feminine, etc.), noticing instances of male power and female subordination.” She claims that by distancing ourselves from the language-as-reality of liberal feminism, we might begin to

“see other arrangements of [male and female]” and therefore “other kinds of power” (8). Halley calls our attention to lenses that might allow us to *notice* such alternatives. She argues: “all theories have in them an image of power. And all of them have implications for how power can and *should* be used” (17, emphasis mine). The notion that power “should be used” in a particular way – and that not pursuing power in such terms is unequivocally detrimental to women – governs most of the critical canon surrounding to the texts I explore, and the female characters who sacrifice themselves within them.

The kind of critique levied by Halley above has led some scholars to conclude that feminism is dead. I argue, however, that despite its drawbacks, the stakes of a feminist movement are still high. Last year, I taught T Cooper’s 2006 novel *Lipshitz 6, or Two Angry Blondes* at the end of a course on American Literature. We had explored the power structures inherent to gender, class, race, and sexuality, and my students were using language associated with various theories concerning these issues with relative ease. *Lipshitz 6* presented us with the character of Esther, a Russian immigrant who loses one of her children at Ellis Island. Though critically savvy, my students were resistant to seeing the complex issues shaping Esther’s response to the weight of motherhood. Both in losing her son and in her response to that loss, Esther was seen simply as failing at her most important job. I’ve noticed a pattern of students concluding that female characters are either *powerless* or *bad*. Their resistance to considering motherhood – and other manifestations of female life –with nuance makes clear the ongoing need for feminist discourse. Yet the specific reading my students offer indicates the importance of developing that discourse outside the norms of mainstream liberal feminism.



In their self-abnegation, the fictional characters I consider respond to nationalistic vulnerability in ways that are polar to those advocated by liberal feminism, and they thereby refuse to accept the mandates of resistance and liberation: mandates that are foundational to national dominance. Butler discusses the public reality of vulnerability, claiming that “although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own....Given over from the start to the world of others, [our bodies bear] their imprint, [are] formed within the crucible of social life” (26). This serves as an acknowledgement of the inherency of human exposure. It is this vulnerability – which Butler suggests we “cannot will away without ceasing to be human” (xiv) – that I see acknowledged within the self-abnegation of the characters I explore. Such acceptance is not modeled on a national level, however, as Butler tells us that “contemporary forms of national sovereignty constitute efforts to overcome an impressionability and violability that are ineradicable dimensions of human dependency” (xiv). Nations – though they are built of and by humans – are invested in resisting an inherent part of humanity. A vulnerable subjectivity stands to offer an antidote to such expressions of sovereignty. As Butler suggests, precarity might just be a gateway to “claims for non-military political solutions, just as denial of ...vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery...can fuel the instruments of war” (*Prearious* 29). The potential power of submission becomes visible when considered in these terms: as a way of maintaining humanity in the face of dehumanizing, nationalistic resistance.

Indeed, though these characters model subordination – leading critics to assume they are powerless within their respective national structures – they refuse the hold that sovereignty has over how we think about precarity. In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and

Antonio Negri explore the “lingering influence of the Enlightenment as the source of domination” (137), citing the values born in that period as those from which our contemporary concept of sovereignty arose. They offer evidence of sovereignty’s relevance to the varied nations explored in this project, saying that though sovereignty as we know it is a European concept, “it was born and developed in large part through Europe’s...colonial project and the resistance of the colonized” (70). Thus sovereignty is central to the ideological tenets of western and non-western nations alike. The logic of sovereignty, Hardt and Negri contend, relies upon the belief that to “[survive] the mortal dangers of war, humans must agree to a pact that assigns to a leader the absolute right to act” (83-84). Agreement to that pact is an inherent part of citizenship, which is inherent to birth: it occurs via “a completely implicit contract” and “prior to all social action or choice” (*Empire* 84). National sovereignty, then, does not amount to personal authority. Though it works to secure freedom “from *foreign* domination,” it concomitantly “erects *domestic* structures of domination that are equally severe” (Hardt and Negri, *Empire* 133). The fact that sovereignty is equated with liberation is, thus, deeply ironic.

Hardt and Negri likewise critique attempts to subvert sovereignty, contending – in a Spivakian way – that such efforts are too imbedded in sovereignty’s logic to avoid reliance on its foundational approach to power. They allow that sovereignty is built of “binary oppositions that define Self and Other, white and black, inside and outside, ruler and ruled,” which “postmodernist thought challenges” in an effort to undermine “patriarchy, colonialism, and racism” (*Empire* 139). Yet they contend that theoretical resistance to “the logics of modern sovereignty” lacks an understanding of current models of dominance, maintaining that most theorists oppose outdated forms of oppression. Thus

postmodern theory runs the risk of “coincid[ing] with and support[ing] the functions and practices of imperial rule” rather than subverting them, “the danger” of which, Hardt and Negri conclude, is that in concentrating “so resolutely on the old forms of power,” theorists “tumble unwittingly into the welcoming arms of the new power” (*Empire* 142). This is the failing I see in mainstream feminist theory. It constructs power using the same “‘liberatory’ weapons” (*Empire* 142) that necessitated it in the first place. Sovereignty, then, is an illusory and highly problematic form of agency. It does not extend to the people who make up nations, yet it relies on those people to yield to it. Maintaining the illusion of sovereignty requires that both the oppressor and the oppressed fulfill their duties. In the terms of my project, sovereignty requires *being* according to the dictates of one’s position within the sovereign community. In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri maintain that sovereignty “consists of a relationship between rulers and ruled, between protection and obedience.” Hardt and Negri suggest, therefore, that submission is as central to sovereignty as dominance because “sovereignty is...a dual system of power” (*Multitude* 332). This demonstrates that even *being* is evidence of agency. Consent is gained through “fear, reverence, dedication, and obedience” (Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* 332), but it likewise derives from active participation on the part of the oppressed.

Because it is an illusion, sovereignty can be overcome. Hardt and Negri note that the dominated might at any point “refuse their position of servitude and subtract themselves from the relationship.” Because sovereignty requires “consent,” it “crumbles” in the face of resistance (*Multitude* 334). The subjects of sovereignty are invisibly empowered to destroy it. Yet the resistance Hardt and Negri envision is “a kind of exodus, fleeing the forces of oppression, servitude, and persecution in search of *freedom*”

(*Multitude* 334, emphasis mine), and they consider such resistance to be “an elemental act of *liberation*” (*Multitude* 334, emphasis mine). What’s striking about the language Hardt and Negri use to describe the potential for refusal is that it echoes the falsely “liberatory” tenets of sovereignty. Their use of similar language demonstrates the tenacity of dominance and its privileging over how we think about resistance.

In *Frames of War*, Butler largely avoids such language, attempting in more precise ways to define how sovereignty might be overcome. She argues that though “aggression is part of life and hence part of politics as well,” it “can and must be separated from violence,” and she maintains that “there are ways of giving form to aggression that work in the service of democratic life, including ‘antagonism,’ and discursive conflict, strikes, civil disobedience, and even revolution” (*Frames* 48). I make a case here for adding self-abnegation to this list. Butler argues that nations “jealously [guard their] right to sovereign self-protection while making righteous incursions into other sovereignties or [in some cases] refusing to honor any principles of sovereignty at all.” To oppose the aggression of sovereignty, she suggests that we must “find ways of crafting...destructiveness,” or of “giving it a livable form” by “affirming its continuing existence and assuming responsibility for the social and political forms in which it emerges.” She cautions, though, that doing so will “be a different labor than either repression or unbridled and ‘liberated’ expression” (*Frames* 49). Though Butler begins to describe what such resistance would *have* to do, she stops short of suggesting ways in which individuals might actually *do* it. I argue that we see some of those ways at work in the characters of this project, who reveal what happens when vulnerability is *not* avoided at all costs: indeed, what happens when it is embraced.

Liberal feminism posits a form of liberal humanism as foundational to feminist struggle, but in doing so it limits its potential as a tool for understanding the kind of self-destruction I explore. Zillah Eisenstein contends that like sovereignty, “the universal feminist claim that woman is an independent being (from man) is premised on the eighteenth-century liberal conception of the independent and autonomous self” (4). Liberalism’s prioritization of “independence, equality of opportunity, and individualism” (4) – so like feminism’s prioritization of “freedom of choice, individualism, and quality of opportunity” (229) – found its “[origin] in seventeenth-century England and took root in the eighteenth century” (Eisenstein 4).<sup>1</sup> Because of both its priorities and its origins, liberal feminism is inherently and ironically invested in perpetuating the very structures it purports to disrupt. Thus Eisenstein joins a community of feminist scholars who suggest that we shift our focus beyond liberal feminism, recognizing that it “is but one” rather limiting “form of feminism.” When liberal feminism – or “what Betty Friedan calls ‘mainstream,’ feminism” (Eisenstein 4) – is taken as feminism proper, alternate manifestations such as “radical, socialist, lesbian, black, [and] anarchist [feminism]...are rendered non-existent” (4). Because of the prominence of both liberal feminism and national sovereignty, then, tools of non-resistance are obscured, and any potential political purchase those tools might offer becomes invisible.

Eisenstein notes the irony of feminism’s connection with liberalism, contending that in fundamental ways, liberal feminism “seek[s] to protect and reinforce the relations of patriarchal and capitalist society” (5). Rosemarie Putman Tong echoes this sentiment, asserting that though “liberal feminists wish to free women from oppressive gender roles”

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<sup>1</sup> Peta Bowden and Jane Mummery likewise acknowledge that liberal feminists find their roots in “the philosophical vision of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers in Europe with their focus on reason, individual rights and equality” (2).

(32), their struggle only truly benefits “white, heterosexual, middle-class women.” What Tong thus finds confounding is the fact that “many minority women, lesbian women, and working-class women allied with liberal feminists in the past and continue to do so today” (40-41). Though certainly not all, most of the women of my project belong to one of the subgroups of women Tong cites. They are largely read as victims, yet they reject the tenets of a brand of feminism whose roots in liberalism and sovereign nationalism always already fail to respond to their interests. Eisenstein urges feminists to “understand that the state is a part of the struggles within society” (225). The rejection demonstrated by the characters of this project reveals their profound understanding of the relationship between the state and their status as women-citizens.

These characters likewise demonstrate a refusal to vie for power in traditionally masculine terms. Peta Bowden and Jane Mummery contend that liberal feminism relies on the notion “that women should have the opportunity to fulfill the dominant ideal for (certain) male lives” (16). Though much feminist theory disrupts this assumption – Bowden and Mummery, for example, problematize such a notion by observing that it takes the male “ideal as universal for all human beings,” asking if this is an “effective [response] to women’s oppression” (16) – it is rarely disputed in mainstream western society. And even within critical dissent, foundational assumptions are maintained. For example, Bowden and Mummery assume as unproblematic feminism’s “desire... for a capacity for self-determination and autonomy according to which women are able to be *effective against their own oppression*” (123, emphasis mine). They further contend that women most want “some sense of entitlement to real choices and objectives, *to be able to act against their subordination*” (123, emphasis mine). So too, Isaacs notes succinctly

that “sexist oppression is unjust, and...action ought to be taken to end it” (131). The underlying tenet to all of these claims is that to oppose patriarchy, one must resist it on its own terms, must fight “against” oppression, must “act,” must “end it.” Liberal feminism is less invested in undermining patriarchy than it is in leveling its playing field.

The mandate that women use their agency to a particular end pervades mainstream feminist theory. Isaacs defines feminist agency as “women’s ability to be effective agents *against* their own oppression” (129, emphasis mine). Though contemporary feminist scholars largely ascribe to relativistic openness, most discussions of agency demand particular conditions within which it will be recognized. Hilde Lindemann argues, for example, that feminism is “about the social pattern...that distributes power asymmetrically to favor men over women” (9). Isaacs makes a similar argument, observing that one way “patriarchy subordinates women” is by subjecting them to “feminine socialization,” which she contends “encourages [women] to be passive, dependent, maternal and nurturing, concerned about others, compromising, [and] unambitious,” and “to accept a subordinate place in society,” without “recogniz[ing] it as subordinate” (131). The question of agency becomes one of definition: the word is charged with caveats about *how* agency must be used to be seen as such.

Power and agency are the terms of liberal feminism that remain relevant in this study of submission and self-abnegation, though I problematized their use here. Bowden and Mummery remark that a “desire for effective agency...drives the manifold projects of western feminisms” (123). In this project, I divert emphasis away from resisting “oppression” and “subordination” – which forces a static prioritization of values – and towards the need for an “agency” that is open-ended. Bowden and Mummery define

agency as “having the power and capacity to act as one chooses.” They go on to note that agency is “linked to notions of self-determination and autonomy,” and that it “denotes the exercise of free will and personal freedom.” For a woman to have agency, they argue, she must have the “capacity...to make sense of and rank her own needs and desires” (125). Nothing about this definition precludes the existence of fully agented self-abnegation. Likewise, Lindemann asserts that feminism is not “about equality, and it isn’t about women, and it isn’t about difference. It’s about power.” This simple definition of feminism – as “about power” – works well for this project because it isn’t valiative; it doesn’t demand that power look a certain way to be afforded the title.

The question of “capacity” (Bowden and Mummery 125) is central to any consideration of a woman’s agency. Though I seek to locate an alternate form of power within self-destruction, I want to avoid implying that all suffering women face is self-imposed and politically productive. Bowden and Mummery acknowledge that “women’s desire for agency may be seen as paradoxical” in that “owing to their social conditioning, women may lack the requisite abilities for taking control of their lives and resisting oppression” (124). Though this is clearly the case, it is a problematic caveat to put on any examination of female power because – though the categories of *agent* and *non-agent* tend to fall along gendered lines, both in historical and in literary accounts – all citizens of all nations are shaped by “social conditioning.” This is as true for men as it is for women, though it’s discussed far less often with regards to men, or in terms of troublesome (and just as arguably non-agented) expressions of dominance. Because mainstream culture subscribes to an ideology that equates dominance with agency, we assume that people are less agented when they demonstrate less dominance. Bowden and



Mummery observe that “in order for someone to be completely autonomous she or he would surely need to be completely self-sufficient and unencumbered,” and would be “able to extricate herself or himself from all socialized norms and expectations” (125). I cannot claim the characters of this project to be “completely self-sufficient and unencumbered.” Instead, I find such impossible standards of agency flawed enough to attempt to see beyond them in my evaluation of the choices these characters make.

The subject of community is likewise relevant, as the women of this project are all deeply entrenched in the communities to which they belong. Indeed, each of the sacrifices explored here is set within specific communal (national) circumstances. Though their nations may not serve their individual interests, the female characters of this project nevertheless serve their nations, and at great personal cost. Jean Behrke Elshtain critiques mainstream feminism’s devotion to an Enlightenment-based privileging of independence by observing that “there is no way to create real communities out of an aggregate of ‘freely’ choosing adults” (qtd. in Tong 35). Though their actions are often dismissed as lacking agency, then, these characters willingly expose themselves to the realities of life within a community. They are deeply invested in the needs of that community, and of their fellow citizens. In *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock maintains that nationalism is “radically constitutive of people’s identities” (353). McClintock perceives that centrality as inherently perilous, contending that “nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender *difference*,” and that “no nation in the world gives women and men the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state” (353). Indeed, McClintock argues that “all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented and all are dangerous...in the sense that they represent relations to political

power” (352). The simplicity of this reading is complicated, however, by Elshtain’s contention about the impossibility of “creat[ing] real communities” from groups of supposedly sovereign citizens. Such communities are as necessary to securing a thriving nation as the need for a deeper humanity of which Butler speaks. I argue that female self-abnegation has the potential to lead to both thriving nations and a deeper humanity, while Enlightenment-based liberal feminism and national sovereignty fail to prioritize either.

### Approaching Precarity

The specific characters I explore here purposefully submit to vulnerability, yet they demonstrate their submission in various ways. They are citizens of different nations, react to different political structures, and fulfill different roles within the violence of which they are a part. They are colonizers, colonized, decolonized, and occupied. Some are born with privilege; others are born with very little and are stripped of even that. Some – Toni Morrison’s *Sethe* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Barbarian Girl* – are denied even citizenship in the structure (nation or colony) that oppresses them. To date, critical conclusions about the relationship between women and the nation of which they are a part have been drawn largely about specific nations, or specific national structures (i.e. colonizing nations versus those subject to colonial rule). While such conclusions are necessary to any understanding of the complex gendered hierarchies of given cultures at given points in time – and while I thus make use of such work in my own – localized consideration prevents us from drawing suppositions that extend beyond national borders and chronological boundaries, and from making comparisons as well as distinctions. The work of isolating specific structures that recur in otherwise disparate nations stands to

expose ideological necessities upon which nationhood relies, as well as consistent methods by which women who are assumed to lack agency might actually affect change. For these reasons – and because such consideration disrupts the reductive binary divisions of East vs. West – I find it useful to put the narratives of this project into conversation with one another. If self-abnegation is deliberately performed, for example, by a runaway slave mother, the Palestinian-born wife of a naturalized Israeli surgeon, and the white South African daughter of communist anti-apartheid activists, then we cannot attribute it merely to local circumstances. Thus I also intend to subvert the oppositionality that undergirds our polarizing, academic gaze.

By necessity, then, this project responds to the academic tradition of categorizing literature (and culture) via precise moments of time and locations in space. Though patterns clearly emerge as a result of historical and spatial structuring, other patterns – which may arise under different categorizing devices – are obscured. As academic inquiry becomes increasingly interdisciplinary and transnational, there is clear value in studying particular elements of literature and/or culture as they manifest across various historical periods and localities. According to Mary Hawkesworth, the planet is currently “divided into just under two hundred nations, whose rights to sovereign autonomy were recognized by the United Nations.” Hawkesworth argues that though “studying women and politics within any one of these nations affords insights into particular raced and gendered political dynamics,” transnational consideration “enable[s] the identification of patterns in women’s political activities,” which “can be surprising and enormously useful in dispelling mistaken notions” (3). Her purpose in conducting transnational feminist research is to “[identify] innovative strategies developed by women in specific regions”

(3-4), which can then, perhaps, “be imported [by] or imposed [in] other nations” (4). Hawkesworth cites as an example of such a transnational ideological shift the fact that “the bourgeois ideology of separate spheres” – which came into being in Western nations – was ultimately “imposed on nations in Africa and Asia with the expansion of colonial empires in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (4). My methodology is in keeping with Hawkesworth’s, as are my justifications for such an approach. What I propose here, however, is a reading of behavior that is learned not *from* the privileged, but *by* the privileged. To greater and lesser degrees, self-abnegation is the purview not of the dominant, but of the dominated. It is theirs to teach, and inasmuch as people in power observe self-abnegation among the powerless, the lesson has arguably been effective.

Just as this work disrupts the categorizing principles of time and space, it likewise calls for exploration of the intersections of postcolonial and gender theories. In “Algeria Unveiled,” Frantz Fanon argues that the structure of colonial nations mirrors the domestic structure of patriarchal ones; thus he compares colonial oppression to gender oppression. If we allow – as Fanon, McClintock, and others have contended – that the nation relies inherently on gender inequity, then using gender theory in concert with postcolonial theory – and using both models to look at texts that have emerged from both colonized and non-colonized nations – stands to expose the degree to which these hierarchies are inherent to the structure of nationhood itself.<sup>2</sup> What do different national moments share in their assumptions about women? How are those assumptions changed by

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<sup>2</sup> McClintock expresses frustration with postcolonial scholars whom she sees as failing to apply Fanon’s claims, and with feminist theorists, who endeavor to keep sexism distinct in study from classism or racism. In the sixteen years since the publication of *Imperial Leather*, however, a number of scholars have worked to integrate postcolonial discourse with feminist theory, including Anthony C. Alessandrini, R. Radhakrishnan, Ania Loomba, and Elleke Boehmer.

circumstances (colonialism, war, et cetera) governing a specific nation at a specific moment in time? And more importantly, in what ways do those assumptions *not* change dependent on such values? I want to be clear that it is not my intent to assume that the relationship between women and the nation of which they are a part is a static one, nor that there are not significant variances within specific nations with regard to gendered structures. Instead, I hope to trace a genealogy not of the origin of female submission within historical structures – which would wed submission tightly to specific circumstances, making it more likely that we would read it as demonstrative of victimhood – but of occurrences of submission as they widely appear. My hope is that this work will be geographically and historically comparative, but not reductive in terms of the individualizing nuances at work in every woman and every nation across the globe.

I focus on eight different nation-states. This analysis is organized not by nation, however, but by thematic pattern. I draw distinctions based on the aspect of a woman's life that is being voluntarily sacrificed in a given text, by a given woman-citizen. When considered in these terms, four clear categories emerge: a woman's life itself, her sex or sexuality, her voice (used, as is common, to denote agency), and her motherhood (i.e. her children or her reproductive potential). Each chapter focuses on one of these concepts, all of which are central to women's sense of identity. I don't mean to suggest here that all women find all of these concepts integral to their lives, as clearly categories like "motherhood" and "sexuality" are of lesser importance to some women than to others. But I do contend that these four elements are so central to the humanity of women at large that the voluntary sacrifice of them is striking and warrants attention not granted

when we assume – as we have for so long – that submission and sacrifice are marks of powerlessness, and not of deliberate intent.

My first chapter, “Suicide as Subversion,” explores women who take their own lives. Butler observes in *Precarious Life* that we are always already vulnerable, yet we struggle to deny that fact such that we might live our lives within the comforting illusion of immortality. In this chapter, I argue that female literary characters of various nations fight against such denial via the radical method of absolute self-abnegation. I consider the suicides of Susan Isaacson Lewin in E.L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*, Erica in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and Sihem Jaafari in Yasmina Khadra’s *The Attack*, each of whom exercises a nationalistically endorsed self-abnegation that amounts to *being*, followed, in death, by an extreme example of *unbeing*. I use the distinctions Giorgio Agamben draws between “zoe” and “bios” to argue that in their sacrifice of “zoe” (physical life), these women generate “bios” (political life) that they might not otherwise have possessed.

The characters I discuss in my second chapter – “Sexual Reparations” – turn to sex to set right an injustice perpetrated by their nation-state. Each of these texts is positioned either at the outset or the aftermath of a highly politicized historical event: the Rosenberg execution, the end of South African apartheid, and the precipice of the recent war in Iraq. Comparing the compliance of Phyllis Lewin in E.L. Doctorow’s *Book of Daniel*, Lucy Lurie in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, and Daisy Perowne in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* calls into question traditional readings of submission by exposing the politically generative power of sexual surrender.

In my third chapter, “Anti-Sovereign Silence,” I examine literary characters who willingly self-silence to bring about political change that dominance or more traditional empowerment has failed to affect. I look here at Leda in Glenway Wescott’s *Apartment in Athens*, Rosa in Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter*, and the unnamed “Barbarian Girl” in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*. These novels – set respectively in Germany’s World War II occupation of Greece, the middle years of South African apartheid, and the bitter decline of an unspecified empire – engage the personal and political fallout of colonization. As power structures shift, these characters withdraw their voices, thereby revoking their consent to the travesties done either in their name or to their fellow citizens. I argue that their silence functions as the verbal equivalent of a hunger strike: they claim empowerment by refusing to participate in demands for it.

Lynne Huffer asserts that “under patriarchy, to be a woman is to be a mother” (15). Indeed, the concerns of my final chapter, “(Un)Conceived Motherhood,” indicate an irony not seen elsewhere in this project, in that motherhood is something all cultures expect women to pursue, yet women are often not afforded the tools necessary to do so successfully. This chapter focuses on two mothers: Sethe Suggs of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Mary Metcalf Crick of Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, both of whom self-abnegate in ways that function as self-sacrificial unbeing. Like the women of my other chapters, these characters perform “unbecoming” before attempting to “become” again on post-maternal, post-patriarchal terms. It is in their powerlessness that they demonstrate “maternal power,” and though liberal feminism would have us view that power as reductive – and their destructive use of it as further evidence of their inherent weakness –

shadow feminism reveals how they use their own vulnerability, in tandem with their maternal power, to subvert patriarchy.



## CHAPTER I: SUICIDE AS SUBVERSION

If today I heard that some American had committed suicide rather than live in disgrace, I would fully understand.

~ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*

As Butler's *Precarious Life* points out, we are always already vulnerable. We are ceaselessly exposed to violence, to accidents, and to the breakdown of the body. At any moment, our lives – or the lives of the people on whom we depend – can be extinguished. Yet we ignore these facts such that we might subscribe to the sovereignty-driven illusion of immortality. In this chapter, I argue that female literary characters of various nations expose the inherency of vulnerability by sacrificing their own lives: that they, in Butlerian terms, “lay claim to [their] bod[ies] as their own” via the radical method of absolute self-abnegation. I consider the self-imposed deaths of Susan Isaacson Lewin of E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, Erica of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and Sihem Jaafari of Yasmina Khadra's *The Attack*, all of whom take their own lives during a period in which they are entangled with the political realities and ideological mandates of their respective nation-states. In terms of the process of self-abnegation – being, unbeing, and re-being – mapped out in this work's introduction, these characters are more limited than those of the chapters to follow. We see the nationalistically endorsed self-abnegation that amounts to *being*, and, in their deaths, we see extreme examples of *unbeing*. Because they die, however, they never achieve the kind of *re-being* we'll see in the chapters to come; thus I focus here on the obscured power of unbeing itself: on the women who demonstrate such power via their own deaths, and on that power's politically generative potential. I also focus on the degree to which the self-destruction of these characters forces others to cede power. Though these

women don't discover themselves anew on the other side of self-abnegation, their unbeing initiates a form of re-being in the privileged citizens around them such that those people are positioned to work against their own privilege, and thereby against the state.

Because these novels depict circumstances arising in, respectively, 1930s-1960s United States, post-9/11 United States and Pakistan, and contemporary Israel and Palestine, they would not commonly be placed into conversation with one another. When read separately it is possible to imagine that the choices these women make are unique to the political or historical situations in which they find themselves. Where patterns are discerned, it would be easy to conclude that they confirm the presence of culturally mandated subaltern-like powerlessness, and thus offer nothing revelatory regarding the relationship between agency and self-sacrifice. The first character I include kills herself in the aftermath of her parents' execution. The second disappears – having almost certainly committed suicide – in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>. And the third blows herself up – along with a café full of people – in a well-planned suicide bombing. Yet despite their differences, I argue that each woman's self-sacrifice engages with the politics of her nation, and that each woman participates willingly in that sacrifice. Acknowledgment of this dynamic subverts the subaltern-like status commonly attributed to submission.

In *Diary of a Bad Year*, J.M. Coetzee's protagonist, J.C., claims provocatively that – in light of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – “if [he] heard that some American had committed suicide rather than live in disgrace, [he] would fully understand” (43). This suggests not only that we are all complicit in the political activities of our nation, but that the shame of that complicity might well overpower our will – or even our right – to live. It seems, however, that while the suicide of a male citizen could be perceived in

such noble terms, the suicide of a female citizen might instead incite assumptions of weakness. Considered via the tenets of liberal feminism, the deaths of the characters I discuss could be used to demonstrate female powerlessness: taken as examples of times when the choice of life has been out of women's hands. This is where I see liberal feminism as dangerous. These characters were not murdered; they took their own lives, thereby demonstrating agency within complex political systems. As I note in this project's introduction, if individuals had to act in ways entirely unguided by cultural conditioning to be considered agents, no one would attain that designation. Yet we look for that level of personal sovereignty when considering female – especially third-world female – agency. When we don't see it, we dismiss a woman's actions as not of her own making. I follow Coetzee's logic – and make use of Halberstam's shadow feminism – to read the deaths of the women I discuss in this chapter as fully demonstrative of will.

In looking at acts of fictional self-abnegation, I hope to hear these characters: to examine their submission without taking the power they have managed to claim away from them. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Gayatri Spivak discusses the case of a young Indian woman named Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, who hung herself in her father's apartment. In a twist on the practice of Sati – a wife's suicide after her husband's death, which was not the motive behind Bhaduri's suicide, but which no doubt had cultural relevance – Bhaduri chose to kill herself when she was menstruating, presumably to inform her family that her suicide was not a consequence of sexual indiscretion. Spivak's interest in Bhaduri originates not only in the fact that her motives have never been entirely understood, but that her family has made little effort to grasp her choice. Spivak asks if, for speech to have been successful – to have, essentially, amounted to "voice" – it must

be not only spoken, but “deciphered” or “interpreted” accurately as well. If Bhaduri’s action is not interpreted at all – or if the conclusions drawn about her motives are inaccurate – any voice she may have gained via her final act is arguably lost, as she has not, therefore, been *heard*. Spivak is skeptical of academic attempts to hear, focusing instead on the process by which a subaltern is silenced. Yet because the women of this chapter never attain re-being, I find value in striving to grasp all we can of their unbeing.

I argue that the acts of absolute self-abnegation performed by these characters demonstrate both a profound level of agency and a profound potential for undermining the state even after their death. Butler claims: “that we are subject to death at the whim of another [is] reason for both fear and grief.” But she goes on to ask if “the experiences of vulnerability and loss have to lead straightaway to military violence and retribution,” insisting: “there are other passages. If we are interested in arresting cycles of violence to produce less violent outcomes, it is no doubt important to ask what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war” (*Precarious* xii). I propose that, in these characters’ deaths, we have found alternative passages. The political ends these women seek are completely divested of notions of invincibility, are instead deeply rooted in the inherency of bodily susceptibility. Thus their actions work to subvert long-held narratives that insist on the necessity of war at any cost. In unbeing, these characters prove that other passages exist: that precarity can be embraced. And if other passages exist, we might move closer to abandoning the default passages of warfare, sovereignty, and aggression.

Several assumptions figure centrally in the difficulty of perceiving self-sacrifice as a desirable choice, as they rely on suppositions about the nature of life that are incompatible with a personal or political desire for powerlessness. In *Politics of Piety*,

Saba Mahmood makes evident many of these in her critique of “normative liberal assumptions about human nature.” Among such assumptions are that “all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all...assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, [and] that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them” (5). These assumptions are dangerous because they presuppose what (all) beings will (and won't) use agency to accomplish, thereby limiting what can be perceived as an *action*, and who can be perceived as an *actor*. They render invisible any action born of a desire to forsake freedom.

Another assumption is that *life itself* is irrefutably and invariably precious, that it must be valued above all else. Giorgio Agamben disrupts this supposition by critically deconstructing the elements of what we broadly refer to as *life* using the Aristotelian binary of *zoē* and *bios*. Agamben describes *zoē* as “the simple fact of living common to all living beings” and *bios* as “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (1). In Aristotelian terms, the life that we commonly consider an integrated reality is actually an amalgam of our biological or cellular existences (our *zoē*) and our political or cultural existences (our *bios*). Here the “normative liberal assumptions” Mahmood contests are helpful. Ironically because of narratives of sovereignty, we are led to believe that our real lives are our bodily presences (our *zoē*), and that nothing should impinge on our pursuit of physical continuation. Though *bios* includes citizenship and sovereignty, *zoē* is still privileged, which is evident by the fact that sacrifice of it is seen as abhorrent.

If instead we define life in terms of the complex relationship between *bios* and *zoē* – and we allow that we are constituted by both constructs – those same sacrifices become rich with generative meaning. When we assume that self-abnegating women are

powerless, we read their self-destruction as evidence that they have failed to appropriately live. Agamben's distinction allows us to complicate this view of suicide as the ultimate surrender of power and agency. Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux further this discourse, discussing German philosopher Theodor Adorno, who contends that life "has to be animated, configured, or deployed within a context, given a particular sense, for it to live" (213). By considering *bios* as interactive with – but separate from – *zoē*, we see that the choice to sacrifice the latter for the former might be read as the process of performing just such an "animation": of "configur[ing]" the life of a woman-citizen within a context whose meaning we might be able to perceive. Suicide can thus be seen as a way of reconfiguring the political implications of *bios*, and not simply as eliminating *zoē*. Without such a lens, however, *lifelessness* is dismissed as *powerlessness*.

Part of the reconfiguration modeled by these characters is born of the troubling violence that marks their suicides; thus it seems necessary to acknowledge its presence. Butler calls violence "a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another" (28-29). So what does it mean when violence is imposed on the self, when it is the will of the self that brings about such "primary human vulnerability"? I argue that this manifestation of violence functions in simultaneous reaction to and against the state, which Butler claims, "shores itself up, seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure" (41). Violence, therefore, is central to the assertion of sovereignty against which these women work. Yet here it is performed in

ways that subvert the standard (sovereignty-mandated) outward trajectory of aggression. This violence is, first and foremost, directed inward.

Because of the direction of self-abnegation's violence, we don't ascribe power to its perpetrators. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault uses the term bio-power to outline what he sees as "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (140) marking the modern historical period. He contends that "genocide is...the dream of modern powers...not because of a recent return of the ancient right to kill," but "because power is situated and exercised at the level of life" (137). Indeed, when individuals kill other individuals, we attribute to them a great deal of power. We make clear that they are responsible for death, and we rely on our judicial system to take their power away, which it often does by demonstrating its own power to take life. Yet as I note above, because sovereignty does not extend to the citizen, we don't ascribe this level of power to individuals taking their own lives, nor especially to women doing so. Foucaultian logic reveals a potential nationalistic reason for such a dismissal: namely, that suicide is threatening to an institution (a nation) that claims as its sovereign space the right to kill. Foucault writes of suicide that it was "once a crime" because it was seen as "a way to usurp the power of death which the sovereign alone...had the right to exercise," and he concludes that a "determination to die...was one of the first astonishments of a society in which political power had assigned itself the task of administering life" (138-39). We still see this "astonishment" at work in the reactions these female characters garner from other characters, readers, and critics. By perceiving suicide as inherently connected to the state,

we are able to see the danger such an action poses to the illusion of national sovereignty, and the reasons behind its dismissal as merely the desperate ends of an agentless being.

Moreover, Foucault claims an intrinsic connection between the modes of bio-power and capitalist economy. He asserts that “bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism,” which he contends “would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production” (141). That relationship is largely responsible for how we in the west are trained to perceive life. By way of demonstrating this, Nealon and Giroux write that “nearly everywhere you look these days (advertising, politics, art, education), there is an appeal to this thing called ‘life,’” a demand that we must all invest in “making life better, enjoying life more, living the life of the mind.” They assert that “contemporary power mobilizes a certain form or understanding of life” (214). Thus we are all, regardless of cost, under impetus to improve upon and grasp onto life. According to these terms, not doing so – indeed, abandoning *zoē*, forsaking it, refusing to value it above certain ideological realities – is inherently anti-national and, especially, anti-capitalistic. Thus the behavior of these women – though largely invisible – is subversively political.

What’s important to note, however, is that the mandate of living does not extend to the other, but merely to the self, and to that which is most like the self. Offering American exceptionalism as an example of such a distinction, Butler maintains that “some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved...operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (xiv). Thus even our supposedly reverential



consideration of life is inconsistent and conditional. Nealon and Giroux note that for Agamben, “even the death-dealing Nazi genocide...was made possible by a strange appeal to life.” They explain: “the twisted logic of the holocaust was that Germanic Aryan life needed protection from being infected by a whole series of supposedly inferior forms of life,” and so, “in short, Nazi power was biopower” (214). To reject the mandate of self-life – by protecting *the other*, even symbolically, at a cost to *the self* – is to turn the dynamic of in-group/out-group treatment on its head. By choosing to die, these women challenge assumptions about who we grieve, who we hold accountable, and how we can be changed by the process of surrender.

Considered in these terms, we begin to see the motives underlying our dismissal of self-abnegation as weak and powerless: namely that if it is politically motivated, female suicide is so flagrantly rebellious as to constitute a “real and credible threat” (to borrow the language of the post-9/11 U.S. government) to national sovereignty. Indeed, such behavior effectively amounts to rejection of the cultural construction of biopower, which works, according to Nealon and Giroux, to regulate behavior precisely because it “invent[s] a species or life-form lurking behind the acts of criminality: the delinquent, the monster, the sociopath, the pervert.” Such citizens “may or may not have *done* anything illegal or transgressive, but their lives are nonetheless outside the slippery slope of biopolitical normativity” (216), and thus they must be villainized. The actions these women engage in position them outside of “normativity.” Indeed, these characters conform so exaggeratedly to demands for female submission that they fail to conform at all, thereby threatening the norms by pointing out their otherwise-obscured fault lines. Nealon and Giroux claim that “because power (like life) is so ubiquitous that it’s nearly

impossible to localize, it's easiest to locate social power...where power clamps down on various forms of resistance." Power is most apparent, they suggest, when it is "brought to light against 'resistant' acts or practices that power wants to eradicate" (218). Within the intranslatability of these women's suicides (like the intranslatability of Bhaduri's), we are positioned to see the danger of sovereignty, as well as a potential way to overcome it.

Where before these women have been read as failing to survive, I propose that we read them as illuminating dangerous norms that – in the absence of such drastic measures – would likely remain invisible. Mahmood writes that "the ongoing importance of feminist scholarship on women's agency cannot be emphasized enough." To be effective, however, that scholarship needs to divorce itself from the assumptions of power that place our analysis of women squarely within the terms dictated by hegemonic structures of authority. As Mahmood contends, "it is critical to examine the assumptions and elisions that attend [our understanding of] agency, especially the ways in which these assumptions constitute a barrier to" our ability to recognize alternate manifestations of it (7). These are the terms of my analysis of the following female characters, and of their self-imposed deaths. For these women, the stakes of political resistance are high. If we dismiss them as powerless, their deaths cannot attain a payoff that would make such sacrifice politically or personally worthwhile. Halberstam asserts: "failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods." Indeed, failure "provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (3). Acknowledging the

transcendent potential of failure allows us to see in the deaths of these female literary characters a generative form of *unbeing*, and not merely a cessation of bodily life.

### Susan

In E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, Susan Isaacson Lewin kills herself after living for just over two decades. Though on the surface Susan is depicted as psychologically fragile, I argue that her actions are, if not sound, then at least well reasoned and purposeful. *The Book of Daniel* positions readers historically within the Red Scare of the 1950s, during which time Rochelle and Paul Isaacson – a couple modeled after real-life communists Ethel and Julius Rosenberg – are put to death for Conspiracy to Commit Espionage. The novel follows their children, Daniel and Susan, who demonstrate an inability to attain closure from the deaths of their parents until some form of justice has been done, and who seek to bring such justice about in violent and symbolic ways. I contend that because of the common practice of punishing the female body for ideological indiscretions, a female form becomes – for both Susan and Daniel – the site of punishment meant to take the place of the perpetrator – the United States Government – which cannot be punished because it lacks corporeal form. Susan's self-violence – which is the focus of this chapter – and Daniel's sexual and physical abuse of his wife Phyllis – which I discuss in the chapter to follow – can be read as cathartic, extra-judicial responses to the wrongful executions of Paul and Rochelle Isaacson.

Moreover, unlike Daniel's externally directed violence, Susan's *unbeing* likewise serves as a refusal to adhere to the doctrine of self-protection promoted by sovereignty. In ending her existence as a middle-class American, Susan models a refusal to live as such

for others. Her actions function as a letting-go of one set of mandates for female submission (the set imposed on Rochelle from the moment she was arrested until the moment of her death), and a claiming of a second, un-condoned set. Finally, Susan resists the state's sovereignty-driven claims vis-à-vis the imposition of death. The government may have had control over the end of Rochelle's life, but Susan refuses to give them control over the end of hers. Though *The Book of Daniel* offers little specific insight into Susan – thus there's less direct textual evidence to support her willingness than can be found in this chapter's other examples – I argue that the few glimpses we get into the logic driving her choices are sufficient to warrant consideration of Susan's self-abnegation in deliberate, non-victimized terms.

Critical reception of *The Book of Daniel* has focused on what is perceived as Daniel's search for the "truth" of his parents' guilt or innocence, while subordinating Susan's concomitant (though markedly different) search.<sup>3</sup> When critics do mention Susan, it is usually via a comparison meant to demonstrate Daniel's superior strength or survival instincts. For example, Douglas Fowler contends that "Daniel is psychologically deformed by the weight and irony of this tragic burden, but his deformity allows him to bend and survive" while "Susan can only break" (48). I argue, however, that Daniel "survives" only because he directs his rage externally, while Susan directs hers towards the self. It could have been Daniel who attempted suicide, or Susan who acted sadistically towards a partner. Yet these scenarios feel less plausible to us because we are more

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<sup>3</sup> Morton P. Levitt argues that "Daniel's difficulties as an adult and Susan's destruction arise directly from their being the children of figures of myth...His historical search is designed to uncover the truths underlying that myth" (102-03). So too, Harter and Thompson claim that "Daniel writes his book in an attempt to free himself from the past [and] from his guilt over his parents' fate" (34). Finally, Christopher Morris states: "Daniel is moved by the detective motive of determining guilt or innocence...His empirical quest ends in nothingness when the Isaacsons' senile accuser, Mindish, cannot establish the reliability of his own account of events" (83).

conditioned to perceive women as victims than men. Thus the weakness inherent to Daniel's abuse of his wife is overlooked. Daniel's survival mirrors national sovereignty in that it figures as self-protection at a disregarded cost to others. Susan, however, flaunts illusions of personal safety. Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson argue that "unlike Susan, Daniel remains functional" (35). In concluding that Susan is not "functional," Harter and Thompson dismiss any reading of her as empowered. They join Daniel in assuming that Susan kills herself merely out of grief and weakness. In this way, Daniel and scholars alike participate in Susan's dismissal. They overlook her overt and deliberate choices – first to assume that her parents are innocent, then to advocate for them, and ultimately to refuse complicity in their deaths by ending her own life – which mark Susan as arguably more agented than her verbose but ineffective brother.

Though only Daniel is critically considered in such terms, both he and Susan function as historians, constructing and creating facts so as to make the present and the future more intelligible. Daniel does this overtly via his frame-narrative construction of the novel: choosing which facts to recount and thereby shaping a particular written version of history. Susan does it more subtly: continually constituting history in her own life, both by remembering and focusing on certain events of the past and by acting as an agent in ways that reflect (and even reenact and alter) those remembered events. Linda Hutcheon asserts that Daniel is "culturally and familially conditioned in his response to history, both public and private" (838). Such "cultural and familial condition[ing]" governs the way both of the Isaacson children perceive their lives. Both have had the private and public realms merge as a result of their parents' trial, and neither has been able to disengage from questions of ideology surrounding the events of their parents'

lives and deaths. The voice Doctorow offers us, however, is Daniel's and – with very few exceptions – Daniel's alone. Susan says remarkably little. It would be easy to take her silence as evidence of her powerlessness, which would be to fail to notice that – far more successfully than Daniel – Susan rewrites history, moving from one form of *being* (the impoverished daughter of revolutionaries) to another (the birth child of executed communists and the adopted child of secure, middle-class parents) and, ultimately, to a revisionary, violent, and symbolic form of unbeing.

Though we're given little insight into the immediate motives behind Susan's suicide attempt, the level of situational – political, historical, symbolic – awareness with which Susan approaches her pre-abnegation state of *being* is too significant to dismiss either her way of living or her choice to die as unplanned or apolitical. The desire Susan has to make sense of the events of her childhood – and of the ramifications of those events – is clear throughout the novel, which makes evident two things: first, that the past dictates her understanding of the present, and second, that she perceives her behavior in the present to be historically connected. Daniel tells us: “in Susan resides the fateful family gift for having definite feelings. Always taking stands, even as a kid. A moralist, a judge” (9). Even as a child, then, Susan is no hapless victim of circumstances. Moreover, of the Isaacson family (including Susan), Daniel says: “everything was theory. Everything was done for a reason, and was usually not the way the rest of the world did it. All the more reason. All part of the plan” (31). In her being, then, we're led to see Susan's daily actions as calculated and political.

Indeed, even before Susan's unbeing she resists narratives of sovereignty, though she performs that resistance from within its structure. Of their imprisoned parents, Paul

and Rochelle's attorney tells the kids: "we shall prove that they are not guilty" (148). Though both Susan and Daniel go on to question Ascher's contention, Susan never does so in a fundamental way. Instead, Susan works to undermine the state's narrative about her family. We see this manifest in a pivotal scene in which Susan and Daniel fight at Christmas (one of the few times we hear Susan speak), during which Susan makes clear that she sees her role as daughter to be one of vindication. She tells her adoptive father: "you let [Daniel] sit there and twist everything I say. My mother and father were murdered – why do you let him sit here and do it again!" (82). Though she has yet to perform *unbeing*, Susan accepts the vulnerability of injustice, thereby rewriting the narrative of Paul and Rochelle Isaacson such that readers perceive them not as perpetrators of crime, but as victims of it. In asking, "why do you let him sit here and do it again?," Susan demonstrates a belief in symbolic power. Daniel, of course, cannot literally kill their parents again. Yet Susan's claim that his language amounts to such lets us know that she perceives a relationship between the real and the representationally realized. If they can be killed again, it stands to reason that they can be resurrected, and in her post-execution being, Susan struggles to bring that symbolic potential to fruition.

When she fails to do so via *being*, Susan turns to *unbeing*, which functions for her on two significant levels. Grasping the logic of the first requires accepting that the Isaacsons' executions amounted to "murder." In traditional terms, closure on a crime like murder is reliant upon the criminal (in this case the U.S. government) facing appropriate consequences.<sup>4</sup> Yet such closure-via-consequences is effectively impossible to attain in

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<sup>4</sup> Reading the (fictional) deaths of Paul and Rochelle Isaacson as the result of murder is, of course, logical if one accepts evidence that they were not guilty of the crimes of which they were convicted, or if one believes that those crimes did not warrant the death penalty. For the purposes of this work, however, I won't attempt to prove these premises and will merely assume this reading henceforth.

situations wherein murder is committed not by a person, but by a nation, especially when that nation offers no acknowledgement, no public apology, no recognition even of wrongdoing. And it is especially impossible in this case – where the murders were committed by the justice system itself – because Susan cannot pursue the culturally prescribed method for seeking justice. I contend that it is in part this inability that results in Susan’s decision to take her own life. When we turn to the justice system to avenge murder, we ask that retribution be enacted via punishment of the transgressor’s corporeal form. If the justice system itself is the transgressor, however, there is no corporeal form to punish. There are thus few alternatives to self-abnegating unbeing for Susan to achieve corporeal justice for the murders of Rochelle and Paul Isaacson.

The second level on which her unbeing functions is the degree to which Susan’s suicide attempt, her passive lingering, and her ultimate death allow her to escape complicity in the injustice of her parents’ trial and its outcome.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the examples to follow – in which I argue that women gain *bios* by relinquishing *zoē* – Susan deliberately destroys *zoē* by sacrificing *bios*. Susan’s unbeing is clearly historically grounded: it is tied intimately to the crime of her parents’ executions. Among the few items Daniel finds in Susan’s car after her attempt is a poster that was once used to protest the Isaacsons’ conviction: a “black and white double portrait” of Paul and Rochelle (30). The presence of this poster demonstrates that Susan’s suicide attempt is itself a form of protest. Moreover, Susan is an American, and is thus a participant in the justice system that

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<sup>5</sup> Susan’s suicide attempt is initially unsuccessful. She survives the slashing of her wrists, and is conscious and able to sit up on the following day. Though she is moved from one hospital to another, however, she is never released from mental health care, and she dies of apparent hospital-related pneumonia after a prolonged bout of illness.



murdered her parents. And after the executions, she is raised in a comfortable middle-class home. We read: “embarrassingly, Daniel and Susan adjusted to the rise in their fortunes. The life provided by an assistant professor of law was, by comparison, one of spectacular wealth...It was life in the middle class and it was unbelievably good” (62). The comfort of these new circumstances causes Susan to feel privileged by the economic system her parents advocated against, and thus complicit in the lifestyle protected by the courts that sentenced her parents to death.

What Susan resists when she rejects life, then, is not merely her parents’ executions, and it is not merely her *being* either: it is arguably sovereignty itself. Susan is a sovereign subject, but she refuses that reality by willingly modeling the forced denial of sovereignty experienced by Paul and Rochelle. In *Frames of War*, Butler argues that “a sovereign position not only denies its own constitutive injurability but tries to relocate injurability in the other” (178). While the United States government “relocate[d] injurability” onto the Isaacsons, Susan makes no attempt to “deny [her] own...injurability.” Butler goes on to insist that violence is usually “a way of relocating the capacity to be violated (always) elsewhere” because “it produces the appearance that the subject who enacts violence is impermeable to violence” (*Frames* 178). In refusing to “relocate” the violence she perpetrates, Susan demonstrably rejects the illusion of personal sovereignty. She refuses to be the citizen she’s been since her parents’ deaths: a citizen who allows such travesties as wrongful executions to be done in her name. She thus destroys a *bios* she cannot abide. In killing herself, Susan ceases to be an American. She stops being middle-class; her adoptive parents’ wealth is no longer of value to her. In unbeing, then, she refuses complicity.

Susan is a baby when her parents are arrested, and a child when they're executed. She performs unbeing in the context of the Vietnam War and, more directly, the protests it inspired. Douglas Fowler asserts that Susan "not only believes in the innocence of her parents, she believes that something must be forthcoming from the American national conscience in order to justify her parents' destruction, to compensate for their literal self-sacrifice" (52). In the years following her parents' deaths, Susan tries to bring such compensation about by establishing and donating her trust money to a foundation she calls "The Isaacson Foundation" (17). It is only when she discovers that the members of "the new left" are corrupt – and that, therefore, activism will not lead to the promised breakthrough – that she chooses to fight injustice by *unbeing* via self-abnegation.

Susan has a model for the performance of self-abnegation. Daniel reminds us that Susan's death comes in the summer of 1967; thus it has as a backdrop "young people" choosing to adopt "a form of protest originated...by the Buddhist monks of South Vietnam." This involves "dous[ing] themselves with gasoline and light[ing] matches to themselves...burn[ing] in protest" (17). Though her reasons are more precise, they are no less political, and Susan joins these Americans in performing willing vulnerability. In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri insist that "the modern military figure of sovereignty" has "the power to decide over the life and death of its subjects" (332). Susan's self-abnegation is subversive precisely because, like the monks, she denies the state sovereign power. Hardt and Negri speak to the possibility of such a denial, saying: "even the seemingly absolute power [of sovereignty] is radically thrown into question by practices that refuse the control over life...such as...the protest of the Buddhist monk who sets himself on fire [or] the terrorist suicide bomber." Such "practices" are revolutionary

because “when life itself is negated in the struggle to challenge sovereignty, the power over life and death that the sovereign exercises becomes useless” (*Multitude* 332).

Susan’s self-abnegation, then, has both historical precedence and political purchase.

This is the context in which I read Susan’s attempt to end her life, which she does – as Daniel imagines it – not by lighting herself on fire, but by “locking the stall door, taking out a fresh Gillette Super Stainless blade, slicing veins, [and] holding the opened veins over a toilet bowl in a public bathroom” (29). Susan’s self-abnegation is thus intensely violent. But as Butler argues, “one has to come up against violence to practice non-violence,” and “the violence one is up against does not issue exclusively from the outside” because “if who we ‘are’ is precisely a shared precariousness, then we risk our own nullification.” Indeed, Butler cautions that sometimes, “non-violence is not a peaceful state, but a social and political struggle to make rage articulate and effective – the carefully crafted ‘fuck you’” (*Frames* 182). I argue that Susan’s unbeing can be read as just such a message to the state. Though we might be led to dismiss her suicide as evidence of disempowerment, it offers closure that would otherwise have remained unattainable, and it allows Susan to escape a form of *bios* that makes her complicit in her parents’ deaths. Susan cannot force her government to bear consequences for Paul’s and Rochelle’s executions, but she can choose to bear those consequences herself.

Like the methods employed by the monks, Susan’s resistance comes in the form of absolute surrender. In the aftermath of Susan’s suicide attempt, Daniel is banned from the hospital for attacking Susan’s doctor upon hearing of his plan to administer electric shock therapy, an especially cruel treatment option for a woman whose parents have been electrocuted. For this reason, Daniel breaks into her hospital room. This is the last time he

sees Susan alive. Upon observing her as she moves silently on her bed, Daniel concludes, “today Susan is a starfish. Today she practices the silence of the starfish. There are few silences deeper than the silence of the starfish. There are not many degrees of life lower before there is no life” (207). Susan’s self-punishment is not merely physical; even before her life drains away, she disposes of her voice. After holding her for some time, Daniel returns Susan to her bed, and he watches as “her arms moved out slowly and her feet hooked the mattress and she fixed herself to the bed, sucking to the bed with the vacuum pores of her shrinking bone marrow,” after which “she stared once more at the ceiling and listened to the slow ebb of the sea.” Watching this silent, fully surrendered body, Daniel continues his metaphor, noting that “a starfish is not outraged.” He concludes that to resist the assumed righteousness of sovereignty, “a certain portion of...energy must be used for the regeneration of energy. That way you don’t just die like a bird falling, like a rock sinking, you die on a parabolic curve. You die in a course of attack.” Daniel thus realizes: “Susan knows” that “to be a revolutionary you need only hold out your arms and dive” (210). No longer an agent in the world, Susan’s transition to “starfish” is a transition away from humanity – from life – and towards self-obliteration. Doctorow’s starfish metaphor seems more apt than most critical takes on Susan’s self-destruction.

The external effects of Susan’s unbeing are limited. Both she and Phyllis influence Daniel – which I discuss more fully in the chapter to follow – but they do so to a lesser degree than we see in most of the other examples of this project. In response to Susan’s self-abnegation, Daniel confesses: “I was learning. I was learning how to be an Isaacson. An Isaacson does things boldly calculated to bring self-destructive results” (206-07). With the influence of first his parents, and now his sister, Daniel begins to shift

his destruction from its external manifestation (his abuse of Phyllis) to an internal manifestation (his withdrawal from society). He notes, “my face now bearded, my hair longer than it had ever been I careen through my changes at an accelerating pace. The sense is of running too fast downhill. But why not, why the fuck not” (207). But in the days before her death, he also writes: “to be truthful, Susan, I can live with your death. I will make a fuss because it will be expected of me. But I can live with it. I know how to do that. I’m not saying I won’t hang sad, but at suppertime I’ll be hungry, right? I’ll want a hamburger with everything on it” (208). And at her funeral, he seems to read her death as meaningless. He writes, “it is the kind of day the crocuses get fucked, exposing their petaled insides of delicate hue, yellow and white, lavender and flesh, to the spring. And it is too soon. It’s a miscalculation. Crocus, first flower, dead flower, flower of revolutionaries” (300). Thus he uses metaphor to dismiss her unbeing as “a miscalculation.” We’re given little with which to read Susan’s self-abnegation as having a revolutionary effect on Daniel.

So too, it merely destroys her adoptive parents. Daniel notes, “my mother wears a black hat with a veil over her eyes. Her eyes are swollen and red and her mouth is turned down in ugly grief. My father....is demolished” (300). And in terms of the potential for broader consequences, John G. Parks claims that “Daniel and Susan...are scarred psychologically and they exhibit many of the traits psychologists and historians have noted in survivors of atrocities and political oppression.” This is certainly true. Yet Parks goes on to claim that “they bear the burden of the ‘survivor’s mission,’ the compelling need to tell the world what happened so that others might learn from it” (43). While this applies to Daniel, I argue that if Susan’s most “compelling need” were to tell the world

about her experiences, she would be invested not in self-destruction, but in self-preservation: she would continue to use her voice to educate others. Yet even before her unbeing, Susan's use of voice is strikingly sparing. When Daniel visits Susan in the psychiatric hospital the morning after her suicide attempt, she says little beyond: "goodbye, Daniel. You get the picture" (9). Susan is more interested in constituting justice and resisting complicity than in the normative notion of helping others to "learn" what happened to her. Unlike the examples to follow, then, the success of Susan's unbeing exists largely in the symbolic.

*The Book of Daniel* functions as we might imagine the opposite of a *Bildungsroman* would: Susan performs *unbeing* steadily throughout the novel, surrendering first her consciousness, then her humanity, and then her life. She moves from woman-citizen to starfish, which is neither woman nor citizen. This is her limited form of *re-being*. Watching her, Daniel thinks: "life recedes like the tide going out, the waves of life shrinking back, and over her forehead and down through her eyes a dryness, a loss of life" (209). Having rejected the illusion of sovereignty in the aftermath of her parents' executions, Susan leaves behind only an empty body, a form over which the state can exert no influence. Daniel writes: "when I picked her up there was no weight to her. There was no heft of ocean and slide of salt dune... Her arms hung down from the shoulders, her skinny legs from the knees" (209-10). Though we are trained to read in every agented person's action a desire to self-protect, Susan demonstrates just the opposite: an instinct to self-destruct. By considering that self-destruction as a transgressive example of unbeing, we are positioned to read within Susan's narrative a powerful refusal of the concept of hegemonic sovereignty.

## Erica

Though her circumstances are less overtly personal than Susan's, Erica – of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* – likewise responds to national events with absolute self-abnegation. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is set in a café in Lahore, where a Pakistani man tells an unidentified – and, in Anna Hartnell's terms, “wholly silent” – American the story of his love affair with both the United States and an American woman. Changez studied at Princeton, started work in New York City shortly before September 2001, and returned to Pakistan shortly after 9/11. He may or may not have become a terrorist in the years following the attacks. The American with whom Changez speaks may or may not be a CIA assassin. The novel may end in one or both of their deaths, or neither may be in real danger. The entire narrative is delivered in the second person, via Changez's side of the conversation; thus everything we learn about the American, the U.S., and Erica is offered not merely via Changez's consciousness, but via his deliberate word choice. This structure subverts the empowered West vs. subaltern East binary by lending voice to the othered character while silencing the traditionally empowered one. What's relevant here, though, is the degree to which this shift is echoed in the actions of privileged Manhattanite Erica, who uses unbeing to self-silence.

Though her self-abnegation is made almost invisible by the prescriptive nature of rhetorics of liberation, Erica's subversion of those rhetorics is apparent when considered through the lens of shadow feminism. Margaret Scanlan contends that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* “is a Rorschach inkblot test exposing our own interpretive strategies, histories, and desires” (277). And Hamid states in an interview with Deborah Solomon that the ambiguity of the novel's ending forces readers to face their own assumptions:

that we experience the closing scene between Changez and the American via whatever prejudices we bring to our encounter with the characters. Scanlan argues that – while most 9/11 novels merely reaffirm the East/West binary – *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* “internalize[s] a conflict in ordinary people.” Such “internalization” can be seen via the private reactions its characters have to public events. Scanlan contends that the novel’s “hesitations, qualifications, and complexities of lived experience become alternatives to the lethal polarities of public rhetoric” (266), which it “challenge[s]” by “revise[ing] the West’s vision of itself as a haven for the oppressed” (267). Though the focus of Scanlan’s analysis is the complexity with which Hamid portrays Changez, I argue that her contentions apply to Erica, as well. Considered in such terms, Erica’s death can be seen as politically generative precisely because, in self-abnegating in the face of America’s retaliation, she offers a way around the “lethal polarities” that dominate 9/11 discourse.

Erica is the most overtly allegorical of all of the characters I discuss in this chapter, as she (by name and by action) is a clear representative of both pre- and post-9/11 America.<sup>6</sup> Hamid houses this national allegory in a female body, which allows us to see clearly the feminized notion of the state discussed above. Scanlan labels Erica “the best of America” and notes that she “shares with [Changez] her ‘insider’s world’” (274). By viewing Erica as an allegorical figure, we begin to see the non-militaristic side of America’s reaction to 9/11. The America portrayed via Erica is not the violent, retaliatory America we might expect, but a submissive America, longing for the past and punishing

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<sup>6</sup> The names Hamid uses in this novel make clear the high degree to which his characters and company names are meant to be allegorical. For example, the valuation firm Changez works for, Underwood Samson, clearly represents the corporate nature of the United States (“Underwood Samson” and “United States” share initials). Erica is a personified version of *America*, and her deceased, “old world” boyfriend Chris brings to mind, in Hartnell’s terms, “not only Europe’s Christian roots but also Christopher Columbus’s encounter with the Americas, and the continent’s status in the European imagination as an object of its own discovery” (343).



itself (herself) with and for that longing. In her willingness to accept profound vulnerability, Erica exposes the danger of the sovereignty-driven assumption that external, retaliatory violence is the only approach to precarity.

Erica's acceptance of vulnerability manifests in traditionally feminine ways, making the distance between her approach and the masculine, militaristic approach of the United States government all the more clear. In the wake of 9/11, Erica is inconsolably struck by the grief of an old loss. As Changez attempts to win Erica's affection, she withdraws further and further into herself, succumbing to self-pity, nostalgia, and a destructive (literally self-wasting) eating disorder. Kristiaan Versluys contends that the events of 9/11 exposed an emptiness that had been present in the lives of Americans for some time, and that as such, 9/11 merely provided an outlet for – and was not the origin of – the cultural grief felt in the wake of those events. Because of her allegorical status, Erica's unraveling serves as an exaggerated example of the weight of such grief: it offers insight into America's self-absorbed response to the terrorist attacks. As Scanlan notes, the U.S. breaks down in similar ways to Erica in the post-9/11 period: “the nation committed to progress is determined to ‘look *back*’” (117). This is not the America of outwardly-focused vengeance, but of navel-gazing self-obsession. In her unbeing, Erica absorbs fear and grief instead of propelling those emotions onto the Muslim (or merely dark-skinned) other, as do the bulk of Americans Changez encounters. Butler notes, “certain forms of grief [are] nationally recognized and amplified,” while “other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable.” Butler clarifies this distinction, observing that “the names, images, and narratives of those the US has killed” are largely unknown to us, while America's “own losses are consecrated in public obituaries that constitute so many

acts of nation-building” (*Precarious* xiv). In her state of *being*, Erica is a wealthy, attractive, white American; thus her death is visible. Yet – ironically because of those same characteristics – we’re conditioned to read her as a victim, especially in the context of 9/11. Perceiving her death instead as a clear and deliberate choice subverts the network of assumptions that sprung up in post-9/11 rhetoric, problematizing the clarity with which we see American deaths and making visible the deaths of non-Americans.

The potential power of the submissive side of America represented by Erica becomes especially apparent when considered alongside Hamid’s second U.S. allegory: Underwood Samson (US), the valuation firm for which Changez works, whose subscription to national notions of capitalistic dominance is far more destructive than Erica’s naval-gazing nostalgia. Scanlan argues that “at first Changez is too pleased to have made it through the firm’s rigorous selection and training process to criticize its aims,” but that as time goes on he begins to notice that “the firm is a powerful force, embodying a fundamentalist conviction in American domination of world markets” (275). Considering the aggression inherent to western military might, it makes sense that, as Scanlan points out, “Underwood Samson is ‘not nostalgic whatsoever’”; that unlike Erica, the valuation firm “remains focused on productivity, fundamentals, ‘the task of shaping the future with little regard for the past’” (276).<sup>7</sup> Changez’s corporate career with Underwood Samson – especially in the context of the retaliatory war in Afghanistan that develops during his short tenure at the firm – exposes the dangerous, sovereignty-driven side of American culture, which makes visible the potential of Erica’s unbeing.

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<sup>7</sup> Hartnell distinguishes between Hamid’s two American allegories, saying that the firm embodies “American state power... while American nationalism is personified by [Erica]” (337).

Just as it takes very little to imagine Susan Isaacson Lewin killing herself, it is easy for readers to see the nostalgic and vulnerable side of America's national consciousness manifest in a female character. Erica punishes herself in the decisive act of suicide in response to a perceived wrongdoing (a terrorist attack), but she does so by wracking herself with grief for events beyond her control (the death of her lover, as well as those killed in the towers), by denying herself sustenance (she starves herself in keeping with cultural norms that govern women and weight), and by refusing to let go of the single-minded suffering through which she ultimately destroys herself. Because she self-abnegates in such feminized terms, it would be easy to read Erica as a victim. Ironically, though, her allegorical status problematizes our ability to do that. Erica represents a nation that is deeply averse to weakness, even as she herself performs vulnerability. Her self-abnegation can thus be read as national-abnegation, as well. Though her suicide has no literal impact over the imperialistic decisions her government makes on her behalf, her death functions to resist complicity in those decisions, and might thus be read as in keeping with the kind of deliberate nobility about which Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* protagonist theorizes. Changez says: "the United States was supposed to be the place that could not be attacked, where life was safe from violence" (39). Erica's power as an allegorical figure is in her ability to demonstrate – and even to perform – a manner of vulnerability that America at large fervently resists.

John Milbank explores that vulnerability – and America's resistance to it – asking why we grieve certain deaths (the people who died in the towers) and not others (the deaths our retaliation brought about). Milbank argues that, first, we are all invested in the idea that sovereign nations have the right to take life judiciously, but individuals don't.

He writes, “killing on this scale is something only the state is supposed to be capable of” (306); thus, as we saw with Susan, to kill outside of the state – as I suggest Erica does – is to attack the sovereign structure of the state itself. Secondly, like Versluys, Milbank argues that our grief-stricken response served as a justification to act on certain already-present desires.<sup>8</sup> He discusses use of the term “liberty” – which, though it’s meant to convey agency, amounts to national, and not personal, power – claiming that globalization puts national ideas of liberty in danger, and that as a consequence, nations require an enemy if citizens are to stay locally (nationally) loyal. Tracing America’s quest for such an enemy, Milbank asserts that the new American empire is even more dangerous than past empires in that we’ve found in the “war against terror” a long-term adversary (309-10).<sup>9</sup> This is the dangerous America to which Erica offers contrast, and against which her unbeing leads Changez to retaliate.

Milbank goes on to expose a political similarity between terrorism and our reaction to it, saying that the war against terror functions as “an effort to resolve the crisis of state sovereignty in the face of globalization.” Yet he likewise suggests that because “both the Western and the different Islamic state forms face the same crisis,” the war on terror shares similar means and ends to terror itself, as both “terrorism and counterterrorism...are attempts to resolve this crisis” (314-15). Erica’s obsession with the self and her paradoxical self-destruction undermine both the shared and the contradictory elements of terrorism and counterterrorism. She refuses to perpetuate the illusion of an

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<sup>8</sup> These include “a continuous war against ‘terrorists’ everywhere; a policing of world markets to ensure that free-market exchange processes are not exploited by the enemies of capitalism [and] an opportunity to reinscribe state sovereignty” (306).

<sup>9</sup> Milbank’s work traces America’s pursuit of an enemy via such historical occasions as western expansion, World War II, and the second Red Scare.

enemy – rejecting a foundational tenet of both terrorism and counterterrorism – but in her willing unbeing, she forces America into the position of vulnerability exhibited by suicide bombers. She makes no bid for power – nationalistic or otherwise – thus she refuses to perpetuate the demands for sovereignty exhibited by both the perpetrators of 9/11 and the retaliatory U.S. government.

In the pre-9/11 period, however, Hamid’s allegorical references to the U.S. remain fairly undifferentiated; far from being subversive, Erica’s state of *being* is submissive in state-sanctioned ways. Changez first meets Erica on holiday in Greece, where he learns that “she hated to be alone....She attracted people to her; she had presence, an uncommon *magnetism*....a naturalist would likely have compared her to a lioness: strong, sleek, and invariably surrounded by her pride” (21-22). The sexuality of this metaphor is important, as Erica tempts Changez in ways not dissimilar to those exhibited by Underwood Samson. Before their relationship turns romantic, Changez sees Erica almost naked (24). The significance of this moment is given context when Changez notes that “being in Pakistan heightens one’s sensitivity to the sight of a woman’s body” (26).<sup>10</sup> It is precisely the American quality of immodesty that Changez picks up on in this encounter with Erica: her willingness to submit to his gaze, and the gaze of others on the beach that day. Before 9/11, then, her submission is in keeping with cultural expectations regarding women. In her state of being, Erica does not challenge notions of sovereignty.

Indeed, in her being – which is a product of class- and nation-based privilege as it interacts with a feminine willingness to submit – Erica seduces Changez easily. Though

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<sup>10</sup> Changez goes on to recount how “one’s rules of propriety make one *thirst* for the improper...once sensitized in this manner, one numbs only slowly, if at all; I had by the summer of my trip to Greece spent four years in America already...but still I remained acutely aware of visible female skin” (26).

Erica's "magnetism" proves captivating in Greece, it is not until they return to the United States that Changez begins to understand how different Erica's reality is from his, and how secure she could be from certain vulnerabilities if she wanted to be. Far from finding it off-putting, however, Changez is transfixed by Erica's family's stature. Of a dinner they share with Erica's parents at their upper-east-side apartment, Changez notes: "Erica received me with a smile; her tanned skin seemed to glow with health. I had forgotten how stunning she was....although she was wearing a short Mighty Mouse T-shirt and did not appear to have been quite as preoccupied with issues of dress selection as I had been" (50).<sup>11</sup> While Changez has agonized over what to wear, Erica's privileged position carries with it a degree of assuredness. Though in observing this, Changez's attraction deepens – letting us know that before 9/11 he is drawn to privilege – his awareness of the significance of Erica's wealth nevertheless creates tension. As Erica leads Changez about the city in the month before 9/11, he notes: "I realized I was being ushered into an insider's world...to which I would otherwise have had no access" (56). In her sovereignty-claiming state of being, Erica's openness to Changez functions as an invitation to the touted pinnacle of the American dream, which Changez gladly accepts.

Even before the fall of the towers, however, Erica is unwell. In this way, her post-9/11 *unbeing* is in keeping with Versluys's observation that the grief most Americans felt over the events of that day was a product of already-present sorrow. For Erica, even that sorrow is linked to the nation-state. Changez recalls a moment from their early interactions when he saw in Erica's eyes "something *broken*...like a tiny crack in a

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<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in a scene at his boss's house in the Hamptons, Changez notes that, "Jim's house was so splendid, I thought even [Erica] might be impressed. And that, as you will come to understand, is saying a great deal" (44).

diamond that becomes visible only when viewed through a magnifying lens” (52). So too, Changez repeatedly notices that Erica is “introspective,” prone to “withdraw, to recede a half-step inside herself.”<sup>12</sup> This “broken[ness]” comes from grief. Erica’s boyfriend Chris – whose death from cancer resulted in Erica’s hospitalization for, among other things, an eating disorder a year before she met Changez – is central to her “rece[ssion],” and thus to America’s nostalgic longing for the past. Describing Chris, Erica fondly recalls: “his nurses had been charmed by him: he was a good-looking boy with...an *Old World* appeal” (27). As critics note, Chris embodies a Christopher Columbus-styled America. This makes Erica’s comparison of Changez’s homesickness to her longing for Chris – she says “I kind of miss home, too...Except my home was a guy with long, skinny fingers” (28) – all the more interesting. In implicitly likening Pakistan to America, Erica indicates that there’s a degree to which she is already positioned to mourn her own nation.

Erica gives us details of this grief, noting on a picnic that when Chris died, she “stopped talking to people. I stopped eating....They told me not to think about it so much and put me on medication” (59). Changez notes: this “evoked in me an almost familial tenderness....I offered her my arm and she smiled as she accepted it....We had never before remained in contact for such a prolonged period...her body was so strong and yet belonged to someone so wounded” (60). In this passage, we see not only the degree to which Erica has already begun the process of unbeing, but the fact that the physical intimacy Changez shares with Erica is tied up in that unbeing via her past with Chris. It thus becomes evident that – though Changez struggles to indentify with what we might call a “new world” America – the nation’s present cannot be separated from its

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<sup>12</sup> He further observes: “she reminded me of a child who could sleep only with the door open and the light on” (57).

“old world” history. Even in the days before 9/11, then, Erica (America) is influenced as much by her (its) past as by the present. Instead of claiming her position of privilege in the aftermath of America’s history, therefore, Erica self-abnegates in response to it, yielding to the historical pain of her nation by shifting her gaze inward.

Erica’s self-abnegation stands to manifest only its internal potential – like Susan, she is positioned to undermine narratives of sovereignty only by refusing to participate in them – until Changez begins to read her as an American allegory, and until he begins to see her as worthy of grief. Once he attaches both personal and political meaning to her, however, Erica’s process of unbeing stands to undermine Changez’s devotion to the United States. In what is arguably the novel’s most controversial passage, Changez recounts for the American his initial experience of the 9/11 attacks, which he learned about via a television in a hotel room in Manila. He recalls: “I turned on the television and... watch[ed as]... the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center collapsed. And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased” (72). The coldness of his response causes Changez anxiety, as does his inability to feel sadness until – observing his colleagues’ concern for their family members – he remembers that Erica is in New York. He notes: “I was almost relieved to be worried for her and unable to sleep; this allowed me to share in the anxiety of my colleagues and ignore for a time my initial sense of pleasure” (74). Here we see that Erica is Changez’s path to grief. Via his subject position as a Pakistani man, he cannot perceive America as a victim. Yet because of the details of Erica’s *being*, it is easy to perceive her as such.

Since she is not a victim of the attacks, Changez’s sympathy is warranted only when Erica becomes a victim of her own willingness to self-destruct. Nevertheless, in



terms of Butler's (and Milbank's) contrast between grievable and ungrivable beings, Erica fits profoundly in the former category, though she has not been directly injured by the attacks. Moreover, she is perceived as grievable not just to her insider group of Americans, but to her Pakistani suitor, as well. In this way – though entirely unharmed – Erica is positioned as the novel's primary victim of terrorism. This is in keeping with Susan Faludi's findings: that instead of working to understand the complexities of 9/11, Americans responded with fear, reverting to 1950s gender dynamics wherein men are seen as heroes and women as victims in need of rescuing (5). This is ironic in that the majority of that day's casualties were men, and the attacks were perpetrated within our commercial and governmental centers. At first glance, this indicates that in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid perpetuates perceptions of female victimization. I argue, however, that the readiness of this reading is a result of liberal feminism's assumptions about women and power. When considered in terms of shadow feminism, we begin to see the way in which Erica's unbeing breaks down this construct. Though he is ostracized as he travels back to America after 9/11, Changez's connection to Erica intensifies his sense of connection to the U.S.: her grievability functions at first to unite Changez with America. Only via her unbeing does Erica's status as a privileged American undermine Changez's devotion to the United States. Though in her death she never accomplishes re-being, then, Erica uses her position as a woman-citizen to undermine assumptions about both privilege and female victimhood.

In the weeks following 9/11, Erica shifts from demonstrative victim to self-destructive agent.<sup>13</sup> Observing this process, Changez notes that Erica is becoming “utterly

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<sup>13</sup> In their first post-9/11 encounter, Changez notes that Erica's “lips were pale, as though she had not slept – or perhaps had been crying,” and she admits: “I keep thinking about Chris...I don't know why. Most

detached...Her eyes [are] turned inward” (86). What her unbeing models, then, is that the biggest danger to America is not terrorists, nor even loss, but its devotion to sovereignty. Significantly, this is Erica’s state when Changez first touches her intimately. Erica gets a bruise while practicing tae kwon do, and, looking at the tender spot of the bruise itself, Changez recalls: “Without thinking, I extended my hand. Then I hesitated. She returned my gaze watchfully, but her expression did not change, so I touched her, placing my fingers on her bruise. She rested her hand on the back of her head as I traced the line of her ribs” (89). Here we see Erica begin to submit to vulnerability, to open up to being touched where she has already been hurt. That night, Changez tries to parlay the intimacy of the bruise-touch into a sexual encounter. He recalls that Erica “did not respond; she did not resist; she merely acceded as I undressed her...she was silent and unmoving...I found it difficult to enter her” (90). Though Hartnell notes that this scene exposes the “impenetrable” aspect of the Erica/America allegory, I find that the passivity with which Erica yields to Changez here complicates the rigidity of a word like “impenetrable.” She is not “aroused,” but neither does she “resist.” Instead, she is “silent and unmoving,” permissive, yet not participatory. I read this scene as an early manifestation of Erica’s post-9/11 *unbeing*. In allowing Changez access to her body, the symbolic victim of terror attacks – the wealthy, white, prototype of female vulnerability – begins a process of self-exposure that will end in her death. She does so voluntarily. And doing so is political. Shortly after this encounter, Changez watches the start of America’s bombing of Afghanistan (99). In this context, Erica’s submission to Changez reads as profoundly polar to the aggression of American military might.

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nights I have to take something to help me rest. It’s kind of like I’ve been thrown back a year....I feel haunted” (80).

Even before her death, then, we see Erica move towards a compliance not unlike Susan's eventual "starfish" state. Unlike the limited degree to which Susan's unbeing influences Daniel, however, Erica's self-abnegation drastically undermines Changez's devotion to America. When Changez invites her to his apartment again – and Erica "acquiesce[s]" – Changez observes that Erica is "vanishing before [his] eyes" (104). And of their second sexual encounter, Changez notes that Erica doesn't "move her lips or shut her eyes." As with their first time together, then, she submits, but her compliance is not fed by desire. She receives and accepts his passion, but she does not participate in it. As she does not "shut her eyes," Changez "shut[s] them for her," after which he asks: "Are you missing Chris?" When she admits that she is, Changez tells her: "then pretend...pretend I am him," and, he later recalls: "in darkness and in silence, we did" (105). His use of the word "we" makes clear that Erica is not the only one pretending. In terms of *Reluctant Fundamentalist's* system of allegories, this is the most concrete example of Changez's attempts to assimilate into American culture.

Even before her suicide, then, Erica's *unbeing* initiates a process of shifting identity in Changez. In his role as Chris, Changez understands Erica's vulnerability anew. He recalls that "the entrance between her legs was wet and dilated, but was at the same time oddly rigid," such that it lent the encounter "a violent undertone." Changez thinks Erica is bleeding, but he recalls: "when I reached down to ascertain with my fingers whether it was her time of the month, I found them unstained." Finally, Erica "shuddered towards the end – grievously, almost mortally; her shuddering called forth [Changez's] own" (105-06). Though she experiences pleasure in this scene, Changez is aware of the depth of her surrender. He carries this awareness with him in the months to follow, and it

impacts his relationship with the U.S. Changez realizes that Erica is “disappearing into a powerful *nostalgia*, one from which only she could choose whether or not to return” (113). His allowance that Erica is empowered to “choose,” even in this compromised state, is evidence of his newfound understanding of the agency driving her vulnerability. In one of the novel’s most overtly didactic passages – occurring in the aftermath of Erica’s deterioration – Changez “wonder[s] how it was that America was able to wreak such havoc in the world – orchestrating an entire war in Afghanistan, say, and legitimizing through its actions the invasion of weaker states by more powerful ones...with so few apparent consequences at home” (131). Similarly, he later tells the American: “as a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you” (168). I argue that Erica functions as an embodiment of America that is willing to suffer such “consequences,” and that her willingness makes the resistant side of America all the more visible to an increasingly dismayed Changez.

Weeks after Changez visits Erica in a mental institution – which is the last time he sees her – he learns that she has disappeared. A nurse tells him that though they never found her body, “her clothes had been found on a rocky bluff overlooking the Hudson, neatly folded in a pile”; she is presumed to be dead. Changez leaves America for good shortly after Erica’s self-abnegation. In his outsider status, Changez seems to understand the complexity of Erica’s surrender. He attempts to honor it as he departs the United States by leaving his “jacket on the curb as a sort of offering, [a] last gesture before returning to Pakistan, a wish of warmth for Erica – not in the way one leaves flowers for the dead, but rather as one twirls rupees above the living.” Though Changez has been affected by Erica’s surrender, however, America at large is still deeply invested in

dominance and sovereignty, which is profoundly visible in this scene. Changez recalls that after leaving the jacket as a gesture, he “saw that [he] had caused a security alert, and [he] shook [his] head in exasperation” (168). Like Erica’s self-sacrifice, Changez’s gesture is misread. Both of these misreadings have potentially dangerous consequences for America. Reading the actions of Changez as possibly terroristic leads to the possibility that Changez becomes – by the novel’s end – a “reluctant fundamentalist.” And if we dismiss Erica’s suicide as a product of mental illness, the generative possibilities of her sacrifice are rendered invisible. Like Susan’s, Erica’s death functions as a refusal: an unwillingness to share complicity in the actions of her nation-state. And like Susan’s, Erica’s unbeing functions as an overt rejection of U.S. sovereignty. Unlike Susan’s, however, Erica’s unbeing has significant external ramifications: she undermines Changez’s loyalty to America such that her death triggers his abandonment of the U.S., and possibly his active resistance to it. As such, Erica provides a model for submissive resistance that destabilizes demands for sovereignty in post-9/11 wartime America.

### Sihem

Finally, Sihem Jaafari – of Yasmina Khadra’s *The Attack* – takes her own life in the most overtly political move of the women I discuss here. And unlike Susan and Erica, she takes the lives of others in the process. Sihem is a Palestinian woman living in Israel with her surgeon-husband, Amin, another Palestinian assimilated to Israel. In one of the novel’s opening scenes, Sihem kills herself – along with a café full of people many of whom are children – in a suicide bombing near the hospital in which her husband works. Until her death, Amin has no knowledge of his wife’s fundamentalist beliefs; thus the

novel follows his attempts to grasp the baffling action she takes. The violence Sihem perpetrates is especially complex because of her liminality as a Palestinian living in Israel, her economic privilege as a surgeon's wife, and her status as a non-practicing Muslim. Though clearly politically motivated, the nature of Sihem's politics is difficult to discern. Amin joins readers in struggling with the same question an investigator poses:

how a beautiful, intelligent, modern woman, esteemed by the people around her, thoroughly assimilated, pampered by her husband, and worshiped by her friends – the majority of whom are Jews – how such a woman could get up one day and load herself with explosives and go to a public place and do something that calls into question all the trust the state of Israel has placed in the Arabs it has welcomed as citizens. (48)

This question works as a puzzle throughout the novel, its answer being the nearly untranslatable message Sihem leaves behind. Perhaps her unbeing is most like Bhaduri's, then: easy to misconstrue, but, if *heard*, full of resonant potential.

Though it's complex to read redemptive value in an action that amounts to the murder of a café full of people, I argue that the tragedy of Sihem's victim's deaths is made only more deeply tragic if Sihem's unbeing is never translated: if no attempt is made to understand the potentially subversive value of her destruction. In *Frames of War*, Butler contends that via the "ongoing contestation over power...the question of doing or not doing violence emerges." But she cautions that "it is not a position of the privileged alone to decide whether violence is the best course; it is, paradoxically, even painfully, also the obligation of the dispossessed to decide whether to strike back and, if so, in what form" (177-78). Via such a lens, Sihem's action can be translated as a politically

informed – and maybe even fully rational – choice. Because the novel ostensibly opens with Sihem’s death, however, the measure of her self-abnegation comes less via the internal and more via the external, or the degree to which her unbeing chips away at the privilege Amin has worked to build. In its effects on Amin, Sihem’s unbeing is far from politically impotent: as we saw with Erica and Changez, Sihem’s action drastically undermines her husband’s loyalty to Israel, returning him to a family he all but abandoned and wartime realities he long ignored. Though she never achieves re-being, then, Sihem’s unbeing functions subversively even after her death.

*The Attack* traces how much Amin changes in the weeks following his wife’s death, and preceding his own. That evolution consists largely of the stripping of assumptions about Sihem (locally), about the role of female-citizens in war-torn cultures (globally), and, ultimately, about the role Amin himself should play in the conflict between his home of birth and his home of choice. Mahmood critiques “the assumption that there is something intrinsic to women that *should* predispose them to oppose the practices, values, and injunctions that the Islamist movement embodies” (2). Such assumptions drive the narrative of *The Attack*, as Amin struggles to understand why the “freedom” and “autonomy” he provided his wife didn’t sustain her. This is especially hard for Amin to understand because there is little he won’t do to achieve success in western terms.<sup>14</sup> Though we never hear from Sihem directly, the answer to *why* she makes the choices she does comes via Amin’s efforts to understand her unbeing. She does not “oppose the practices” of Islam; indeed, she submits to Islam’s most radically

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<sup>14</sup> He notes, “I’ve clung to my ambitions like a jockey to his horse,” and admits that in his pursuit of success in Western terms, he “renounced [his] tribe, agreed to leave [his] mother’s side, [and] made concession after concession in order to dedicate [himself] to [his] career alone” (165-66).

violent subculture, using her body not to secure freedom and autonomy, but to undermine Amin's notions of freedom and autonomy in the face of decades of holy war.

Through Amin's search for answers, we learn that Sihem understands her own gendered role as a Palestinian woman to be one of surrender, and that she adheres to that role (the *being* that preceded the privileged *being* she gained via Amin's success in Israel) above the "desire for freedom" she is expected – according to Amin, demands for national sovereignty, and the tenets of liberal feminism – to value most. In "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," Fredric Jameson provides a framework for understanding the difference between Amin's perceptions and Sihem's, and therefore for tracing the *unlearning* that Sihem's self-abnegation initiates in her husband. Jameson asserts that literature produced by capitalist societies reflects a barrier between the public and the private, while "third world texts...necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (69). Though Amin embraces the boundaries he encounters in Israel (the barriers between the public and the private), Sihem finds that she cannot do so, and – in the ultimate blurring of those boundaries – she offers her life to her state of origin. What's especially interesting about Sihem's choice is that – as we saw with both Susan and Erica – such willingness is itself feminized. As Amin searches for answers, he is told: "Sihem was a woman, not just your woman. She died for others" (226). Thus the act of sacrifice is offered up as *a thing women do*. Though Khadra could have given readers a male suicide bomber, these gendered notions of sacrifice become strikingly apparent via a character like Sihem



Jaafari who intelligently, consciously, and deliberately offers her life (and in so doing demands the lives of others) to a cause she deems more worthy than individual existence.

The insider/outsider binary I discuss throughout this chapter manifests here in the oppositionality of Israel and Palestine, the dichotomy of silent femininity and dominant masculinity, and the subversive potential of feminine submission to undermine masculine authority. As *The Attack* is set largely in Israel, our first introduction to Palestine comes via the racism Amin experiences in the hours after Sihem's bombing. Our insight into Palestine is thus complex: it comes in the form of Israeli prejudice as it manifests in the life of a Palestinian-born, naturalized Israeli surgeon. Amin notes: "it was hard for a son of Bedouins to join the brotherhood of the highly educated elite without provoking a sort of reflexive disgust" (7).<sup>15</sup> Thus we come to understand the lengths to which Amin has gone to assimilate into Israeli culture. We don't see Palestine first-hand until Amin travels there in search of answers about Sihem's choice. His first trip largely brings him frustration with his homeland, but on his second trip – which ends in his death – Amin discovers for himself a submissive willingness not unlike his wife's. Arguably, only Sihem's unbeing could have initiated this return for Amin – this willing abandonment of the prosperity he found in Israel – thus Sihem's unbeing leads Amin to relinquish the values that Sihem's radical cause struggles to oppose.

Having just concluded a surgery, Amin is in his hospital near the attack site at the time of Sihem's detonation; he feels its reverberations. He spends the better part of the day operating on her victims, yet he still does not know Sihem is dead, and he certainly

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<sup>15</sup> When news of his wife's attack gets out, their home is vandalized, and covered in newspapers that read, "THE FILTHY BEAST IS AMONG US" (52). This is a good example of both dehumanizing rhetoric and the public invocation of fear, which manipulates people into behaving in particular ways. Indeed, moments later, Amin "find[s] some food in the fridge and pounce[s] on it like a famished beast" (54). Thus he is reduced to animal behavior based on, or in accordance with, prejudicial expectations.

does not suspect that she perpetrated the attack. He is sleeping at home – under the assumption that his wife is at her grandmother’s house – when he receives a call from a friend: a police investigator, Navid, who asks him to come to the hospital. When he arrives, Navid informs Amin that he is needed to identify Sihem’s body, which bears the marks of her violent unbeing. We read: “only Sihem’s head, strangely spared by the devastation that ravaged the rest of her body, emerges from the mass, the eyes closed, the mouth open a little, the features calm, as though liberated from their suffering” (29). In time, Amin comes to understand how this look of “liberation” functions symbolically for Sihem, signaling that she finds in her death a sense of peace that eluded her in her privileged life with Amin. At this point, however, it reads as cruelly ironic.

After he identifies her body, Amin is told that Sihem is suspected of perpetrating the attack, and he observes: “I can clearly make out the captain’s words, but I can’t manage to attach any sense to them. Something seizes up in my mind...I no longer recognize the world I live in” (33). In her violent unbeing, Sihem has initiated what Butler calls “the disorientation of grief” (*Precarious* 30), undermining assumptions about security and assimilation that Amin has been cultivating for decades. Amin notes: “in a fraction of a second, all my reference points have vanished. I no longer know where I am, don’t even recognize the walls of the building where I’ve spent my whole professional career” (28). When Amin gets a (pre-written) letter from Sihem in which she confesses to the attack, we read that his “last reference points have hit the fucking road” (70).<sup>16</sup> This is not a world that Amin is equipped to make sense of. Because of the power of Sihem’s

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<sup>16</sup> Sihem’s note says simply: “what use is happiness when it’s not shared, Amin, my love? My joys faded away every time yours didn’t follow. You wanted children. I wanted to deserve them. No child is completely safe if it has no country. Don’t hate me. Sihem” (70).

unbeing, Amin's grief functions as a process of creating a system of knowledge within which this tragedy is possible, and perhaps even within which it ceases to be tragic.

The external measure of Sihem's success takes time to manifest, however, and at first we see Amin's resistance to the lessons his wife's actions have to offer in his desperation not to read Sihem as agented. His quest to understand her choice first functions as a need to discover who's to blame. He tells his friend Kim, "they killed my wife," to which Kim responds, "Sihem killed *herself*...She knew what she was doing; she's chosen her destiny. It's not the same thing" (143). Interestingly, it is Amin's only female friend who is capable of offering these insights. Because voluntary subordination is foreign to him, Amin needs to believe that Sihem was controlled by an outside force, that she was as much a victim as the people she killed. Kim, however, doesn't try to redeem Sihem. Instead, she merely affirms Sihem's ability to have freely "chosen." We likewise see Amin's need for someone to blame in his insistence that he "can't mourn" his wife until he "look[s] into the eyes of the son of a bitch who stole her mind." He perceives an imagined manipulator as a competitor who won the attention of his wife, saying: "I want to understand what he's got that I don't," and thinking of Sihem as "the worst slut in the world" (144). Finally, Amin struggles to comprehend "why the woman [he] was crazy about was more receptive to other men's sermons than she was to [his] poems" (108). In his early attempts to understand it, then, Amin poses Sihem's unbeing as infidelity, unwitting sexual submission being a part of feminine *being*: a vulnerability in which women are expected to engage.

Even when he begins to recognize Sihem's agency, Amin continues to attribute her actions to the model of generations of terroristic violence. Thus he reads her unbeing

– and the external violence it entails – merely as in keeping with those who would “reduce the exercise of faith to an absurd and frightening question of power relationships” (99), blind faith and a desire for power being the motives typically afforded terrorists. In contrast, Amin is invested in the classic anti-terrorist rhetoric: that nothing matters above life. His ethic as a surgeon is founded on resisting death; he says: “the only battle I believe in, the only one that really deserves *bleeding* for, is the battle the surgeon fights, which consists in re-creating life in the place where death has chosen to conduct its maneuvers” (234). He likewise recalls a saying his father had, that “anyone who tells you that a greater symphony exists than the breath in your body is lying. He wants to undermine your most beautiful possession: the chance to profit from every moment of your life...There's nothing, absolutely nothing, more important than your life” (99-100). Though this ideology is friendlier than Sihem’s, it relies on assumptions that are central mandates of sovereignty. It neglects the lived reality of many for whom life offers little to “profit from,” and insists only on the protection of the self with no mention at all of the potentially dangerous impact of protecting the self over the other. Yet Amin subscribes to these assumptions. He claims: “I have never felt implicated in any way at all in this bloody conflict, which is in reality just a slugfest at close quarters between the punching bags and the scapegoats of history” (165-66). Considered in these terms, Sihem’s death is a meaningless waste: she is yet another scapegoat.

In Amin’s journey to understand Sihem, he begins to recall her familiarity with vulnerability, which no doubt helped prepare her for such a drastic choice. For example, Amin remembers that “when [Sihem] was eighteen, her mother died of cancer, and her father was killed in a road accident a few years later.” He reflects: “it took forever before

she finally agreed to accept me as her husband” because she feared that “fate...would return and deal her another blow” (22). Likewise, he recalls that Sihem “grew up among the oppressed, as an orphan and an Arab in a world that pardons neither,” and that “she must necessarily have had to bow very low” (228). She had, thus, a great deal of practice learning to live with precarity. Moreover, her response to that practice – her willingness to embrace it – is portrayed as distinctly feminine. As Amin searches for answers to his wife’s choice, he is told: ““the fact of being a woman doesn’t disqualify or exempt a resistance fighter. Men invented war; women invented resistance. Sihem was the daughter of a people noted for resistance....She wanted to *deserve* to live...not just to enjoy her good fortune”” (226-28). Again the act of sacrifice is offered up as *a thing women do*. The question of whether or not one deserves free life is not central to notions of sovereignty; it is a foregone conclusion. Yet according to the logic to which Sihem subscribed, life, self, and joy are not rights, but privileges. This is the foundation of Sihem’s perspective. When she discovers Amin’s nephew Adel’s allegiance to the cause, the walls of the (capitalist) fortress that Amin has built for her come down, and she abandons the Western belief that is so important to Amin: that there are barriers between the private and the public. Without a belief in an inherent right to life, Sihem is free to use her body to whatever ends she sees fit.

Because this use of freedom is such a deviation from the rationality of Enlightenment thinking – and also from the sovereign and biopolitical nation-state – it’s the hardest part of Sihem’s death for Amin to understand. Yet he comes to realize that Sihem chose destruction over self-preservation when he learns that the leaders of her fundamentalist group neither solicited nor, at first, endorsed her decision to become a

suicide bomber. When questioned, Adel – who served as Sihem’s conduit to the cause – tells him, “it’s not my fault. It’s not anybody’s fault. I didn’t want her to blow herself up, but she was determined.” In terms of Sihem’s reasoning, Adel recalls: “she said she was a full-blooded Palestinian, and she didn’t see why she should let others do what she ought to do herself,” adding that they “told her she was much more useful to us alive than dead. . . . She was the keystone of our Tel Aviv section” (221). Here we see the willfulness of Sihem’s unbeing. No ill-fated victim, Sihem chose to kill herself and others.

Once he accepts the responsibility Sihem bears, Amin begins to realize that he is implicated in her death and, as such, in the entire catastrophic conflict. In this way, Sihem’s unbeing leads to Amin’s re-being: he comes to know himself anew through the trauma of learning to understand her. This part of the process is initiated when one of Sihem’s fellow fundamentalists picks up on Amin’s assumption that her death was the cause’s fault, and he turns that assumption around, implying that Amin was the greater manipulator. He asks tauntingly: ““she was so happy in her gilded cage, wasn’t she? She ate well, slept well, enjoyed herself. She lacked nothing.”” He continues to voice the assumptions Amin has been making, suggesting facetiously that all of this was true until ““a bunch of mental cases turn her away from her happiness and send her to – how did you put it? – to ‘blow herself away.’”” Having given voice to Amin’s assumptions, he concludes bitinglly: “the good doctor lives next door to a war, but he doesn’t want to hear a word about it. And he thinks that his wife shouldn’t worry about it, either”” (212). Amin is accused of not merely failing his wife, then, but of failing his people: of being willfully ignorant with regards to the suffering surrounding him, and of demanding that Sihem be ignorant too. But Sihem, Amin is told, was unwilling to remain blind to

suffering. She rejected “the happiness [Amin] offered her” because it “smelled of decay. It repulsed her....She couldn’t work on her suntan while her people were bent under the Zionist yoke” (213). Though Sihem only makes such assertions directly in her brief note, her unbeing communicates her unwillingness to live as Amin does. As Amin begins to understand that unwillingness, it invades his own righteous sense of distance from the chaos of holy war. He begins to question all that, in her death, Sihem rejected.

Amin’s acceptance of his complicity grows until what began with denial – a rigid resistance to the precarity of Sihem’s position, and of his own – becomes an abandonment of sovereignty and an effacement that mirrors his wife’s. We see this in the language Khadra uses to describe Amin’s evolving state of mind. For example, when he’s first questioned about Sihem’s unbeing, Amin observes that his interrogator’s “voice....surges up like a dark wave, submerging [his] thoughts and shattering [his] incredulity before it suddenly withdraws, taking with it entire sections of [his] being” (34). The loss of self he experiences here is not of his making; he is involuntarily stripped of voice. It makes sense, then, that at this stage he interprets Sihem’s loss of self as out of her control as well. Amin maintains this resistance to vulnerability in the days following the attack, recalling that when Kim “offers [him] her shoulder” he refuses, “prefer[ring] to lean on the wall” (59). Likewise, he confesses to “pray[ing] that [Kim] won’t say anything...that she won’t take [his] hand in a gesture of compassion; one consideration too many, and [he] may not survive” (61). His discomfort with vulnerability is evident in nearly all of his actions during this period.

When he receives the letter from Sihem in the post, however, we see Amin begin to submit to the vulnerability she has thrust upon him. As he “take[s] a deep breath [to]

rip open the envelope” he remarks: “I could slit my wrists and feel less threatened, less endangered, than I do now” (69). As he moves beyond unyielding denial, his first clear emotion is anger, and ironically, this makes Amin almost bomb-like himself. He feels that he has “to be offensive” his “rage...like a monster of the abyss, crouched in the darkness of its lair, waiting for the right moment to rise to the surface and terrify its world.” He recognizes how transparent his anger is, acknowledging: Kim “knows I’m trying to externalize the horror wallowing around in my guts; she sees that my aggressiveness is only a symptom of the extreme violence laboriously welling up in me, waiting to gather together the propelling charges of its eruption” (88). In this way, the first lesson Amin learns from Sihem is a willingness to harm others, outward violence manifesting more quickly than willing vulnerability. During this period of anger, Amin concludes: “Sihem must have been carrying that hatred inside her forever, long before she met me” (228). When he felt powerless, he assumed Sihem was powerless. Now that he’s filled with rage, hatred is the emotion he assumes drove her actions. As he translates her exclusively via the lens of his own behavior – and he isn’t ready to accept his own vulnerability – Amin still cannot fathom Sihem’s willing precarity.

Once he goes to Palestine looking for answers, however, the boundaries he subscribes to erode further. Adel describes the difference between Sihem’s perceptions and Amin’s, saying: “it was as if you were firing up a barbecue in a burned-out yard. You saw only the barbecue; she saw the rest, the desolation all around, spoiling all delight.” Adel’s vindication of Sihem functions as an indictment of Amin. And this rhetoric – as irresponsibly as it is often used in situations of terror – works to bring about a process of unlearning that undermines the privilege Amin felt securely worthy of before



Sihem's death. If Amin is blind to "the desolation all around" before Sihem's unbeing, he no longer is in its aftermath. And for better or worse, what he now sees makes it impossible to live in ignorant privilege. The world Amin lives in now – Sheikh Marwan would argue – is the world that always was, a place "where people tear one another to pieces every day that God sends," where "evening[s are spent] gathering [the] dead" and "mornings burying them." From this recognition forward, Amin exhibits no righteousness as to his time as Sihem's husband or his subscription to the values of Israel.

Amin ultimately submits to the lessons of vulnerability his wife's radical unbeing offers. Yet even before his eventual submission, Amin recalls: "you think you know. Then you lower your guard and act as though everything's just great...Life is smiling on you...You love and are loved. You can afford your dreams." But then, "without warning, the sky falls in on your head. And once you're flat on your back, you realize that your life...hangs and has always hung by a thread as flimsy and imperceptible as the threads in a spider's web" (70-71). Though he does not yet embrace this fragility, his recognition of it demonstrates that Sihem has initiated a process of unlearning in him. That process is brought to completion by surviving members of Sihem's cause, who isolate and mentally torture Amin when he voluntarily presents himself to them. Having kept him solitarily confined for days – threatening his life repeatedly – his tormenter tells him: "I'm told that you're a decent man and an eminent humanist, and that you've got no reason to wish people ill. So it was difficult for me to make you understand my point of view without stripping you of your social rank and dragging you through the mud" (217-18). And indeed, this process is effective; we read: "a few hours later, still handcuffed, I'm gagged and blindfolded and thrown into the trunk of a car. I believe this is the end." What is

noteworthy in this scene is Amin's "docility": "the way I submitted to them. A lamb would have defended himself better" (213). He does not fight. He is most struck not by a desire for dominance, but by "the sadness that takes hold of [him] when the lid of the trunk comes down," which provokes in him the thought that he's "not anything anymore" (214). Though far more a product of force than Sihem's unbeing, Amin's pursuit of understanding is unflinching, which demonstrates his openness to the destruction it may bring. When Amin finally embraces precarity, he sees Sihem anew, and from that vantage point he wonders: "how could I have lived her when I never stopped *dreaming* her?" (184). Here Amin's Enlightenment-inspired reasoning is turned on its head: his rationality is presented as ungrounded, while her willing submission connotes reason.

As his re-being unfolds, Amin recalls his devotion to Sihem, and to making a child with her as a way of ensuring their continuation. He remembers saying: "I want you to give me a daughter...I want her to be healthy and beautiful...I'd like her to have your features and your dimples, so that when she smiles, she'll be the spitting image of you" (174). Her death functions as a refusal to do this: a refusal to offer him a daughter who will inherit the privilege that is so foreign and uncomfortable to Sihem, and so welcome to Amin. In forcing Amin to give up on this dream, Sihem compels him out of that privilege too, such that Amin ultimately contends: "there are only two extreme moments in human madness: the instant when you become aware of your own impotence and the instant when you become aware of the vulnerability of others" (220). Sihem's unbeing makes Amin aware of both precarities.

In the chaos of an Israeli aerial bombing that injures and ultimately kills him, Amin begins to hallucinate, and what he sees is revelatory in terms of Sihem's influence

over him. Shifting from the masculinist demands for sovereignty exhibited by Israel – and necessary to his own role as a surgeon whose duty is to save lives – to a domestic or even feminized depiction of Palestine, Amin notes: “I look for my mother amid the chaos...and discover only orchards, stretching as far as I can see...a land of orange trees, where every day was summer” (5). Amin’s death – an unbeing brought about by his willing re-being – is not deliberate like Sihem’s, but it is a product of his acceptance of vulnerability, which is reflected in the degree to which he submits to his dying moments. Though the violence of Sihem’s unbeing is devastating and deeply disturbing, it is not without the consequence of unlearning she sets out to initiate. Like Bhaduri’s suicide, it could easily go untranslated, or could be read merely as the product and cause of harm. In finding his way towards precariousness and away from the demands for sovereignty that drive the conflict between Israel and Palestine, however, Amin makes use of Sihem’s choice. Even before his death, Amin has willingly sacrificed his status, thereby refusing complicity in kinder terms than did his wife, and yet just as completely. Thus Sihem joins Susan and Erica in violating and disrupting the illusion of sovereignty that perpetuates the relentless cycle of nationalistic, retaliatory violence.

## CHAPTER II: SEXUAL REPARATIONS

“To be cut, to be bared, to be violated publicly is a particular kind of resistant performance....[Such willing precarity] invite[s] us to unthink sex as that alluring narrative of connection and liberation and think it anew as the site of failure and unbecoming conduct.”

~ J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

In J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Professor David Lurie visits his daughter, Lucy, in rural, postapartheid South Africa. During his visit, three black South Africans invade Lucy's farm, kill all of the dogs she shelters, and rape her. When Lucy refuses to report the rapes, David assumes it is because she is too ashamed, a fact she seems, disturbingly, to embrace. Though Lucy acknowledges the likelihood that the men will return to rape her again, she refuses to leave, suggesting that rape may be the price to pay for staying on in a land where whites benefited for so long from inequity. By choosing to stay, Lucy exposes the degree to which those who benefit from hegemony refuse to face consequences for having done so. She does not run from such consequences. Her acceptance is a product of her gender, which is evidenced by David's failure to understand her choice. It is not merely as a white South African that Lucy comprehends that a price must be paid, but as a woman. And it is as a woman that she chooses to pay that price bodily. David's resistance to Lucy's submission is in line with the tenets of liberal feminism. Using *Disgrace* alongside two other novels, this chapter envisions an alternate reading of such willing unbeing: one that acknowledges the transgressive power of sexual submission in the face of sovereignty-inspired assertions of dominance.

That women are conditioned to sexually submit – not in direct effort to meet their own needs, but in adherence to political or economic structures – is undeniable. That they might gain power from doing so, however, is a complicated and controversial suggestion. Guided by the logic of western liberalism, we are encouraged to question power that

comes via sacrifice of one's own body, or to assume that the surrender of one's body functions inherently as a surrender of power. I hope to disrupt such assumptions. Like the suicides discussed in the previous chapter, these characters – Lucy Lurie of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Phyllis Lewin of E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, and Daisy Perowne of Ian McEwan's *Saturday* – use their bodies to satisfy divergent aims. Indeed, the ends to which these women offer themselves vary considerably, ranging from a direct effort to save the lives of family members to a symbolic gesture of subjugation in the wake of profound racial injustice. Nevertheless, each of the novels I discuss is set within the context of an especially fraught sovereign situation: the end of South African apartheid, the second “Red Scare,” the Vietnam protests, and the start of the second Iraq War. And each of these characters performs a provocative form of unbeing – and to varying degrees, re-being – underscoring the degree to which existence as a woman-citizen often manifests as a willingness to sexually self-sacrifice, and that, moreover, makes clear that such a willingness undermines the mechanisms of power that demand our allegiance to the tenets of sovereignty. According to Halberstam, “in order to inhabit the bleak territory of failure we sometimes have to write and acknowledge dark histories, histories within which the subject collaborates with rather than always opposes oppressive regimes and dominant ideology” (23). Here, then, are the “dark histories” of these characters, and of their powerful collaborations with oppression.

### Lucy

I trace the process of Lucy's self-abnegation from her pre-attack state of *being* – during which she exists as a privileged white South African woman who was raised under

apartheid rule and who now lives in the lingering racism of apartheid's aftermath – to her self-imposed *unbeing* – which is instigated not directly by the rapes she endures, but by her refusal to resist the vulnerability those rapes bring about. From there, I explore Lucy's attainment of *re-being*, which manifests in her decision to permanently sacrifice the privilege granted her at birth by her nation-state: to stay on at her farm as a relative subordinate to Petrus, and to willingly carry to term and raise one of her rapists' babies. In abandoning her privileged *being* and constructing in its place a subordinated identity, Lucy resists the enforced dominance that comes with all claims to sovereignty. In ceding her power to resist rape, Lucy cedes her role as a citizen altogether; thus she attains *re-being* more fully than the other characters I discuss in this chapter. Using shadow feminism, I trace Lucy's movement through these phases of submission as she ceases to be the white, female South African the privileged circumstances of her birth made her and becomes instead a tool for undermining state-sanctioned oppression.

Lucy's choices destabilize the illusion of an equitable postapartheid sovereignty, which like apartheid sovereignty, still dictates who has power and for what purpose it should be used. The power of Lucy's self-abnegation can be found primarily in its effect on the self: in her *unbeing* and in her ultimate *re-being*. Lucy's refusal of comfort, privilege, and personal sovereignty is meaningful in a culture where those qualities are hungered for, discriminately given, and denied. Lucy rejects the *being* to which she was born, but in so doing, she demonstrates Halberstam's "queer art of failure": she "quietly loses," and in her loss she "imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being" (88). Moreover, she becomes a model for those goals. As I argue in the previous chapter, the destruction of the self can be a powerful external tool, as it stands to undermine

privileged individuals who witness acts of unbeing. We see this at work in Lucy's influence over David, who slowly yields to her way of thinking, taking up the mantle of vulnerability himself by the novel's end. According to the markers by which I measure the impact of self-abnegation – the degree to which it undermines and potentially rebuilds the self, the privileged, and the state – Lucy's response to rape is profound. In addition to tracing the effect of self-abnegation over Lucy, then, I trace it over David, and over postapartheid South Africa at large. Her influence over the state is more abstract than her influence over David, but it is apparent when one considers Lucy's sacrifice of personal sovereignty as a model for sacrifice of state sovereignty in the postapartheid era. Lucy uses self-abnegation to disrupt the narrative of sovereignty promoted by apartheid and postapartheid South Africa alike, and in so doing, she models a potentially sanative form of re-being for a culture that has been deeply injured by boundaries and resistance.

Despite *Disgrace*'s acclaim – it earned Coetzee a second Booker Prize – critics in and outside of South Africa have largely found its treatment of postapartheid racial politics appalling. Nadine Gordimer, for example, contends that in *Disgrace*, “there is not one black person who is a real human being” (qtd. in Donadio 1).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the novel's few black or interracial characters – David's conquest Melanie, Lucy's farming partner Petrus, and the three black African attackers – are notably less well developed than its white players. Athol Fugard critiques *Disgrace* on the grounds of its rape-as-justice narrative. He retorts: “we've got to accept the rape of a white woman as a gesture to all

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<sup>17</sup> As Mardorossian observes, Gordimer's resistance to *Disgrace* is ironic in that “in 2006, the eighty-two-year-old Nadine Gordimer was attacked in her Johannesburg home by four young black men but resisted relating the incident in terms of her own trauma.” Indeed, in a position similar to Lucy's, Gordimer “focused on her attackers' social status, describing them as ‘products of a society grappling with the legacy of South Africa's past.’” She seemed to feel that “any individualized attention to the trauma experienced by the victim would serve as fodder for generalizing racist assumptions” (75).

the evil we did in the past. That's a load of bloody bullshit. That white women are going to accept being raped as penance for what was done in the past? Jesus! It's an expression of a very morbid phenomenon" (qtd. in Attridge 164n). Likewise, Lucy Valerie Graham suggests that though "female silence in Coetzee's previous novels [can] be linked to 'the power to withhold,' Lucy's refusal to speak about her experience certainly does not empower her" (265). Carine M. Mardorossian summarizes these critiques, suggesting that at first glance, the novel is guilty of "colluding with and perpetuating the worst nightmares and clichés about South Africa as a violent society." And Michael Marais argues that "this 'reading' is now so commonplace that [the]...term 'Lucy syndrome' [is] used to signify the notion that white South Africans should be prepared to abase themselves in atoning for their collective responsibility for apartheid" (32). Both Marais and Mardorossian complicate these assumptions, however, with Mardorossian suggesting that "*Disgrace* focuses not on the attack so much as on the response to it" and that it "does not *reproduce* so much as *expose* the workings of racist ideologies and the inextricable link to gender" (73, emphasis mine). This exposure comes – for Mardorossian – via Coetzee's subtle critique of his protagonist, whose obvious racism and sexism blind him to the complexities of both his own affairs and those of his daughter. As Laura Wright suggests, David's "lack of understanding...is the necessary product of a postcolonial and post-apartheid narrative about shifting and renegotiated power in an historical moment fraught with various racially and sexually determined displacements" (91). We're not meant – I join Marais, Mardorossian, and Wright in asserting – to take David Lurie as an embodiment of a healthy, postapartheid attitude. Moreover, David's limitations mirror the reader's, as like David, we resist Lucy's



submission. In doing so, however, I argue that we condemn her – even more so than do her attackers – to the position of victim, not allowing space for the complexities that dictate and even empower her actions.

Lucy attempts to undermine David's resistance to submission even before the attacks. When David first arrives at Lucy's farm having resigned from the professoriate in the wake of a sex scandal, Lucy asks, "so you stood your ground and they stood theirs. Is that how it was?...You shouldn't be so unbending, David. It isn't heroic to be unbending" (66). This dynamic – Lucy as sacrificial; David as "unbending" – is evident throughout the early part of their time together. We see it manifest overtly in terms of the plight of animals in South Africa, of which Lucy says, "on the list of the nation's priorities, animals come nowhere" (73-74). To this, David replies, "we are of a different order of creation from the animals....So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution" (74). This separate-but-equal logic – which fuels the common trope of colonial resistance to guilt – reveals David's devotion to notions of personal sovereignty. As I demonstrate above, critics often respond to *Disgrace* in ways that replicate such oppositional thinking. Marais, however, contends that *Disgrace* "requires the reader to think beyond conventional antinomies which, as it shows, threaten still to determine our interactions and thus our history." He suggests that we might instead "imagine possibilities of being and belonging with difference that are excluded by these dualisms." And he argues: "to read the novel merely as...an articulation of a politics of white abasement is...to reduce it to a term in precisely those dualisms that it questions and seeks to destabilize. Such readings...evinced a failure of historical imagination" (38). Lucy's subordination forges a way out of the "dualisms"

offered by national sovereignty and liberal feminism alike, opening up the possibility of existence external to institutions of inequity that are too deeply entrenched to be undermined by legislated shifts like the end of apartheid.

Lucy's movement from *being* to *unbeing* is already at work when the attack occurs, positioning her to choose self-abnegation. David, however, is resistant to such vulnerability, though he does immediately understand the situation's relevance as allegory. As the three attackers lock David in the bathroom – leaving him powerless to help his daughter – David thinks, “so it has come, the day of testing. Without warning...it is here, and he is in the middle of it” (94). Calling the attack and its aftermath “a day of testing” draws our attention to both the political landscape of a newly postapartheid South Africa and the dichotomy of David's and Lucy's respective reactions. Though it is difficult for David to accept Lucy's decision not to report the rapes – and her decision to stay on at her farm knowing the likelihood that she'll be raped again – resistance to her intention to do so reads as a desire to *save Lucy*, which here (recalling Spivak) means to *save Lucy from black men*. I want to be careful not to suggest that Lucy deserves the violence she faces because of the paleness of her skin. I am not advocating for the common critical response to *Disgrace*: that, in Marais's terms, the novel demands that “white South Africans must...be prepared to accept humiliation by black South Africans” (33). Indeed, such a reading is in direct opposition to what I propose as it relegates Lucy to the prolonged status of victim: if she *must* pay for the sins of apartheid, then her self-sacrifice is not a choice; *unbeing* is forced upon her by the history of South Africa, and no deliberate *re-being* can take place.

Yet unwitting humiliation is the only lens through which David can view Lucy's choice, at least until she offers him another. David Lurie functions as a sort of neo-colonial figure, especially in light of the events that come to transpire in the white-dominated, urban, university setting in which we first encounter him. When observing Melanie Isaacs – a student of his course on the Romantics with whom David has an ill-planned and arguably non-consensual affair resulting in his resignation – David wonders, “does she know he has an eye on her? Probably. Women are sensitive to it, to the weight of the desiring gaze” (12).<sup>18</sup> Thus Coetzee establishes at the outset both that women are sexual objects, and that they know it. Later, when trying to convince Melanie to have sex with him, David says, ““a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone....She has a duty to share it”” (16). Considered in the context of what is to come, this notion is striking. These words in particular – “duty” and “share” – will dominate Lucy's argument vis-à-vis her own submission, where they will become, ironically, repugnant to David, who utters them so haphazardly here. As his seduction of Melanie continues, David watches her rehearse for a university play – *Sunset at the Globe Salon* – in which “catharsis seems to be the presiding principle: all the coarse old prejudices brought into the light of day and washed away in gales of laughter” (23). Here we see David's awareness of the continued (postapartheid, post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission) struggle for “catharsis.” Though he is skeptical of any healing that might come via such structures as the TRC, David demonstrates even before he arrives at Lucy's farm that he is conscious of both the role of female subservience and South Africa's ongoing need for redemption.

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<sup>18</sup> Though these insights come via a narrator – and not via David – Coetzee's use of free indirect discourse signals that the narrative voice is charged with David's thoughts. I'll therefore attribute insights delivered in such a way to David himself.

In his seduction of Melanie, however, David seems concerned only with the former. Though as Graham points out, “the majority of reviewers of *Disgrace* read in sympathy with Lurie, glossing his interaction with Melanie as a seduction, rather than a rape” (262), David consummates his relationship with Melanie in an overtly colonial way.<sup>19</sup> When he “takes her in his arms, her limbs crumple like a marionette’s. Words heavy as clubs thud into the delicate whorl of her ear. ‘No, not now!’ she says, struggling” (24). Despite these pleas, however, we read that “nothing will stop him” (24), and for her part, Melanie does not overtly try. Indeed, “*she does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes. . . . Not rape, not quite that*, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (24-25, emphasis mine). David’s assessment of the encounter as “not rape, not quite that” creates room for grey area with regards to consent: “resistance” defines rape; “aversion” is something less than that. David assumes that Lucy *resists* more overtly than Melanie, but Lucy’s willingness to absorb the assault without retribution suggests otherwise. If we allow for the possibility that Lucy’s reaction is largely *aversion*, what we’re able to imagine about both the political and the personal ramifications of the assault changes. Conventional thinking holds that if she does not resist, she is to some degree consenting. But if she is powerless either way (as we are encouraged to see her), we might ask what purpose her resistance serves.

Here’s where I see the logic of sovereignty falling apart. Because only resistance is conventionally translatable as a “liberated” response, women in such situations are often perceived as agents only when they actively resist. If women forcefully refuse – and yet are raped – their behavior is in keeping with an acculturated desire for personal

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<sup>19</sup> Graham cites Lucy Hughes-Hallet’s “Coetzee triumphs in description of fall from grace,” Michael Morris’s “Coetzee thinks publicly about new SA,” and Albert du Toit’s “Finely tuned novel set in new SA.”

sovereignty – and yet they have none. In their resistance, they perform a desire for agency, maintaining the tenets of liberal feminism while ironically proving that those tenets don't secure free will. If, however, they do not overtly resist, we consider them accomplices in their own undoing, implying that they possess power in the situation after all. I argue that – according to the structure of power imposed by cultural privileging of dominance – only in consenting to the inevitable submission can a woman in Lucy's situation demonstrate the agency necessary to challenge narratives of sovereignty. Though both the danger and the strength of surrender are largely invisible, Lucy demonstrates that women are not blind to either. Recognition of this dynamic baffles mainstream feminism's desire for female dominance, and begs for an alternate reading of submission. By consenting to this inevitable subjugation, then, Lucy undermines invisible assumptions still at work in postapartheid South Africa. Unbeing and re-being – and, in the process, undermining David's devotion to both personal and national sovereignty – may be the only way Lucy can claim power in the ongoing double bind created not just by apartheid rule, but by liberal feminism as well.

Considering the invasions of Melanie and Lucy in such terms – and in light of one another – David's description of Melanie's participation becomes even more telling: the resistance David wants Lucy to demonstrate is precisely the resistance he doesn't want to see in Melanie. Indeed, the novel's language vis-à-vis this dynamic suggests that female subservience is easier for David to accept when it is performed by and on a non-white (always already less powerful) body. David describes Melanie's body language as suggesting that “she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck” (25). He perceives her as a victim of

prey, and he sees being such as a kind of “death.” Yet arguably because she’s of interracial heritage, this does not disturb him. When his white daughter enacts a similar relegation of the self at the hands of her black attackers, however, David refuses to grant her precarity, wanting Lucy to reinstate apartheid racial dynamics: to move via the protection of a still-biased legal system to the position of predator, prey being – to David – the only alternative. When Melanie seeks justice, however – reporting David to the university – he refuses to cede guilt, though he allows that the “affair” took place.

In fact, in a university investigation that Mardorossian claims “evoke[s] South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its media coverage” (74), David refuses to deny Melanie’s claims in any way. This refusal ends his tenure in Cape Town, and prompts his fateful visit to Lucy’s farm: “a low, sprawling farmhouse painted yellow...the front boundary” of which “is marked by a wire fence and clumps of nasturtiums” (59). Right away we see Lucy’s vulnerability through David’s eyes: not barbed wire and weaponry, but a fence and some flowers separate her land from its surroundings. David next describes Lucy’s body, noting that “her hips and breasts are now (he searches for the best word) ample. Comfortably barefoot, she comes to greet him, holding her arms wide....What a nice girl, he thinks, hugging her; what a nice welcome” (59). Like her land, David sees Lucy as open and vulnerable, “welcom[ing]” with that word’s myriad of connotations. Made full-bodied by her years in the African countryside, Lucy greets David “barefoot,” and with open arms. Her time in rural South Africa has made her not harder – as one might expect given the history of that space – but comfortable with exposure, which demonstrates the steps she’s already taken to move

away from the *being* of her birth.<sup>20</sup> When David asks if she finds it unnerving to run the farm alone, she replies: “if there were to be a break-in, I don’t see that two people would be better than one” (60). Regarding his daughter’s ease in the face of potential violence, David thinks, “bread in the oven and a crop in the earth. Curious that he and her mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler. But perhaps it was not they who produced her; perhaps history had the larger share” (61). This is David’s first allusion to how different Lucy’s choices are from his own: she is a “throwback,” iconic of a time before his.

Before the rapes that inspire her unbeing, David is able to appreciate the peace Lucy finds in the country. He “strolls with her past the mud-walled dam, where a family of ducks coasts serenely, past the beehives, and through the garden.” He notes too the pleasure Lucy takes in relating the facts of her land to him. “She talks easily,” he says, “a frontier farmer of the new breed. In the old days, cattle and maize. Today, dogs and daffodils...History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein. Perhaps history has learned a lesson” (62). This allusion to “a lesson” feels prophetically unsettling, especially when David ties it to his perception of Lucy as a legacy holder. We read, “Lucy’s bare toes grip the red earth, leaving clear prints. A solid woman, embedded in her new life. Good! If this is to be what he leaves behind – this daughter, this woman – then he does not have to be ashamed” (62). The language here suggests that even before the rapes it is Lucy’s “goodness” – and not his own – that secures David’s atonement. As a white man, David acts as a conqueror. As a father, he offers up a “bare-toed” daughter, implying that doing so redeems him. He has no problem with the abstract notion of

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<sup>20</sup> The setting for Lucy’s farm is, as Marais describes it, “the Salem area of the Eastern Province,” which “invokes a history of frontier wars waged on the issue of land between the British settlers and the Xhosa people in the nineteenth century” (36).

offering Lucy to South Africa by way of penance. He only resists when she does so herself. It is not female submission with which David is uneasy, then, but willingness.

David grows increasingly uncomfortable with vulnerability throughout and after the attack. When he realizes that the men plan to set him on fire, “a vision comes to him of Lucy struggling with the two in the blue overalls, struggling against them. He writhes trying to blank it out” (97). David meets his realization of Lucy’s precarity with an attempt to eradicate it, which is in keeping with the response he’ll go on to have. What starts as denial morphs into a desire to turn responsibility over to the authorities such that justice can be done and Lucy can “move on.” This desire leads to his desperate attempts to convince Lucy to abandon the farm, and rural South Africa altogether. Lucy, of course, also seeks justice, though she defines it in radically different terms. She thinks of the assault as evidence of a continued need for “payment.” Her logic becomes apparent when considered in terms of the arguably inadequate efforts of the TRC to bring justice for the irreparable harms of apartheid.<sup>21</sup> Lucy offers herself as a body on which a form of justice that avoids replicating the demands for individual sovereignty might be done. Yet David cannot read her efforts through any lens other than that of sovereignty.

David struggles with this from the outset: if Lucy has been the victim of black men, David clearly sees himself as the heroic, white rescuer. The night of the attacks – Lucy having reported only the burglary and the killing of the dogs and not the rapes – he wakes up having “had a vision: Lucy has spoken to him; her words – ‘Come to me, save

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<sup>21</sup> Graham asks, “is it possible to read the silence of the two rape victims in *Disgrace* outside of a phenomenon of historical silencing?” Citing the post-TRC research of Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjes – who suggest “that although there is a widespread belief that the TRC exposes South Africa’s brutal history, ‘violence against women is one of the hidden sides to the story of our past’” (260) – Graham argues that “in spite of the TRC’s ‘women’s hearings’, there is no doubt that certain fragments of remembered history have had insignificant status in South Africa, that the inseparability of sexual and political violence was not addressed by the TRC, and that the climate of public exposure and responsiveness during the hearings failed to create ‘a safe space’ for women” (260-61).



me!’ – still echo in his ears. In the vision she stands, hands outstretched, wet hair combed back, in a field of white light” (103). Lucy’s unwillingness to actually reach out to him is both personally and culturally confusing to David. When he goes to her, “she confronts him, neck stiff, eyes glittering. Not her father’s little girl, not any longer” (105). Though he wants Lucy to resist her rapists, then, David still expects her subservience with regards to his own paternal role in her life. In his frustration with Lucy for refusing to cede to her role as daughter, David equates the power she denies him with the power she grants her attackers. He assumes bitterly that the rapists “will read that they are being sought for robbery and assault and nothing else,” and that it “will dawn on them that over the body of the woman silence is being drawn like a blanket. *Too ashamed*, they will say to each other...and they will chuckle luxuriously.” He wonders: “is Lucy prepared to concede them that victory?” (110). David demonstrates a need to understand how the attackers think about the assault, what it taught them about power. It is not the lived reality of what Lucy has faced that haunts David. Rather, it is the thought that her rapists might gain power from the event, while (because of her silence) he and Lucy will lose it.

We likewise see David’s desire for enforced sovereignty emerge immediately after the attacks. Recalling Lucy’s neighbor Ettinger – who “‘never go[es] anywhere without [his] Beretta” (100) – David thinks they “ought to install bars, security gates, a perimeter fence....They ought to turn the farmhouse into a fortress” (113). So too, when Lucy does not want to go to the market the week of the attack, David thinks, “she would rather hide her face...Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame....that is what they have done to this confident, modern young woman....How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for” (115). This description – that Lucy is a

“confident, modern young woman” – is striking in that it is more consistent with the discourse of liberal feminism than the novel’s overall portrayal of Lucy. Far from being “modern,” Lucy is – even according to David – a “throwback.”

Similarly, in David’s conclusions vis-à-vis what’s been done to Lucy, he holds no space for what’s been done to the attackers. He continues to assume that he can comprehend their motives despite his radically divergent experience of South Africa. When he “thinks of the three visitors driving away...their penises, their weapons, tucked warm and satisfied between their legs,” we read that “*purring* is the word that comes to him. They must have had every reason to be pleased with their afternoon’s work; they must have felt happy” (159). Indeed, David thinks that he “can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself” (160). It seems, however, absurd to assume that what he – as a colonial presence in the aftermath of a segregation from which he still benefits – imagines the men gain from the encounter is what they actually do gain. Dominance simply cannot read the same to someone to whom it has been handed as it would to someone who fights for it. We see a similar lack of comprehension in David’s naïve hope that “Lucy is healing too, or if not healing then forgetting...so that one day she may be able to say, ‘The day we were robbed,’ and think of it merely as they day when they were robbed” (141). This hope reveals both the degree to which David minimizes the impact of the rapes and his unwillingness to see that impact as generative. With both the rapists and Lucy, David demonstrates discomfort with the possibility that the situation is in any way beyond him.

Conversely, Lucy’s power lies in her acceptance that the struggle for dominance cannot secure it. Marais contends that Lucy uses her submission to “[refuse] to perpetuate

the cycle of domination and counter-domination out of which colonial history erects itself” (37). Such “refusal” stands in stark contrast to David’s aggressive and resistant reaction, which becomes – more than the attacks themselves – the narrative’s dominant conflict. According to Marais, Coetzee positions the assault within “the Hegelian relation of dominance and subservience” (33). Marais summarizes this context, explaining that for Hegel, when someone who “assert[s]...independence” is “pitted...against” another, “his/her autonomy is challenged” and he “may seek to solve this problem by eliminating the challenger.” Hegel cautions, however, that “this ‘life-and-death struggle’” is “a false solution” (Marais 34). The power struggle doesn’t stand to resolve the conflict, Marais suggests, largely because the “relation of dominance and subservience is fundamentally unstable and ‘self-frustrating’ ...since the master can never know whether the recognition that ‘he’ receives is a function of ‘his’ reduction of the challenger to an extension of ‘his’ will” (34). The structure, therefore, is an illusion wherein “the slave may realize that it is through his/her labour that nature is dominated and, accordingly, that the master is superfluous...Rebellion is thus endemic in the very structure of this relationship” (34). In terms of *Disgrace*, David and the rapists (in their counter-aggression) act in terms of this “false solution.” Only Lucy does not. Marais contends that “the only way of breaking out of this cycle is by bringing an end to the entire struggle for affirmation” (34). This is what Lucy’s unbeing stands to accomplish.

Viewed through a Hegelian lens, we see in Lucy’s actions “an acknowledgement ...of the other’s right to exist, [which] can bridge the gap between the ‘I’ and the other ‘I’ and thereby end the struggle for affirmation” (Marais 34). David’s resistance maintains these divisions, as does the rapists’ violence. Only by ceasing to react can Lucy position

herself to “bridge” oppositionality. We see this at work in a conversation Lucy has with her father about Petrus, who chains up two lambs in an ungrazable area for days before he plans to slaughter them. David says, “‘I’m not sure I like the way he does things – bringing the slaughter-beasts home to acquaint them with the people who are going to eat them.’” To this, Lucy asks, “‘what would you prefer? That the slaughtering be done in an abattoir, so that you needn’t think about it?...Wake up, David. This is the country. This is Africa’” (124). While Lucy accepts harsh realities, David denies them in deference to cultural assumptions. Lucy’s acceptance affords her a relationship with Petrus that pushes against the norms of postapartheid power structures (and that profoundly rejects the norms of apartheid). As Marais suggests, her “denial [of power] signifies a desire to transcend the cycle of domination and counter-domination that determines the course of history” (35). Conversely, even in postapartheid South Africa, and even in this rural, majority-black part of the country, David wants his own system of ethics to reign.

Before David leaves the farm, he makes one final attempt to convince Lucy to change her mind. He writes her a letter in which he states, “‘you wish to humble yourself before history. But the road you are following is the wrong one. It will *strip you of all honour*. You will not be able to live with yourself’” (160, emphasis mine). Once back in Cape Town, David tells his ex-wife Rosalind that Lucy “‘would be mad to feel safe. But she will stay on nevertheless. It has become *a point of honour* with her’” (187, emphasis mine). Despite their time together, David has yet to be moved by Lucy’s process of unbeing. To assume that staying is a matter of “honour” is to assume that Lucy gains from staying what nations gain from resistance: sovereignty, regardless of cost. Instead, she gains little and cedes much. In not reporting the rapes, Lucy cedes her safety and her

sexuality. In not leaving, but in offering the land to Petrus in exchange for his protection, she cedes her property. And in her willingness to carry the (biracial) child she conceived as a result of the rapes, she cedes much of her racial privilege. Lucy seems to agree with David that staying will “strip [her] of all honour.” What she disagrees with is the notion that dishonor should be avoided, a distinction David seems unable to make.

Despite his resistance, however, Lucy tries repeatedly to explain her unbeing to David, and I argue that those efforts eventually pay off. She maintains: ““in another time, in another place [what happened to me] might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.”” The “place” and “time,” of course, is postapartheid South Africa, where Lucy suggests that crime can only be read through the cultural lens of ongoing racial oppression. Still not understanding, David asks, ““Do you think that by meekly accepting what happened to you, you can set yourself apart from farmers like Ettinger? Do you think what happened here was an exam: if you come through, you get a diploma and safe conduct into the future?”” Though he grasps his daughter’s political stance, he mistakenly assumes that her unbeing is born of a desire for redemption. To this assumption, Lucy responds: ““I am not just trying to save my skin. If that is what you think, you miss the point entirely....Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don’t act in terms of abstractions”” (112). The assumption that guilt motivates Lucy’s submission is a common one: critics largely contend that we’re meant to see her sexual self-sacrifice as a way of atoning for privilege. Lucy’s argument that guilt is an “abstraction” arises because guilt in this situation wouldn’t be personal: it would be a product of one’s nation’s actions and not one’s own. Lucy absorbs anger and violence not merely for the sins of her state, but in and of herself. Her body is penetrated

and impregnated. Her unbeing is personal. By trying to understand Lucy's actions only within a framework of guilt, David relegates them to the status of self-imposed punishment. By seeing them as personal choices, their potential power becomes visible.

Wright explains the danger of missing this nuance, arguing that readers run the risk of doing what Lucy accuses David of here: reading "women's bodies [not *as* bodies, but *as*] sites of displacement." Wright argues that "for the black men who rape her, Lucy's white female body symbolizes the land from which they have been dispossessed" and that "for David, Melanie's biracial female body offers the opportunity to symbolically reclaim not only his youth, but also his authoritarian position at a university where the white male professor is marginalized by increasing demands of gender and racial diversification." The concern, she suggests, is that "in the case of both women, one runs the risk of reading their bodies on a purely symbolic level, as metaphors that inform the men who enact varying degrees of violence upon them" (90). I want to be careful in reading Lucy allegorically to leave space for her actual, lived reality. It is only because of her body – which houses her consciousness – that Lucy can suffer, and it is in her willingness to suffer that I hope to find something other than victimhood. If Lucy is mere allegory – or if her motivation is merely the abstraction of historical shame – then her unbeing can't be read as personal. But it is personal: for Lucy and for her rapists. It makes visible the suffering body as a body, though it does so without ignoring the historical or allegorical significance that body might convey. Thus a version of the future might arise from Lucy's unbeing that would otherwise be impossible to attain. After all, the crimes of apartheid exist outside of the history books that summarize them. The legacy is inherently *of the body*. And as Marais suggests, the personal nature of Lucy's

submission may be the only path to a South Africa that can exist outside of the unequal sovereignty driving even the postapartheid era.

Though the actual rapes are hidden from readers – we only see the attack through David’s eyes, and by locking David in a bathroom Coetzee makes literal his figurative blindness – we do see Lucy suffer in their aftermath. And I argue that in that suffering, Lucy begins the process of re-being. Lucy tells her father, “I think they have done it before....At least the two older ones have. I think they are rapists first and foremost. Stealing things is just incidental. A side-line. I think they *do* rape.” Lucy’s attackers are not looking for a way to support themselves through thievery, then; they are looking for women to violate. Thus their intentions are deeply personal. Lucy says, “I am in their territory. They have marked me. They will come back for me,” to which David replies, “then you can’t possibly stay....that would be an invitation for them to return.” After some time, Lucy replies, “isn’t there another way of looking at it, David? What if...*that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something ....Why should I be allowed to live here without paying?” (158). She makes no mention of the past; her focus here is on her choice to live in South Africa. That choice requires that she *be* something new, and so, instead of leaving, she struggles to become whatever that is.

David concludes it is “slavery,” insisting: “they want you for their slave.” It seems that if it were slavery, however, it would be a direct product of the past. Slavery would be overt historical vengeance. Lucy senses this. “Not slavery,” she insists, “subjection. Subjugation” (159). I argue that her rejection of the term slavery is a way of rejecting the colonial terms of that relationship itself. Using the word “subjection”

instead relates more to the notion of *subjecthood*, or of *being a subject*. If subjecthood has to do with subjecting oneself to a particular subordination (as postmodernists think of it), then David's position is that of a white South African under apartheid. Lucy realizes this – intuiting that David will continue to perpetuate colonial logic – and she wants to inhabit a different subject position. This functions as a relinquishing of privilege. Lucy can no longer fall back on the graces that apartheid provided her; she is in a willing state of disgrace. “Subjection” and “subjugation” are deeply personal. They aren't merely about ownership; they are about humiliation. Lucy recognizes this, and bears it willingly.

By re-being in these terms, Lucy also helps move David (and likewise readers) away from a privileged subject position. This is the external work of self-abnegation. To gauge the effectiveness of Lucy's submission in these terms, I use David and Lucy's dispute about animals and its evolution throughout the novel. This conflict provides useful ground on which to evaluate Lucy's effect on David because it represents the most profound movement we see in him. Graham suggests that in *Disgrace*, “female bodies may not fare better in the new order, as after Lucy is raped she becomes pregnant, gives up her land, and retreats into the house” (260). Yet despite the fact that David still misunderstands her when he first leaves her farm, we see the effect Lucy's willing unbeing has had over him via his relationship with the novel's dogs. Tom Herron suggests that in their “lack of power” dogs in *Disgrace* “come to assume an exemplary, transformative status.” Herron contends that the whole notion of “disgrace” can be understood “only when the condition comes to articulate not just David's individual fall, or Lucy's rape and subsequent silence,” but “the being of animals themselves: in other



words, when the notion of disgrace has expanded to include all animals” (472). This is the journey David takes, and it is initiated by Lucy’s modeling of precarity.

When Lucy first asks him to help Bev – who works as a stand-in veterinarian, offering rudimentary treatments and humane euthanasia to a host of unwanted dogs, cats, and other small animals – David says, “‘I’m dubious, Lucy. It sounds suspiciously like community service. It sounds like someone trying to make reparation for past misdeeds.’” Once more, “reparations” are not something David feels willing to make. Like his earlier misinterpretation of Lucy’s subordination, David misunderstands the work Bev does. By the novel’s end, however, he willingly subordinates himself to that work: David “is the one who holds the dog still as the needle finds the vein and the drug hits the heart and the legs buckle and the eyes dim.” Not only is he willing to subject himself to such trauma, he acknowledges the emotions he feels as such. Wright argues that “while David never actively participates in a vegetarian ethic, his sensibility with regard to the lives of animals is greatly altered after Lucy is raped” (91-92). Indeed, one night after assisting Bev, “driving home in Lucy’s kombi, [David] actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop” (142-43). So too, when they euthanize the dogs, “he and Bev do not speak. He has learned...to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love” (219). This passage suggests that David has moved from understanding animal stewardship as public guilt to considering it a private form of engagement. Seeing this service as an act of “love” is the first step David takes towards his daughter’s position of willing unbeing.

As Wright suggests, “critics read the role of animals in *Disgrace* as the means by which David Lurie begins to learn to love the [other]...by taking responsibility for the bodies of dead dogs” (93). “Responsibility,” however, is arguably tied more to David’s hierarchically oriented, neo-colonial viewpoint than to Lucy’s way of thinking. In the immediate aftermath of the rapes, David wants to take “responsibility” for what happened to Lucy, to “handle” it by controlling her reaction. What comes of David’s development in terms of the dogs is something different. His newfound openness can be seen particularly well via a connection David shares with one of the dogs, “a young male with a withered left hindquarter which it drags behind it,” for whom “he has come to feel a particular fondness.” This animal is “alone,” and “no visitor has shown interest in adopting it. Its period of grace is almost over” (214-15). As the novel draws to a close – with Lucy still refusing to leave her farm, still pregnant, and still willing to raise the child she’s carrying – we think David might want to rescue something and, unable to rescue his daughter, might “take responsibility” for the dog by trying to save him. Instead, we see David carry that dog’s small body towards Bev. When she asks, he says that though his kindness “will be little enough, less than little: nothing,” he will offer it, and that he is, despite his attachment, “giving him up” (220). Wright argues: “it is through the dog himself that David learns to give without expecting anything in return” (98-99). I argue, however, that Lucy’s subordination heavily influences David in this scene. I also argue for another shift in reading: one that recognizes that David learns not to *give* – as that implies a force I don’t see present here, a force that is tied to “responsibility” and “control” – but to *accept*. He loves the dog in spite of the fact that he doesn’t perceive it

as his duty to save him. This is a significant change for David Lurie. He doesn't merely recognize this dog's vulnerability; he facilitates it, and his own in the process.

From such a place of acceptance, David says to Lucy, “how humiliating...Such high hopes, and to end like this.” He finally acknowledges the disgrace of the situation without trying to alter it. And at last, Lucy agrees with him, saying, “it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.” To this, David replies, “like a dog,” and Lucy concedes: “Yes, like a dog” (205). David's tentative grasp of Lucy's willingness indicates that he has begun to unlearn privilege. She does not resist this comparison, and David does not make it to persuade her to choose otherwise. Instead, he seems to perceive the possibility of a different kind of future, one pursued by his daughter throughout *Disgrace* and hinted at when Halberstam asks: “we are all used to having our dreams crushed, our hopes smashed, our illusions shattered, but what comes after hope?” (1). At *Disgrace*'s close, we're not told “what comes after hope,” arguably because for these characters, it's too soon to tell. But Lucy says to David simply, “I am determined to be a good mother...A good mother and a good person. You should try to be a good person too” (216). In response to this, David thinks that Lucy “is becoming a peasant” (217). This is a striking way to think about Lucy's refusal to dominate, to colonize, to resist. To *become a peasant* is to move backwards in time, to shift away from the “advancements” of modern civilization and towards a genuinely *pre-colonial* way of being, a re-being in which one's “goodness” is more important than one's superiority. I argue that Lucy's choice to live on under dangerous conditions is an example of the

potential influence of unbeing: she stands to shift South African politics away from Apartheid dynamics in ways that Truth and Reconciliation – which was invested in healing and disallowing suffering – could not. For Lucy, more suffering is necessary; there will be no clean resolution to apartheid’s legacy. Lucy’s narrative ends pessimistically, yet her willing suffering instills hope.

### Phyllis

Phyllis Lewin – of E.L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* – likewise offers herself as a sexual object, though unlike Lucy, she does so not to strangers but to her husband, whose physical and sexual abuse I read as an unconscious attempt on his part to seek retribution for his parents’ wrongful deaths.<sup>22</sup> I argue that – as we saw with Lucy and her rapists – Phyllis’s compliance with Daniel’s sexual domination functions as a voluntary sacrifice to the need for retribution. As I discuss in my first chapter, Daniel’s sister Susan makes use of her own (complicit American) body to avenge the murders of her parents. Daniel makes use of his young wife, whom he describes as a “helpless breeder” (5), thereby establishing his view of her as agentless. Arguably even his choice of a younger and seemingly naïve wife is an effort to secure an agentless body, a corporeal form to punish for the crimes committed against his family by the formless and sovereign state. I question Daniel’s assessment of Phyllis as powerless. Despite her youth and her vulnerability, Phyllis demonstrates an awareness that part of her role as Daniel’s wife is

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<sup>22</sup> As I establish in the previous chapter, I read the Isaacsons as having been murdered by the United States Government. Andrew Pepper claims that, “any novelist who [like Doctorow] had witnessed the upheavals of the Vietnam War, campus protests, assassinations and race riots would...view the USA in a changed manner. In the cold afterglow of Kent State and the Tet offensive any lingering notions about the benignity of the US state could be put to rest” (479). Considered in this historic context, the idea that Doctorow (via Daniel) positions the Isaacsons not as perpetrators of crime, but as victims of the state, seems sound.

to absorb his violent retaliation – a level of consciousness we don't see reflected in Daniel himself – and she seems, moreover, willing to comply. The unbeing Phyllis voluntarily endures is a replication of the unbeing that was forced on Paul and Rochelle. Her apparently masochistic form of unbeing stands out in this chapter, however, because it is the only example of submission that could be argued to come from actual sexual desire. This contributes to the fact that Phyllis meets with less success than do the other characters I discuss. Yet there are sufficient indications that she understands the connection between Daniel's violence and his grief over the injustice of his parents' deaths to conclude that at least part of Phyllis's pleasure comes from the role she plays in her husband's quest for justice. In the limited re-being she attains, Phyllis makes of herself – in Daniel's language – a “sex martyr.” Thus – despite the relatively insignificant impact of her self-abnegation – Phyllis joins Susan in attempting to bring closure to deaths that would not otherwise be avenged.

Because Daniel has personally suffered for the state's claims to sovereignty over its citizen's lives, we might expect that he is more open at the outset to the lessons of vulnerability Phyllis has to teach than was David to Lucy. Though this does not turn out to be the case – despite both Susan's and Phyllis's modeling of vulnerability, Daniel's aggression remains fairly intact by the novel's end, limiting the degree to which we might consider Phyllis's unbeing an external success – he does search for closure. Daniel remains committed to finding that closure through some form of justice, however, and not through a shift in ideological perspective. Like Susan, Daniel inherits a faith in justice from his parents, Paul and Rochelle Isaacson. Of Paul, Daniel recalls, “he told me about Henry Ford...and the Depression which came like a blight over capitalist

America...about Sacco and Vanzetti....He ran up and down history like a pianist playing his scales...‘And it’s still going on, Danny’” (35). And like Susan, he lacks tangible recourse to securing it. Daniel cannot even seek justice out in grand or illicit ways because, as he says, “there is nothing I can do, mild or extreme, that they cannot have planned for” (72). Though he is relegated to searching, then, Daniel is unlikely to find justice via traditional means, for which reason he begins manifesting it symbolically: by acting it out on his wife’s body. Though Susan and Daniel share this need for justice, critics distinguish Daniel’s apparent strength (ability to survive) from Susan’s apparent weakness (willingness to die) without speaking to the assumptions about dominance and submission upon which such an assessment relies.<sup>23</sup> This distinction fails to acknowledge both the scale of Daniel’s abuse and the reality that abuse is able to obscure.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, it fails to acknowledge Phyllis altogether: the role she plays in the strength critics perceive in Daniel, and the subtle signs that she plays that role willingly.

I argue that it is Phyllis – and not Daniel – who is most able to endure, as like Susan, Phyllis acknowledges the fallout of America’s actions with regards to the Isaacsons. Daniel resists that fallout, projecting what he isn’t able to repress onto his wife. Rather than perceiving strength in Daniel’s abuse – a reading that exposes our own disturbing privileging of dominance – I suggest we see it in Phyllis’s internal resilience.

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<sup>23</sup> Douglas Fowler contextualizes the suffering Susan inflicts on herself (discussed in the previous chapter) with that Daniel inflicts on Phyllis, saying that “Daniel is psychologically deformed by the weight and irony of this tragic burden, but his deformity allows him to bend and survive. Susan can only break” (48). Fowler also contends that Daniel’s repeated abuse of Phyllis is “his means of maintaining a precarious sanity, a draining off of large evil done *to* him by means of a small evil done *by* him...Incapable of this transmutation and soul purge, Susan is broken, catatonic, finally dead. She has the immaculate honor and yet the brittle vulnerability of the saint” (49-50).

<sup>24</sup> Though Reed contends that “by the time [Daniel] reaches adulthood, [his] survival instinct has turned into a cynical, nihilistic will to power he exercises through the sadistic torture of his wife” (297), he never observes the similarities between Daniel’s aggression and the violence with which his sister destroys herself.

Any implication that Daniel is better equipped to handle trauma ignores the dynamic of Daniel's marriage. Daniel's sadism seems a product of anger, which calls into question the degree to which his actions might be read as fully agented. He is playing out old trauma, his inability to escape which leaves him psychologically rooted in the past – in the years spent as a powerless child in the midst of familial tragedy – and not in the present. His performance of dominance is consistent with David Lurie's performance of colonialism, and cultural blindness to the degree of Daniel's sadism is as disturbing as critical dismissal of David's encounters with Melanie as an "affair" and not "rape." Conversely Phyllis, like Lucy, chooses to stay knowing she'll face violence again and again. She is complicit in the abuse Daniel inflicts on her, and not acknowledging this further denies her character agency, casting readers in a similarly dehumanizing position to Daniel. Though we never get direct insight into her motives, I argue that we see sufficient evidence of Phyllis's astuteness to read her unbeing not as naiveté, but as a potentially cathartic willingness to bear the sins of the state on the body.

In addition to reading Daniel's abuse of Phyllis as healthier than his sister's self-abuse, some critics conclude that Daniel's relationship with his wife is not even particularly vexed. Fowler claims, for example, that Daniel's cruelty towards Phyllis is not unlike the hostility he directs at everyone in his family. He argues that Daniel "lashes out at his wife, his child, his adoptive parents, and the sister with whom he shares his pain and humiliation precisely because they are family" (51). Daniel is certainly angry, and he takes that anger out on his entire family. Yet he is not – with one notable exception in a scene with his son – violent towards them, while he is clearly and consistently violent towards Phyllis. Moreover, Daniel admits that abuse has been part of his relationship

with Phyllis since their courtship (56-57). Unlike Susan and the Lewins, Phyllis knew upon meeting Daniel what their dynamic would be, and she chose to go further. Thus distinction between his treatment of his wife and the rest of his family is warranted.

Critics arguably perceive Phyllis as a hapless victim largely because Doctorow describes her as such. As with David and Lucy, however, all of our observations of Phyllis come via Daniel, and Daniel makes clear that he's a highly unreliable narrator. When we first meet Phyllis, Daniel notes that she is "nineteen, with long straight natural blond hair worn these days in braids. She came to his shoulder" (4). He wants us to know that in both age and stature, Phyllis is not his equal. He further observes that "as a matter of principle she liked to talk to strangers and make them unafraid" (4). Like Lucy, Phyllis is unthreatening and comfortable with exposure. Yet Daniel does not depict that vulnerability as strength. In his description of meeting Phyllis at a sit-in, for example, Daniel mocks her openness, saying, "someone had solemnly offered her a daffodil... Solemnly with a spiritual smile, she walked with her flower, taking those too large, slightly awkward strides of hers. She was avid for spiritual experience" (56). He sees himself as taking advantage of such naïve "solemnity," noting that on this occasion he "took her home to 115<sup>th</sup> Street and put on some Bartók... suggest[ing] to her that fucking was a philosophical act of considerable importance." He adds: "I knew that in deference to this possibility she would allow herself to be fucked" (56-57). We are thus led to believe that Phyllis does not choose to submit; she is manipulated into doing so.

Though it seems likely that what Daniel describes as "the strong erotic content of [their] marriage" (4-5) is a result of Phyllis meeting Daniel's sadism with her own masochism – and likely too that she has other reasons for being willing to absorb his



anger – Daniel rarely discusses his wife with enough complexity for us to do more than speculate about her motives. Instead, he disparages her, describing her as “the kind of awkward girl with heavy thighs and heavy tits and slim lovely face whose ancestral mothers must have been bred in harems,” as well as “the kind of unathletic helpless breeder to appeal to caliphs,” and “the kind of sand dune that was made to be kicked around” (5). Though acknowledgment of the historical prominence of female subjugation lends ironic depth to her position, we are led to dismiss any intentionality on the part of Phyllis: according to Daniel, she is subordinate not of her own inclination, but because she comes from a long line of women “bred” to be so. Daniel likewise tells us that his adoptive parents disapprove of his choice of a wife, “but of course they wouldn’t say anything. Enlightened liberals are like that. Phyllis, a freshman dropout, has nothing for them. Liberals are like that too. They confuse character with education” (4). Here he critiques Phyllis for her lack of education, western liberalism for its dogmatism, and his parents for their bourgeois attitudes. Thus Daniel attempts to establish himself as intellectually and rhetorically superior, an ethos that serves, once more, to prejudice readers towards him. His actions are consistently those of a deeply disturbed man, yet critics overlook this fact in deference to Daniel’s assertions of strength. And in so doing, they follow his lead in dismissing Phyllis as unworthy of serious consideration.

With little direct textual insight, the easiest way to draw conclusions about Phyllis’s submission is via a nuanced understanding of Daniel’s sadism. We see subtle evidence of that sadism in the first scene in which he describes having sex with Phyllis, which consequentially is what Daniel is doing when he receives a phone call about Susan’s suicide attempt. He sets up this scene by showing us – in the third-person

narrative technique he uses to distance himself – “Daniel and his child bride at sex in their 115<sup>th</sup> Street den.” He exaggerates Phyllis’s youth here, arguably to make us more aware of her vulnerability to him. He then shifts to the first person, taking responsibility for the degradation to which he subjects her. He writes, “the music of the stones pounds the air like the amplified pulse of my erection. And I have finally got her on all fours, hanging there from her *youth and shame*, her fallen blond hair over her eyes, tears sliding like lovebeads down [her] long blond hairs” (6, emphasis mine). Unlike Lucy’s rapes, this sex is consensual. Yet as we intuited with Lucy’s rapists, Phyllis’s “shame” is central to Daniel’s arousal. He notes that when Phyllis is high, “all her inhibitions come out. She gets all tight and vulnerable and our lovemaking degrades her.” Far from wanting his wife’s inhibitions to come down – as we might expect – Daniel wants them to “come out,” such that being penetrated by him is “degrading.”

Despite his implication that Phyllis is an unwitting victim, however, Daniel hints at the fact that Phyllis chooses subjugation, seemingly for both personal and political reasons. He tells us: “Phyllis grew up in an apartment in Brooklyn, and her flower life is adopted, it is a principle” (6). Though he thinks of her as a descendent of a “harem” (5), then, he acknowledges contradictorily that she has chosen the stereotypical hippie vulnerabilities of subordination and pacifism. He continues, “her love of peace is a principle, her long hair, her love for me – all principles. Political decisions.” Yet when she’s high, Daniel claims, “all her instinctive unprincipled beliefs rise to the surface and her knees lock together. She becomes a sex martyr. I think that’s why I married her” (6). The shame she exhibits in this scene is something Daniel works deliberately to affect. He offers these insights not to demonstrate Phyllis’s agency, but to show us his ability to

undermine what he sees as her attempts at autonomy. Yet ironically, this passage makes clear the deliberate nature of Phyllis's actions. If "her love for [Daniel]" is "a principle," then the lived reality of that love is a conscious choice. Phyllis does not suffer for a schoolgirl crush (as Daniel would sometimes have us believe) but for an ethical adherence to a complex value system. If she is a sex martyr, she has martyred herself.

As this encounter progresses, Daniel conflates the power dynamic of sex with the political landscape that dominates his consciousness, reading flawed (and to his family, dangerous) manifestations of communism onto Phyllis's body and making clear the connection between his abuse of Phyllis and his parents' deaths. He begins in exhibitionist fashion – using overtly lascivious language – depicting his wife as "suffering yet another penetration and her tormentor Daniel gently squeezing handfuls of soft ass while he probes her virtue, her motherhood, her vacuum, her vincibles, her vat, her butter tub." Yet he soon shifts to political language, describing her body in terms of "the small geography of those distant island ranges, that geology of gland formations, Stalinites and Trotskyites, the Stalinites grow down from the top, the Trotskyites up from the bottom" (6). As Daniel reads onto Phyllis's body various manifestations of communism, his aggression intensifies. Indeed, he depicts himself here as a kind of McCarthyite, probing for sources of communist threat to Phyllis's "virtue" and "motherhood" in paranoid terms. Yet in this first scene, we are not given the insight necessary to know whether Phyllis understands herself to be a representative of all those ideological structures that doomed her husband's family.

Though nothing about this scene is particularly violent, Daniel's use of words like "suffering," "tormentor," and "cruel" suggest his intention to degrade. As the

transgressor, Daniel knows he'll garner judgment: that he'll be perceived as the brutally empowered half of their relationship. He even asks, "if the first glimpse people have of me is this, how do I establish sympathy?" (6-7). What this language suggests is that readers will "sympathize" not with him, but with Phyllis: that we will read her as his victim, and that we will pity her. In practically demanding that we perceive him as brutal, Daniel portrays himself as sacrificing his own standing in the reader's eyes. Because we privilege dominance, however, this scene functions as false humility. Though readers may judge him for his cruelty, they might nevertheless perceive that cruelty as a manifestation of a kind of strength. Conversely, though readers may feel that Phyllis has been mistreated, Daniel's presentation of her as a victim obscures any sense of her as an active participant in her own symbolically charged suffering. Phyllis lacks dimensionality not just because she is underdeveloped in the novel, but because her development suggests that she is merely an object to her husband's whims.

Having set up this dynamic – Daniel as cruel but worthy of respect; Phyllis as weak and unwitting – in the relatively subtle aggression of the novel's first sex scene, readers are inclined to see it manifest all the more in the overt violence of later scenes. Though Phyllis's participation in orchestrating these occurrences becomes increasingly apparent, however, Daniel never acknowledges her as anything but his victim. The novel's most explicit scene of sexual abuse finds Daniel and Phyllis driving Susan's car to Boston, having just visited her at the mental hospital after her suicide attempt. It is raining, and their son Paul is sleeping in the backseat. As the scene unfolds, Daniel hints at the abuse we're about to witness. He recalls that Phyllis's father "tried to bring himself to ask...about the bruises his wife saw on his daughter's upper legs; he mumbled and

cleared his throat, but I pretended not to understand, and he gave up” (57). Though we’re never shown these bruises directly, this intimation calls us to imagine how they might have come into being. And in introducing them to us via his wife’s parents, Daniel accentuates the extent to which we see Phyllis as a child-victim.

Yet Phyllis’s actions in this scene are arguably quite deliberate. When Daniel shifts back into the third person to depict himself “grop[ing] for the wiper switch,” their “car veer[s] for a moment, and a horn bl[ows] behind them.” In the split second of this event, Daniel observes “that Phyllis clutche[s] the armrest of the door with her right hand and extend[s] her left back over the seat to protect the baby.” But just as importantly, Phyllis “glance[s] at him to see if he had seen” (56). When Daniel notes Phyllis’s fear, then, she notes his observation of it. Though she’s depicted – and largely taken – as a victim, she is keenly aware of the power dynamic between them. From this space of awareness, Phyllis remarks, ““oh, Daniel, I wish I could hold Susan and hug her and kiss her and be her friend....Maybe when she’s better she could come and live with us for a while. We would really love her and make her happy. The baby would love her”” (56). Taken out of context, this could sound merely sweet, but in the context of the observation Phyllis registered moments before, it’s incongruous. Such childlike exuberance is arguably meant to convey her naïveté, but following as it does Phyllis’s awareness of power, it seems folly to take this moment at face value. Instead, it seems reasonable to assume that Phyllis encourages Daniel’s perception of her as weakly feminine. Though Daniel never registers her behavior as manipulative – and neither do critics – Phyllis’s naïveté seems a bit too well timed not to be calculated. And if it is calculated, then we

can assume that she welcomes what follows, a thought which – though disturbing – affords Phyllis far more power than either Daniel or critics are inclined to grant her.

Considered in such terms, the scene that follows seems inevitable from the moment of Daniel and Phyllis's mutual recognition. Daniel asks: "will you do me a favor?...Take your bell[bottom]s off," adding, "I'm not being funny. I mean it...Come on, Phyllis. Right now...Take them off" (58). Daniel states his desire first as a request, and then as an order. Phyllis initially resists, which leads critics to see her as unwitting even when she does comply. I suggest, however, that her resistance is part of the power play between them. It is necessary to Daniel's arousal – and more importantly to the catharsis offered to Daniel via the scene – that Phyllis resist, and so she does. In that vein, Phyllis says: "I don't think that's right. I don't want to do that," to which Daniel replies: "But I want you to, Phyllis." When she does not immediately comply, "Daniel gently depresso[s] the accelerator and sa[ys] nothing" (58). From here, Daniel moves into a subtle and sexually charged form of verbal torment. He begins "quietly explain[ing] to her the mechanical problems of the car: there was considerable play in the steering, the front wheels were unaligned, the brakes were worn and the tires slick. He glance[s] at the speedometer and inform[s] Phyllis that they [are] doing eighty-five miles an hour" (58-59). Though the scene goes on to include physical abuse (in the likely form of a burn from a cigarette lighter), we don't see that abuse directly. Instead, this exchange stands as the most visible representation of Daniel's dominance, and of Phyllis's willing unbeing.

In the moments before Phyllis complies, she adds one more comment to their dialogue, this time not in resistance but in demonstration of her awareness of the origin of Daniel's violence. She says of the Isaacson family: "you're all such big deals... You're

all such big deals of suffering” (59). Having demonstrated that she’s aware of the source of Daniel’s demands, Phyllis is ready to meet them. She “unbuckle[s] her belt and unzip[s] her fly and arching her back off the seat pull[s] her bellbottoms down.” Daniel returns to a tone of requests and not orders, saying almost politely: ““all the way off, please,”” to which Phyllis replies with quiet willingness, “lifting her knees, [and putting] the heels of her boots on the seat.” As Daniel watches, Phyllis “unzip[s] her boots, pull[s] them off, drop[s] them on the floor, and pull[s] the pants over her ankles....Then she look[s] at him and pull[s] her underpants off” (60). It would be easy to assume that Phyllis’s compliance is merely a matter of force: that Daniel gives her no choice if she wants to protect both herself and her child. And indeed, the next moments find her in tears. As “Daniel [takes] his foot off the gas pedal and turn[s] on the windshield wipers,” we read: “Phyllis [is] crying. She r[uns] her fingers up through her hair and h[olds] her ears and crie[s].” She does not, however, resist. The tears come not as a mark of opposition, but as a sign of submission. She does not even – as Melanie does – “avert herself”: Phyllis “look[s]” at Daniel in the moments before taking off the last of her clothes (60). She is not in control in this scene, but there is little textual evidence to suggest she has a sincere objection to that fact.

Phyllis’s response after Daniel regains control of the car further suggests her full participation in the sexual encounter. Daniel “[instructs] Phyllis to kneel on the seat facing her side of the car, and...bend over as far as she c[an], kneel[ing] and curl[ing] up like a penitent, a worshiper, an abject devotionalist” (60). As she obliges, she asks, ““like this?”” with “her voice muffled by her hair.” By requesting confirmation that she’s in the position he wants her in, Phyllis implies an investment beyond the preservation of safety.

Daniel is no longer speeding, and Phyllis has already met his demands, yet she continues to engage with him. “That’s fine,” Daniel responds, “running his right hand over her buttocks” in response to which she “shiver[s] and the flesh of her backside tremble[s] under his hand” (60). This moment is depicted in graphic but subtly consensual language. Once again, nothing about Phyllis’s actions suggests resistance.

In the next moment, however, Daniel becomes overtly violent, and we’re given no insight into Phyllis’s reaction. Returning to the third person, Doctorow writes: “Daniel leaned forward and pressed the cigarette lighter. His hand remained poised.” Though there’s no way to speak to Phyllis’s compliance in this moment, it is important to note that her modeling of vulnerability – her willingness to subordinate herself to her husband in this scene – does little to assuage Daniel’s aggression, which again suggests that the external consequences of unbeing do not manifest in Daniel. Having hinted at but not performed this act of violence, Daniel leaves the scene, moving metafictionally away from Phyllis and towards the reader by asking, “do you believe it? Shall I continue? Do you want to know the effect of three concentric circles of heating element glowing orange in a black night of rain upon the tender white girlflesh of my wife’s ass?” (60). Though Daniel refuses to offer insight into Phyllis’s complicity, he deliberately involves readers in the violence he commits against her. If we read on, Daniel suggests, then we want to watch; thus we are, in a manner, like him. What he doesn’t allow for is that we’re also like Phyllis: that the agency we demonstrate in continuing to read is similar to that demonstrated by Phyllis in continuing to stay, for which reason readers share in the precarity she models. In this small way, Phyllis’s submission is externally influential.



Though she is read largely as agentless, Phyllis's unbeing ironically becomes almost too much to bring Daniel relief, as if justice can only be enacted on a resistant body, and Phyllis's has become – though Daniel never overtly acknowledges it as such – too willing. During a less sadomasochistic encounter in their home following the car scene, for example, Daniel makes clear Phyllis's sustaining sexual desire. He writes that as Phyllis becomes more and more aroused, he “[does] not break [his] rhythm, which [is] insolently slow,” and that in response “she purse[s] her lips and the effort [is] as if she [is] half whistling in pain or amazement” as she “shiver[s] her way through one come after another” (169). As pain and pleasure commingle, Daniel does what he calls, “the cruel thing”: he “pull[s] back.” He then writes: “she h[angs] from my neck whimpering into my mouth. At the peak of her distraction I slowly s[ink] it back in, and this [is] the stroke that t[akes] her beyond her limits of character and physical integrity” (169). After this encounter, however, Daniel is not content merely to have satisfied Phyllis; he wants her to have registered his technique as “cruel.” He notes: “leaning over her sleepy smiling eyes I c[an] not find here the education recorded, no impression of the cruel thing, the cruel thing, and that it is always the cruel thing that mixes the tears of our eyes, the breath of our lungs” (169). Daniel's ability to think of Phyllis as his naïve and unwitting victim, then, relies on her perceiving herself that way. In acknowledging pleasure within pain – and by not acknowledging his “cruelty” – Phyllis undermines Daniel's ability to view her reductively as naïve, which apparently undermines his catharsis in turn.

Dissatisfied by her playing along, Daniel wants Phyllis's unwitting submission, and during a trip to Riverside Park, he gains it by shifting his abusive attention from her to their son. In what starts as a touching parent/child encounter, Daniel begins to toss

baby Paul playfully in the air. He recalls: “Phyllis smile[s] and out of the corner of my eye I c[an] see an old lady with a cane stopping for a moment in her walk to smile at the attractive young family.” Though we might assume this moment to be a positive, healing one, being perceived as a normal family man enrages Daniel, and his playful game becomes dangerous. He writes: “I thr[o]w my son in the air a little higher and he screeche[s] a little louder and I ca[tch] him....I [toss] my son higher and higher, and now he laugh[s] no longer but crie[s] out.” Daniel is not deterred by the fear he sees on Paul’s face. Though he says that he “can’t bear to think about this murderous feeling,” he concedes that he “enjoy[s Phyllis’s] fear” (130-31). Phyllis’s opposition here exposes the limits of her willing precarity. Though she consents to offering her body, she resists Daniel’s attempts to victimize their son. Yet Paul – who cannot choose – functions as a contrast to his mother, illuminating the degree to which Phyllis’s unbeing is voluntary.

This scene likewise makes the common reading of Daniel as healthier and more empowered than either his sister or his wife all the more disturbing. While both Susan and Phyllis willingly bear the physical burden of history on their own bodies, Daniel projects it onto the bodies of others, and here he projects it onto the body of a helpless child. In perceiving Daniel as stronger than both his sister and his wife, critics imply that they see more strength in a need to threaten others than in a willingness to accept one’s own precarity, or to help another work through his. Viewed instead in terms of shadow feminism, Phyllis’s unbeing takes on a disturbing nobility. If she helps heal Daniel, his sins will not be visited upon his son (as his father’s were visited – though in a different way – upon him). Like Lucy’s decision to stay on at her farm, this motive is unsettling. Yet it serves as evidence that Phyllis’s unbeing is well reasoned.

Despite the abuse of the scene with baby Paul, there are some indications that the symbolic justice both Susan and Phyllis facilitate works to heal Daniel. Levitt, for example, claims that Daniel “is no [Biblical] Daniel to save his people, but perhaps, he comes to realize, he can save himself and his own wife and son” (101). There are occasions when Daniel is kind to Phyllis, and we might conclude that, like David Lurie’s need to rescue Lucy, Daniel’s need to seek retribution has been quelled by Phyllis’s act of unbeing. Daniel writes, “my wife c[omes] back while I [am] ill with the flu and she t[akes] care of me. I [want] to cry when I [hear] the front door open.” He’s clearly still wary – saying, “I [am] waiting for her to make one false move of solicitation” – yet he remarks with self-awareness: “since she’s come back I have not worked on her” (168-9). Yet though he concedes without apparent resentment: “forgiving me turns her on, I have no other explanation for the fact that she keeps returning,” Daniel concomitantly notes that “small premature age lines have appeared at the corners of her eyes. Her face has thinned out and her thighs have got slimmer. Suffering does fine work with the chisel. I am finding her admirable, which disturbs me” (168). So though he does not “work on her,” he still takes pleasure in her suffering.

Moreover, Daniel continues to connect Phyllis’s body with the political crimes done to his parents, and he continues to garner pleasure from watching even small amounts of suffering play out on that body. This association stands to offer catharsis, but it fails to do so. As Fowler contends, “Daniel cannot *forgive*...[his] personality is by turns vicious, vulgar, shocking, agonized” (48). After her return, for example, Daniel notes with satisfaction that Phyllis is “way down.” Watching her, he observes “a gesture she has with her long light hair, taking the loose strands falling past her cheek and tucking

them behind her ear.” And he further recalls that “to make it all perfect, from where I stood her head was just under the poster of the Isaacsons” (169). His pleasure in this scene seems untempered by the work of Phyllis’s unbeing. Though Harter and Thompson argue that Daniel is ultimately “liberate[d] from the past,” which “allows him belatedly to assume manhood and identity” (47), I contend that – unlike David’s – Daniel’s allegiance to the dominance of sovereignty has not been undermined, which is ironic in that Daniel had far fewer reasons to be invested in the first place. I maintain that Daniel never *lost* “manhood,” that instead his resistance to vulnerability is demonstrative of a wealth of constructed manhood and a loss (or denial) of inherent humanity.

Finally, though Phyllis’s unbeing is arguably elective, we are never given indication that she attains a significant form of re-being. Perhaps her subordination is limited precisely because she derives pleasure from it – which cannot be said of the other women considered in this project. Phyllis does not forsake privilege, as Erica and Lucy do, nor does she refuse complicity in sovereignty, as we see with Susan, Erica, Sihem, and Lucy. Thus – in terms both of its internal ramifications for herself and its external ramifications for Daniel – Phyllis’s self-abnegation accomplishes very little. Though I maintain that Phyllis demonstrates far greater agency in her precarity than we see with Daniel, her unbeing amounts largely to a pleasurable performance of submission.

### Daisy

Like Lucy, Daisy Perowne in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* volunteers her body against her father’s wishes in an effort to dispel violence. In keeping with the move towards domesticity seen throughout 9/11 literature, *Saturday* portrays a single family as a way

into contemporary politics. The setting, as Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz describes it, is “the ‘community of anxiety’” that arose “after...the terrorist attacks in Madrid and before the bombings in London” (199). Specifically, the novel takes place in London on 15 February 2003, which holds the significance of having seen the largest protest in world history.<sup>25</sup> The novel’s protagonist, Henry Perowne, encounters protesters on several occasions throughout his day, blurring the spheres of public and private. The personal affairs of the Perowne family thus function allegorically, forcing readers to consider alongside Henry the ethical and moral concerns that attend matters of privilege and lack, west and non-west, terrorism and counter-terrorism.

The novel’s climax involves a literal intrusion of the public into the private space, as an encounter Henry has earlier in the day leads to two men forcibly entering his home, and (among other intrusions) ordering his daughter, Daisy, to strip. Ultimately, the family overpowers the leader, Baxter, and is spared further violence. Tammy Amiel-Houser observes that – in no small part because of the novel’s pseudo-heroic ending – critics largely take McEwan to task “for producing a contemporary update of the common Western fable of the privileged male hero” who is “faced with violen[ce]” but who ultimately “overcom[es] his opponents, thus restoring order and stability” (129). As Amiel-Houser concedes, this reading is shortsighted. I argue this is so because (among other reasons) Perowne does not “overcome” Baxter on his own. He and his son, Theo, do ultimately catch Baxter off guard – causing him to fall down the stairs and sustain a brain injury that requires surgery – but I contend that they are in a position to do so not by virtue of their plotting, but because of the subservience displayed by both Daisy and

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<sup>25</sup> Though gatherings took place all over the globe, London’s witnessed an estimated one million protesters speaking out against the impending war in Iraq.

her mother, Rosalind.<sup>26</sup> While Henry resists Baxter's invasion – continually imagining ways to dominate the scene – his daughter intuits the wisdom of compliance, and when Baxter holds a knife to Rosalind's neck and orders Daisy to strip, she undresses quickly, saying, "I'll do anything you want. Anything" (227). The repetition of the word "anything" in her promise to Baxter conveys the degree to which Daisy is willing to submit herself sexually to protect her family, and the ensuing scene functions as her unbeing: smaller in scope than either Lucy's or Phyllis's, but a striking example of the degree to which singular moments of submission stand to undermine aggression. In her *being*, Daisy is privileged in ways not dissimilar from Erica in the previous chapter: she has both health and wealth enough for Baxter's struggles to be foreign to her. Yet in her willing sexual subservience, Daisy undermines the privilege her position carries with it, humbling herself to Baxter in ways Henry consistently thinks he should, but never does.

I explore Henry's ambivalence to vulnerability before offering a look into Daisy's decisive, self-exposing form of unbeing. Puschmann-Nalenz contends that *Saturday* "raises...more than two hundred years after Kant and the Age of Enlightenment...[the subject] of free will in moral choices versus contingency" (189). Though critics almost exclusively focus on how agency manifests in Henry – ignoring it as it appears in other, less privileged characters – the unbeing Daisy resigns herself to during the invasion can be seen – through the lens of shadow feminism – as a strong example of "free will [within] a moral choice." Daisy's compliance is especially apparent in contrast with her father, who – though far more willing to admit culpability than either David or Daniel – resists the precarity of privilege while concomitantly obsessing over it. Henry

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<sup>26</sup> Though I don't discuss Rosalind with any depth, she remains calm throughout the encounter, surrendering to Baxter's violence in similar ways to Daisy, in spite of which she is rarely mentioned in critical explorations of the novel.

experiences Paul Gilroy's postcolonial melancholia in a number of ways, demonstrating an awareness not consistently seen in the privileged men of this chapter.<sup>27</sup> As Elizabeth Wallace observes, Perowne expresses discomfort with such things as his luxury car (which he continually reminds himself that he deserves for all of his hard work, thereby demonstrating guilt over his possessions), his relationship to Baxter (to whom Henry feels responsible because he, Henry, has been much more advantaged), and his wealth (which contrasts sharply to the poverty of the people he witnesses in the park right outside his window).<sup>28</sup> Henry does not take his privilege for granted, nor does he take total credit for it. Though he benefits from affluence – and he actively resists losing it – he acknowledges that his success is not built merely of hard work, but also of chance.

Though Henry is aware of his own vulnerable position, however, he does not submit to it. Indeed, his first inclination in the various encounters he faces throughout the day is to hold himself responsible for the consequences of economic and genetic disparity. After a minor accident in which Baxter's car scrapes his, for example, Perowne critiques his own behavior towards Baxter, thinking, "he could have been friendlier...he should have relaxed, from a position of strength, instead of which he was indignant and combative" (114). Similarly, of street vendors in the park outside his home, we read that Henry "vaguely feels...that he owes them an apology. One day he'll buy something from them" (148). So too, during Baxter's break-in, Henry feels "responsible. He humiliated

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<sup>27</sup> In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy claims that until the nations responsible for colonization face and grieve their own capacity for destruction, guilt and fear of reciprocity will linger on for those whose governments have taken the liberty of establishing a hierarchy of human worth on behalf of the world.

<sup>28</sup> On the way to his car, for example, Perowne passes a street sweeper, and, "as the two men pass, their eyes meet briefly, neutrally...For a vertiginous moment Henry feels himself bound to the other man, as though on a seesaw with him, pinned to an axis that could tip them into each other's life. Perowne looks away" (73).

Baxter in the street in front of his sidekicks....He used or misused his authority to avoid one crisis, and his actions have steered him into another, far worse” (219). According to Amiel-Houser, *Saturday* “resonate[s] with Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of Otherness, with its emphasis on the self as infinitely responsible toward the ever-strange and incomprehensible Other” (128). Indeed, Henry exhibits a noblesse oblige sense of responsibility, though it manifests more in the form of guilt than of action.

While his guilt demonstrates his understanding of precarity, Henry finds the quest for dominance to be biological and not, therefore, something that should necessarily be overcome. In this way, his Enlightenment-inspired logic leads to a secondary reaction of justification, which overwhelms his willingness to be vulnerable. This is arguably the reason that Henry’s acceptance of precarity rarely leads to personal sacrifice. He notes: “self-interested social organisms find it rational to be violent sometimes” (88). So too, of a squash game, Perowne contends that beneath civility, “there’s only the irreducible urge to win, as biological as thirst” (115). And of ordering lobster in a restaurant, he advises: “the key to human success and domination, is to be elective in your mercies” (128). Henry privileges the willingness to overcome his inclination towards vulnerability, and that privileging both leads to and informs his response to Baxter’s invasion.<sup>29</sup>

Holding an acceptance of vulnerability alongside a resistance to it proves problematic for Henry. Postcolonial guilt mixes with Enlightenment rationality to muddy his response to both, leaving him philosophically irresolute and somewhat paralyzed in actual response. For example, moments after his original encounter with Baxter, Henry

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<sup>29</sup> We see his privileging of dominance again when Henry encounters women wearing burkhas later in the day. From the position of his Mercedes S 500, he observes “three figures in black burkhas emerge from a taxi on Devonshire,” and “he can’t help his distaste, it’s visceral. How dismal, that anyone should be obliged to walk around so entirely obliterated” (124). He cannot see in their choice to adhere to the mandates of their religion and culture anything but absolute “obliterat[ion].”



“feel[s] a rising unease... a disquiet he can’t yet define, though guilt is certainly an element.” Interestingly, this awareness is followed by acute consciousness of “his left knee creak[ing] as he stretches... When will it be time to give up this game? His fiftieth birthday?... Get out before he rips an anterior cruciate ligament, or crashes to the parquet with his first coronary.” Between his psychic and bodily “unease,” Henry “suddenly feels his own life as fragile and precious” (103). Guilt yields to feelings of vulnerability, then, and neither emotion is comfortable for Perowne. We likewise see guilt and precarity collide when Baxter first enters the Perowne home, having forced his way in with Rosalind at gunpoint. Upon recognizing Baxter, Henry immediately “tries to see the room through his eyes,” noticing “champagne, the gin and the bowls of lemon and ice, the belittlingly high ceiling and its mouldings, the Bridget Riley prints flanking the Hodgkin... the cherry wood floor beneath the Persian rugs, the careless piles of serious books, the decades of polish in the thakat table.” Having observed anew his own affluence, Henry thinks: “the scale of retribution could be large” (213). His awareness is seemingly constant, but Henry is just as constantly unwilling to act on it by ceding anything but mental space to the guilt he feels.

While Henry grapples with but does not surrender to guilt, Daisy’s willingness to degrade herself can be read as evidence that – like Lucy Lurie and Phyllis Lewin – her understanding of precarity is not merely theoretical. Even before we meet Daisy, McEwan establishes her as playful, comfortable with the vulnerability of her own sexuality. Perowne notes, for example, that “it would be easier for him if her poems weren’t so wanton – it isn’t only wild sex they celebrate, but restless novelty, the rooms and beds visited once and left at dawn” (189). Even in her state of being, then, Daisy

demonstrates a preference for risk-taking over measured control. She makes that preference clear before the break-in, when she insists to her father that, politically speaking, resistance to the potential threats of Hussein-led Iraq will only make Great Britain less safe. Of the impending Iraq War, she asks Henry, “do you think we’re going to be any safer at the end of all this? We’ll be hated right across the Arab world” (194). In ironic response to her pleas for pacifism, Henry is “adversarial,” with “poison in his blood...and fear and anger, constricting his thoughts” (195). Until her unbeing models its sanative effect, Daisy’s insistence on surrender provokes not understanding but hostility.

Despite the ambivalence he expresses throughout the day – “he’s a dove with Jay Strauss, and a hawk with his daughter” (198) – the aggression Henry exhibits in this conversation with Daisy marks his thoughts during the home invasion as well: we see him analyze how he might overcome Baxter throughout the encounter. He observes, for example, that Theo “stands with his arms crossed, still staring tensely into the ground, possibly calculating,” and that “his forearms look strong.” So too, he contemplates “act[ing] alone, wrestl[ing] Baxter to the floor and trust[ing] the others will pile in,” or “hit[ting] Baxter hard in the face with a clinched fist and hop[ing] that Theo will take on Nigel” (221). But moments later, we read that “when Henry imagines himself about to act, and sees a ghostly warrior version of himself leap out of his body at Baxter, his heart rate accelerates so swiftly that he feels giddy, weak, unreliable” (221). Though he seems to buy the media representation Faludi observes – that it is men’s duty to save women from terrorism – Henry wavers when it comes time to perform such principles. This leaves him open to the lessons of vulnerability his daughter is about to teach. Aggression and resistance – which arguably got the Perowne family into this potentially catastrophic

situation – will not be the tools that help them out of it. This aspect of the domestic narrative also works in terms of *Saturday*'s political allegory and its implications for national sovereignty. Aggressive western practices may have brought 9/11 about, but those same practices have done little to overcome the threat it embodied.

Conversely, Daisy models precarity from the beginning of the invasion. Her first words to Baxter, for example, are calm, measured, and subservient: “if you leave now and never come back I give you my word we won't phone the police. You can take anything you want” (222). Similarly, when Baxter punches her grandfather, Daisy attends to his bleeding, after which Henry observes: “looking after her grandfather has helped her” (220-21). Though we never gain access to her thoughts, Daisy's actions indicate a focus on caretaking and submitting, and not on retaliation. That focus is most apparent, of course, when Baxter and Nigel order her to strip. Daisy's method of undressing makes clear her commitment to unbeing. The scene finds Daisy “pulling off her tights with an impatient gasp, almost tearing at them, then throwing them down” before quickly “pulling off her black sweater and chucking that down too.” Even stripped down to her underclothes – “white, freshly laundered for the journey from Paris” – we're told that “she doesn't pause,” and that “in one unbroken movement she unhitches her bra and hooks off her knickers with her thumb and lets them fall from her hands.” Finally, once undressed, she “glance[s] at her mother, but only briefly. It's done. Head bowed, Daisy stands with her hands at her sides” (226). Though no doubt profoundly humiliated by this violation, Daisy's unbeing is resolute. Moreover, her actions are in keeping with her political assertions from earlier in the evening. In their discussion before the invasion, Henry accuses Daisy of being blind to “genocide and torture, the mass graves, the

security apparatus, the criminal totalitarian state” saying that though it opposes invasion, “the iPod generation doesn’t want to know” what’s actually happening at the hands of Saddam. Daisy demonstrates here not merely that she is aware, but that she is willing to live her resistance to aggression by facing torment herself.

Of significance are Daisy’s family members’ varied responses to her willingness, which are in keeping with gendered norms and which serve as evidence of the strength and value of vulnerability. For example, Rosalind “is shaking badly as Baxter leans over her shoulder and steadies his fidgety hand with its blade against her neck. But *she doesn’t turn away from Daisy*” (226, emphasis mine). Despite the horror of watching her daughter be violated, Rosalind stays present in the moment. This response contrasts with Theo, who is “so stricken that he can’t bear to look at his sister. He keeps his gaze fixed on the floor.” We read that Daisy’s grandfather “too is looking away.” While averting one’s eyes is no doubt respectful, it also serves as a way of avoiding the reality of the situation. In looking away, Theo and Grammaticus demonstrate their extreme discomfort with the vulnerability Daisy models. In his ambiguity as a sometimes-hawk/sometimes-dove, Perowne does not maintain contact like Rosalind does, but neither does he look away. Once Daisy is undressed, Henry realizes that he “hasn’t seen his daughter naked in more than twelve years,” and yet “he remembers this body from bath times, and...it is above all *the vulnerable child* he sees” (226, emphasis mine). Though he erroneously associates her well-reasoned submission with childhood, this is the first indication we have that Henry recognizes something profound in Daisy’s actions: that he is struck by her willingness to accept her own precarity so publicly.

The depth of her vulnerability is made all the more evident when we become aware – alongside Baxter and Henry – that Daisy is pregnant. Daisy’s precarity is thus even greater: through her unbeing, the secret of her pregnancy has been exposed. Interestingly, though, the fact that she is with child changes the dynamic of the encounter. When Baxter realizes that Daisy is expecting, he averts his gaze from her body – focusing instead on her poetry manuscript and seemingly abandoning his apparent plans for sexual assault. “Well, well. Look at that!” he says, “pointing with his free hand across the table at Daisy’s book.” Instead of raping her, then, Baxter demands that Daisy read her own poetry to him. Daisy initially consents to this new order, “tak[ing] the book” from him. As she attempts to read, however, we see that “all her resolution is gone. She closes the book. ‘I can’t do it,’ she wails. ‘I can’t’” (228). Though she is willing to degrade herself sexually to protect her family, she balks at this unorthodox demand.

What critics credit as Daisy’s salvation in this scene is her grandfather’s coded suggestion that she recite not her own work, but Matthew Arnold’s poem, “Dover Beach.” Baxter believes this to be her poetry; thus she never exposes herself in writing. Roland Weidle summarizes the scene as it is generally read, suggesting that “when Daisy recites Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ to the thugs, Baxter and Nigel, *the poem* has such a strong effect on the intruders that they do not carry out their original intention to rape her” (67, emphasis mine). Ultimately, then, Arnold’s work (along with Daisy’s grandfather’s hints to read it) is credited with “convert[ing]’ Baxter and lead[ing] to the final happy ending,” and also with “generat[ing] understanding, compassion and empathy in Perowne for Baxter and his plight” (67). Kathleen Wall offers Arnold even greater praise, concluding (despite textual evidence throughout the novel as to how easily

Baxter's mood can be swayed) that "the recitation of 'Dover Beach' astonishes and calms an angry man determined to rape Daisy Perowne and probably kill her family, and makes him hopeful about a cure for the disease that is shortening his life and promising a horrific death" (757). Like Weidle, Wall credits the poem with the lenience Henry ultimately takes on Baxter, arguing that it "prompt[s Henry] to prod the family into agreeing not to press charges and to get Baxter into a humane facility rather than into an inhumane prison" (785). Despite her willingness to strip and face the likelihood of being raped in front of her family, then, and despite reciting poetry naked while her mother is held at knife-point (she does not dress again until well after the reading), Daisy is not assumed to play much of a role – beyond the fact of her pregnancy – in Baxter's decision to back down, nor in the changes her father experiences after the encounter.<sup>30</sup>

I argue that critics neglect to recognize the profundity of Daisy's role in the positive outcome of the invasion because female self-abnegation is largely invisible, and when it is seen, it is read as victimhood. To make it more visible, I find it helpful to consider Daisy's two possible scenarios – being raped and reading her poetry – beside one another, which exposes the significance of her willingness to yield to sexual advances. This is important because without such contrast, her submissiveness may appear inconsequential, so accustomed are we to seeing women perform sexual willingness. Daisy's resistance to Baxter's demand for a reading is telling because it

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<sup>30</sup> Amiel-Houser does concede that "Daisy's body of flesh and blood and her body of words and rhymes become interconnected," and that "they become the catalyst that alters the chain of events in a surprising way" (139). And she likewise suggests that "Daisy's loving speech is an appeal to [Baxter], suggesting through Arnold's poetics, as well as by her own 'varied tone' and exposed and confessing body, the promise of life, of faithfulness and honesty" (146). Yet she virtually glosses over the scene in which Daisy strips, saying only that "the scene begins when Baxter forces Daisy to take off her clothes," and that "she does so in quiet panic, exposing a hitherto unknown pregnancy" (139), and attributing none of the evening's non-lethal outcome to Daisy's actions.

indicates that she is possessed of agency. This, in turn, makes it clear that – though we might be inclined to take her compliance with his sexual demands as an indication of her powerlessness – Daisy is agented, and she’s aware of that fact throughout the encounter. Her preference for offering her body over her work reveals much about her identity as a contemporary British woman. As with Phyllis and Lucy, sexual compliance seems an available form of unbeing for Daisy. Her choice to strip, and to offer herself bodily to the invaders, is just that: a choice. If it weren’t a choice, she’d have been equally submissive to Baxter’s demand for her poetry. Once we recognize this, it becomes evident that Daisy acts in opposition to the doctrine of resistance that is integral to the illusion of sovereignty at work in the British government’s decision to join the U.S. in invading Iraq. In keeping with her opposition to the pending invasion of Iraq, Daisy refuses to deny her own inherent vulnerability. Like Lucy, Daisy uses her position as a woman-citizen to model for her nation the power subservience can have during precarious historical times.

While her willing unbeing in this scene has power, we don’t see enough of Daisy in its aftermath to know whether or not it leads to a significant re-being. What we do see is the degree to which her embrace of precarity undermines the political ambiguity that has kept Henry paralyzed. Indeed, her vulnerability is ultimately more powerful than Henry’s apparent faith in the Enlightenment rationality that legitimates both personal and national sovereignty. During the attack, it first appears as though Daisy’s vulnerability will make Henry more inclined towards aggression. When Henry thinks of Daisy’s pregnant state – “the overwhelming fact of it” – for example, he concludes, “it’s time to act” (232). In the aftermath of the encounter, however, Henry becomes more and more compassionate towards Baxter, agreeing to operate on him out of a desire to save his life

and resolving not to press charges for the invasion. According to Amiel-Houser, “the break-in, combined with Daisy’s reading and Baxter’s unexpected exhilaration, work together to shake up Perowne’s subjectivity, opening him to experience the wonders of the Other’s enigmatic singularity and so, finally, to acknowledge his involuntary debt to Baxter” (139). I would argue, though, that as Lucy’s did for David, Daisy’s performance of precarity works to teach Henry *how* to respond to such a “debt”: what it looks like to move beyond recognition of guilt and towards a lived form of reparations.

Puschmann-Nalenz describes Henry’s post-invasion practice of compassion as a desire “to atone for his feelings of superiority, which made him ‘act unprofessionally, using his medical knowledge’ (111) to humiliate Baxter earlier in the day and secure his own escape” (200). But she attributes that desire to “his interest in and enthusiasm for the medical profession” (201). I suggest that Henry’s position as a surgeon influences his thoughts throughout the day, and that therefore it cannot be responsible for the shift he undergoes after the invasion. It seems necessary that this scene would have some impact over Henry, and it would be easy to assume that it would be the opposite of what we see: that Henry would be filled with rage towards Baxter for having humiliated and terrified his daughter. That his reaction is so counter to anger suggests that something more meaningful to him than a poem he’s rarely heard has had an impact. We get hints at what that might be with his preoccupations at the end of the day. Standing in his bedroom after successfully operating on Baxter, Henry finds that it’s “harder . . . to recall, or to inhabit, the vigour of his row with Daisy. . . . A woman bearing a child has her own authority.” Already, then, Henry’s resistance to the ideas Daisy put forth in their argument is weakened, and he grants her an “authority” he himself cannot possess. Though his newly



tentative stance is no doubt a product of a number of influences, I argue that Daisy – perhaps the most overlooked – is likely the most substantial.

In an interview with Helen Whitney, McEwan said of the terrorist attackers on 9/11: “what those holy fools clearly lacked, or clearly were able to deny themselves, was the ability to enter into the minds of the people they were being so cruel to. Amongst their crimes, is, was, a failure of the imagination, of the moral imagination” (207). If Baxter’s invasion of the Perowne home metaphorizes both the attacks of 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq – and if we conclude that Baxter lacks the “moral imagination” to intuit the impact of his behavior over this family – Henry’s ultimate response to him undermines the cycle of blind aggression, acknowledging the pain of Baxter’s existence in generous and dynamic-altering ways. Thus I maintain that Daisy’s unbeing – which takes the form of her willingness to absorb Baxter’s violence for her family’s sake – works to teach Henry a new way of being outside of his sovereignty-driven willingness to dominate. Just as Lucy models vulnerability for David, and Phyllis strives to do so for Daniel, Daisy teaches Henry to subvert his allegiance to dominance in deference to a recognition that our very bodies are always already vulnerable, and that seeking to deny that fact (as Henry does in his first encounter with Baxter and as the United States and Great Britain do in their invasion of Iraq) only increases the depth of our risk. At least externally, then, Daisy’s unbeing is profoundly successful.

### CHAPTER III: ANTI-SOVEREIGN SILENCE

I cannot muster the 'we' except by finding the way in which I am tied to 'you,' by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.

~ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

Though in ways more abstract than her life or her sexuality, a woman's voice is foundational to identity, and in an array of literary texts from the twentieth century, it is often voluntarily sacrificed. Here the distinction between willing and forced submission is especially important, in that the degree to which women are denied agency is a prominent theoretical discussion. In this chapter, I look at Leda Helianos of Glenway Wescott's *Apartment in Athens*, Rosa Burger of Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*, and the unnamed "Barbarian Girl" of J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The shifting power structures of empire prove a revelatory context for considering the transgressive potential of self-silencing; thus these novels all engage the fallout of colonization. They portray sovereignty – the benchmark of imperial rule – as it manifests and is resisted in, respectively, Germany's World War II occupation of Greece, the middle years of South African apartheid, and the bitter decline of an unspecified empire. In withdrawing their voices – sometimes literally and other times figuratively, by ceding their influence – the characters I consider revoke their consent to the travesties done either in their name or to their fellow citizens. I argue that the silence performed by these women functions as the verbal equivalent of a hunger strike: they subvert power by refusing to participate in demands for it.

In unbeing, these characters withdraw their participation from unconscionable political circumstances. And in re-being, they take up their voices again when it becomes

possible to do so without bearing complicity in oppressive narratives of sovereignty. Butler explores self-silencing in *Precarious Life*, though she assumes it to be a self-protective – and not a self-abnegating – gesture. She writes that “it would be heinous” to be thought of as “treasonous”; therefore, people whose opposition to the status quo might position them to be read as such often “[fail] to speak, or [speak] in throttled ways, in order to sidestep the terrorizing identification that threatens to take hold” (xx). Though Butler’s larger concern is forced silence – which she calls a “strategy for quelling dissent and limiting the reach of critical debate” (xx) – she likewise contends: “it is precisely because one does not want to lose one’s status as a viable speaking being that one does not say what one thinks” (xx). So for Butler, silence is a means of preserving the ability to speak for some later point. I argue that the women of this chapter are just as deliberate in their silence as Butler suggests, but that their motive is not protection of their “viability” as speakers, but rather sacrifice of that viability in favor of the opportunity to affect political change. In any threatening circumstance, we have, according to Thomas Crocker, “a choice between competing narratives deployed by competing ways of seeing the world.” We can either “accept the dominant script” of mandated sovereignty, or we can “accept the challenge of narratively constructing a new way of [being]” (306). Within their respective political landscapes – each turbulent with demands for power – these characters “accept [that] challenge.” They “refuse to speak,” and in so doing, they refuse to participate in the injustice inherent to sovereignty’s “dominant script.” To grasp the power of their refusal, it is important to read – amidst the cacophony of violence – as deeply into silence as we can manage.

## Leda

The youngest character I explore in this project is the complex, often mute Leda Helianos, of Glenway Wescott's critically-neglected World War II novel, *Apartment in Athens*. Despite her youth and her relative inexperience, Leda stands to reveal a great deal about the subversive potential of those in positions of profound vulnerability. As the youngest member of the Helianos family, Leda is ten years old when the German Captain Kalter takes possession of her family's home, and, by proxy, the family itself. She is described throughout the novel as psychologically troubled, and we're told that the war is largely to blame for her affliction. Yet Leda's silent surrender is too complex to conclude that she is merely a victim of that conflict. Instead, I argue that study of her character exposes the power of silence in settings where the voice is used predominantly to manipulate and coerce. In her unbeing, Leda demonstrates her resistance to occupation, and in her ultimate re-being, she proves that her resistance was of value.

Psychologists working in the subfield of trauma have begun to identify the influence of war over children as a neglected field of research. Though Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as it manifests in combatants, prisoners of war, and victims of World War II concentration camps is well documented (Berntsen and Rubin 127), little data exists regarding its appearance in children, who, for various reasons, are especially vulnerable to the trauma of warfare. This field of study stands to expose not how combatants – trained aggressors invested in the narrative of sovereignty – handle trauma, but how it is met by children, especially female children, who I argue are as far removed from the dominance mandate as it is possible to be. I suggest that *Apartment in Athens* is well positioned to offer such insight. As World War II remains the conflict that resulted

in the highest number of civilian casualties, victims of that war offer researchers the greatest opportunity to understand this issue.<sup>31</sup> Leda exposes the traumatizing effects of warfare on children. Yet she also demonstrates the degree to which those effects can be undermined by a refusal to participate in them. Leda's youth complicates the trajectory of being, unbeing, and re-being that I trace in characters throughout this study. Because she is so young, Leda's *unbeing* is, in some ways, her *being*: she has no time to form an identity before the war. For Leda, then, *being* is itself subversive, which is made all the more apparent when she demonstrably attains re-being after the war.

The absence of data on the trauma non-combatants face is a result of what literary critic James Campbell terms "Combat Gnosticism," the privileging of the combatant's as "a qualitatively separate order of experience" (203). Those who live through war without waging it are granted little authority. If they speak about warfare, few listen. Dorte Berntsen and David Rubin observe that because of such privileging, the vast majority of those whose reactions have been studied were adults at the time of their trauma (128).<sup>32</sup> Indeed, according to Joshua Barenbaum, Vladislav Ruchkin, and Mary Schwab-Stone, "children under war-time duress are largely a *voiceless* population whose rights and needs are often subordinate to those of soldiers, and the necessities of war" (41, emphasis mine). This privileging is a clear result of our conditioned preference for aggression over vulnerability. Combatants are – by nature of both their training and their survival instinct

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<sup>31</sup> In a 2006 American Psychological Association study, Dorte Berntsen and David Rubin sought to evaluate the long-term impact of PTSD in children of World War II who were exposed to the German occupation of Denmark. In the resulting paper, Berntsen and Rubin cite the civilian death toll of that war as over forty million, with nearly twenty million children orphaned: numbers not seen in any war before or after (127).

<sup>32</sup> So too, a 2004 study conducted by Joshua Barenbaum, Vladislav Ruchkin, and Mary Schwab-Stone concentrated on the impact of warfare on child development. Barenbaum, Ruchkin, and Schwab-Stone assert that "the first literature on the effects of war on children dates largely from World War II, and is sparse...Not until the 1980s was more systematic enquiry conducted" (42).

– inherently invested in sovereignty. By listening exclusively to their voices, any notion of voluntary submission in the face of warfare is absent. The voices of mothers, for example, have long been discounted in wartime discourse, as have those of medical workers, pacifists, and men who are medically unqualified to fight. Accordingly, the voices of female children are entirely missing from this discussion. And with Leda, that voice *is* missing: she is largely silent. Seen in this context, however, her voicelessness appears transgressive. If even in speaking, Leda would not have been heard, then perhaps the most subversive thing she could do is withhold voice.

On the surface, Wescott offers no shortage of textual evidence to support the Helianos family’s assumption of Leda’s powerlessness. We read that “she had never been a clever child” (3), and that her dimness deepens upon Germany’s invasion, after which “her infant character took on a strange aspect, as if she drew all the confusion and intimidation in with her breath, absorbed it through the pores of her skin in an unwholesome damp” (3). Having internalized the occupation, Leda “rarely spoke, sitting and watching things without a word for hours at a time” (4). Already silent, then, she one day observes “eight or ten bodies [lying] on the pavement, machine-gunned” (6) in the aftermath of a protest against the German occupiers, which leads her to grow even more detached, and “for two and a half days she *would not, or could not*, move or speak or eat or sleep” (5, emphasis mine). Wescott’s vacillation here – that she either “would not” or “could not” make use of her voice – affords the possibility of agency. Yet her family concludes that Leda is a “poor inferior offspring” (7) and, on several occasions, that she is “subnormal.” She is not considered possessed of agency before the war; after it she is presented as more object than human.

Via sibling comparison, however, we can begin to understand the gendered nature of Leda's response, and the degree to which her silence might be read as strategic. Her brother Alex turns to revenge in the aftermath of their older brother's death at war. Alex "had taken the news of [Simon's] death on Mount Olympos very quietly, but after that...he began to talk only of growing strong enough to kill at least one German" (3). Wescott uses voice here to mark Alex's shift: he is "quiet" before Simon's death, but verbally aggressive after. Unlike his sister, then, Alex has a goal – a perceived purpose – of vengeance, which we're led to admire because such a goal is in keeping with narratives of national sovereignty, and because aggression does not leave him as paralyzed as his sister, who silently "shrank" (4) during the occupation. The juxtaposition of silent Leda and outraged Alex is telling, as it makes apparent Leda's ability to circumvent sovereignty. As we saw with *Saturday's* Daisy – who submits until Baxter demands that she read her poetry aloud, at which time she resists, demonstrating that she possessed the ability to resist all along – Leda regains voice when doing so allows her to care for her family. That she is able to speak makes it clear that she has had the capacity to do so from the outset, and that, therefore, her silent form of being is a choice.

Leda's voicelessness is a reaction to her status as a young female citizen of occupied Greece, and it is read as weakness even by her parents. But in a country at war – a country that has, indeed, lost the war and been stripped of its sovereignty – we might ask if it is a weakness to "shrink" from one's circumstances, to refuse to participate in the scramble for power. I suggest instead that Alex's aggression is troublesome in that it demonstrates his absorption of the anger and violence of warfare. In being effectively colonized, Alex develops a desire to colonize others. While this adherence to sovereignty

might serve him if he were a combatant, it seems impossible that it could serve him as a child. We're not given insight into Alex's behavior after the occupation ends. Yet in becoming central to his being, anger sublimates the other, natural impulses of childhood such that it becomes difficult to imagine how Alex will ever – even after the occupation – act on anything other than aggression.

Considered in this context, Leda's withheld being could be described as a temporary refusal to exist: a refusal to develop under the tyranny of warfare. Relevant to any discussion of Leda's identity is the body of research conducted in recent decades by theorists, psychologists, and philosophers to understand the relationship between physical space and the process of individualization. In an introduction to *Apartment in Athens*, David Leavitt discusses the relevance of the novel's title to its themes, claiming that "it so perfectly captures the novel's claustrophobia. Wescott may be our greatest poet of confinement" (ix). Indeed, nearly all of the novel's narrative occurs inside the apartment; thus while very few of the more dramatic elements of war are depicted, the German occupation of Greece remains a heavy presence. We are shown that occupation intimately, via the occupation of the four small rooms formerly belonging to the Helianos family and, for the bulk of the novel, possessed by Kalter. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard claims: "our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (4). For Leda, then, it is not merely rooms that are occupied; it is her "universe." Furthermore, J. Gerald Kennedy claims that the "process of orientation, of situating ourselves in space and coming to know the surrounding environment, seems indispensable to the recognition of the self as a self" (8). In light of such theoretical examinations of space, I contend that the trauma of



wartime occupation of one's physical space might result, for children, in two disparate reactions. The child's identity could be subsumed by violence, as we see with Alex, or the child could, as Leda does, refuse to develop self-identity, resisting the form of being imposed by violent occupation when that being will likely result in either a desire for dominance or a case of learned helplessness. In silently *unbeing* as a form of *being*, Leda avoids responding to aggression altogether, thereby forestalling aggression's power.

The deliberate and subversive nature of Leda's silence is obscured by the invisibility of her trauma, which makes it easy to overlook the ramifications of self-abnegation as they appear in *Apartment in Athens*. For the most part, Leda's suffering bears no resemblance to the dramatic or heroic trauma often attributed to wartime. The closest Leda comes to actually witnessing death are the "eight or ten...machine-gunned" protesters (who are already dead when she sees them), and Kalter, whose pistol shot she hears from the next room when he takes his own life. In fact, the family decides that, if they survive to see the war end, they won't talk about the experience of Kalter's occupation, as "it was too far below the level of what other people recognized as courage" (35). This is especially true of Leda, who is not seen as "courage[ous]" even by her own family. Only one other character demonstrates a similar lack of resistance to Leda, and she is depicted as cowardly. Mrs. Helianos meets this woman at the market one day, and the woman says sadly, "I pray, every day, for my little children doomed to die...I pray for them to die faster" (153). Mrs. Helianos resists this vulnerability, encouraging the woman towards a more hopeful sentiment. Like this mother, however, Leda seems to embrace the state of subdued despair that permeates occupied Greece. Indeed, she cedes to it entirely, which makes possible her eventual re-being, and which

likewise undermines Kalter's authority in the home, possibly even contributing to his suicide, by virtue of which the family's autonomy is restored. None of these effects is visible, however, as long as Leda is dismissed as "subhuman."

I argue that the mere diagnosis of PTSD perpetuates the degree to which Leda is dismissed. Of Leda's apparent recovery at the novel's end, Ira Johnson concludes: "the ordeal after the death of her father is...the catalyst that works as a shock-treatment on Leda, curing her schizophrenia and restoring her speech" (148). Johnson's diagnosis is outdated, yet it is indicative of the lingering assumption that something in Leda is simply broken and needs to be fixed. And indeed, when considered in light of contemporary diagnostic criteria, Leda's is a clear case of PTSD. According to Berntsen and Rubin, for a child to be diagnosed with PTSD, s/he must "have experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with an event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury of him- or herself or others...[and] have responded to the trauma with intense fear, helplessness, or horror" (127-8). After Leda accidentally stumbles upon the "sickening wall against which [Athenian protesters] had been knocked" (6), she returns to the apartment, with, we are told, radically decreased functionality. In the following days, Leda is described as "a small sleepwalker" who "sat no matter where all day long" and "lay all night long breathing with her mouth open and staring straight ahead" (5-6). In terms of the criteria stipulated by Berntsen and Rubin for PTSD diagnosis, the sight of the massacred protesters would have proven traumatic. And Wescott's depiction of Leda's subsequent "sleepwalker" behavior seems an expression of the prolonged impact of the experience. Leda likewise exhibits the "helplessness" attributed to PTSD. Even

hearing her parents discuss their plight causes Leda to “cry in her silent, passive fashion” (5).<sup>33</sup> That she has been disturbed by what she has witnessed is clear.

Yet it seems important to note that the symptoms of PTSD are reflective only of a passive response to warfare. Though potentially much more destructive, Alex’s learned aggression is not included here as symptomatic of trauma; Leda’s arguably harmless silence is. Far from wanting, as her brother does, to “kill...German[s]” – a response that is likely to be lauded for its devotion to sovereignty and not, therefore, considered a demonstration of trauma – Leda seems to want only solitude. PTSD, then, is but one manifestation of traumatic stress: one that in our deference to dominance we perceive as illness, thereby neglecting that it allows one to circumvent demands for violence. I take no opposition with claims that Leda has been traumatized, but I call for a reading of her introversion that yields space for strength. I argue that Leda’s ability to create solitude by withdrawing into herself in the midst of the horrors of World War II demonstrates her resilience, positioning her for successful re-being in that war’s aftermath.

By behaving in ways contrary to the means of dominance enacted by German occupiers, Leda resists the sovereignty-seeking selfhood Alex develops when he internalizes warfare. Her unbeing can best be seen, then, in terms of its internal manifestations. To understand her actions – and to differentiate them from more traditional pacifism – it is necessary to grasp the gravity of the occupation over Leda’s developing identity. Wescott writes: “[Leda] had a kind of placidity, never the least hysterical alarm” (7). Leda is detached. She does not resist; she silently cedes even her

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<sup>33</sup> Leda was likewise “apt to be panic-stricken if she had any sort of open space around her or distance stretching away before her. She preferred enclosures and hiding-places” (136), exactly the kind of “universe” crucial to Bachelard’s self-space relationship.

own reaction. Kennedy claims that “the extent of one’s psychic involvement in our identification with a given place affects – and is affected by – the symbolic meanings associated with that site” (6). Thus Leda’s ability to identify the apartment as a home in which she could find safety would have been challenged by its occupation.

The space in which Leda must establish her individual identity, then, is already, by force of war, occupied. It is now the enemy’s home, too. Though it could be said that no member of the Helianos family has a place once Kalter enters their lives, if we consider the criticality of place to a developing sense of self, Leda and Alex are the family members most vulnerable to the occupation. It’s difficult to read strength into such a position. Yet in a military occupation – wherein the usurpation of the property of others becomes the primary motive – Leda’s relinquishment of self and surroundings works in overtly oppositional ways to the machinations of warfare. In the development of his being, Alex longs to defend Greece, thereby mimicking the behavior modeled by German occupiers. Leda, however, makes no moves towards resistance, seeming utterly willing to cede her home to Kalter, and Greece to Germany. Given the irrelevance Greek resistance had, isn’t a form of being that rejects the example set by warfare preferable?

Another aspect of Wescott’s construction of Leda that makes it possible to read her character as ironically empowered despite her silence is her name. According to Johnson, “the name Leda is intended to call up mythical overtones,” as Leda is “a symbol of Greece, deprived of all reason by...violation, but still alive in her sensitiveness to the emotional atmosphere” (144). Here, Johnson refers to the Greek mythology of Leda, who is raped by Zeus in the form of a swan, and who is impregnated as a result with Helen, on whose beauty is placed the blame for the Trojan War. William Butler Yeats is largely

responsible for the revival of the Leda myth in the twentieth century, as his 1924 sonnet “Leda and the Swan” offers a brief telescoping of that history from the rape itself to the resulting war, and, ultimately, Agamemnon’s death at the hands of his wife – Helen’s twin sister Clytemnestra – upon returning from Troy. Yeats writes: “A shudder in the loins engenders there / The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead” (lines 9-11), suggesting that the violence done to Leda might be seen in relation to the death of Agamemnon decades later. Considered in this context, the occupation of Leda Helianos is charged with the potential for far-reaching consequences.

Yet the suggestion is not merely that Leda’s role is incidental. In the closing stanza, the reader is asked:

Being so caught up,  
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? (12-15)

Here – though Leda never speaks in the poem, never asserts her perception of the rape or its aftermath – the speaker calls us to ask if Leda may have understood the power given her in the event, or have grasped its long-term consequences. That “Wescott intends [Leda] as a symbol of Greece” (Johnson 144) encourages readers to ask the same question of Leda Helianos’s silent response to Kalter’s occupation. In this context, I argue that Leda “puts on” some of the “power” that appears to belong entirely to Kalter, that her silence appears an effective and calculated strategy when considered in terms of the Yeatsian take on Leda’s power in the aftermath of rape.

As Halberstam contends, “what looks like inaction, passivity, and lack of resistance” can sometimes be viewed instead “in terms of the practice of stalling the business of the dominant.” Far from mere uselessness, failure can be read, Halberstam goes on to suggest, “as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique” (88). We need not read Leda’s silence as powerlessness, nor her refusal to *be* according to the aggressive examples set before her as a sign that she isn’t a keen observer of the situation at hand. Mrs. Helianos suggests this herself, thinking after her husband is imprisoned that “their children, even wild Alex and witless Leda, had more sense of self-preservation than he” (238). Though she thinks of her daughter as “witless,” Mrs. Helianos recognizes by the end of the occupation that Leda is possessed of some ability to survive that she and her husband lack. Though she clearly suffers from PTSD, then, Leda likewise conveys a wisdom and intentionality not reflected by the rest of her family: though she is dismissed as “subhuman,” she is potentially empowered to, in Halberstam’s terms, “stall the business of the dominant.”

Though her self-abnegation is largely an internal process, Leda’s unbeing has at least one possible external manifestation: Kalter’s suicide. Though Kalter has plenty of motives for ending his life, Leda’s interactions with him in the weeks before his suicide are noteworthy, and suggest the possibility that her submission contributes to his death. Though Leda is mute at nearly all turns until Kalter is gone, she demonstrates an apparent fondness for the German officer. Shortly after his occupation of their apartment, we are told that Leda “was fascinated by Kalter, and she soon lost all her fear of him; then little by little...began showing signs of liking him (39). Upon hearing Kalter’s approach of an afternoon or evening, Leda “would slip quickly into the corridor and stand smiling up at

him, seductive, like a tiny courtesan,” and “sometimes she took his hand, or reached out her small grimy hand to give his fine uniform a sort of envious, luxury-loving stroke” (39). In response to her silent but open behavior, Wescott asks if “there [was] more cleverness in her retarded little mind than they had given her credit for,” suggesting that perhaps Leda was “seductive in order to be on the safe side.” And indeed, her strategy is effective: “Leda was the only one of them...whom the [major] regarded with favor” (39). Though still a child, Leda joins the women of my second chapter in intuiting the sexuality of vulnerability. Not only does she submit to the subjugation of identity required by the occupation, she carefully reads the situation, anticipating the potential benefit of sexual subordination, as well, and approaching the German officer with that benefit in mind. Though there’s no way to know if Leda’s openness with Kalter contributes to his unbeing, it seems possible enough to warrant mention. At any rate, Leda’s performance of precarity has more transgressive potential than Alex’s impotent desire for revenge, which stands no chance of leading to Kalter’s relinquishment of the apartment.

In addition to the possibility that she influences Kalter, Leda’s silence is, in at least one small way, *heard*. Bachelard claims: “over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us” (14). If the house of our early memories has such significance, it seems certain that a child in Leda’s position – living in a home that has been occupied by force, and in which her family is subsequently relegated to the status of servants – would face a problematized identity construction. Yet in Mr. Helianos’s letter to his wife, he writes, ““I do not believe that the children of Greece are irremediably, incurably sick; not all of them. They are like Leda...She is not really psychopathic, I have decided. She is only horror-stricken and paralyzed by fright, and no

wonder” (235). The recognition that there is not something irredeemably flawed about his daughter – that her behavior is a reasonable reaction to trauma – implies that the distress brought on by the German occupation will not permanently disable the Greek people. In allowing for the temporality of Leda’s silence, Mr. Helianos takes a step towards seeing his daughter not as broken, but as profoundly resilient.

And indeed, most of the novel’s hopeful ending is a result of Leda’s re-being. Shortly before Kalter’s suicide, Leda is deeply silent and demonstrably withdrawn. She utters not words, but the occasional “ghostly cry” (162). After he is dead, however – when Greece remains occupied, but the Helianos household no longer is – we see Leda use her voice thoughtfully and productively when her ability to do so has the power to aid her family. We first see this shift in Leda’s relationship to voice when the children return after Mrs. Helianos has learned of her husband’s death. Mrs. Helianos tries to stand, but is unable to hold herself up, and we read that “the little one with her cloudy but good instinct rose to the occasion, drew closer, and tried to bear more weight” (249). Shortly thereafter – despite being locked in a closet by Alex when he goes for the doctor – Leda breaks free and goes in search of a neighbor, calling, “‘Maria’s mother! Maria’s mother!’” until she finds her and “explain[s] the emergency quite clearly” (253). Importantly, Leda’s aggressive use of her previously silent voice does her no harm. Wescott writes, “apparently Leda’s miraculous effort had tired her, but that was all; she did not fall into her apathy or her tearfulness” (254). Having come into being transgressively, Leda’s re-being – itself a hopeful reflection of the change in their living quarters when that occupation ends – is a restoration of voice. Once her silent form of unbeing no longer stands to undermine the occupation, Leda has no problem re-being in a



traditionally empowered – vocal – way. In developing her identity now, Leda is arguably more likely than her brother to live a happy, functional life.

Wescott's portrayal of Leda Helianos – and of her response to the occupation of her childhood home – is a haunting example of the extent to which warfare can decimate the non-combatant. Bachelard writes, “the poet well knows that the house holds childhood motionless ‘in its arms’” (8). For Leda and Alex, childhood itself is occupied. Yet *Apartment in Athens* also serves as an example of the lessons to be learned from decimation. Bachelard goes on to say: “a house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability” (17). For Leda, those “illusions of stability” are shattered. But in their ruins we stand to discover a way of being that exists outside of wartime mandates of dominance. In silently resisting *being*, Leda resists the aggression that is modeled by Germany's occupation of Greece. And she becomes a model herself: demonstrating how not to internalize demands for sovereignty at a permanent cost to the self. Whether or not this modeling contributes to Kalter's death – and thus to the relinquishment of the family's apartment – Leda's silence contrasts with Alex's aggression to circumvent the internal psychological effects of warfare.

### Rosa

Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* is based on the family of real-life attorney Bram Fischer: a white member of the illegal South African Communist Party who represented Nelson Mandela in both the Treason and the Rivonia Trials. Fischer was tried and sentenced to life in prison for his activism, and Lionel Burger – the character Gordimer bases on him – dies in prison, leaving his daughter, Rosa, to struggle with

questions of duty and responsibility in a nation to which she has lost a great deal. The context of Rosa's struggle is apartheid rule; Rosa's *being* is a product of the privilege granted her under apartheid combined with the reactionary ideologies of her anti-apartheid parents. Her unbeing, then, is a reaction not just to apartheid rule, but to her parents' methods of opposing oppression. Of particular significance is an encounter she has with a black man who is beating a donkey. Though Rosa is horrified by the violence she witnesses, she knows that her ability to intercede is a product of her privileged position, and that doing so would undermine the small bit of authority not denied the man by racial oppression. She decides, therefore, not to act, and as she drives off she realizes that she must "defect" from South Africa, as she "can no longer live in Lionel's country."

This moment is the final instigator for Rosa's unbeing: in leaving, she carries her silence in this encounter through to her relationship with South Africa at large, abandoning her father's active form of resistance. For Lionel, the only acceptable way for a privileged white South African to live under apartheid is to rally all of one's energies to oppose it: to use voice unsparingly. While Lionel's anti-apartheid struggle can be defined as an aggressive use of voice, Rosa struggles in her unbeing to find a form of resistance that opposes apartheid without relying on the privilege on which speech like Lionel's depends. She finds that form in self-silencing. Though critics read her departure from South Africa in these terms, I argue that even in her silence and exile, Rosa never abandons the fight against apartheid. Instead, in her unbeing, she joins that fight by refusing to benefit from inequity. And in her re-being, Rosa joins Leda in reclaiming her voice: she returns to South Africa to take up the work that her parents began. Yet even within her re-being, the formative threads of voluntary silence can be found,

differentiating Rosa's passive form of resistance from the sovereignty-oriented form modeled by Lionel and Cathy Burger.

Her silence differs from the other characters discussed in this chapter in that it is a product of both Rosa's gender and her privileged – and not her oppressed – racial status. As such, Rosa's actions are more in keeping with those of *Disgrace's* Lucy Lurie, who voluntarily submits to black South Africans. Both Lucy and Rosa find themselves in a culturally liminal space – constructed not by them, but in some ways on their behalf – the hardships of which they are willing to endure bodily. We're conditioned to recognize Lionel Burger's approach to fighting oppression: resistance is a tool of both domination and opposition. In his death, Lionel is all but canonized by the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa for his life-long activism, which was loud and aggressive and unyielding, and which is therefore perceived as heroic. But just as no one recognizes Lucy's submission as heroic, Rosa's silent and yielding activism goes unobserved. Like the suffering endured by the Helianos family, Rosa's self-abnegation is “too far below the level of what other people recognized as courage” (35). Yet careful reading of Rosa's actions reveals within her silence a unique and resolute example of unbeing, and a re-being that is itself a new (and newly submissive) form of unbeing. Rosa makes herself new once – and then again – in her struggle to find not heroism, but a way of life that circumvents the culminative effects of misused power. I claim that by leaving South Africa when her voice cannot be used without conveying the authority of her race (unbeing), and later by coming home to quietly pick up her family's legacy of activism on her own terms (re-being), Rosa resists complicity with apartheid rule.

Understanding Rosa's childhood is central to understanding her pre-abnegating state of *being*, and the responsibility she perceives herself to bear as a white South African. *Burger's Daughter* opens with a young, newly menstruating Rosa waiting outside of a prison to deliver items of comfort to her political-prisoner mother. Her first way into citizenship is thus via routinized opposition. Rosa is expected to rise above the trauma of the occasion to fulfill the role of activist: Lionel "knew that his schoolgirl daughter could be counted on in this family totally united in and dedicated to the struggle" (12). The horrors of apartheid are the backdrop for Rosa's childhood; she is not sheltered from them. For example, she recalls overhearing that after a raid the apartheid government "sent a black policeman to pick up the brains [of black protesters] with a shovel" (44). Lionel and Cathy Burger make no effort to hide such trauma from their young daughter. Consequently, though Rosa acknowledges that "perhaps it was... a sickness not to be able to ignore that condition of a healthy, ordinary life: other people's suffering" (73), she nevertheless accepts that to her family "the real definition of loneliness" was "to live without social responsibility" (77). Rosa bears that responsibility in the form of her devotion to the communist party, which she maintains after her mother's death and her father's incarceration. But as Kelly Hewson asks, "what is the meaning of any kind of commitment if there is no self to commit?" (59). Arguably, Rosa's childhood is as occupied as Leda's early life, though for Rosa the occupying force is not a warring nation but an ideology. Her unbeing is a process of finding herself within her role as both recipient and opponent of apartheid privilege, which she does not by speaking, but by falling both literally and figuratively silent.

Like Leda, the relinquishment of voice is accessible to Rosa because she thinks of nothing – even life and freedom – as solidly *hers*. Having opened with an adolescent Rosa standing outside the prison that holds her mother, *Burger's Daughter* closes with Rosa herself imprisoned, having returned to South Africa – where she is assumed to be “her father’s daughter; she might try anything, that one” (177) – after her period of self-imposed exile. Rosa has been taught by Lionel and Cathy that “imprisonment [is] part of the responsibilities of grown-up life” (54); as her lover Conrad says, “you’re not scared to...go to prison...you will, won’t you. Sooner or later” (50). She is raised amidst both the horrors of apartheid and the single-purposed struggle against those horrors, “breathed it as children must fill their lungs indiscriminately out of mountain air or city smog, wherever they happen to be pitched into the world” (111). As such, she has no trouble making herself vulnerable to these realities, saying critically to Conrad: “you never got beyond fascination with the people around Lionel Burger’s swimming-pool; you never jumped in and trusted yourself to him, like Baasie and me, or drowned, like Tony” (117). Rosa “jump[s] in.” In both her unbeing and her re-being – in self-silencing by defecting and regaining voice by returning home – Rosa demonstrates that she is born of this nation at this time: that she is always already vulnerable.

Because Rosa demonstrates comfort with precarity at every step of her development – being, unbeing, and re-being – her agency is questioned. Karen Halil, for example, contends that “Rosa only ‘becomes’ a revolutionary subject at the end of her journey” (32). Her conduct along the way is seen as neither “agent[ed]” nor “revolutionary.” Halil reads Rosa’s time in Europe as empowered, however, suggesting that her journey “disrupts Western societies’ configurations of women’s ‘places’”

because “women traditionally have been relegated to silence” while men “have had the privilege of inhabiting the public realm, wielding political power, and claiming absolute right to reason.” Halil considers Rosa’s voluntary exile in terms of “the traditional male quest,” suggesting that she “becomes the traveler-hero, goes abroad, enjoys sexual trysts, tells stories, and explores the public world.” In so doing, Halil argues, Rosa “reclaims her body and her desire, steps out of the spaces of silence, and finds her voice” (32). The notion of Rosa needing to “[find] her voice” to be agented – to “[go] abroad” and “[enjoy] sexual trysts” – is in keeping with liberal feminism’s narratives of agency. Rosa’s abandonment of the fight to end apartheid – a fight not for her own freedom, but for that of others – is seen as her sole empowered act, as it leads her towards self-possessed pleasure and away from the burden of responsibility. In this way, Halil reduces Rosa’s unbeing to an act of self-protection and obscures its potential political power.

Readings like Halil’s reflect the problematic assumptions of liberal feminism. In her life in France – where she “finds her voice” in masculine terms – Rosa ignores atrocities in favor of freedom, becoming an accomplice to the systems of power against which her family struggled. I argue that though the actual act of leaving South Africa is politically important, Rosa’s activities in Europe are not. As I go on to assert, they are diversions meant to occupy her as she performs her real work of silent absence from South Africa. Yet those diversions are the activities we’re encouraged to see as Rosa’s most agented. Similarly, Halil reads Rosa’s unbeing critically, arguing that she “cannot keep intact any notion of personal interiority or private space” because of which she “loses access to her body and her agency.” Halil likewise asserts that the onset of Rosa’s menstruation is “overshadowed by the social co-ordinates of the moment” such that

“Rosa’s body *is made* public territory. She *is transformed* into a place where South African politics are mapped and can be traced” (35, emphasis mine). I argue, however, that, Rosa’s body is not “made public territory” by social forces. Instead, she makes it so, “tracing” her nation’s political landscape onto her own body via her embrace of precarity.

I argue that we see agency and opposition not in her hedonistic pursuits while in Europe, then, but in the other stages of Rosa’s evolving sense of self, each of which reveals some form of transgressive vulnerability. To begin with, Gordimer demonstrates the subtle degree to which the vulnerability of Rosa’s *being* disrupts the sovereignty of apartheid. In the novel’s opening scene, Rosa’s female body functions symbolically. She recalls that her first menstruation “began just after [her] father had made [her] go back to bed after [her] mother had been taken away” (115). Her mother’s incarceration is the catalyst for Rosa’s burgeoning womanhood such that when we meet her, Rosa stands amongst the families of other political prisoners while “the internal landscape of [her] mysterious body turns [her] inside out.” This development is tied to broader political events as well. She recalls that “at twelve years old what happened at Sharpeville was as immediate to me as what was happening in my own body” (115), and that “in 1956 when the Soviet tanks came into Budapest I was [Lionel’s] little girl, dog-paddling to him...reaching for [Lionel] as a place where no fear, hurt or pain existed” (115). It is as a feminine political being, Halil argues, that Rosa “dismantles the concept of a Cartesian, stable subject” (31). For Rosa – as a daughter of racially privileged communists – political and personal vulnerability are always already interconnected. Her being is a product of the political landscape of her nation-state. Yet like Leda Helianos, that being is

inherently and transparently vulnerable, and because she does little to resist that fact, Rosa undermines the illusion of sovereignty even before the silence of her unbeing.

And indeed, even before her unbeing, many of Rosa's political activities involve silence. For Rosa, silence is not powerlessness; it is choice. Far from an agentless child of imprisoned activists, Rosa perceives herself as well-versed in "cunning" and "concealment." She recalls of a lover that when they made love, "he [did] not know that the essence on his tongue in the bitter wax of [her] ear chamber, the brines of mouth or vagina were not [her] secret. For [Rosa] to be free is never to be free of the survival cunning of concealment" (142). Indeed, her words throughout the novel are tightly controlled, strategic at every turn. We read that "Marisa's name was not mentioned before a third person" (144), and that Rosa "didn't mention to Orde Greer who [her father's biographer] was" (145). Finally, to Afrikaaner Nationalist Brandt Vermeulen, Rosa is a "mistress of her own silences" (183). Even in being, then, silence is a tool.

Moreover, amongst her family and peers, Rosa's use of silence is unique. Rosa's father, for example, does not struggle with the ethical questions that plague his daughter. In language Gordimer borrowed from Bram Fischer's own trial, Lionel Burger proclaims at his sentencing: "there will always be those who cannot live with themselves at the expense of fullness of life for others" (27). Both the heroism Lionel evokes and his choice to make one final public statement indicate that he remains invested in active opposition through speech. Rosa, however, lacks her father's certitude about the tactic of aggressive resistance. She has lost her entire family to a cause and approach determined not by her, but on her behalf. Much of Rosa's life has been a process of learning to live with consequences not of her making, consequences that have led her to be, by her mid-



twenties, “the last member of the family of five” (33). Her relationship to voice is far different from her father’s – far more cautious – largely because Rosa has seen the ways in which his vocally aggressive tactics have failed. That her use of voice is cautious is all the more reason to assume that both its presence and its absence are purposeful.

Rosa perceives the occasion that first prompts her unbeing – Lionel Burger’s death – as concomitantly devastating and “free[ing].” That occasion occurs when, “in the second month of the third year of his life sentence, Lionel Burger develop[s] nephritis as a result of yet another throat infection and die[s] in prison” (37). Bram Fischer died of cancer, but Gordimer’s choice to have Lionel Burger suffer from chronic throat infections works well as a symbol for a voice silenced by imprisonment. Lionel never voluntarily relinquishes voice; he is forced by the nation-state, and by his failing body, to do so. This symbol is made more complex, however, as Lionel’s imprisonment also traps Rosa. Thus his silencing results in her empowerment, which she in turn uses to self-silence. Rosa thinks repeatedly, “now you are free,” and she is struck by “the knowledge that [her] father [is] not there ever, any more, that he [is] not simply hidden away by walls and steel grilles” (62). Rosa is no longer bound to the Burger family or its code of ethics. Richard Peck argues that the moment of Lionel’s death marks a “growing recognition that [Rosa] has a choice” (73). The decisions she makes from this point forward, then, mark a new era in her relationship to the nation-state: her era of silent unbeing, which is arguably just as effective at undermining apartheid as her father’s vocal resistance.

Rosa’s unbeing first manifests in the form of “a monstrous resentment against the claim...of blood, shared genes, the semen from which [she] had issued and the body in which [she] had grown.” She recalls “stand[ing] outside the prison with an eiderdown and

hidden messages for [her] mother,” realizing that since “Tony is dead...there is no other child for [her mother] but [her].” And she notes that while Lionel was in prison, “[her] studies, [her] work, [her] love affairs” were made to “fit in with the twice-monthly visits to the prison, for life, as long as he lives – if he had lived.” Ultimately, Rosa concludes: “I have no passport because I am my father’s daughter....And now he is dead!...and I knew I must have wished him to die; that to exult and to sorrow were the same thing for me” (62-63). This resentment is made further apparent when her father’s comrade Dick tries to comfort Rosa, saying, “some of us will still be around when it happens. Too late for Lionel, but you’re here,” in response to which Rosa falls silent. Observing this, Dick touches her comfortingly, “afraid he ha[s] made her weep” (108). Rosa later concedes that though Dick assumed she “was overcome at the thought of [her] father,” she was instead “filled with the need to get away as from something obscene” (111). It is arguably Dick’s faith in the communist party’s ability to affect change that Rosa reads as “obscene,” as she is no less invested in seeing “it happen.” Her resentment isn’t with the cause; it’s with the method. She senses that the role of communist-activist is impotent. Though her anger causes her to interrogate the assumptions behind her parents’ way of opposing apartheid, it does not make her abandon their cause.

Having begun to question her parents’ activist approach, two events further instigate Rosa’s unbeing. The first is a dead man on a park bench, whom Rosa assumes, for a period of time, to be alive. Because of this assumption, Rosa and the others eating in the park take no notice of the man’s presence. This proximity to death – and the fact that she was oblivious to it – causes Rosa to question her family’s ideologies; she asks, “the change from life to death – what had all the certainties I had from my father to do with

that?" And she thinks, "when the hunger ended...when there were no rents extorted and no privately-owned mansions and cosy white bungalows, no white students in contemplative retreat where blacks could not live...one would be left with that" (80). For all its devotion to ending suffering, nothing in the communist party's creed tackled death. Here Rosa becomes aware that though they counter the demands for sovereignty made by the apartheid government, activists still resist the basic vulnerability of humanity: that we die. Injustice can be overcome; death cannot, but the party finds ways of obscuring that fact. Conrad tells Rosa, "among you, the cause is what can't die. Your mother didn't live to carry it on, others will. It's immortality. If you can accept it...The same con, the future in place of the present" (52). Through this event, Rosa confronts vulnerability on a new level, recognizing that it will persist even when apartheid crumbles.

The second – and even more integral – event that initiates Rosa's unbeing is the beating of the donkey. It is in this scene that Rosa begins to model profound silence. After giving a woman a ride to an unfamiliar part of town, Rosa approaches "a gang of black children" to ask for directions, and they respond by throwing stones at her car (207). What they see when they look at her is not the daughter of civil rights devotees, but a white woman. This is a reminder to Rosa that her suffering does not negate her complicity in apartheid rule. Still lost, Rosa encounters a donkey-cart, about which she notices "something strange," making out first "a woman and child bundled under sacks," and then "a driver standing up on the cart in a wildly precarious spread of legs in torn pants." Finally, she sees the driver "[arch] back with one upflung arm...and [lurch] over as if he ha[s] been shot," and the donkey "draw its four legs and head down towards the centre of its body in a noose, then fling head and extremities wide again" (208). The

concomitant movements of man and donkey are repeated again and again, which Rosa notices incrementally such that her comprehension of the beating unfolds with the scene.

As she watches, Rosa recalls that she “didn’t see the whip,” she “saw agony. Agony that came from some terrible centre seized within the group of donkey, cart, driver and people behind him. They made a single object that contracted against itself.” In her perception of this scene, then, the abuser and the abused become one, as do the trapped onlookers, abuser and abused in their own right. Rosa continues, “I saw the infliction of pain broken away from the will that creates it...cruelty gone beyond control of the humans who have spent thousands of years devising it” (208). The “cruelty” Rosa sees here is no more about the man beating the donkey than it is about the apartheid government. In this moment, the beating is indistinguishable for Rosa from:

The entire ingenuity from thumbscrew and rack to electric shock, the infinite variety and gradation of suffering, by lash, by fear, by hunger, by solitary confinement – the camps, concentration, labour, resettlement, the Siberias of snow or sun, the lives of Mandela, Sisulu, Mbeki, Kathrada, Kgosana, gull-picked on the Island, Lionel propped wasting to his skull between two warders, the deaths by question, bodies fallen from the height of John Vorster Square, deaths by dehydration, babies degutted by enteritis in ‘places’ of banishment, the lights beating all night on the faces of those in cells. (208)

She sees suffering. And she does not intervene. Rosa notices that the donkey “[doesn’t] cry out,” which leads her to ask herself, “why didn’t the donkey give that bestial snort and squeal of excruciation I’ve heard donkeys give not in pain but in rut?” Having registered the donkey’s learned helplessness, Rosa shifts her attention to “that rag of a

black man” who “was old, from the stance of his legs, the scraggle of beard.” As she begins to grasp the thread that runs from this scene to all suffering, Rosa ceases action altogether. Her “car simply fell away from the pressure of [her] foot and carried [her] no farther” (209). She does not stop the abuse. Instead, she becomes a willing accomplice to the man’s cruelty. Her silence is an act of profound unbeing. And it is the sole reaction by which Rosa could demonstrate her own agency without denying the driver’s.

In choosing silence, Rosa disrupts the cycle of dominance better than she could have had she disrupted this one particular manifestation of it. Susan Barrett observes that this scene – “the only direct act of violence described in *Burger’s Daughter*” – is not an example of “white [South Africans] against black [South Africans] but of a black man beating a donkey.” Indeed, in this novel, violence against blacks is always offered to readers secondhand, which is troubling, though it makes this scene stand out for its undiluted emotional resonance. Barrett goes on to assert that “much of the horror of this passage comes not from the brutality of the man and the suffering of the donkey but because Rosa is powerless to intervene” (117). It seems inaccurate to categorize Rosa in this interaction as “powerless,” as once she returns her awareness to the political structure of the moment, she acknowledges: “I had only to careen down on that scene with my car and my white authority. I could have yelled before I even got out, yelled to stop.” She could, she notes, have used her voice to “deliver them over to the police, to have him prosecuted...to take away from him the poor suffering possession he maltreated.” She knows that simply by intervening she could have effectively defined this man’s life, removed this moment in which the man is the perpetrator of abuse from a context in which he is its victim. She could, in short, have “put a stop to it” though only “*at that*

*point I witnessed*' (209, emphasis mine). Her qualification here – that she could only have stopped the pain at the “point [she] witnessed” – is key to her choice not to act. And it's key, too, to the danger of acts of aggression in general: they respond merely to specific circumstances and not to their context, yet their impact is far-reaching. Instead, Rosa leaves, saying, “I don't know at what point to intercede makes sense, for me.” And she confesses: “if somebody's going to be brought to account, I am accountable for [the man], to him, as he is for the donkey.” This becomes the final event in Rosa's incremental unbeing. After this, she finds a way to leave South Africa because she can no longer “live in Lionel's country” (210). By not using her white authority to stop the man's violence, Rosa deliberately and profoundly silences herself.

Her silence in the scene with the donkey continues throughout her departure from South Africa – Rosa “[says] goodbye to no one” (190) – and it goes on, too, in France, where Rosa's nationality is invisible. She observes: “if I'd been black that would at least have given the information I was from Africa. Even at a three-hundred-year remove, a black American. But nobody could see me, there, for what I am back where I come from” (231). Once in Europe, then, her silence is physical, as well: her body offers no insight into her origin. In that physical silence, on her first day in Paris, a black man tries to pickpocket her, but as with the donkey, Rosa says nothing (234). In that state of surrender, Rosa travels to Nice to stay with her father's first wife, Katya. Having gone through the painful process of unbeing, Rosa longs to remake herself in terms of the villagers she meets, of whom she reflects: “it's as if nothing has ever happened – to them, or anybody. Or is happening. Anywhere. No prisoners in Soviet asylums, no South Africa” (287). If this is the form her re-being is to take – if she wants to construct herself

anew at a remove from the tragedies of her nation – she must unlearn the lessons of a lifetime spent opposing apartheid rule: must, in effect, pretend that “nothing has ever happened.” And she does so for awhile, finding pleasure in the release from responsibility. Ultimately, though, escapism is not where her unbeing leads.

Rosa’s exile in France is the period of time that Barrett reads as Rosa’s most empowered. Halil reads it similarly, contending that Rosa’s “movement to France is necessary to her development as a speaking subject” (40), which both privileges speech and implies a lack of agency in Rosa’s previous actions. Halil claims that “to know and fulfil [*sic*] her own desires, [Rosa] must remove herself to other rooms, houses, and countries” (36). In France, she does exactly that, taking a married professor as a lover. Of this new reality, Rosa tells herself: “Bernard Chabaliere’s mistress isn’t Lionel Burger’s daughter; she’s certainly not accountable to the Future.... ‘This is the creature that has never been’” (304). To her, this freedom is always “mythical” (304), not real. We see this manifest in subtle differences between Rosa and Bernard, who talks about his vulnerability in London – where his first language was not primary – and the discomfort it caused. Rosa recalls feeling at peace with that sensation. She says, “I’ve always been surrounded by...languages I don’t understand” (267). Vulnerability is the atmosphere in which Rosa thrives. Thus the hedonisms of France are not manifestations of her unique power; they are moments when that power becomes irrelevant. I argue, then, that the strength of Rosa’s time in France lies merely in her absence from South Africa.

What ultimately initiates Rosa’s re-being – restoring in her a desire to use voice – is ironically the call for Black Consciousness levied by several of the novel’s

characters.<sup>34</sup> We first encounter the rhetoric of Black Consciousness before Rosa's defection, when she hears at a party that "because the problem is white racism, there can only be one valid opposition to balance it out – solid black unity" (164). This rhetoric seems to persuade Rosa. I would argue, however, that she is not convinced that she has no role in South Africa's politics, but that her role is a subordinate one. She encounters Black Consciousness once more in France, when she runs into Baasie, whom she knew as a brother when she was a child. Until this chance meeting, Rosa doesn't know what happened to Baasie, though she does know that "his father was found dead in a cell after eight months in detention" (142). After receiving – in front of him – public recognition for her father's sacrifices, Baasie calls her late at night, full of rage. Lionel Burger is seen as a South African hero for dying in the struggle to end apartheid, while Baasie's father is unknown. This call impacts Rosa deeply; she perceives herself to be "dissolved in what [she] heard from him, the acid" (330). She felt sisterly love upon seeing him again; he felt the bitterness of having suffered invisibly. This conversation renews in Rosa the sense of complicity that initiated her unbeing. Yet she realizes that while her unbeing could be accomplished through silent defection, her re-being will require a renewed use of voice.

Thus Rosa returns to South Africa, quietly taking up the activism of her parents, as well as medical work with children hurt by police brutality: "teaching them to walk again." Once more, Halil reads Rosa's actions as insufficient, observing that her "role in the revolution when she returns to South Africa is secondary, for, as a physiotherapist,

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<sup>34</sup> Barrett claims that the Black Consciousness movement "refused all collaboration with whites and criticized them for speaking in the place of... blacks." Addressing the complications this brought about for white South African writers, Barrett cites Michael Chapman, who writes: "should they enter the black consciousness they will stand charged with colonial appropriation: should they permit the black figure its silence... white Africans will stand charged with perpetuating the myth of the empty land" (398). In Rosa, we see Gordimer struggle to account for this dilemma.



Rosa provides ‘palliative’ care for the survivors of the Uprising in contrast to the primary, ‘healing’ care her father provided as both doctor and revolutionary” (33). Rosa’s re-being does not mirror her father’s heroism. She regains voice, but not to perpetuate her own sovereign selfhood. She does not seek authority, even in activism. Instead, her re-being inspires her to pursue “palliative care” because she has concluded:

No one can defect.

I don’t know the ideology:

It’s about suffering.

How to end suffering.

And it ends in suffering. (332)

The path to “end[ing] suffering” is not dominance, but suffering. Rosa maintains her devotion to self-abnegation even in her return to South Africa, and to subversive politics.

In her re-being, Rosa is willing to accept even more vulnerability than she suspects her father would have been comfortable with for her. During the backlash to the 1970s protests, Rosa reflexively asks Lionel: “you used me as a prison visitor, courier, whatever I was good for...but would you have seen yourself watching [my brother] and me, hand-in-hand, approaching guns?” (349). She cannot know his answer, but she does know her own. She acknowledges that representatives of the threatened apartheid government could appear “from behind the big old syringa trees with the nooses of wire left from kids’ games in the branches,” that they could “put a Russian or Cuban machine-gun at [her] back, or...a scythe or even a hoe.” Yet despite these threats, Rosa “slept the way [she] had when [she] was a child, thick pink Waverley blankets kicked away, lumpy pillow punched under [her] neck.” She longs to tell Lionel: “anyone may...come in the

door and [look] down on me; I [won't] have stirred" (352). Rosa knows she is vulnerable. But in her re-being, she makes no effort not to be. It is in this period of her life that her own arrest comes. Rosa's re-being thus brings her full circle; her silent self-abnegation leads her to the same political prisoner status as her parents. Though her self-abnegation has no immediate external manifestation, her willing silence moves beyond heroism and towards a recognition of the inherent harm of action in some contexts. Rosa seeks not to solve racial injustice – for doing so would require embodying the authority that initiated and sustained it – but to cede from participation in that injustice. In both her unbeing and her re-being, Rosa seeks not to intercede, but to quietly subvert.

### The Barbarian Girl

Finally, silence plays a profoundly subversive role in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, J.M. Coetzee's portrayal of an unspecified empire's outpost at the end of an era of colonization. Here we see the interaction between that outpost's long-time Magistrate and a woman who has been tortured by other representatives of empire. Though we know less about the woman's internal process of self-abnegation than we do about Leda's and Rosa's, I argue that the external ramifications of her unbeing – in other words, the effects of her silence on others, as well as on the dominant power structure – are unprecedented, making her self-abnegation one of the most generative examples we see in this project. As a legal enforcer of colonial rule, the Magistrate is a clear representative of the "masculine-imperialist ideological formation" (Spivak 2204). Yet using little other than a startling degree of silence, the tortured woman initiates in him a drastic example of Spivak's process of "unlearning" such that the Magistrate is forced to come to terms with

the vulgarity of the empire's power, and the degree to which he is complicit in it. As he unlearns – willingly sacrificing more and more of his long-held privilege – the Magistrate comes to be viewed as the empire's enemy. And powerfully, in the wake of the woman's silence, he seems to embrace this position.

The woman who initiates the Magistrate's process of "unlearning" – referred to by the Magistrate as "the girl" and by critics as "the Barbarian Girl" – demonstrates an even more profound level of voicelessness than the other characters of this chapter. As we never know the Barbarian Girl's name (just as we never know the Magistrate's), she remains representational: we think of her in terms of her ethnicity – via a reductive and racist moniker – and her gender, and not her individuality.<sup>35</sup> She suffers tremendously, and it is important to note that she has no choice about the torture she faces. She and her father are brought in for "interrogation" by Colonel Joll, a colonial investigator sent to quell a supposed "barbarian" uprising. The Girl's father is "questioned longer than anyone else." A guard recalls that "his daughter was with him: she tried to make him take food." She was "also questioned" and "sometimes there was screaming" (29). We know little else except that "they broke her feet," which the guard believes they did in front of her father. I argue that the torture she undergoes is a part of her being, her existence as a young, female, colonized other. That she goes on to *choose* unbeing – to move from involuntary precarity to voluntary silence – is therefore momentous. The Barbarian Girl doesn't mimic the demands for sovereignty modeled for her by imperial forces. She makes no effort to shift from colonized to colonizer. Instead, she claims vulnerability as her own, learning how to use it subversively.

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<sup>35</sup> Though the assumptions inherent to the label "Barbarian Girl" are deeply problematic, I make no attempt to refer to this character otherwise, not merely because we're given no other option, but because that title's degradation is indicative of the degree to which she exists in a state of subordination.

She begins to perform her unbeing when she meets the Magistrate in the days following her father's death at the torturers' hands. Despite his efforts to draw her out, she refuses to speak, steadfastly resisting questions regarding the torture she's faced: when asked, she "shrugs and is silent" (29). Hania Nashef contends that "the arrival of [the torturers] forces the magistrate to get engrossed in an alleged barbarian insurgency" (22). This makes his opposition to torture sound inevitable, as if risking his livelihood is a default reaction to the empire's activities. Arguably, however, compliance would have been the most automatic reaction; the Magistrate could have found himself "engrossed" only so much as it took to support Colonel Joll. I argue, therefore, that it is the Barbarian Girl's passivity – and not Joll's aggression – that leads to the Magistrate's ultimate self-abnegation. Though the Magistrate never uses his power as inhumanely as Joll does – thus the stakes of his allegiance to empire are lower – he is a way *in* to the sovereign imperial system, an access point through which silence and submission might speak.

From the beginning, the Magistrate's presence seems to affect the Barbarian Girl very little, while hers undermines his entire existence – an ironic dynamic given that he is, by all accounts, the more empowered of the two. Indeed, it is often in their moments of intimate contact that he is confronted with new insights into the imperial system: he is able to see what was – before her silent influence – invisible to him. Though the Magistrate's loss of authority is most often read in negative terms – Nashef contends, for example, that the "process" the Magistrate undergoes is "invariably one of degradation" – it results in a profound and arguably voluntary shift in his use of power. In the wake of his relationship with the Barbarian Girl, the Magistrate yields the authority afforded him within the system of oppression, using his position within the empire to subvert its aims.

That this shift is instigated not by demands for dominance on the part of the Barbarian Girl – but by her avoidance of it – is indicative of vulnerability’s power.

Before the Girl comes into his life, the Magistrate is not merely complicit with racial injustice; he is an active part of the empire’s government, and he has well learned privilege. Prior to the supposed threat of an uprising that brings the colonial interrogators to the outpost – thus before the girl is left wounded and vulnerable – the Magistrate describes himself as “a country magistrate, a responsible official in the service of the Empire” (8). He says, “I believe in peace, perhaps even peace at any price” (14). Indeed, his role within the empire’s legal system is to righteously uphold peace without thought to “price,” especially where “price” means cost to the colonized. As Bijay Danta observes, the Magistrate “derives much needed security from his routine, which includes, among other things, inspection of the city gates....His station is peaceful....His primary work is keeping peace in the border” (23). He “do[es] not want to see a parasite settlement grow up on the fringes of the town populated with beggars and vagrants” (37). Though he does not participate in torture, then, the Magistrate subscribes fully to the narratives of sovereignty that fuel imperialism, and he feels that as the outpost’s legal authority, it is his duty to sustain those narratives.

We see his allegiance to the legalities of sovereignty in the Magistrate’s first interaction with the Girl, to whom he says authoritatively: “we do not permit vagrants in the town” (26). Despite his loyalty to the system he represents, however, the “security” (Danta 23) he finds in his role is undermined almost immediately by the girl, whom he finds “kneel[ing] in the shade” – “straight black eyebrows” and “glossy black hair” – “muffled in a coat too large for her, a fur cap open before her on the ground.” He returns

throughout the day to watch her begging, while she remains oblivious to his presence. From the gatekeeper, the Magistrate learns that the Girl is ““blind,”” and that “[Colonel Joll] brought [her] in. She was left behind” (25). Feeling simultaneously responsible for her in light of the torture she’s faced and willing to exploit her vulnerability for his own gain – motives not, in terms of Spivak’s “complicit intellectual” (“Subaltern” 2197), all that different from one another – he “offer[s her] work,” saying: “I need someone to keep these rooms tidy...The woman who does it at present is not satisfactory.” Nashef maintains that the Magistrate’s interest in the Girl begins as “an act of pity” (24). Yet even in making this seemingly benevolent offer, the Magistrate allows for its underlying implication: he notes that the Girl “understands what [he is actually] offering.” At the outset, then, his intentions for her are self-serving. Having heard both his actual and his implied offer, she “sits very stiff, her hands in her lap,” silent. Eventually, the Magistrate asks, ‘Are you alone? Please answer’” to which she “whisper[s]” merely: ““yes.”” Then – as she silently “tugs at her coat” – it occurs to him that “the distance between [himself] and her torturers...is negligible.” With this realization, the Magistrate “shudder[s]” (27). She is already changing his self-perception: in the stillness created by her silence, he begins to grasp the disturbing reality of his relationship to empire.

The political context for these early interactions between the Magistrate and the Barbarian Girl is important, as they meet at a particularly intense moment of imperial aggression. We read: “news arrived from the capital that whatever might be necessary to safeguard the Empire would be done, regardless of cost,” and the Magistrate notes: “we have returned to an age of raids and armed vigilance” (38). This demand for sovereignty in the face of potential threats stands in stark contrast not just to the Barbarian Girl’s

subordination, but to the Magistrate's increasing uncertainty. We see this at work when – after moving the Barbarian Girl in with him – the Magistrate goes on a routine hunting trip, and his “pulse does not quicken” when he encounters a ram. Indeed, he notes with surprise: “it is not important to me that the ram die.” As he struggles to understand his newfound ambivalence, he observes “an obscure sentiment lurking at the edge of [his] consciousness.” Looking “inward,” the Magistrate discovers that what “has robbed the hunt of its savour” is the impression that it is “no longer a morning's hunting but an occasion on which either the proud ram bleeds to death on the ice or the old hunter misses his aim” (39). Far from being willing to do “whatever might be necessary” the Magistrate finds himself stilled, “suspended in immobility,” aware of the consequences of his potential actions over the ram. He later tells the Girl, “never before have I had the feeling of not living my own life on my own terms” (39). This, I argue, is the Magistrate's first taste of self-imposed vulnerability. He hesitates to act out of aggression, but the precarity of that hesitation is a sensation with which he is not yet comfortable.

The Magistrate finds his interactions with the Girl just as fraught as this moment with the ram, noting that with her, “it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which [he] hunt[s] back and forth seeking entry” (42). Indeed, though her passivity extends to the quasi-sexual intimacy they share – he notes that she silently accepts all that is expected of her, “her body yield[ing]....to everything” (30) – he lacks the drive to consummate his relationship with her. And tellingly, he becomes concomitantly unable to fulfill the duties of the empire. To understand this dynamic, it seems helpful to imagine the Magistrate's response if the Girl had argued with him when he asked her to leave, or had resisted his invitation, or had made demands of her own. Were any of these the case,

we might imagine that his desire to master the situation would be intensified. In the face of her silent unbeing, however, that desire – like his desire to kill, or to penetrate – dissolves. In her submission, she gives him nothing to dominate, and his desire to do so disappears. Emenuela Teglu acknowledges this, contending that the Magistrate’s “reactions when faced with a body that is in his power to do whatever he wants with...are the first signs of his awakening” (72). His frustrated search for a point of “entry” leads him to ask: “is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was?” In turn, the Magistrate begins to “feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other” (42). Here, then, he grasps the futility of dominance: Colonel Joll’s tactics – horrifyingly limitless though they are – could never truly expose the Barbarian Girl. And with this acknowledgment, the Magistrate understands further the lack of distinction between Joll’s torture and his own soft exploitation. He notes: “the girl lies in my bed, but there is no good reason why it should be a bed. I behave in some ways like a lover – I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her – but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her; it would be no less intimate” (42). Like his inability to kill the ram, then, the Magistrate’s uneasy relationship to sex with the Girl is merely one symptom of his newfound inability to function as a colonial figure.

Likewise indicative of the Barbarian Girl’s erosion of his virulence – and of the fact that it is her silence that so affects him – is the Magistrate’s repetitive use of the word “blank,” which I claim is a visual manifestation of the silence that spreads from the Girl to the Magistrate. The idea of blankness is first used by the Magistrate when he tries to penetrate the Girl, at which time he notes: “these bodies of hers and mine are diffuse,



gaseous, centreless [and] also flat, blank. I know what to do with her no more than one cloud in the sky knows what to do with another” (33). It’s also present when he tries to recall her face while making love to a prostitute at the inn. He “ha[s] a vision of her closed eyes...filming over with skin. Blank, like a fist beneath a black wig” (41-42). He fails to remember once more on the morning after she uses his hand to achieve climax (43), and again when he cannot bring to mind the image of her sitting in the space beside her father, before torture disfigured her (46, 47). It is not merely the barbarians in general whose features he easily forgets, as the Magistrate notes: “I can remember the woman with the baby [who died], even the baby itself,” and “I can remember the bony hands of [the girl’s father]; I believe I can even, with an effort, recompose his face.” Instead, the absence is specific to “the space beside [her father], where the girl should be,” but where now, in the Magistrate’s mind, there is only “a blankness” (46). It’s as if, to him, she never existed in her unbroken state. We might anticipate that his inability to imagine her face would lead to an increased ability to disregard her humanity, but instead, it tortures him. Her absence in his mind – arguably a product of her profound silence – leads to the Magistrate’s unbeing, her blankness ultimately infiltrating him and causing his own.

The blankness that the Girl inspires increasingly undermines the Magistrate’s ability to exert control. For example, during his ritual of massaging her feet, the Magistrate recalls: “I lose myself in the rhythm...I lose awareness of the girl herself. There is a space of time which is blank to me” (28). So too, he confesses: “often in the very act of caressing her I am overcome with sleep as if poleaxed, fall into oblivion sprawled upon her body, and wake an hour or two later dizzy, confused, thirsty” (30). Though she appears to remain unaffected by his attention, the Magistrate is increasingly

undone by her silence. He begins their relationship with an assertion that “until the marks on this girl’s body are deciphered and understood [he] cannot let go of her,” but he finds his conviction fading as he tries – and continually fails – to perform such “decipher[ing].” Interestingly, then, he thinks of her torture wounds as something of a voice, a text to be “deciphered.” But like the Girl herself, they yield nothing. ““What did they do to you?”” he asks, but his “tongue is slow” and he “sway[s] on [his] feet with exhaustion [while] she gives no sign that she has even heard [him].” He tries to demand: ““tell me,”” but he cannot. His “lips are at the hollow of her ear, [he] struggle[s] to speak; then blackness falls” (31). Like the blankness he sees when he tries to recall her face, the Girl’s silence silences him, undermining his intention to “decipher” (possess) her.

Similarly, despite her willing submission, the Magistrate and the Barbarian Girl share only two moments of sexual intimacy. In these, voicelessness extends beyond the withdrawn use of speech into an emptiness that can infiltrate others. On the first occasion – when she uses his hand to achieve orgasm – the Magistrate finds himself unable to feel pleasure, just as he is unable to shoot the ram. He confesses, “I experience no excitement during this the most collaborative act we have yet undertaken. It brings me no closer to her.” What most disturbs him, though, is that it “seems to affect her as little. I search her face the next morning: it is blank.” Once more, she is silently unaffected. He finds this fact “disquiet[ing],” and he wonders: ““what do I have to do to move you?...Does no one move you?”” With this question comes new comprehension as, “with a shift of horror [he] behold[s] the answer...offer itself to [him] in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze” (43). The “two black glassy insect eyes” are those of Colonel Joll, “masked” and reflective because of the

sunglasses he wears. Seeing himself through those eyes marks a step in the Magistrate's process of unlearning. He tries desperately to convince himself that "there is nothing to link [him] with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars," and he insists: "how can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman's body anything but a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!" (43-44). In their early encounters, then, the Magistrate is unwilling to cede to his new glimpses of self for fear of where such admissions might lead. The Girl's silent unbeing is revelatory, but not yet destructive.

The second moment of sexual intimacy – and their sole occasion of penetrative sex – occurs during the journey to return her to "her people" (57); thus it takes place in the liminal space between the Magistrate's world (the outpost) and the Barbarian Girl's (which, because of colonial expansion, is no longer definable). She wakes him in the tent they share, and he recalls that "she is warm, swollen, ready for [him]; in a minute five months of senseless hesitancy are wiped out and [he is] floating back into easy sensual oblivion." Finally, then, sex brings the kind of "easy" release it brought before the Girl, or before the complications of the Magistrate's new awareness. When he wakes after, however, "it is with a mind washed so blank that terror rises in [him]. Only with a deliberate effort can [he] reinsert [him]self into time and space: into a bed, a tent, a night, a world, a body pointing west and east" (62). What starts off as pleasure turns into disorientation; the blankness brought about by the girl's silence shifts in this moment to the Magistrate's own "mind." This transference suggests that the clarity with which he perceives his place in the power dynamic has been effaced. He has unlearned another

piece of his privilege. The Barbarian Girl's unbeing becomes, thus, a weapon: a tool that is effective against domination when counter-domination would almost certainly fail.

In the wake of this vulnerability-inducing transference of blankness, they come upon the Barbarian Girl's people, and the Magistrate tells her: "I wish to ask you very clearly to return to the town with me. Of your own choice." To this offer, she responds clearly and decisively: "no. I do not want to go back to that place" (70). Brief though this moment is, I read it as a kind of re-being for the Barbarian Girl. Like both Leda's and Rosa's reclamation of voice, the Girl's speech here makes clear that she has possessed the ability to speak all along; that her silent unbeing was a choice. As further evidence that she attains re-being, we're told that the Barbarian Girl returns to her people with a new form of strength. Of her changes, the Magistrate observes: "she adapts without complaint." Though he assumes at first "that she submits because of her barbarian upbringing," he concedes: "what do I know of barbarian upbringings?" Ultimately, he realizes that while he still "see[s] her as a body maimed, scarred, harmed, she has perhaps by now grown into and become that new deficient body, feeling no more deformed than a cat feels deformed for having claws instead of fingers" (54-55). Perhaps, then, her re-being is a reclamation of her body not as damaged, but as newly whole.

The Magistrate makes his own unbeing apparent as he watches the Girl ride away from him on a stranger's horse, at which sight he observes: "these are the people being pushed off the plains into the mountains by the spread of Empire. I have never before met northerners on their own ground on equal terms... What an occasion and what a shame too to be here today" (71). In the aftermath of her silence – which provokes the Magistrate's own unbeing, or, in Nashef's terms, his "becoming" (25) – he feels not

heroic at having reunited her with her people, but ashamed to be returning her blind and with broken feet. His appreciation for being on “equal terms” with her people also speaks to the Magistrate’s ability, finally, to penetrate her the night before. Though we are led (because of his long-term sexual relationship with a prostitute) to assume that the Magistrate is comfortable with sexual power, his inability to penetrate the Girl at the empire’s outpost suggests otherwise, just as his ability to do so on neutral territory suggests a shift towards an equality not endorsed by imperial rule. Discussing Spivak’s articulation of the subaltern’s silence, Vincent Leitch says, “in every utterance, [Spivak] urges us to hear the faint whisper of what could not be said” (2196). Whether or not the Magistrate can ever quite hear “what could not be said,” he does intuit – through their disorienting intimacy – the power of the Girl’s subjugation. The process of unlearning does more than lessen his hold on power. In subtle ways, it redistributes that power, such that the girl’s moment of re-being marks the Magistrate’s unbeing. While as Nashef observes, “the girl remains...undecipherable” (26), the Magistrate unlearns his devotion to sovereignty. He then becomes an instrument for undermining the empire.

Having witnessed her re-being and begun unbeing himself, the Magistrate leaves the Barbarian Girl and makes the journey back to the outpost, where he finds he has been stripped of his imperial power. Where the Girl’s journey starts with forced submission and leads to voluntary unbeing, then, the Magistrate’s starts by choice – via her influence – and leads to force. In contrast to his newfound discomfort with sovereignty, the newly arrived colonial officer tells the Magistrate: “[war is about] compelling a choice on someone who would not otherwise make it” (49), to which the Magistrate responds: “I wish that these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson, so that we would learn to

respect them” (50). He is imprisoned and tortured for comments like this – indications that he has unlearned power – yet he continues to make them. Ironically, then, the Girl’s silence inspires speech in the Magistrate.

As his comfort with vulnerability increases, the Magistrate’s assumptions about the relative values of strength and weakness fall away. He notes upon his return to the town that he feels “a faraway tinge of exultation at the prospect that the false friendship between [himself] and the Bureau may be coming to an end” (75). The government official who has been sent to replace him accuses him of “hav[ing] been treasonously consorting with the enemy,” to which the Magistrate replies: “we are at peace here...we have no enemies...Unless I make a mistake...Unless we are the enemy” (76). He finds these statements thrilling, and he concedes: “I am aware of the source of my elation: my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man. Who would not smile?” (76). That he perceives freedom in his newly disempowered state indicates that for him, the value of sovereignty has at last been subverted. Stripped of the power vested in him by colonial rule, the Magistrate is free of the requirement that he act out of a desire for self-protection.

Yet he worries that his subversive “joy” is “dangerous” (76), and indeed it goes on to cost him a great deal. The representatives of empire sent to replace him devote themselves to torturing the Magistrate. As they do, the Magistrate “wonder[s] how much pain a plump comfortable old man would be able to endure in the name of his eccentric notions of how the Empire should conduct itself.” What he learns, however, is that his “torturers [are] not interested in degrees of pain.” Their torture is not practical: not engaged in for the purpose of gathering information, the justification offered to excuse its

use. Instead, the empire is “interested only in demonstrating...what it means to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well” (113). I argue that they engage in this cruelty not to advance sovereignty, but to punish the Magistrate for having abandoned it. So too, I argue that they punish him because – just as the Barbarian Girl’s passivity reveals to the Magistrate his own complicity – the Magistrate’s active resistance to sovereignty reveals the inhumanity of the new representatives of empire. Having been humbled by the Girl, the Magistrate is vulnerable enough to submit to the trauma of torture. And in that vulnerability – though we never know if he is successful – the Magistrate possesses the potential to initiate the process of unlearning in others. Colonel Joll and his cohort may be set on a path of precarity by the Magistrate’s example of submission. Indeed, perhaps even their willingness to abandon the outpost at the novel’s end is a sign of submission.

Though we can only speculate as to the Barbarian Girl’s influence beyond the Magistrate, we know its full measure within him. He appears to get little that he wanted from her: despite her willingness, their intimacy is rare and strained, she chooses to return to her people instead of staying with him, and he loses his position and is imprisoned by the empire as a result of his allegiance to her. Yet *Waiting for the Barbarians* closes with a kind of optimism that springs from the Magistrate: from his newfound compassion, from the guilt that fuels a heightened awareness of others. When he thinks of the Girl’s father, for example, he thinks of “any father who knows a child is being beaten whom he cannot protect,” and he concludes with remorse: “I should never have allowed the gates of the town to be opened to people who assert that there are higher considerations than those of decency.” He holds Colonel Joll and the empire at large accountable – saying,

“they exposed her father to her naked and make him gibber with pain; they hurt her and he could not stop them” – yet he yields to the burden himself, admitting that the torture took place “on a day I spent occupied with the ledgers in my office” (79). Once he makes space for his own culpability, the Magistrate’s sense of responsibility cascades, leading him to think about life in newly empathetic and markedly vulnerably ways. “We crush insects beneath our feet,” he observes, “miracles of creation too, beetles, worms, cockroaches, ants, in their various ways” (105). Likewise, he whispers to Colonel Joll the distinctly anti-sovereign sentiment: “the crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves...not on others” (160). As Nashef observes, the Magistrate is undone by the realization that “the darkness within the self should undergo a transformation rather than being exteriorized and imposed on the other.” And indeed, in the wake of the Barbarian Girl’s silence, the Magistrate faces the “darkness within the self” on new terms. We read: “I finally give way and sob from the heart like a child. I sit in a corner against the wall and weep, the tears running from my eyes without stop” (107). The humiliation he faces is external. The newfound grief and willing precarity that lead him to yield to it, however, are profoundly internal, and are, therefore, likely to remain long after the torture has ended. Here, then, we see a measure of the Barbarian Girl’s impact on the Magistrate: he can no longer look past the damage and the danger of domination.

The Magistrate’s unlearning undermines his entire concept of justice, a concept on which, it’s worth noting, his career has been built. Of justice, he now thinks: “once that word is uttered, where will it all end?” It would be “easier to shout *No!*” he contends, “easier to be beaten and made a martyr” because “where can that argument lead but to laying down our arms and opening the gates of the town to the people whose land we



have raped?” (106). As Nashef allows, then, by the novel’s end the “magistrate becomes receptive to the existence and suffering of others” (30). So too, his unlearning culminates in his ability, finally, to *see* the Girl. As he realizes there will be no justice short of self-abnegation, the Magistrate finds himself able to picture the Girl more clearly than he has ever done before. He imagines her “wearing a round cap embroidered in gold. Her hair is braided in a heavy plait which lies over her shoulder.” To this manifestation of her, he imagines himself saying, “I have never seen you looking so lovely,” to which, in his mind, “she smiles” and he notices, “what beautiful teeth she has, what clear jet-black eyes.” He continues this fantasy, noting that she “[holds] out to [him] a loaf of bread, still hot, with a coarse steaming broken crust,” in response to which “a surge of gratitude sweeps through [him].” In his mind, he asks the Girl: ““where did a child like you learn to bake so well in the desert?”” This offering metaphorizes all that the Barbarian Girl has given to him: silently, she has made something with impossibly insufficient tools and offered it freely. But of course, when he “open[s his] arms to embrace her” he “come[s] to...with tears stinging [a] wound on [his] cheek” (107). The irony here is that at last he is open to her, but she isn’t there. He learned these lessons too late for them to change his interactions with her. He cannot approach her as the person he has become. Though her impact on him is far-reaching, he cannot, therefore, alter her.

*Waiting for the Barbarians* closes with the former Magistrate restored to a kind of unofficial leader status, though his leadership no longer hinges on sovereignty. The new representatives of empire have abandoned the post: they believe it will be overrun by barbarians at any time, though it’s worth noting that if their fears are realized, it will be because of their own aggressive tactics. The Magistrate considers leaving too –

“resigning [his] post [and] buying a small market garden” – but he decides against that pleasure because in his absence “someone else [would] be appointed to bear the shame of office, and nothing will have changed” (136). Not only does he see the outpost as a “shame,” he is now willing to “bear” it himself. As the Magistrate reflects on the officers who’ve left, he observes: “one thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die” (131). Thus he acknowledges the danger of sovereignty, of self-protection at any cost. Though he is once more a representative of empire, the Magistrate no longer holds to the tenets of imperialism.

In recalling the Girl, the Magistrate thinks she should have stopped his failed attempts at intimacy, that she should have told him: ““if you want to love me you will have to turn your back on [the empire] and learn your lesson elsewhere.”” The Barbarian Girl never actually asks the Magistrate to do so: she never, in fact, asks him for anything at all. Instead, he imagines their conversation, which means that this call for the abandonment of power comes only from him. He realizes: “I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow” (132-33). I argue that the Magistrate is not that “lie” now. Now he waits, humbled, void of comforts, with the others who’ve been left behind. They are vulnerable to what is to come. And as they wait, “in the shelter of [their] homes, with the windows bolted and bolsters pushed against the doors, with fine grey dust already sifting through roof and ceiling to settle on every uncovered surface,” the Magistrate “think[s]” not of his own imminent demise, but “of our fellow-creatures out in the open who at times like this have

no recourse but to turn their backs to the wind and endure” (150). In his newfound willing precarity, his own discomfort bears little relevance.

The Barbarian Girl’s silence is so profound as to leave her feeling ethereal even when she’s present. We are not granted access to her post-abnegation self – as we are with both Leda and Rosa – thus our understanding of her re-being is as intangible as the Magistrate’s understanding of her life altogether. Yet we see as monumental a re-being in the Magistrate as in any of the privileged characters of this project. Indeed, where neither Leda nor Rosa can be said to bring about the external consequences of self-abnegation, the Barbarian Girl’s subversion of the Magistrate is astonishing. And though his power is more diluted than Joll’s from the outset – and his use of it far kinder – the Magistrate nevertheless works to maintain sovereignty one day, and not the next. The late-empire setting of the novel’s end may not be “the scene [the Magistrate] dreamed of” (152), but it is a magnificent one in terms of the revolutionary external potential of silence.

## CHAPTER IV: (UN)CONCEIVED MOTHERHOOD

Child sacrifice to either the patriarchy of religion or the patriarchy of the state has been long endorsed, as we see in Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, or in the sacrifice – in any nation with a military force – of young men at war.

~ Martha Minow, "Child Endangerment, Parental Sacrifice"

No matter what I may be doing, in my heart is the wish for children and knitting. God, I never asked better than to boil some good man's potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar.

~ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*

Having examined female sexuality in my second chapter, I look here at women and motherhood. I see this chapter as necessarily distinct from the one focusing on sex because – though these issues are biologically connected – the expectations placed on women by various nations with regards to sexuality differ vastly from, and sometimes even directly oppose, those placed on them regarding their duties as mothers. Despite these differences, however, both a woman's sexuality and her maternal responsibilities are regulated by her nation-state. And as with life, sex, and voice, the stakes for self-abnegation within motherhood are high, and the potential for subversion profound. Motherhood differs from the other themes I've explored in that someone else – a child – is subject to acts of abnegation. Indeed, in this chapter both an infant and a fetus are sacrificed. Though I explore those deaths in depth, my interest is maternal abnegation, which I define as the destruction not of a woman herself, but of her role as a mother.

Motherhood is something all cultures encourage – or even expect – women to pursue. Yet women are often not afforded the tools necessary to do so successfully. As Lynne Huffer asserts, "under patriarchy, to be a woman is to be a mother" (15). Women are responsible for sovereignty in that they are expected to provide and care for the bodies necessary to sustaining it, for which reason Dorothy E. Roberts contends that

“motherhood is virtually compulsory for women: no woman achieves her full position in society until she becomes a mother” (34). That this dynamic – which I call the motherhood mandate – hinges on hypocrisy is obscured by the invisibility of motherhood as a practice. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich writes, “we know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood” (11). It is a practice in which most women engage – and as a practice, it is rife with power struggles, political complications, biological imperatives, and cultural assumptions – yet it goes largely unremarked upon in most academic and political spheres. Jocelyn Fenton Stitt and Pegeen Reichert Powell claim of American women, for example, that “despite the fact that roughly 80 percent...will have children at some point during their lifetimes (this statistic leaves out adoptive mothers, so the percentage of women actively caring for children is...higher), issues facing mothers are still seen as the marginal problem of a subgroup” (3). The sacrifices that a woman makes to the institution of motherhood are invisible; we are only aware of them when they are not made, or when they are made in a way that is untranslatable to us given the sovereignty-maintaining motherhood mandate.

This chapter focuses on two women who respond to the motherhood mandate via maternal abnegation. The first – Sethe Suggs of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* – adheres to that mandate, but in so doing, finds herself trapped by expectations she cannot fulfill. The second – Mary Metcalf Crick of Graham Swift’s *Waterland* – refuses the mandate. Both Sethe and Mary respond to their circumstances by unbeing in ways that undermine the constructed *being-ness* of nationalistic womanhood. In these texts – set respectively in Reconstruction-era United States and 1940s-1980s England – women sacrifice their children and their potential for children in response to ideologies governing their culture,

and within settings where the domestic is made political (i.e., in ways that demonstrate that their romantic, self-protective, and maternal choices are irrevocably tied to the state). Making use of maternal theory, I examine the bind into which various cultures put mothers and would-be mothers, and the lengths to which they must go to adhere to the simultaneous mandates of their gender and their nationhood.<sup>36</sup> Via the lens of maternal theory, the transgressive potential of maternal abnegation becomes evident, but so does its potential for failure. Where Sethe's unbeing proves revolutionary, Mary's – which by traditional measures would be considered far less tragic – offers little beyond despair. Thus this project closes with an example of self-abnegation that leads not to re-being, but to further loss. Far from calling us to question submission's merits at large, however, this final example makes clear the risk of vulnerability as an approach: *that it might not work*, and that when it fails the suffering is immense. Mary's failed unbeing thus reveals in contrast just how radically subversive most of this project's acts of submission are.

Maternal abnegation has the potential to be powerful precisely because a woman's choices are not merely personal; they are tied to the political structures of maternity vis-à-vis the state. Mothers – to be fully considered such – must be willing to sacrifice their children to the interests of the state. They must be willing to send their children to war, to expose them to the inhumanity of slavery, or to enforce upon them laws and regulations not in their genuine best interests. This makes ironic our horror when mothers sacrifice their children to any other purpose: the children's own interests,

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<sup>36</sup> Paula Gallant Eckard claims that “maternal theory” focuses on “the physical, psychological, social, and cultural dynamics affecting the maternal experience” (2). Maternal theory is a relatively new field of study, a fact that indicates that though the mother/child relationship is central to our development as a culture, it is not valued in an intellectual way. Eckard contends that “maternal subjectivity, which presents the experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, breast-feeding, and motherhood from the mother's perspective, has not had a visible place in the history of written culture” (23).

for example, or those of the mother. The potential power of maternal abnegation is further evident in the widely understood (though rarely discussed) binary of the “good” versus the “bad” mother, which nation-states use to regulate motherhood. Sharon Abbey discusses how “images of the ‘good’ mother...cull[ed] from religion, myth, fairy tales, and the media” almost exclusively depict mothers as “heterosexual, married, white, and middle class.” Additionally, good mothers “are devoted, loving, attentive, and self-sacrificing” (xviii). In regulating the behavior of mothers, nation-states successfully regulate women’s identities. Diana L. Gustafson writes that “maternal...self-sacrifice exacts enormous costs on a woman’s career aspirations, social life, and personal needs.” Nevertheless, Gustafson notes, “accepting the inequitable burden of parenting labor and selfless love is an expectation of the good mother” (26). To motherhood, then, women are all but required to subordinate the self, and an unwillingness to do so functions as a powerful refusal of the nation-state. This expectation is not placed on fathers, who are asked primarily to “provide”: a task inherently removed from that of parenting itself.

In my experience of teaching novels that highlight these impossible expectations – *Beloved*, *Waterland*, T Cooper’s *Lipshitz 6*, or *Two Angry Blondes* – complex maternal characters are unpopular, receiving vigorous criticism from otherwise open-minded students. Though they are adept at understanding the cultural limitations that various othered groups face, students often seem unable to extend such understanding to mothers, concluding semester after semester that various mother-characters are simply *bad* at their most important (this qualification seems implicit) societal responsibility. Rich writes that “most women in history have become mothers without choice, and [many] have lost their lives bringing life into the world” (13). Because of these realities, student resistance

surprised me at first. I underestimated the extent to which cultural mores regulate motherhood. Roberts writes: “the duty imposed on mothers to protect their children is unique and enormous. Mothers have an immediate and unavoidable duty to care for their children from the moment of birth, if not from the moment of conception” (31). Roberts’s use of words like “unique and enormous” is important here. In First- and Third-World nations alike, there is no higher perceived duty for women than the act of good mothering.<sup>37</sup> As my otherwise compassionate students demonstrate, it’s easy to judge mothers like Sethe and Mary: to conclude merely that they have *failed* without considering either the motives for that failure or its potentially revolutionary outcome.

The figure of Antigone provides a model for examining such failures and their outcomes. In *Antigone’s Claim*, Judith Butler examines various representations of Antigone’s rebellion against the state, including her affinity for kinship over political or legal allegiance and our seemingly contradictory perception of her (stemming from both the etymology of her name and her childlessness) as “opposed to motherhood.” Butler asserts that for Antigone, “symbolic positions have become incoherent” because she “confound[s]...brother and father” and “emerg[es]...not as a mother but – as one etymology suggests – ‘in the place of the mother’” (22). Butler establishes Hegel’s conception of Antigone as markedly anti-authoritarian, saying that to Hegel, “Antigone represents the law of the household gods” while “Creon represents the law of the state” (5). In her *being*, Antigone adheres to state expectations for women. But in refusing to obey Creon’s demand to leave her brother Polyneices unburied – a refusal we might

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<sup>37</sup> Roberts goes on to contend that “most of the cases on omission liability, if not all, concern mothers...who failed to care properly for their children...[C]riminal law is more likely to impose an affirmative duty on mothers than on other classes of people. Mothers are far more likely to be punished for *failing to act* than anyone else in our society” (32).



describe as her *unbeing* – Antigone refuses to yield to the state. This is further complicated by the fact that because she is caught in her transparent crime – because she is buried alive as punishment, and because she chooses to kill herself instead of waiting for her lover to rescue her – Antigone voluntarily sacrifices the roles of wife and mother to which we would expect her, in her affinity for kinship, to endeavor.

Like the women of this chapter, motherhood is part of Antigone’s identity structure; yet she is always already an outsider to it. Butler asserts that “Antigone figures the limits of intelligibility exposed as the limits of kinship,” which “raises the question of how it is that kinship secures the conditions of intelligibility by which life becomes liveable,” but also “by which life...becomes condemned and foreclosed” (23). For women, kinship establishes these conditions absolutely, dictating how a woman becomes a mother, and thus how she becomes a woman. In not giving life (not becoming a mother), Antigone perceives herself as not having lived (Butler 23). Thus it is not merely that motherhood makes someone a woman, but that motherhood gives a woman *life*. Huffer contends that “the mother is a symbol of beginnings; as the one who gives birth, she occupies the place of the origin. Metaphorically speaking, everything begins with the mother” (7). This gives the motherhood mandate an added imperative: women only *become women* when they give birth; in delivering their children, they deliver themselves as full manifestations of their potential. They create a new being who will be expected to fulfill the role of citizen, but concomitantly, they fully realize the role of citizen themselves for the first time. Antigone exposes and rejects this ideology. She demonstrates an acceptance that – in not giving birth to a child – she failed to give birth to herself as mother-citizen. Sethe and Mary mirror this rejection, though they do so to

varying degrees of success. They refuse the motherhood mandate, and in so doing they expose the impossible expectations placed on women regarding motherhood.

### Sethe

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison depicts a mother desperate to spare her children from slavery, but with no means of doing so other than by killing them. Though Sethe Suggs is stopped before her whole family is dead, she succeeds in killing her older daughter. In the urgency of this moment, Morrison exposes the trauma of motherhood in a society where not all mothers can meet the criteria set by national ideology for that role. I argue that though Sethe's actions are guided by her impossible role as slave-mother – and thus by her relationship to the state – the action she takes is her own, the individuality of her behavior evidenced by the shock of those around her. Her action is not merely one of outward violence, but of inward sabotage: it may be impossible to grasp the depths of Sethe's personal sacrifice in killing her daughter. My interest lies in Sethe's maternal abnegation itself – which functions as her unbeing – and in how we read both its personal and political ramifications. Though her action costs *Beloved* her life, it is possible to read within Sethe's maternal abnegation both personal and political redemption.

Critics have long searched *Beloved*'s pages for a sense of redemption from the horrors of slavery. Despite the novel's shattering narrative, most of its robust critical response finds its retelling of the aftermath of slavery to be healing, with critics focusing on its metaphysical or magical realist elements. Brooks J. Bouson contends that Morrison pursues “a cultural cure both through the artistic rendering and narrative reconstruction of

the shame and trauma story” (5).<sup>38</sup> While critics overwhelmingly agree that the novel’s primary subject is the trauma induced by the institution of slavery, they seem likewise convinced that its function is sanative: that it endeavors not merely to expose the wounds of slavery, but to heal them. What I find interesting is that the focus of such scholarship remains on the degree to which Morrison’s actions (in creating the novel) are healing; yet no one argues that Sethe’s are such. This is no doubt because it is painful to search for redemption in the death of a child, or in a mother having deliberately brought about that death. Allowing that Morrison’s novel is cathartic, however, I argue that Sethe’s choices must be as well. Resistance to seeing those choices in such terms demonstrates our own cultural conditioning vis-à-vis motherhood. Sethe’s action is untranslatable given the limitations of liberal feminism. These are the terms in which I explore Sethe, and I do so in an effort to view her as both agented and subversive of the state, which relies on mothers to produce citizens who can in turn be counted on to maintain sovereignty.

I trace Sethe’s journey from her state of *being* as a married slave woman – during which time she struggles to attain agency despite the radical degree to which it is denied her – to her self-imposed process of *unbeing* – which she initiates by killing Beloved, an act which ends not just her daughter’s life, but Sethe’s own sense of herself as a successful mother. Ultimately, I argue that Sethe attains re-being, configuring meaning for herself and her children outside of the motherhood mandate. Though her maternal abnegation is fueled by her subscription to the motherhood mandate, that abnegation likewise marks her resistance to those impossible standards. In ending Beloved’s life –

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<sup>38</sup> So too, Lisa Williams claims that Morrison’s multi-focal narrative structure “posits the healing nature of both narrative and memory” (129). The climactic scene in which Beloved disappears is read as especially redemptive, as it constitutes a kind of reenactment of the day Schoolteacher returned to claim the family. Bouson says this scene is “often construed by critics as a therapeutic and self-healing reenactment of the original trauma...in which the past is revised or reversed” (158).

and in thereby refusing to allow her children to carry the burden of a sovereignty that does not extend to them – Sethe abandons the impossible methods by which she has been taught to pursue power. Halberstam claims that women who practice shadow feminism “[refuse] the essential bond of mother and daughter that ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in so doing, reproduces her relationship to patriarchal forms of power” (2). Sethe performs such a “refusal.” She ends life to avoid perpetuating her own enslaved “legacy” in the life of her daughter. Halberstam further contends that “the whole model of ‘passing down’ knowledge from mother to daughter is...invested in white, gendered...hetero-normativity” (3). The expectation is that mothers will train their daughters to take on the responsibilities of motherhood themselves; it is central to the motherhood mandate that they do so, and perhaps it is the motive behind that mandate. Sethe refuses to train Beloved to support the nation-state. Her resistance to motherhood reflects a powerful abandonment of tradition: unable to “pass down” freedom to Beloved, Sethe refuses to pass down anything at all.

As I establish in this chapter’s introduction, parental self-abnegation is the purview almost exclusively of women, which renders mothers solely responsible for replenishing the citizenship that maintains the illusion of sovereignty. We see this in *Beloved*’s opening lines, as we read “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children” (3). From the moment we meet “the women in the house” – Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs – we watch them struggle against the “spite” of the baby’s ghost, who appears to torment them out of anger with Sethe for ending her life. Women remain the primary victims of hostility throughout *Beloved*, and Sethe receives most of the blame, as the local African-American community shuns her –

“step[s] back and hold[s] itself at a distance” (177) – in the decades after the tragic events brought on by Schoolteacher’s arrival. Sethe’s husband, Halle, never makes it to Ohio, and thus never faces the baby’s wrath. Even if he had succeeded in escaping, or if he’d been directly responsible for Beloved’s death, he would likely not have received the same level of rage from either his family or the community. Similarly, their sons, Howard and Buglar, leave as soon as they’re able. We read that “first one brother and then the next stuffed quilt packing into his hat, snatched up his shoes, and crept away from the lively spite the house felt for them” (3). Even Paul D – himself a victim of the atrocities of slavery – condemns Sethe, telling her before he leaves: ““you got two feet, Sethe, not four”” (165), thereby defining her unbeing as subhuman or animalistic. Paul D stays only until he knows Sethe’s history, and then does not return until Beloved – the reminder of that history – is gone. The women, however, seek no such escape. “124 was spiteful,” and Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs are the objects of its malice. They implicitly agree to bear the consequences of sins both of and not of their own making. Like the men around them, they could fall apart – or leave out of fear or judgment – but they do not.

Paul D’s inability to understand Sethe’s decision – which is ironic given the depth of his understanding of the enslaved *being* against which she reacts – seems a product largely of gender roles. In her analysis of the subaltern, Spivak argues that “if, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (2203). If we allow that the victims of slavery represent a subaltern group, then we might also allow that the voicelessness of the subaltern applies especially to women, and, most of all, to mothers stripped of the ability to mother. In terms of American history, only the enslaved child serves as a

greater example of the subaltern than the enslaved mother. Yet this novel centers on a woman's choice, and to overlook that choice, or to assume (as critics of *Beloved* have long done) that it was merely a product of fear – that it reflects no higher order thinking – is to perpetuate the idea that Sethe is powerless. To explore this novel exclusively as a cultural critique of slavery is to deny Sethe agency. It is only theoretically true that she had no choice (only true in terms of academic consideration of runaway slave mothers). What is literally true is that Sethe took her children to the shed to kill them, having decided that death would be better than a return to slavery. She could imagine the life Beloved would live as a slave-girl (and as a future slave-woman), and she chose against that life. I argue that this choice is – along with her decision to run away from Sweet Home – one of the most significant acts of agency Sethe ever performs. And it is as profound an unbeing as any this project has to offer.

The burden of her choices can be understood via a conversation Sethe has with Paul D, who asks if she might consider having his child. In response, we read that Sethe is “frightened by the thought of having a baby once more. Needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, *that* caring – again...O Lord, she thought, deliver me. Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer” (132). “Motherlove was a killer” for Sethe, of course, not merely because she had to be “good,” but because being a “good” African American mother under or in the wake of slavery was impossible. As Gustafson points out, fulfilling the motherhood mandate is difficult enough in the comparatively secure context of “contemporary western society,” where “the good mother...is charged with the impossibility of rendering continuous, intensive care from birth to independence” (26). While these terms no doubt apply to Sethe's understanding of “motherlove,” it is further

complicated by her proximity to the threat of slavery. Paula Gallant Eckard claims that “motherhood in the slave community held much significance because it brought status to women...[T]he mother-child bond was regarded as the most important and sacred relationship within a slave family” (20). Ironically, this is true precisely because slave women were not given the legal protection of marriage. Eckard argues that the privileging of motherhood “lay in the fact that slave marriages were fragile institutions. They were not recognized as legal, and any vows spoken were not binding. In slave marriage ceremonies, preachers changed the vows to ‘until death or distance do you part’” (20). Motherhood was thus upheld as the primary familial connection amongst slaves, but it was not supported by the law. *Being* as a slave mother was a matter of impossible contradiction. For a slave woman, producing children compensated for the lack of legal recognition of marriage. Yet it likewise functioned as an inherent offering of more slave bodies to the nation-state. This recalls Antigone’s dilemma. But where in refusing to become a mother, Antigone refused to *birth herself* as a national citizen, a slave woman could only refuse to perpetuate sovereignty at her own expense.

Moreover, even when slave women managed to meet the criteria for “good” mothering, racist sentiment nevertheless assumed they were failing. Eckard writes: “it was in the realm of sexuality and motherhood that the patriarchy delivered the most oppression,” asserting that “women’s bodies were the terrain upon which the southern patriarchy was erected” (12). Though slavery has been demolished by the novel’s end, “the southern patriarchy” has not, and *Beloved* directs our attention to “women’s bodies” such that we might come to understand what is sacrificed to patriarchy’s continuance. Bouson argues that “Morrison exposes the shameful treatment of African-American slave

mothers who, according to the racist constructions of nineteenth-century apologists for slavery, were ‘more primitive’ than white women,” and less “‘attached’ to their children” (133). Thus we begin to see the contradictory and irreconcilable position in which the nation-state placed slave mothers. And we see, too, the risk of assuming that Sethe’s killing of Beloved is merely a result of her position as escaped slave: if we conclude that her ability to kill her daughter is a result of her lack of agency, we risk implying that it is, in turn, a result of an insecure attachment.

Instead, I argue that Sethe’s resistance is complex. Though we are conditioned by narratives of sovereignty to think of violence as inspired by a desire for dominance, Sethe’s utter submission to the mandate of *good mothering* drives the murder she commits. Destructive as it is, however, her willingness to take this drastic action keeps Beloved from life as a slave woman. Thus Sethe’s movement from being to unbeing is perhaps the only way she can refuse aid to a sovereignty that exists at her expense, but in no way *for* her. Jean Wyatt claims that throughout *Beloved*, Sethe “defines herself as a maternal body” (211). Yet even this self-definition creates a contradiction, which we see play out in Sethe’s vulnerability. Rich draws a distinction between two versions of motherhood: “the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control” (13). This distinction is useful in teasing out the jumble of resistance and submission that Sethe exhibits. If motherhood functions on two levels – one that invests a woman with power, the other that strips it from her – then neither embracing nor resisting motherhood can be simply self-abnegating or rebellious.



Submission to the motherhood mandate is what leads to Sethe's maternal abnegation, but that abnegation ultimately functions as a refusal of the motherhood mandate.

In abandoning that mandate, Sethe refuses the notion that a child-citizen's interests are inherently in line with sovereignty. She sacrifices Beloved not on behalf of the state, but in profound resistance to it. Sethe's unbeing is a chosen reaction to the impossibilities of slave motherhood, which I argue were intentionally constructed by the state to be so. By conditioning citizens to blame mothers for their failure to protect their children, nations established as necessary the racial inequities that, ironically, caused the conditions that garnered blame in the first place. Sethe understands that no matter how impossible it may be to protect her child, her role is to do so. Yet even her acceptance of blame is a way of claiming her children as her own. She refuses to cede to the law – to the idea that she must relinquish her claim to her children when a white man demands that she do so – yet she is faced with just such a demand. When Schoolteacher comes to return them to the status of slave, killing them (or attempting to) is the form her refusal takes. Sethe does not even look up at the men who come. Instead – while “two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other” – Sethe “simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time” (149).

Agonizing though this scene is, Sethe's unbeing protects her children from slavery, refusing Schoolteacher's assertion of ownership. We read: “right off it was clear...that there was nothing there to claim” (149). Sethe has not bred black bodies for white men.

Despite its subversive outcome, Sethe receives no shortage of blame for her action, and I argue that her acceptance of that blame in the form of guilt functions as her

re-being. Morrison's portrayal of blame – both its internal and external manifestations – exposes the hypocrisy of a culture that claims to be invested in protecting women and children all the while allowing them to suffer from laws that invest them with little power, and blaming them for what comes of their subordinated status. When Paul D criticizes Denver, and Sethe responds defensively, Paul D thinks, “risky...very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love” (45). Yet cultural narratives demand that a mother love her children, and that she channel that love into unparalleled protection (unless or until the state wants to use their bodies in the defense of sovereignty). These demands are made regardless of a woman's ability to meet them. By sacrificing both Beloved and potential future children with Paul D, Sethe owns the consequences of slavery over the female body, and she channels those consequences – with deliberate intent – into actions that we might otherwise find reprehensible (if we grant her agency) and powerless (if we don't). Moreover, in her re-being she demonstrates a commitment to mourning her daughter. In her self-blame, Sethe becomes the only person willing to bear responsibility for ending Beloved's life. When Schoolteacher gives up – leaving Ohio without his “property” – he does so out of a sense that Sethe is too destroyed to be of value, and not because he grasps the gravity of his actions. No one else is going to accept responsibility for Beloved's death. Thus Sethe's guilt works to humanize her daughter.

To understand the potential subversion of such humanizing guilt, we might look at another of *Beloved's* slave-mothers, Ella, who refuses to bear responsibility for the harms done to her, or, apparently, to feel guilty for her unwillingness to care for the product of those harms. We read that “she had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy

white thing, fathered by ‘the lowest yet.’ It lived five days never making a sound. The idea of that pup coming back to [haunt] her too set her jaw working” (259). In declining to take on the blame of white, slave-owning America, Ella refuses to perform the kind of unbeing we see in Sethe. Through the lens of liberal feminism, Ella appears to exhibit more consistent agency than does Sethe, who judges herself based on the impracticable standards of white society for subaltern black mothers. What the juxtaposition of these two mothers stands to offer, however, is insight into how re-being in the form of guilt functions. No one mourns Ella’s child. The death of the “hairy white thing” – because s/he was conceived in the most heinous way imaginable – goes unmarked. The efforts of a society endeavoring to strip value from people of color have thus been effective, as Ella’s half-black child is unloved and unvalued. This is not true of Beloved. Sethe loves and values her, which can be seen via the burden of guilt she accepts as her re-being.

Beloved’s value is likewise apparent in the blame put on Sethe by others – such as Paul D, Denver, the older Beloved, and members of the Cincinnati community in which they all live – who respond to Sethe with fear and recrimination. Though their blame is problematic, it demonstrates the external ramifications of Sethe’s unbeing: in holding her accountable, others mourn Beloved. We see this first with Denver, who goes to jail with Sethe for her sister’s murder, and who says “Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother’s milk...I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I’m scared of her because of it...[T]here sure is something in her that makes it all right to kill her own” (205). Of her brothers’ fear, Denver goes on to say that Sethe “missed killing my brothers and they knew it. They told me die-witch! stories to show me the way to do it, if ever I needed to. Maybe it was

getting that close to dying made them want to fight the War....I guess they rather be around killing men than killing women” (205). This passage demonstrates the fear Sethe’s surviving children feel, and the blame they place on her for the events of that day.

It seems important to note that Denver has no memory of slave life, as she was not born until Sethe had escaped from Sweet Home. She cannot understand the *being* of slavery, and she lacks the perspective to grasp how much more victimized her mother has been by those circumstances. Thus Denver blames Sethe for having “something in her that makes it all right to kill her own” without acknowledging the complex motives for her mother’s unbeing. In contrast, Denver never holds Halle accountable, though he fails to protect his children even more than Sethe does. She writes, “my daddy was an angel man. He could look at you and tell where you hurt and he could fix it too....We should all be together. Me, him and Beloved. Ma’am could stay or go off with Paul D” (209). Though she never met Halle, Denver puts all of the blame for her family’s suffering on Sethe’s actions and none at all on Halle’s. And Sethe lets her. In her unbeing, Sethe models a form of responsibility that embraces precarity. Sethe makes no attempt to explain the fact that Denver is only free because of her maternal abnegation.

Like Denver, Beloved holds Sethe accountable for her current reality. This is especially complex because of the ambiguous nature of Beloved’s existence: the uncertainty of characters and readers alike over whether Beloved is a ghostly manifestation of the dead child or an unrelated escaped slave. This debate fuels much of the novel’s critical canon. Instead of assuming that she is merely a ghost, however – or conversely that she is not a ghost at all – I will focus on the reality that remains stable regardless of our reading of her origin: that Beloved is someone’s daughter, that because

of her race she has suffered unthinkable violence, and that she both longs for and feels immense anger towards a mother whom she perceives as having failed to protect her. Regardless of her origin, Beloved views Sethe as both a sexual object and a mother, and with desire, passion, jealousy, and contempt. For example, we learn from Denver that it is Beloved who chokes Sethe in the Clearing, but Beloved insists to Denver that she later “fixed it...Didn’t I fix her neck?” (101). This contradictory reaction to the woman who represents her mother seems a product of both desperate love and righteous blame. Importantly, once Sethe becomes convinced that she is Beloved’s mother – “once [she] had seen the scar, the tip of which Denver had been looking at whenever Beloved undressed” (239) – she seems willing to do anything to “pay” for her sins against the child. After Sethe is fired from her job as a cook, she “play[s] all the harder with Beloved, who never got enough of anything; lullabies, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk” (240). Sethe wants to explain to Beloved – to make her understand that “if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her” (200) – yet she does not. This thought – that if Sethe “hadn’t killed her she would have died” – makes clear both Sethe’s responsibility for Beloved’s death and the distinction she draws pertaining to it. She “killed her” so that Beloved would not “die.” While the blame Beloved places on Sethe may seem symbolic of that held against all subaltern-like slave mothers who are powerless to protect their children, Sethe’s silence in the face of that blame demonstrates power within precarity.

In the years after Schoolteacher finds them, Sethe “thought how little color there was in the house and how strange that she had not missed it...It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it”

(38-39). This melancholy, which arises for Sethe after her daughter is dead and buried, exemplifies her inability to forgive herself. Morrison writes, “to Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (42), and the arduous struggle of doing so is a result of the guilt she feels for her daughter’s death. Bousoon argues that “Morrison dramatizes the painful sense of exposure that accompanies the single shame event” (4). Sethe “would trade places [with Beloved] any day. Give up her life, every minute and hour of it, to take back just one of Beloved’s tears” (242). Thus Sethe has internalized the impossible mandates of motherhood without allowance for the reality that child protection was unattainable. When Sethe becomes obsessed with the older Beloved out of a desperate desire to rewrite her infant’s death, Denver thinks that her mother “was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it” (251). But importantly, “it was as though Sethe didn’t really want forgiveness” (252). Even if Beloved had offered forgiveness, then, Sethe would likely not have accepted it. It’s easy to read such a refusal as overly self-destructive: as demonstrative of a harmful (and unwarranted) sense of responsibility. But Sethe’s admission of responsibility is her re-being: her devotion to both accountability and Beloved’s worth when the nation – dismissive of Sethe’s agency and unwilling to demand recognition of Beloved’s basic humanity – discounts both.

Though *Beloved* exposes us to some of the worst outcomes of slavery, it likewise offers – to borrow the language of my previous chapter – a slave mother who is possessed of voice at all. Eckard asserts that *Beloved* works to “restore the mother’s lost voice and her diminished subjectivity” (32), claiming that “the maternal body in *Beloved* emerges as a force that celebrates both the individual and a people and gives voice to [their] experiences” (75). Arguably, Sethe’s voice is the ultimate manifestation of her re-being,

as it serves as evidence that subaltern slave mothers might, in Spivakian terms, speak, even if to the privileged ear their voices are untranslatable. This makes it all the more important that we work to *hear* the voice within Sethe's maternal abnegation in an effort to understand its nuances. Out of a similar desire for the novel to converse with the nation-state, Dean Franco suggests that we read it as a call for reparations, or recompense "for slavery and Jim Crow social oppression" (428). He expands his definition of the word "reparations" beyond economics to "restoration, spiritual healing, mending, compensation, and reconciliation" (428). Though Franco allows that our current legal structure does not lend itself to fiscal recompense, he still sees merit in considering "the ethics and the value of reparations" (428). Perhaps that's part of the external work of Sethe's self-abnegation: its ongoing call for reparations beyond what seems possible.

In response to critics who consider the novel revisionist, Franco points out that "revising history means reconstructing a view of the past as well as recharting the future. The dream that the novel makes 'history come out right this time' can only come true when we acknowledge just what it is that characters in the novel and the novel itself claim of us" (43). In my exploration of this text, I have a similar intent. I argue that, via the lens of shadow feminism, we come to see a reconfiguration of Sethe's sacrifice: a glimpse of power, of *re-being*, within Sethe's vulnerability and her maternal abnegation that is obscured when we view her actions within the terms set by liberal feminism. Like Franco, I realize that our current legal and political system will not allow the kind of recompense necessary to ending the inequalities that relegate individuals to subaltern statuses. In restructuring our view of the subaltern, however, a direct and consequential form of recompense can emerge from subalterns themselves.

## Mary

Like Sethe, Mary Metcalf Crick – of Graham Swift’s *Waterland* – grapples with the guilt of choosing to end her child’s life, and of inadvertently ending her reproductive potential.<sup>39</sup> We first meet Mary in her state of *being*, when she is the school-aged sole child of a farmer father and a Catholic mother who died giving birth to her. We’re told that Mary might have become a “distilled and purified version of her mother, had she known at all what her mother had been like” (46-47). So like Sethe – who could only recognize her own mother by a scar she was once shown – Mary is neither a product of “passing down” (Halberstam 3) nor willing to pass down in turn. In her sexually playful *being*, Mary demonstrates her understanding that she is a subject of desire, and that part of the expectation placed on her is to meet that desire. But in her maternal abnegation – in trying to jump herself into miscarriage and in visiting the “witch” Martha Clay, who performs an unsanitary and ultimately sterilizing abortion – Mary begins to resist societal expectations. Her unbeing starts with her abortion and evolves as Mary adopts non-maternal roles, becoming first a chaste religious devotee and later a childless wife. Through the process of unbeing, Mary accepts first acute and later lingering vulnerability.

During her long unbeing, Mary sometimes demonstrates great serenity. At other times, however, submitting to her childless state seems to destroy her. Her arguably disastrous version of re-being occurs when Mary surrenders to the longing for motherhood that she’s long suppressed, deciding in her fifties that she will mother after

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<sup>39</sup> Mary is somewhere between ten and fourteen weeks pregnant when she seeks out an abortion, for which reason some readers may find my use of the term “child,” and my comparison to the infant Beloved, offensive. I am aware of that risk, and I use the term with an understanding of the complexity with which it will be read. I do so largely because Mary seems herself to consider her pregnancy with such weight, and because my work is an effort to understand the perspectives not of critics (who might prefer that I use “fetus” instead), but of the characters whose lives I’m attempting to consider in new light.



all and – in an act of desperation – kidnapping a baby from a supermarket. Like Sethe, Mary is harmed by the motherhood mandate: that it is virtually required of women whether or not they possess the means for making or caring for children. And like Sethe, Mary struggles to accept the circumstances brought on by her maternal abnegation. Whereas Sethe finds her way to a re-being outside of the motherhood mandate, however, Mary's re-being amounts only to despair that leads her back into the motherhood mandate. Here, then, in the final textual example of this project, the performance of vulnerability fails to subvert mandates of dominance. Mary's precarity is as profound as the other characters who perform it here, yet it yields neither external destabilization nor internal catharsis. Perhaps this is because the social context of wartime England would have allowed a child born out of wedlock; thus Mary's resistance to the motherhood mandate functions differently than Sethe's. For Sethe, social factors both demand that she mother and leave her unable to do so. Mary, on the other hand, would have been met with cultural and familial support had she chosen to marry Tom and raise the child with him. Mary's maternal abnegation is thus born more of a personal sense of responsibility than a refusal to perpetuate sovereignty at any expense.

Like so many of the novels of this project, our understanding of Mary comes via a masculine subject position. *Waterland* narrator Tom Crick is Mary's future husband and the father of her never-born child. Perhaps this drives critical response to the novel, which focuses largely on Tom, and which disregards Mary almost entirely. Katrina Powell points out that "in the scholarship surrounding *Waterland*, Mary Metcalf and all women characters for that matter, have largely been ignored" (60). Yet motherhood drives *Waterland*'s narrative, and as Powell contends, "Swift depicts...the significant

women characters, except for the witch, Martha Clay, as mothers” (69). The novel opens with Tom’s recollection of his father’s advice, which is to remember that “whatever you learn about people, however bad they turn out, each one of them has a heart, and each one of them was once a tiny baby sucking his mother's milk” (1). Thus I argue that the novel leads us to see the characters within its pages in relation to the maternal.

It is especially striking that most of *Waterland*'s central characters – including Tom and his brother Dick, their mother Helen, and Mary herself – are motherless. Mary’s mother dies giving birth; thus Mary is raised by her farmer-father, for which reason “it was her father’s milk – but, alas, never her mother’s – that Mary Metcalf grew up on” (44). Likewise, we’re shown a recently bereaved Tom spying on his brother Dick from a prone position on the frozen earth “only recently recovered from a bout of flu.” Yet we’re told that he does not suffer from the cold, “so scornful [is he] of any discomfort the world can muster after the loss of a mother, that he feels neither cold nor damp” (288). Not merely motherhood, then, but maternal absence drives this depiction of the Fens and gives its characters their identities. Despite the absence of critical dialogue on the topic, Mary’s maternal abnegation occurs in the context of generations of motherless children.

When critics *do* consider the theme of motherhood, it is in large part to establish Swift’s representation as outdated; thus those who focus on Mary do so to critique Swift’s construction of her. Powell, for example, contends that “Metcalf’s desire to fill the vacancy of her womb...is the traditional notion of woman” (69).<sup>40</sup> Allowing that

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<sup>40</sup> So too, Pamela Cooper claims that “like the always-already-lost body of the mother in Lacan's formulation, the body of the heroine in historiographic metafiction is always already known--enjoyed as an object of desire--within the repetitive cycles of discursive inscription...the heroine is implicitly focalized...in terms of reproduction” (381).

*Waterland*'s portrayal of mothers is consistent with English norms, however, we might do well to ask whether it perpetuates or calls into question the motherhood mandate. Powell implies the former, arguing that in his depiction of Mary's desire for children, Swift "constitutes woman-as-mother as the only alternative for naturalness and unity," and that "by representing Metcalf as a woman who desires maternity, Swift reinforces the traditional notion of woman as mother" (103).<sup>41</sup> I argue, however, that if instead of perceiving Mary as an un-liberated embodiment of motherhood, we view Swift's portrayal of her as a glimpse into the demands placed on female bodies, we might come to understand her acts of unbeing as attempts to undermine the motherhood mandate. Even in the failure of Mary's vulnerability, the performance of it functions as resistance.

Though her re-being amounts only to despair for Mary personally, she does affect a kind of re-being in Tom, forcing on him the depth of vulnerability that she herself voluntarily faced. Because of the kidnapping, Tom is asked to resign his teaching career, and as he prepares to do so, he tells his high school students, "I do not expect you to understand that after thirty-two years I have rolled you all into one and now I know the agonies of a mother robbed of her child" (7). Tom thus associates his own feelings of orphaned parenthood with the longing of a childless mother. We begin to see in this passage the way Tom displaces the parent-child dynamic onto his teaching career, and specifically onto one student, Price. After Tom is informed of his forced retirement, he takes Price for drinks and, when the bartender asks if Price is of age, Tom asserts that he

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<sup>41</sup> As I discuss later, Powell connects procreation to storytelling – and both of these to the patriarchy – arguing that "by sending [Mary] to the asylum, Swift re-emphasizes that telling stories is crucial to controlling reality" (75). She likewise claims that "Metcalf's inability to tell stories to fill the void of her barren womb (without child, without story)...renders her unable to cope with reality," arguing that "by representing [her] subjectivity as he does, Swift in turn privileges the male act of story-telling" and "limits Metcalf's agency by representing her as refusing to tell stories" (75).

is, saying, “I should know. He’s my son” (241). Though he never discusses this moment, the weight of Tom’s desire to parent is unmistakable. Tom struggles with the loss of his child and the potential for other children throughout his life, but the extremism of Mary’s kidnapping takes away the substitute with which he’s made due, making it impossible to suppress that struggle. Though it never proves transcendent, then, Mary’s self-abnegation does cultivate external awareness.

The cultural critique inherent to her response to the motherhood mandate is also apparent in the fact that, at each step of her existence – her sexual being, the stages of her unbeing, and her failed and sorrowful re-being – Mary’s self-abnegation is tied to the historical events of the time. This is especially significant because the backdrop for much of Mary’s suffering is war, which of course leaves both children and parents orphaned. Mary and Tom’s first sexual encounter is set against the backdrop of World War II. Tom tells us that “one day in August 1942 (defeat in the desert; the U-boat stranglehold) we first explored, tentatively but collaboratively, what we called then simply ‘holes’ and ‘things’” (50). So too, Swift conflates public sexual explorations with combat, depicting Mary and Tom, along with their friends, “convened on the banks of the Hockwell Lode and engaged in matters little affected by (and little affecting) the muffled noises-off of world events” (181). Pamela Cooper contends that because *Waterland* is “written in the aftermath of empire and self-consciously enmeshed with its legacies, [it] engages the colonialist motifs of propulsion and escape with the aggrieved, derisive passion of a postcoloniality enthralled by the imperialism it critiques” (372-73). Indeed, we see the

complexity of such an “enthralled” state in Swift’s conflation of sexuality and warfare.<sup>42</sup>

While Cooper critiques this aspect of *Waterland*, however, I argue that it works to expose the relationship between imperial rule and mandated female subordination. Just as nations impose military might by using the bodies of young men as weapons, they likewise impose patriarchal might over the bodies of women. That Swift does not depict Mary as innocent or victimized is therefore transgressive. In her fulfillment of the woman-as-sexual-object trope, Mary willingly performs one part of the *being* that is expected of her.<sup>43</sup> She demonstrates little bodily shame, however, acting unabashedly on curiosity in her encounters with Tom, Dick, and possibly Freddie. Mary thus exhibits an acceptance of the expectation that she serve as an object of desire.

When she learns of her pregnancy, Mary tells Dick – whose feelings for her she has, at the very least, encouraged – that Freddie is the father. She does so to protect him from the knowledge that she’s been having sex with his brother, Tom. Dick kills Freddie out of jealousy, implying that he might have done the same to Tom. In the wake of Freddie’s death, Mary’s sexual curiosity dissipates. When she responds decisively to the new circumstances surrounding her pregnancy, Tom thinks, “she must be braver than me. No wasted emotions” (56). Indeed, he observes that “when she looks up she seems three times older than me, as if she’s become a hard-featured woman with a past. Then I see it’s because something’s gone from her face. Curiosity’s gone” (57). Tom wants to keep

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<sup>42</sup> Powell claims that “*Waterland* articulates the functional mutuality of sexuality and imperialism, weaving both the inscriptions of gendered anatomy and the rhythms of empire into the irresolute fabric of history” (373).

<sup>43</sup> When Freddie becomes especially forward during a moment of group exploration, for example, Mary doesn’t flee, though the only other female in attendance does. We read that when “Freddie Parr leans forward suddenly, pulls Mary’s right hand from her left shoulder, presses it against his swimming-trunks and says: ‘There, you’ve had a feel... Shirley, with a look of fright, scrambles for her clothes, removes herself to a distance, dresses hastily and hurries off on her bicycle, amidst jeers and cat-calls” (184).

the child. He thinks: “so we’ve made a little one. And it’s on the way. But we love each other, don’t we?....And love takes its course, doesn’t it? It means we’ll have to tell the world....And then get married. It happens all the time” (262-63). He’s more than happy to continue their paths of *being*: to parlay the sexual curiosity of youth into its next incarnations: marriage and procreation. He’s willing to pass down patriarchy. And in his devotion to prominent cultural ideologies, Tom accepts little blame; he clings to the notion that no one is responsible for Freddie’s death. He asks desperately: “why can’t everything happen by accident? No history. No guilt, no blame. Just accidents.” Tom concedes, however, that unlike him, Mary isn’t in denial, that she “isn’t planning on any self-escapology” (264). It is precisely Mary’s avoidance of “self-escapology” that I argue drives the many manifestations of her unbeing.

Unlike Tom, Mary is unwilling to pretend that either her pregnancy or Freddie’s death was an accident. And unlike Tom, Mary is willing to bear the consequences of those events bodily. It takes Tom some time to understand what Mary has decided to do. He fails to comprehend even once he finds her jumping to induce a miscarriage: when he asks, she calls him “[s]tupid” again and again (292-93). In retrospect – with the knowledge of all that her choice goes on to cost them – Tom recalls hauntingly: “I don’t stop her” (293). Once he grasps her choice and its origins, Tom “understand[s]. Because if this baby had never...Then Dick would never...And Freddie...Because cause, effect...Because Mary said, I know what I’m going to [do]” (295). Though the jumping is ineffective, Mary remains determined, deciding to get help from Martha Clay. As we see other characters do to varying degrees in this project, Mary’s initial unbeing serves as

payment, in this case for Freddie's death. In accepting that she bears some responsibility, suffering a consequence is, for Mary, a logical step.

Mary likewise accepts responsibility for her own suffering, owning her choice to end her pregnancy. Powell distinguishes between Tom's responsibility for the abortion and Mary's, saying that Tom "is careful to show that he has no control either in the decision to [abort] or the act of abortion." Yet Powell goes on to insist that Tom "evades responsibility and control to show the ill-effects of a woman's act of control" (65). Powell sees Mary as burdened by her vulnerability in this situation. But even if it's true that Tom abdicated his responsibilities, portraying Mary as unduly hampered by accountability denies the purposeful decisiveness she models at every turn. Ruddick writes: "the complexity of maternal power is poignantly expressed in a woman's biological ability to give birth and, therefore, her ability to refuse to do so" (36). Though Mary trades one vulnerability (pregnancy) for another (childlessness), the choice to do so is *hers*. If in our analysis of her character we see it merely as a burden, we deny that there is power to be found in the vulnerability of the maternal.

In her abortion – the first step of her unbeing – Mary claims that power. Though abortion reads as liberating via the logic of liberal feminism, it functions differently here because of Mary's motive for submitting to it, and because of her reaction to having done so. Inasmuch as it frees Mary of one burden (raising a child), it imposes on her another, far heavier one (childlessness). And it does so, again, in the tragic national context of World War II. Mary and Tom go to see Martha Clay beneath a sky full of World War II aircraft, which "were taking to the wing...leaving their scattered daytime roosts" just as Tom and a "white-faced, numb-lipped" Mary, "catching every third breath," traveled

“from the Hockwell Lode to Wash Fen Mere.” As Mary makes her way from *being* to her first act of *unbeing*, then, the planes are taking off for “Hamburg, Nuremberg or Berlin.” And as Tom accompanies the determined though “white-faced” Mary, we’re reminded that “all the brave pilots and navigators and gunners and bomb-aimers...had once sucked mother’s milk,” and that “all the citizens of those doomed cities...once sucked mother’s milk too” (299). Mary’s *unbeing* has as its historical backdrop the absolute *unbeing* of countless lives; the destruction of World War II becomes emblematic of the small-scale destruction happening to (and because of) Tom and Mary. But whereas the lives of the soldiers are undone by military might – and arguably against the soldiers’ wills – Mary’s *unbeing* is a deeply personal, self-abnegating refusal of the motherhood mandate.

Tom makes us aware of the difference between the military men (who lived to “suck mother’s milk” and then to wage war) and his and Mary’s child, who never did. Via this contrast, we might come to understand the relationship between the baby Mary is carrying – whose life is mere moments from ending – and the historical events of the nation. If warfare is an endeavor to which men who “once sucked mother’s milk” may one day apply themselves, what might we make of Mary’s choice not to bring her child into being? As a woman-citizen of a wartime nation, Mary is conditioned to protect the interests of England. Yet as with Sethe’s decision to end Beloved’s life rather than sending her back into slavery, Mary’s *unbeing* goes against what is expected of her. She refuses to provide England with a child who might one day be forced to use his or her body to sustain sovereignty. Though Mary herself does not indicate that she intends her abortion to function as such, the conflation of intimacy with warfare makes space for



such a reading. And the fact that Tom brings our attention to this conflation suggests that he – and perhaps Mary too – benefits from considering her abnegation in this light.

Mary remains committed to maternal abnegation throughout the extremely traumatic visit to Martha Clay. Tom, on the other hand, seems weak and powerless. Of the journey itself, Tom writes, “twilight thickening . . . Right time to arrive at a witch’s. Hold my hand, Mary. Hold on, Mary. Love you, Mary. Keep going, Mary. Are we going to get there? (Do we want to get there?)” (301). Mary, meanwhile, consistently pursues her plan. When Martha tells her, ““Martha don’ wanna hurt you. . . . But if she hurts you anyways, you just put your hand over the candle. Right over the flame,”” we see Mary “blink” (306) her willingness in response. Mary’s power here lies in her precarity: she willingly submits to the invasive care of this strange woman in this unnerving setting. While Tom has to be given a task with which to divert himself throughout the ordeal, Mary has only a “flame” to distract from her pain. She thus demonstrates both absolute certainty and utter vulnerability in her visit to the witch of the Fens.

This is Mary’s first act of self-abnegation, and it might have been her last had circumstances been different. Because of the unhygienic, arguably brutal abortion methods of Martha Clay, however, this one choice ends not merely that pregnancy, but Mary’s ability to conceive. In the days after the abortion, Tom learns via the gossip of townsfolk that Mary has been “taken to hospital. Very nearly – Septi-thingummy of the womb. . . . Bless us, what’s happening to the world. (A world war’s happening to it.)” (316). Like the townspeople, Tom’s dad struggles to understand why Tom and Mary didn’t merely get married. He asks Tom, “but if you, I mean, if she was– Why didn’t you just–? Not such a bad match – even starting it the hard way. . . . So why?” (317). Henry

Crick's question makes clear the degree to which Mary had another choice, a choice that would be more in keeping with the ideological governances of the time. Thus it is evident that Mary didn't end her child's life to escape the burden of raising him or her; she did so out of a willingness to bear the burden of responsibility over Freddie's death.

Just as the abortion can be read as a consequence of Freddie's death, Mary's cloistered state might be read as a consequence of the baby's. Though the townspeople speculate that Harold Metcalf is responsible for Mary's withdrawal, Tom knows that Mary has chosen those conditions, which represent what I argue is the second phase of her unbeing. Tom tells his students: "your history teacher (frightened witness to his wife-to-be's resolve) knows...that Mary locked herself away of her own free will" (118). Though townspeople, parents, and readers alike portray Mary as a victim and attempt to attribute power to the men around her (Tom, Harold), adult-Tom offers insight into Mary's ownership of these decisions. During her three years of "self-imposed cloister" (41) after learning of the heavy consequences of her abortion, Mary seems to believe that if she becomes religiously devout – choosing to abandon the material world altogether – then she might find a way of re-being outside the mandates of motherhood.

While Mary performs *unbeing*, Tom engages in a form of culturally condoned *being* as a soldier in the Second World War. Upon seeing Mary again after the war, Tom "expects to find – and accept – a nun, a Magdalen, a fanatic, a hysteric, an invalid." Yet at their reunion Tom finds instead "a woman (no girl) who impresses him with her appearance of toughness," and who seems to have "made the decision to live henceforth without any kind of prop or refuge." Upon reacquainting with her, Tom "realizes that though this three-year separation has fostered the illusion that, should they reunite, *he*

would be a prop to *her*...it is quite the opposite: that she will be a prop to him; that she will always be...stronger than him” (120). Mary consistently demonstrates pragmatism: facing her pregnancy, facing her culpability in Dick’s murder of Freddie, facing her abortion (while Tom sits on the porch plucking feathers from a duck), and facing her infertility. Mary is devoted to “liv[ing] without any kind of prop or refuge.” Just as women are left to bear the wrath of the baby-ghost in *Beloved*, pragmatism is the domain of women throughout *Waterland*. In continuing to reject her state of being in favor of an acceptance of vulnerability, Mary becomes more (and not less) equipped to bear reality.

Nevertheless – and unlike the other characters of this project with the exception of *The Book of Daniel*’s Phyllis, whose submission fails largely because it’s a product of her search for pleasure – I read Mary’s unbeing as a failure. The voluntary precarity of her abortion leads to her involuntary loss of fertility, and Mary abandons her attempt at pious withdrawal from society. She then enters her third manifestation of unbeing: a non-procreative marriage, which she appears for decades to have parlayed into a successful re-being. Tom and Mary happily reunite after their respective periods of “payment,” and Tom finds in Mary’s first kiss upon his return that “they are still lovers in spirit.” But immediately after the kiss, Mary looks Tom straight in the eyes and says, ““you know, don’t you, that short of a miracle we can’t have a child?”” (122). She does not look away. Though it is likely to cause her more suffering, Mary resolves to face childlessness from within the typically procreative structure of marriage. Though Powell contends that Mary’s marriage to Tom functions as an attempt to “protect Metcalf from her tendency to act on her [sexual] curiosity” (67), Mary’s curiosity dissipates before the abortion, with Freddie’s death. Instead, then, I argue that by entering the bonds of heterosexual

marriage, Mary chooses to inhabit a subject position whose full role she can never fulfill. Unlike Sethe, she meets the other criteria for a “good” mother: she is white, solidly middle-class, and heterosexual. But Mary is painfully othered by infertility. In her choice to live within the bonds of a non-procreative marriage, we see something akin to Sethe’s resistance-within-submission. The deliberate nature with which Mary confronts each choice – when viewed through a lens that exposes the agency liberal feminism denies her – makes apparent the depth of her self-abnegation.

This final phase of her unbeing lasts for over thirty years, throughout which time Mary performs stoic pragmatism with regards to her childless state; it appears that she has attained re-being. Powell applies the motherhood mandate to Mary, saying that as her “womb no longer designates maternity, she is subject to displacement within society” (62), and indeed – in ways that recall *Disgrace*’s Lucy – Mary makes every effort to accept her “displacement.” That effort is especially apparent in the context of Tom’s attempts to romanticize or redeem the situation as fantasy, which itself is evident in the language he uses to discuss their history together. We read, “once upon a time there was a future history teacher and a future history teacher’s wife for whom things went wrong, so...they had to make do. And he made do...by making a profession out of the past...But she made do (so he thought) with nothing” (126). Though there is less societal pressure on Tom to father than there is on Mary to mother, Tom finds a symbolic way to parent. He says, “once upon a time there was a history teacher’s wife who, for quite specific and historical reasons, couldn’t have a child. Though her husband had lots: a river of children – new lives, fresh starts – flowed through his classroom” (127). Mary could have pursued paths to symbolic parenthood as well, but she doesn’t. The contrast between her reaction

to infertility and Tom's is thus apparent. Mary endeavors to embrace the precarity of childlessness despite the perception that it makes her less of a woman.

Importantly, Mary could have actually (and not just symbolically) become a mother. Tom allows that they could have adopted – and he approaches his wife with this idea on numerous occasions – but he says that Mary refuses “for the simple and intractable reason, so the husband supposed, that to adopt a child is not the real thing, and his wife was not a woman to resort to make believe.” Ironically, immediately after establishing Mary's devotion to realism, Tom returns to fairytale language, adding: “once there was a history teacher's wife who, as if to prove that she could live without children, chose to work with old people” (127). Though Tom's reading of her motives may well be accurate, it seems likewise possible that Mary suffers the unbeing of childlessness not because she can't have “the real thing,” but because childlessness is a consequence that she wants to accept. Indeed, Tom's narrative tics undercut his claims. The recurrent use of “once upon a time,” and “once there was” – as well as his frequent description of himself in the third person (“so the husband supposed”) – suggests a distancing of his interpretation from reality, a recognition that he's making this up. Unlike Tom, however, Mary holds “no illusions.” Tom notes: “it's real, this coming of things to their limits, this invasion by Nothing of the fragile islands of life.” Yet he says that in response to that invasion, Mary “become[s] a practical person, a realistic person” (341). Mary pragmatically bears the consequences of her being and her unbeing. Indeed, her unbeing manifests as attempt after attempt to accept and model peace in precarity.

Nevertheless, in carefully reading Swift's account of the thirty-six years between Mary's abortion and her ultimate kidnapping of a child, I can find little evidence of a

successful re-being. During those decades, Mary seems almost to stand still. Powell contrasts Tom's storytelling with Mary's realism, saying that whereas Tom's "means of coping with the reality of the abortion is to tell stories," Mary "is seen as insane" for "refus[ing] to tell" them (66). Though Powell uses this distinction to critique Tom's narrative nature, it is telling in terms of Mary's attempts at unbeing as well. If we connect storytelling to the kind of patriarchal passing down that Tom's narrative style aims for – and of which Halberstam speaks (3) – Mary's refusal to tell stories can be read as a refusal to play a part in the maintenance of systemic norms. Powell touches on this, saying that with Mary's "decision to abort...to stop patriarchal lineage, the description of Metcalf transitions from a 'place of potential ripeness' (Cooper 386)...to an empty vessel" (66). Yet for Powell – who views *Waterland* in terms of liberal feminism – this transition figures as disempowerment. In contrast, shadow feminism reveals that Mary's refusal of motherhood – her choice to end her pregnancy, withdraw from society, enter a non-procreative marriage, and resist adoption – functions as a refusal to meet societal expectations. Far from attaining re-being via that refusal, however, I argue that Mary spends this time at a remove from *being* altogether. She maintains a marriage, and she works for a period of time caring for the elderly, but her life during this period is marked by neither significant event nor remarkable decision. Her many attempts at unbeing cost her greatly, but they never lead anywhere beyond sustained despair.

Her disastrous final attempt at re-being comes when – at fifty-two years of age – Mary proclaims that by God's will she is "going to have a baby" (130), which she tries to bring about by stealing an infant from a new mother at a supermarket. Powell contends that – though Tom has spent his marriage believing that his wife is the stronger of the two

of them – “Metcalf’s later insanity causes us to question whether Metcalf was ever strong...Her independent decision is shown to ruin both of their lives and because the abortion renders Metcalf infertile, she is responsible for ending the Crick family line” (67). It is possible to read the kidnapping as a sign that Mary has gone insane; that’s certainly how her contemporaries view it, as evidenced by her placement in a mental hospital and Tom’s forced retirement. Just as Sethe is characterized as subhuman because of her ability to kill her child, everyone around Mary assumes that the kidnapping is a mark of mental illness, a deviation from the norms of society. Though she accepts this diagnosis, however, closer examination of the behavior Mary exhibits leading up to, throughout, and after the kidnapping reveals a woman who is acting more out of cultural mandates than against them. I argue that Mary’s re-being fails precisely because she cannot fully escape the motherhood mandate. Her attempts to remake herself outside of its governance fail, and she yields to it in the end, which results in a decimation that is neither redemptive nor of her making. Mary fails, then, largely because instead of finding re-being possible, she desperately attempts to *reestablish* being.

Her attempt to restore *being* fails itself, however, hours after it begins, when Tom comes home from teaching one day to find Mary mothering the child she’s kidnapped. When Tom takes the baby from her, we read that he “cannot suppress the sensation that he is pulling away part of his wife...tearing the life out of her” (267). Robert K. Irish claims that here, “history's circularity is reinforced...Mary, whose curiosity for life died with her aborted baby, receives new life when she acquires a new baby” (928). Mary has attempted to “be” again – to adhere to the motherhood mandate – via this child, and

without him, she returns to a final form of unbeing, this time not of her making. Because she does not choose this motherless state, it cannot be read as transgressive.

The injustice of returning the baby makes Mary's despair all the more apparent. Tom concedes that, though Mary "hand[ed the baby] over, in a trance...it's still there...in her arms. Always will be" (312). Though traditional measures of justice would privilege the baby being with his birth mom, there's a sense of unfairness in Mary being forced to give him back. Mary has lived in this childless state since her abortion at sixteen, and she's fifty-two here; she's lived with infertility and loss for thirty-six years. In contrast, Tom notes that the baby's birth mother is "young. Still in her teens. She can't be any age...Only a kid" (313). Powell contends that "Metcalf's infertility and insanity are juxtaposed with the rightful mother's natural instincts," insisting that "Crick depicts this woman" as "sane and natural," and "her baby a sign of her fertility and therefore her proper place" (73). But Crick's depiction of the baby's mother as "only a kid" calls this into question, making the weight of Mary's vulnerability all the more apparent.

Despite the injustice, however, Mary gives the child up to his mother with a passivity that signals the failure of her unbeing. This passivity – which differs from the type of submission in which I find power throughout this project – reflects and therefore does not seek to subvert both legal and gendered expectations. Mary accepts her arrest and her subsequent placement in a mental institution. Yet her passivity is not merely a matter of allowing herself to be abandoned. Tom observes that Mary "is receding into the obscure and irrecoverable distance" (328). This all works as evidence of Mary's insanity. As Tom prepares to leave her in a place that "smells of crazy old women" Mary "stares, vigilantly and knowingly...at...frail, playground children. Her eyes are bright. They



blink. Her arms hold nothing” (330). Mary now lives among “crazy old women.” Banished for her inability to meet the motherhood mandate – and for her inability to accept that failure – she now “hold[s] nothing.” I argue, however, that her acceptance serves as a mark not of insanity, but of lucidity. Her attempts to parlay her vulnerability into some survivable re-being have failed, but the grief she feels comes not because she has escaped reality, but because she still faces it. Like Sethe, Mary does not seek escape. Instead, she merely continues to grieve the children she has not had.

In struggling to understand exactly why Mary’s self-abnegation fails when precarity proves transgressive for so many others, it seems helpful to note that her kidnapping is fueled by Christianity. She recounts that “God came down to Safeways and left...a gift, a free product. A babe in the bulrushes. He said, Go on, I command you. Take. It’s yours” (311). As the kidnapping is the first time Mary’s actions are depicted as driven by something other than her own agency, Christianity’s function in *Waterland* seems worth considering. Indeed, it is impossible to extricate Mary’s story from Christian narratives. Her name clearly recalls the virgin mother. So too, Cooper notes that “as a nubile and sweetly inquisitive schoolgirl, Mary plays Eve to Tom’s Adam and initiates him into a prelapsarian haven of adolescent sex” (385). Powell focuses on Tom’s portrayal of Mary as “sexually curious” in ways that tie it to Christianity.<sup>44</sup> And it is Catholicism to which Mary turns in her second act of unbeing, when the abortion takes her fertility from her, and she “cloisters” herself away. Finally, Mary’s story calls to mind

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<sup>44</sup> Powell writes: “Crick describes Metcalf as the initiator, the Eve who tempts [Tom],” and she goes on to contend that “both Adam and Crick shirk responsibility for their actions by placing the initiative on the woman.” So too, she maintains that “Crick goes to much trouble to describe Metcalf as strong and curious in a sexually aggressive manner. This initial description of Metcalf as initiator serves dual purposes: to show how tragedy can result from a woman enacting control over her body and to show Metcalf’s transition from a strong woman to a weak woman as a result of her sexual curiosity” (64).

Christian lessons of submission. Christianity fuels Mary's self-abnegating subordination, but it likewise leads to the failure of that very self-abnegation. Far from allowing Mary to redefine herself in post-maternal terms, Christianity reinforces the structures governing her status as a woman-citizen by offering models of female subordination by which women *should* live. Perhaps this accounts for the failure of Mary's attempts at re-being.

Mary embodies societal expectations for women. She is at turns experimental, virginal, passive, contented, and mothering. Yet her ultimate failure demonstrates that meeting these requirements simultaneously is impossible. Within the vulnerability of attempting to do so, we see an obscured power begin to emerge. In his conflation of the personal and the historical, Tom notes that we are historically against surrendering, asking his students, "why is it that every so often history demands a bloodbath, a holocaust, an Armageddon? And why is it that every time the time before has taught us nothing?" (141). We never, he suggests, learn non-resistance. Mary models what non-resistance might look like. Sadly, however, the potential power of her precarity is overcome by the insuppressible weight of Mary's desire to mother. What limited success her unbeing has can be seen in Tom, who attempts – in the wake of Mary's failed re-being – to teach his students the value of defeat. He tells them: "children...there can be no success with impunity, no great achievement without accompanying loss...even nature teaches us that nothing is given without something being taken away" (72). As he faces defeat himself – childless, rejected from his life's work, his wife in hospital – Tom struggles to teach his students how to accept the inevitability of vulnerability. Despite her suffering, Mary models the strength-in-defeat that Tom endeavors to teach.

Yet at the novel's close, Tom feels not the transcendence of defeat, but emptiness. He tells Price: "the end of the world's on the cards again," but he adds that this is "not new." He claims: "Saxon hermits felt it. They felt it when they built the pyramids to try to prove it wasn't true. My father felt it in the mud at Ypres. My grandfather felt it and drowned it with suicidal beer. Mary felt it...It's the old, old feeling, that everything might amount to nothing" (269). The "emptiness" initiated by Mary's inability to mother is compared to that felt by others, including soldiers in combat. In this way, Mary is a soldier, but in her refusal to mother, she surrenders, refusing to fight. She refuses, too, to offer England a son who might one day go on to defend its sovereignty. Though her refusal costs her greatly, she looks it in the eye throughout her life the same way she looks Tom in the eye when she tells him they'll never have children. Though Mary's re-being never brings a new reality about, then, her unbeing is powerful. Mary doesn't need students to serve as substitute children. She doesn't drink herself to death over the trauma she's faced. She is stoic in her defeat. The tragedy of her suffering aside, her failure does not call into question the potential merits of self-abnegation. Instead, it makes clear that in taking the risk of precarity, one cannot predict whether one will find transcendence or further despair. Thus Mary's narrative makes apparent the bravery of trying.

In the context of Mary Crick's stoic failure, the deaths of Susan Isaacson Lewin, Erica, and Sihem Jaafari appear all the more startlingly empowered, as do the sexual sacrifices of Lucy Lurie and Daisy Perowne, and the acts of self-silencing performed by Leda Helianos, Rosa Burger, and Coetzee's Barbarian Girl. Only Phyllis Lewin can be counted alongside Mary as having failed in self-abnegation, and in her case that failure is a product more of apparent pleasure than devastation. These characters cannot know as

they choose unbeing what that choice will yield: if they'll undermine those around them who occupy positions of power, if their sacrifice will be *heard*. An inherent part of unbeing, then, is taking the risk of it coming to nothing, as it seems to do for Mary. Butler contends that "if the humanities has a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a task at the present moment, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense" (*Precarious* 151). I have tried to perform that task: to examine these characters in their most profound moments of "frailty." The political power of precarity has long been invisible, making it impossible to know what those who've exercised it have accomplished: what power they've disrupted, what dominance has been abandoned in their wake. I hope this project will join others in mapping, and seeking out, and striving to make visible that power such that we might formalize ways around the dangerous and illusory tenets of sovereignty.

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