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**Spelling Violation: Writing Bodies From the Margins**

**Alison Marie Mandaville**

**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**University of Washington**

**2002**

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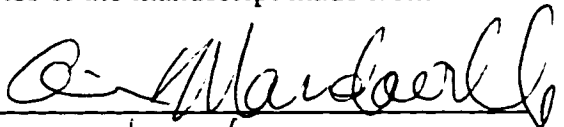
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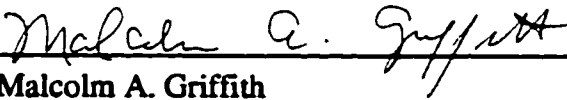
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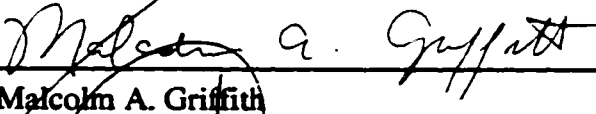
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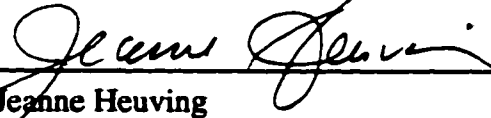
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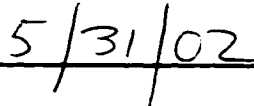
  
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**Abstract**

**Spelling Violation: Writing Bodies From the Margins**

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This project considers the marginal writer's relationship to linguistic violence—and through violence to survival and “a living.” From Romantic era poetry to present day comics, I seek particular strategies of those who *create* within language that has proved potently injurious to them. These are writers shaped by material and linguistic violation—sexism, homophobia, political and military repression, artistic and economic oppression, racism and colonialism—and are drawn to—and draw upon—writing violation as a personally incarnating force. To consider how and to what effect these authors engage textual violence, I rely on theories of how language is constitutive—and destructive. Feminist, African American, queer and post-colonial theories offer ways to consider the local specificity of the “violence of articulation.”

Using literary strategies I put under the umbrella of “spelling violation” these creative writers engage moments of constitutive linguistic violence. Through *possession*, *tailing*, and *prophecy*, these writers “spell” violation, casting and re-casting violations through and of language. They are attracted to the forceful possibilities of such risky negotiation as frameworks of articulation to structure not only the “linguistic life” Judith Butler names, but also the material/physical life that ghosts every text.

As William Blake, Mary Robinson and Octavia Butler constitute the textual slave body they sharpen the stakes in the power and risk of marginal literary possession. Through foreclosure and comics strategies, Art Spiegelman, Lynda Barry and Randall Kenan reveal the novel form as a problematic but strong container for violation which can through foreclosure focus the text inward and backward—on genealogy or detection.

Forward-looking prophecy and the apocalyptic framework that accompanies it in the poetry of William Blake, Kamau Brathwaite, and Marlene Norbese Philip create the violation of empire as a permanent space—not inevitable, but given, and when aesthetically pressurized, mobile in its cycles of destruction and renewal. Finally, experimental poetry by Teresa Hak Kyung Cha and WWII journal writing by H.D. offer synthesis of strategies of “spelling violation,” materializing how (marginal) writers constitute themselves under (locally specific) linguistic erasure, how language can offer a specular shape for the surviving writer, the (marginal) writing body.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
List of Figures	ii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2 : Possession (Race, Gender and the Literate Body)	19
Blake's "Little Black Boy"	21
Robinson's "Negro Girl"	35
Butler's <u>Kindred</u>	50
Dis/possession	67
Chapter 3 : Tailing (Foreclosure and the Graphic Novel)	71
Maus Und Man: Art Spiegelman's <u>Maus</u>	82
The Language of Meat and Lynda Barry's <u>Cruddy</u>	115
Be-longing in Randall Kenan's <u>Visitation of Spirits</u>	155
Stripping Møbius	175
Chapter 4: Prophecy (Art Against Empire)	180
William Blake's <u>Jerusalem</u>	188
Kamau Brathwaite's <u>Middle Passages</u>	204
Marlene Norbese Philip's <u>She Tries Her Tongue</u>	221
The Word Incarnate	241
Chapter 5: Spelling Violation (In/Conclusions)	246
Epilogue	258
Works Cited	260
Appendix A: "The Negro Girl"	268

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure Number</b>	<b>Page</b>
Figure 1: "The Little Black Boy" Copy I: Plates 9, 10	21
Figure 2: "About Auschwitz" <u>Maus</u> Volume I: page 88	82
Figure 3: "Time Flies" <u>Maus</u> II: 41	84
Figure 4: "Smokestacks" <u>Maus</u> II: 55, 58, 69	89
Figure 5: "The Mother Tail" <u>Maus</u> I: 136-7	96
Figure 6: "Burned Notebooks" <u>Maus</u> I: 158-9	98
Figure 7: "Burning Bodies" <u>Maus</u> II: 72	99
Figure 8: "Murderer" <u>Maus</u> I: 159	101
Figure 9: "Safe House" <u>Maus</u> I: 110	104
Figure 10: "Swastika" <u>Maus</u> I: 125	106
Figure 11: "Auschwitz" <u>Maus</u> I: 157	108
Figure 12: "Tombstone" <u>Maus</u> II: 136	112

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## **DEDICATION**

**To my parents, Janet and Jon  
And In Memory of Karen Shabetai**

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In grade school, I took piano lessons from our elderly backyard neighbor. She was a kind woman who I nevertheless managed to irritate terribly with my lack of practice time. During lessons, I fantasized incessantly (as she reprimanded me and my fingers for their carelessness/uncaring of the music set before us) of how I would someday make a music entirely of my mistakes—and become well-known (and thereby well-loved/cared for) because of my brilliant carelessness, my amazing mistakes. Often, I walked round-the-block home with angry, sad, and very guilty “I’ll show you” tears locked in my throat and eyes. Though I now worry that this is the kind of notoriety a serial killer seeks, I think it is as much the governing fantasy of the capitalist scientific age, the colonial, entrepreneurial age of discovery where mistakes and mutations and chance favor us as boon and plenty. And true to a fantasy that—like the American Dream that is not of hard work but of no work at all—binds chance and fantastic insight, my piano fantasy is not about just any random mutation of notes and timing and pedal work, but rather about particular mistakes made by *me*. Unique mistakes. Special and important mistakes that only I could make.

Thus I became aware, for all my rationalizing arrogance not without some psychic pain, of the particular ways I came askance to the rules, to the language of music. It was handy to call my clumsy musical approaches mistakes and thus abdicate responsibility for my love of reading over playing the piano (well, okay, my love of most things over playing the piano). But in some way, I sought also through these fantasies to take control of my omissions, of my apparent inability (whether through lack of “talent” or laziness, or both or neither) to attain control of the music—which I couldn’t, for the life of me, seem to “master.” Where I could not possess or inhabit the divine and perfect center of a language, where indeed I felt excluded but required nevertheless to remain in its attendance, I found a fantastic home in its deformation, in the haphazard, not-up-to-code renovations that ghost every turn of any language. There was, finally, little satisfaction in this home however—little love. And because I was privileged with an alternate, more

comfortable language to inhabit, I never had to test the permanent viability of a musical house of monstrous mistakes.

Being closer to the divine (powerful) center of words, it has been in writing that I really reward myself for my mistakes. Where presumably the musician who advances to composition does finally revel in the slides around and away from previously organized and authored works of sound, I hazard that most can, much earlier and more easily, come to this place in language, where one's differences, where they do not result in total social ostracization, can buy, if not an audience, a space in which to sound and construct particular selves and relationships. This is the positive spin on the ways in which language undoes and re-makes itself at the edges, where finally every *individual* stands, though where, as is the subject of this project, some stand with far less risk to the psyche and the body than others.<sup>1</sup>

In truth, as I have said in some fun, there is for many a psychic and material pain in the institutionalization of this process, wherein language is clarified and reified in the name of the power such crystallization can yield to those housed at its center. Language plays out in this post-colonial world as territory. And it is a most personal territory with contours that transcend all space and time. For as the medium through which one patterns and interprets the sensory world in order to move within it; through which one knows oneself and names one's cultures, histories, and families; and through which these things are constructed and demolished, language offers the most intimate of relationships, that between creator and created, produced and housed in the self-same body.

To create the boundaries on which both communication and creation depend, language continually undoes itself in the particularly material margins (which striate it), in sometimes slow, sometimes desperate and frantic efforts to "shore-up" the cracking and fissuring that all these bodies, speaking and writing and reading, create. Language is continually realigning—and in places that are particularly muddy or territorialized or contested, there is dilution, drought—shaping, destroying. For there are particular violences in those boundaries, accelerated with the advent of the book, with the

proliferation of mechanized writing. With mass printing of books, local language falls to the margins as language centralized becomes language more easily captured and erased.<sup>2</sup> And so the ongoing pressure, always present at the unstable edges of language, builds against the increasingly rigid walls of the dominant printed and centralized word. There are those, institutions and groups and individuals, who have benefited in enormous material ways from this linguistic stiffening. There are those whose material privilege and physical protection is thereby supported. But for those who find themselves linguistically constituted in that (increasingly) violent boundary of identity and alienation, living in a disjuncture between local and dominant language, or in linguistic dispossession at the coastline of their own languages, language is a space of neither privilege nor protection nor belonging. Of dominant academic French Michel de Certeau writes, "this language also risks betraying those who speak it differently," and argues that the constitution of oneself from the margins is always a profoundly risky business.

Many argue a necessary "violence of articulation" including Marian Hobson who maintains, "Articulation and syntax constitute a 'violence,' but this is an 'anguish'...through which the indeterminate passes into concepts. It is the price of any discourse at all" (79). But unlike many theorists of the violence of articulation I do not think articulation itself is fundamentally oppressive; I don't think there is an "originary" violence of the word. Entering the symbolic order does not necessarily involve violence unless one holds a view of the individual as somehow sacred and "innocent" (and clearly bounded). However, articulation in and of a system dependent on oppression *is*

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with radical or rugged individualism, I speak here of individuation dependent on the communal language to name itself.

<sup>2</sup> In Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin Jacques Derrida writes about how linguistic minorities choose to be able to speak and be heard in the rest of the world at the expense of their local language. See especially pages 30-31. Interestingly, recent scholarship has focused on how loss of the world's language may confer some of the same kinds of loss of diversity in culture and human potential that the environment is incurring—another legacy of the Universal Humanity concept of the Enlightenment. See Roger Chartier's The Order of Books for a wonderful discussion of the history of the impact of "The Book" on local language and culture. See also Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities for a look at how printing and the mass-produced book as commodity contributes to the creation of "nations." Finally, for a fascinating and compassionate look at how the dominant language of the academy obscures the lived experience of the people it claims to investigate and provide a critical intellectual space for, see Michel de Certeau's essays on the events of 1968 in France, when protests brought the University to a halt, in The Capture of Speech.

necessarily oppressive: Violence adheres and there is no "outside" to that. The Western Judeo-Christian myth of the Fall is a helpful representation (and one exploited by creative writers such as Blake) to get around how the violence of articulation is, has always been—in history, but is yet not originary. The "paradise" of articulation and creation without violation thus becomes both the promise of art and the problem that gets in the way of living/making it *now*.

And so, violence may adhere in articulation, but positioning and particularity matter very much to the shape and experience of that violence. As Jacques Derrida writes in Monolingualism of the Other: The Prosthesis of Origin of this marginal relation to one's own language (that one doesn't own),

[t]here is no possible habitat without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia. Most certainly. That is all too well known. But it does not follow that all exiles are equivalent. From this shore, yes, from this shore or this common drift, all expatriations remain singular. (58)

Here Derrida does not (necessarily) equate suffering with the "exile" of articulation. For as he asserts, from a certain exile in language "it does not follow that all exiles are equivalent." Certainly, just as someone explicitly oppressed of and by "the symbolic order" can nevertheless take advantage of the ways in which even oppressive language is constitutive, so can someone who reaps, without apparent suffering, the benefits of that "order," even find herself nicked in that harvest. However, it remains that some experience far more violation and suffering and terror along the way—violence from which others do experience benefits. Importantly, "pain" is not the issue. Pain does not "necessarily" constitute oppression. Instead, it is how pain is particularly constructed that can align it with oppression.<sup>3</sup>

I have emphasized the "stiffening" of language, but it is not that language does not undo itself (or we, it) in printed form. Indeed that undoing is the subject of every dissertation these days, eh? We write of how authors and texts transgress, how they swerve, and even—imagine my surprise—how they employ the art of the mistake.

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<sup>3</sup> I admit that I think this not because of trauma theory, but because of personal experience with pain. I experienced profound pain giving birth to my daughter, but never was I afraid or terrorized by that pain. A differently constructed childbirth could (and does) radically alter the formulation of its requisite pain.

Indeed. These theoretical readings seem to be offered to address and redress the material violence in which texts participate, to reveal therein resistance to this violence of linguistic marginalization.<sup>4</sup> And I certainly do not exempt this project from that reading party. But, how can such readings account for the authors who but for that violent margin would not, materially or linguistically, exist and who therefore embrace textual violence? What of authors for whom linguistic violation, finally, constitutes a critical part of a (powerful) linguistic living?

In Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative, Judith Butler is concerned with "linguistic survival" and the potential for significant social and political change that she feels moments of injurious linguistic constitution can offer. Though she confines her argument primarily to an exploration of speech act theory as it illuminates the question of legally regulating hate speech, her distillation of such theory to describe the conundrum facing a linguistic subject interpellated and constituted violently in language is quite helpful as I consider how and to what effect authors in a marginal relation to language engage textual violence. She argues against legal regulation of hate speech citing the importance of performance and context to any speech act, the ongoing mobility of words and meanings, and the dangers of classifying speech the same as (purely) physical acts for the ways in which the state thereby gains the kinds of (politically susceptible) powers over speech that it has over physical actions (other than speech). She adamantly resists limiting "speech," because finally such censorship cannot (even) so protect the linguistic subject anyway. She writes:

That one comes to "be" through a dependency on the Other—an Hegelian, and indeed, Freudian postulation—must be recast in linguistic terms to the extent that the terms by which recognition is regulated, allocated, and refused are part of larger social rituals of interpellation. There is no way to protect against that primary vulnerability and susceptibility to the call of

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<sup>4</sup> Bloody margins. Paper cuts. The violent wor(l)d. A dependence on the word "margin" says much, I think, about how my own construction through language is spatially deployed; I seem to figure the world and its peoples by way of a flat rectangular page of text. This is (perhaps) a legacy of imperialism, of efforts to "map" the world. It is a spatial mapping handily undone, however, by the ways in which a page of text incorporates the graphic, and, for all its flatness (lack of depth), endlessly multiplies in reference. This is the way that language (as opposed to the page on which it is printed), is striated and multiplicitous, and so may offer a stronger specular shape for the forces of what theorists, for lack of better figures (or for fear of them), call "center and periphery," or "first world and third world," or "body and margin."

recognition that solicits existence, to that primary dependency on a language we never made...The address that inaugurates the possibility of agency, in a single stroke, forecloses the possibility of radical autonomy. In this sense, an injury is performed by the very act of interpellation, the one that rules out the possibility of the subject's autogenesis (and gives rise to that very fantasy). It is therefore impossible to regulate fully the potentially injurious effect of language without destroying something fundamental about language and, more specifically about the subject's constitution in language. On the other hand, a critical perspective on the kinds of language that govern the regulation and constitution of subjects becomes all the more imperative once we realize how inevitable is our dependency on the ways we are addressed in order to exercise any agency at all. (24-5)

It is not within the scope of this introduction to entirely unravel the origins of Butler's thinking here. Indeed, the usefulness of this citation is in its summary of speech act theory, that "recast(s)" one's dependence on the Other for one's own constitution in linguistic terms and makes note of the potential injury thereby risked in one's very (linguistic) existence. Points of particular relevance to my project that I will further discuss are: the emphasis on the constitutive effects of a potentially injurious "call;" how the constitutive address "forecloses radical autonomy"; and the curious and undiscussed notation of a "dependency on a language *we never made*" (emphasis mine).

I begin with this latter qualifier (for want of a better term) because it is the hidden frame of Butler's and many theoretical discussions of the violence of articulation. It is a qualifier sounding curiously akin to Derrida's words that begin his aforementioned book: "I have only one language. It is not mine" (1). However, where the "we" of Butler's discussion remains unmarked, in Derrida's text the particularity of that alien, linguistically dependent identity is his focus. He specifically concerns himself with what it means to be linguistically constituted through a language not one's own—that is, to come from the margins (Franco-Magrebian), abdicating (without realizing it) one's "mother tongue" to make the language of empire one's (only) language. Unlike Derrida, Butler does not indicate here any particularity to the "we" who have a "primary dependency on a language we never made." English, and any specific margin Butler herself inhabits in relation to English, is unmarked. Certainly, Butler intentionally speaks

broadly to generate critical theory that can address "the kinds of language that can govern the regulation and constitution of subjects" for "a more general theory of the performativity of political discourse" (40). But despite such general goals, she makes this *particular* reference to a "language we never made." She cites a "we" who "never made" language even as she claims mobility for language throughout her work, even though she, herself, produces writing. And so while the general theory of interpellation and linguistic constitution is helpful, it seems dangerous to generalize with a royal "we" for the very reason that it violently subsumes the particularity of material differences in potential linguistic "agency" in the very lives of those about whom Butler hopes theorize.

For this project, I do rely on such general theories of the ways in which language is constitutive—even as it rakes (some of) its constituents over the coals. And a critique of "radical agency," insofar as it is in itself part and parcel of what has proved for many people a violent doctrine of enlightened progress, helps very much in illuminating the ways in which some writers are compelled to write violation. But in attending closely to creative texts, I am here primarily concerned with the *particularity* of those "kinds of language" for which Butler seeks general theory. I seek local specificity in the strategies of those who *create* within language that has proved potently injurious. Because, as Butler is herself eager to point out, language is "incongruously" a bodily act which can recall and represent bodily violence, I think it is important to "locate" the particular bodies in which and from which such language issues in order to understand "linguistic living" as a particularly creative act. Butler usefully claims for (even) the linguistically injured subject an "agency" that is not sovereign, but that can use "trauma" as "a strange kind of resource" through which to enact "the repetition of an originary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partly open" (38). There is a future that ghosts every attempt to speak and write. But where Butler sees this opening projected within "*a language we never made*," the texts that are my primary focus constitute not only linguistic subjects, but claim *creation* of the very language that is not theirs, that subordinates and would unmake their very authorship.

In this project I imagine a way to consider that marginal writer's relationship to linguistic violence—and through violence to survival and “a living.” The material force of language (and of the art one makes of it) may not be apparent when one is constructed “along the grain;” moving with the current, one does not feel its force. But this (transparent) force *is* felt and framed by numerous marginal critics as a matter of life and death.<sup>5</sup> And so, to particularize the violence of articulation, to understand the conditions under which those particularly threatened in language write, my critical readings implicitly make use of some theoretical approaches that have stakes in considering violence in its particularity. Feminist, African American, queer and post-colonial theories all play significant roles in revealing Donna Haraway's “situated knowledges” about writing and violence (Simians). For these theorists, language is tied closely to constructing a living and surviving materiality—or actively destroying that materiality. To speak of “bodies of literature” is, for those theorizing of and from the margins, to speak at the same time of the very bodies who write and engage that literature. Additionally, I seek to give creative writing itself theoretical voice where it relates to writing textual violence from the margins.

About literary criticism, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote that one should only approach literature with love, a critical challenge under any circumstance (23).<sup>6</sup> But to approach violence—even virtual violence—with love (S/M aside, or perhaps a notable exception) is an especially uncomfortable approach to take. Violation is so pejorative a term in academic culture these days that one hardly chooses to associate oneself with it—unless one is locating a “violation” of (oppressive) social norms. Such criticism has even found alternate terms to re-name such a violation, e.g. “transgression,” in order to avoid imaging the ugly violence such punctures entail. Criticism often appears to/seeks to

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<sup>5</sup> See Cornell West's discussion of popular music and church sermons operate to help people survive. Audre Lorde argues similarly for the power of language and textual creativity in “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.”

<sup>6</sup> Rilke makes this comment in one of his “letters to a young poet.” In this comment, and indeed throughout these letters, he is very much concerned with the pain of writing and the importance therefore of distinguishing between writing with urgency and by necessity and writing for secondary (non-constitutive?) purposes. His is, perhaps, the “fantasy” of “autogenesis” through writing, that Butler names.

overcome, move beyond, or—at the very least—contain violence.<sup>7</sup> Even Butler seeks language that can overcome foreclosure to achieve a "partly open" future. And yet, notions and acts of violence are so powerful a shaping force that one's very identity, even one's body, is thereby forged. We cannot therefore dis-own violation without (virtually) losing substance and force. Indeed, the further one finds oneself from the reins of language (though no one, thankfully, holds those reins in entirety), the more violently one is interpellated through language, and the more vital it may be to engage (in) literary violation with, if not love, then at least recognition and attention.

To constitute and enact violation in and through writing is by no means a static, or simply representative or mimetic act. Written words spell, transform, and shape in the fluid process of naming. For the purposes of this project, I treat language as an effective force, as speech-act theory does, and thereby sidestep the question of whether words matter in order to consider ways to talk about their force. When I began this project I had thought to differentiate between "speech" and "writing" and thereby make clear the differing shapes of violence in each. I was not, however, able to do this—at least not neatly. Instead, what became clear was that the form of articulation governs the shape of its violence only in a negotiation with the situation of articulation. The complex and particular relations of power in time and space, between speaker and addressee (or listener), and between reader and writer converge to produce varied trends and intensities of linguistic violation. Form nevertheless matters, functioning as a significant element of both relation and violation. And so I have tried to avoid entirely conflating speech and text (as, for example Butler does for the purposes of arguing against the censorship of "speech" in its broadest sense). In addition, I am working with written literary texts; where and how that form of articulation particularly matters to theorizing linguistic violation is, for the most part, the focus of this dissertation.

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But for all its phantasmagoria it is the promise of an imaginary creation that has no less (though perhaps different) force than the "real."

<sup>7</sup> See for example Deborah Horvitz' discussion in Literary Trauma where (through a reading of literary texts) she makes an argument for the "use" of trauma narrative such that "the cycle of violence can end" (134). While I'm all for reducing suffering, linking narratives directly to a goal of "healing" risks occlusion of linguistic violence.

The violence, or force, of being silenced, of being spoken for, of speaking (writing) at all under marginal conditions, has, then, special attributes and effects. The literary shapes of some of these “special effects” are the subjects of this project. Writing of the 1968 general strike in France, Michel de Certeau differentiates between “words” and “work:”

No more than becoming conscious, taking speech is neither an effective occupation nor the seizure of power. By denouncing a lack, speech refers to a labor. It is a symbolic action par excellence that reveals a task that today concerns the totality of our system. To believe it effective on its own would be to take it for granted and, as if by magic to lay claim to control forces with words, to substitute words for work. But then to conclude that it is meaningless would be to lose meaning, to put a mechanism in the place of a system of relations, and to suppose, ultimately, that a society can function without human beings. (Capture 10)

That is, while not identical to other effective forces (gravity, heat, physical violence), and certainly “unable to be effective on its own,” language operates as any “real” force does, in relation to these other “forces”—and to matter. Language is necessary to a “system of relations” by which society functions, and that cannot be (entirely) “mechanized.” When Derrida speaks of the violence of language, it is not the SAME as the physical violence of rape, torture, or forced starvation—even as we call them both by the same name and even as they operate in fields of relationship with each other. Indeed, in writing about the shape of literary violations, it is very important not to confuse the “violence of the letter” or even the effects of “representing violence” with physical violation (of bodies). This is perhaps most critical in order to avoid magnifying the power and the pain of linguistic violence by diminishing the pain of a violent physical reality. Yet it is also important to be as clear as possible on this distinction in order to name and bring a particular space to writing violation, to consider its shape and force, at least initially, without the degree of confusion the shared terminology lends current critical discussion. Such confusion has caught current discussion of violence and language, on the one hand, in the relativistic question of whether words matter at all, and, on the other, in the rhetoric of linguistic regulation and censorship where words are so tightly bound to specific material effects that language—and its dynamic power—is frozen.

This is not to say that the analogous use of physical terms to describe linguistic violation is not significant. As Butler notes, language is "incongruously" a bodily act. Indeed, I focus this project in a critical collaboration with literary texts by authors for whom writing seems—almost—to belie this distinction between physical and literary violation. These are writers shaped by material and linguistic violation that intertwine—sexism, homophobia, political and military repression, artistic and economic oppression, racism and colonialism. These are writers drawn to—and who draw upon—writing violation as a personally incarnating force. That is, though they "almost belie" my distinction, it is precisely the "almost" by which they continue to live and breathe.

Violence and linguistic violence are difficult to define for several reasons. I have begun to discuss how there is, first of all, real confusion inherent in the terms used in common for both material and linguistic violence. And, definitions certainly shift as the stakes shift. As Michel Foucault theorizes, what counts as violence is socially/linguistically produced. That is, violence, whether material or linguistic, depends on what "matters." That is not to say that violences (material or linguistic) do not involve pain and suffering in the absence of attention; but it does mean that unless one is the sufferer—and even then—one does not necessarily see the pain and suffering as a "violence" in either the pejorative sense it has come to have (under liberal feminism or enlightened academic westernism) or in the productive sense it has had for theories of political or economic revolution (Marxism, Postcolonialism). Teresa de Lauretis notes, by way of Foucault, how the representation of violence is socio-sexually-historically based. That is, some things count as violence while others are not even given names. She writes, for example, of how until recently there was, in effect, no such thing as domestic violence. It was, indeed, part and parcel of the patriarchal structure of the family such that it was not even considered as a violation (245). In that sense, family violence resembles the violence of the camps (particularly those of WWII in Germany, but there have been others in modern times) as critiqued by Giorgio Agamben. He argues that the camp is not "an historical fact and an anomaly belonging to the past...but...the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are still living" (106). This brings me to the

most difficult part of defining violence—the ways in which violence is defined by its very invisibility.

For indeed, violence—as violation, as unjust, injurious force—has no definition in the camps because “The camp is the space which is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule.” Violence—defined as exception—cannot be seen. Likewise, the family violence that de Lauretis names, for a long time (and even now) operated as something which could not be perceived, much less voiced. For, the father, with no exceptions (meaning, commanding all exceptions), ruled. Now this is a very brief view of domestic violence highly uncomplicated by race, class etc., but it is still a useful comparison by which to help understand under what conditions one “sees” and “voices” violation. This is the center of the question Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak considers when she asks, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” And so, can violence even be defined? In this sense, violence only “counts” (has currency) as such insofar as it cannot be voiced and does not carry the name of violence. Once it has been named it is already being accessed, voiced, linguistically transformed, and so experienced cognitively (not just viscerally); the power lines are reversing.

Hent DeVries writes to define the boundaries of violence, exploring in particular Walter Benjamin's attempts at such definition, and subsequent critiques thereof by others. Benjamin comes finally to an expansive definition where even the unintentional “forces of nature” can be violent (“Violence and Testimony”). DeVries shows how others have since drawn boundaries of violence more specifically—especially in the realm of language. But he comes back finally to think about what happens if one does take such an expansive definition of violence such that it is one's very horizon in all directions, thus requiring every action and inaction to operate within a virtual economy of violence. He comes finally to a critique of the customary (western enlightenment) views of violence that presuppose either an inviolate self and invading other, or, a self that is violently determinate (as against “innocent” others).

In bringing my discussion to the violence of articulation itself, there are two theoretical extremes (at least). For some, there is profound violence in the ways in which

words literally “matter.” For Catherine MacKinnon, pornographic text produces direct material violations—rape. While I do not disagree that representations have force and effects, I find such pornographic representations ubiquitous, and perhaps even fundamental to all kinds of representations in the current cultural context. I am thus unprepared for and indeed think it impossible to effectively intervene at the point of representation in the language-material violence cycle. Judith Butler is similarly unconvinced by MacKinnon's arguments for textual censure; and her own argument against this censure, as being not only ineffective, but potentially dangerous, is the premise for her book Excitable Speech. But I am equally impatient with the often-abstract discussion of the originary violence of articulation (cutting as it names, categorizes, and (over)determines) for reasons I have already articulated. Indeed, I am impatient with focusing on a general “violence of articulation” without attention to its counterpart the “violence of inarticulation.” And, for the same reasons I find myself unwilling to be convinced by MacKinnon's arguments for de-legitimization of pornography, I am uncertain that this universal violence of articulation does not simply function to efface material suffering. That in this oppressive culture and society violence and language are linked seems to me a foregone conclusion. What is not foregone, what is yet unclear, is how that linkage functions in particularity.

When Derrida writes, “I have only one language; it is not mine,” he articulates a particular lacuna of operating in a marginal relation to one's own language, in exile from the words by which one is constituted. This is the violence of articulation where it intersects with the particular body in the world. Language voices him; for him to voice his marginal relation to his own constitution, to his “absolute habitat,” gives rise to a permanent displacement that corresponds with the linguistic mechanisms by which colonialism and patriarchy, for example, maintain themselves. Such particular marginal constitution, such a simultaneous material and linguistic constitution and displacement is the frictive and violent gap in and into which the marginal body writes.

De Certeau writes specifically about the violence of writing itself, of the ways in which a socially overdetermined reader/text relationship obscures the very material world

which the writer may seek to re-present. He sees in writing itself a kind of terror, a violence, and certainly an oppression. But, by focusing on the *processes* of literacy, as opposed to the fixed text, de Certeau locates a kind of mobility for the marginal reader in what he calls “Reading as poaching.” He explains:

The autonomy of the reader depends on a transformation of the social relationships that overdetermine his relation to texts. This transformation is a necessary task....[the reader] deterritorializes himself, oscillating in a nowhere between what he invents and what changes him...we are directed toward a reading no longer characterized merely by an ‘impertinent absence,’ but by advances and retreats, tactics and games played with the text....alternately captivated, playful, protesting, fugitive. (Practice 175)

Here, the terms “oscillating,” “advances and retreats,” “captivated,” and “fugitive” all imply a boundary that is materialized, neither from the inside, nor from the outside, nor in any fixed way. By refusing to re-cognize boundary, and instead focusing on movement, on “oscillation,” one reads linguistic boundary itself in mobility. Fixity may exist, but the reader as poacher operates neither in “impertinent absence” (ignorance) nor in “compliance” (submission)—both being readings that attend to the boundary itself—but instead in a recursive motion that creates the boundary as conditional, itself a matter of the reading. Drawing from this idea of “poaching” on language, I am interested in how the marginal *writer*, working to sound a presence obscured in a material/linguistic violence of subalterity in the only language she has (which is not her language), might use such “tactics.”

In these chapters I build upon de Certeau's concept of poaching as well as Butler's general notion of how injurious language such as hate speech can offer moments of reversal, when, interpellated into voice through the address, the subject can “talk back.” I use these ideas to look at *particular* places where the authors work such moments of linguistic violation. Through literary strategies I am putting under the umbrella of “spelling violation” they effect transformative moments which engage violence. Not simply by “reversal,” nor direct mirroring, nor cathartic exorcism of violation, nor by work to bury and move beyond violence do these engagements operate; instead they seek to embody violation as it embodies them, to wield it as they are so wielded—through

language. Their approaches are not identical but do share questions of violent identity, of attraction to the power of linguistic violence that both injures and shapes the subject/writer. Through strategies I have defined as *possession*, *tailing*, and *prophecy* all these writers “spell” violation, casting and re-casting violations through and of language.

I see “spelling violation” as the literary negotiation, by a variety of strategies, of constitutive linguistic violence. In a way, I turn Harold Bloom’s concept of poetics, the “anxiety of influence,” on its head (or take it to its extreme) to consider writers who work from the margins. Poets, he argues, write in an anxiety of their overwhelmingly strong and admired predecessors (The Fathers). Through literary swerves and disjunctures the poets Bloom concerns himself with try to avoid becoming mere “copies” of the esteemed ancestors. The authors in which I find myself invested work instead (and perhaps also) in an anxiety of the linguistic and material destruction (by same The Fathers) that is at the center of the very medium within which they are constituted. Throughout this project I trace how the particular literary strategies each writer enacts in relation to violence have much to do with the social, cultural and historical context of the writers’ constitution in terms of both linguistic and material violations. Nevertheless, I also argue that the ways in which “making text” is embodied through and embedded in materiality also creates critical commonalities of force in writing violation. The writers I explore are attracted to the very forceful possibilities of such a negotiation, as frameworks structuring not only the “linguistic life” Butler names but also the material/physical life that ghosts every text.

In the chapter “Possession” I examine three writers’ uses of the related and intersecting economics of slavery and literacy/voice to take possession of the power of the constitutive violence of language. Through Romantic era poems by William Blake and Mary Robinson and a late twentieth century novel by Octavia Butler I consider each writer’s “use” of slavery to approach and embody a violence that is gender specific in its effects on the writer’s relationship to voice and literacy, and ultimately survival. For the marked body literacy and a literary identity is a sexualized/racialized exchange. Romantic literature draws heavily upon the ideas of sensibility, and, working in tension with principles of the Enlightenment, locates the writing body as the powerful nexus of

sensory perception and mental reasoning, offering Blake in “The Little Black Boy” and Robinson in “The Negro Girl” an opportunity to bring the “marked” body into play as “marker.” The linked potentials of violation and creation, of subject and subjectification at this nexus of body and language become particularly acute in the virtual slave body. In a more contemporary text, in her novel Kindred Butler locates a similar moment of material and “linguistic vulnerability,” as Judith Butler would call it, introducing as well the contemporary twist of how reproduction (of bodies, of texts) figures literary constitution. Setting this text into conversation with the earlier work of Blake and Robinson further illuminates and complicates the possibilities and costs of fully possessing such a violative, self-constitutive moment, and in doing so calls into question an enlightened sense of progress focused on “individualism,” “choice,” “free-will,” and “self-knowledge.” The authors’ explicit foci on topics of literacy and voice in these texts sharpen the stakes in what it takes to be a (marked) subject who writes (marks)—and the power gained and risk taken in the literary possession of those violent stakes of survival.

Where in the above chapter a narrative strategy of dis/possessing the textual slave body puts the marginal writer into powerful relation with the intersections of material oppression and literacy, in the next chapter “Tailing” I work with writers who inherit the violence of a narrative strategy closely linked to Western European enlightenment and empire—the novel. The foreclosed narratives of Art Spiegelman’s Maus: A Survivor’s Tale, Lynda Barry’s Cruddy, and Randall Kenan’s Visitation of Spirits—stories of aging, coming of age, and receiving the violent legacy of preceding generations—all assume violation (from the beginning and in the end). They thus disturb the traditional novel narrative with its linear progression towards resolution and deceptive openness. Through both foreclosure and comics strategies, the novel form is here revealed as a problematic but strong container for violation which can through foreclosure focus the text inward and backward—on genealogy or detection. The rise of the novel during the enlightenment is no coincidence, and as in the preceding chapter, I critique enlightenment thinking and narrative in conversation with several theorists of linguistic violence. Scott McCloud’s study of how comics strategies particularly shape narrative, Michel Foucault’s

concept of genealogical investigation, Judith Butler's ideas regarding language and foreclosure, and Donna Haraway's theory of "situated knowledges" provide important critical background to my analysis of how these writers tail narrative violation.

I turn "tail" to "Prophecy" in the next chapter. Seemingly opposed to an approach that would foreclose violation by tracking its history in the present, forward-looking prophecy and the apocalyptic framework that accompanies it also, interestingly, name violation as a permanent space—not inevitable, but given, and when aesthetically pressurized, mobile in its cycles of destruction and renewal. Like the texts in the previous chapter, William Blake's Jerusalem, Kamau Brathwaite's poems from Middle Passages, and Marlene Norbese Philip's poetry from She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks all rely on the graphic nature of text to simultaneously *clarify* and *materialize* scenes of violation. Here I look at the ways in which the material violations of empire and colonialism are fused with language to create an extremely violent linguistic constitution of subjects—at both the center and the perimeters of empire. Post-colonial theories here help trace the ways in which empire and language are fused. Kamau Brathwaite's argument for "Nation-Language," Edward Said's excavation of colonialism in British literary scenes of the domestic, and Spivak's theories of the "subaltern" inform my analysis in this chapter.

As I come to this project's spelling (though perhaps not binding) conclusion I bring together the common threads of strategies outlined in the previous chapters to concern myself with the questions with which I began. In this last chapter "Spelling Violation" I consider how (marginal) writers constitute themselves under (locally specific) linguistic erasure. For while texts are the material and medium of this inquiry, I am finally interested how these texts can offer a specular shape for the surviving writer, the writing body. I read Teresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictee as explicitly experimenting with literature as a particularly forceful way to theorize this very speculation. In this experimental text that crosses genres and juxtaposes text and graphics Cha spells the limitations and possibilities of the junction of literacy and materiality in the (marginal) writing body. I consider further possibilities for the study of the limits and possibilities of

"spelling" by way of a brief selection from the poet H.D.'s personal journal writing during her experience of the WWII bombing of London. Both Cha and H.D. suggest the limits of the surviving writing body in the face of impersonal material violence. For it is one thing to take on moments of individual violent address, where violence is simultaneously personal and impersonal (or institutionalized)—as Butler theorizes through her discussion of "hate speech"—but to write from the margins is also to work at moments of violation where the violence is so impersonal that there is no moment of "address" to effect even a reversal. Cha and H.D. explore moments of violent linguistic "subalterity" where "one" is not addressed at all (bombing, colonialism) and so where the writing body must nevertheless constitute (address) itself through a ritual "spelling."

Once upon a violation...

## **CHAPTER 2 : POSSESSION (RACE, GENDER AND THE LITERATE BODY)**

**“I have only one language; it is not mine” (Derrida 1).**

My brother’s kindergarten teacher assigned each child in the classroom to one of the life-size inflatable letter people the curriculum of the day was using to begin the teaching of reading. These were something akin to blow-up punching clowns. My brother was assigned the letter “H:” “Mr. H with the Horrible Hair.” Ostensibly the letter was chosen for him because his first name begins with an H. But when my parents found out about this assignment after the fact, they were deeply disturbed. For my brother’s hair, an unmanageably kinky and fine combination of his African and European American birth parents indeed seemed to be “horrible hair.” His hair refused to be shaped either into the longish Afro that was the fashion of the day for “African” hair, or into the shaggy white boy cut of the 1970s. Who knows what his teacher was thinking? That she was African American herself would seem to have ruled out blatant racism. But, as numerous folks (particularly women) have argued over the past few decades in literary and cultural studies, hair is no small thing in much of African American culture.

That my brother became, as each kindergarten child assumed the identity of his or her respective letter, “Mr. H with the Horrible Hair” was only the beginning of an elementary school experience marked with difficulties in learning to read, and problems getting along with his teachers. My brother’s difficulties with education, with writing itself, continue to this day. Of course one elementary school incident can hardly be the sole cause of his later problems with school, or even with reading and writing. Yet it remains a stark marker for me: in its re-markability in memory, in how I remember my parents’ dismay, and in how my brother’s body was negatively invoked by the letter that began the spelling of his very name. How do we read the effects and interactions of literacy, of a linguistic life, on and with a body so spelled? A spelling so (horribly) embodied?

When Jacques Derrida writes, “I have only one language; it is not mine” he remarks the hard place in which a body constituted in a marginal relation to language finds itself. To speak or spell one constitutes oneself as linguistically alien—horrible. But

to not speak or spell means one cannot find oneself at all, for one has no other linguistic home than this body of language. As I believe is the case for my brother, the negative constitution of the body through language sets up that body for a life of spelling in which one continually re-wounds oneself (horribly). In this chapter I explore this legacy<sup>8</sup> of connections and gaps between the body so constituted and the words it spells. I consider a strategy of “possession” three marginal writers use to materialize the forces of violence ranging those connections and gaps.

The problem of possessing and so being (horribly) possessed by language, of articulating and constituting that linguistic violation is acutely represented in the metaphor and materiality of the slave body. The popular circulation of anti-slavery literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, concurrent with a call for universal “natural rights” in both Europe and the Americas, suggests parallels to the overlapping discourses of race and rights that emerged in the mid to late twentieth century in the United States. Writers during both these time periods made use of the slave—as figure and as fact—as a powerful approach to the writing of violation.<sup>9</sup> Beginning with romantic-era poems by William Blake and Mary Robinson, and then moving to a more contemporary text by Octavia Butler, I consider the ways in which slavery offers a space for writers theorizing writing violation from the position of the marginal body, helping in particular to reveal the material-linguistic complex of ownership and power that constitutes a marginal linguistic life.

Under interdict against literacy, dispossessed of land, language, and even her own body, the slave figures as a powerful (if now somewhat historical, and always fanciful) manifestation of the marginal writer/speaker. The body, forbidden language and literacy but nonetheless possessed of and by both, materializes in the (mythological) African slave. The significant differences in the ways in which the slave is embodied and

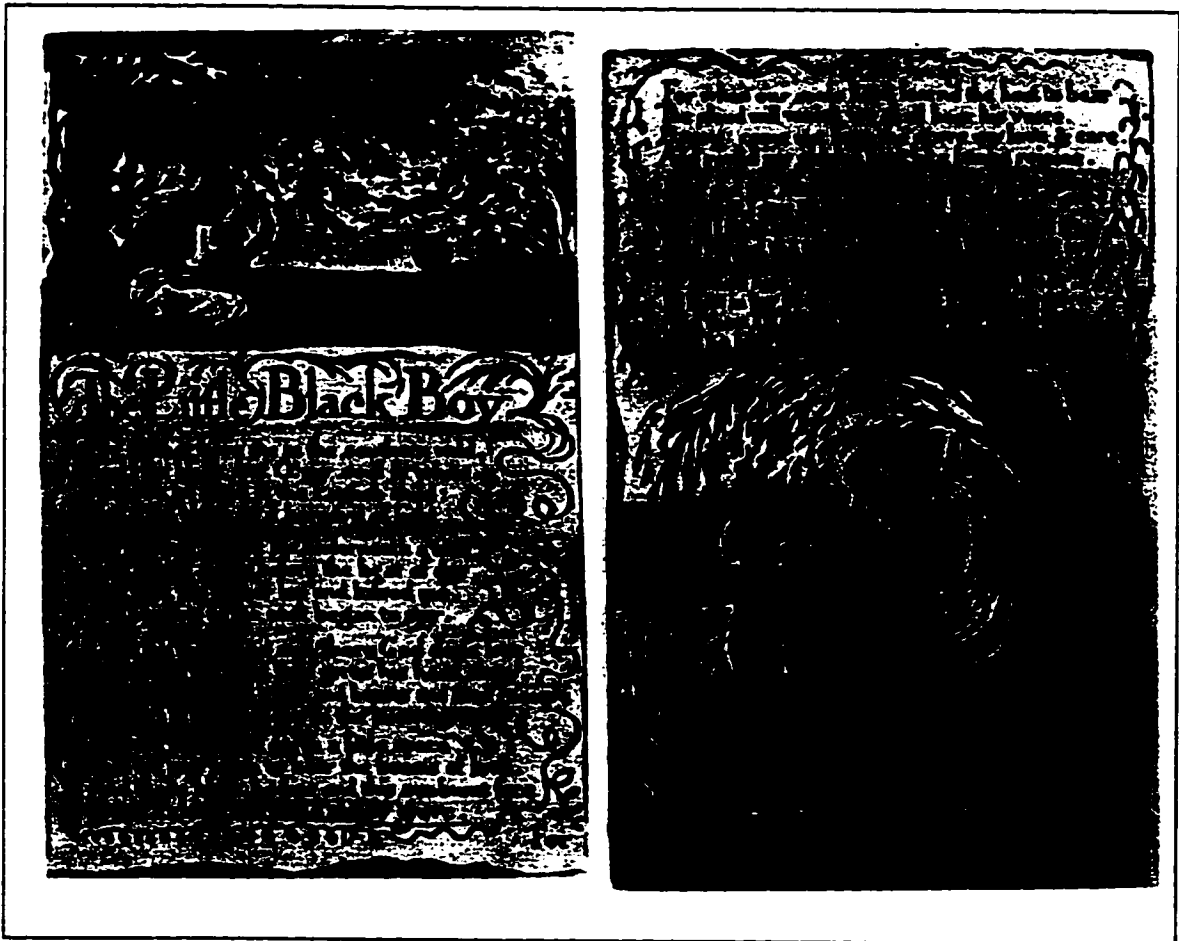
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<sup>8</sup> Legacy: the lacy edges, the legible laces, the racy legs.

<sup>9</sup> In the late eighteenth century see both “slave narratives” such as Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*, as well as a wide variety of poetry and fiction by such writers as Samuel Coleridge, Robert Southey, Hannah More, and Anne Yearsley. In the mid-late twentieth century, see for example Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* and Alex Haley’s *Roots*. In this latter time literature by James Baldwin, Paule Marshall, Gayle Jones, Ralph

inhabited in these three texts are informed by the author's particularities of gender, race, class and geographic locale. But, that there are these differences tied to the construction/perception of the material body says as much about the governing significance of the writer's own body in the process of writing, and specifically of writing violation from any marginal materiality, as it does about the particularities of violations. In the work of Blake, Robinson, and Butler, the slave body constitutes a particularly sharp (fascinating and exotic and uncanny) metaphor, mimetic and identical, of that spectral space of marginal literacy.

### BLAKE'S "LITTLE BLACK BOY"



**Figure 1: "The Little Black Boy" Copy I: Plates 9, 10**

Ellison, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and many other explicitly explores characters constituted in the violent legacy of slavery.

I begin with William Blake's poem in Songs of Innocence "The Little Black Boy" because although his work is not in the mainstream of anti-slavery writing, it is sensitive to those traditions, offering a close look at, as well as a pointed critique of them. Critical of the mind/body divide being reified under the enlightenment, Blake is interested in artistic creativity as an issue of the body writ large in the imagination. In his most famous prophetic poem Jerusalem, he creates all of England as a body that is also the body of the poet/artist/prophet. In the "little" poem "The Little Black Boy" that I discuss here, Blake offers intentionally or inadvertently—and probably both—a particularly concentrated and complicated look at embodied issues of gender, race, sentiment, and voice. The poem holds (marginal) commonalities with as well as marked differences from other texts drawing (upon) and figuring (calculating) the slave body—namely Mary Robinson's "The Negro Girl" from her Lyrical Tales, published 1800, a poem strongly in the sentimental anti-slavery tradition, and Octavia Butler's Kindred, a novel of time travel published in 1979.

Though now firmly in the canon of male English literature, Blake was in his own time a relatively marginal writer and artist. A skilled laborer (as was his father), he made the bulk of his living engraving other writers' and artists' work. Although he claimed England for the artist, Blake created on the margins of the worlds of both "high art" (for example, Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Royal Academy of Art) and popular art (the newspapers where Mary Robinson mostly published). A self-proclaimed visionary, he worked in a lifelong aesthetic resistance to empire, the totalitarianism of the "new" sciences, and domestic oppression and poverty. Able to make a living through his engraving and the occasional support of patrons, during his lifetime he nevertheless gained little attention for either his artwork or the political and religious views it embodied.<sup>10</sup>

The Little Black Boy narrates his own story:

My mother bore me in the southern wild,

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<sup>10</sup> Legend has it that he was, however, once arrested and briefly held on charges of treason when, upon finding a soldier pissing in his garden one morning, Blake cursed the Queen (Adams).

And I am black, but O! my soul is white;  
 White as an angel is the English child,  
 But I am black as if bereav'd of light

My mother taught me underneath a tree,  
 And sitting down before the heat of day,  
 She took me on her lap and kissed me,  
 And pointing to the east began to say:

“Look on the rising sun: there God does live,  
 And gives his light, and gives his heat away;  
 And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive  
 Comfort in morning, joy in the noonday.

“And we are put on earth a little space,  
 That we may learn to bear the beams of love;  
 And these black bodies and this sunburnt face  
 Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

“For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear,  
 The cloud will vanish; we shall hear his voice,  
 Saying: 'Come out from the grove, my love & care,  
 And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.”

Thus did my mother say, and kissed me;  
 And thus I say to little English boy.  
 When I from black and he from white cloud free,  
 And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,

I'll shade him from the heat, till he can bear  
 To lean in joy upon our father's knee;  
 And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,  
 And be like him, and he will then love me. (Illuminated 50-1)

Certainly Blake affords himself of the figures and narratives of slavery being widely circulated in his time. He frequently makes use of slavery as a literal description of both artistic and material repression, repressions he links through the body. The virtual slave body may also have offered a more easily and obviously mutable material body. Under the pressures of racism—to which Blake, a skilled white Christian artisan was not immune—it may have been hard to imagine fluxing the coloring of the white body. But Blake was all about resisting fixation—especially of the body and its senses. He sought a

dynamic sensibility he felt was integral to art, and through art to divinity. So, the Black boy, a child, already appearing in a socially undesirable color form, may have offered an easier, more palatable opportunity to shift the body. But Blake finds himself in a bind here, for shifting the body too much, making its color or form matter not at all, too easily eliminates the productive tension the body presents (the tension is lost if the body is simply loosened from a field of spirit rather than mattering to that field). Blake is not—nor does he wish to be—color blind. The body remains (must remain) the reminder (remainder) of the material stakes (as in burned at?) of his words.

As he does throughout his deceptively simple Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience collections, in “The Little Black Boy” Blake takes a tradition of simple, sentimental children’s rhyme and turns it on its head. This gentle verse continues his inversion and complication of widely held definitions of innocence and experience. The poem is lettered and illustrated in two facing plates, the coloring of which changes with each edition. On the left side a small dark-skinned boy is pictured sitting with a dark-skinned woman against a tree in a landscape named the “wilds.” On the right side, the same boy is pictured in a domesticated pastoral countryside complete with sheep, reaching after what the text names as an “English Boy” who is lighter-skinned and faces away from the Black Boy towards a God/Jesus figure. Thus in this poem are conceits common to much anti-slavery poetry: the familial scene, the references to God as maker of both White and Black children, the initial “wild” setting and subsequent relocation of the Black Boy to a setting in England, and the sun which shines on all creation—rhetorically leveling humanity as does the sun in Hannah More’s “Slavery, A Poem,” published in 1788, just one year before the “Songs.” And, as in other anti-slavery poetry, such as More’s, these conceits are not without problem as they stereotype (and thus reduce to rhetoric) the people involved. Yet, in the face of the horrors of the slave trade, such a consideration may have seemed minor.

Indeed, Blake’s other moves in this poem do indicate some awareness of this problem—he undercuts the heavy-handed stereotyping and dramatic rhetoric of anti-slavery verse by portraying a very particular scene between an individual child and his

mother with a very “typical” parental kiss (read: just like any English parent might offer), a little bit of storytelling, and advice in the manner (if not content) that “typical” parents offer. The woman thus has a voice not uncivilized; God’s own words actually come out of the loving mother’s mouth: “Come out from the grove, my love & care, /And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.” Unlike the brutal master and slave scenes depicted in numerous other anti-slavery pieces, the “shadow” of racism that the Black boy feels is portrayed in an understated scene of wanting to be loved by a playmate—a child’s innocent prayer or wish for a friend. And though very different from each other, the countryside is quite pastoral on both the “wild” left and “civilized” right plates, creating a sense of shelter and calmness in each.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Blake disconnects the stereotypes of color from their familiar rhetorical content. For Blake, whiteness and blackness, as light and dark, are not “good” or “bad” per se. In the line “But I am black as if bereav’d of light” the “as if” can be read strongly. That is, being black does not really mean being without Light with a capital L. In this poem, there are two sides to the “clouds,” figures for the material bodies from which the speaker of this poem looks forward to being free. In Blake’s long poems, clouds (white or black) are problematic, as they obscure vision. Here, as dark skin, the “clouds” are a protective “shady grove” against the divine heat that neither boy can yet bear unprotected. Indeed the Black Boy, being “like a shady grove,” can offer shelter to the pale English Boy who may need more or longer protection before he is ready to “bear the heat” of God’s loving presence, a “golden tent.” But “bereav’d of light” also emphasizes an undercurrent of grief and loss for the Black Boy. The narrator is indeed “bereav’d” of the “light” with a small “l.” Lacking this light (white) skin that would afford him equity with the English boy, he has not the visibility as a subject that would grant him the white boy’s notice—his “light” or love. In this sense, while protective, the Black Boy’s material body remarks him darkly as an *object*, albeit a useful one, and so obscures and renders him invisible as a *subject* of love—of both the love he gives as well

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<sup>11</sup> In addition to the dramatic scenes of death in Mary Robinson’s poem “The Negro Girl,” other poems offering brutal scenes of slavery include “The Sorrows of Yamba, or the Negro Woman’s Lamentation” by Hannah More and “A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade” by Anne Yearsley.

as that for which he longs. Although the *Black Boy* narrates his own story, the social construction of his body (as black), is a barrier to his being heard, and thus to his being “called”—interpellated in love and language.

But Blake changes the skin colorings of the human figures from printing to printing in this poem—at least those of the Black boy and God/Jesus. Erdman notes, “The Black boy is as light of skin as the English boy in some copies, quite black in others,” and “In [copy] U the black boy is blue black here, though brown in the preceding page; the white boy is pink and white; Christ is a compromise between them, the upper part of his face being almost as blue-black as the black boy” (*Illuminated* 51). The darkening of the Black boy’s face from the scene in the wilds to the scene in England runs counter to prevailing scientific ideas about climate causing skin color—emphasizing that, for Blake, the human imagination was far more important in constituting human form than rigid ideas of “reality.”<sup>12</sup> It may be that the English imagination itself blackens the boy; and certainly Blake shows that the blackest body yet enjoys God’s love. Erdman’s view of the Christ figure’s coloring as a compromise between dark and light bodies is borne out by the “golden” coloring of the tent. But this coloring is only one way Blake issued this poem. Erdman sees these changes as “different ways of making the same points.” *The Illuminated Blake* is not intended as a strongly theoretical text; Erdman does not elaborate on exactly what these “points” are. Most obviously, Blake here critiques slavery and/as prejudice justified by and reified in a fixed material body. Certainly Blake’s ongoing rage against the ways in which science and reason fixed and essentialized the material world comes out in this poem, as it does in his ongoing insistence on hand printing and coloring his own work, single edition by single edition. But it can also be that Blake’s “points,” and angles of approach thereto, were less planned than Erdman’s words imply. Blake may have been conflicted not only about how to make these points but also about the points themselves. The alternate colorings may indicate that Blake was not immune to the ambivalence of the day as to what WAS the point about skin color and race. Perhaps he himself vacillated on the importance (and thus portrayal) of skin color

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<sup>12</sup> Thus his insistence that the world was flat.

and race. Certainly, under the influence of Lavater's readings of physiognomy, he takes on decidedly racist tones in his address "To the Africans," urging them to change the slope of their foreheads and simultaneously gain intelligence. Mutable though he calls this body, he calls it through an association of reason and appearance *by race*. The white boy's coloring does not shift significantly, perhaps a measure of white English mental rigidity but nevertheless naturalizing in its constancy.

Set against this relative naturalization of the English boy's body, the fluidity of the Black boy's figure, as design and text move from the first to the second plate, creates a trajectory of desire and longing that foregrounds and yet continually defers the European figures of landscape and religion. The Black boy is nation-less, coming "from the southern wild," whereas the other boy is "English." Blake's usual two-way street of contraries and conversation is complicated here (when isn't it?), for while in the narrator's words the English boy supposedly benefits from his (the Black boy's) "shelter" (perhaps his work as a slave underwrites the white boy's comfort?), there is no hint that the English boy desires, or appreciates, or even notices the black boy's help and love. The English boy will "lean in joy upon our father's knee" while the Black boy will "stand and stroke his silver hair." Whether "his" hair is the boy's or the "father's"—the syntax does not make it clear and thus conflates Christ and the English boy—there is such longing for that paleness, or lack of color, *from behind*, that "lightness" can't help but be elevated. The trajectory of that longing may be amplified to illuminate its error, but perhaps Blake cannot help but re-mark the racist valences of "light" and "dark" figuration.

The boys here are pictured and talked about "like lambs." And in copy "I," "The Little Black Boy" directly follows "The Lamb," a poem in which Jesus and humanity are conflated in the form and image of the lamb. In addition, Blake writes in "The Divine Image," "Then every man of every clime, /That prays in his distress, /Prays to the human form divine." Together, these pieces show Blake's belief that the Black Boy is as divine as any English "lamb." And yet, even in matters of the spirit, race comes into play. Blake's struggle with how exactly that "human form," the material body in the divine

image, is constituted when the materiality of race enters the question remains in as much flux as his varied colorings of the plates.

“The Little Black Boy” never mentions slavery. But with all its abolitionist narrative cues, the removal of the Black boy to England (or, possibly an English colony, where we might also find “English” boys) without his family of origin is the unstated background of this poem. Perhaps Blake wishes to avoid this well trodden and sensationalist literary territory. But slavery is ever a backdrop to Blake’s work—though he only rarely alludes to the specific practice of buying and selling Africans. In his poem “Visions of the Daughters of Albion” the first word of the “Visions” is “Enslav’d” and the cries of slaves form a sea of sound that incessantly laps at the shore: “At entrance Theotormon sits wearing the threshold hard/With secret tears; beneath him sound like waves on a desert shore/ The voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children bought with money” (*Illuminated* 130). The oppressive forces that engender slavery constitute and erode the very landscape in which Blake’s characters live. On this same page a prone black figure, fallen away from a pick axe and lying against a tree almost bent to the ground, is trying to raise him or herself up on a straining arm. The body of this slave figure divides the page in two signifying the sundering of human narrative that a landscape of oppression entails. For Blake did not limit the idea of slavery to the African slave trade, but used slavery as a broader metaphor for myriad symptoms of oppression: the labor of youths in factories, youths used as cannon fodder in political wars, and the artist chained and denied creativity and vision.<sup>13</sup> In “The Little Black Boy” he may indeed be working to address racism beyond the confines of slavery, because (as the great anticipator) Blake saw that slavery itself was not the all encompassing or foundational problem (as its abolition would not be the grand solution), but part of larger cycles of oppression and violence. Certainly, in the dislocation suggested behind the move from plate to plate slavery and its destructive effects on familial relations are given and assumed. Like the endless deferral of the English boy’s love, this continental and familial dis-location is part and parcel of the violent landscape in which Blake writes.

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<sup>13</sup>See Blake’s *Jerusalem*, especially Chapter 3, plate 65 (*Complete* 216-217).

In “The Little Black Boy” Blake creates a poem that does everything to indicate it will be in the tradition of abolitionist literature. He includes family<sup>14</sup>, philosophy about universal humanity under one sun,<sup>15</sup> the science of climate creating skin color,<sup>16</sup> moral elevation of “the black boy” over whites,<sup>17</sup> and a vilification of the owner class—the “English boy.”<sup>18</sup> But beyond these markers, he refuses the narrative that should go with them, never mentioning “slavery,” and centering instead on emotion or sentiment—especially love.<sup>19</sup> But as strongly as this poem affirms love, it also leaves the reader with a profound feeling of sadness at this boy’s longing for love and his resignation to present suffering in exchange for that love in the indeterminate future—after death. Knowing that in his other work Blake sought action over inaction, energy over passivity, and generally abhorred sacrifice (even self-sacrifice which he aligned with war), the perspective of this accepting and passive narrator, loving as he is, is not the final word on this scene.

Stephen Cox sees Blake’s poem as envisioning a child somehow un-warped by his experience with racism, still able to wholly love and sympathize according to the best human nature discourse of the day. Yet something *is* missing—the mother for one thing—and this boy longs for a reciprocal love with an English boy who despises and treats him badly. Love will come, according to the mother’s voice that haunts him, only when they are in heaven. Today in middle America this would describe an “unhealthy” relationship, for which talk-show hosts would urge counseling and encourage the boy to develop reciprocal love relationships in *this* lifetime. In Blake’s time, the same general

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<sup>14</sup> See Hannah More’s “The Sorrows of Yamba, or the Negro Woman’s Lamentation” for a particularly good example of the sundered family used to elicit sympathy with the slave.

<sup>15</sup> See Hannah More’s “Slavery, A Poem.”

<sup>16</sup> See Buffon and Blumenbach for examples of the thinking that many writers including More and Blake draw upon for the science of race.

<sup>17</sup> In “The Negro Girl” by Robinson, the slave woman maintains the high moral ground in her loyalty to her mate.

<sup>18</sup> William Cowper’s “Sweet Meat Makes a Sour Sauce” complicates this vilification of owner by speaking from the middle class sea merchant’s point of view. And Robert Southey writes a poem in which a sailor expresses deep regret for the suffering he caused and was witness to in the slave trade, “The Sailor Who Served in the Slave Trade.”

<sup>19</sup> In Love’s Logic Stephen Cox argues that central to all the Songs of Innocence is the emotional theme of love.

public might label this boy's attitude as reflecting admirable sensibility. In either case, the subtext of this poem presents death, the eternal resting place of the "white" soul, as the happiest location for this black boy to occupy (someday). While not spelling out suicide, the boy narrator of this poem parrots the themes of self-sacrifice and longing for release from suffering through death that are common in anti-slavery poetry of the time—themes which Blake could not condone.

While the Black boy is certainly "innocent" of the violence in the rhetoric he parrots, it is a rhetoric that ricochets among all the poems in Innocence and Experience. The theme of self-sacrifice is repeated and revealed as supporting material violence in another blackened character's voice in the companion poems "The Chimney Sweeper" (one each in Innocence and Experience). In the Innocence version of the poem, the young narrator's companion sweep, Tom, dreams of their current lives as being deaths, "lock'd up in coffins of black," from which an "angel," as representative of repressive organized religion, will release them back into clean white bodies for their ascension into heaven. Such rhetoric, coming as obviously as it does for an adult reader from the hypocritical church leaders we see in other poems in Innocence and Experience, nevertheless comforts and warms these cold and miserable boys in their innocence. So, though they rise in the "dark" and "cold" morning to a labor that was quite deadly to children in eighteenth century London, the narrator can conclude, with heart wrenching trust and faith and without the terrible irony the reader hears, that "Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm; So if all do their duty they need not fear harm" (14). Once he is "experienced" however, the sweep loses faith, becoming bitter in the face of the revelation of the violence this rhetorical constitution of his life does him. In Experience "A little black thing among the snow, / Crying 'weep! 'weep!' in notes of woe!" now sees how his innocence was taken advantage of:

"Because I was happy upon the heath,  
 "And smil'd among the winter's snow,  
 "They clothed me in the clothes of death,  
 "And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

"And because I am happy & dance & sing,

“They think they have done me no injury,  
 “And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King,  
 “Who make up a heaven of our misery.” (34-5)

In the first poem, the narrator remarks upon being sold so young he could hardly say “weep! 'weep!” Here the missing letter 's' marked by the apostrophe shows how the child can hardly even name the labor to which he is put. By the time the narrator comes around again in the second poem in Experience, the missing letter “s” now emphasizes the knowledge of experience, that to “sweep” is to “weep.” That it is the father and mother that sold the narrator (in both poems) into this wretched existence points both to a terrible betrayal of intimacy, but also to the violent hypocrisy inherent in paternalistic structures of church and state, not limited in their violence to the buying and selling of Africans in the colonies. In “making up a heaven,” England sells its very own children into “misery.”

Strong in his critiques of oppression, and aware as he was of “the rights of woman,” Blake was nevertheless as tied as any artist to the context of his time, remarkably a context from which he consciously works to create, rather than separate.<sup>20</sup> He writes unapologetically from an imaginative world centered in England. From that perspective, it is not surprising that the plate portraying these “lambs” of boys meeting with God looks to be an English countryside. Likewise, knowing how much Blake loved bodies and painting them in all their nakedness, the topless Black mother may not be surprising. But, other (white) mothers in “Songs” are fully clothed. This Black woman is “available” to the reader in a physical way that the white women of the text are not. And it fits just too neatly with the circulating rhetoric of empire to place the figure of God in a European rather than “heathen” landscape. Note, as Erdman does, the wildness of the trees in the first plate as opposed to the more contained and obviously English willow in the second. A discourse of race tied to the material body and landscape is heavily present here.

Together the text and design of the poem assign and depict a heightened “Black” “sensitivity” to counter a notion of African heathen savagery. In this sense, the poem

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<sup>20</sup> Blake associated with a number of dissidents including Mary Wollstonecraft for whom he engraved a book of progressive educational stories for children.

works in accordance with current philosophical efforts to unify a vision of human nature. Certainly Blake presumes an essentially good (though he has difficulty with that term) universal humanity manifested through divine love and imagination. Nevertheless, Blake is also tracing, perhaps unwittingly, a concurrent trend in political and social thought to label the female the more “moral” or “sensitive” sex. The mother is pictured with the black boy on her lap, offering him physical and emotional support, and passing on to him a narrative secure in a knowledge of divine love and correct moral attitude towards others.

In “real life” the “moral” woman of the day found herself in the difficult position of being more qualified to speak to ethical issues in society than a man, but in danger of ruining her qualifications should she venture forth from the home to do so. Conservatives would have her moral force “uncontaminated,” and so limited to the domestic sphere; her job (ideally) was to raise sons to carry her moral influence into the dirty world. This idea of women as essentially, by their very “natures,” morally sensitive sets up artificial boundaries between the public and the domestic and highlights the very real limits set on their power and influence in the “public” spheres of politics and economics.<sup>21</sup> Granted, in Blake’s design, the mother’s domestic realm turns the inside to the outside— “[the Black Boy’s] mother bore [him] in the southern wild” and she attends to him in this “wild,” “[teaching him] underneath a tree” without any housing structures, much less kitchens or parlor rooms, in sight. But this “landscape” is hardly disruptive. Just as the “wild landscape” of this plate draws on stereotypes of a romantic Africa circulating at the time,<sup>22</sup> the “natural” landscape here essentializes the mother-child relationship as well as the morality of her teachings. Blake’s piece draws heavily on popularly circulating notions of powerful “native (wild) morality”; and on the strength of the Black Boy’s

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<sup>21</sup>Marlon Ross’ article “Configurations of Feminine Reform” analyzes the ways in which “occasional” poetry of this period gives women a genre in which to signal their political participation while remaining in a feminine “form.”

<sup>22</sup>For all that I think his analysis should be taken with many grains of salt, Wylie Sypher does a good job in his book of 1942, *Guinea’s Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the XVIIIth Century*, of noting the ways in which abolitionist literature romanticized Africa and created the “pseudo-Negro” which set the stage for stereotyping and future racist discourses.

savage ancestry (though again, this being Blake, he makes it the gentle strength of pure love that comes from this wilderness).<sup>23</sup>

According to Cox, Blake emphasizes the interchangeability of bodies—gender and race and class and age—in enacting the love he argues as central to Songs of Innocence. But it seems important that the female presence which gave this boy his secure belief that love will triumph is gone in the second plate of this poem. Somewhere between the “southern wild” drawn in the first plate and the vision of “England’s pleasant land”<sup>24</sup> in the second, the very embodied mother has been lost. Her voice remains only in her boy’s re-telling. The second plate is a wholly male, spiritual vision, powered by the “shadowy” words from the female wild. As Cox argues, what is NOT in the Songs of Innocence provides the narrative tension as much as what is there. The strange gap between the first and second plates of “The Little Black Boy” creates the present moment as an absence, underscoring longing. The missing narrative is not unimportant; the contextual clues of this poem evoke the missing narrative and simultaneously call into question rhetoric that raises such narrative (particularly allegorical narrative) over sentiment.<sup>25</sup> But even as these gaps critique allegorical strategies in sentimental literature, the genre is exactly about foregrounding sentiment over narrative. Thus the (critical) narrative gaps that create this emotional tension stand the poem directly in the main stream of sentimental literature.

In a poem evoking sentimental abolitionist slave narratives of its time, the absence of a large portion of that expected narrative (the story of capture, of being torn from a parent’s breast, of horrible middle passage, of detailed cruel treatment by owners) stands in such tension with the presence of “innocence” in this poem as to threaten its destruction. And the circuit of palpable longing for and endless deferral of love from a fellow human being is rending any boundary between pure innocence and experience. Even as sentiment comes first, the big narrative pieces missing from this little poem beg

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<sup>23</sup> In addition to Rousseau on “the noble savage” see as well Laura Doyle’s criticism of a “racial sublime”—a powerful discourse of the exotic supporting imperialism during this period.

<sup>24</sup> From the poem prefacing Blake’s Milton (Complete 95).

<sup>25</sup> See Todd for good definition of sentimental literature and its historical and social context.

the big material/literal questions: How did the black boy get to the place where he faces the “English” boy? What happened to his mother? Why is he being rejected?<sup>26</sup>

Blake’s various colorings of characters in his two plates for “The Little Black Boy” simultaneously raise and dismiss the bodied characteristic of skin color as important. Never mind, he may be pointing out, whatever you are on the outside, your soul is “white” and will come (eventually) to divine love. Or, perhaps, he may be pointing to other more deeply enrooted causes of the Black Boy’s rejection in this poem, for which skin color becomes the essentially frivolous (frivolous in its essentializing) rationale; therefore he mobilizes color, uprooting it as fundamentally fixed. In any case, as the skin colors change, the soul of the text remains “white,” referencing and establishing a fixity of color which happens to be the European skin color. If ambivalence is a measure of attention, what changes and what remains the same in these printings raises questions about Blake’s own stakes in an essential relationship of the material body to a spiritual body, and about his sense of the roles of both material and spiritual embodiment in imagining oneself human and in creating connections one to another. And although the constitution of race and its effects on a linguistic life is clearly critiqued in body of “The Little Black Boy,” for Blake, the African mother as a physically and morally reproductive body is unambivalently illustrated as an untroubled relation.

For writers of sensibility, as sentiment rose in reaction to stringent reason, the body provided transition: The body is a bounded location for both empirical understanding of the “human” as well as the source of sensation essential to “sensibility” in imagination and creation. If sensibility bridges emotional and intellectual responses to sensing the world, the body is the terrain for that bridge. But for Blake it is a bridge over troubled waters. In this poem, as in most of his work, the body is a bounded but fluid figure. Drawn by “the wiry bounding line” the body offers potential for a materially

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<sup>26</sup>Is the impulse in this poem of “innocence” really for the quiet acceptance of the burnt and suffering body (and spirit!) in deference to a future of eternal equity and love? Or is the impulse here toward death as better than life? Both are common themes in abolitionist literature. Conservative literature, as More’s, urged Christian humility and the bearing of suffering. Progressive writers, as Yearsley, depicted—or warned of—slave resistance. But even in the case of resistance the result was invariably death—either

creative living. Fixing the body through an overemphasis on “reason” is therefore profoundly oppressive, with effects ranging from African slavery to artistic repression.

### **ROBINSON’S “NEGRO GIRL”**

I begin this discussion of Mary Robinson's construction of the slave body in her poem “The Negro Girl” with the comparative reaction of my undergraduate students to Blake and Robinson; their reactions neatly frame the material particularity of each writer's marginalization. In class discussion it became clear that, unlike men, women writers' bodies are read inseparably from their writing. Indeed just as Blake figures the Black boy's mother nakedly, so students in my course on the literature of enlightenment and revolution seemed unable to consider the poet Mary Robinson aside from her body, or from that body's relation as a body to other bodies. Where in their discussions of male authors such as Blake, and even Swift, whose texts recall the body in explicit and intimate ways, they did not ever question an *authority* to speak and be heard, in their discussion of Robinson they focused exactly that question by way of her body. They wondered if we could even read her texts with any seriousness given the way in which they felt she “sold” herself to men for material support. Money did not contaminate the male writers' authority, but when drawn through the body, it did affect female authority as a writer.

I have mentioned Romantic era strictures against women's participation in the public sphere; my students' sense of Robinson's participation in such economic exchange was particularly affected by her very public presence. Jane Austen was saved from their critique when they were unable to find out much about her “romantic” life (though they brought it up). Mary Shelley was saved by her (romantically read) marriage and the early loss of a husband and multiple children. That is, in Austen's case, her body was modestly inaccessible, and in Shelley's case, she and her body could be read as a victim narrative evoking pity. In both cases, their writing was protected because their bodies could fit conventional and morally acceptable narratives of the female. As a public woman,

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immediately, or as punishment. Blake seems to be drawing on the contemporary literature to create a controlled world in which available choices as well as the perspectives on those choices don't offer enough.

Robinson was neither modest nor evocative of pity. She actively refused tragic narratives of herself, taking her own life in hand with her vibrant memoirs. The only conventional female narrative that my students could then read her body into seemed to be that of the “fallen woman.” And many students, particularly men, saw no difficulty in making the leap from a perception of immorality in the acceptance of material support in the context of a romantic or sexual liaison, to the immorality in the exchange of material support for art—but only for women.

For women, sex and art are apparently linked in the (male?) imagination when these activities visibly support a living. This is an image of the practicing female artist that is both reductive and sullyng. An interesting extension of this analogy begs the questions of whether the women writer is in a heterosexual relation with her publisher and whether indeed such heterosexual relation is finally immoral. Where Swift was just “weird,” and Blake “hard to follow,” a number of my students called Robinson a whore. What they perceived as remuneration for the body made her untrustworthy (as a text); thus she could not be held as authentic in her art. If she could so “use” her body, was her art merely an economic exchange?<sup>27</sup> Ironically, perhaps tellingly, this belief in writing as “easy money” came primarily from students who seemed to find writing their own short essays excruciating. One student avoided reading Robinson’s poetry and went straight to the library for her memoirs for proof of why we couldn’t trust her. What came out of the fiery discussion, at least for some students, was the realization of a contradiction in such a reading of this woman’s art—that without such material support, without such a means of exchange (afforded by both body and text), it is possible that Robinson would not have been able to write and publish at all. Though a teaching “opportunity,” the discussion was also a painful reinscription of the ways in which the female writer is read in her body, read in ways that the white male writer, at least one who is perceived as well-classed, is not. Even today, the body is deeply implicated in a woman’s writing.

Now, both men and women were drawn to the subject matter of slavery. William Cowper, so popular an eighteenth century poet that even the characters of Jane Austen’s

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<sup>27</sup> All writers should be so lucky to get “merely” paid for their creative work!

novel Sense and Sensibility discuss him, wrote a number of anti-slavery poems. Robert Southey, Samuel Coleridge and others published both anti-slavery poetry and commentary. That white writers, male and female, benefited from their anti-slavery literature while opposing the practice of slavery—a situation that continues today in published literature of the oppression of “the other”—is important, particularly as it complicates its own subject matter (materially!) to reveal the ways in which the exchange of bodies and texts are tightly wound/wounded together.<sup>28</sup> Bringing the personal and economic lives of anti-slavery writers, even and particularly those of women, to a reading of their poetry has proved enormously productive—both in class discussion and in my own reading of texts and violence. As messy as it makes the discussion, it helps avoid the tendency in considerations of violence and writing to draw a line between metaphysical and material theories of the violence of articulation.<sup>29</sup> And, that Mary Robinson could maintain a romantic liaison with a port-town politician who supported the slave trade while receiving remuneration for her anti-slavery poetry wreaked all kinds of generative havoc on my students' sense of art as a pure and sacred ground.

Mary Robinson's poem “The Negro Girl” shares with Blake's “Little Black Boy” many of the elements of popular sentimental abolitionist literature and fills the gaps he leaves: the “natural” familial/lover bonds torn apart, elements of a “natural” landscape naturalizing the “humanity” there housed, and the discussion of the color, or lack thereof, of the soul linking humanity in God. And where the more politically mainstream Hannah More broadcasts her abolitionist “Slavery, A Poem” as “news” from the position of a nearly omniscient observer-narrator, both Blake and Robinson choose the perspectival approach of a first person narrative. Framed by the words of an observer-narrator, most of Robinson's poem is offered in the voice of Zelma, the female protagonist. Such frame

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<sup>28</sup> See Sypher's Guinea's Captive Kings for a significant collection of both men's and women's anti-slavery poetry.

<sup>29</sup> See for example Nancy Fraser's “The Force of Law” in Feminist Interpretations of Derrida. She argues that because Derrida privileges a metaphysical approach (over a critical/political approach) to the constitutive “force” of articulation (law)—and names such force “violence” he “risks the loss of important normative political distinctions by conflating a view about the (presumably inescapable) interplay of freedom and constraint in interpretation with (contingent, alterable) modes of individual and institutional

storytelling enables authority and specificity without claiming an all-encompassing reality.

This primarily first person narrator puts both author and reader into a (temporary) relationship of identity.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, eighteenth century women poets' intense interest and opportunism in the writing of slavery has recently been argued as a question of identification. Critics including Anne K. Mellor and Moira Ferguson assert that slavery provided British women with a distant group through which to explore the oppression by white men that they could not yet fully face in their own lives.<sup>31</sup> Ferguson writes, "That female writers cannot recontextualize their relationship to society fundamentally circumscribes their view, even at the unconscious level," and she claims that "[c]onfiguring Europe's abject slave-other as a reflection of a white middle-class unitary self speaks to a nadir in women's self-esteem and an attempt to regain some of it in an era of interdiction" (244-5). Nadir it may be, but as these white women authors "went exploring" racial oppression through sentimental literature, they produced a paradoxical narrative in which they were both doing the job of the conqueror—expropriating the resource of slave experience; and establishing an identification with the conquered—a foundation of their own eventual resistances to sexual oppression.<sup>32</sup> This identification

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coercion (160)." Indeed while I think it is critical to distinguish between textual and physical violence, I do not, however, see that as a meta-physical/physical divide.

<sup>30</sup> See Langbaum's *Language of Experience* for helpful discussion of reader identification with (even despicable) first person narrators.

<sup>31</sup>Ferguson and others have noted how a literature of sensibility provided women with a discourse in which to explore social and political issues and to gain voices outside the domestic realm without losing their purity of womanly-ness. Some, as Todd, have framed women's anti-slavery poetry as opportunistic. Most recently, critics like Mellor have observed how women "used" anti-slavery poetry to create a political voice and scout the territory for the women's movement, generally at the expense of slave and African subjectivity. While a move towards gender equity, this poetry at the same time reified narratives that continue to support racism.

<sup>32</sup>Ferguson notes that in anti-slavery poetry stereotyping slave experience, white British women's political power grows at the expense of slave materiality—see for example Hannah More's "Slavery, A Poem." Slave materiality gets partially reestablished as lower class and dissident women bring their voices to the genre of anti-slavery poetry with a more personal identification with slaves as also-oppressed, rather than with the general identification of slaves as part of humanity to which the writer also belongs. For examples of this, see the anti-slavery poems by Ann Yearsley and Mary Robinson. Women writers subject to the worst material effects of oppression seem more likely to focus on the material effects of slavery and work on a more material construction of slave experience in their writing. Yearsley's poem on slavery published at the same time as More's has a far more visceral effect. It seems that Ferguson is critiquing the absence of a sense of specific slave experience or subjectivity as much as the loss of materiality. However,

of slave and (white) woman exposes not only a common (and often self-same) oppressor, but also a common *mechanism* of oppression—the paradoxical and fraught space in which the marginal body reads and writes.

While white women's appropriation of the slave experience to explore questions of oppression may be to us a stretch, their experience of themselves as property during this time period was reinforced legally. In 1772 the comparison of marriage to slavery seems to have been raised without contemporary surprise in the case of the famous Mansfield Judgement. In this case, a man, Somerset, arriving with his owner in slave-free England on a visit from the colony of Virginia, seeks to be released of his legal designation as slave. Interestingly, the owner's attorney, in arguing that the relationship of slave and owner is one that travels with the parties in question, makes the quite progressive argument that the institution of marriage is not natural. He argues,

A distinction was endeavored to be established [by the opposing attorney] between natural and municipal relations [with municipal relations stopping at the borders of their respective governments]... The relation of husband and wife, I think myself warranted in questioning, as a natural relation: does it subsist for life; or to answer the natural purposes which may reasonably be supposed often to terminate sooner? Yet this is one of these relations which follow a man everywhere. If only natural relations had that property, the effect would be very limited indeed... There is but one form at present with us by which the relation of husband and wife can be constituted; there was a time when it was otherwise...(56-57)

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"materiality" should not be equated with "individual subject" or specificity of experience. Descriptions of material existence can be figured as stereotypical "ideas," obscuring individuals as easily as abstract religious and philosophical rhetoric. But (in echo of my classroom discussions of Robinson) it is interesting how easily "materiality" and "subjectivity" collapse together when one speaks of slave men and women, or white women for that matter.

This issue of the universal human vs. the individual subject is not limited to the ground of women and slaves: it is a concern throughout this period. That "universal" humanity comes at the expense of specific subjectivity is a paradox of the both the philosophy and abolitionist literature of the time period. In some ways the rational classification of human beings by body characteristics would seem to be very specific and local, but it nevertheless creates stereotypes which obscure the subjectivity of individuals and their communities. On the other hand Romanticism, in its resistance to materialist reason, works to plumb the depths of individual imagination toward a "natural" subjectivity unsullied by the practicalities of material human existence. Stephen Cox writes of the bridge that sympathy, as explored in the literature of sensibility, builds between the purity of individual subjectivity and the material world, noting that the bridge itself, in connecting, ironically deconstructs the very purity of imagination that the sensitive romantic poet prizes (Stranger).

By contrast, the attorney for the slave in question (he wins Somerset's freedom) contests this construction of marriage and argues conservatively for marriage as a "moral" relation—where morality stands in all places at all times—as opposed, of course, to either a natural or municipal relation of slavery. While the attorneys argue with each other about the specifics of the comparison, the ready availability of this association of marriage and slavery is fascinating, and makes sentimental women poets' explorations of slavery in their writing somewhat less of a voyage beyond their own borders.

In fact, Robinson's poem is quite focused in its critique of sexual oppression by race. At the very core (stanzas thirteen and fourteen of this twenty-one stanza poem), she locates this racialized sexual oppression in an economics of language and power:

Torn from my mother's aching breast  
     My tyrant sought my love,  
 But in the grave shall Zelma rest  
     Ere she faithless prove;  
 No, Draco, thy companion I will be  
 To that celestial realm where negroes shall be free!

The tyrant white man taught my mind  
     The lettered page to trace;  
 He taught me in the soul to find  
     No tint as in the face;  
 He bade my reason blossom like the tree,  
 But fond affection gave the ripened fruits to thee. (lines 67-78)<sup>33</sup>

In exchange for being cultured, for the "gift" of literacy, for being afforded the power of "bearing" her oppressor's words, Zelma is expected to pass on her "fruits"—her products—to her master.<sup>34</sup> While referring directly to intellectual fruits, this figure also alludes to the fact that the children of a slave "belonged" to her master, and that those children, a woman's fruits, mark her body as sexual. In turn Zelma's sexual body is implicated in her intellect.

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<sup>33</sup> See Appendix A for full text of "The Negro Girl."

<sup>34</sup> Zelma's owner seems to be one of those characters Markman Ellis critiques who do not seek abolition of slavery, but rather to reform the institution: "The problem of slavery in the discursive field of sentimentalism has at its centre the opposition between persuasion and coercion, one an action on the mind, the other on the body...trust based systems seek to persuade the slaves to accept a reformed slavery through

That Zelma is metaphorically *the tree* is illuminating given Blake's use of trees, particularly in "The Little Black Boy" where the mother leans over her son as a tree leans over and shelters them both. Zelma recounts, "He bade my reason blossom like the tree/But fond affection gave the ripened fruits to thee," while the Black boy recalls, "My mother taught me underneath a tree." In both poems the tree evokes simultaneously the tree of knowledge and the tree of life, handily weaving together the intellectual, procreative, and sexual body. But the particularities of this intertwining of the tree/body with learning stand in stark contrast in these two poems. The scene in the first plate of "The Little Black Boy" depicts the black mother of the "southern wild" under a tree with her procreative fruit—her son—in her lap. The "teaching" is comfortable, natural, unforced. By contrast, Zelma's learning experience, "bade" to blossom at her "tyrant's" hands, is strongly controlled; the female slave body is at once an object of possession and of harvest. While the Blakean mother's fruit apparently is removed to an English landscape wherein her son can direct his fruity love to the English boy, Zelma's fruit (and love), by her own intervention, is not.

When Zelma resists her master's expectations of exchange, or payment, one sees that her fruits have been formed in "[tyrannical] chains" she now seeks to "break." At the moment of refusal, Robinson creates a sense of possible exchange (despite being forced) of (European) literacy for sexual favors and "fruits." Drawing (on) a body made a passive object by discourses and economies of racism and sexism, but tutored as a literate subject, Robinson briefly pushes back on the unmarked direction of force in this economy. Revealing the violence of the benevolent slave owner and the lack of equity in this "exchange," she creates a subject from a possession. Blake too creates some sense of exchange even in the context of racism. In a reversal of the "white man's burden"—the commonly perceived "duty" of the Europeans to offer "civilization and salvation" to their slaves—the Black boy imagines he can "offer" (Christian) spiritual shelter to the English boy *with his body*: "I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear/To lean in joy upon our fathers knee." In this reversal of the customary (forced) direction of *who has what to*

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better treatment: it is essentially a rhetorical ploy (that is, a persuasion) directed at the body (through good

offer, Blake reveals the violence of this civilizing force, which masks itself as compassion and charity. Both authors draw on the body, made a passive object by discourses and economies of racism and sexism, to create subjects. The characters' eventual decisions regarding their participation in these exchanges differ. But paradoxically, it is through the deployment of the characters' bodies as sites of exchange, and in that exchange interrupting and so materializing the lines and directions of force, that both authors can afford a momentary subjectivity to Zelma and the Black boy. The slave bodies briefly materialize as subjects in a system, which by way of those very bodies objectifies them.<sup>35</sup>

At this moment of subjective exchange, the sense throughout this poem that language and literacy are simultaneously profoundly empowering of and dangerous to the marginalized subject becomes particularly acute. For once Zelma's "fruits" (progeny, at once biological and literary) begin to ripen she has also become "impatient" of "control." "Ripening" these fruits, like finding the right words, seems to crystallize everything—she can see clearly now, creating her own words and desires. BUT, at the same time, she is rendered visible, or "hearable" by this self-possession—and subject to violence. Her master now "sounds out" her love for Draco: "With jealous rage he [the owner] marked my love, /He sent thee far away." "[M]arked my love" can be read multiply here: as "the tyrant" simply noticing Zelma's love for Draco, as rape of Zelma, and as punishment—such as a beating to "mark" Draco's (or Zelma's) body. And, "mark" also carries the meaning of writing. One's "mark" is most literally one's signature, a claiming of agreement with or authorship over a document. To make one's mark is to succeed, to "impress." And to mark is also to brand with one's "sign" of ownership. Marks on a page are words. For Zelma, literacy, or "marks," are inextricably tied to her sexual, racial body. And as this poem continues, it remains a text that deals as much with the power

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usage)..." (128)

<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, where (as in many of the poems in *Innocence*) the Black boy "innocently" parrots the voice of Church Authority that would name the soul "white," and so highlights the racism inherent in subsuming a "universal" humanity in the contours of Western civilization, Robinson, for whom as a woman the body is a more troubled terrain, constructs the soul with "no tint" at all, and so refuses, even in critique, the risk of reinscribing the oppression of the material body in the spiritual realm.

and economy of a gendered and racialized tradition of language, as with the “material” suffering of Zelma and Draco under slavery.

Though initially Zelma’s “plan” for breaking the “chains” when she escapes her master is unclear, it *is* a plan, an idea intellectually organized towards action. But as Zelma approaches the shore, the boundary of land and sea, the storm swells and language and reasoning lose force. Whether the plan is for surviving and escaping together, or for mutual suicide, intellectual reasoning can’t get her to the boat on which Draco stands chained, nor can it get him to land. The forces of nature drown out her voice:

Her eager eyes beheld the main  
                   While on her Draco dear  
 She madly called but called in vain—  
                   No sound could Draco hear  
 Save the shrill yelling of the fateful blast,  
 While ev’ry seaman’s heart quick shuddered as it past.

White were the billows, wide displayed,  
                   The clouds were black and low;  
 The bittern shrieked, a gliding shade  
                   Seemed o’er the waves to go!  
 The livid flash illumed the clam’rous main  
 While Zelma poured, *unmarked*, her melancholy strain. (7-18, emphasis mine)

Zelma becomes identified with this “natural power.” She and the storm echo one another as the storm assumes Zelma’s despair and wildness in its windy cries. Her “voice,” the organizing force of language, is lost in the fluidity of the storm: Zelma “pour[s]...her melancholy strain.” Her words, the quantum units of defined sound, become a strain, an unbroken stream of emotive music, marked only by its force, her “strain.” In this undefined space of noise, no one can “hear” her: She is forcefully “unmarked.” In some sense Zelma at this point exchanges the organized and rational, but ultimately enslaving and sexually oppressive power of language (the marking that is also a branding), for the power of the emotional chaos of the sublime.

Robinson draws here on the common Romantic poetical figure of nature as sublime, as source of energy for Zelma. A black woman’s body is a commodity of desire and of trade, an exchange that does not stop with monetary purchase, but continues in the

“civilizing” process of ownership. In the storm, Robinson takes back the enslaved power of the body, making it uncontainable and sublime. From a feminist perspective, Zelma here trespasses on the traditionally masculine territory of the sublime, associating herself with, or claiming its power. But in the context of a culture that “nobilizes” the “savage” and seeks a “racial sublime,” *and* embraces a contemporary rhetoric that ties women even more closely to a “natural” body, this association of Zelma with the forces of nature can also be read as racist and sexist.<sup>36</sup> Just as Blake responds to his writing context with differential depiction of white and black women’s bodies, Robinson is not immune to reproducing the racist and sexist rhetoric of her time. For Zelma, the energy of the sublime is significantly at odds with language and communication; she cannot regain her “voice.” “Mastery” of the sublime, as a re-inscription of a male model of power relations, is not available (nor perhaps desirable) to Zelma, a Negro girl. Certainly, there is some evidence of her interplay with the sublime of Nature. For example, Zelma cries, “Now by the transient vivid light/I *mark* the frantic throng!” (emphasis mine). Her *emotions* are heard in the storm’s wail as “melancholy strain” and intermittently she is able to see clearly, to “mark.” And indeed, it is from this dangerous boundary that Zelma recounts her terrible story—the record of which is some kind of recuperation perhaps.

That is, the marginal chaos of the sublime, uncontrolled by the linguistic order/center, may be momentarily useful for Zelma. Dorothea Olkowski notes that “The sublime is the formless and limitless sensation that operates to reveal imagination and understanding’s inadequacy to present the absolutely great in a representation and so produces a feeling of pain” (220). Allusion to the sublime offers a space of “no-representation,” gesturing to the inadequacy of the symbolic order to represent the violence Zelma experiences as a marginal literate body. In the sublime, her vision can operate outside of the oppressive order and yet materialize the “pain” of that condition. But, even though she can intermittently see in this marginal symbolic chaos of the sublime (a space that is perhaps a clearer representation of the margins she inhabits as a slave woman), she is nevertheless here also abject—unheard and unshaped. She loses the

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<sup>36</sup>Women are biologically more “sensitive” at the same time they are more frequently considered potentially

individual (though violated/violent) subjectivity she attains through/by/in the language of mastery. She risks being fully fixed as an observer, rather than as an actor, and so risks dematerializing and existing only as/in “formless and limitless” sensation.

“Marking” the frantic throng is the last articulation Zelma makes; she has constituted violation as a gap in (or interdict against) her own (literate) body. Such violent vision/voice cannot be sustained and indeed annihilates the speaker/Zelma. This articulation models the risks of negotiating violation directly—simply “seeing” the violence (especially in its own terms). The setting is too chaotic, finally, to sustain embodied vision and voice.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the raging and sublime power with which she is now associated or infused overwhelms—it destroys the slaves as well as the abominable slave ship on which her lover stands. In a rather obvious critique, the sublime here is ultimately destructive rather than recuperative. Nevertheless, although on the one hand this picture of “Nature” offers a strong critique of the sublime’s destructive results for (on) a woman,<sup>38</sup> playing just as strong a note, the scene also affords Zelma an extreme exit from the gendered human power play of which language and literacy are so much a part and in which her sexed and racialized body seems inextricably implicated.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women become more and more involved in writing and publishing literature. But even in the “female-appropriate” sentimental genres, the degree to which they can write and access an audience is dependent on a tradition of literature and a machinery of publication powerfully controlled by men. Robinson was herself acutely, materially and literally, dependent on a

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mentally and physically unstable (like the forces of nature).

<sup>37</sup> And so perhaps strategies of a linguistic living must include not only “mastery” of the master’s language (which runs close to self-annihilation always) but also the space apart, the space aside and under and around, of side languages—of Creole, of “Ebonics,” of “women’s talk”—because, while one may not be able to fully materialize oneself in this “side” voice, one can here survive and mend to deal with the (often involuntary) violent negotiation of the master language by which one may be fully constituted, but also may be most fully destroyed. The negotiation between “a mastery of form” and “deformation of mastery” goes on as well in many of the texts I study in this project (Baker, 107 and 111). As a white person moving mostly in middle class—albeit, as a woman, still marginal—circles, Robinson may not have had any sense of the power available in local language. She appears not to have had any comfortable sense of daily community with other women; thus for her, it was the master’s language or nothing. That a historical Zelma would likely be very linguistically isolated as a first generation slave, further intensifies the potential for self-destruction in the master’s language—there may be no other way for her to have a linguistic life.

<sup>38</sup> Consider how Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* can be read as the same kind of critique.

male-controlled market for the publication of and remuneration for her writing—her “fruits.” About a poem Robinson wrote addressing “the material constraints of newspaper publication” Judith Pascoe notes, “it is worth pausing over the violent trope Robinson uses to portray the printing process, the subjugation of a feminized page to the brute pressure of the printer’s lead,” and argues that “[t]he poem provides a veiled commentary on the appropriation of the poet in the pages of the *Post*” (258). Apparently my students’ association of publication and sex was in fact an analogy Robinson herself imaged, her physical survival at stake in her writing as much as it was the other way around. In “The Negro Girl” escape from controls of the linguistic tradition of mastery proves fatal—for the protagonist. Zelma refuses to be “marked” and thus loses the power to mark herself, opting finally for suicide. But as in Blake’s “Little Black Boy” the question of “final” narrative position—and survival—in this poem remains inconclusive. For these marginal writers, it is something of an oxymoron to be self possessed of the language that explicitly constitutes them as possessed by another. The romantic project of poetic self-possession is here inverted, as the linguistically productive slave body is most powerfully materialized, at least provisionally, in a moment of extreme dispossession. Zelma suicides. The Black boy defers unto death. But the poems continue.

Robinson was ever one for an elusive and shifting narrator. As others have discussed, her open use of many pseudonyms served to keep her style and narrative position fluid from poem to poem (Curran; Pascoe). Even within this poem, the narration moves from a frame narrator to the first person narration by Zelma, who then narrates both in the first and third person and talks of both her lover and her master alternately in the first and third person. These are shifts that startle the reader with what appears to be direct addresses: “But fond affection gave the ripened fruits to *thee*,” and “Why, cruel, white man, when away/my sable love was torn, /Why did *you* let poor Zelma stay/...?” (emphasis mine). Readers are alternately put into the positions of *observer*, of *Zelma* (as we read her ‘I’), and of both *beloved* and *oppressor*. In this ricochet of identity Zelma’s “voice re-echoes in the wind”—continually shifting subject position for both narrator and

reader with the moving target of a lyrical marks/woman. Indeed, through the (surviving) poem, the reader constructs what is “unmarked”—the marginal voice mobilized.

Blake’s poem evokes profound discomfort in the reader about the Black boy, despite all his talk about love and God. Likewise, Zelma’s choice to die, despite the fact that one might argue (and some do) that she is “acting” to refuse slavery and join her lover in death, remains horribly unsatisfying, as well it should.<sup>39</sup> The claustrophobia of the worlds in which these two characters, Black boy and Negro girl, don’t seem to be able to even imagine alternatives to profound suffering or death leaves the reader crying out for cracking that world open. As when watching a horror movie, and the viewer calls out to the protagonist “Don’t open that door,” the reader of these poems is “moved” inversely to desire openings the characters can’t themselves see. Coupled with a casting of marginal literacy in the slave body, this passionate movement of the reader is the foundational goal of poetry of sensibility and sympathy of this time and provides the emotional-political thrust of these two poems.

For a woman, the body is a location of, and justification for, oppression. Yet the sensing body is vital to “sentiment,” a critical—and political—literary medium for Mary Robinson, not least because it affords her space for a linguistic living, but also because the sensible body becomes the very grounds for exposing mechanisms of oppression particularly of concern to the woman writing. Mary Robinson’s “Negro Girl” explicitly maps the difficult terrain of the female writing body through a portrait of a literate slave woman. Despite the fact that she “called in vain,” Zelma’s final choice to end her life sounds a powerful formulation of the literate woman’s position and choices in regards to race and sexuality.

And although her narrative voice often shifts, it is not particularly hard to see Robinson as invested in Zelma’s situation. Her writing was for many years her livelihood—directly through remuneration for publication as well as indirectly through the artistic patronage on which Blake at times also depended. Moreover, as I have discussed, it seems hard for the critical reader of literature to dissociate the female

writer's texts from the conditions of her material life. But indeed, both Blake's and Robinson's material lives were dependent on their artwork. And the fruitful (gendered) tendency to read Blake's "Songs" *only* as shifting perspectives, not necessarily Blake's "own," tends to obscure the most obvious—that his poems *are* his own and should too be read as enmeshed in personal stakes. Though apparently not substantially dependent on an audience for his illustrated poetry, Blake labored at engraving for a living—to eat and pay rent and continue his own creative artwork after hours.<sup>40</sup> And as he shifts body coloring in different copies of "Songs," he highlights the very problem of that fixed and laboring material body; the gaps in narrative and longing for reciprocal love in "The Little Black Boy" raise the problem of a presence and voice marginalized because of (perspectives towards) that body. That the "English" boy may hear the marginalized boy's voice only in the eternity beyond material existence raises the question, and central pathos of the poem, of *who is listening in the Now*. Considering his scrappy day-to-day living and lack of significant contemporary recognition (far less than Robinson's!), Blake's impulse to avoid fixing the problematic and limiting body in the material medium of his art and instead holding it fluid can be read as (at least) a partial identification with the marginalized voice in the poem.

The sensing body is vital to sentiment, a critical medium for both Blake and Robinson. Both resist materialist efforts to fix too closely the body (and a gendered and racialized human nature in turn), partly in order to maintain a sensibility which can serve varying artistic visions and narrations,<sup>41</sup> but also, and perhaps more personally, because the body nailed down<sup>42</sup> is a body confined and dependent and delimited by others—and for a woman who also happens to be a slave, a body is a sexual object for rape.

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<sup>39</sup> See Ross' work on Romanticism and masculine desires for a really good explication of the propensity for unhappy endings in Romantic era women's poetry (*Contours*).

<sup>40</sup> Sandra Kroupa, special collections librarian, often tells students who romanticize the life of this romantic poet, "Imagine standing at a table in bad light, to finely engrave other writers' and artists' work, getting to work on your own art only after hours—still standing, still working by poor lighting late into the night."

<sup>41</sup> Robinson's relentless experimentation with narrative voice and structural form is discussed in both Pascoe's and Stuart Curran's articles. Blake writes of "vision" in the third chapter of *Jerusalem*, "Let the Human Organs be kept in their perfect Integrity/At will Contracting into Worms, or Expanding into Gods" (*Complete* 205).

<sup>42</sup> As Orc in Blake's *The Four Zoas*, or *Jesus* (*Complete* 300-407).

“Marked,” Zelma is severely oppressed, subject to rape and harvest. “Unmarked,” she cannot be heard, nor seen as a subject—she cannot survive in language.<sup>43</sup>

Significantly, while Blake refuses to fix the body, which contemporary philosophers and scientists are so assiduously trying to hold static as an anchor for the abstraction of being “human,” he nevertheless keeps the “Little Black Boy” alive. Though both he and Robinson are often on the economic edge, there is a big difference in how their bodies are implicated in their writing/art work. Blake may have to scrimp for money, but his “Little Black Boy” doesn’t seem to have to put his body on the (literary) line in the same way that Robinson’s “Negro Girl” is expected to. The Black boy is not listened to, nor loved perhaps, but Zelma is expected to submit to sexual objectification, probably rape, and the loss of her fruits (children as well as creative linguistic products) in exchange for a voice her master can “hear.”<sup>44</sup>

While not immune to the same racist paradoxes perpetuated by other anti-slavery literature, including Blake’s “Little Black Boy,” in “The Negro Girl” Robinson nevertheless locates a remarkable nexus of race and gender oppression in the production and consumption of literature itself, exposing life and death stakes in a forced exchange of reproductive sexuality for literacy—for the creative, writing body. In this poem Robinson’s identification as a woman and her choice of a female protagonist reveals the sexual stakes in the female slaves’ experience; and reminds the reader that even for women and girls who may not be slaves there are particular costs for being Christianized and educated with the power of the oppressor’s language—the only language most slaves eventually speak, and likely the only language in which those who are literate can read and write. Robinson here sketches—and publishes—a forced economy of language and culture in which her protagonist, who is revealed as a protagonist *in her own right*, finds

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<sup>43</sup> This is the condition of Spivak’s “subaltern,” who can be heard in neither a local language nor the centralized language.

<sup>44</sup> I do not want to imply that slave men were not subject to sexual objectification and rape from their owners—I’d be surprised if they weren’t. In fact, the psychological “feminization” of black male slaves that so many critics note, and see manifested the punishment of castration, should be expanded to explore the probably repeated violent sexual physicality of that objectification. Nevertheless, Blake, as a man, especially a white man, does not have the stake in rape that Robinson does—regardless of race—and this difference in sexual stakes is reflected in their poems.

the cost for that subjectivity in the form (of a de-formation) of her own body and “faith” too high—she destroys both the means of production and the goods. Robinson herself dies shortly thereafter at age 42. Blake lives to the ripe age of 70.

### **BUTLER'S KINDRED**

Though the stakes in a fascination with the slave body may ostensibly be sharper for Octavia Butler, an African American woman writing in the late twentieth century, and certainly are somewhat different from those of either Robinson or Blake, what these three writers share in their writing of the slave body is its significance as a spectral figure for the marginal writer. Certainly, just as Robinson's and Blake's writings of the slave body reveal distinct differences in gender relations to literacy, language and voice, so does Butler's use of the slave body reveal the shift in those stakes for the twentieth century African American writer. The novel Kindred comes at a particularly critical juncture for African American women writers. First appearing in 1979<sup>45</sup> amid an unprecedented wave of publications by African American women in the mainstream, the novel followed Alice Walker's 1974 critical piece “In Search of Our Mother's Gardens,” in which Walker chronicles her search for a “hidden” legacy of literary texts by African American women.<sup>46</sup> This latter piece follows close on the heels of the civil rights and black power movements and amidst “second wave” feminism in the United States. Thus Kindred appears at a time when African American women writers are gaining significant new voice and audience in the mainstream of literature.

Kindred's publication in the wake of a confluence of both women's and minority rights in the United States mirrors the ways in which Robinson's poem comes at a time when women's and African slavery's roles in English national and political culture both reach an unprecedented level of visibility. And, despite a new visibility by writers of color in the late twentieth century, nearly two hundred years after Blake and Robinson

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<sup>45</sup> The story itself is set in the year 1776. In a book about slavery, this date ironically recalls the bicentennial of the United States' “freedom” from the British empire.

<sup>46</sup> Some critics use this essay to mark the resurgence of literature, both new and recovered, by African American women. See for example Barbara Christian's “The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism.”

published their poems the virtual slave body remains a re-markable metaphor for the marginal writer's possession of and by language. In Kindred the quandary of Butler's contemporary African American protagonist echoes the literate Zelma's own Romantic-era "fix." Married to a white male writer who asks her to type his drafts for him, Dana is mysteriously drawn back through time to the ante-bellum south of the United States, indeed to a time parallel to Zelma's own. There she finds herself repeatedly arriving just in time to save the man who will be/is her great-great-grandfather.

And not only do these historical periods parallel each other in the concurrent visibility of issues of women and people of color, but the two times are, of course, also fully implicated in one another. Kindred's explicit focus on what it means to be a woman writer in the late twentieth century, and on how, for the African American protagonist, a writing life is inextricable from her ancestor's lives as owned, productive, and, significantly, *reproductive* bodies, reads like an updated version of Zelma's story. Zelma's death is reinscribed in the suicide of Alice, Dana's foremother, who is torn from her black lover and forced to have sex and children with her white master. But significantly, the endings of the two narratives differ. Butler's main character, the late twentieth century Dana, survives where Zelma does not. And where Zelma dies prior to sharing her "fruits"—textual or reproductive—Alice survives long enough to bear the child who will become Dana's great-grandmother.

Although she survives her strange tale, Dana does so at great risk both to herself and others; violence inheres in her very existence. Her life itself is dependent on the long ago rape of her foremother by a white man. And in the course of the novel she becomes actively complicit in the violent deaths of both her male and female ancestors. It is Dana who repeatedly saves this man who will rape. It is Dana who persuades her foremother to submit to the rape. And, it is Dana who finally kills her male (master) ancestor, the white plantation owner who has raped her great-great-grandmother and driven the woman unto suicide. Dana kills him finally in self-defense when he tries to rape her—even as both his desire for her and for her great-great-grandmother she resembles is likely the result of his early "imprinting" on her when she repeatedly chooses to save him as a child and youth.

From the future, she triggers (used advisedly) the past chain of events leading both to her own (maimed) life, and to the violated life of her slave ancestor. She survives the great-great-patricide she enacts only because, by this time, her great-grandmother has (finally) been “sired” and born, ensuring that she too will eventually live. But as a result of her last violent act in the past she loses her arm: She continues to be shaped/injured by the violence of the system of slavery that produced both her ancestors and her.

At the center of this story is the survival of the marginal storyteller—linked as that survival is to the reproduction of bodies. Butler has a stake in figuring the slave’s successful material reproduction, as Robinson clearly does not. The tale veritably (and her ancestor literally) hangs on Dana’s escape from Zelma’s fate. But Dana’s opening for such an escape remains quite narrow. She runs the risk of un-surviving herself at least thrice over: first if she doesn’t step in to save her accident prone white forefather, second if she cannot convince her “rebellious” Black foremother to survive long enough to submit to the white forefather, and third if she cannot redirect her own violent and suicidal feelings in the face of her enslavement in the past. Quite literally, how one survives (a lifetime) of telling (a constitution/living) when one is linguistically constructed in violence is the issue in Dana’s strange journey. And, just as importantly, she must figure a survival that allows her to live with the violence she herself enacts. For to live and write in and from the margins, one finally must choose to construct in violation, to metaphorically re-wound, re-rape one’s own predecessors (fictional or not), risking one’s (material) sanity for a linguistic life. And so Butler’s own racial stakes intensify and afford particularity to the sometimes glib figuration “slave to the muse.”

Others have read Butler’s later Xenogenesis series as an allegory for slavery, but both this series and Kindred (on which I focus for the purposes of this chapter) can also be read as an allegory for the marginal writer.<sup>47</sup> In Dawn, the first of the Xenogenesis novels, humans are given no choice but to incorporate alien genetic material with their own—or end in extinction from sterility caused by environmental destruction. By analogy, during slavery forced sex and reproduction between masters and slaves was a

given; it was sometimes the price of survival. In both cases, the stories are entirely unsentimental about this “choice” for a future. Survival entails no “material” choice (no choice in materials) at all. For the alternative is Zelma's choice, and unlike Robinson, Butler does not have a white body to fall back on after killing off her Black character. Butler's novels expose the issue of linguistic survival and reproduction for African Americans as closely connected to this material survival. In writing of African American cultural survival under erasure during the Harlem Renaissance, Houston A. Baker describes “a field marked by awesome strategies of deformation and mastery.” He goes on to argue a deep connection between bodies and creative culture, saying “It is this discursive field that links us bone of the bone, flesh of the flesh, and note by resounding blue note to contours of those transforming African masks that constitute our beginnings” (111). For in order even to communicate with other slaves, much less their masters, and so materially survive, in just one generation most slaves were forced to abandon their diverse African languages in favor of the language(s) of their owners. Despite the eventual creation of new local languages in variations on and creolizations of the masters' languages (“awesome deformations”!), for the purposes of literacy and publication and dissemination (spreading the seedwords to join and fertilize with others) the masters' language was a given—the foregone genetics of rape. Under slavery the profound uncertainty of where and when one's children or words or literacy would be torn away—or buried—ghosted each creative act, whether forced or unforced. There is little choice in the raw materials if one is to participate in literate culture in the United States. And those raw materials are not inert, but do forcefully re-injure in their use. But, not to participate in linguistic culture, whether local or other-owned, is to be the subaltern, lost and unheard.

In the prologue to *Kindred*, as Dana awakes from her last trip into the past, she wants to see her injury—the amputated arm. She writes, “Somehow I had to be able to see to accept what I knew was so.” Here sensory perception is set up as the route by which one can truly engage the wound(ed)/self that is history. “Seeing is believing” is

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<sup>47</sup> In addition to the introduction by Robert Crossley to the 1988 edition of *Kindred*, see Donna Haraway's

less an adage of rationalism than of sensibility, the foundation of which is a full apprehension of the world through the senses. For one can “know” things—especially history—without really believing them. The irony here of course is that one cannot “sense” history, per se. And neither did many of the abolitionists in England ever see slavery. Its sensuality was and is lost by way of the passage of time, by the distance of space. But as the body is invoked through sensibility, and in writing, all these texts work to engage slavery through the virtual sensory space of the story. This prologue ends with the characters Dana and her husband Kevin discussing the loss of Dana’s arm. Kevin says of the police who questioned him,

“they wanted me to tell them how such a thing could happen. I said I didn’t know...kept telling them I didn’t know. And heaven help me, Dana, I don’t know.”

“Neither do I,” [Dana] whispered. “Neither do I.” (11)

And neither does the reader know—at first. For while the characters are referring specifically to the arm, they are also speaking through this wound to the greater wound of slavery to which (and in which) they have both found themselves drawn, and the events of which run in some grotesque parallel to their contemporary lives. Though the reader knows there has been an injury, it is at the outset bizarre and unimaginable. The violence is truly fantastic. The rest of the novel strives to offer us by way of the virtual world of story the substance of this injury that Dana will carry in her body for the rest of her life—of which her mutilated arm is only the visual marker.<sup>48</sup>

Significantly, Dana is drawn into the past to rescue her white forefather, just as she, an African American woman, and her husband, a European American man, are moving in together. While the novel sets up her ancestor as the reason she is called into the past, the timing in her contemporary life is critical. Just prior to her first trip to the past, she is in their new home, unpacking and sorting their books for shelving,

We were still unpacking—or rather, I was still unpacking. Kevin had stopped when he got his office in order. Now he was closed in there either loafing or thinking, because I didn’t hear his typewriter. Finally he came out to the living room where I was sorting books into one of the big

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discussion of *Xenogenesis* in *Simians* (225-230).

<sup>48</sup> Ruth Salvaggio reads this mutilation as a “birthmark” for Dana, the sign of her “disfigured heritage.”

bookcases. Fiction only. We had so many books, we had to keep them in some kind of order. (12)

The tension suggested by Dana's husband's self-centered abandonment of his wife, a writer, to their unpacking while he goes about his own writerly business is present throughout the novel, both in the past and in the present. We learn that the couple's first major fight was over his requests to have her type his work. She does it once and then refuses. She doesn't even like typing her own work; when they first meet, she is working out of an unskilled labor pool they jokingly refer to as the "slave market" precisely because she is not a good typist. It is clear that she is only expected to type because she is bodied a woman, not because she has any particular facility or interest in it.<sup>49</sup>

Comparisons between her husband and the ancestor, Rufus, who will rape her great-great-grandmother run throughout the novel. Their appearances are linked—both through their shared whiteness as well as their similar blue eyes. And more importantly, their attitudes and behaviors are compared, for Dana sees in her husband pale reflections of the white male privilege Rufus' draws upon. Though the violence that Rufus gives, and takes for granted, in the past is merely ghosted in her husband's typing requests, Kevin's initial blindness to the dangers of slavery on the Weylin's plantation is enough to make Dana uneasy (99-101). And once, returning to the present from the deadly violence that triggers every such return, Dana arrives in her Los Angeles home to find herself in bed scratching her husband's face, drawing blood as he leans over her, just as she had been fighting a white man trying to rape and injure her in the past (43-44). The "unpacking" of books in this opening scene stands as a metaphor for the entanglement of race, gender and writing that the rest of the text will trace, a genealogy of this interracial relationship of writers.

This little domestic scene evokes themes of literacy, of story telling, and of the complex web of gender and race relations that thread the entire novel. The possession of books—"so many books"—signs the unquestioned acquisition and exercise of literacy—an abundance in the present that is explicitly denied Dana in the past. On the

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<sup>49</sup> When I mentioned this point in my project to a colleague who received his Ph.D. some thirty years ago he smiled with recognition, saying that he had more than once avoided breaking up with girlfriends mid-term because he wanted them to type his papers. "Typist" was, he said, a sought after quality in a girlfriend.

plantation in the past, the master's library figures prominently. It is there that she is drawn for her second visit, to keep her young white ancestor Rufus from endangering himself by burning the house down. The books of the future are explicitly tied to books of the past—the boy admits he envisioned her in her apartment with books piled around just before she arrived to help him in the library. But interestingly, whereas she and her husband are both readers and accomplished writers in their time of origin, the master to whose plantation they are called in the past has only a basic level of education. He does not read the books in his possession; they are for show. They are the outward material sign of his association with the power of the dominant language—and they need not be read to stand so possessing.

But that the books are unread suggests that neither does the master entirely have mastery of a linguistic living. In fact, it is *Dana the slave's command* of language, both oral and written, that undergirds her material complicity in the violence of the slave system as she repeatedly saves her master/ancestor's ass for the sake of her own survival. She uses her powers of linguistic persuasion to urge the slave Alice, her female ancestor, to submit to Rufus' sexual desire in order to avoid his murderous wrath and the termination of her ancestral line. She becomes “literally” complicit in the success of this slave plantation when debt threatens the plantation and Rufus enjoins Dana to use her creative literary skill to ward off creditors. He leverages her with the threat that without her help he will be “forced” to sell slaves and thereby separate families and possibly make the slaves lives even worse—and potentially threaten the survival of Dana's newly born great-grandmother. The boundary between the basically literate master and the highly literate slave is blurred—but not erased.

Positioning of usage matters. For Dana's literacy threatens the master precisely because she does not merely possess literacy as object, but wields it as subject. Her “use” of language, like Zelma's, reveals the oppression in the linguistic status quo—the order of “usage.” And so she unveils its mystery as a sign of possession—a mystery that the master's use, even as a barely literate user, cannot (and does not want to) make visible. She dares to open the master's books. In the United States today, basic literacy is not

considered a particularly dangerous.<sup>50</sup> However, as a tool and medium of creativity, of construction and destruction, language and literacy nevertheless have force. In an ironic twist on another adage, which equates information and power, when Dana manages on one of her trips to bring to the past a history book of the Southern U.S., her ancestor Rufus (now a young man) makes her burn it. Here knowledge, and particularly textual knowledge, *is* figured as very powerful. Rufus is afraid she will use the knowledge it spells to escape; and it is by way of the very power he fears that he convinces her to destroy it. He convinces Dana, and rightly so, that it is profoundly dangerous for her to have such a book, complete with its critical analysis of slavery. The book burns. Dana had hoped to use the book to help orient herself to the culture and geography of the day—and thus have a better chance of survival. Powerfully helpful as it might have been, her literacy and the book—the outward material sign of that literacy—also threaten her survival. And this is a threat substantiated by Rufus' very own fear and anger in the face of her possession and reading of such a text—and his subsequent dissembling to force the book's destruction.

In a culture where the law rules against literacy or possession of its signs (books, writing materials) for slaves (people who are perceived as looking like she does), Dana's education is re-markable in the past. From beginning to the end of the tale she repeatedly draws the suspicion and distrust of the master(s), and some other slaves as well, for being an “educated nigger,” a “reading nigger”—even for offering to write a “pass” for another slave (120). Her first beating, or “marking,” as a slave, by Rufus' father, comes after she is discovered teaching slave children to read—with books taken from this master's library. Paradoxically, as was the case for Zelma, it is in the practice of literacy, of a linguistic life, that the violated illiterate slave body becomes visible, found/ed, and thus subject to a violent “re-marking.”<sup>51</sup>

Throughout the novel, Butler makes plays on the imaginary line between fiction and non-fiction. Dana's present day sorting of the fiction from the non-fiction as she

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<sup>50</sup> Thus today the risk of giving a basic education to all citizens has lost its edge and certainly hardly outweighs the benefits of an (post)industrial labor force that can read directions.

<sup>51</sup> Perhaps such remarking constructs the marginal writer as a living palimpsest.

unpacks, her resulting pile of “fiction only,” humorously belies the blurring of genre in the text as the novel itself works to undo either one of these genres as having authority over or advantage in reporting lived violence. At once Dana says, “I’ve been watching the violence of this time go by on the screen long enough to have picked up a few things,” and also says, “That most of the people around Rufus [Dana’s white ancestor] know more about real violence than the screenwriters of today will ever know” (48). Likewise, when Dana and her husband come back home to the present day, the contemporary TV news of the war in Lebanon and rioting in South Africa feels more distant to them than the past they have been living—though Dana instantly collapses the distance she initially feels, saying of white South Africans that they “were living in the past as far as their race relations went” (196). In some sense, the fictional form of this text has the final word—but the story ends with the characters journeying to the South to find the “actual” historical places they experienced in the past. Clearly fiction alone does not suffice; the material world, lived “reality” also matters. This interplay of lived experience and history and imagination stands (“& their words stood in chariots”) much as Blake’s own mixing of contemporary politics, mythology, street scenes, philosophy and prophetic/poetic vision (Complete 204). Blake likewise played with time, creating a sense of all times in one time, all actions in all times, undoing linear causation as Butler here prophesies the past.

Implicating past and present in one another produces both a critique of our understanding of history as well as of marginal literacy today. The distrust of a slave who is literate is congruent with Dana’s modern day experiences while working through a temporary labor agency—where she first meets Kevin. Dana says to Kevin of another co-worker, “I’m a joke as far as Buz is concerned. He thinks people are strange if they read books. Besides,’ I added bitterly, ‘what would a writer be doing working out of a slave market?’” (53). Butler’s narrator, Dana, describes the modern temporary day labor pool in contrast to the slave labor of the past: “we regulars called it a slave market. Actually it was just the opposite of a slave market” (52). But it is not that this labor agency is good, where slavery was bad. Instead the agency operates as a reconfigured echo of the practice

of slavery; it is less directly brutal, more effective in its indifference to individuals, races, or genders—but it is nevertheless a form of conscripted labor preying on individuals by the very categories to which it appears nonetheless indifferent:

The people who ran [the casual labor agency] couldn't have cared less whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered. They always had more job hunters than jobs anyway. If you wanted them to think about using you, you went to their office around six in the morning, signed in, and sat down to wait. Waiting with you were winos trying to work themselves into a few more bottles, poor women with children trying to supplement their welfare checks, kids trying to get a first job, older people who'd lost one job too many, and usually a poor crazy old street lady who talked to herself constantly and who wasn't going to be hired no matter what because she only wore one shoe. (53)

Published during the height of the recession of the late 1970s, the economics behind this scene point as much to that particularity as they do the workings of the “non-skilled” labor market. But keeping in mind that the company “Labor Ready” is a “real” contemporary national temporary agency for day laborers that indeed expanded during the economic “good times” of the 1990s, these companies would seem to be an institutionalized constant of our economy, in good times and in bad. Making these connections past to present, Butler complicates a tendency to pin slavery on (only) slave owners (for is Dana, the contemporary writer, not finding herself painfully complicit?), and simultaneously points out how one should no more evade the responsibility for investigation and naming oppression in the present than one does in (the newly complicated) past (even though those responsible seem to have evaporated without a trace). That is, it is in both cases (historically and presently) harder and more urgent to trace the complex and particular lines of force than one thinks.

Embedded in this comparison of past and present labor markets is also a commentary on the present day reversal of how literacy was deployed and withheld as a force of oppression in the past. Instead of denying literacy to the underclass, the force of literacy in the U.S. is today paid lip service or simply ignored—for some. The past is clearly not so containable in history. Dana's white husband successfully sells his writing. Dana, admittedly a few years younger, has not made significant inroads into publication.

She gratefully takes Kevin up on his later offer to support her while she writes, and it is his successful novel that buys them their house. Dana's potential to create and so reproduce linguistically is embedded in a politics of biological reproduction that has, historically, been very much an issue of race and gender. Reproductive literacy or at least voice—a linguistic life—is ghosted in "Little Black Boy" by the intergenerational "carrying on," so to speak, of the black mother's words through her son. Writing as reproduction is figured more explicitly as "fruits" in "The Negro Girl." But in *Kindred* biological reproduction and literacy constantly overlay each other. And given the history of rape, of families torn apart, and even of later forced sterilization of African Americans, such reproduction remains a painful and troubled space. This violent context particularly intensifies how a woman's body and her text are inextricably read one from another as it links as well the creation and reproduction of those texts and bodies.

Certainly in Butler's text, Dana's physical survival and literary creativity are explicitly and continuously linked. For it is not only her physical survival that is tied to her actions in the past, but also her linguistic survival in and of this text she narrates. I have noted that while Zelma dies prior to the "dissemination" of her "fruits," Alice produces children that survive to themselves become parents and grandparents. But fertility itself is a sore point for Dana, one whose control she carefully guards. She thinks after the following conversation with the older Master Weylin, "My fertility was none of his business, anyway" (90):

"Twenty-six then," said Weylin. "How many children have you had?"

"None." I kept my face impassive, but I couldn't keep myself from wondering where these questions were leading.

"No children by now?" He frowned. "You must be barren then." I said nothing. I wasn't about to explain anything to him. My fertility was none of his business, anyway.

He stared at me awhile longer, making me angry and uncomfortable, but I concealed my feelings as well as I could.

"You like children though, don't you?" he asked. "You like my boy."

"Yes sir, I do."

"Can you cipher too—along with your reading and writing?"

"Yes, sir."

“How’d you like to be the one to do the teaching?”  
 “Me?” I managed to frown...managed not to laugh aloud with relief. Tom  
 Weylin wanted to buy me. (90-1)

Biological and literary fertility come so close to one another in the literate slave body that they are easily mistaken one for another in this conversation between Dana and Master Weylin, Rufus' father. As Weylin shifts from asking if Dana has/likes children to asking if she is mathematically (as well as linguistically) literate, he collapses biological reproduction and literacy into the same (discursive and economic) space. Master Weylin's stakes are in the body's value; educating, ciphering or breeding, it is all “figuring.” And that's what (slave) women are for.<sup>52</sup>

In “Displacement and the Discourse of Woman” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes in regard to “the law as the code of legitimacy and inheritance” that “[o]ne version of this simple law is written on the woman's body as an historical instrument of reproduction” such that

The institution of phallogentric law is congruent with the need to prove paternity and authority...to secure property by transforming the woman into a mediating instrument of the production and passage of property. In this narrow but “effective” and “real” sense, in the body of woman as mother, the opposition between displacement and logocentrism might itself be deconstructed. (60)

Indeed, the collapse of the “opposition between displacement and logocentrism” is acutely figured in the literate slave woman. That is, biological reproduction and the production of language (here specifically literacy) are closely intertwined in the literate female slave body as a “mediating instrument of production.” But where it's all “figuring property” for Weylin, for Dana the shape of that figuration matters very much. Language and body may be inextricable from one another and share the same surface, but they are nonetheless not “the same.” When Weylin “only” wants to buy Dana to gain the “fruits” of her literacy she is tremendously relieved, having feared from the outset of this conversation that he wants to “breed” her. And it is this literacy Dana finds herself

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<sup>52</sup> And this is why the education of children has traditionally been undertaken by women for not much more than the subsistence living they get (if lucky) for bearing and raising them (a biased, but informed analysis: I taught elementary school for eight years).

bartering for the survival of her body and for the other slave bodies in which hers is implicated. While her “fertility was none of his business,” she is more generous in her confidence of her literacy, more willing to share. It is only when she is asked to barter her body itself, to relinquish control of her sexual body that she finds the line she will not cross. It is only then that she finds herself capable of murder.

Dana’s final deadly resistance to Rufus’ sexual advances parallels her ostensibly more innocuous resistance to Kevin’s request early in their relationship to type his manuscripts. As I have already discussed, Alice and Rufus’ relationship in the past ghosts Dana and Kevin’s contemporary relationship. When the modern day police suspect Kevin as the perpetrator of Dana’s worst injuries sustained in the past, Dana says this is “easy to understand.” Indeed, Dana observes of Rufus after Alice has been beaten nearly to death for running away, “He spoke out of love for the girl—a destructive love, but a love, nevertheless” (147). Although Dana can stand up to her husband’s request for typing services without fearing for her life where Alice resists rape only at grave bodily risk, violence remains in the contemporary field of unequal gender relations. When Dana’s modern day friends see her battered from the physical violence she has experienced as a slave, they assume her husband has done it. Thus, interestingly, where Robinson in the eighteenth century locates an intersection of the ways in which sexism and racism both play out in the sexual and reproductive female slave body Butler too locates this intersection in the twentieth century free black woman’s body.

Although they avoid physical violence in their own relationship, Dana and Kevin nevertheless must negotiate the gendered violence that seems to be taken for granted as part of the larger landscape, both in the present and in the past, both in their relations together and in their dealings with others. That is, in the present times of Kindred while it is no longer legal to beat one’s partner, the beating continues as a practice outside the law, operating as a panoptic force.<sup>53</sup> While mild beside Alice’s resistance to rape, Dana’s refusal to type almost becomes a make or break issue in her relationship with Kevin.

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<sup>53</sup> See Michel Foucault, “Panopticism” in Discipline and Punish, (195-228) and Patricia Williams discussion of how making oppression officially illegal seems to eliminate it from dominant awareness—masking violence even as it continues (146-65).

When Dana stands up to Kevin about the typing, he is first annoyed, then angry. And when she shows up the next day expecting to continue their relationship, he is surprised to see her, and assumes she has changed her mind about typing for him. When he realizes she has not, he is very angry, exploding “Damnit, Dana...!” (109). Certainly, not typing someone else’s work is certainly not necessarily a sign of oppression, but that Kevin expects it of his girlfriend and not vice versa represents how Dana is, even in the present time, asked to “serve” as a vessel (or “passage”) through which male productions can take shape.<sup>54</sup> Significantly Dana and Kevin, both writers, have no children. Admittedly, Dana is only in her mid-twenties, but the refusal to type her husband's novels reads as a metaphorical refusal to serve, to act as “instrument” for him or his creative “phallogos.” And it is here that she draws the line with her ancestor as well—thinking explicitly that she will not be Rufus’ (the master’s) lover. It may seem contradictory that she refuses Kevin’s request for typing in the present and then in the past agrees to numerous acts of literacy to save herself and other slaves—even as she won’t submit sexually. But in every case that she agrees to use her literacy for the master’s own ends, it is because other lives are at stake; in the submission or refusal of her sexual body to the master, she has only herself to lose (as is the case in the present).

Near the end of this novel, during Dana's final stay in the past, Alice, her great-great-grandmother and Rufus’ (forced) beloved, commits suicide; Rufus’ own violence towards Alice is the direct cause. Bereft, drawn to Dana as he was to Alice (by their resemblance to each other), Rufus tries to keep the writer from the future for himself in the past. Because only mortal danger to her body can move Dana into the future, short of a violent physical attack by another, she must attempt suicide to get home. She does this once, and when Rufus realizes she aims to leave him this way again, he tries to stop her, and at the same time rape her. But Dana will neither type her husband’s writing nor have (forced) sex with Rufus, the master. She will not give herself as an “instrument of production,” or relinquish her fruits to either man. Her sexual body and her writing body

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<sup>54</sup> And a mechanized vessel at that—in addition to Spivak’s discussion of the vessel, this is also parallel to Blake’s concern with the dehumanizing engines of the industrial revolution—an anti-thesis of creativity. Hey, I want to write an anti-thesis!

are related and that relation is the line she draws—as does Robinson's Zelma. But in her relationship with Rufus she toes that line very close indeed. That only mortal danger, a physical violence so intense that Dana feels death as imminent, sends her forward in time is both a symbolic and literal representation of the potentially annihilating linguistic violation the marginal writer must spell to survive, to move forward in/to the linguistic future, to tell.

Although Dana protests Kevin's typing request, both she and their relationship survive in the present; the risk she assumes as marginal writer is driven "home" by way of the past. A literate slave does not possess her own writing, whether or not she has "mastered" it. Rufus cannot read nor write particularly well, and yet he controls her fruits—he hides the letters she tries to send her distant husband. He holds the linguistic reins. She has no direct access to/control of the dis-semination of her words—just as she has unequal access to publication in her own time period. The specter of the slave body constitutes a violent bio-linguistic complex in which Dana was and is (still) constituted. Dana's relief that Master Weylin assumes that she is barren gains tangibility when she narrates the violence done to another (fertile) slave woman who risked literacy:

There was a woman on Weylin's plantation whose former master had cut three fingers from her right hand when he caught her *writing*. She had a baby nearly every year, that woman. Nine so far, seven surviving. Weylin called her a good breeder, and he never whipped her. He was selling off her children, though, one by one. (192)

Seven surviving children. One for each surviving finger. Each finger surviving the practice of a linguistic life. Caught in the act of linguistic living/loving her body is subject to maiming, partiality, loss. But while she appears to be left materially intact for her physical reproduction, for the ways in which she makes more property, she suffers loss none the less. Loss of her issue. The issue. Material loss of her children and the psychic anguish that loss likely engenders. This is the immanence with which violent materiality here strikes at the face of literacy, of both articulation and in-articulation for African Americans. For where Robinson constructs her slave protagonist as entirely refusing to operate in this violent economy, she herself did nothing of the sort. She did not have to so operate. By contrast, Butler's protagonist finds herself unable to duplicate

Zelma's choice. Heavily invested in surviving her own narrative, Dana chooses to end the life of another rather than her own.

It is this force of linguistic and material destruction that Audre Lorde, writing from the stand of a creative writer, names when she says,

Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism...to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings...And that visibility that makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. (42)

While such violence (“distortion of vision”) may be a “constant,” Lorde calls on voicing and writing, on linguistic constitution in and of this violent force of erasure. In making explicit (by becoming visible as an inhuman construction!) “the lesson” “that we were never meant to survive,” one finds “the source of our greatest strength.” For while marginal violence is the “constant” risk of marginal articulation, she argues, “My silence had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you.” Drawing on the violent power of revelation, she makes the following claim for creative writing “I speak here of poetry as revelatory distillation of experience...For women then, poetry is not a luxury. It is the vital necessity of our existence” (41). She speaks of the survival of a linguistic living, a survival haunted deeply by the loss during slavery of reproductive possession. In Kindred, the woman whose fingers have been cut off is allowed to possess neither the creative cultural continuity of a linguistic living, nor the creative issue of her body—her children.

Dana's great-grandmother Hagar, daughter of the white slave owner Rufus and the black slave Alice, is the material issue, that constellation of tissue pushed forth to stand as outside evidence of the inside, the externality of that which is endemic: material evidence to the violation that created her, a violation entwined with its own interdict against its linguistic projection, that will, with each generation, be pushed forth until the narrator of Kindred, first of her family to find/found herself a writer, transforms the force

of that material violation into the force of a linguistic living. This is the violent marker of the child of linguistic “miscegenation” when it is so literally cast.<sup>55</sup>

In “The Little Black Boy” Blake entirely sidesteps the violence of miscegenation—where not the least of said violence is in its very construction as such. His life is nowhere at stake in either the violation or the survival of the child of the rape of a slave by her master. Robinson does, by implication, raise this issue—but with Zelma’s death (apparently without children)—the (fruitful) issue dies. As a popular white woman writer, Robinson, finally, has material stakes only in the marking/the remarkability of the text. But for Butler’s tale to work, to exist at all, the “monstrous” “issue” must live and survive else there be no future for the storyteller. Butler has a material stake in the survival of the issue of “miscegenation”—as embodied in both its textual and sexual/physical issue. This storyteller can *only* live in the violence of such an issue. But she loses her arm. More than three fingers. Less than her (zero) children? T/issue. It is the issue of linguistic miscegenation that calls into question the purity of a slave body, that creates the ambivalent space in which the storm rages and makes visible (re-marks) the violent and monstrous shape of marginal literacy.

Butler’s character cannot kill the master too early, or she will not exist. And even when she does kill him she loses her arm. She resists the violation of her body at the risk of that body. It is a delicate and painful dance: which violations to live/constitute, which to resist/erase? In a linguistic field, one works to write violation in such a way that one can survive—spiritually, linguistically, with one’s imagination more or less intact. Notably, right-handed Dana loses her left arm. She retains her writing arm and as we have earlier learned, she prefers to write in longhand rather than type anyway. Indeed, in a neat reversal, her husband will probably have to type everything for her now.

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<sup>55</sup> And in the year 2000 it is precisely this “issue” which is re-issued in Midnight Robber by Nola Hopkinson, an Afro-Caribbean feminist cyber-story of violence, possession, and voice—and reproduction thereof.

## DIS/POSSESSION

Where Robinson zeroes in on the economics of literacy, voice, and reproduction, Blake seems to deliberately unvoice economics, untethering the tight linkages of spirit/voice and body but stopping short of entirely loosing them. Both writers struggled financially, but for Blake, ownership of his body, of its productions, was less tied up in ownership of linguistic expression than it was for either Butler or Robinson. Nevertheless, Blake—albeit gently—opens the wound of racial prejudice, creating a present space for the unheard voice so that it needn't remain unheard until we are all in heaven; being heard in heaven is the best the black boy can hope for from his limited and “innocent” perspective. Robinson has Zelma choose the honorable way out; she refuses to be tainted by the violation her literate body must live to survive and be heard and cuts off her own future. But Robinson herself lives through Zelma's demise, in a sense enacting the violence of slavery, of a metaphorical slave suicide, for her own literary survival in much the same way—I venture—as Butler's character repeatedly enables the eventual rape and finally the suicide of her great-great-grandmother in order to ensure her own survival.<sup>56</sup>

Blake's projection of a marginalized voice into the specter of the slave body is indeed a critique both of slavery and of the tradition of anti-slavery propaganda. Robinson makes use of the very sentimental tradition of anti-slavery literature that Blake's poem critiques. For her, the textual slave body is helpful in naming a sharp intersection of economics, sexuality, and literacy in the condition of being a literate woman (and of being a literate slave woman). For Butler, the slave figure is “spectral” only in its distance through history. That is, this is the violated body she “assumes” because it is the violated body she finds herself in. The violence of slavery is embedded in the very cells that make up the fingers she types with—in the socio-historical construction of such a biology. From Blake to Robinson to Butler, the figure of the slave

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<sup>56</sup> It is more complicated than that, it's true. When the main character, Dana, first saves the little white boy who will grow up to be the owner/rapist/murderer; neither she nor he has any awareness of his eventual role in her own existence. And later, she encourages her great-great-grandmother's relationship with the man, because, in truth, the woman will otherwise be taken by physical force.

is consistently forceful in its portrayal of a marginal body possessed of a linguistic life, but the writers' stakes in the relative solidity and particular shape of that embodied figure vary enormously. Where Blake's plates offer an ideal portrait of love and innocence, and Robinson offers hints at rape and a very theatrical physical death for her characters, Butler gets down and dirty with vivid descriptions of the physical violence she and other slaves endure for their words, for their efforts at both physical and linguistic self-possession.<sup>57</sup> In this "realism" eschewed by the other two writers is Butler's not so subtle commentary on the ways in which one cannot know the violence of the body unless one experiences the violence of the body—that all the TV, books, etc., cannot prepare one for the violence one lives and inherits.

Much as it is for Blake and Robinson, sensibility is key to this tale of Butler's. She too employs the tricks of the abolitionist slave literature's trade, drawing on the sensual body to spin the tale and evoke a visceral connection with the reader. Crossley even labels the text a cross between a slave narrative and a fantastic time-travelogue (xii). But, unlike both Blake's and Robinson's texts, in this novel sympathy seems beside the point. The central character, Dana, remains remarkably dry-eyed throughout the book, which is, if anything, a critique of sympathy as remedy. Sympathy is not here the project. A linguistic living, as projected in the African-American time-traveling writer, is. The problem with sympathy is that it separates even as it moves. One experiencing sympathy is, by definition, not one at the epicenter of pain or violation. The central character, an African American writer, cannot afford such separation and dispossession, such a disowning from and of the slave body. She cannot write that body out of her will, if a written will she is to have at all. She must cast—constitute and contain—the slave to survive the slavery that, through and despite time, has cast her.

As he changes coloring of his design, Blake unfixes the body because he can afford to. Even as I have no doubt that he is fully invested in the plight and the power of the shunned little black boy, it is an investment in the *imaginary* space he creates for him. Imagination was critical to Blake. Blake changes coloring possibly because for him, color

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<sup>57</sup> Butler researched primary historical accounts of slavery for Kindred.

was not the point. Though he cared deeply about the daily living conditions of the poor and oppressed of his time, and at times lived at the edge of some of those conditions himself, he was after bigger theories of violence that could tie his oppression as an unconventional, political artist, to the oppression of the poorer classes and to the wars in which his nation was engaged. His was an investment in freeing the space of imagination for the imaginative imaging of error. He sought to free the sensual body to serve the imagination—the divine creativity the body can house. Speculations on his relative mental health aside, as a skilled white male artisan, nothing particular about the construction of his own body limited him. And he lived long (for those days). So although he overturns as essential the embodied limits on the Black boy's education or voice, and indeed gives him a first-person voice, the violations of the-boy-unheard are more loosely tied to the body's construction than they are in either Robinson's or Butler's texts.

By contrast to Blake, Robinson found herself limited by social constructions of her body in profound ways. The ways in which my students read her poetry point to the importance of the female body in marking and unmarking voice. Her consistent construction as a fallen woman—even as she was easily one of the most popular poets, male or female, of the Romantic era—dogged her success as a woman of letters. Caught between this negative construction and a construction of women as having no public voice at all, she created her writing self as a moving target, using a wide variety of pseudonyms to flex her linguistic positioning. Robinson's trope figuring the printing process as a rape sharpens her material stakes in Zelma's situation, making visible an intersection of the ways in which racism and sexism are violently "marked" in the body. And yet, Zelma ends her life as Robinson does not.

Neither can Butler escape her body, particularly in the genre in which she writes. For while Science Fiction is labeled a more speculative space than most, it has only very recently begun to see a burgeoning of writers of color. And, as an African American particularly invested in the intersections of biological and literary reproduction by race Butler does not "kill off" her writer-narrator. Which is not to say that her narrator or her

tale stands inviolate. On the contrary, the repeated criticisms of media representations of slavery in the novel ensure that we must retain the same suspicions of representations within the novel itself—never mind the “authenticity” of the author by way of her own skin color. For, no matter how horrific the words, they are not the violence of slavery. And it is in this differentiation of particular experience from particular text, of the virtual (textual) slave from the material (physical) slave, that is found the obvious, but nevertheless powerful, opening that textual violence can allow. That text, while material and not without force, is also not the body. Butler’s text reminds one, even as her stakes in writing the marginal slave body are most acutely constructed in that very terrain of writing, that one must approach all texts as texts, as intersecting with but separate from the body. One must remember that even as these writers write to live out, and, out-live, the constructions of their bodies and material existences that would limit them, they also need those bodies. And the writing that sustains them can also threaten them, by both its presence (the literate and voiced slave body) and by its absence (the illiterate and silent slave body).

Slaves were owned: Blake’s black boy. Robinson’s Zelma. Butler’s Alice/Dana. What does it mean to wrest possession of one’s language (just) to turn around and create an owned character, to inhabit the specter of the slave? Though the “minute particularities” of who and where “one” writes from clearly matter, all three of these writers chose to write/project this specter for the powerful living it affords (Blake, Complete 205). One cannot disown language or its violence. And so neither can one dis/own the slave body which, after all, exists in some relation to oneself. To possess one’s language, to wield it with effectiveness, one does risk “owning” in the ways one is owned. But it is in this space of violation that one also has the chance to access, or re-capture, the constitutive power, the living (work it!) that such possession enacts. And the proof of this success is in the pudding, the fed/read body. Does one still survive? Can (any)one still write?

### CHAPTER 3 : TAILING (FORECLOSURE AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL)

What would it mean to think of violence as an inescapable horizon or inherent potentiality of any act or of any restraining from action? (De Vries, "Testimony and Violence" 18).

I have been arguing that just such a violent horizon describes the marginal creative writer's embodied relation to language: where to speak, or read, or write may (at least) promise danger and (at most) bring down material violence upon the body of the speaker, or reader, or writer. But, neither does the alternative—inarticulation—guarantee safety. Such an "inescapable horizon" challenges notions of potential openness, of a progressive "freedom from" violation. This violent horizon conditions both the content of a creative writing text as well as its form, both the meaningful narrative and the shape of the telling—thereby also contouring, or sounding, the vacuum of inarticulation.

In the preceding chapter I explored a narrative strategy of linguistic possession and dis-possession through the literary figure of the slave, a figure that virtually materializes the violence the marginal writer experiences in achieving literacy and voice. In this chapter I work with texts that grapple with ancestral (familial) violation through the linguistic inheritance of a now traditional narrative form—the novel. The foreclosed narratives of Art Spiegelman's Maus: A Survivor's Tale, Lynda Barry's Cruddy, and Randall Kenan's Visitation of Spirits—stories of aging, coming of age, and receiving the violent legacy of preceding generations—all assume violation (from the beginning and in the end).

In spelling "violence as an inescapable horizon or inherent potentiality" these texts deliberately inhabit their violent inheritances. There, they trace, and even shape, the insensibly destructive borders of historical inarticulation and ignorance *in (as) the (very) face* of that legacy. In that violently containing likeness, these texts thus disturb the traditional novel narrative with its linear progression towards resolution and deceptive openness. Moreover, when read through a "Comics" lens, the novel form is itself revealed as a problematic but strong container for violation which can, through (fore)closure of violence, focus the text inward and backward—on a genealogy or detection of that violation. The tale can serve to tail. Squeak!

My reference to genealogy or “detection” invokes the critical (theoretical) approaches of Michel Foucault. He writes of genealogy:

[I]t is an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within or underneath...it disturbs what was previously thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself...Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose *a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body*. (Counter-Memory 146-8)

Of significance to this project on marginal writers and violence are the ways the body and history—writing—have forceful effects on one another. As history is linguistic memory, the “articulation of the body and history” is the intersection where language materializes and bodies *matter*. The generalized “body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body” is given particularly violent shape in the genealogies that each of these texts enact. For as genealogy “disturbs what was previously thought unified” it engages and explodes (family) narratives of clear and linear cause and effect to create mobile narratives of partial perspective where particular bodies can materialize as “an assemblage of faults” and “the exteriority of accidents” (146).

It is not, however, accidental that these narratives (also) tussle with the literal (material) meanings of “genealogy.” All are concerned with family, with ancestors, and with the founding and ongoing violations which bring the characters into violent being. All completed and published in the past two decades, these “late-model” texts raise difficult questions of violent linguistic constitution, and of its survival. In Maus, Spiegelman is concerned from beginning to end with the ways in which the hideous violence experienced by his Polish Jewish parents in Nazi Europe has shaped their later lives and informed his narrator’s own life—particularly as an artist and writer. In Cruddy, the narrator uses her diary to track the “contamination” of her teenage life by the White working class poverty of her family and a particularly deadly journey with her “Navy” father as a young child. In A Visitation of Spirits, as the title suggests, the central character, a gay African American teen, is “visited” in a brief period before his suicide by the “demons” that inhabit memories of a profoundly restrictive life with his family in the

small community of Tims Creek. Each of these texts engages the violence of narrative itself, figuring the shape of the marginal narrator.

I say “shape” here rather than “identity” to make use of the way that the first term can infer a more active, creative and mobile figuration of individuals. To “shape” is aligned with the artist who works in some plastic relation to the boundaries of her medium. To “identify” is aligned with the scientist who presupposes a fixed figure for discovery.<sup>58</sup> Post-Structuralist theory, that parallels a more plastic and creative figuration, critiques enlightened concepts of identity, of individuals and groups with clear borders. More mobile theories of identity thus emerge, wherein the individual is figured as surf(ac)ing with/in a nexus of relation/ships, a node in a vast network of power lines, communications, and/or trajectories of desire<sup>59</sup>. For example, Donna Harraway argues for re-casting a fixed notion of objectivity into “situated knowledges” where the body/identity becomes a prosthetic for construction of this particular and partial knowledge.<sup>60</sup> Through such situated and plastic lenses, narratives of violence and oppression appear increasingly complex, and increasingly partial. While helpful in materializing the particularities of violence that are effaced in “history,” the modern anxiety over “loss of origin” can blossom into the excess of connection in the “postmodern” moment such that discourses on identity and its reproduction flatten, and become “mainstream” concerns, often blunting the urgency of questions of particularity—especially marginal particularities. For those in the margins, questions of how the past and future are tied to (present) reproduction and physical survival have thus become particularly acute, even and especially as they are (once again) increasingly effaced (but not erased!) in that webbed “mainstream.” And in the totality of the traditional novel form, the violence of such “present” issues of reproduction and survival are only intensified as they get re-presented omni/presciently.

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<sup>58</sup> I speak to a very simple (but popular) view of the scientific method that hides its own particularity of vision, for scientists can and do work as artists in their fields (and artists can be scientists). As Donna Harraway says, “Scientific objectivity (the siting/sighting of objects) is not about dis-engaged discovery, but about mutual and usually unequal structuring, about taking risks” (*Simians* 208).

<sup>59</sup> For example, in addition to Foucault see Beaudrilliard’s “Ecstasy of Communication,” Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, and Probyn’s *Outside Belonging*.

Importantly, I am not interested here in a study of “the novel” per se, but rather in how such a traditional—even violent (homegrown as it is in imperialism)—form can pressurize the issue with which I *am* here concerned—engaging textual violence in and from a marginal relation to language. A potentially violent formation, the novelistic presumption of openness (even and especially at the end) distracts from the potential power of the foreclosed moment as an opportunity for detection. For the traditional novel omnisciently does not reveal its “frame” and so bleeds always to the edges of every page, implying and constructing the particular tale (with the reader’s often unthinking complicity) as the whole (open and unending) world. But, perspective implies particularity and partiality. And worlds do end.

Judith Butler’s discussion of injurious language and foreclosure is relevant and useful here, although the novel texts with which I am interested do not presume or place focus on the “openness” (or, expansion) that (still) seems Butler’s goal for reversals or re-stagings of injurious language when she says:

The subject is called a name, but “who” the subject is depends as much on the names that he or she is never called: the possibilities for linguistic life are both inaugurated and foreclosed through the name.

Thus, language constitutes the subject in part through foreclosure, a kind of unofficial censorship or primary restriction in speech that constitutes the possibility of agency in speech. The kind of speaking that takes place on the border of the unsayable promises to expose the vacillating boundaries of legitimacy in speech. As a further marking of the limit to sovereignty, this view suggests that agency is derived from limitations in language, and that limitation is not fully negative in its implications.

Indeed as we think about the worlds that might one day become thinkable, sayable, legible, the opening up of the foreclosed and the saying of the unspeakable become part of the very “offense” that must be committed in order to expand the domain of linguistic survival. The resigni-fication of speech requires opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never yet been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms. (Excitable 41)

Butler’s assertion that “limitation is not fully negative in its implications” is found commonplace in any discussion of creative writing, especially by creative writers, for

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<sup>60</sup> “Situated Knowledges” 183-201; “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies” 203-230. In Simians.

whom the tussle with and at the bounds of language and form is a daily (creative) living. Certainly there is creative power, that she names “agency,” in what William Blake called the “wirey, bounding line.”<sup>61</sup> She reveals her stakes in the (limiting) imperial metaphor of territorial ownership when she sounds a call to “expand the domain of linguistic survival.” While not quite ceding a desire for “openness,” or the “new,” she does seek an “opening up of the foreclosed.” And in her desire for expansion, even an expansion from within, she pre-figures a space to expand into, and so seems to me to tread that line of openness very fine.

Nevertheless, particularly when addressing violence, this “boundary” or “shared surface” between what can and can't be spoken is critical. In terms of violence (because there are no such terms), the force of inarticulation is as important as that of articulation. One sounds the shapes of lives, and the violation of those lives, at the edges of what is sayable. Indeed, what is not sayable is where the violence still lies.<sup>62</sup> As I discuss in the introduction to this project, that violence presents and enforces difficulty in its very definition is at the core of most contemporary discussion of the violence of articulation and inarticulation.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, while language can itself be re-signed, the sign (if it can so be called) of violence (though not perhaps of injury), its very power, lies in its “un-significability”—in Butler's word, its “unspeakable[ness].” The writers with whom I am concerned seek to wield that un-signable power in the only place it can be wielded—at and in the (violent) margins of language. That is, while I do not want to minimize the significance of Butler's “offensive” linguistic strategies in enlarging our linguistic living rooms, I think that the power of linguistic violation, and access thereto lies not so much in re-signing it, but rather in darkening, giving weight to, and indeed pressurizing the

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<sup>61</sup> In “A Descriptive Catalog of Pictures” about “Ruth—A Drawing,” Blake writes, “the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the boundary line, the more perfect the work of art...How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the boundary line and its infinite inflexions and movements?” (*Complete* 549).

<sup>62</sup> Said another way, violence “lies” in language. That is, violence cannot truthfully be spoken at all.

<sup>63</sup> For a number of excellent current essays that trace past and current discourse defining violence in both philosophy and language see *Violence, Identity and Self-Determination* edited by Hent De Vries and Samuel Weber.

in/visible lines of foreclosure that border it.<sup>64</sup> Certainly, the border, or horizon, is itself very much a figure of Western imperialism and nation building, but as such it is also a figure which, as I have said, is finding usefulness in its own “re-staging” by a postmodern model of limitless (if enclosed) surface and connection—a figure that is indeed all border and no domain.<sup>65</sup>

Speaking to this imperial figure of domains and borders—and expansion, others have helpfully discussed the ways in which the European novel evolved alongside an age of empire; and although this genesis in oppression is not at the center of my consideration of the novel, it is important to note as a significant feature of the form that, in its presumptive totality, mirrors the conundrum—the simultaneous promising and forswearing—of language itself.<sup>66</sup> For those writing from the margins, it is a conundrum that undergirds and structures material violation. In its totality, the traditional novel pretends to “open” a world it has ruthlessly circumscribed. Likewise, it pretends to “open” onto a plot that will (always) evolve towards some “better” place—a “clearer,” and therefore privileged and enlightened, structuring of character and event.

At the foundation of the “novel” medium is a presumption of the “new.” The traditional novel journeys to a place that seems from the outset “unknown,” and indeed open to discovery and creation, if only by the characters of the story. But indeed, by the time the reader arrives on the scene, there is only one central path to take through the plot, and the characters’ ending is already written. And so, in a traditional novel, as in the rhetoric of empire, the glamour of such an open “progress” (where “glamour” is read in the sense of a shiny, distracting and deceptive veiling) is closely linked to the form’s requisite “resolution:” both wear the clothes of future and opportunity, both hide or

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<sup>64</sup> I admit I am not entirely certain what Butler means by “resigni-fication.” In so hyphenating the word she seems to be calling for something other than simply a re-signing. I can, for example, read it as a reference to the daily work creative writers do in re-signing fiction. Or maybe it’s a sound-alike to “Resign! Vacation!”, which I could really appreciate right now, I tell you. It could also be just a typo.

<sup>65</sup> Indeed Haraway labels enlightenment science as a “travel discourse, intimately implicated in the other great colonizing and liberatory readings and writings so basic to modern constitutions and dissolutions of the marked bodies of race, sex, and class” (*Simians* 221).

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Spivak’s “Three Women’s Texts” and Edward W. Said’s discussion in *Culture and Imperialism* of Jane Austen’s construction of space in the novel *Mansfield Park*.

discard the grounds of violation that future “newness” stands upon and is indeed grown from.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, these three texts create (from the marginal seeing/telling) explicitly foreclosed narratives that can reveal the illusion of such a progressive reproduction in the novel form, a reproduction that, like other enlightenment narratives, obscures the violation in and with which it is conceived.<sup>68</sup> Rather than presuming an open and “new” future, the foreclosed narrative focuses instead on tailing and detecting in order to demystify and give shape to (outline) the violence of such inarticulable conceptions. To “tail,” these authors draw heavily on the medium of comics run through the related form of the novel (with a focused use of the detective genre for its potential in genealogical pursuit of violence) for the possibilities these related forms offer to the marginal writer who “investigates” the inherited violation that is the inevitable horizon of their writing lives.

This violence of the novel as a linear, rational, and total progression towards “unknown” resolution (where in the rhetoric of European empire, unknown=new=novel) is undone as each of the texts I discuss reveals what would traditionally be the climax of a novel—an critical event of great violence, undoing, and transcendence—at the very beginning of the narrative. Both Cruddy and Visitation begin with a revelation of the main character's suicide. And in Maus, though it is clear the main characters (at least) physically survive the violence against Jews and other minorities of WWII (for otherwise

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<sup>67</sup> Haraway marks this obscuring “glamour” as a “god-trick,” writing that “Relativism and totalization are both ‘god-tricks’ promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully” (Simians 191). She argues for the advantage those writing from the margins might have in materializing such tricks: “The subjugated are savvy to modes of denial through repression, forgetting, and disappearing acts—ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively. The subjugated have a decent chance to be on to the god-trick and all its dazzling—and, therefore, blinding—illuminations” (Ibid.).

<sup>68</sup> See Stathis Gourgouris’ essay “Enlightenment and Paranomia” for an excellent discussion of how the enlightenment mythologizes its own origins, placing them outside (particular and violent) history so that “The law...comes to name its subjects by an act in which the subject that makes the law (“We, the people”) occludes itself. It is a disappearing act, an act of magic...Herein lies the seduction and violence of Enlightenment rule: its fascination with the abyss as generative trope and its uncompromising self-occultation of this abyss in the guise of a textualized rationality...a rationality of violence—literally, to rationalize violence...the American Declaration of Independence served as the totemic alibi for the extermination of the Plains Indians...” (127-128). When seeking to materialize the violence of enlightenment narrative, one is thus tailing a violence that by its very (own) definition leaves no tracks.

the author would not have been born), the violence of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s is from the outset understood as the historical horizon from which there is no escape in the present. In this way these are all novels of detection; they draw on the “low” popular literary form of the “Mystery” or “Detective Novel” where the worst—death—appears early, or is, in any case, assumed by the reader before she even opens the book. By this foreclosure of *events*, the standard linear and plot dependent narrative is thus neatly undercut, and the text is free to develop as a hunt for the relation of clues to what has already happened.<sup>69</sup>

In a traditional novel the reader is compelled by an illusion of linear time to move in only one direction, along only one hypotaxical path, “progression” being entirely circumscribed. But in a novel of detection, rather than a linear walk from here to there along a trail or causal chain, with each scene or event building clearly upon the previous scene or event, the hunt instead meanders through time and space, accumulating clues that are piled, if not entirely haphazardly, at least parataxically, so that “leads” are recursively reconsidered until recognizable shapes emerge to “solve” for “X,” for “the guilty relation” of the (surviving) murdered body. In this way, time becomes a space in which one moves about to connect clues, people, and smoking guns out of sequence (per se) in order to seek and shape increasingly particular solutions for “X.” Here, no-thing is new; only perspective shifts. How often does the detective say to herself, “I knew the answer was right before me,” or “There was something I was missing. I just needed to look at things differently”? In fact, in one contemporary pulp detective novel, the detective says to herself,

What I was looking at here was simply a more sophisticated version of dot-to-dot. If I could understand the order in which the items were related, I could probably get some notion of what was going on in Mickey's life. For now, what I was missing were the links between events. (Grafton 191)

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<sup>69</sup> By foreclosing both the murder and the knowledge that it will be eventually solved, today's mystery writers use the “leftover space” to background their political interests, or hobbies. The novel of detection has indeed become a forum for presenting current issues and research, from social issues such as child abuse and foster care to environmental issues. Supposedly just the background story, these issues assume a prominent position in the narrative when the rest of the novel's progression is a no-brainer.

What is “given” are the “items,” in an accretion that lacks “order” and “relation.” But while the canned detective novel is still, primarily, a traditional novel, where there really is, finally, only one way to connect the dots, in Maus, Cruddy, and Visitation the trails of crime are relational, partial, and always in question. In these complex fields of detection, “X” emanates as an imaginary number, a question of perspective. And while there are many ways to connect the dots, the particular picture that emerges matters very much.

The genre of the detective novel that works backward from murder to propel itself forward has at times been closely connected to the comic strip or graphic novel (as in Dick Tracy). Even in today's entirely worded detective novel series, the sleuths are clearly and visually marked from the outset, becoming their own easily recognizable icons. In the popular series from which I cite the above “dot-to-dot” passage, the detective carries with her at all times a wrinkle proof black dress and pumps, an instant outfit which enables her to assume false professional identities and attend events to which she has not been invited. With this dress she transforms into “the detective in action,” akin to a superhero in cape and tights:

I only own one dress: black, collarless, with long sleeves and a tucked bodice (which is a fancy word for front). This entirely synthetic garment, guaranteed wrinkle-free (but probably flammable), is as versatile as anything I've owned. In it, I can accept invitations to all but the snootiest of cocktail parties, pose as a mourner at any funeral, make court appearances, conduct surveillance, hustle clients, interview hostile witnesses, traffic with known felons, or pass myself off as a gainfully employed person instead of a freelance busybody accustomed to blue jeans, turtlenecks, and tennis shoes. (Grafton, 81-2)

The garment is “synthetic,” a *construction*—as is narrative (the stories one makes and tells about oneself). It is a prosthetic enabling one to take on a particular shape for the purposes of detection in otherwise restricted fields. These familiar and reappearing objects of pulp detective novel series are not unlike the magical trans/porting props of a cartoon character—a transparent airplane, or the batmobile. Associated with such regular vehicular shapes, these detectives become clearly marked as essentially unchanging cartoon figures who can, without invoking any reader doubt, transform/transfigure as easily and familiarly as superman, and so move from the everyday world of food

preparation and exercise and lovers to enter—and always survive—the dark underworld where death is commonplace and violence is the norm.<sup>70</sup> And indeed all three of the texts I am investigating as novels of detection are, or concern themselves closely with, these illustrated or graphic forms.

The Novel shares fundamental kinship with Comics. In Understanding Comics, Scott McCloud's basic working definition of the comics form is “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (9).<sup>71</sup> While the early Western European novel did not necessarily include illustrations (though it sometimes did), the text was often initially conceived and offered as a *serial* publication in newspapers and magazines. This serial heritage is remarked in the chapters and episodes upon which most novels still depend to reinforce “narrative pull.” These chapters and episodes are no more or less than the frames employed by comics to demand reader participation (and thus maintain reader investment) in that leap from drawn scene to scene. The spaces between novel chapters are the “gutters”—the unmarked void between comic frames by which the text provokes the reader into an imagining forward, while suspending animation, so to speak. The reader must bridge the gap herself—or stop reading. This imaginative act of “filling in the world” from partial vision is called “closure;” it is the imaginative work people do every day to survive, the work of making predictions about what one cannot see from what one can in order to choose and act.<sup>72</sup>

Taken to its extreme, this act can become synecdoche, where the part comes to figure for the whole. Synecdoche, as it operates to rigidly stereotype individuals by (often fetishized) meaning invested in a single “sensible” (usually physical) characteristic

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<sup>70</sup> Though indeed, some series' ends are marked by the death of their central detective character, I would argue that those texts become a different novel genre when they choose to kill off the detective.

<sup>71</sup> Earlier precursors to the comic strip include mediaeval illustration where “sequenced” events might appear all in the same frame/landscape. In this fascinating turn on linear ideas of history, different times get simultaneously illustrated in late medieval illustrations of the events in Genesis in the Nuremberg Chronicles. In the scene depicting the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, both cause and effect appear in the same landscape (John Henry Nash, ix). In another scene of the building of Noah's ark, the construction goes on next to the completed ship over which which the dove has already appeared (Ibid. xvii).

<sup>72</sup> My definition of closure here is indebted to McCloud's very clear explanation of this everyday fantastic phenomenon whereby the “fragmented and incomplete” world one's senses reveal is nevertheless perceived as whole (62-3).

(apparently) shared by a group—she is a *cunt*, he is a *dick*, they are farm *hands*—is a potentially limiting and destructive reification of “closure.” Yet, when mobilized, this closure is the imaginative work, the continual creation of perceptual knowledge one must do to avoid catatonia. A comics form draws on this everyday imaginative work we all do. Frames thus make for “a medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion” (65). In its serial nature, the novel then fits a good part of McCloud’s working definition of comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence.” For indeed McCloud includes text as “other images” (8).<sup>73</sup>

Both words and cartoons function iconically. And while the traditional novel (and especially the contemporary one) is rarely illustrated (with pictorial images) to any significant degree, it is nothing if not deliberately sequenced textual imagery or iconics, however de-picted through words. In the novel, framing has become less visible; it is virtually unmarked these days. Even when chapters are clearly delineated, today the text is (usually) obtained all of a piece, rather than week by week. Though reader participation cannot be entirely annulled in any reading, it has, in the novel, become unremarkable, as the text seems to assume total control over the world it has created as well as over the ride it offers within that world. Coupled with the foreclosed narrative of the detective genre that unfixes the novel’s linear trail and illusion of openness, a reading of these three novels through the strategies of the related medium of comics reveals a powerful strategy of writing violation from the margins, and even from the gutters, where violence is indeed an “inescapable horizon.”

Starting with the ways in which the “obviously” comics medium of Spiegelman’s Maus makes use of and deconstructs the novel, I then read Cruddy and A Visitation of Spirits as employing some of the same strategies as comics in spelling violation: foregrounding and challenging “the frame” (and revealing the gutter that accompanies it),

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<sup>73</sup> McCloud differentiates between comics and pure text, but he also uses pure text at times to illustrate both closure and iconics, strategies central to comics. See, for example, his discussion on page 46 that relies entirely on text to make his strongest point about closure.

materially containing and pressurizing text and violence for particular detection, and finally demanding reader participation through iconics and closure.

### MAUS UND MAN: ART SPIEGELMAN'S MAUS

I begin this discussion with Art Spiegelman's Maus: A Survivor's Tale. This text is, of these three texts, the one most firmly lodged in the form of comics. Easily recognizable as comics, as McCloud's "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence," it progresses box frame by box frame, text and illustration operating in full view together to "tell a story." Because it situates itself fully in this artistic medium, this text is a helpful place to begin to explore the ways in which strategies of comic art can operate to both draw and spell violation—strategies I will then explore in texts that are not as recognizable as comics.



Figure 2: "About Auschwitz" Maus Volume I: page 88

The world should stop.

(It doesn't stop.)

The world should stop.

(It doesn't stop.)

The world should stop.

(It doesn't stop.)

Frame. By. Frame. It. Jerks. Ahead. Anyway. It. Can. The narrator of Maus takes the macro-political, macro-historical context of the WWII massacre of millions and millions of people—primarily Jews—and telescopes it to a micro level in small comic strip drawings of his father-the-maus' recounting of WW II experiences as a Polish Jew. The artist/narrator's reactions and interactions with his father's story telling are integrated with—and sometimes bleed into—the narrative of the past and vice versa. The text is descriptive of some that survived WWII and its aftermath into the present day—and of some that did not. With its human-as-animal characters, this tale en-tails survival.

Indeed, in a homonymic pun on the tails of mice, the two volume narrative is subtitled “A Survivor's Tale.” Not only a tale of a Polish Jewish father's survival of the violence of WWII, this is as well the tale of the son's survival of the damage done to his parents in that violence. On the one hand, survival is certain in this text—the very telling depends on the foregone survival of both the narrator's parents to conceive him, and at least one to tell the tale of WWII to him when he is of an age to hear and remember it. Though from the beginning of the text, the father faces his impending death from myriad physical health problems, physical survival is never really the central question. Indeed, survival is closely questioned as being simply a matter of physics. Some twenty years after WWII, the artist/narrator's depressive mother suicides. His father seems “damaged” in his abilities to relate to people. He obsessively hoards things and money, even returning half-eaten boxes of cereal to the store for his cash back. His second wife eventually leaves him. He oppressively heaps guilt upon his son.

The artist/narrator's own physical and psychic survival are related and, at times, seem tenuous. In the first volume, he describes his own earlier mental illness and attempted suicide. In the second volume, facing the public and commercial success of the first volume of his father's tale re-told, the pictorial character of the artist/narrator seems to literally/literarily destabilize:



**Figure 3: “Time Flies” *Maus II*: 41**

In this scene, the character of the artist/narrator, who has, up to this point, drawn himself as an unequivocal mouse along with all the other Jews in the tale, now draws himself as a human in a mouse mask. A narrative imposter, fronting the father's tale, he offers details of the critical acclaim he is receiving—together with other important, but seemingly disconnected life events: the pregnancy of his wife, his father's death from congestive heart failure, his mother's suicide, and the gassing of hundreds of thousands of Jews in Auschwitz. The text of each of these life and death events is encased and separated in comic bubble after bubble that float leadenly above the pile of naked and emaciated bodies of WWII maus-victims that sprawl across the double-wide frame at the base of the artist and his work desk. Facing the success he has built upon this pile of

bodies, the artist/narrator says (comically), “Lately I’ve been feeling depressed.”<sup>74</sup> The particular significance of the narrator is threatened by the violent enormity of the tale and its telling. Particular and partial perspective is threatened and so is the linguistic survival of the teller. As the narrator/artist faces his own complicity in violence that is implicit in the very act of telling, it becomes clear that one cannot “tell” outside a history and present economy of violence (the narrative that would pretend to do so, being inherently and doubly violent). The telling itself materializes as a threat to both tale and teller.

In these box frames, containment of violence through time frames is eroding, threatening the comic text with the contamination of “reality.” This section is titled “Auschwitz” where the previous section was “Mauschwitz,” indicating some loss of the comic form to “reality.” Subtitled “Time Flies,” in this section’s opening scene, the flies of time defy linearity. They are buzzing about the narrator artist’s head, about the pile of bodies, reminding him of the violence upon which he seems to have built himself as a successful artist and author.<sup>75</sup> Resisting commercialism, committed to the form in which he chooses to “tell,” he refuses to authorize a TV special or movie; but after the flies, and this suggestion of the camera, the reader is primed for doubled meaning when a voice calls from outside the bottom right side of the frame containing the pile of bodies, “Alright Mr. Spiegelman... We’re ready to shoot!” Literally, this snippet of text refers to filming for an interview, but in the field of comic narrative, the commercialization of his father’s story has materially violent effects; destabilizing the artist/narrator’s sense of authority and shrinking (“de/pressing”) him into a small child wearing a mouse mask. Danger shadows the telling as outside his (New York City) window stands a death camp watchtower and barbed wire fence. One reporter asks, “Could you tell our audience if

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<sup>74</sup> In the novel as a whole, the narrator/son’s comments *external* to his father’s telling and to scenes that depict the relationship of the father and son during that telling are lettered in a conventional mix of upper and lowercase; the *internal* narrative is lettered entirely in uppercase, with emphasis on specific words marked in bold. Though these differences may serve to mark the “real” vs. the “tale,” because they function mainly to separate the internal and external narratives, I have chosen, for readability, to cite the text in conventional lettering throughout my discussion.

<sup>75</sup> These “flies of time” are of coincident (but significant) relation to the flies in Barry’s *Cruddy*, which begins with a quote from a poem by Francesco Redi (the seventeenth century scientist who “disproved” the popular idea of “spontaneous generation” by way of an experiment with rotting meat and flies) and later includes a description of the flies that appear on the body after death.

drawing Maus was cathartic? Do you feel better now?" (42). He answers only "WAH!" For rather than being cathartic, the telling is making him mentally ill, undoing his very image of himself even as it "makes" him.

Thus as *Maus* offers up questions of survival, the definition of the term itself becomes unstable. When a psychiatrist calls the artist/narrator "the real survivor," it is difficult to know what that means. Does the therapist name the artist/narrator the survivor because he never had to face the camps, or because, relative to his father's obsessiveness, he is fairly healthy psychologically? Or is he "the real survivor" because he is surviving the hearing/telling of the father's tale? Or does he survive *by way of* the hearing/telling? In any case, a significant part of the back-drop (or foredrop) to the historical "tale" of survival the father relates is the *ever-present* question of surviving the violent telling, psychically and physically: Will the father survive his health problems (long enough) to tell his (whole) tale? Will the narrator survive his past mental illness and attempted suicide, and current bout of depression long enough to hear the telling? Can he then survive the difficult content and delivery of that telling, entangled as it is with his father's "difficultness?" Can he himself survive the re-telling he does—the embodiment of the violent tale in his own book with its violently experienced dis-semination?

That psychic survival seems to be bound up in physical survival is emphasized by the medium of comics. In its cartoon tangibility, comics is neither the realistic photo nor the film into which the gazer's act of gazing, her perspectival "eye," disappears. Nor is it the transparency of text "through" which we read the tale. The comics medium is not merely vehicle, but calls attention to itself, to the tale and the telling as material. And so, the comics tale enters itself into recorded history as event. It does so by way of an interplay and tension between words and pictures that recursively cast and re-cast each other and the telling, by the explicit framing of each scene, and finally by the demand for and revelation of reader participation that both iconics and framing make. For while it may seem counterintuitive to identify more fully with the abstract stereotype of an icon or cartoon than with a "realistic" representation, in the intense closure such abstraction (vacuum, really) requires, the reader becomes (must become in order to follow) far more

heavily invested in comics than in the realistic scene that fills in all the blanks for her. Comprehensive “realism” makes the sturdy claim, “You are definitely NOT here.” The interplay of imagery and narration, of framing, iconics, and reader participation—none of these are strategies unique to comics. But in comics these practices are *explicit* as practices, so that, even as the story (content) of survival comes through, the survival of the telling itself—and the reader’s investment therein—is made material.

In Maus the effects of the comic frame also materialize the particularity of the telling. Comics’ frames slow the narrative to a jerky advance that—together with the animal-human characters who then sometimes appear masked again as other creatures—never quite allows the reader to be “lost” in the text, while simultaneously demanding her participation therein. Awareness of representation in the Brechtian sense creates an inability to “settle in” to the story. The side by side narrations of “Then” and “Now” function similarly to jerk the reader in and out of the narratives; again, not allowing the comfort of a continuous narrative—a comfort present even in traditional tales of horror. The irritation of one narrative time line with or against another refuses a transparently immersive story telling that would let these narratives rest as “tales.”<sup>76</sup> To move between pictorial and narrative time frames, she must bridge the gaps with her own sensory imagination, must actively participate in “closure” of the narrative. And as I will later discuss, in terms of the iconics of “cartoon,” this effort of closure always operates in explicit excess of the given narrative—the reader remains.

Even the advance and construction of the frames is sometimes irregular, implying that the narrative cannot always control the content. The teller is not all-powerful. “Things” are often escaping the comic frame, with the effect of making the text/image more material/opaque/tangible—and uncontainable by one frame or perspective. Consider: the map of Poland that overlays several narrative frames (I:60); the official tickets that litter and overlay story frames (I:15); the “Prisoner from Hell” comic strip within a strip held at the edges of the frame by life-size drawn fingers overlapping the text (I:100-3); the magnification of a louse, centered and partially obscuring the framed

drawings/story (II:91); and the comics photos of friends and relatives that the frames shed and flake into piles on the bottom of the page, as if affected by (the) gravity of the tale (II:114-5). These latter “photos,” cartoon portraits falling dead to the ground, framed and “shot” by the cartoon camera, parallel the perception of complicity felt by the artist/narrator who earlier in the volume draws up(and)on the bodies piled at his feet. And, in comics form, these are piles the reader must “close” upon in complicity as well.

Maus makes continual use of reader closure through frames and cartoons in ways that make the reader deeply complicit in the terrible violence of WWII Europe for Jews and other minorities. In the following frames, in order to make sense of and move from one frame to the next, the reader sometimes must kill the victims all over again in her imagination.

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<sup>76</sup> This is a different use of the word “immersive” than Joseph Cady uses in his discussion of immersive AIDS literature.

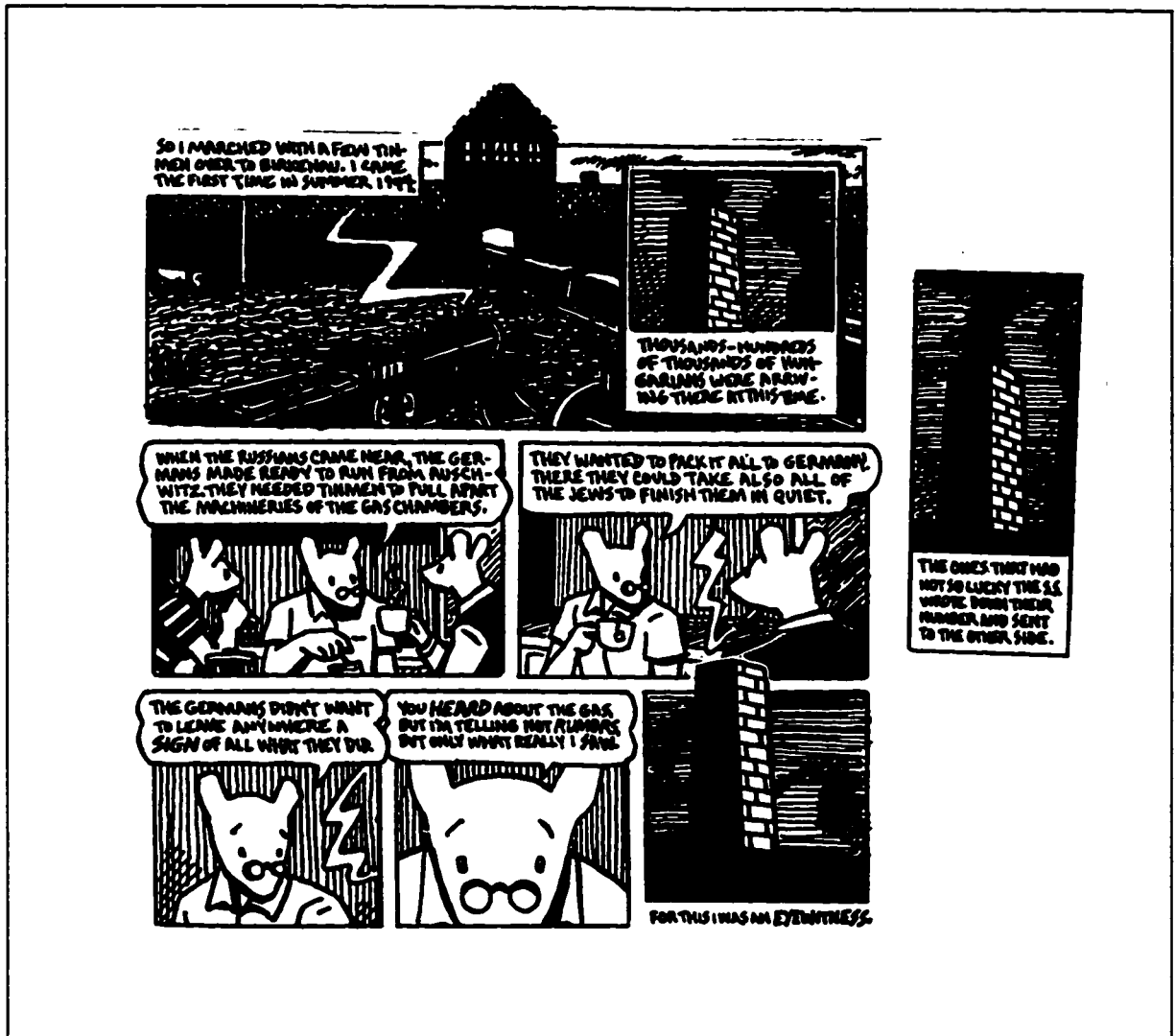


Figure 4: "Smokestacks" *Maus II*: 55, 58, 69

This is at once a depiction of the father's own witness. He says, "You heard about the gas, but I'm telling not rumors but only what I really saw./For this I was an eyewitness." He was an "eyewitness" of smoke, of crematoriums finally empty. And the way in which the artist/narrator's own cigarette smoke hovers above the chimney in the last frames here underscores his complicity in this violence that the telling materializes. But, at the same time, by refusing to "pretend" witness to unseen violence, by either father or son, these frames also figure the ways in which violence cannot, finally, be "really" re-presented. The reader never "sees," and can never see, people gassed and cremated in these buildings—it already happened behind the closed doors and brick walls under the

smokestacks depicted in these frames. She must use her own particular knowledge of history to close on this image of violence, to effect what McCloud calls the “blood in the gutters” (60-93). As the comic frame creates the comic gutters, it invokes the reader-murderer, collaborator to/with the unspeakable.

In addition to unsettling the narrative and invoking reader investment and complicity in closure, the changes in framing show how narrative itself is a continual process of collaboration with a reader. And as a dynamic process it offers a force of change in shaping narrative content. In friction, past and present narratives affect each other, so that while the violent horizon of WWII for the father remains the ground of the tale, the telling shifts, takes different paths through that ground. As narrative and reader wander around these grounds of historical violence (moving through daily events of the present, through the banter between father and son and their moods while together, and in and among the questions and answers shaped by these interactions) the power of the present narrative to shape historical narrative is made plain. The creative process of constructing partial perspectives is powerfully explicit and—almost—constant.

This partiality is critical to effectively spelling violation. For if violence is the horizon, requiring that to tell at all we must enter into a kind of violent economy, some violations nevertheless “count,” or hurt, more than others, depending on the particularity of positioning.<sup>77</sup> Indeed when that particularity is entirely refused, when nothing is relative because only one vision prevails, then we enter the total violence akin to that which Giorgio Agamben explores in his essay “The Camp as Nomos of the Modern.” In the space of “the camp,” the exception becomes the rule because vision is constructed as totally singular.<sup>78</sup> He writes, “*The camp is the space which is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule...* The camp is thus the structure in which the state of

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<sup>77</sup> See Hent deVries discussion of Levinas’ and Derrida’s views on violence as he articulates just such a (theoretical) economy of violence in “Testimony and Violence.”

<sup>78</sup> I know singularity has been used to theoretically discuss an utter particularity. I find this use somewhat problematic for its easy slide into relativism. And so I use the term “totally singular” in contrast to “particular and partial” when speaking of vision in this chapter to address how not only is the dominant view omniscient (seeing everything) but it is a single view that excludes all others. It is a view that can be the “one way” to see things and also be the omniscient view that pretends to be “just one.” Thus in this

exception—on whose possible decision sovereign power is founded—is realized *normally*” (109) and,

the camp is the new, hidden regulator of the inscription of life in the order—or, rather, the sign of the system’s inability to function without being transformed into lethal machine... The state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of order, now becomes a new and stable arrangement inhabited by the bare life that more and more can no longer be inscribed in that order... To an order without localization (the state of exception, in which law is suspended) there now corresponds a localization without order (the camp as permanent space of exception). The political system no longer orders forms of life and juridical rules in a determinate space, but instead contains at its very center a *dislocating localization* which exceeds it and into which every form of life can virtually be taken. The camp as dislocating localization is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living... (114)

When this notion of the space of the camps is brought to bear specifically on narrative (not a hard conceptual transfer given Agamben’s own use of the terms sign, inscription and order), the traditional novel can be read as potentially encompassing both an “order without localization”—the prescribed and linear path to a certain ending; and “localization without order”—the omniscient pretense of realistic (local) description. Agamben himself generalizes this condition as the “nomos of the modern” but indeed, it is not a “nomos” equally experienced by all “forms of life” at the level of “bare life.” The order of exceptions is not so disorganized. Part of the power of “the camps,” and of narratives of the enlightenment, is that in them the violence they *particularly* bring to bear on *particular* bodies is hidden by their own narratives of total “exception.” Such narratives of exception, of “localization without order” (where all things are relative), refuse inscription of partiality and so also refuse responsibility for particularly shaped violences. The more marginal the teller, the more violent the “machine’s” effects as she tries to “tell,” or, “inscribe” her particular partial shape. Under such conditions, the partial telling is utterly dispersed. On the flip side (of the same camp), “order without localization” is the (pretended) absolutely rational narrative that has become the norm, an “order” justified of total exception wherein the particular violence—again—cannot be

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term totally singular. I am trying to bring together the two extremes of total vision that Haraway discusses

“inscribed.”<sup>79</sup> Only one voice speaks and can be spoken. There is no way to materialize differentials of power and violence. While Agamben here traces the historical roots of “the camp” to WWII Nazi camps, I find the camps, and in many ways the novel form, to both be extensions of Enlightenment rule, where the “law” (violently) obscures its own violent particularity, and functions in some congruence with the “camp” as “the hidden regulator of the inscription of life in the order.”

Indeed, cartoons as stereotypes would seem to totalize, creating “order without localization.” They certainly run the risk of totalizing when read as a synecdochal evocation of the “real.” Cartoons are figures we close on, that in turn underdetermine and over-determine particular subjects. But they also *explicitly* (rather than transparently) figure the “real” in material iconics, in (mostly) empty and fantastic form. The artist/narrator of Maus worries about the stereotypes in his text, questioning his own portrayal of his father’s “stereotypically Jewish” behaviors (I: 131-2) and wondering if comics are in fact “inadequate” to portray his father’s tale (II: 16). And Spiegelman’s choice of animals used to portray different groups in Maus can be critiqued as a reinscription of violent stereotyping that is as harsh as the camps’ erasure of individuals with numbers: “They took from us our names. And they put a number” (II: 26). The reporters who come to interview the artist/narrator in volume II after the success of volume I prod him on just such grounds (II: 42). The stereotype of Jews as passive and cowardly would seem to be reinforced by their portrayal as mice. Likewise, drawing the Germans as cats who prey on mice without conscience, and the Americans as dogs who are friendly, but essentially dumb—and not much kinder to mice than the cats they chased away—would seem to reify the stereotypes that have underwritten systematic material violence and hatred. And yet, by portraying groups as cartoon stereotypes, each time individual characters act in a manner contrary to or in excess of their animal shape, it becomes startling. In addition, as is the case with science fiction’s use of alien settings for human beings, alien, or “other” constructions, allow more “space” for handling of

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when she calls “relativism the perfect twin of totalization” (Simians 191).

<sup>79</sup> This is Blake’s problem with the reigning portraiture of his time, where “minute particulars” were entirely lost in the “ideal” figuration of the human body.

“hot” or difficult material.<sup>80</sup> Finally, “real” depiction, in its total dispersal of all “typing” operates as much to randomize particularly as do the tattooed camp numbers. Indeed, with more effectiveness than a portrayal of every character as an “individual” and “realistic” human—a depiction that cannot account for the profound violence that is occurring through construction of stereotyped “groups”—the cartoon animals in Maus can function to multiply critique the potential violence of stereotypes they draw (upon).

In addition to a critique of stereotype, the cartoon can offer a stronger sense of reader identification with particular characters than can “realistic” depiction (McCloud 36-7). The cartoon, as icon, as vacuum, invites and even demands reader closeness and participation: the reader *must* imagine what (more) is there. And, the more iconic a face is, the more the reader can and does bring of herself to a reading of that face. Using drawings, McCloud makes a strong argument for the ways in which the more “realistic” a drawing is, the further the reader can/does distance herself from it. Certainly, the more “realistic” a face is, the more the reader is sure it isn't her. “Reality” is (really) resistant to particular reader participation.<sup>81</sup> Though the characters in Maus are remarkably similar to each other (both as they are drawn, and as their speech—even—is drawn and so “sounds”), the reader nevertheless makes all kinds of distinctions between them. As she draws herself further into the story, she discerns particularity in full collaboration with the artist in the creation of character and plot. Entering that roomy cartoon icon the reader closes on the barest representation in particular identification. And, in her own particularity, she always exceeds the cartoon lines.<sup>82</sup> Injecting herself in/with the stereotype of the nearly identical cartoon mice, working to “close” (with) the story of these Jews/mice, there is excess in the particularity (of context and presence as well of history) that the reader brings to this tale of history. There, in that discontinuity and

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<sup>80</sup> Of course science fiction is another genre that is closely aligned with comics.

<sup>81</sup> In fact, I think “reality TV” shows actually function iconically, each “real” character becoming a cartoon to figure and hold the viewer's particular investment.

<sup>82</sup> This is the overdetermination of all articulation that some theorists figure as violent, but which could (even and also and/or) be felt as over-fullness, as an erotic friction productive of want and/or pleasure. That violence adheres even there, I will grant, but it is not, necessarily originary to overdetermination, but a secondary effect—a spectral effect of socio-political material violence. And the production of want is NOT

excess, the reader constitutes herself as (co) creator. There is enough re-cognition to “close” in identification and enough of a mis-match around which to emanate a linguistically figured particularity. Thus in and around the face (and the tail) of the mouse—one effects the “reader corona.”

In Maus cartoon characters, even and especially as stereotypes, intensify reader engagement and complicity in the particular violence of this tale. Judith Butler states that the interpellative power of (even) the “injurious” (stereotyping) call to the individual constructs linguistic agency, and in fact does so in the very foreclosure of that call. I am here extending that notion to theorize that in cartoon terms, at that iconic (even violently stereotypical) call one is revealed to herself—even to others—in particularity. For at the very edges of that interpellation one exceeds that call/cartoon, *in particularity*.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, in the very “agency,” or “potential for articulation” that is the “side-effect” of foreclosure, one exceeds the injurious call that figures the one called as inarticulate. For, the call, or the cartoon, would not be felt as injurious if it fully matched—or could fully construct—the personage interpellated—nor if it fully mis-matched. Indeed, the call/cartoon would not even have been heard/said, were it not preceded by the excess it *tries to re-capture* in stereotype.<sup>84</sup> Thus when the narrator of Maus worries that he is describing his father as a stereotype of the stingy, neurotic Jew, he worries precisely because of the ways in which his father exceeds that sounding—even as it also constructs him. That the cartoon, as icon, is a tool with which to figure a particularity that is only recognizable by and at its iconic edges, shows how the call (how language) can, injurious or not, actually offer a strategy by which to reveal the shapes of particularity. Bound in

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the same as violence, even as capitalism would construct the consumer that goes in “want” of the commodity as being in an unprivileged, and yes, even violated state of existence.

<sup>83</sup> As in an earlier footnote I differentiated between my uses of singularity and particularity, for the purposes of my argument, it is important as well to distinguish between “individual” and “particularity.” The first term invokes a sense of self-determination which is at the very heart of the enlightened idea of controlled and open-ended progress that I see these writers as critiquing in their writing of violence. Particularity instead speaks to the context, the nexus of relations or forces or matters in which one finds oneself. Individuality focuses on and implies a control and choice of novel materials in the making/telling, whereas particularity centers in positioning, in visioning and telling the matters at hand.

<sup>84</sup> De Certeau’s discussion of the French student uprisings in the Spring of 1968 takes up this matter of capture and re-capture of (and through) speech in a very grounded way. See his essays in The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings.

the injurious call, in the violence of a linguistic construction in the margins, the particular (disfigured and unvoiced) body swells and wriggles.

Importantly, Maus does not rest in regularized cartoon. Just as irregular use of frames keeps the very act of framing at the surface of this tale (and so refuses any naturalization of perspective), cartoon characters do not appear with entirely regular (predictable) shapes or body boundaries.<sup>85</sup> In Maus the cartoon is, at times, unstable: humans are masked as animals, humans are animals, human-animals appear masked as other animals, and tails appear and disappear.<sup>86</sup> Matter is tangible but its borders are changeable. Indeed, when more “human” figures erupt into the text (the “real” photos of family, the “realistic” drawing of the masked human figure of the artist), the reader is shocked by the degree to which she is suddenly distanced from the lives of cartoon characters she has been collaboratively creative of and participant in (I: 100; II: 5, 41, 134). A comics medium, as it plays to directly to vision (and to the other senses through vision), can more explicitly field the sensual boundaries of the tale than the entirely worded novel.<sup>87</sup> Creativity itself is perceived as “real” (really material). In turn, the realistic photo or drawing, in its unexpected appearance, no longer automatically escapes (enters) the reader as “real.”

The momentary appearance of a photo also intensifies foreclosure. Against the ongoing and explicit work the reader is doing to create the tale alongside the comic artist, the appearance of a “real” photo throws the reader participant outside “historical reality” itself, in fact re-marking upon her very lack of power there. The photo raises the specter

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<sup>85</sup> This “strategic de-regulation of the frame” is in some ways similar to Spivak’s concept of strategic essentialism: Spiegelman “chooses” at times to invoke “reality” through photos, or through a photorealistic/novelistic bleeding of the landscape to the very edges of sight (thereby totalizing vision) in order to ghost “realist” perspectives of material violence that so totalize. However, I have difficulty using the term “essentialism” to describe this strategy, tied as it is to a larger discussion/contestation of “essentialism” for which I do not have space here. Suffice it to say that taken only at face value (so to speak), “strategic essentialism” exists only oxymoronically, in impossible relation. But as Spivak “deploys” the term, essentialism is thereby overturned in its fixity to become a question of perspective and particular positioning—the very strategies of sensibility the writers with whom I am here concerned explore in writing violence (“Three Women’s Texts”).

<sup>86</sup> Okay—I know humans really ARE animals in scientific nomenclature. Nevertheless, in literature, a division between humans and other animals is still the norm upon which much literary device work depends.

<sup>87</sup> See McCloud’s discussion of how other senses are evoked through vision (118-137).

of the ways in which the text (and so the reader-collaborator) is ghosted by material (“real”) survival-as-lottery—whether or not we survive the *telling* of it. The inclusion of “realism” raises anxiety over the telling process, calling into question not only the reader’s control over the content within the frame, but also the artist/author’s control over the framing itself. The particularity of the “realistic” photo, or of the destabilized narrator, reveals how, when faced with a very particular body, total control of the tale is an illusion preserved in the traditional form of the novel. Narrative power is thereby shown as a matter of particular positioning—the positioning of particular matter. The importance of the body’s particular constitution as “real,” in relation to the telling, *surfaces* in the matter of the narrator’s mother’s tale/tail.

In the following frame, the two “parent” mice walk down the street (in the past), as the father tells his son (in the present), of how much more difficult it had been to hide his wife’s Jewishness than his own.



Figure 5: “The Mother Tail” *Maus I*: 136-7

The father says, “I was a little safe. I had a coat and boots, so like a Gestapo wore when he was not in service. But Anja-her appearance-you could see more easy she was Jewish. I was afraid for her.” The illustration comments on the wife’s appearance, “you could see more easy she was Jewish,” by giving her a long tail. The father’s tail is not visible. It may be that the wife “really” “looks” more Jewish. But her gender also limits her disguise. She cannot easily pass as a member of the all-male Gestapo.

Though the text here comments only on the quandary of “looking Jewish,” through the interplay of text and illustration, the comics form reveals an intersection of the oppression of women and minorities that is re-marked in and through the body. Both femaleness and Jewishness are linguistically constituted as physical. And, where everything so materially constituted operates in a marginal relation to the immaterial “symbolic order,” their tales *tail* them. Reading just a little further into the wife’s “tail,” this illustration is a marvelous joke on the quandary of women as marked bodies. For men do indeed have “tails,” so to speak, but because of the constructed “size” (read “power”) of their tails they can actually render those big tails and their embodiedness invisible, and stride forth only as their icons— iconically clad in “coat and boots,” or “words” (symbols). Women, on the other hand, who do not have “tails,” so to speak, or, whose “tails” are, indeed, very tiny by comparison, are nevertheless fully “tailed” as they sally forth, “marked” in their (deeply entailed) bodies.

And so, by way of comics, the narrative shows how at times the very constitution/interpellation of “the tail” obscures the desire of she who would tell it. For not only has the artist/narrator’s mother committed suicide by the time the son is ready to hear the tale of WWII, but the father has also burned the journals in which she had detailed (ouch!) her own story of WWII and the camps.

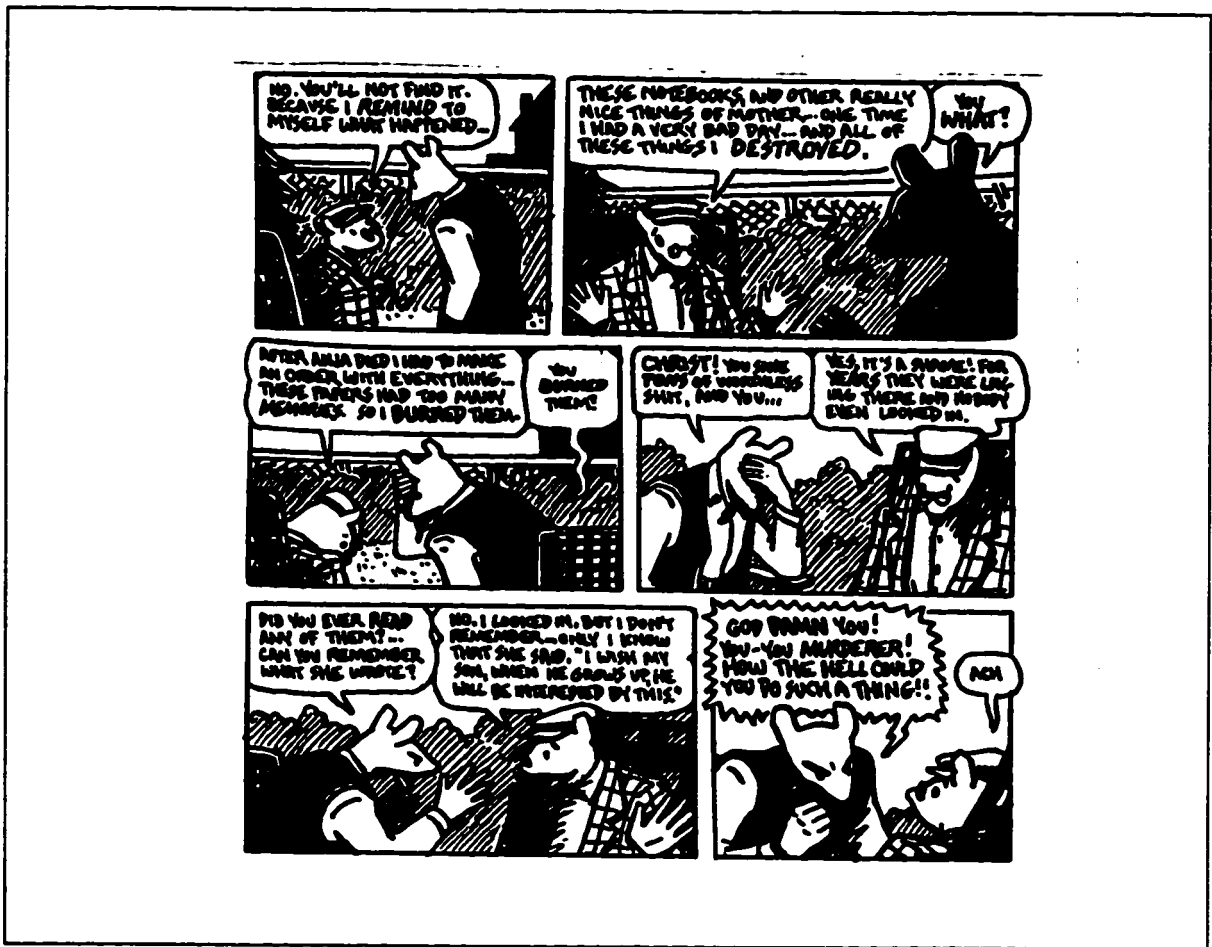
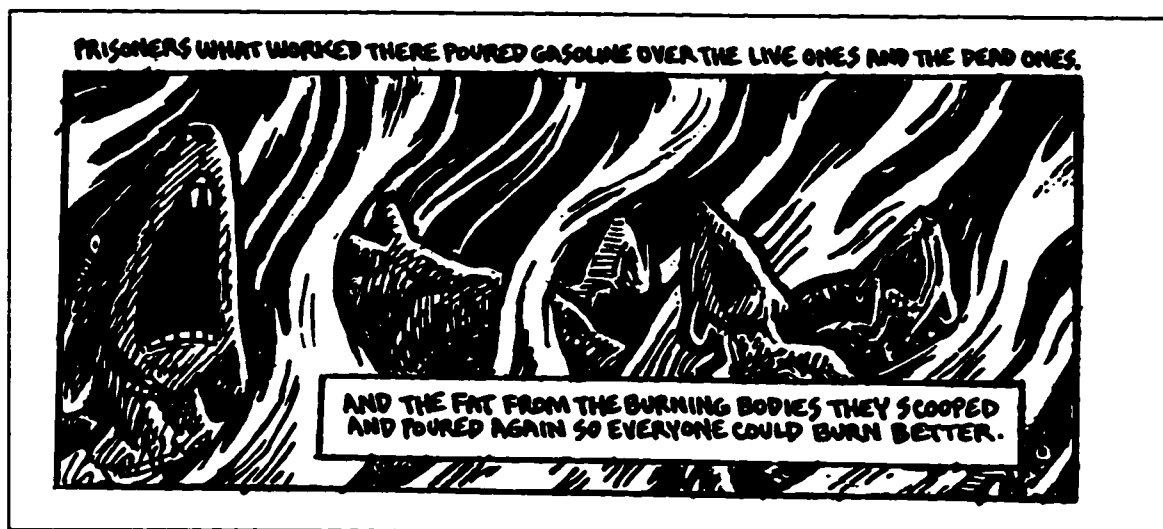


Figure 6: "Burned Notebooks" *Maus I*: 158-9

Insofar as the artist/narrator has access only to this fully "tailed" mother, and not to the mother who tells (who tails and de-tails), such a tangible burning of the mother's tale, materially re-marks the violence of the father's own story-telling, illuminating the ways in which, even as he details terrible suffering of people (many of whom were burned to death), he violently sears from the frame, de-tale-ing, the story of another.<sup>88</sup>

The anguish of such a burning is echoed pictorially in the second volume in a vivid and horrible frame depicting the immolation of living people in pits when there were too many for the gas chambers—a scene described to the father by a fellow prisoner.

<sup>88</sup> The irony of the narrative's subtitle "A Survivor's Tale" cuts deeply as indeed the mouse with the "visible" tail is lost to "history" and the mouse with the invisible tail still tells.



**Figure 7: “Burning Bodies” *Maus II*: 72**

The violence of this physical burning is closely tied to linguistic violence by the open and screaming mouths of those being burned, emphasizing not only the ineffectiveness of their voices in achieving material survival but also the destruction of their voices along with their bodies. These ghost voices, silenced then by fire, and now by illustration, are heard now only at the edges of their violent silencing, and then only as horrific and sublime noise. Marked only in inarticulation, their voices remain insensible.

The horror of this telling burning haunts both author and artist/narrator. For interestingly, where similarly horrific mass violence such as the gassing of people in the camps is primarily left to (demanded of) the reader through closure in the gutters—between frames of smokestacks, or in diagrams, or in the cavernous interiors of now-empty facilities—the scene of burning people is explicitly, pictorially shown, intensifying a sense of particular authorial investment in these parallel burnings, linguistic and physical. A close up of a portion of this (unwitnessed) frame even opens this chapter “Auschwitz: Time Flies.” Here the author uncharacteristically seeks total control over the tale of the burning, visually and in words. This is a control he cedes to reader closure in the case of most of the material violence detailed in the father’s narrative, for the father himself directly witnessed neither gassings nor burnings, and, the author sticks pretty closely to illustrating just what his father has witnessed. Hearsay is

(usually) passed on only in text.<sup>89</sup> Notably, the author himself closes tightly on the violence of this burning; it serves as an inscription of the connection between the concomitant violence against tailed bodies *and* their tales.<sup>90</sup>

The burning of the mother's journals by the father strikes to the core of questions of the violence of articulation and inarticulation from the margins. Physical violence against the bodies in the camps that is justified in a de-particularization of individuals mirrors how the linguistic constitution of someone as physically tailed entails the destruction of a person's "tale" (the tale that is indeed their de-tailing). Thus destroyed altogether is the possibility of a person's survival as a particularly embodied teller. Particularity in and at the edges of the iconic telling is the only thing that *can* simultaneously constitute the teller and mark the violence of that very constitution. And so, at the very end of volume I, after learning of the father's destruction of the mother's journals, the narrator calls his own father a "murderer," linking together the father's story of the camps, the mother's later suicide, and the destruction of her story in a complex detection of the violence this tale entails.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> The difference might be in part because one violence took place behind (necessarily) closed doors, and the other in full view "outside." But even this "difference" reinscribes the ubiquity of violence in the camps, where inside or outside, there is no protection. Articulation and inarticulation ghost each other, violence being the common landscape whether hidden from sight and sound or hidden in(the)visible.

<sup>90</sup> Another instance in which the "unwitnessed" begins to surface in depiction is when the father describes the Nazis' killing of small children by swinging them against walls. The father's verbal text in this instance partially obscures these depictions but they—even unwitnessed—exceed the text. As is the case with the scene of immolation, this depiction of the unwitnessed nevertheless is depicted because it carries material and emotional content parallel to what *was* witnessed. For on the opposite page the reader learns of the death of the father's first (polish-born) son by poisoning when a relative kills herself and the children in her care rather than go with the Nazis. This latter death, also only hearsay, is not directly shown; the scene on the previous page holds open the space for that unwitnessed violence in an even more "real" way than its direct depiction could. For the Nazis were surely responsible for the boy's death, even as they never touched him (I:108-9).

<sup>91</sup> This ending to Volume I also foreshadows the artist/narrator's own (narrative) undoing by the father that occurs in the final frames of Volume II.



**Figure 8: “Murderer” *Maus* I: 159**

As deeply disturbed as her son is by this destruction of her journals, in that he only has access to the fully “tailed” (father-tailed) mother, the father’s act of destruction points to the inescapably violent process of tailing violation. The artist/narrator’s frustration results in part because the father’s burning of the mother’s journals mirrors the occlusion his own tale inaugurates. For, as one accumulates clues, the antecedents and detritus of violation, one materializes (mother-realizes) it, giving the violated mother a tail. But, in that revelation of material violence, one pushes the very *subject* of violence further from being herself a de-tailed, and thus powerful, teller. Violence thus adheres in its own textual constitution. This, then, is the problem (absolute violence) of the photo, and of the total vision of the traditional novel. When the artist/narrator’s mother appears in a “real” photo it becomes clear that though the cartoon can speak to and through the reader, the woman in the photograph “really” cannot (I: 99). Her physical “fact” obscures her tale.<sup>92</sup>

History as static, as a fact figured photo-realistically, is here thrust outside the comic tale, where telling is necessarily partial, iconic and thus an immanently (and/or permanently) creative process. The violence of totalizing narrative is a violence unbounding, inarticulable as tale—the violence of the fact. The subtitle of the volume in which the father comes to the gates of Auschwitz is “My Father Bleeds History.” This is a sentence descriptive of a totalizing history in which the telling subject and object told

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<sup>92</sup> That is, we could read her as cartoon, as “Photo-Woman,” only if she was first set up as unreal.

are entirely reversible. Tale and teller intertwine. Indeed, coming close on the tail end of the first volume where the father both comes to the gates of Auschwitz and the artist/narrator calls his father a “murderer” for destroying his mother’s journals, the word “bleeds” functions both actively and passively (I: 159). In a number of ways the father controls the tale he tells his son; he bleeds himself. But the father also “bleeds” his history involuntarily; it exceeds him, escapes him in all his actions and words, staining his world beyond the tale he tells to contain it. History seeps. The father here is figured as a historia/hemophiliac. And this is a bleeding in which the artist/narrator/son also engages that, like the “leeching” done by doctors to try to externalize and rid the body of the poisons with which it is infected, can weaken and even kill the patient bled. For it is the body’s containment and circulation of that (deadly) history/blood that is its very constitution. And, where self-control (determination) is in Western thought (still) figured as progressive, the subtitle reminds us that even in the limited control the father has of his tale and its telling, he himself exercises the violence therein. As he destroys (de-stories) the mother’s story, the father himself is cutting at the throat of the character called “history” even as he is figured as bleeding himself out.

Burning his wife’s journals and letters, for years trying to forget the past, the father has survived by so sharply cur-tailing (grrrrr<sup>93</sup>) the tale that he and all his family nearly ceases to exist. The extent to which he is diminished becomes clear when later, in Volume II: “And Now My Troubles Really Began,” the father and son revisit the destruction of the mother’s journals. The father explains, “All such things of the war, I tried to put out from my mind once and for all...until you **rebuild** me all this from your questions” (98). Ostensibly, the father here means simply that the son has made him remember what he has tried to forget. But the text makes use of the father’s Eastern European syntax to make memory material as the son’s “questions” “rebuild...all this,” where “this” is letters, journals, and other material texts the father associated with his WWII experience and his wife’s later death and so destroyed. In the father’s view, it is as if by destroying the physical texts, he could have truly erased his memories, and even

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<sup>93</sup> The father, after all, moves to the United States—in Maus the land of dogs.

undone the past for which those memories are placeholders. This is a past so tangible it can be created, held, and destroyed as texts. But more significantly, the father says “you *rebuild me*...from your questions,” as if in the questioning and the telling the father himself is truly re-constructed (emphasis mine).

It is a rebuilding the father dreads at times, feeling as much at risk in the telling as he seems to have been in the curtailing. For if the telling “re-builds” him and seemingly offers a less partial survival, that potentially larger, more “whole” visibility is equally risky. Visibility directly resists the specific erasure that was the neat strategy of oppression of WWII German policies and death camps, where indeed the marginal body sought to erase itself to save itself.<sup>94</sup> In the visibility newly materialized with the father’s telling, the potential danger such an appearance posed in the past comes to haunt them in the present frame. On the car trip during which the father says that his son “rebuilds” him, the father also details the violence done to a group of women who actively protested their internment in the camps. As the (present) occupants of the car converse, apparitions of these (past) women (who were executed) now hang “rebuilt”—as dead—in the trees the car passes. For the father, to make past resistance visible today is to risk undoing the containment of history in the total and static—or totally vaporized—tale, and so to raise the ghosts of the material suffering that such resistance en-tailed.

Just as the narrator son “rebuilds” his father with his questions, so in the construction of the father’s tale is the son’s own living. The above play on the father’s syntax echoes a comment the father makes in volume I when he is trying to describe the layout of a secret safe house to his son:

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<sup>94</sup> In the extreme, this entailed not only quietly hiding from Nazi attention, but suicide, as when the relative to whom the Spiegelmans have given their son for safety poisons herself and the children in her care in order to avoid capture (I: 109).

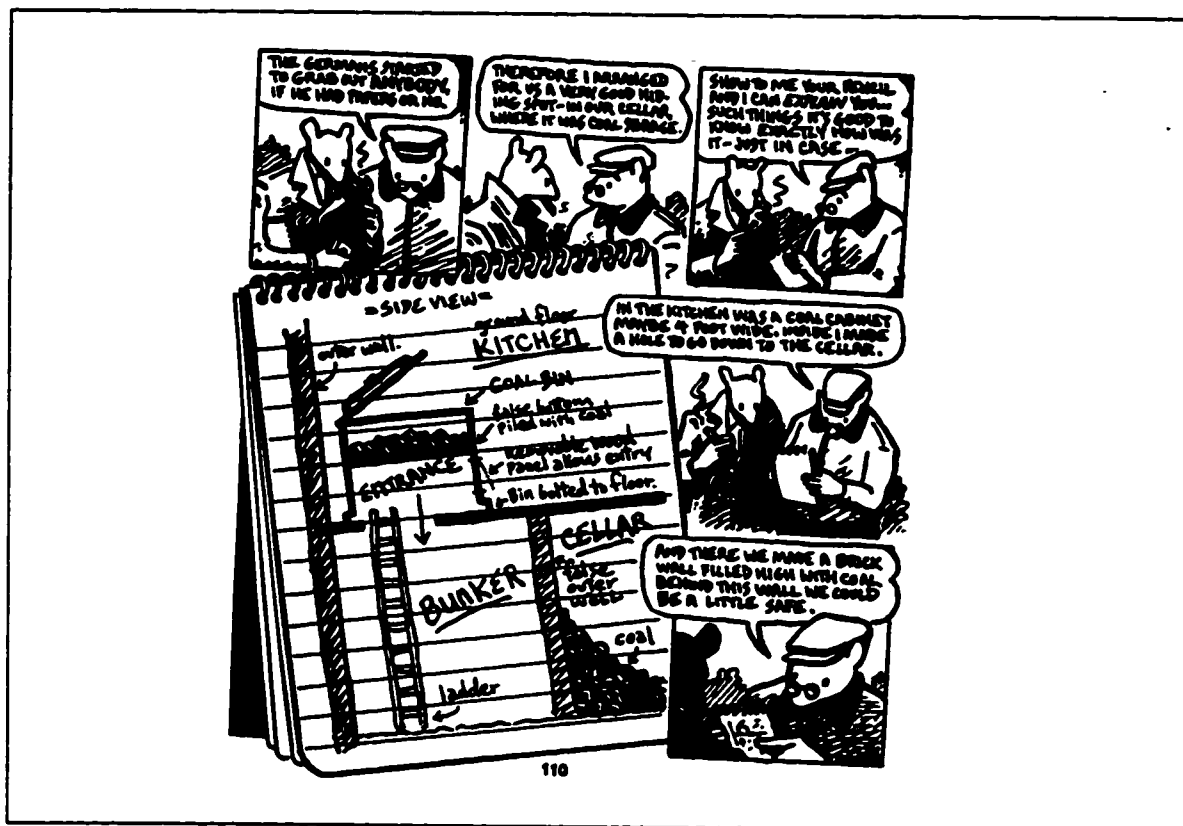


Figure 9: “Safe House” *Maus I*: 110

The father says in this frame, “Show to me your pencil and I can explain you...such things it's good to know exactly how was it—just in case...,” and then he draws a diagram of the hiding place. In this moment, he is explaining his own survival, and so also the existence of his artist/narrator son who would eventually be born as a result of that survival. In addition, the father is, with this advice, seeking to ensure his son's future by giving him a practical strategy for survival “just in case.”<sup>95</sup> And indeed, the words do play on how “the pencil” is a living for his son. Drawings are an integral part of the artist/narrator's day-to-day livelihood, and with the use of a pencil his son, “Art,” can so be constituted or “explained.” Given the power assigned by the father to the tale that can,

<sup>95</sup> See how also in Figure 9, at the bank, the father wants a key for his son to be able to “go also to my safety box.” This is his safety deposit box, but it echoes the “bunkers” of safety during the war, which after all, guaranteed no safety. This also alludes to the father's self-contained story frame which ultimately boxes out the narrator as the father shuts away his history in the “happy happy” ending.

with questions, “rebuild” one person and, with a pencil, “explain” another, it is a clever irony when the father criticizes the man whose safe house he describes. In preparation for emergency stays, the man has brought books there instead of food. When the father chastises, “Books!?! What's the matter with you? We can't eat books!” the reader is reminded that for all the ways in which words have just been shown to be constitutive, they may finally fail to sustain the body upon which they depend (I: 112).

As the narrative frames shift back and forth from past to present to past, the reader sees just how deeply each narrative time is written in the other, how each narrative is *invested* in the other, sequence bounded as much by space and human relation as by time. Through pictures, narrative time becomes an elastic landscape in which one walks around, paralleling the act of memory. As memories appear side by side with the “present narrative,” they gain currency in the continual connection and closure the reader does to move about the tale. Memory and linguistic presence are revealed as the same act, together enclosed and enclosing each other. In comics, a late twentieth century forest through which the characters drive, or a room of today in which they converse, can “really” hold the swaying bodies of Jews in Nazi Europe of the mid-century, hanging in the wind (I: 84, II: 79). Present day father and son can walk across and against the past landscape of a Jewish ghetto in Poland, as the tale of that ghetto unfolds in the present day (I: 105). The present day pair can sit next to a large rat in a basement in which the father of the past is hiding from the Nazis (I: 147). Though this mutual enclosure of past and present and even future narrative is sometimes extant in entirely worded narratives, it becomes *sensible* in the medium of comics. The “struggle to survive then and now” become materially inseparable (I: 122).

In Maus, not only does time become a space in which to wander, but so do abstract philosophy and politics. A symbology of “human” ideas becomes the very landscape through which these characters pass, in which they find themselves, and from which, unlike a particular “real” physical landscape, there is no escape. The ways in which philosophical/political narratives constitute the sensible landscape are represented

materially when the artist/narrator's parents "escape" from a Jewish ghetto in Poland but remain caught in the totality of Nazism:



Figure 10: "Swastika" *Maus I*: 125

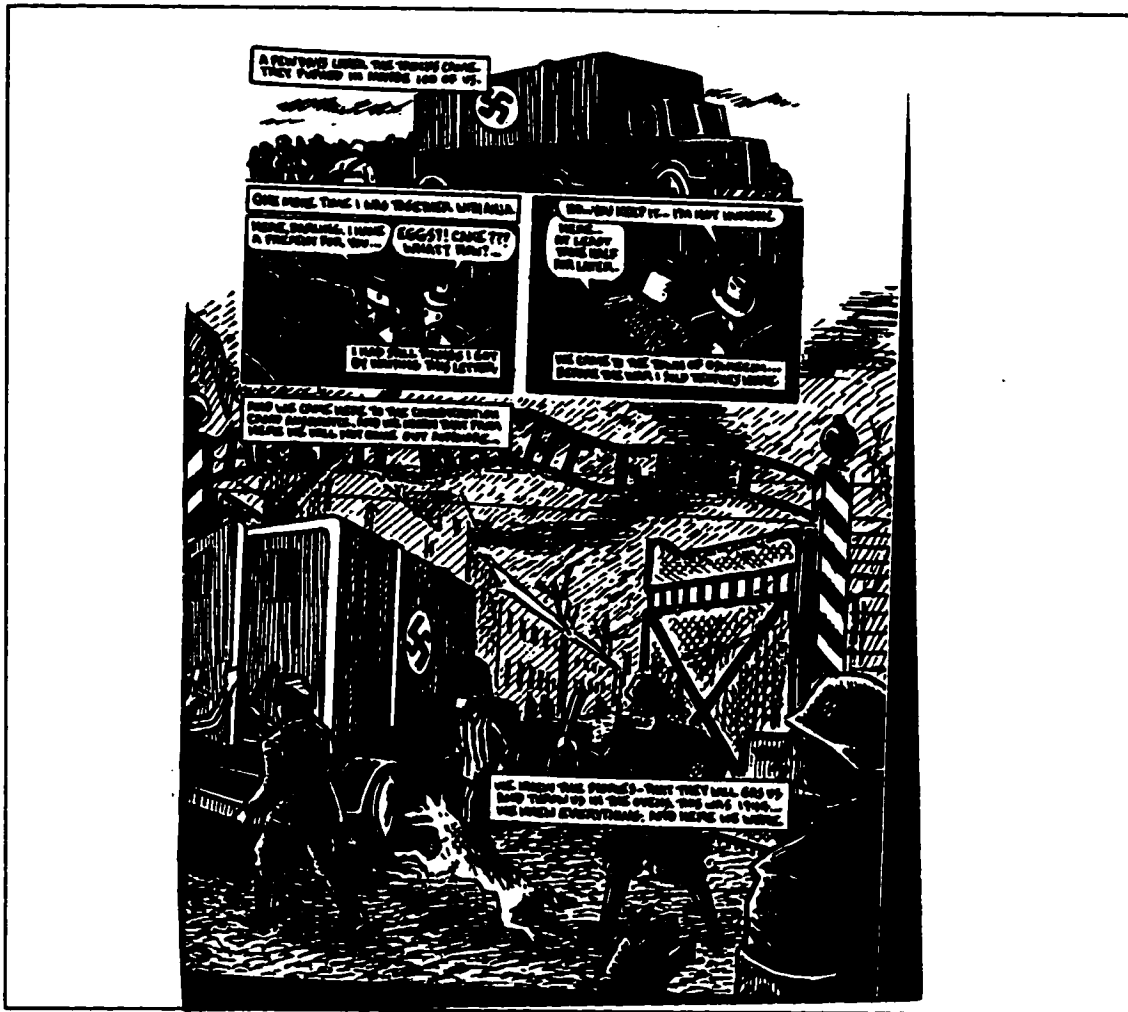
Here the characters find themselves unable to escape the swastika; it is the road that leads in all directions. Through cartoon, this picture reinforces the material experience of the father's words as no photo-realistic landscape could. When the father says, "Anja and I didn't have where to go./We walked in the direction of Sosnowiec—but where to go?!" the question implicit in the syntax of the father's first sentence, "didn't have where to go," is made explicit by the end of the frame's text in the pictorial image. They can "go" places but there is no "where" to go to. That is, there is no place where their existence is anything but violently conditional, totally circumscribed. On this road dictated by the Nazis—not spatially dictated, but philosophically dictated, "survivally"

dictated—violence is the promise of every step the characters take as ten pages later they are still walking on one of the arms of the swastika (135).<sup>96</sup>

Until the end of the first volume, the violence of this narrative has been enclosed. It is a violence *foreclosed* certainly, but nevertheless always contained in the drawn frame, in text and picture as particular and partial vision. And so when in the final pages of the first volume the characters arrive at Auschwitz and the scene for the first time bleeds to the very edges of the page, suddenly even the possibility of containment through partial vision erodes:

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<sup>96</sup> This vision of the swastika as the violent road the characters must travel brings to mind by inverse analogy the protective yellow brick road in Wizard of Oz. One protective, the other injurious, both roads equally foreclose travel within the tale. Interestingly, Frank L. Baum's work on his series began during wartime.



**Figure 11: “Auschwitz” *Maus I*: 157**

Vision is entirely controlled here—just as in the conventional novel. But here, set amongst and against explicitly partial narratives, the violence of totalizing narrative vision, of a text that entirely controls page and perception, that calls the details and the action down to the very corners, is revealed in all its terror. The totality of narrative vision, as structured in the traditional novel, mirrors the (total) material violence of the camps. In such a total narrative there is no place for the survival of the reader as particularity, as partial perspective. Faced with the gates of Auschwitz, the limitations of this telling become clear. For while foreclosure is a powerful strategy of detecting violation, it cannot neutralize the violence of the camps—it can only embody them. The father relates, “And we came to the concentration camp Auschwitz, and we knew that

from here we will not come out anymore.../We knew the stories—that they will gas us and throw us in the ovens. This was 1944...we knew everything. And here we were” (156). Neither total perception, nor total knowledge can save those in the past, or in the present, from the total violence that is the camp: “We knew everything. And here we were.”

Indeed, to sustain such total vision is finally to annihilate particularity of perspective. The total (universalizing) narrative obscures how violence operates in particular ways on particular bodies. The reader may be able to hold the vastness of the massacre of millions in her head as an idea, but she can't *see* six million much less *touch* six million. To “actually” feel the enormity of this horror would be to lose herself psychically in a vast suffering, or in the abstraction thereof. The particular “she” must stand back, perceive the violence distantly or she would not, I think, “survive.” Totalizing singular histories and “realistic” fictions are both narratives that can obscure the violence of the narrative itself, the reader's complicity therein, and the potential mobility partial perspective can offer.

Spiegelman's adaptation of a historical period of terrible human cruelty and suffering to the comic book genre may seem to trivialize, or at the least presume to imagine “simply,” what is finally monstrous and unsurvivable perhaps even in the imagining. But the framed pen and ink drawings and words that, for all their iconics, represent a man's particular story and his son's attempts to interact with him and elicit his tale, demand of the reader a substantial imagining and make questions of survival a matter of the tail. Maus takes the **BIG TALE** by the mouse tail, by the small twitchy, crotchety end that is the father. For if the terror of this period was an unimaginable, horrible, existence of cruelty and suffering lived by great numbers of people, it was also lived as daily, minute to minute individual experiences: Where Spiegelman the narrator-author-maus “can't **BEGIN** to imagine what it felt like,” his therapist, who lived that daily violence does not hesitate: “**BOO!** It felt a little like *that*. But **ALWAYS!**” (II: 46). The particular daily (lived or read) experience is perhaps a key to both that imagining and its survival.

I began this section with a consideration of how survival gets defined in Maus. But even more important, I think, than this questioning of the definition of survival (the pre-condition of the tale) is a concern with mechanisms of survival within and by way of this text—survival of a linguistic life. Set against the father's tale of innumerable measures he took to survive, from building safe-houses, to bribery, to always being on guard and using his “wits,” is the psychiatrist's claim that survival—of the violence of WWII at least—was accidental, a matter of chance; he maintains that there was no way to ensure survival. Certainly, implicit in survival is something of the accident. When one says, “she is a *survivor*,” one implies some control over staying alive, but one also says, “the passenger in the car *survived* the crash” where one suggests that survival itself was the “accident.” How is the foreclosed telling itself, and its artifact the tale, *accidentally* survived and (still) thereby shaped? Rather than a rush forward into an “open” and “free” and “self-determined” future, Maus is framed as an enclosed tailing that through a comics medium materializes not only (invisible) “blood in the gutters” but also the violent potential of an omniscient narrative frame to make invisible both the accident and the opportunism of its own survival (McCloud 60).

Where survival is at one extreme omnisciently foreclosed, and at the other a matter of chance, it is, in either direction, out of the teller's control: only perspective remains in flux. To gain the mobility of partial perspective one must cede “total” control of the tale. But it is a worthwhile exchange—and for marginal writers it is no choice at all. For as Haraway notes, “Only those occupying the positions of the dominators are self-identical, unmarked, disembodied.” And, if the “marked” and “subjugated” take entirely to the tools of totalizing (transparent) vision and “scramble into that subject position [they] then disappear from view” (Simians 193). So, mobilizing partial perspective in the telling, even and especially within the foreclosed tale, offers space for an embodied and so “sensible” creative living. Even as Spiegelman makes substantial the father's tale, constituting it under the totalizing historical narrative of erasure that was Nazi Europe, and thereby entails the tale with force, he also, by way of this particular

ailing of a potent(ial)ly accidental survival, undoes survival as a novel process of progressive individual ingenuity.

“They all survived themselves,” the father says of a family he knows during the war (I:154). Again making use of the father’s Eastern European syntax, the narrative pushes at the shape and process of “survival.” The father turns “to survive” into a transitive verb, as in “it helped survive them” (I: 63) and “he survived me my life” (I: 80), making survival a matter of relation, not an isolated (“self-identical”) act. What does it mean “to survive oneself?” To the father, it means one somehow had the power to keep oneself alive. But for the marginal writer, it means as much to survive “despite” oneself, despite the names one has to call oneself in order to constitute oneself under an inescapable condition of violent erasure. To re-call the father (violated), to re-cast his violent story that is one’s own genealogy is to risk killing him (again) and to thus enter into the process of “surviving oneself.”

As the second volume of the text comes to a close, the narrator draws at the bottom of the very last page a tombstone, on which is engraved his parents’ names and birth and death dates.



Figure 12: “Tombstone” *Maus II*: 136

The stone rises up and overlaps the bottom of the last two comic frames, which depict a bedside scene of the last time the narrator speaks with his father. The father has just related the last of his WWII story—the joyous reunion of him and his wife at the end of the war—where he clearly draws and frames the end of his “story” with the remarkable claim, “More I don’t need to tell you. We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy, ever after.” The artist/narrator does not directly contradict his father’s “happy happy” claim; the narrative allows the claim to stand uncontested in the frame in which it is uttered (complete with full moon). This claim is remarkable because, while the artist/narrator is clearly reluctant to undermine the father’s telling, and his sense that life

after, and relative to, WWII and the camps was indeed “happy, happy,” throughout the preceding tale it is also clear that the father’s “ever after” wasn’t “happy happy.” His wife suicides. His son is institutionalized for mental problems. His marriage with his second wife is deeply problematic; she, at one point during this narrative, leaves him. He complains his way through each of his son’s visits. But the intensity of The Story frame, the weight of The Telling itself, overcomes “reality” for the father. From trying to entirely forget and destroy the tale, the father now “totally” encloses the tale with the “happy, happy” conclusion. “Happy, happy” in his telling, the telling father does indeed seem to “survive [despite] himself [his material self]” through the enclosed tale. His physical death occurs shortly after he concludes and (so “happy, happy”) contains his story.

Such linguistic survival is “telling” of the violence of the enclosed tale itself. For in the father’s own framing of his story, not only the mother’s tale is destroyed, but so is the artist/narrator/son’s tale/tail, his experiential perceptions of damage and violation passed into his lifetime are obscured and un-articulated. The “happy, happy” closing of the historical tale reveals the violence of the telling that seals itself off from its own “relation,” creating present and future time (or the artists/narrator’s life) as a vacuum, a yawning maw from which the father-tale must barricade itself or risk disappearance.

Indeed at this point, just such a narrative erasure—un-articulation—is figured by the mis-naming of the artist/narrator/son. Suffering significant health problems, the father has by the time of his “happy happy” conclusive frame become somewhat confused. He follows up his tale’s “ending” by calling his artist/narrator son by the name of the first Polish-born son who died during the war—“Richeu.” Such a calling has the strange effect of erasing the living son, un-surviving him by way of the re-built and surviving memory of the dead son. The tale so sealed as “happy, happy” in the end is revealed as violently severing relation to a present and future living. With the tale so sealed in the past, the presence of the living artist (which would—ironically—believe the happy ending) is no longer nameable. The name “Richieu,” so en-tailed, survives the dead body—in the violence of the “happy happy” novel telling—only to obscure the living body.

Below the aforementioned tombstone the narrator/artist signs his name with the dates that range the time he spent working on this text: “—Art Spiegelman 1978-1991.” Set under the parents’ birth and death dates engraved on the tombstone, the dates next to the artist/narrator’s “signing” imply that while he tells the tale, he survives. At its close he ceases to exist. This is literally true of the characters of any text—and symbolically this can, of course, refer to one’s constitution through language. This narrative death also neatly underscores (en-graves) the ways in which the narrator saw his linguistic/artistic success, or survival, as resting on the bodies of those killed in WWII by the Nazis. But in telling this tale of his father, a tale that began and ended before the artist/narrator’s birth, he narratively erases himself. In “re-building” his father through his questions about the past, he has, in some sense, undone his own building. For he has become, literally and literarily, a conception of the present that the father has narratively isolated, and indeed severed, from the violent past. In re-viving the older son “Richeu” in the contained narrative the father constructed to survive, the younger surviving son, “Artie” must cease to exist. The father’s “Happy happy ending” re-marks the power and the occluding violence of the contained telling the father has used to *survive* the material violence of which the tale tells.

In raising issues of narrative survival, this is a story of the violent telling, of the tale itself. That the artist/narrator explicitly stops and starts the father’s central narrative to consider his medium and the manner of the telling creates a novel self-conscious of its own framing, of the violent pressures that play in and around the narrative shaping. In that act of meta-narrative, this is a novel of detection that shows its bones. The son’s task is to materialize the father’s tale without totalizing it, and indeed to critique the violence such totalizing narratives create and obscure. And where the father finally re-contains his tale, even at the cost of the present, the comic serves to frame the frame, a “frame story” that (in foreclosure) inserts the gutters of uncertainty and potential creative particularity. So. Here. The. Tale Survives.

### THE LANGUAGE OF MEAT AND LYNDA BARRY'S CRUDDY

As does Maus, Lynda Barry's novel Cruddy deals in the originary (bottomless) violence of the father, and in the relation of the father to language and the telling. But where Maus is primarily the telling of violence done *to* the father, Cruddy is more focused on the violence done *by* the father. Both explore the anxiety of dis/seminating the father's tale, of telling tales. For the violence of articulation is (also) the violence of the reading, the violence of circulation—how the pollution circulates in a potential corrosion of both the teller and the one(s) told. Whereas Maus' artist/narrator worries about the ethics of a public and commercial success built from the dead bodies he tells and draws, such ethics are not a problem for Barry's teen narrator, Roberta, who plans to be dead before anyone even reads her tale. More intensively than does the narrator of Maus, Barry's narrator confines her exploration of the violent telling to its intimate circulation—or lack thereof—among family, friends, and—by the words scarred into her own arm: “I'm sorry”—in the very body of the teller.

Better known as a comic artist, Barry's work gains (brief) mention in McCloud's Understanding Comics (52-53). And though Barry herself calls her text Cruddy: An Illustrated Novel, and not “Cruddy: A Comic Book,” her “juxtaposition of pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” in this text is unquestionable. Fifty-three illustrations and four maps accompany the words of the narrative. Most of the illustrations are portraits of people, animals and occasionally objects (still life). There are a number of landscapes as well. Train tracks predominate (through repetition, gaining iconic stature). In both drawing and text, it is not hard to align this text with a comics medium.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> One friend (a fellow Ph.D. Candidate who shall not be named) who read the book commented, when asked if he had liked it, “Well, the premise is great, but she does comics.” That is, real literature is more subtle; comics are too “obvious” to be real literature. My argument here is that the self-conscious way in which comics uses form is exactly what works to reveal the violence of a form that constitutes itself as transparent. And in doing so, “comics” can offer a critique perceived as accessible—unlike many other experimental efforts to make language and its construction sensible.

A mark of its comic form, the “illustrations” of this novel are not just in the pictures, but seep into the text. The exaggerated descriptions of the characters and settings are punctuated as if by bubbles of comic text. Chapter 2 begins:

Once upon a cruddy time on a cruddy street on the side of a cruddy hill in the cruddiest part of a crudded-out town in a cruddy state, country, world, solar system, universe. Once upon a cruddy time behind cruddy Black Cat Lumber on a very cruddy mud road which bubbles up very weird smells that evil genie themselves up through the cruddy dark rain and into the yellow lit-up window of the cruddy top bedroom of a cruddy rental house where a cruddy girl is sitting on a cruddy bed across from her cruddy sister who I WILL KILL IF YOU TOUCH THIS, JULIE, AND IF YOU DO I SWEAR TO GOD I WILL KILL YOU, NO MERCY, NO TAKE-BACKS PRIVATE PROPERTY, THIS MEANS YOU, JULIE, YOU! The cruddy girl named Roberta was writing the cruddy book of her cruddy life and the name of the book was called Cruddy. (3)

The description here is entirely comic, avoiding “real” depiction in the repetition of the adjective “cruddy.” There is much for the reader to close on in this abstraction where almost every object functions entirely iconically (rather than “really”). As in *Maus* where all the mice are essentially the same, here everything is “cruddy.” The reader is left to bring to the “town,” the “mud road,” the “rental house,” the “bed,” and even to the “sister” her own sense of “cruddy.” The accompanying illustrations, though more “realistic,” are also limited in what they reveal. Faces are often cut and framed off-center. Pictures of the inanimate world (landscapes, objects) appear as amateur photographs that rarely center a “subject,” implying a bigger world but never giving “the whole picture.” Space and time are neither linear nor regularly shaped. In a text that moves from street to universe and back in the space of two sentences, “real” distance has no meaning. Child-like maps of neighborhoods, and of a cross-country treasure hunt, open and close the text, flattening it. Framed as “once upon a time” the tale is deliberately cut loose from “real” time and geography.

As in *Maus*, the juxtaposition of the past and present narratives together in a place where all places are one (and the same) cruddy place creates history (a narrative of time, space, and cruddiness) as an elastic ground for investigation. The use of mind-altering drugs by the characters further undermines the ordering of “real time” or place. In fact,

one of the drugs the teens use is nicknamed “Windowpane,” which in one word/drug figures this story as a partial/view, as the comics frame that simultaneously illuminates and panes/pains, and as the opening of (partial) vision and perspective—the fascinating and potentially toxic prerequisite to the tale. Roberta reflects on how “The Windowpane had twisted time so badly. The day had seemed a minute long but in that minute my life uncoiled” (192). Street to universe, and once upon a time, the tailed tale materially “uncoils.”

This text also mirrors comics in its tangible materiality. Each chapter begins with a hand-drawn and framed letter that functions as a drop cap, constructing words as well as pictures as “hand made.” And every drawing—portrait, landscape, map, and letter—is also hand framed, enclosed with a thick band of looping, entwined lines. The reader shuttles between the words that only partially describe (and then often in caricature) and the pictures that cut faces and landscapes in framing. As is the case in comics, such framing explicitly forecloses reader vision, pressurizing reader closure. Unlike most of her other published work, where words and pictures are integrated and balanced together in frames, in this novel words predominate, and, with the exception of the maps included at the beginning and the end of the novel (that integrate pictorial graphics with words), words and illustrations are presented—framed—separately. Such separate presentation is, however, undermined when at times the text of this narrative is more cartoon than are the illustrations—which are in their turn more “realistic” than most of Barry's serial comics. And so, dis/integrated, the two, word and picture, and even word and word, work together in Cruddy in many of the same ways they do in (real) comics.

Cruddy is the first person narrative of a white working class girl from Seattle, Roberta Rohbeson, who inherits material violence as deeply and intimately as language. As the teen narrator breaks a five year silence to relate her role in the terrible multiple murder “mystery” of the “Lucky Chief Massacre,” she simultaneously materializes the violence of her present daily life, and that of her new-found teen friends, all of whom are adolescents living on the fringes of adult society. But where “the telling” might be offered as a novel and thereby cathartic—transformative and life-enabling—moment,

here the articulation of violence is, at its sharpest focus, a suicide. Indeed, the violence of suicide is figured as part and parcel of articulating the extreme violence the narrator has contained through her years-long silence.

The inescapable violence of these characters' horizon is present from the very beginning of the novel. The epigraph reads:

Such bright blood is a ray enkindled  
Of that sun, in heaven that shines  
And has been left behind entangled  
And caught in the net of the many vines.  
—Francesco Redi

These lines are from “Bacco in Toscana” (lines 15-18), a poem that The Catholic Encyclopedia calls “one of the best works of the seventeenth century” and travel guides repeatedly mention as early praise for the wine of the Tuscany region. The “bright blood” in this poem refers literally to the juice of grapes, made sweet by the sun, that becomes wine. But blood and wine both signify life, and the sun is the force that “ignites” that life. In the context of Bacchus (or Dionysus) blood and wine are often ent/wined in revelry that may entail a certain violence. And, for a Catholic writing of the “bright blood” left behind by the “sun” (The Son) wine is certainly not just wine. The first chapter of this novel indeed raises the very figure of Jesus in all the violence of a bloody crucifixion (the fictional cross) when Roberta describes a frightening portrait of him her mother hangs above her bed (1).<sup>98</sup> Moreover, Redi (1626-1697) was a physician and poet who is most famous for his experiments with rotting meat and flies disproving spontaneous generation.<sup>99</sup> His science experiments deserve mention here as fitting companions to Barry's meat-tale (bright blood tale) that seeks to materialize the particular “generation” of the central character's experience of violence. Barry's choice of this quote would seem to be less a literary allusion, than a comment on the (verifiable) inability of violence (as life) to come out of nowhere.

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<sup>98</sup> Jesus, the son of the Father, turns water to wine and wine to blood, and so figures the body both sated and violated.

<sup>99</sup> I remember my father telling me of this experiment when I was about seven years old. I don't remember why he told me, but the story stuck as a vivid and preeminent example of “science.”

“The father” (as the daughter-narrator calls him) is named Raymond—Ray. “Ray” is the epigraph’s line of illumination caught in the vegetative world. He is the father/son “enkindled” and then left behind, disinherited by his own father of the family slaughterhouse business. But so is the narrator, his daughter, also “enkindled” as a “son”—the sun of “Ray.”<sup>100</sup> “The father” calls Roberta his son, “Clyde.” She explains to the reader, “He wanted a son to pass his wisdom to. Me being born a girl was just a technicality” (16). When the father abandons his family, the mother secretly packs Roberta into the back seat of the father’s departing car. And so, as she leaves home with the father who had meant to abandon her, Roberta becomes the “ray” with a small “r.” She is “ray jr.,” a son “lite,” enmeshed in “the net of many vines” that is the father’s violent rampage in the face of his own bloody dis-inheritance.

This novel is a telling of a claustrophobic genealogical cycle of sons bound in violence: It is the bloody profession. Above the poetic epigraph to the “ray” enkindled of “such bright blood” is a silhouette of a figure writing in a top-bound spiral ring notebook. The figure is framed by a ring of white space that is in turn framed by heavy looping, curling lines which thickly surround the picture, forming the outward shape of a square turned on its side: a diamond. It is a beautiful frame, but it entirely binds the figure inside, alluding to the “net of many vines” in the epigraph it illustrates. In this tiny bound round space of light the blood-darkened writer scribbles her tale of violence and mystery. Writing, professing the blood of the father, she is herself the “bright blood” “enkindled” of the father named Raymond; both are the “rays” “left behind,” of another sun. And in this novel the characters are all so caught, living and dying by that “bright blood” of heaven, “entangled” in the “inescapable horizon” of an inherited violence. Bound in body, bled in word.

The metaphor for the father’s violence towards other human beings is comic, literally and figuratively a sledgehammer. It is a meat-a-phor. For the father comes from a long line of accomplished slaughterhouse butchers.<sup>101</sup> The narrator recounts,

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<sup>100</sup> Enkindle: das Kind—child in German—and kin (cyn) in old English.

<sup>101</sup> Barry grew up in Seattle, but as an adult, moved to Chicago, the land of meat.

The father came from meat people. Generations of them that could be traced all the way back to the time of the monkey. “The monkey with the most meat wins,” said the father...”Meat people run things, Clyde. Always have and always will.” (16)

His blood is Roberta's heritage, both in body and in profession. Their bodies profess by way of the knife in what Roberta later calls “meat language” (48). Partly, this is an issue of their working class status. “Meat” people, they labor with their bodies. And for the father, power is doubly in the “size” of one's body—in a capacity for physical force—and in the quantity of material goods—figured literally as “meat” (the bodies of other creatures)—that one can bring down and possess. There is no potential for “individual” movement in this class system— apparently one is either a meat person or one isn't. This violent equation of meat and power is bottomless and infinite; it is a deadly game of survival “back to the time of the monkey.”<sup>102</sup>

Roberta internalizes the timelessness of the myth, saying later “We are knife people and have always been knife people” (72). But for all the father's claim to the power of “meat,” Roberta witnesses that it is the “knife” that holds the power. The use of a sharp-edged tool can foil the biggest hunk of meat. Roberta learns, “With the right knife you could do such great damage” (66). And when she writes, “It's in my blood, I know it is. Meat person. I am hell with a knife and there is nothing I can really do about it but try and keep my mouth shut and not let it show” (17), word and butchery are tied together. For the narrator conceals her physical expertise with a *knife* by not *talking*. The *open* mouth is closely tied to *use* of the knife. Not only might words “show” her violent prowess, her “hell with a knife,” but they can promise harm. Both her mother and father threaten her with violence should she “talk.” Thus in its “worded” inception, this particular tale threatens violence.

Early in the novel, Barry's narrator gives away the edged violence of her own story beginning, middle, and ending. She explains how she was involved, with her father, in the “The Lucky Chief Massacre” five years before, and was found afterwards wandering in the desert, silent and covered with blood. She concludes her precis:

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<sup>102</sup> (No)evolution=Novel/ution.

The author knows this is a lot of details to remember for your reading comprehension but the author badly wants to give you the who, what, when, where, and how of this story right away because the author very badly wants to get to the question of why. The burning question of why she turned out the way she did and why she ended the way she ended. Ask a burning question, get a burning answer. (11)

Gifted “the who, what, when, where, and how of this story right away,” the reader is left only to the “why.” Shortchanged the satisfaction of a neat “problem, climax, resolution” story, the reader may wonder, “What is left to tell?” But the mystery is “why” the “who, what, when, where, and how of this story” happened at all. This is a hunt for what does not appear in the details, but for what appears at their edges and gives them shape. It is a hunt for the “why” of the violent telling itself, as much as for the “reason” behind the profound material violence it spells. It is not the events of the tale themselves that matter, but rather the shape of their linking—the matter of the telling. The events are connected one to another by the violence their relation promises, the horizon that is the tale, spinning regardless of time. All the violence, material and textual, is given; all that’s left is the dis/covery of its particular pattern and force. The foreclosed tale thus assumes violence in order to explicitly deal with/in its (given) force and patterns.

Gift it may be, but Roberta's divulging of the “facts” doesn't come cheap—for either narrator or reader. Agency and death go hand in hand, or rather, pen in hand, for this narrator :

It was my idea to kill myself...If you are holding this book right now it means that everything came out just the way I wanted it to. I got my happily ever after.

Signed, Sincerely Yours,  
The Author,  
Roberta Rohbeson  
1955-1971

From these words, and these dates, the reader knows from the beginning of this novel that the narrator is going to kill herself, and within a few pages knows that she has killed others, including her own father. Roberta's attempt to relieve others of any responsibility for her death is a gift that allows the reader to enter the tale excused, unaware of the role that she will be asked to play; for it is also a veiled invitation to the reader to close on

(collaborate in) the conditions under which the narrator arrogantly assumes such destructive (insane) agency. Unlike the similar date range used by Spiegelman next to his signature at the end of Maus to indicate both the time spent by a “real” author working on the text, and to ghost the death of the prosthetic artist/author/narrator who dematerializes as the text ends, Roberta Rohbeson's up-front dates indicate the “real” death of a faux author. Where Art Spiegelman himself survives his own telling of the tale to write another day (and indeed I just heard him on the radio a few months ago), Barry's fictional narrator cannot, of course, survive the tale (Interview). No one in this tale can survive it. The tale takes its toll.

It is not the material violence in this tale that kills Roberta. It is in the telling (the father had warned her not to talk) that she comes to suicide. It is only after her father's death and a long period of silence—five years—that Roberta finds she “can” and “must tell.” She writes near the beginning of her story,

And now the story can be told. And must be told. In this book the truth will finally be revealed about the horrible murders and then the author must die. And people may be sad about that and wishing there were more books by the author, Roberta Rohbeson, but sadly, it will be too late. There will be only one Dewey decimal system number for her. Sadly only one. And if they ever find her body, and if she could have a final request, that number is what she would like engraved on her gravestone. (13-14)

Of course, Roberta's body is raised by the novel, she is only found in the telling and the reading of the tale which must, as all tales and readings do in the end, also result in her demise. And so responsibility for her death, while claimed as her “idea,” can only be *realized* in the reading. That the reader is fully complicit in her ending is both underscored and denied in her opening words “If you are holding this book right now it means that everything came out just the way I wanted it to. I got my happily ever after.” While it may seem as if she is naming this book as her suicide note, only to be found and read in the event she has “already” killed herself, it is also the case that she can only be killed by that reading. And, she is, by that same reading, given her “happily ever after.” Nevertheless, by naming her own ending a suicide, and ostensibly denying the reader any control over that ending, the text remarks upon the conditions of the relations of any

telling/reading, and creates responsibility for those conditions as contested. By intensifying the end result of any book character—the potential generalized violence of “every-tale”—in the “novel/suicide,” the text establishes within that general violent landscape a material particularity of force with a telling perspective. The book is Roberta's gravestone, her container engraved with a single number on the upright spine that places her among the other novel gravestones. Her end so foretold, any illusion of progression is fore-skinned; the violent tale turns back upon itself.<sup>103</sup>

Revealing, or materializing, the upright phallus is no hidden agenda in this novel. For of all the dead bodies in and of this telling, the narrator names the desiccated body she sees in *Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe* down at the piers as the most “influential” dead body she has seen. The power of The (big) Phallus draws her. She is attracted to the shop for its sign advertising the display of a “WHALE PENIS.”<sup>104</sup> Once inside, she spots “Sylvester the nude mummified man” and describes the corpse in deep fascination, down to her notation of his hidden genitals, “He had a piece of ancient cloth over his privates but otherwise he was completely exposed.” She is, however, disturbed by the way Sylvester is displayed:

The one thing that kept bothering me was that they displayed him standing up... I would have made it look as realistic as possible and most of all, I would not have covered his vulnerables. I would have wanted everything displayed. In the interest of science. To show what happens to a dead man's pecker in the sun. I thought about it even before it happened. But I wouldn't count that as ESP. (113-114)

Most obviously, her words about the “it” that “happened” foreshadow the geography of her father's death, but they also challenge the display of death, the telling of the dead body, the tale that the preserved body tells, and the reading of the (dead) body of the tale (as “standing up”). As the book is her (upright) tombstone, all books are (dead) bodies of writing. The inert rem(a)inders of the telling. Seeking both the power of the father and the vulnerable and thus mobile place from which that power can be other-

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<sup>103</sup> Rather than a circumcision that would cut away in order to reveal, the tale fore-skinned, re-covers, and so materializes *the contours* of what has been (powerfully) hidden—the invisible phallus.

wielded, Roberta thus fashions her own tale, her body of writing, to fully “display” the “private” “vulnerables” from which the father draws his power.

Sylvester’s “privates” are covered merely by “a piece of ancient cloth.” For Roberta, this is an obsolete form of display that obviously hides the father-pecker—the phallus. For to expose the hidden violence of her own/the father, Roberta’s telling must engage the entirely contemporary “dazzle camouflage” he uses, the enlightened illusions of change and progression that cover and excuse his violence, his continual claims that they are getting somewhere by way of their violent means. She recalls how as a young child, unable to “see through” the father, she heard his promises “thinking maybe it could work, Maybe we could set up a new life someplace in the yonder and the past would somehow tumble into the hole of forgetfulness” (148). Now, in the present telling, she must expose the vulnerability of the father’s power as concealed by his illusory “promises,” for as she finally dis/covers, “He made so many promises” that went unkept (233). Roberta’s tale exposes the “dazzle camouflage” of the father-promise forsworn by taking it on, by placing its shiny self-justification alongside a flat narrative of horrific violence.

Though it is in a present day meeting of her new friend Vicky Tallusco, herself a master of hiding “in full view” by way of her garish fashion and make-up, that Roberta begins to re-call her time with the father, it is from the father himself that Roberta first learns about “dazzle camouflage,” a protective covering so bright and/or out of place that one can neither “see” it, nor look past it to what it hides (66). She writes,

It was hard not to notice Vicky. She had extravagant ways, too much makeup and very bright clothes and a sort of burnt-rubber smell she tried to cover up with Chantilly. People automatically turned away from her. No one could really stand to look. In the Navy they call it dazzle camouflage. It was the Navy that figured out you could paint something with confusions so horror-bright that the eyeballs would get upset to where they refused to see. Battleships were painted this way and the bomber planes just passed them by. Dazzle camouflage is Navy. The

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<sup>104</sup> The Whale Penis stands here as one of many literary allusions in this text. It is, of course, an allusion to Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, another text that undoes the novel form in the course of a hunt for the whale/phallus that results in nearly everyone’s death. See Chapter 95 for a discussion of the whale’s penis.

father was Navy too. "Navy all the way, Clyde. Every goddamned inch right down to the end of my pecker." (17)

So bright the eye cannot take note and passes right over in ignorance, "dazzle camouflage" is aligned in this text with "Navy," with the military, implying a "cover" so aggressive it carries the threat of violent force. And the father is "Navy all the way, ...Every goddamned inch right down to the end of [his] pecker" (17). Indeed, although Roberta reveals herself as the one who has carried out physically violent acts, unsurprisingly, it is dazzling Vicky who gains the nickname "The Violent One" from their mutual friend The Turtle.<sup>105</sup> Roberta's violence, while clearly related to the violence of "dazzle camouflage" (for her recollection of the violent tale is thereby triggered) is nevertheless of a different order from the blinding promise. She says, "...I am [Vicky's] opposite in every single way. I am about as detailed as a shadow" (17). If Vicky is the bright cartoon, Roberta, "her opposite in every way," is the featureless figure writing inside the small frame at the beginning of the book. Visible only by her outline, she is all "shadow." Thus violence is here being re-defined as less a matter of physical force than of illusion and concealment in the form of packaging, whether through fashion or language—or lack thereof.<sup>106</sup>

Indeed this is a story of tailing the father (pin the tail on the father), a tale that turns from "giving head" to "giving tail," where the pecker behind the violence that is the narrator's life is de-privatized and exposed to shrivel in all its vulnerability. The bloody profession here materializes the (only) source of its ink in the very violence and vulnerability of the father's "pecker." The hunt for the "why" that Roberta constructs for her reader is therefore not a matter of plotting the physical violations of this tale, but

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<sup>105</sup> Dazzlingly violent as she may be, Vicky's "normalcy," relative to the other teens in this tale, reads as a desperate effort to surf the violent telling. Importantly, through this strategy, Vicky appears to be a material survivor; but she so survives at the cost of her "own" tale. Nevertheless, in some sense, Vicky is the survivor in this tale. And she may indeed be the surviving tale (The Violent One) itself. Alluding to fictional constructions, Roberta writes that, "So many things about Vicky were stolen" (201). In fact, a one time office mate of mine named Vicki, who claimed a wild youth, was a high school classmate of Lynda Barry's. Everything a writer writes is stolen.

<sup>106</sup> See Susan Willis' essays on postmodern consumerism for useful discussions of the potent force of packaging.

rather of tailing their hiding, of articulating the end(ing) relation of language to the material world that is suicide.

With material violence the ground foreclosed and assumed at the very outset, this story orients (as opposed to occidends), or queers, the violence of suicide in the telling of the tale.<sup>107</sup> That such material violence is closely related to “telling” is, for these teen characters, understood. In one of the opening scenes, Roberta and two other teens sit next to a reservoir where a boy recently drowned himself. One of the teens relates,

“The fellow was a homo and this was difficult. His parents were never in the mood for this information. We were saddened by the news of his self-inflicted homicide.”

“Suicide,” said Vicky.

“Not at all,” said the Turtle. “It was murder.”

Vicky snorted. “You can’t murder yourself.”

The Turtle shook his head. “If only he had known.” (54-55)

For all Vicky’s denial, that suicide can be murder is the premise of this tale. And with her denial, perspective itself becomes “broadly” (as opposed to “deeply”) implicated in the shape of the telling—and its effects. That the teen who killed himself was gay is not, here, the problem. Instead, the problem is in the (queer) telling: “His parents were never in the mood for this information.” The “difficulty” lies in the relative, so to speak, “wanting” to hear the tale, in the tale’s potential for “circulation.” For as Roberta notes upon their arrival at the reservoir, “We were there to watch the high jets of water shoot out of the Jefferson Park Reservoir. Water must be kept in motion or the result is stagnation. For creatures it’s blood that must be kept in motion or there is putrefaction...” (51-52). And as linguistic creatures, it’s the telling “that must be kept in motion.”

Thus violence adheres in the *want* of information, as much as in the information itself—in how the material information (information about materiality) is wanted—or not. Roberta has, until now, been under explicit interdict not to speak. On their violent journey together five years before, Roberta’s father told her to pretend to everyone she could not speak. He presents her to others as a retarded child who cannot talk and attempts to kill her several times because she might “tell.” In the present time her mother

approaches her with needle and thread, threatening to sew her mouth shut.<sup>108</sup> For the boy who drowned in the reservoir, the interruption of articulation, the inability to constitute oneself before the parents (to talk to, to talk back, to circulate in all directions), and the interdict against such constitution, materializes in the suicide, the “self-inflicted homicide.” On Emanuel Levinas’ theories of violence as they appear in his text Totality and Infinity, Marian Hobson writes “Expression is not self-determination through language, but a bearing witness to oneself.” Though Hobson is interested in Levinas’ concept of “face” as expression that exceeds language, this idea of expression is nonetheless helpful to my discussion of language and narrative suicide, for it implies the “ultimate” counter-threat of a *lack* of expression, with the accompanying inability to bear witness to oneself in the face of another. According to Hobson, Levinas proposes such witness as “a relation beyond power,” a “one-sided gift” (78). But for the marginal person, this is not a gift one can give oneself without revealing the very horror of one’s *lack* of articulation (with—in the faces of—the father and mother).<sup>109</sup>

If it is in the face of Vicky’s “dazzle camouflage” that Roberta begins to *recall* the tale, she *tells* it in response to the other teens’ desire to hear:<sup>110</sup> “The Turtle sat down beside me. ‘Tell me about the dangerous adventure of Little Debbie’“(52-53). And so, Roberta begins to tell her tale of violent want to the others, for the Turtle asks—he wants to hear (about) her knife (life), about sharp “Little Debbie:”

This story was tumbling out of my mouth as we walked to the Washeteria. It tumbled out in broken chunks and pieces. The Turtle was listening. Vicky wasn’t. She was talking at the same time and her words sounded like scribbles...She held the screen door open for him, but the Turtle

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<sup>107</sup> The material reality of teen suicide as reported in studies of the past two decades, particularly of gay teens, is a significant part of the contemporary context of Cruddy as it is of Visitation of Spirits.

<sup>108</sup> The mother’s threat is given additional weight by the image of the mummy in the shop whose mouth is sewn shut.

<sup>109</sup> In “Characteristic Violence; or, The Physiognomy of Style” Hobson, by way of Jacques Derrida’s reading of Levinas, qualifies Levinas’ sense of the face of expression as non-violent, and naturalizes a “violence” or “anguish” of articulation in order to distinguish between the “violence of articulation” and “determinate political violence”—a distinction I argue is contested by the creative texts I here discuss (79).

<sup>110</sup> That Vicky does not want to hear it, indeed calls Roberta’s stories lies, and basically does not listen all the way through this novel is important commentary on who “gets” to survive the tale in the end (Vicky)—and the costs of that survival to the telling.

stayed with me. He stayed right beside me and listened to my spilling story....

The Turtle listened to my speeding words and then held up a long finger.

'Wait. Tell me one thing,' he said. 'Are you wanted?' (60-62)

Now "wanted," her story, immobilized for five years, comes fast and with weight, "tumbling" and "speeding." For "The Turtle was listening." To be heard is to be "wanted." When Turtle asks Roberta if she is "wanted" he refers both to the possibility of her being "wanted" for the killing she has done as well as to her being "wanted" as a person, as a child in the world. Certainly, for Roberta, the two kinds of wanting are directly related. In her time with her father, to be "wanted" by the father means to be engaged in the violence he so admires, a violence that can lead to being "wanted" by the "authorities"—and that is a kind of wanting that seeks only to silence.

For all that he admires her knife work, her father wanted her silent, entailed, taleless. When five years before she bought stationery with some money the father gave her, he said, "who the hell are you planning on writing?" She later sat next to him on the bus repeating to herself:

Who was I planning on writing? Who was I planning on writing? The father's question was bothering me I looked over at him... And I will admit I looked at his neck to find it. The light pulsing of the carotid. The involuntary pulsing. As involuntary as my eyes studying it. //There are two kinds of dying for every single person. There is the moment when your personality dies, when the you of you drains away into the air, and then there is the part where your body dies, organ by organ. And then three days later there are the flies. (90-91)

The question of being wanted is thus related to the question of the telling as circulation, as a circuit of "who [to plan] to write." To be "wanted" is to have someone to write to. Before anyone "wanted" her tale, she was "short-circuited." Of course, once wanted, the violence, the high voltage running through the (now) closed circuit of her tale, will kill her. The telling tolls for her. The want of the tale was enough to set Roberta to her telling, but it is also a want of care that she traces in this violent tailing of the father. The father's question "bothers" her. His lack of care, of want for her words, triggers the seeds of the violence she will later do (to and in the face of that want). Faced with his indifference to her writing, her "[look] at his neck" to "find [the carotid artery]" is automatic and

“involuntary.” Her description of what happens to the dying and dead body recalls Redi’s experiment; the “flies” do not generate spontaneously. For to “want” someone “silent” is to invoke a contradiction that opens a chasm of violence.

Just as five years before “the father’s question” “bothers” her, The Turtle’s question about being wanted also haunts—but she nowhere searches for *his* carotid artery. Later she connects The Turtle’s want of her story to a want of physical “care,” asking herself, “Did it mean anything, his arm around me? He was interested in my story. He asked me questions. That one question, ‘Are you wanted?’” (93-94). For she wants wanting. She wants to want herself and be wanted. She talks about having always wanted a boyfriend. But she cannot “see” herself wanted. For as much as she was used, she was not wanted. She can only see in herself the violent face of the father who “wanted” her silent and dumb. She writes in loathing of her own appearance,

I’m what a person might call a dog...My face cells divided into the shape of the father, who even for a man was on the homely side...All of [the father’s features] revisited in me by means of somatic mitosis, Stedman’s Medical Dictionary, page 954. (60)

Her violent inheritance runs cell-deep. She fears being touched—not for what someone will do to her, but for what she might do to them. She has a hard time controlling “her biting impulse” when The Turtle does put his arm around her. Nevertheless, to close the telling circuit is to open herself to perception and sensation. After having begun her story, when dropping acid (the aforementioned “Windowpane”) with The Turtle, Roberta finds she can connect with the sensations of her body in ways that have been shut off since her violent experiences with her father. As she continues to tell her tale to The Turtle, she finds herself able to enjoy his touch. This becomes a “romantic” scene not only in the physical, but also in the philosophical sense. Sensation and expression are explicitly linked through the body when The Turtle offers Roberta the drug: “Open your mouth. Lift up your tongue. Sublingual is the only way. Sublingual is the only way” and then, while they are making out, “He said, talk. Talk and keep talking and do not stop talking because it was so good that way. Close my eyes and keep talking while he kissed the places, keep talking, keep talking while he touched every part of me” (162). With the

experience of sensation and care, “with the *sublingual* addition of the Windowpane,” she can tell her story of want (emphasis mine). As violence ensured want in her past, the telling of violence arises from want in the present. For want of her tale by a boy.

When Roberta first begins to tell her story, in response to The Turtle's interest, the tale affects her bodily, as potent as the acid they have all been dropping. She grows dizzy watching the reservoir fountain, saying,

I watched the motion of the shooting water, shooting high and white, then gone, then rising again. It's called pulsing. It happens because of the differences in pressure. Blood shoots for the same reason. You would be surprised by how it can spray. Blood can hit the ceiling and drip back down on you. But usually blood on the ceiling and the walls is secondary. It is from the knife or the ax in fast repeated motion. Back-spattering. Meat people know how to keep it at a minimum but it is still an unavoidable part of the job.... (52-3)

Set in the context of the suicidal violence that is linked to the want of articulation, Roberta's description of butchery, the “secondary” nature of the blood on the walls that is “back-spattering,” becomes figured as the marker of the secondary violence inherent in articulating violation. The bloody (sonic) feedback, like the re-coil of a shotgun, is “an unavoidable part of the job,” of the violent profession that is her tale. Although the “primary” circulation of the “blood”—the continual “*telling of*” (expression) that is the constitution and witness of the linguistic self—may prevent “putrefaction” or suicide, there are side-effects to the meat-tale—the meta-tale that is the “*telling on*” the father-tale. And she will not survive those effects; the reader knows this from the beginning. She is not “healed” by her edged expression for she is a “meat person”; the violence is in her “blood” and the telling cuts. As the father in *Maus* “bleeds history,” so does Roberta, watching the fountains of water at this reservoir where someone has drowned, begin her bloody tale. She notes and thereby invokes her own ending, her secondary death figures as the “minimum” of back-spattering that is inherent in linguistic butchery, the bloody profession.

The effects that such re-presentation—the imaging of past violence—can have on the material body and the inescapability of that violent imagery, are further manifest

when “memory smells” cause Roberta to throw up. She explains shortly after she begins her tale describing “backspattering:”

Memory smells are a problem for me. Actual smells can be difficult, sometimes almost impossible for me to stand. But actual smells are things a person can get away from. The memory smells are impossible to fight. The [remembered] tripe smells steamed. I started heaving. (57)

For Roberta, memories are more powerful, because inescapable, than a reality one might walk away from. Just as in Maus, when the characters can no where escape the swastika and the father’s memories hang “rebuilt” around him, so Roberta cannot “get away from” the “memory smells.” At times, they figure a reality more potent than the present material world. The sickening effects of rendering her tale are reinforced when the metaphor of nausea is used again a few pages later. Roberta continues to speak: “This story was tumbling out of my mouth as we walked to the Washeteria. It tumbled out in broken chunks and pieces” (60). Roberta describes her story tactilely, not dissimilarly to the vomit she earlier threw up after dropping acid. She is attempting to rid herself of the toxic pollution by which she feels contaminated. In that sense this would seem to be a cathartic telling. But instead of “ridding” her of the violence, the telling itself is making her violently sick. Just as the artist/narrator in Maus faces deep depression as a result of the violent shape and dissemination of the tale he tells, Roberta is constituted as polluted by this very toxic tale she externalizes. Indeed when she describes the “back-spattering” of blood during the butchering process, Vicky comments, “You’re sick, Roberta” (53):

Material effects of the violent tale continue when, in her words, the water “shooting” out of the reservoir fountain becomes blood “pulsing.” Roberta’s telling now affects her vision: “I saw the little bright spots come swimming from the sides of my eyes” (53). She attributes her dizziness to the way the clouds move across the sky in opposition to the shoots of water, and her friend Vicky attributes it to the drugs they have just taken, but this erosion of vision that comes as Roberta begins her violent tale is the same loss of perception she experiences at moments of profound material violence throughout the novel. In Chapter 6, when the father runs down a cousin of theirs with their car, the confused and horrific sensory input almost refuses to form:

A smashed face hitting the glass with horrible features flattened, and then thumps sounding over my head and then nothing. Just silence and a weird weightless feeling all around. A feeling like when you stand up too fast and the spots of light swim around your eyes. (38)

As when she first began to relate her tale, vision/perception are obscured. The extreme violence of the father operates as dazzle camouflage; the eye and ear turn away—or are burned out. Blood pressure drops “like when you stand up too fast” as if it is one’s own body that is damaged and bleeding itself out. Violence hides (surfaces and conceals) itself.

Indeed violence provides such excellent coverage that the father boasts of how he literally hides violence with violence. He tells Roberta of how he “hid” his real violence against a relative—the cuts with which he bled that woman until she revealed the location of a suitcase of money the father sought—by shooting off her arm. And later, he “hides” a messy murder in their vehicle with more violence—a freshly killed deer. As they wait in the woods for the deer he says to Roberta,

“Know what we’re waiting for, Clyde?”

I said, “No.”

He said, “We’re waiting an explanation.” (148)

As Roberta earlier associates knives and language, so here is the power of an “explanation” fused with violence and butchery. Words again tip into the knives. For indeed the book is all about explanations, the good and bad and the ugly. Explanations are a matter of perspective that in scene after scene with the father is shown to be a matter of relative violence(s). From the beginning of the text, the narrator Roberta has set the reader on the trail of “why.” So here, when as the father cuts up and spreads around the gore of the slain deer and Roberta realizes that “He wanted a mess. Because that was the explanation” (150), she speaks not only of the mess of the deer, but also of the larger “mess” of the father’s tale that is the dazzle camouflage *hiding* the explanation for which Roberta’s tale tails: Why Roberta “is the way she is.” His is the mess that hides. The violent mess that renders the hiding; that eliminates the bounding and recognizable, articulable shape of particularity and perspective.

Clearly (or grossly), explanations, messy or otherwise, are as dangerous as the violence that hides them. As I have noted, both her father and her mother have warned Roberta not to talk under threat of violence. To survive, she keeps this “bargain” of silence with her parents. When she comes out of the desert, out of the massacre, still she keeps her word, and tells no one what has happened. She internalizes this interdict against a voice that promises to set violence in motion, maintaining, “I kept my part of the deal. I didn't say a word” (99). Even though her father is long dead, when asked by new teen friends to explain her scarred, chopped off finger, she is wary. She says, “And I hesitated but the father's voice did not scream at me for my hesitation. When it came to my finger situation I do not think the father had anything more to say” (157). Of course Roberta's “hesitation” is as much for the physical effects of “telling” as for her father “screaming at [her].” Words and violence are so deeply implicated one in another that, although she no longer worries about what the father “has to say,” the reader knows that the words Roberta still fears are those spoken by the father-knife of “meat language” that cuts across time in the shape of her own body. While she survives, there is no escape from violence.

When Roberta was younger, before gaining an understanding that her father's perspective is not total, she briefly considers trying to escape him. But she is literally unable to image a landscape without the father. Consideration of escape skitters off into a consideration of violence: “Just open the door and take off running into the black scrub on the other side of the tracks. Would he come after me? I didn't know. And then what? What would happen after that? If he caught me or if he didn't” (48). Here is the inescapable horizon, the “what” that happens “If he caught me or if he didn't.” Caught or not, the horizon for running away is unbearable in its uncertainty, in its violent potential. Moreover, the inescapable unbearability of that horizon is a reflection of the inescapable unbearability of the body itself, so “faced”—“by means of somatic mitosis”—*and* totally articulated as it is by the father. She goes on to detail the insecurity in being a “meat person,” and so subject to and encompassing of material violation.

Some people cannot forget the location of the jugular and the carotid any more than they could forget the alphabet. After a certain amount of time

it's just burned into your mind like a song on the radio, the vascular system, the skeletal system, all the different cuts; standing rib, Porterhouse, round eye of round, Delmonico, fillet, strip skirt, sirloin. The knives you want for each. Obviously I am talking the language of meat. Of course I mean cattle. I do not think there is anything that could be called a specific cut on a human being. We have organs in common with cattle, we share many systems of the body, but I am not sure there is such a thing as the Delmonico area in a person. (48)

“Of course [she means] cattle,” but at the same she is “not sure” whether the “cuts” can refer to the human body. Moreover, after this rumination “[she] didn't run” (48). She cannot get away from what is in her—the violence of “meat language.” For the “language of meat” is the language of the body. It is the language of violence done to the body, of the body divided, cut from itself in articulation of its particularity, its regions for consumption; it is the body killed and (so) materialized as sustenance.

As I have said, the work of butchery is an explicit metaphor for language. As deep as the “alphabet” one can't forget, butchery is the careful selection and shaping of the tale with knives and (s)words, parsing and arranging the body linguistic: the work of a teller/speller. Like articulation, butchery entails a certain “violence” in the work of making food, of sustenance.<sup>111</sup> And like the “work” of language, butchery is framed with “cuts” and “alphabet” “burned into your mind,” as a knowledge and an art, as an aesthetics inseparable from the work of a living: survival. The force of both butchery and language balance on this knife edge of potential—so that when wielded in particularity, marginal and/or dominant, the inherent force and matter of both can “do great [and very particular] damage.”

In “the language of meat” words are everywhere material, sensible with a kind of synaesthesia: “[her story] tumbled out in broken chunks and pieces,” “and her words sounded like scribbles” (60), “the sounds of his words were smudged” (48), and “[h]is voice was casual but I heard a tautness” (269). The tale itself functions like superman's phone booth as characters instantly transform with a new story. Roberta recalls how

The father's hand on my shoulder gave me a squeeze and our new identities rose on this command. It was a freakish sensation to feel them

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<sup>111</sup> Even vegetarians chop live vegetables and fruits.

come to life so naturally, to witness the father drain away and the brokenhearted barber from bum-fuck take his place. (167)

Reinforcing language as a material medium, this tale is shaped with the sensory language of comics, where words have explicit weight on the page and function as iconically as the cartoon characters from which they balloon. Sounds are illustrated in comics form: “BLAM” and “HOOOOOO.” Letters become material objects in depictions of signage, where it is clear that size matters. Mixed upper and lower case letter refuse a transparent reading on the side of the “Knocking Hammer” slaughterhouse building: “LET US cuT youR MeaT We WiLl DreSs YouR meAt wE WilL bUy Your MeaT we Will Pay Cash BeSt PricEs tHE BesT nOnE bEtTER cuStoM HousE ButCher hoUSE louNgE gRocERY CamPinG (169). And in a comics pun on the materiality of “text,” “characters” at times become the text that gives them shape, taking on the form of punctuation, and of language that is punctuated: “His posture was in constant motion, going from question mark to exclamation mark and back again, and all his extremities, including his head, seemed to flatten and retract and then extend and sharpen” (174); “He looked at my dress as he drew a backwards question mark in the air with his finger. I drew an exclamation mark” (231);<sup>112</sup> and, of Vicky’s desire to have a “popular” character as a boyfriend, one teen says, “He will conjugate her verb. He will use her in a single sentence and punctuate her and there is nothing we can do” (244). To flex from character shape to character shape, sometimes signifying the interrogative, sometimes the declarative, presents the body of language as plastic and responsive to situated particularity. But language can be fixed, and in stasis lose power. To be “used in a single sentence” undoes one’s particular mobility. Conjugation fixes the infinitive that is Vicky when she has sex with a boy who does not care for her. And sometimes “characters” float to the surface of the text in such iconic abstraction that they negate language itself. Roberta notes of some men at the mob slaughterhouse, “They were rubbed out men. Looking like old hard erasers” (171). The “rubber out men” are entirely *without* “character.” They present the tired staleness of

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<sup>112</sup> In this, her final scene, Roberta wears a dress; the slaughterhouse “dresses” meat.

language gone hard and old, reified, long ago “conjugated” in a “stiff” erasure of the body's particularity.

Body and text entirely conflate in the words scarred into Roberta's arm.

He touched the inside of my arm where the words are, *I'm sorry*.

He looked at me without blinking. 'You did this?'

I nodded.

He said, “You're perfect” (162).

In Roberta is the “perfect” confluence of word and body. While silent, words and their violence physically contained, she lives. When she begins to talk, the telling and the body annihilate each other. When the character “The Stick” notes this scar Roberta says: “I saw him staring at the raised letter 'y' scarred into my arm” (217). And later, “He ran his finger over the inside of my arm and said the words spelled in scars. *I'm sorry*” (303). Here is the word, raised/razed from and in her body in the tail sign of the phallus, the “y” of determination, the last letter of an apology for the violent technicality of her survival.

And so, while Roberta chooses to tell, decides the father “did not have anything more to say about the finger situation” (her finger is, after all and by contrast to her violent daily life, tangibly healed), the violence of meat language, borne in the body, is, with her telling, uncontained; it annihilates time. Her words focus the threat of “past” violence in the present. So that, even as the eye and ear of the past fail in the face of violence, in a comics mode, the windshield that frames the smashed and thumping face remains material, affecting her (and the reader) throughout the tale. Later, her father's sudden face at the car window produces terror. The frightening illustration of this moment reinforces the materiality of the text as it reverberates terrifically in the tale. Indeed, as one turns the last page of the “windshield” chapter, the violent image of the “smashed face hitting the glass” hangs on sonically and iconically through time as the next chapter begins: “HOOOOOOOOOO!” This sound effect not only resurrects blanked sensory perception but links the past tale to the present. As Vicky and Roberta enter an abandoned shed they hear the creepy noise hang ghostly in the air. Roberta's memory is momentarily materialized in the voice that reads as comic strip ghost, “Hooooooo did you killlllll?” Roberta thinks “It was a person for sure and for a second I thought it was

someone it could not possibly be unless the dead do truly walk” (39). Just as in Maus the executed bodies of WWII traverse frames to hang meatily in the present, in Cruddy the violence of the past exceeds its containment in the previous chapter. Through this comics strategy, the ways in which narrative and reader frame the past as past, and the ways in which that past nevertheless violently exceeds that frame becomes visible and hearable: the hiding materializes.

As Roberta continues her tale, the tension between the violent articulation and its (perceptual) hiding only intensifies. The erosion of perception in the face of violence recurs when, steeped in this landscape of violence and midway through the journey with the father, Roberta wakes up to a male relative jacking off against her face; she stabs him to death. He is the first person she kills. Afterwards she says,

And if there was screaming, I didn't hear it. What I heard was a long tone, faint and endless. And the center of my vision was punched out, gone gray, with a hot light scribbling fire at the edges, melting the world from the center outward like a movie burning up on the screen. (134)

The “long tone, faint and endless” is sound without differentiation. It is the loss of perspective, which is, finally, the loss of acuity in perception. The “hot light scribbling fire at the edges, melting the world” is simultaneously the too bright illumination of perception and the inked text of Roberta’s tale, her own “scribbling” “melting the world” with the insensible violence of the telling. In the erasure of sensibility from these “edges” of vision, her words “[melt] the world from the center outward.” For where perception is critical to the sensibility upon which the telling of the world depends, the loss of perception destroys the world—and in destruction reveals that world as constructed through perception. Just as the violence of centering and totalizing constructions of the world can burn out marginal and/or particular perception, so can perception expressed from the (knife) “edges” burn out the world from its very center: “Ask a burning question, get a burning answer” (11). It is her contamination by the father’s omniscient violent perception with which Roberta struggles in her telling. Unable to escape the eye/I of the father, to entirely reveal and contain that poison she chooses the tale that is suicide.

The total insensibility of physical violence transfigures into linguistic inarticulation when she is locked in a meat saw room of a slaughterhouse the mob uses to “disappear” its victims. When she switches on the light, the human carnage she sees refuses to become recognizable. Her vision disintegrates as her mind is unable to understand the human jaw she sees cut from the body. She describes the jaw,

What I saw before my vision disintegrated was a double sink, very deep, a metal table with a drainage trough around it, heavy hooks for hanging, and a job someone left in the middle of. And the job's head was severed from its body and the head didn't have a face or a lower jaw. It had a horseshoe of human teeth, and some of the teeth had gold fillings. And that was what I stared at until something like ash began to fall inside of my eyes, an obscuring gray ash, a blinding that comes. An incineration of vision. I heard the father and the sheriff. Words. Words. Words, and someone was walking me outside. (225)

Again as she loses organized vision and sound too dis-integrates. No longer heard as articulation, words become unrecognizable “chunks,” the “Words. Words. Words,” that are the dis-membered body parts she sees but cannot perceive whole or articulate. Where vision dis-integrates, language gains materiality but loses meaning. The accompanying illustration shows us a small frame enclosing an upside down U of teeth. Between the white toothy arms of the “u” show faint ridges of skin that are the surface of the upper palate. This oval frame, encircled, as all the illustrations are, by the looping vines, is set against a dark background in which nothing else is visible. Where some illustrations in this book carry the entire page, this one picture is small, nearly surrounded by text. As Roberta stares at this object, a familiar image entirely decontextualized against an unmitigated background of black nothingness, words turn material and unmeaning. The reader cannot help but close on the horrific vision illustrated, even as the illustration holds off closure, holds vision tightly partial. Mirroring Roberta's loss of language when faced with this horror, the reader cannot simultaneously “see” this jaw *and* make sense of the words that surround it. A single jaw, so separated, can neither speak nor be spoken except as utter singularity, without perceptual and linguistic differentiation. It is “an incineration of vision.”

Over and over, faced with unbearable violence, Roberta's vision and hearing refuse knowledge, while the reader sees in frame after frame the illustrated faces of violation. The text turns from words of horror into an insensible space—and illustrations appear. There is no where for the reader's eye to go if she chooses the tale, mirroring the characters' own inescapable violent horizons. And, because these illustrations are caricatures, more comics than photo-realism, even as the reader is repelled by the violence, she is sucked into the vacuum created by the horrific iconics of this tale. While insensible to the words her vision has dis-articulated, and so unable to “handle” resistance, the father hands her off to the sheriff who then drives her into the countryside and tries to rape her. She kills him, setting off yet another loss of perception. Afterwards, she actively *seeks* solace in dis-articulation. Standing in close proximity to a passing train, she tries to re-create and escape into the very blankness of inarticulation she feels in the face of violence. She explains,

When a train is passing a few inches above your head you can't really think about anything else and there are times when a clear head is something I am most thankful for.

And when the train is gone, there is a kind of silence called a ringing silence. Something like the negative shape of sound. People call it a ringing but this word isn't quite right. I think it's more like the sound you hear when you are drowning, when water encloses you and keeps air away from you and sound moves differently to reach your ears. Would drowning be so bad?...

This ringing, this high-pitched sound was something I heard during my fever. My fever time in the trailer. The father told me to look for the sandman. Told me if it hurt at all I could cut a finger from his hand. He made so many promises to me. (233)

She compares “this ringing” that gives her a “clear [empty] head” to her “fever time” in the trailer. At that time, overcome by a systemic infection of the finger cut when she fights off the father (and that her father worsens—“taking care of” the infection with a crude amputation), the sensory world ceases to matter. The solace that she seeks in sensory overload is the disconnectedness of the final stage of “infection,” an utter de-particularity experienced in the impending loss of the sensory body. Now, next to the roaring train, she comforts herself in just such an overwhelming of perception—where in

total sensation she can give up the horrifying work of articulating (with) the dismembered jaw. Total noise becomes an escape, a desperate strategy of blocking totalizing perspective within an economy of violence where to perceive and to avoid perception are both to melt the world. In this economy of infection Roberta seeks escape from perception, from the painful, self-annihilating work of engineering perspective in her violent father's world. But she cannot long sustain this "comfort;" she cannot help articulating, for such articulation is the price of survival.

The pressure for the reader herself to "close" on this trail of detection in such a violently "contaminated" economy shapes a strong—but impossible—task. In desperation/frustration one closes on the violent promise of closure itself in a further undoing of the idea that we can "solve"—an undoing of even the detective genre itself. Meta-detection. Everything is so explicitly partial, text and illustration creating such immense gutters, that the reader becomes acutely aware of the dazzle camouflage of novel narrative, the violence of presumptive "wholeness," of total perspective. As the reader continuously tries to figure the violence within another's partial frame, she gains awareness that this is the experience of Roberta and the other teens who inherit, but also are subject to, the violence of totalizing (authoritative adult) perspective. The reader thus becomes aware of the pressure of closure, and aware that any such thing as "individual closure," of "independent" resolution, is impossible in the face of such an intense framing. And yet, such partiality, a particularity of perspective, is all one has to figure the violation.

And indeed, though violence is foreclosed in this narrative, in its explicit foreclosure of novel events, perspective is not. The comics frame, the intensely first person personal point of view of a character who is straight out of a comic book, a narrator at once Roberta, Clyde, Hillbilly Girl, Junior Bizarre, and a self-described dog, ugly and distorted, creates a vacuum for and pressurizes the reader's own particular perspective. There may not be any escaping the horizon of violation, but in her tailing for the "why," in figuring Roberta (the shadow), the reader begins to close on the inarticulability of IT, the bounding shape of the blankness and/or dazzle camouflage that

maintains IT as hidden. Unable to accurately vision and differentiate these moments of extreme violation, in Roberta's telling taling of the father she nevertheless links them metonymically, one to another. It is hard to locate a violence you can hardly look at, or tell a tale that melts you with searing heat. And because he is at the melting center of violence, her father is risky to *directly* locate. She says, "I didn't often look at the face of the father" (151) and later speaks of the difficulty of finding the "father wire" within herself. And so this is a tale mapping the blank spaces of insensible violence, the relations of the violent father tale.

Over the course of her violent journey with the father, Roberta learns to locate perspective, and thus the mobility particular "perspective" inaugurates, through the eyes of other characters. To others, the father tries to explain away his daughter's bruises and her apparent "inability" to talk (her silence of course a result of his own dire instructions) as defects of her own. However, a truck driver from whom they hitch a ride, "Syd," sees "right through" the father's lies. He speaks directly to Roberta: "Epileptic Mongoloid with brain damage to boot. Somebody dealt you a real bad hand, son. I'd fold if I were you" and winks at her (84). His wink is a revelation, at which Roberta feels a "sudden bolt of fear in [her] stomach." She writes "I'd never met someone who could see through the father before. I didn't know it was possible" (Ibid.). She is fearful in part because she "has no idea how the father would handle it if Syd pushed him." "But," she says, "Sid didn't." Nothing materially changes in this scene. Yet she is also fearful of the long term risk this new awareness of partial perspective entails. That someone can "see through" the father gives her a potential handle on articulation of the father's "dazzle camouflage," his "god trick" as Haraway terms it, that has been blowing her own particularity of perspective (Simians 191). This is a powerful handle that nonetheless puts her in grave danger. In separating her perspective from the father's, she of a sudden becomes consciously "subject" to his violence—her awareness of Syd's "seeing through," and the potential mobile perspective it implies, makes her suddenly visible as a fellow "seer," a contestant to the father-view. And indeed, now that she is aware of the possibilities of perspective, the father (for the first time) tries to kill her.

After this moment, she no longer doubts her perception that her father sometimes sees her as female, that her gender is more than “a technicality.”<sup>113</sup> For, just as one represented may exceed the icon of cartoon, or find oneself constructed at the edges of the injurious call, there is a constitutive catch in the father’s singular figuration of Roberta. That she is the daughter, not the son, is perhaps “a technicality” of form, but one which continually invites cracks in and corona’s around his figurations. After walking miles away from the scene of “The Lucky Chief Massacre” she is “rescued” by nearby townspeople and resides for a time at a Christian charity home. Her femaleness is a shock to the adults who rescue her “[b]ecause up until then, everybody thought I was a boy. When it turned out I was a girl, that was a surprise no one was expecting” (14). Roberta’s gender figures a powerful *dislocation* of perspective, reinforcing the lessons of the power and the danger of perspective she learns from Syd. This dislocation of perspective impresses Roberta as a powerful strategy of survival. Ironically, she credits this strategy to her father’s advice: “The father taught me. Against the odds, he taught me his wisdom: No matter what, expect the unexpected. And whenever possible BE the unexpected” (14).<sup>114</sup> Indeed it is her “taking” of his own advice that is the father’s undoing, and that finally enables Roberta to survive him. The “shocking” dislocation of perspective that her femaleness causes her rescuers to experience is the echo of the slight misalignment of her material particularity of being female with her father’s desire for a son. And in a novel in which the only mobility is figured through particularity or partial perspective this is a technicality that *matters*.<sup>115</sup>

The father himself initiates the cracks in his figuration of “Clyde.” For although he calls her “son,” when it serves him, he “names” her as female. He calls her “little girl “

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<sup>113</sup> Women are a technicality, one that both “gets men off” and makes them anxious. Women are constructed as outside/exceeding the frame.

<sup>114</sup> She even sews this advice into dozens of sock monkey dolls she makes while at the Christian home, dolls that are bound for “needy international children.”

when he wants to touch her with sexual intent. When first she reads this intent in his words—he says “little girl” as he reaches for her and hugs her to him—she bites him badly. Nevertheless, she doubts her own perception of this incident. He hits her for her resistance to his physical advances, bruises her face badly, and verbally denies her own perception that he has threatened her at all, much less that he sees her as female. He says, “You ain't even female to me” (75-76). And so she doubts herself, thinking, “But he had said 'little girl.' The train was a pinpoint on the horizon that vanished away. I thought that's what he said but I didn't feel sure. Ears played tricks. Eyes played tricks. Fingers and hands played all kinds of tricks” (76). Given this crack of doubt, the trucker Syd's accurate “sighting” of/through the father's dazzle camouflage offers Roberta an opening. Perception cannot be trusted, the body cannot be trusted. Words certainly cannot be trusted, for “He made so many promises to me.” All that's left is the tale—the particular telling that does not depend on truth, that un-assumes truth even as it locates the “x” that marks the spot, that is the end of the wire, that when pulled can unravel the love of the violent father.

From this point in the story, the narrative suggests that the father sexually abuses Roberta. She mentions her discomfort as he (secretly) watches her strip to change her clothes. And another section ends with “his arms reaching out for a certain kind of comfort” as he says, “Clyde. Clyde. I need you” (207). The text alludes to her “use” by the father for “comfort” as the events untold: “After all the things that happened, described and undescribed...”; in her fear that she will be unable to bear letting a boy touch her “There was information he could have used” (162); and in her intense desire “To show what happens to a dead man's pecker in the sun” (113-114). There are things still “undescribed” in this novel, things just barely hinted at—the sexual abuse of the

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<sup>115</sup> Interestingly, though it would seem her being a girl is a “physical” or in some sense “essential” technicality, it is a technicality as much under construction as her being a boy. For in order to avoid a sense of himself as homosexual the father constructs even “technically” male characters as “female to him” and thus (sexually) subject to him, the father. This is the case with the very first “cousin” he advises to disguise himself in women's clothing as well as of the character Gyrah who, because he has several penises, seems in the father's mind to abnormally and effeminately cancel out his own masculinity, making it just fine for the father to accept oral sex from him (and then kill him).

daughter by the father, the reason she bites when touched. The telling is bottomless, the cuts get made as necessary to ensure the survival of the tale.

“Little girl” is her vulnerability, and, her opening to act unexpectedly. The incongruence of this “technicality” sets in motion Roberta’s ability to both follow the father’s “advice” and simultaneously undo the smoothness of his plans. The father’s figuration of her as his son “Clyde,” the “Epileptic mongoloid with brain damage” is Butler’s “injurious call” that inaugurates Roberta not only as linguistic agent but presents her with a figuration she can then exceed as a particular (telling) *subject*. His naming of her to others as literally unable to speak, intensifies the particular power of her telling. I have framed Roberta’s desire to expose the “withered pecker” as connected to the telling, to the uncovering and exposure of the linguistic phallus. But the pecker here maintains its power precisely in relation to the very material sexual violence that, even in this most violently descriptive text, is not de-tailed, leaving it embodied but unspoken (unspeakable). Where other murders and violences are here “textualized,” sexual violence is left entirely material and so de-textualized. Drawing on this power of the unspeakable, that is, on its invisibility (inarticulability) so as to always “be the unexpected,” these (sexual violences) are events that she cannot/does not articulate at the risk of making sensible the particular and powerfully incongruent ways in which she exceeds the father’s explicit signification. Sexual violence remains perhaps the most profound violence of this story—the horror signed (singed) only at its edges. These violations are the blinding center of Roberta’s marginal power even and because they are and remain the most violent point of her inarticulation and vulnerability. Even as she would reveal the father’s withered pecker, she cannot expose the un-signed site of her own power.

Because violence cannot be (fully) imaged through articulation (and so cannot be subject to manipulation), perspective, the figuration of one’s relation to that impossible image, is therefore critically important in this “contaminated” economy. The “camera eye’s/I’s” angle figures the only possible mobility in such a foreclosed landscape. Indeed the aforementioned “hot light scribbling fire at the edges...like a movie burning up on the screen” is only one of many references to the movies in this text (134). Roberta and her

younger sister are horror movie aficionados and her world often seems to parallel or be allied with the constructed fiction of these films. Though movies and “real life” never entirely fuse for Roberta, in this coming-of-age-in-the-age-of-multimedia story she begins to grow up by gaining an understanding of all telling as perspectively created. Driving into the desert with her father she recognizes the landscape as the “actual” backdrop of a number of movies—a location for the tale: “I was in the valley of the monsters” (247). And, though she is still under interdict of silence, it is indeed through a new awareness of the camera's narrative eye, initiated by Syd and now remarked in the movie landscape, that Roberta gains an awareness of herself as an actor/teller with a potential audience to her life/tale.

During the final, most violent scene of her tale of travels with the father, she imagines an audience just out of earshot, as on her father's orders she enters a dark and frightening cave. Recalling the original movie version of H.G. Wells Time Machine she says:

The main girl in the movie is Weena and she didn't know the god she worshipped was created by the monsters. A god that opened its loving mouth and then sucked you into the meat saw room. There were very obvious clues that made you shout at the TV, saying, “No, Weena! No” and as I half listened to my father explain the Navy way of flushing an enemy out of hiding, I wondered if someone somewhere was yelling warnings at me. Someone watching the movie of my life and shouting, “No! No! Turn back before they eat your legs...” But I didn't turn back. (285)

The allusion to the innocent character “Weena,” who cannot perceive evil in those she is dependent upon and loves, parallels the opening chapter of the book, where Roberta mentions the ghoulish portrait of Jesus that her mother has hung over her bed—and of which Roberta is very much afraid. She says, “Some nights looking at him scares me so bad I can hardly move and I start doing a prayer for protection. But when the thing that is scaring you is already Jesus, who are you supposed to pray to?” (1). This, of course, is no thinly veiled reference to Roberta's relations to both her parents, neither of whom protect her, and both of whom frighten her and indeed harm her. The father is sending her, like Weena was sent, into the cave of the monster.

“Legs” figure mobility. Their rough equivalent in the telling would be narrative perspective. Neither Weena nor Roberta can “hear” the warnings (even as Roberta can now, at least, imagine them) because each girl’s sense of herself in the scene is without perspective: their narrative legs have already been eaten. Of course, the advantage of narrative legs over physical legs is that one can regain them, or at least gain prosthetic perspective in the (appended and conditional) tale. Nevertheless, this scene shows how constructing oneself as an *actor* does not (necessarily) afford *agency*. For though Roberta imagines cautionary voices, while she is an *actor* (rather than teller) she has little force to direct change. It is still her father who “tells” her to enter the cave and so “directs” the tale.

When five years later she finds her “tale can be told,” Roberta shifts from actor to teller. Now, building on her earlier education on how to “see-through” the father, she can “construct-through” the father. She gains an ability to “tell,” which is both the ability to perceive, as in “I can tell that...,” and the ability to construct narrative—telling. Indeed, it is when she returns home, completely stoned, from beginning to tell her tale at the reservoir, that she first notices how fakey the TV horror movie series introduction is:

The vampire rose out of his plywood coffin and said “Good Evening.” And while he announced the night’s presentation, I noticed an extension cord running behind one of the plywood gravestones, and I noticed he was standing on a floor that looked like linoleum and that his shoes looked Sears, and I was wondering how I could not have noticed this before...I looked closely at the vampire. It was the King’s Castle Carpet man. It was suddenly very clearly the guy from the King’s Castle Carpet commercials dressed as Dracula. Had the *Nightmare Theater* always been him? How come I never noticed it before? (111)

She asks herself, “How come I never noticed it before” (111)? It is as if in beginning to tell she has initiated a transformation of her perception of the narrative world, wherein she begins to see through the camouflage of the father’s tale, the dazzle of his medium, *as she articulates* it. After initiating her tale of the father (which, importantly, and contrary to the typical coming of age tale, does not finally arise from individual “initiative” but rather from *relation*, from a perception of others’ desire for “want of her tale”) she is re-drawn from the cartoon character of another’s tale to be (herself) the teller.

Roberta's new and telling awareness of the construction of movies is figured as the power and the potential violence of the adult perspective. She writes, "It turns out that once your mind gets expanded its very hard to shrink it back down again"(8). In Roberta's story, to become the marginal teller is to "expand," to "grow up," to move away from a perspective of victimization, or "shrinkage." But it is not a mov(i)e beyond violence, for, as in Maus (when the father fears being "rebuilt" by the tale), in assuming a telling position one becomes both visible and so "subject" and vulnerable—and, one also assumes potentially great violence in the tale one now wields. Now that she can tell, and move away from the father's totalizing omniscient vision, she runs into the problem of how to tell such that she avoids the violence of total relativism (of a relation to adult cynicism). Suddenly everything is potentially suspect, everything appearing fake. Even the landscape of "the journey" she takes with her teen pals becomes suspect: "The flat landscape moved behind him looking oddly fake" (301). One becomes powerful in the face of a violent constitution, but also more responsible for the violence therein. When the Maus father burns his wife's journals, and the artist/narrator of Maus builds success on the bodies of those who died in WWII, each assumes and participates in the violence of his own tale. And so just as Roberta de-tails her own violence, she constructs herself responsible, deadly responsible for the very perspective that has maimed her, "everything came out just the way I wanted it too."

Importantly, the reader can, in turn, "read" Roberta's perspective, can see her insistence that everything turned out "just as [she] wanted" for the particular and situated teen perspective that it is, not to diminish it, but to understand it as constructed in the detritus of a genealogy of violation. As Roberta says of a sea monster in a horror movie after seeing the polluted water of the "Dentsville Sound," "now that I saw the kind of water he hung around in, I understood him better" (105). Just as cutting off her infected finger does not heal her, externalizing the tale does not cure her queasiness, nor relieve the violence done to and by her. The infection is throughout her, is contiguous with her environment, a contamination that cannot "dry out," for its wet circulation is also her survival. It is not the erasure (or the cutting off) of the violence, but rather, a particular

mobilizing of violent perspective that “survives” Roberta. To become the teller, one turns from being the actor, blinded by the total and whole world, to being the speller, who has partial, and so mobile, vision, knowledge of the beginning, middle, and ending—but no power to effect change in that “polluted water” of the tale (so forgone).

Where reading “life as a movie” can sometimes distance and obscure perception of the “real,” in this novel, as in comics, this association with the “very fake” world of the horror movie offers Roberta a sense of perspective through which to figure the violence of the father tale. That she knows the desert through which she travels with the father (and later with her friends) only as a movie landscape, makes it no less familiar to her. On the contrary, it is through the movies that she is able to locate places where she has never been, and so place herself (find habitation) in the telling of the (ongoing) horror movie that is her life. The horror movie is another genre closely allied with comics, with monsters and superheroes. And here the “horror movie” landscape indeed functions comically, iconically casting space to illuminate Roberta’s particular “monster” tale.<sup>116</sup>

It is no accident that when she and the father enter the desert she recognizes as a movie backdrop, Roberta gains the ability to wield her new particular perspective against her father’s omniscient vision. She is now in the familiar territory of the horror movie—where the monster is always (at least temporarily) overcome. She calls the Nevada desert into which she and the father drive, “Dreamland.” The back drop for military bomb tests as well as movies, “Dreamland is Air Force. Top Secret. Located somewhere on the base that stretches on and on for miles, filled with such craters from the violent tests of all the interesting bombs that came after the A and the H. All the silent letters of the alphabet that exploded after these” (268). Here again, language is associated with inescapable violence, a landscape forever contaminated with nuclear waste. In a play on how—in English anyway—“silent” letters shape the sounds, the articulation, and thus the meaning of language, these exploding “silent letters” figure the violent and powerful

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<sup>116</sup> The emphasis of this as a comics landscape is reinforced through ongoing noises presented in comic strategy of all bold onomatopoeia to describe the sounds of military testing in the desert: “BLAM BLAM” (247).

outlines of inarticulation, the violated and inarticulate figures that we can see only in their explosions, their suicides.

Dreamland is a dystopia associated with the contaminated imagination, with creativity, and with the fakeness and de-naturing of the material world through perception and language. Of this de-natured landscape, Roberta writes, "I stared out the window and watched the land change like it had a mental illness" (170). Naming this space "Airforce" as opposed to "Navy" sets up the entire landscape as a metaphor incongruent with the father's violent "explanations." He is a navy man in the desert. His dazzle camouflage, so powerful at the coast, is, in the desert, not as powerful as the Airforce strategies that move underground with the invisible force of air:

There are many people who know about Dreamland but there are not many who know this: Dreamland is never in the same place twice. Dreamland roves about beneath the landscape. Sometimes it's under a dry lake bed, sometimes it is in the mountains, sometimes it roves off the base completely thorough a system of chutes and tunnels and natural underground passages. Dreamland is nowhere and everywhere at once. (268)

And so while "Dreamland" is as toxic as the father, he is here out of his element. Though Roberta is still in an economy of violence, and the violent horizon remains, there is mobility in "Dreamland" in invisibility, in the power of "silent" words to effect sonic shifts in the telling. Because of "all the silent letters" Dreamland can rove underground unchecked and unmarked in its destruction, in its inarticulate boom and reek, "everywhere and nowhere at once." With new awareness of the power of invisibility, even as she cannot "escape" the father, Roberta sets herself up as an invisible force, allied with the immateriality of the "silent" words she tries to contain, first by not talking, then, finally by "cutting past from present" in her own narrative suicide. Figured as silent, polluted as a "knife person," Roberta considers her own violence: "It's hard to say when premeditation begins....I am a very corroded person. Extremely corroded" (214). And she says, "My stomach was churning. It is true that I am a person with black pockets of evil and hatred in my heart. There are underground places inside of me. Many underground Dreamlands that rove. A cold flavor was in my mouth and it made saliva

flow over my lips” (281). In her invisible corrosion, she thus allies herself both with the father and with “Dreamland.”

“Dreamland” is also sleep, is the power of the eyes closed, of no articulation, of insensibility standing next to the roaring train. And where this tale figures sensibility as necessary to articulation, it also, in the particular technicality of Roberta's femaleness, figures the power of inarticulation, of insensibility. Even as the father tries to kill her for talking, he is just as fearful of her silent “insensibility” in sleep that he cannot measure or control. On their drive together, the father threatens to crash the car each time he sees, in the mirror, the daughter close her eyes: “You're the only thing keeping us on the road, son. You better not fall asleep or we'll both be crow meat” (49). For just as Roberta images herself in the face of the father, so he too seeks the (past) origins he feels he has lost, in her:

...”used to be a father would never turn on his own son. Would never sell the business right from under his own son. Used to be you could count on your old man not to cut your balls off and feed them to the squirrels. You understand what I'm trying to tell you here?” *His eyes searched me out in the rear view mirror.* (48-9, emphasis mine)

Seeking confirmation in the “rear view mirror,” the father plays out a reactionary nostalgic figuration of the past. Just as he seems to draw his survival from Roberta's “sensibility” and so needs her awake, she too is dependent on staying awake for her own minute to minute survival. She depends on an accurate and continuous “reading” of her father—she must (always) take him at his word. She writes, “[d]on't ever disappoint the father when he needs something. Ever” (78). To survive, Roberta must take the father's figures literally, she must anticipate the violent potential inherent in his figuration as her daily horizon. Roberta exists, as do the father's words, in his own violent figuration. By way of a *rear view mirror*, the father seeks confirmation of his figuration of the past in the tiny frame that is the daughter-mirror. Time is confounded. The daughter is here figured only by way of her confirmation of the father's past. The mirror shows him his daughter; and at the same time reveals him back to the daughter. In this mirror at an angle, father and daughter see themselves only in the framed and reflected images of each

other. This reciprocal figuration is the claustrophobic trap of total perspective where one's survival is constructed as fully dependent on another's perspective.

The father experiences this primary betrayal by his own father, a parental disowning, as an emasculation—cutting off of his own reproductive potential. So castrated, he looks for confirmation from (and in) his own progeny: “You understand what I'm trying to tell you here? His eyes searched me out.” But while his comment seems to affirm relation, it is figured (“*used* to be you could count on your old man”) as a threat and re-marks the foreclosed and violent genealogy that is (will be) both his own and Roberta's undoing. His search for Roberta “in the rear view mirror” frames the violence that has happened/is yet to come in her present telling. The passage marks a violent relation of parent and child, where the death (or sleep, or inattention) of one, means the death of both, and where such death is finally unavoidable.

Father and daughter are connected, mirrored in a violent familial severance that circulates across time. But to materialize this violent relation is, for Roberta, to sharpen the knife:

She gleamed. Seeing her made my eyes wet. The father was right, I am a knife person. Knife-loving blood circulates within me. There is a symbol for infinity, a line that describes a sideways figure eight. X marks the spot in the center. X marked the spot of recirculation. That is where you should plunge the knife to stop the blood of time past from infecting the blood of time future...how to cut one side of time away from the other. “ (230-231)

Gene-alogically speaking, having detected the “y”, the violent horizon of the father narrative, it is now time to undo the “x” that recirculates that poison. And so, in one sense, to cut past from future is to cut at linear time and deny its “progress,” its progressive glamour that functions to obscure a looping re-circulation of contamination. But to truly cut past from future time is to suicide, to de-materialize. The end of the story. Cutting at the intersection that marks the treasure of re-circulation, Roberta un-produces the body. X marks the spot, and the reader learns by the end (and in the beginning) that the spot is her.

Roberta detects and constitutes herself as the intersection, the re-circulation of violence. The tale of suicide figures an arrestation of the telling, where stuck in her own bio-graphy, the language of meat, the inheritance of the father's face, Roberta cannot fully realize the power of the tale as a perspectival imagining that has form outside the bio-body. She constructs herself (as) the bloody (te)X(t). Just as the artist/narrator's father in Maus replaces the present with the past in his telling, erasing the son produced during his life after WWII, so this narrator can have only one incarnation. She cuts past from present. In the particularity of the violence done to and by her and in which she survives, Roberta is remaindered (forever after) in the tale.

By the end of the novel, as Roberta's tale of the past comes to a close, her character (as a teller) begins to fade. She says of her present day journey, this is "...something I had been wanting to do and planning to do for so long. Take the whole journey again, re-trace the trail of the father to the very cliff edge. But the urge had drained away" (300). She had wanted to trail for the father, and had wanted to do it physically, "re-trace the trail...to the very cliff edge," but as she comes to the "edge" of her linguistic "trail," the characters who inaugurated her tale (in wanting) drown. It is as if with the end of the tale, the characters on which it depended (in its very inception as a telling) "drain away" as well. Vicky still remains, but Vicky had neither wanted to hear the tale, nor did she listen to most of it. Herself the non-stick teflon of "dazzle camouflage" Vicky can serve as no container, no holder, she is no "telling body." The telling slips away, enervating the teller.

But Roberta undoes her own end with the tale itself. She admits the contradiction of the telling suicide earlier in the novel when she says,

All of what surrounded me that evening in Dentsville is gone. Paved over. The freeway did come through. And there are days when I would like to go to Dentsville and see it, make sure of it, because I was not lying when I told Julie that bones crawl after everybody. And that fire can't do a thing about it. (132)

Whether the violent tale "burns" or "drowns" or is "paved over," its "bones crawl after everybody." Roberta is here referring to the horror movie where she and Julie trade ideas for how to stop "The Hand" from coming after a person. But she also alludes to how even

the “burning answer” to the “burning question” of “why,” the “hot melt” of perception and articulation at the center of violence, cannot eliminate the bones of violence that give shape and frame to the telling body—the body of writing.

As a child Roberta is caught in her meat body, the “son” of Ray. But, after she gains awareness of perspective from Syd, she gains for herself the powerful potential of being a particular viewer who can mobilize meat language, the alphabet burned into her, and so vision and scribble at the edges of the father's violence, even as it melts at the center. She gains (realizes) power from (in) (perceiving) her own incongruence with his figuration of her, first as a girl, then as “dumb.” For after she gains the dangerous blade edge of perspective, each time she acts against him he seems not to expect it, until finally the incongruence of her actions (with his figuration of her) proves fatal to him. When she first shoots him, “He was twisting...to see where the shot had come from even though he was looking straight at me when I fired at him. His eyes saw me but his mind refused the knowledge” (288). Indeed, by the time she kills the father himself, her vision no longer blanks. So that, although she does not articulate the violence of her time with her father for five more years, she is not inarticulate. Indeed, by the end of her tale Roberta is able to clearly image the insensibility of violence (if not the violent experience itself) and able to recognize in others when violence overtakes sensation. When Vicky's brother “The Stick” thinks he has accidentally killed his drunken father, Roberta remarks that “there is a certain spreading blankness that covers over the mind after you kill someone. A certain blank tide washing in, smoothing thinking into something of a horizon line” (273). Violence is the world flattened, washed of particularity. While reason may justify violence, violence itself is unreasonable, unremarkable, a “horizon line,” a bounding without content, the world “melting...from the center.”

When early in the novel Vicky names the (Roberta's) mother's threats as larger than life, as “very fake,” and figures the mother's stories of violent male strangers as “True Crimes. True Confessions,” she invokes the exaggerated cartoon world of the tabloid (61). Ostensibly, Vicky sounds a practical voice here, but, because she is also characterized as a shallow liar who repeatedly seeks attention through her fabrications

while Roberta has the bodily scars to “prove” her tale, Vicky’s doubt does more to inversely figure comics as “real” than to dis-figure Roberta’s telling. Blending the comic and novel genres makes the extreme violence of this novel at once fantastic and sensible. Throughout the novel, in the comics interchange of illustration and text, in cartoon character names, and in bodies that function as punctuation, the body is figured as icon, as living language, and, language is figured as alive and so subject to harm. The meat-body is language and tale; the blood is articulation, animation, the telling. Coming from several generations of slaughterhouse butchers, Ray and Roberta’s inheritance is as both knife people and meat people. They are constituted of bloody articulation into the vulnerability that is the body and the tale.

The end of the tale mirrors the suicidal preface, thus containing the violence in the internal re-circulation of the tale, further encapsulating the violent tale with an “ending” as remarkable as that pronounced by the artist/narrator’s father in *Maus*. Roberta writes:

And so if you are reading this, if you are holding this book in your hands right now it means my plan worked completely, I am gone. I am gone. I got my happy ending....

This is the End.

I dedicate this book to my sister, Julie.

**fuck** you roberta!!!

I **hate** you roberta!!!

where are you?? (305)

As in *Maus*, while this is an ending that takes itself entirely seriously in its claim of a “happy ending,” such narrative closure is belied by the tale itself, by the sister’s handwritten plaintive and desperate addendum that again re-frames. A gesture to the horror movie genre, where the hand still crawls, Satan’s baby still lives, the ghost of Jason rises again, etc., Julie’s annotation is a strategy of the comic book, the serial ending that implies its own frightening sequel: a character remains to write on the text contained, surfacing the reader/character who rises from the evil tale to presage another tale. It is “the bones that crawl after” but it is also an ending that implies *endings*. The end no longer singular, is now potentially multiple. Without a sequel in hand (and indeed, *refused* the possibility of a sequel: “only one Dewey decimal system number. Sadly only one”), this strategy again requests and requires the reader’s participation in the imagining,

either of further horror—or of change. For all that Roberta seeks to cut at the center of the sign of infinity, circulation is re-lived in the tale itself. Any settlement Roberta's "happy ending" tries to create is thus undone; her attempt at total containment is contested by these linguistic remains. "[W]here are you??" sounds the stubborn and plaintive and persistent call, the adherence of another linguistic creature hanging (on) even at the tale's end.

In establishing particular perspective, Roberta mobilizes the totalizing father tale, not as a linear progression out or away, but as a circulation, a bloody profession that suicides, that cuts at the point of "natural" re-circulation, a scribbling from the knife edges of an infinite intersection of lines that "melts the world from the center outward." At grave risk (with the certainty of a gravestone), the tale is set in motion. An investigation ghosted by a contemporary context of attention to teen suicide, particularly in the face of sexual oppression and violence, this novel tails the narrative suicide that ghosts the end of every tale to mark the particularly violent effects of such a narrative (ending) for the marginal writer. Here is the revelation of the father's material violence in words, of the use of words to contain the image of violation that exceeds and violently circumscribes the body and the body's ability to perceive, and of the violence of and to words and the speaking body in the process. Maybe you can't murder yourself, but for the marginal writer the telling is murder.

#### **BE-LONGING IN RANDALL KENAN'S VISITATION OF SPIRITS**

"[T]he divine command and the ruse of the demonic are intertwined."  
(DeVries on Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling 27)

Like both Maus and Cruddy, A Visitation of Spirits by Randall Kenan is a tale within a tale. Indeed, it is many tales within a tale. In Visitation, the present day Horace Cross enacts a sacrificial ritual to call up a demon who can transform him from a deeply unhappy teen into a bird. In this new form he hopes to be free of the human condition that so troubles him in his human body. The demon indeed comes to him, but instead of transforming him, it accompanies Horace on an all night journey around the small town of Tims Creek, during which, as in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, it replays for

Horace the stories of his own short life set in and against a larger community history. Like the other two novels in this chapter, this is tale of detection, a trailing tailing for the suicidal violence that is Horace's, as it is Roberta's, ending.

Suicide ghosts all three of these texts and is closely linked in each to narrative violence. In Maus the narrator includes a description of his own earlier suicide attempt, his mother's suicide, and suicide by characters during WWII, finally signing his own ending with the date range of his narrative work on the text. And, like Cruddy, Visitation is a novel exploring youth suicide. Where Cruddy explores the difficult relation of a white working class girl's survival in the face of a father's violence that inseparably binds body and word, Visitation concentrates on the particular experience of an African American gay teen trying to articulate himself in a small homophobic community.<sup>117</sup> The youngest of a long line of church-leading men, Horace has been raised in a strong tradition of sin and salvation and public achievement wrested from a history of slavery and disempowerment. For him, "The Word" is closely linked to the commandments of God. And according to the family narratives passed on to Horace, the Cross family (always) lives up to its name. And so, unable to find a voice that does not spell him in his queer desires as an irredeemable sinner, he seeks a shape outside voice through which to survive. Horace realizes that there "[t]here are no moral laws that say: You must remain human. And he would not" (12). Growing desperate in the face of the internalized and bounding rules and expectations of this tradition of the Word, by which he cannot live, but that he cannot live—literally—with/out, sixteen-year-old Horace creates his magic ritual, a spell to become other than human, and thereby casts his own destruction.

He casts for a form, for a trans-formation, that can accommodate, that can house, that can make material his sexual desire in such a way that he can survive it under an intense pressure of racism and homophobic religious upbringing. Influenced by superhero comics, TV shows, science fiction movies, and religious narratives, Horace searches for a way to transform his body. He seeks to become a hawk (a reversal of his sense that he is in his life hunted/haunted by his ancestors' morality) but the ritual operates instead to

demonize his desire. After carefully collecting and burning the ingredients of the spell he has devised,

[h]e smiled and reached into the mud, into the soggy sod where the ashes had melted, and in one motion smeared his face with them, as though to reacquaint himself with the sensation of touch. ... listening, listening for the voice that now seemed his only salvation. Salvation? Was that it, now? Beyond hope, beyond faith? Just to survive in some way. To live. (27)

Here, as in Cruddy, sensation and articulation are linked, as “in one motion” Horace simultaneously “reacquaint[s] himself with the sensation of touch...” (that he has blocked because of the suffering his gay desire has caused) and “listen[s] for the voice that now seemed his only salvation.” He seeks “the voice,” a narrative that will enable a transformation by which he can “live” in a sensory body. But to open himself to sensation is to articulate the very (gay) body from which he seeks escape. And, as the novel progresses, the reader sees that there are no narratives of survival by which Horace can constitute himself as queer in his community. The only voice he can hear is that which will destroy him. From the outset of this novel, Horace is enclosed, narratively caught like Roberta, in a claustrophobia of violence that is his every horizon.

Visitation is harder to define as employing a comics medium than either Cruddy or Maus. Nevertheless, the novel operates in a close relation to comics, both topically and in form. In Visitation “Comics” are raised from the first as a strategy of constructing perspective. The central character, Horace, is deeply influenced by the graphic form. The intensity of full-color superhero posters decorate his bedroom walls: “On the white walls of his room hung his many friends...the Sorcerer...his hands...surrounded by an electric blue glow...a huge green monster-man so muscled he appeared to be a green lump...a woman whirling a golden lasso...a Viking with long yellow hair and bulging muscles” (17). As the tale progresses, these colorful figures, electric blue, huge green, golden, and yellow, leak their bright and larger than life presence into Horace's everyday world. Science fiction and fantasy books litter his room. References to comics-influenced TV shows such as “Star Trek” infuse his thinking, offering powerful figurations beyond his

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<sup>117</sup> Both these texts arise during two decades in which teen suicide, and particularly gay teen suicide, has become a popular focus of scientific study (“Suicide”).

everyday world. Together with various “ancient” religious texts he finds, these stories help him shape the magic ritual he performs. And from its very title the narrative invokes the serial “visitations” of spirits that exist as sensible narrative characterizations.

The novel's epigraph invokes both Dickens' A Christmas Carol (not to mention the rest of Dickens' work as a serial novelist) and William Gibson's Neuromancer, a story that also draws on timeless spirits (albeit in an electronic-age web interface),

“Are spirits' lives so short?” asked Scrooge.

“My life upon this globe is very brief,” replied the Ghost. “It ends to-night.”

“To-night!” cried Scrooge.

“To-night at midnight. Hark! The time is drawing near.”

—Charles Dickens

A Christmas Carol

To call up a demon you must learn its name. Men dreamed that once, but now it is real in another way...

—William Gibson

Neuromancer

These citations spell a narrative that, like comics, can move *materially* back and forth in linear time, keeping “all times” past, present and future in play to spell a genealogy of the violation Horace experiences and seeks to end—first through physical transformation, and when that fails, through suicide. The epigraph creates this story as a detection for the “name” of the demon. And this is a detection with a deadline, for “Hark! The time is drawing near.”

Accompanied by the demon and all manner of fantastic and evil mythological creatures, Horace wanders around his small town remembering his life and imagining his own death. As he ranges the town boundaries, *places trigger times*. Thus the narrative very explicitly juxtapositions frames of past and future events *spatially*. Horace's life is mapped by the town in which he was raised. As a map, time is flattened and events are connected in a spatial rather than linear relation. As in both Maus and Cruddy, the reader holds the events, from past to future, all at once in the corner of her eye—a strategy McCloud claims for the comics form, writing

...in Comics, the past is more than just *memories* for the audience and the future is more than just *possibilities!* Both past and future are real and visible and *all around us!* Wherever your eyes are focused that's *now*. But at the same time your eyes take in the *surrounding landscape of past and future* (104).

This ever-present landscape of violence is paralleled by the ways in which particular perspectives of community members weave among Horace's own memories. Though it shares with the other novels an immediacy of perspective regardless of chronological time or geographic location, in contrast to Maus and Cruddy, this narrative is primarily in the third person. As such, the reader is privileged to tail for and spell the violence in a way that the characters cannot. But this is (carefully) not an omniscient third person narration, but rather a series of mostly third person personal narratives. Perspective thus remains ever partial, even as the pieces multiply. This juxtapositioning of sections from different points of view and in different textual formats—reminiscence and traditional storytelling, play scripts, an autobiography, italics and plain type—raises the very strategies of sequencing and positioning image and text that the comics form exploits. Difference in narrative form is explicitly materialized by the juxtapositioning of genres, so that “genre” itself is foregrounded, making its framing explicit. The differing visual impacts of these forms as well as the cultural symbology adherent in each, creates the forms themselves as characters with context and perspective. The placement, for example, of a “play script” within a novel narrative (as during conversation between Horace and his older cousin about sex and religion) showcases the constructed-ness of the scene, and throws the reader into “reading a play” mode, where she knows, and *keeps in mind*, that much of the play is missing—such as sets and costumes...and direction. Finally, the constructedness a play implies even as it is unperformed (potential performance here nascent in the script), offers this scene as potentially palpable.

This (conditional) text everywhere implies a missing and necessary graphic element. As Shohat and Stam discuss, not only is “the visual ‘language’” but also “language itself has a visual dimension” (45). And McCloud argues that in comics, when the text carries more of the story's weight, pictures are “free to go exploring” (138-162). Presented entirely as text, Visitation relies heavily on the graphic exploration of the

reader. This textual narrative of disparate memories, perspectives and genres that mill about this small town, tramping through and on the all too short life of its “son of the community more than most”—Horace—requires the reader create a graphic interface. One envisions—or actually draws in the margins, as I did—a map of the community by which to trace Horace's physical journey, a family tree by which to understand his familial web of relations and thus his cultural and emotional inheritance (and the lacks therein), and a multi-dimensional timeline by which to connect the events of his life and those of other community members. These mental (or drawn) graphics help make sensible the myriad relations implied in the narrative juxtaposition and repetition of these places, people, perspectives and events. Throughout, this textual narrative functions as a kind of literal hypertext by which the reader may both maintain and link all these “maps” one to another without specifying a single “path” of travel. In fact, the intensity of reader participation required to close on the disparate threads of such an “experimental” novel stands in stark contrast to the ease by which one comes to closure in the reading of a traditionally structured novel. This is the work of the reader required by every comic in some measure, a work made explicit and sensible by the form's material and sensual nature. Moreover, this longing for graphics surfaces Horace's violent journey and fate as one of perspective and sensibility—a longing for a “reacquaintance” with “sensation.”

Despite his powerful longing, Horace can “see” no alternative to the deadly spell he casts, “He had no alternative, he kept saying to himself. No other way out” (16). For like his older cousin James who returns to Tims Creek against the advice of Northern friends and colleagues, Horace cannot “get out”—Tims Creek is in him. As his uncle confirms, “He was a son of the community more than most” (188). Even in selecting the animal shape into which he hopes to change, Horace decides against non-native species, thinking to himself:

Cats had a physical freedom he loved to watch, the svelte, smooth, sliding motion of the great cats of Africa, but he could not see himself transforming into anything that would not fit the swampy woodlands of Southeastern North Carolina. He had to stay here. (11)

Despite being “African” American, Horace does not identify with Africa; he admires its “great cats” from afar. Compounding the violent severance from Africa experienced by his ancestors, his own family and community raise him to move “beyond,” to overcome, and indeed to sever himself from this oppressive inheritance: “He was Horace Thomas Cross, the Great Black Hope, as his friend John Anthony called him” (13). He comes to feel more at home with a group of White boys in his town than he does with other African American children. And yet, neither can he see himself beyond his community. This sense that there is no where else to go mirrors the novel’s repeated shifts in narrative form as it casts for a shape by which to house itself but can no where escape the violent forms that language takes in this particular telling—the forms by which it is, if it is to tell at all, necessarily bound. Leaving is not an option, no matter the form of body or word.

Without access to family narratives of leaving, Horace is unable to escape. And, failing in his effort to transform himself, Horace exorcises his queer desire, externalizing it in the shape of a demon. He casts himself outside himself:

So he listened to the voice, the voice that was old and young, and mean and good. He put all his faith in that voice...with hellish glee at his acceptance of his doomed, delicious fate, and he was happy, O so happy, as he cradled the gun in his hand like a cool phallus... for he knew the voice would take care of him and teach him and save him, and there was feeling, full and ribald and dangerous, and he reveled in the sensation and whatever felt good... listening for the commands of the one voice, the only voice...surrounded by fiends who quaffed strong ales as they marched along the fields, who danced about on the tree limbs and on the surfaces of streams all by the light of the crescent moon and fornicated and let blood from one another in bouts more violent than cockfights, smearing excrement on one another... and he smiled and joined in for this was his salvation, the way to final peace, and as he marched along aware of the gun that he held tight in his hand... he began to wonder—though it was much, much too late—as he pranced along alone down the road, somewhere in the small bit of his mind yet sane, he pondered: Perhaps I should have used, instead of a kitten, a babe. (28)<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> That Horace thought “perhaps I should have used, stead of a kitten, a babe” raises the question of effective narrative sacrifice. Unlike a kitten that operates outside the human symbolic order, a newborn human, is close to articulation, is “of the community”—as Girard’s theory of sacrifice requires—and yet still inarticulate, innocent of the violence of narrative. The “babe,” better than a non-human animal, fulfills both requirements of the sacrificial victim (innocence and community belonging) to forestall

This demonization constitutes his bodily desires as powerful, but as an exteriority they are ultimately self-destructive. In this casting, Horace moves beyond ethics into the totality of a “voice that was old and young, and mean and good.” In an introduction to Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling, Wahl writes, “Whoever has sinned has placed himself outside the general, but in a negative manner; he can no longer save himself, having lost all rapport with the general, he enters into rapport with the absolute. For ethics is insufficient to make one truly leave one's sins behind” (qtd. in De Vries 28). Indeed, Horace finds himself caught in this dialectic of Demon and God, where “the divine command and the ruse of the demonic are intertwined” (27). Having “sinned,” faced with bodily desires he can't seem to “transform” within the totalizing narrative that is his family's expectation of him, Horace turns (himself) to the demon. For he is finally unable to maintain the “double will” of Kierkegaard's “knight of faith” and “simultaneous(ly) affirm...an irreducible 'destruction' and 'construction’” that is his constitution in this community (29).

While I don't want to diminish the religious mode in play here for either Kierkegaard or Kenan (especially with the novel's dedication to “the inscrutable host of hosts”), I do suggest that for the African American writer who operates in some sense in a sinful and dangerous relation to dominant language and literacy, being able to forge a “double will” is not entirely unlike maintaining the double-consciousness of the oppressed. That is, to write from the margins, one must be doubly conscious of how the words one wields simultaneously construct and erase. One must be aware of both the dominating valence as well as the marginal pressure in order to step right, to step carefully, to avoid stepping on toes—or mines. Like the “knight of faith” the (surviving) marginal writer must articulate, not in some “mediation” between “construction” and “destruction”—for such an articulation could not have any force at all—but rather, in a *constitution of destruction*.

The reader participation that Maus and Cruddy accomplish through closure on partial depiction, Visitation accomplishes by creating the “gutters” of shifting

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violence—here narrative violence. The kitten is neither of the human community nor can it be

perspective, variety in narrative genre, and a demand for graphic imaginings. But where the other two novels use iconics and cartoon characters to engage the reader's own particularity, this entirely textual novel relies instead on a *refusal* of reader identification to accomplish the same construction of particularity in the reading. Like Scrooge, at the beginning of the novel Horace is not a lovable character; his early consideration of whether to sacrifice a human baby or a kitten for his ritual is repulsive and his ongoing treatment of friends and family is such that he essentially isolates himself from them, also distancing him from the reader. And so, in this re-casting of the novel form, the reader is denied from the first a simple identification with a central sympathetic character. Unlike Scrooge, repulsion for Horace only intensifies as, after performing the ritual, his affinity with violence deepens "in bouts more violent than cockfights, smearing excrement on one another... and he smiled and joined in." Within this foreclosed novel which refuses traditional pity for the victim, the reader is unable to "read from the inside" and is forced to bring her own particularity to the table. To reveal and contain the particularity of Horace's violation the reader must theorize and cast her own spell. For, from his "doomed delicious fate" to his decidedly narrow (and violent) sense of choice that has come down to whether to sacrifice a human baby or a kitten, Horace's life is violently circumscribed. The reader's experience mirrors the violence of Horace's alienation. In his totalizing (totalized) perspective there is no room for the (partial) reader to find herself.

Raised up to respect the "voice" of God—the Word as apparently consistently manifested in the voices of the church and of his family (often one and the same thing)—Horace seeks "one" voice that can "take command" of and responsibility for his life and his bodily desires. He seeks a totalizing narrative that can "save" him and set him on the way to a "terrible" and "final peace." The particularity of his sexuality divides within him the singular "right" perspective he has been raised to respect as the only perspective. The incongruence of his very eye/I with singular and divine expectation threatens to shatter a world he cannot imagine leaving. It is "much, much too late" for him to gain the power of particular perspective. And so, just as Horace is stuck in Tims'

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"innocent"—for it cannot be guilty of articulation.

Creek, the reader is stuck in a foreclosed narrative knowing from the very beginning of the novel exactly what Horace's grandfather's gun will be used for. Horace cannot survive the materialization of his desire, bound as it is spelled into a complex weave of sin and racism and community that materialize simultaneously. The voice that "saves" him here does so by "dooming" him. And so the novel bypasses the traditional narrative that culminates in the tragic victim's demise. The foreclosed ending side steps—though does not entirely deny—victimization.

As I have earlier discussed, this foreclosure of traditional narrative thus contains and reveals the novel form's suspension of disbelief in what is, already and always, a certain ending. The dazzling illusion of an "open ending" is a story in which Horace himself is brought up to believe, and is indeed the promise of a tale that his family sees him as embodying when they call him "the great black hope." This belief is reinforced as well by the sense of privilege he learns from his white friends. He "identified with their sense of entitlement, believing the world owed him what it owed them. Believing wholeheartedly he would receive it in the end" (237). Horace is caught in the discontinuity between a generation that never expected such an open world for themselves, and yet brought up their own children, their "Hopes" to expect it for themselves. This break in narrative belonging reveals parallel chasms: one in the gulf between projected ("hope" for) equality and past and current marginal inequality, and another in an absence of the stories that should be passed between generations. Brought up by his grandparents, Horace is missing his own parents' stories that might help bridge this narrative gap that materializes in such profound violation. Moreover, "the great black hope" is framed in the family narrative as casting for possibility in a (singular) context of racial inequity. Horace's sexual orientation complicates this hope; it is creative of a queer particularity the "Black Hope" cannot embody and hold forth.

The stories Horace does receive lack reference to any of the "sins" of his relations. They are stories of success—on the land, in church and in family—that are partial in content but framed for him as singular and total. The Cross family, it seems to Horace, has done no wrong, making his own sexual transgressions stand out and entirely

isolating him from the community to which he nevertheless feels bound. Of course, the family stories of success are belied by Horace's own presence, a child of parents who were first exiled or absent, and then dead, and who abandoned him to the care of grandparents. But Horace doesn't know these stories. That his own parents grew into lives of rebellion and exile escapes Horace's frame. He does not hear of his own family's sexual rebellions and enjoyments. When he tries to talk to his cousin James Malachai Jr. about his troubled sense of sexuality, the older relative brushes the topic off, admits he himself "experimented," and says "Horace, we've all done a little...you know...experimenting" (113). When Horace asserts that what he feels goes beyond experimentation, his cousin denies those feelings, saying he is "normal" and confirming Horace's statement that "it's wrong." Horace is thus denied the ability to envision himself in any of his family's narratives, for he knows and feels that "IT" is a very big deal to him indeed; it shall not pass.

Neither can Horace go outside his family to find himself in narrative, even though his friend Gideon appears to be surviving an openly queer teenage existence in the community. For Gideon is from a "trashy" family that Horace's own family discredits. Even Horace and Gideon's brief sexual involvement cannot confirm his queer place in the community. For indeed, Gideon's apparently easy presence in the town exists as a constant and physical reminder of how Horace cannot fit into his own family. Though it further isolates him, Horace breaks off their relationship; he cannot sustain the fissuring within himself that the involvement requires.

Absent the stories of his own relatives and his community the substance of Horace's spell to transform becomes a piecing of the tales that *are* available to him. The spell is an amalgam of cartoons and fantasy novels, of ancient Christian and early Native American traditions. It draws on cultural traditions uprooted from local context and made interchangeable. Potion ingredients from one culture are substituted those of another. This is a most post-modern spell, where anything goes. But this global "everything is relative" magic destroys him as certainly as the rigid local stories and traditions in which he lacks a place. And indeed, in Horace's loss of cohesive community narrative replicates

the loss of narrative imposed upon his ancestors during slavery.<sup>119</sup> In that sense this is a story of nostalgia and conservation. But in the context of Horace's "lonely inarticulateness" this is explicitly figured as nostalgia for a queer narrative of be-longing that has never (yet) existed. It is a nostalgia for a future.<sup>120</sup> In the face of Horace's own queer desire that exceeds the cartoon image of "the great black hope" projected upon him, the spell cries aloud for a mobile community narrative—a narrative that can recognize the bounding violence that is the horizon of the Cross family, and so offer within it the possibility of registering (marginal) particular perspective.<sup>121</sup>

This is the potential mobility that the ninety-five year old character Ruth inhabits. As an "outsider" who "married into" the Cross family, Ruth nonetheless finds herself circumscribed within the violent horizon of that family and the Tims Creek community. Her ability to mobilize a particular perspective of want enables her to survive a physically and emotionally devastating work and family life. Her late life visit to a dying friend frames most of the events of the novel. Sitting at her friend's bedside she remembers to herself how she survived, how, after a day of exhausting work, her depressed and drunken husband would come home late, stinking and wanting sex:

He would come home those nights, those blue nights already filled with cooking and cleaning and bone-tiredness...and even though she was too tired to move she would wake...hear him fumbling in the dark, through the dark into the room, and she would see him in her mind's eye: his face, not as she knew in her heart it was, with bloodshot eyes, stubbly half-beard, tired cheeks, and a lazy, distant expression, but she concentrated, concentrated on a handsome him, a him on a Sunday afternoon, a green spring, down by the riverside, with white happy eyes and a smile, this she

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<sup>119</sup> This is not to say that this imposition, the sundering of community narrative during slavery was successful, for indeed such narratives were anyway constructed, alternately encoded, enabling the (linguistic) survival of individuals, families and communities despite. Nevertheless, that loss, or rather, the violence of the attempt to impose such loss, and the pain and suffering inherent in that imposition, ghosts Horace's own inability to find himself in his community's stories.

<sup>120</sup> See Probyn's *Outside Belonging* for helpful discussion of how nostalgia for what one *knows* one never had can function to propel one into a constructive future of change. She contrasts this dynamic nostalgia with the conservative and limiting nostalgia for the "good old days" that obscures the fact that those days never did exist, or did not exist for many particular folks.

<sup>121</sup> When in his poem "Let America Be America Again" Langston Hughes calls for a materialization, even celebration of "The land that never has been yet," he turns narrative time upon itself, seeking in that nostalgic be-longing what is, he acknowledges, a narrative of a history that never was. This is the mobile power of narrative perspective to cast for and be creative of, in the present and future, a history immanent.

thought...and as he climbed into her bed calling Woman, in a vaporous mumble, she imagined the sun brighter, and the water cleaner, and his smile kinder, and when he touched her, grabbed her like a feed sack, rough, she imagined him holding her tender...and when he mounted and entered her with the sigh of a peeing bull, and the pain, the quick, quicksilver pain shot up and out through her loins...she tried with all her might to remember that it was love, and that she once loved him and that she wanted to love him and it turned into a prayer, a funny prayer because it would be lost in the rhythm that stabbed through her, that was both white and black, that brought her joy and pain, joy and pain, joy and pain, pain, but more pain, less and less joy, and hastened within her, inside her, as she finally did grab him...as he called to her... and she loved him, and when he was done, after the world had turned catty-cornered, after she opened, gave, sought, saw, comforted, protected, released, received, after she had been the beginning, the middle, the end, after she had drunk tears, wiped snot, licked sweat, when the world had been righted and all that was left, now, was a calm, still blue, he turned over, without a word, leaving her empty and cold, and commenced to snore. (131-3)

Ruth is exhausted. And, like her biblical namesake, tired from work all day in the fields, at night she still lays down “at the feet” of a man, in this novel, her husband.<sup>122</sup> He essentially rapes her. This is a violent encounter in the beginning when he “grab[s] her like a feed sack” and in the end when “he turn[s] over, without a word, leaving her empty and cold.” But without denying the violence of her horizon, and indeed, literally by embracing it, Ruth manages to survive and make of it a creative, if violent, tale. Here the “beholding” of a complex of violation (where both she and her husband experience and embody particular and differential violations) is turned to a moment of *being held*. As he “gives it to her” she turns into the violation to “take it” on; as he “makes her” she turns on the making. Through her own narrative of the rape, Ruth takes herself at her word. She articulates herself as the maker he is on. She refuses victimization even as she is violated. As she “opened, gave, sought, saw, comforted, protected, released, received”

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<sup>122</sup> I have mentioned my brother in this dissertation. Fair is fair, so here I also bring my sister to the text. My sister, too, is middle-named Ruth, and was subjected to sexual harassment by a professor in her chosen “field” of geology. Because the man was the only instructor for a required course, and because there was, at the time, no sexual harassment policy by which to articulate, much less seek redress for, the gendered violation she was suffering, she dropped her major in geology. Unlike either Ruth or Horace, as a white woman with many family narratives of escape she escaped to another field. She was, however, effectively silenced as a scientist, for she moved entirely out of the “hard” sciences into Women’s Studies.

she frames herself as active. From a narrative combination of her nostalgia, her longing for what once was (never) and the experience of actively touching another, Ruth ekes a creative longing that sustains her throughout her life.

Significantly, this memory of past creative survival comes to Ruth illuminated by the present time dying of a friend she did not have as a lover, though she would have liked to have had him. In the space of that present longing she makes room, takes room, re-members and effaces the insensibility of violation for her own shape as a maker, a player, a ninety-year-old woman at the video game machine. For though the novel begins with a scene in which Ruth repeatedly falls down, underscoring her physical age and infirmity (3-4), towards the end of the novel, after the visit to her dying friend, the reader comes to see this woman as the most flexible of the novel's main characters, a woman who at ninety takes up a child's challenge to play a video game while her companions grouch about their broken down car:

Ruth grasped the lever and began to play as she had seen the girl. In less than a minute her game was over, but the glee—that's what Jimmy decided it was—in her face was like a revelation...She threw her head back again and laughed the hearty laugh of a woman who has gained the right to laugh and cares not who hears or how they might judge it. (205-6)

That Ruth here "grasped the lever and began to play" is no thinly veiled metaphor for the active role she made for herself in be-holding her relationship with her husband. Not surprisingly, her male companions (Horace's aforementioned older cousin and his grandfather) are respectively puzzled and irritated by her behavior, her grasping of levers. That her face was "like a revelation" sounds Ruth as both terrible and illuminating (especially when it is a fundamentalist minister who sees her so). Unlike Horace, who, caught in a desire to read himself in the master narrative, cannot reconcile his desire with his world, in Ruth's face is read the very creative narrative of violence by and through which she does live. Stuck in "The Voice," Horace cannot make from his "outside belonging" a narrative that can simultaneously "be" and "hold," construct and destroy.<sup>123</sup> He cannot image the power of particular and partial vision. As his demon tells cousin James

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<sup>123</sup> See Probyn for definition and discussion of "outside belongings."

Jr. just before Horace kills himself, “See, he has this image of the world as it should be, and this ain’t it. This ain’t the world he ordered. So he thinks he’ll get a new one” (253).<sup>124</sup> Whereas Horace tries first to escape and then to exteriorize the violent marginalization of his desire, Ruth faces violence; it is in her face and laugh and “she cares not who hears or how they might judge it.” For judgement will come however one is revealed.

As Cruddy is a search for the “Why,” the “y,” the genealogy of violence that is the father as manifested in the technicality that is the daughter “X,” so this text too becomes a puzzle, a contained and recursive search for the particular threads of voice and voicing which can locate Horace and his death. Such revelation of the foreclosed narrative structure of the novel—as the story already written, the life already lived and died, the violent history that is foregone—refuses the illusion of a linear plot which will matter *in the end*, and instead it pressurizes and thereby energizes, fires and illuminates a particular genealogy or *particular process* of violation. Beginning at the end, so to speak, and then linking sections, not through time, but through the relations of people, Kenan furthers this “play” Horace finds himself in, asking “why was he here within this parody of a parody. So many questions. But he did not ask, and the spirit moved on...” (231). While Roberta asks after the “why” of herself, Horace imagines asking—but doesn’t. For when Horace *has* asked questions of his cousin James Jr. he is denied voice. And so, finally, he does not ask anymore.

His one-track sense of the almighty, of history and of his potential place in it confines his life choice to all or nothing. Queer, he cannot find himself in “all.” And so when he finds himself in the town cemetery as does Scrooge in A Christmas Carol he

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<sup>124</sup> The text essentially repeats Langston Hughes’ query, “What happens to a dream deferred?” Indeed, earlier in the text the following appears,

What does a young man replace the world with, when the world is denied him? True, the world was never his, but if the promise of the world, free of charge is suddenly plopped in his lap and then revoked? If the rights and freedoms of patricians are handed to him and then snatched away? If he is given a taste of a shining city with no limits, and then told to go back to the woods?/Horace had no alternative but to retreat. (239)

faces this “choice” for a final time. Expecting to find his own grave, at first he finds “nothing amiss:”

Then...he saw what he what he had led himself to see, the reason, the logic, the point. It was round and square. It was hard and soft, black and white, cold and hot, smooth and rough, young and old. It had depth and was shallow, was bright and dull, took light and gave light, was generous and greedy. Holy and profane. Ignorant and wise. Horace saw it and it saw Horace, like the moon, like the sea, like the mountain—so large he could not miss it, so small he could barely see it. The most simple, the most complex, the most wrong, the most right. Horace saw. *Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, said the prophet Joel, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.*

*But what will they see?*

People. The sons of the sons of the sun and the earth. Dark and bold and alive and free. (232)

Because this passage on prophecy starts by pointing out the significance of particular perspective in shaping what is perceived—“he saw what he had led himself to see”—prophecy (voiced vision) is *potentially* mobilized—for the reader. The question “*But what will they see?*” creates the potential for this mobilized perspective, where one might (prophe)see “People...Dark and bold and alive and free.” But, still seeking “the one voice,” Horace is trapped in “the absolute,” “the reason, the logic, the point” that is total, “both round and square...the most wrong, the most right,” wherein particular perspective is annihilated. For Horace, caught in the “absolute” narrative of sin, it would indeed seem that “ethics is insufficient to make one truly leave one’s sins behind.” Truly he cannot “save himself.” The narrative goes on to play, in fast forward, through an African American history of oppression, from slavery through hard times of the twentieth century, until “The people try to sing, but find they have no voice” (234). It is at this point that “Horace saw clearly through a glass darkly and understood where he fit. Understood what was asked of him./Horace shook his head. No. he turned away. No. He turned his heart away. No” (234). Unable to reconcile his queer desire with the “part” he is slated to play as prophet, Horace refuses to enter his “place” in history, refuses to shoulder what seems to be his responsibility to “speak” for his people who “have no voice,” and so turns his back on his God, finally unable to fit the role that would seem to

offer his “redemption.” Shooting the image of himself that now materializes to plead his (own) case, Horace opts for “nothing.” He literally murders himself (the suicide comes later) (235).

Horace’s belief in the ruling Word—“the one and only voice” that fixes and commands (as opposed to words which might, through partial perspective, tail the violence of the totalizing narrative that stalks him)—is finally his destruction. By the end of the novel, chronologically just before the violent ritual that opens his story, when Horace has lost one after another of his bids to belong—to summer theater, to a group of white friends, with his friend/lover Gideon, with a girlfriend, at school, in his family, and at church—he comes round to seek a final and desperate medicine in words. Unable to accommodate himself to (in) family and community narratives of belonging, he now seeks to exorcise his polluting and sinful desires in the externalization of his words:

So he wrote his autobiography, without stopping, one long suspended effort, words upon words flowing out of him, expressing his grief. *But he never read what he had written, hoping rather to exorcise his confusion.* So strong was his belief in words—perhaps they would lead him out of this strange world in which he had suddenly found himself. In the end, after reams and reams of paper and thousands of lines of scribble, he had found no answers. In frustration he burned it. (239, emphasis mine)

This excretion and burning of life text mirrors Horace’s final burning ritual enacted to raise the demon. In both cases, first in words, then in body, he attempts to externally materialize his sinful desire in order to be rid of it: “so strong was his belief in words.” But as Roberta notes in *Cruddy*, “burning doesn’t work, the bones follow you.” And, although the father in *Maus* burned his wife’s journals and letters to be rid of the past, she, and the violence of WWII about which she wrote, continue to ghost him. Indeed in Horace’s night with the demon, all of his past makes spirited appearance to haunt him—not in “auto” biography, but rather in “one voice.” “The Voice,” a singular and total demonization of the “one divine voice” he knows from his family and community, becomes all-important—it is the means to happiness, to sensuality. But subsumed in this “absolute” voice he cannot hear/read his (partial) self: “But he never read what he had written.” Like Roberta, he turns to his own words, but unlike her, he makes no room for a

reading—even by himself. From words, Horace seeks salvation, while Roberta seeks only a reading. And, the reading of one's own story is as important as the writing—but Horace has “read” only the words written by others, and never did he find/found his queer self there. Faced with a totalizing family and community narrative, throughout the book Horace in turn represses, externalizes, and demonizes his particular marginal voice(s). In the end, or rather in the beginning, he is unable to speak his particular bio/graphy and live with(in) it.

Elspeth Probyn (after Deleuze and Guattari) argues for desire that is not lack but a fullness of longing, and for queer be-longing as the potentially transformative desire to be other. For constituting oneself under erasure means materializing the erasure at its very empty edges, as a be-longing; not to get over it but to in/corporate it. But for Horace, for whom queer desire is damnable, the narrative splits into multiple voices contesting for absolute singularity that is a contest effectively as violent as the “one voice” by which he initially seeks to abide. In casting his ritual of “be-longing,” he desires to become other, to become the hawk, “a bird free to swoop and dive, to dip and swerve over” the land on which he feels “bound” (12). But in seeking a form through which he can entirely rise “over” “human laws and human rules” and hold the whole world in his whole bird's eye, “unfettered, unbound, and free,” he casts to replace one total vision with another. And indeed in so reconnecting with his body, “reacquainting himself with sensation,” failing transformation, he can only articulate the body in which he senses by the word that damns him. So embodied, finally lacking the partial vision necessary to cast himself, he can only *cast out*, in a horrific effort at externalization of his desire and identity. The autobiography burned parallels and prefigures a demon suicide. For when Horace tries to transform, his belief in The Word catches him, conjures him as (splitting into) an external monster, a narrative demon as powerful as the words cast to construct the spirit, and also as lethal.

Not unlike Spiegelman's staged use of the “real” (in carefully placed photographs and realistically detailed sketches of Auschwitz) to create a “reality narrative” or vision that, in its exclusion of and resistance to the co-creative reader, ghosts the total violence

of the camps, Kenan's final strategy is to spell out Horace's suicide "realistically" in graphic, sensual, factual detail. In stark contrast to Horace's unstable and fantastic nightlong tale of violent demons, Kenan now writes:

This is a fact. The bullet did break the skin of his forehead, pierce the cranium, slice through the cortex and cerebellum, irreparably bruising the cerebrum and medulla oblongata, and emerge from the back of the skull, all with a wet and lighting crack. This did happen. The blood did flow, mixed with grey brain matter, pieces of bone and cranial fluid... These are the facts... the facts are enough, unless they too are subject to doubt. (253-4)

Indeed, "...the facts are enough, unless they too are subject to doubt"—which of course they are, especially in a fictional novel, and particularly in one in which perspective seems to endlessly multiply. The final section of the novel "Old Gods, New Demons," in which these "facts" appear, is prefaced with a dictionary definition of the word "subjective." Placing the entire narrative into the conditional mode fully mobilizes perspective at the very moment the central character is fully, fixedly, destroyed. First revealing the false openness of the traditional novel with the foreclosed ending, Visitation now catches us—Brecht-like—in a further suspension of the disbelief that the novel form, foreclosed or not, fosters. In this way, the truth of a fiction, and indeed the truth of any "history" comes under scrutiny as a narrative fiction, setting perspective loose to tail—partially. This meta-questioning of frame and content is congruent with the comics strategy that in both Maus and Cruddy explicitly foregrounds the frame to reveal the violence of total vision and narrative. Facts may be facts, but when totalized, they are as destructive as bullets. In the face of the violent horizon, partial perspectives offer mobility. Haraway argues that "The split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable; the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history" ("Persistence" 195). However, while powerfully mobile, this is also a dangerous self that threatens at every turn to de-compose. Indeed, Horace is not (here) resurrected.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Writing of a colleague whose inhabitation of "split and contradictory [selves]" led to mental dissolution and insanity, Patricia Williams affirms the power of making visible one's contradictory selves but urges caution, "I try not to wear all my contradictions at the same time" (196).

The slippage of time in this text, which compresses years of history, often out of chronological order, into one demonic night, reinforces this final reminder about stories. That is, while the text reveals and contains violence, making visible and available a particularity of violation experienced by a gay African American small town Southern Christian boy, and while the violence is a foregone conclusion, we must also not be stuck in the “facts,” or risk reifying that violation. The passages from A Christmas Carol and Neuromancer that open the novel materialize timeless spirits, both old and new, that mobilize all-time to spell change. And, in the last pages of the novel, Kenan turns to a past of “once upon a time” to conjure a historical narrative not of demons and wargs and fairies, but of humans, human in their sensual belongings,

It is good to remember that once upon a time hands, human hands, plucked ripe leaves from stalks, and hands, human hands, wrapped them with twine and sent them to the fire. And it is good to remember that people were bound by this strange activity, this activity that put food on their tables and clothes on their backs and sent their young ones to school, bound by the necessity, the responsibility, the humanity. It is good to remember, for too many forget. (257)

Placing history into the fairy tale genre of “once upon a time” *and* aligning it with spiritual prophecy unlocks it from its confinement in the past, to mobilize it as infinitely available in story. For while the content of this “Requiem” is tobacco, the non-fiction history of tobacco farming and manual labor, the form it takes places it in the realm of storytelling, of re-membering—another “binding” human activity and labor. “The story” of Horace re-members (t)his broken work; it reminds the reader that if narrative labor is marginalized for any (particular) one, or if that labor constructs the tale of the past merely as “historical fact,” thereby placing it out of present (and future) reach, then “too many forget” and the result is “lonely inarticulateness” and certain “doom” for those who cannot find themselves, except damned, in such solitary and singular articulation (230, 28). So the foreclosed narrative opens the violent tale—into a “once upon a time” of the past. Herein, history is foregone. It is not (necessarily) a conclusion.

Neither Cruddy nor Visitation is your usual coming of age story; the children do not come of age, but rather die. Many a narrative celebrates the birth of a child as itself

embodying renewal and hope. But at best, birth merely inaugurates the signage of hope and renewal, re-sets the tale, and spells a promise. And, in fact, under a violent horizon, birth can sign a threat of further violence as much as any easing thereof. In Horace's visions of the past he sees that the people "will bring forth children who will die, who should die, rather than be born into this wicked world...and the children of the children of oppression, my Lord, cut themselves off and crucify themselves" (233-4). Simply biologically growing to maturity and reproducing cannot ensure the survival of a community or its individuals where violence is everywhere in time and space the given horizon of one's existence. And so, this is a story of the significance of a *narrative* coming of age, of the material effects where that process fails, of how this process is in no way aligned with physical time and biological maturation. For in this novel, rather than the younger generation offering hope, it is the older generation that must come to terms; and, as Ruth does, take their shapes as makers/tellers in a winter field of sorrow and suffering—tailing violation unto the queer faces of their suicidal off/spring.

### **STRIPPING MÖBIUS**

At the end of each novel the characters die; they are undone. Readers know that this will be the case every time they pick up a book of fiction; but they read anyway and anyway lose the characters, both heroes and villains, in resolution after resolution. Indeed, in the gutters that lie at the edges of the tale's frame the reader herself ends these characters. Horace's demise in Visitation is the fate of every character, of every narrator of every tale, of Roberta in Cruddy and of the artist/narrator in Maus. It is the function of the tale to end the narrator. For each of these tales, such a "violent" certainty is explicitly figured as the horizon in all directions. But rather than figure a universal victimhood, such a revelation of foreclosure enlivens and mobilizes perspective. Relieved of a suspended ending, positioning within the tale and of the frame (together, *the telling*) comes to matter. The tale becomes one of particular livings, and of particular violations of those lives. These tales raise the ethical dilemma faced by the marginal writer seeking a linguistic living in what is, as far as words can tell, an economy of violation. For in the language of meat, when violence seems the outcome whatever one chooses and one finds

oneself the center of the re-circulation of that poison, one may, then, be immobilized in form, one's verb "conjugated in a single sentence." Or, one can take the father at his word, "be the unexpected" in the face of his violent figuration, and open the chasm of that contradiction—and so be violently *taken* at one's own word.

In these three texts, the marginal writer creates the vacuum of violent identity, a prosthetic constituted for the purpose of tailing violation—the cartoon "stalking goat."<sup>126</sup> For the most part, the texts don't simply re-present violence, nor do they function as sacrifice "in place of" material violence in order to neutralize it. Rather, they cast iconically to frame the space of linguistic violation, bounding it to reveal marginal particularity within an "inescapable horizon" of violence. The reader projects into this linguistic space (as a measure) of the particular force of the violence that is the peculiarity of her own horizon. And next to the iconic face, iconically framed, even "reality" can come to operate as cartoon. For as Maus frames it, there can be no "real" depiction of the violence of Auschwitz even and especially because "it was not"—perspective was there annulled and violence totalized. The text of Maus includes a photo of the father in "camp uniform." The father calls it a "souvenir" he had made after the camps, to "realize" his experience there. Contained as tourist travel, the photo serves as a macabre play on the "vacation" of going to camp. The father has, of course, no "real" picture of himself there—there is no imaging that violent "reality," and so the "fake" photo, a souvenir, stands in as cartoon. It serves, like the volumes of Maus themselves, as an iconic placeholder for the violent tale. Likewise, the "facts" of Roberta's tale,

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<sup>126</sup> The stalking goat, importantly, differs from the sacrificial goat in the perspective with which it is deployed. Sacrifice, as Girard defines it in Violence and the Sacred functions as a community outlet to "bleed off" the build up of violent tension brought on by mimetic contest. Being innocent and of the community, but sacrificed with complete unconsciousness of its relation to community violence, the sacrificial victim is thus not in any way associated with responsibility for the violent contest itself. Thus, Girard argues, sacrifice is a safe way to de-fuse potentially violent of tension without danger of re-marking and further escalating it. That is, the pure sacrifice works to forestall violence precisely because it is itself perceived as innocent of violence. How this might function in literature, in lives lived in linguistic violence is not clear: Can one find an innocent book to burn? The stalking goat seems to me a more useful figure to project in (surviving) spelling violation. It is an explicit casting to snare and make visible the force of linguistic violation without entirely destroying the one who takes on the reading thereof. It is a conscious rather unconscious casting for violation with the desire to sound the shape of violation rather than to render it temporarily inert or invisible.

“described and undescribed,” the “details” of her suicide, are never so important as the trail of violent relations her story tails. The maps of her neighborhood, and of her journey with the father, in fact *erase* photo-detail to instead materialize a space that is all about relation and trajectory. And so the “facts” tell the reader nothing *about* Horace’s suicide. The facts, “themselves subject to doubt,” have no valence without the implied web of narrative loss and “lonely inarticulateness” his death re-marks. Facts (alone) cannot “spell.”

And so perspective itself is framed as a prosthetic placeholder for violence; for material violence *lacks* perspective. Like the sublime, speakable only in its recuperation, in retro-spectacles, one knows violence only in its ghostly articulation (and/or discourse); it is, in its moment (which is no-time), unspeakable. The paradox of the violence of articulation is that it, like material violence, is unspeakable. One re-presents material violence through articulation in order to project and “see” it. But to “see” violence is, in that vision, to de-nature it; to pith it. To leave only its “harsh husk.”<sup>127</sup> How does one re-present the violence of that articulation itself, the forceful potential of the tale of violence without destroying the teller? I have been framing what these authors do as a detection, a use of the comic frame and cartoon to draw deeply on the participation of the reader “closing” on violent articulation. In addition, I have argued that the materiality of that pictorial and textual juxtaposition, the interleaving on the page of what are explicitly icons, rather than realistic images, offers particularity of perspective, a material presence (in the frame), that nevertheless keeps past and future frames “always in the corner of one’s eye.”

Another way to think about comics detection is as a material articulation of “prospecting” for violence. Rather than retro-specting, one pro-spects, ‘spects for what is not only *already*, but also still *is*, and not only that, but is *ex-pected and possible*—or else why would one look at all? But in pro-specting, as the metaphor implies, the risks to land

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<sup>127</sup> In the next chapter I discuss the poetry of Marlene Norbese Phillip who uses this term “harsh husk” when spelling the violence of inarticulation for African-Caribbean speakers and writers in her poetry (*She Tries* 88).

and people are potentially very material.<sup>128</sup> As Barry figures in the relation between Roberta and her father, violence can multiply indefinitely in articulation that is figured in the mirror. Roberta watches the father carefully in the rearview mirror. As she says elsewhere “I rarely looked directly at the father”—but in the context of the violent narrative, neither can she take her eyes away without risking her life. She figures this relation through the mirror because she cannot bear, though she does bear in her very body, what she sees: the world melted at its very center. In the mirror turned slightly, in marginal particularity, an a-symmetry, rather than in total/real/direct reflection, one can (“once upon a time”) look forward into the rearview mirror, and instead of the self, see there the violent relation of one’s figuration “re-built.” As her friend Wesley says, “The son shall bathe his hands in parent’s blood, and in one act be both unjust and good” (299). In that reflection of narrative *relation* the artist-narrator of Maus fails to know his father and thereby survives himself his tale; Roberta sees herself figured a knife loving person in words and body, and uses that power she articulates to “cut past from present” in the tale that suicides; and Horace, at a loss to figure himself for want of stories, relationships that have sunk or been cast adrift in the name of heaven, is finally unable to sustain himself in either word or body. Prospecting for the violence of one’s own articulation, one sees there oneself reflected back in another’s eye. In relation, so comically framed, one becomes the pupil, the “I” learned of her own violations.<sup>129</sup>

These foreclosed novels of detection constitute a virtually material world that through explicit framing and iconics pressurize questions of (surviving) writing from the margins. Maus and the less obviously comics form novels Cruddy and Visitation are narratives that alternate between present time and historical past to create frame stories where the frame rarely recedes to the (invisible) margins, and is itself “the story.” These tales within tales cast narrative time as an elastic space that allows for mobile and non-

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<sup>128</sup> Here theories of post-coloniality offer ways to think about the relations between what is past and the violence to people and their environments that still re-mains at the center of a living.

<sup>129</sup> Jacques Lacan’s work on mirrors and the formation of identity is, of course, implicit in this discussion, and I am aware that there is much more here that might be put in conversation with Lacan and other psychoanalytic theory. However, it is not within the scope of this project to undertake that larger discussion.

linear genealogical spellings and readings, “situated knowledges”—and thereby survival—of violent narrative margins. These writers, creatively spelling, presuming particularity within a horizon of violation, cast mœbius strips (the father rebuilt, the whale penis, the cool phallus) of past and future, matter and language, within which, nonetheless, therefore and thereby, is a living, a survival of the creative body symbolic. Immanently finite. Alive.

**CHAPTER 4: PROPHECY (ART AGAINST EMPIRE)**

And did those feet in ancient time,  
Walk upon England's mountains green:  
And was the holy Lamb of God,  
On England's pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem Buildd here,  
among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold:  
Bring me my Arrows of Desire:  
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!  
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I shall not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:  
Till we have built Jerusalem,  
In England's green and pleasant land.

...

**Would to God that all the Lords people  
were Prophets.**

—Numbers XI. ch 29 v.

—Milton, by William Blake (Complete 95-6)

Dies irae dreadful day  
when the world shall pass away  
so the priests & showmen say

what gaunt phantoms shall affront me  
my lai sharpville wounded knee  
arthur kissorcallatme

to what judgement meekly led  
shall men gather trumpeted  
by louis armstrong from the dead

...

& his record page on page  
forever building he shall scan & give each age  
sentences of righteous rage

...

mighty & majestic god  
head savior of the broken herd  
heal me nanny cuffee cudjoe  
grant me mercy give me sword

day of fire dreadful day  
day for which all sufferers pray  
grant me patience with thy plenty  
grant me vengeance with thy word<sup>130</sup>  
—"Irae," by Kamau Brathwaite (Middle  
Passages 119-20)

**i prophesay**  
(Ibid. 52)

...with the fate of a slingshot stone  
loosed from the catapult pronged double with history  
and time on a trajectory of hurl and fling  
to a state active with without and unknown

<sup>130</sup>In another published version, the final word of this poem is "sword" instead of "word." The two words seem to be somewhat interchangeable—as they are for Blake at times. Also interesting to note is that Brathwaite moves from tercets to quatrains. Blake, drawing on the Bible, found numbers very important. Threes were never indicative of anything "good" because he worked in contraries, dialectic. Thus fours were indicative of a kind of completeness or healing, with things in their proper places and everything in full view as the four heads of the "living creatures" in Ezekiel and Revelations—the final judgment to which Brathwaite's poem also alludes.

**i came upon a future biblical with anticipation<sup>131</sup>**  
 —"She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks," By Marlene  
 Norbese Philip (Tries 84)

Prophe/see. Prophe/say. Future anticipation. Vision and revelation.

Groundshaking, groundbreaking, an impellation of future in prophesy past present. Precipitating the participle of a linguistic living. Poet packing pain promise "from the crippled brambled pathways of his vision/to the certain limpen knowledge of his nam" (Brathwaite 54). With "tongues shrunk up" (Blake Complete 218, Plate 66: Line 37), "knives through their tongues" (Brathwaite, Middle 17), and the "blackened stump of a tongue/torn/out/withered/ petrified" (Philip, Tries 92), William Blake, Kamau Brathwaite and Marlene Norbese Philip reject a linear tradition of history as obscuring and silencing and immobilizing the material dynamic of their creative lives.<sup>132</sup> "Rock'd by Year, Month, Day & Hour" such linear systems of empire create "a Satanic world of rocky destiny" (Blake, 208, 58: 51).<sup>133</sup> Violently cutting/cut loose/fallen from origin, these poets enact mobile and apocalyptic prophesy: "the Past, Present & Future, existing all at once" (159, 15: 8) "where past means present struggle/towards vlissengens where it may someday end" (Brathwaite, 52-3), and where "in the history of circles/each point lies/along the circumference/diameter or radius/each word creates a centre/circumscribed by memory...and history/waits at rest always//still at the centre" (Philip, 96).

To explore the particularities of these creative materializations, to read "with their grain" ("with love"?) and against the temporal and spatial gaps a tradition of enlightened linear scholarship creates between them, I here (sitting pretty in a café edging city) collapse time and space to trace an aesthetic—a virtual "borderland" if you will—between the geographical "center" of empire in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry of Englishman Blake and the "peripheries" of empire in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>131</sup> The "state active with without and unknown" sounds very much like one of Blake's "states" of existence, from the vegetative existence of our material world to the infinitely flexible state of the creative imagination (I simplify here—he has elaborate names and symbologies for the several states he articulates). And Philip's "biblical with anticipation" certainly appears to allude to the tension and forward momentum of judgement day.

<sup>132</sup> I order the poets based on their birth dates.

<sup>133</sup> "Rational Philosophy and Mathematic Demonstration" are "the awful Building" glorified "As a Mighty Temple" in Chapter 3, Plate 58, lines 13 and 22 of Blake's Jerusalem (Complete 207).

poetries of Caribbean Brathwaite and Caribbean-Canadian Marlene Norbese Philip. In “The Lagoon” Blake aphorizes, “Empire Against Art,” en/gravating the stifling effects that he felt empire had on artistic creativity (274). But for Blake, Brathwaite, and Philip the oppressive linguistic friction that empire creates, *itself* offers a forceful, and indeed violent, aesthetic of *Art Against Empire*. I begin by considering how the frictive aesthetics of empire, from which these three artists—working centuries and continents distant from each other—create, finds intersection in The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano.

Born twelve years before Blake, nearly 200 years before Brathwaite and Philip, Equiano was an Ibo African kidnapped and sold into slavery as a young boy. His life reads, as does his writing, as a complex of resistance and complicity that was and is the lot of a literate subject of empire—especially the literate slave.<sup>134</sup> Eventually buying his own freedom at twenty-one, Equiano had wide and various experiences—from plantation field work to the work that was his primary living—a sailor on merchant ships carrying goods and sometimes slaves between North America, England and the West Indies. Materially complicit in the slavery he resisted, he was as well a full participant in an age of conquest and “discovery,” even accompanying an expedition to the Arctic looking for the elusive Northwest Passage. Born in Africa, resident for a time in the West Indies, settling finally in London where he worked with the abolition movement, with his own body Equiano traces the triangle of slavery and trade that was “the Black Atlantic.” He early learned to read and write in English, and his memoir, The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano published in 1789 (the same year as Blake’s Songs of Innocence and Experience), is considered a foundational abolitionist slave narrative and was widely published and read in both England and America.

While he came to hate the West Indies for the harsh treatment he received there, Equiano, text and person, offers a look at an aesthetic developing under empire which, like that of Africans who stayed in the West Indies, straddles two distinct languages and cultures (for Equiano, specifically Ibo and English). The very title of the book reflects

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<sup>134</sup> See earlier chapter “Possession.”

this cultural split, including both Equiano's African and European personal names.<sup>135</sup> The prominence of both names show how Equiano's cultural identities, African and European, remain differentiated, neither subsumed to the other: though the European name is slightly larger, the African name comes first. While the narrative centers on his experiences with Western European culture, he takes time to detail many of the customs of his Ibo people as well, relating memories of his life among them. And to the end of the book he remains connected to his past, his childhood heritage, through continuing concern for the fate of his family and friends left behind in Africa. Here, "The African" connection, the landscape of history and memory which forms the basis for a West Indian aesthetic that can be re-vitalizing and transformative—an aesthetic which later Brathwaite feels has been submerged under the ocean of empire<sup>136</sup> and Philip identifies as the lost mother-tongue in a "culture of silence"—is a landscape still quite "visible" and "hearable."

Also visible is the struggle against the oppressive effects of the linguistic and cultural domination under empire and slavery that Blake writes to resist.<sup>137</sup> When Equiano says of the Bible, "I was wonderfully surprised to see the laws and rules of my own country written almost exactly here; a circumstance which I believe tended to impress our [Ibo] manners and customs more deeply on my memory," he lends veracity to abolitionist claims for a universal humanity while keeping a comfortable (for Europeans) line between the two cultures (83-84). But even as "manners and customs" held in common underscore the abolitionist theme of *universality*, with its attendant (often brutal) erasure

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<sup>135</sup>Offering even more complexity, the added label "The African," holds the tension of a narrative working to be exemplary of a universal condition—slavery—while speaking very much from an individual perspective. For an excellent discussion of the tension between the universal and the individual during the "romantic" period, see Stephen Cox's *The Stranger Within Thee*.

<sup>136</sup>See Bridget Jones' article "'The Unity is Submarine': aspects of a pan-Caribbean consciousness in the work of Kamau Brathwaite" for a general exploration of Brathwaite's work to found continuity in a Caribbean aesthetic.

<sup>137</sup>Equiano places himself as "example" beyond objectification as "case study" and subtly resists the loss of African cultural identity that his "conversion" to European culture and religion might imply. In the literature of teaching English language and culture to children who speak other "primary" languages, "replacement" of one language and culture by another is called "subtraction learning." This learning of English at the expense of a primary language used to be seen as a bad thing when the focus on education for these children was to achieve bilingualism. The tide of public opinion and policy has, in the past decade, obviously shifted somewhat on this issue (English Only anyone?).

of particularity, Equiano locates commonalty here through a reinscription of *difference*, or, more precisely, *pressure*. Such pressure is frictive, productive of heat, indicative in text and travel of force and dynamic. As Brathwaite says of African postcolonial culture through the figure of jazz in “Duke Playing Piano at 70, these are “cracks that flow” (Middle 21). For in this passage, Equiano’s European learning superimposes itself upon, rather than replaces, his African cultural identity—and vice versa. His European literacy enables him to read “laws and rules of [his own African] country written here” on the pages of the (European) Bible which in turn more deeply impresses his African culture of origin. This loop of superimposition can be read as a preservation of the mobile and continuous currency of a dynamic, contemporary culture.<sup>138</sup> As revealed in both Equiano’s writing and his merchant marine work, the Ibo are a culture not separate from, nor merely co-existent with European culture but actually connected to it, both through common “laws and rules” and in the very travel of Europeans and Africans across the Atlantic. Cultures touch in Equiano: Blake’s Europe, Brathwaite and Philip’s African and West Indian heritage, “impress” one upon another, and even *emphasize* one another “more deeply.”

Subtly resisting a “subtractive” enculturation by English language and culture at the same time he uses and “mines” both for their power as the currencies of the empire which enslaved him, Equiano creates a pressured creativity—early threads in a long tradition of African-based West Indian cultural aesthetics drawn through oppression by and resistance to the English empire.<sup>139</sup> Of his life among Europeans before he learns to read and write, Equiano remembers

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<sup>138</sup> And “currency” might be read in its monetary signature here too. In an essay exploring the connections between Romanticism and Capitalism, Sonia Hofkosh makes the persuasive argument that even as Equiano resisted erasure of his African culture, he sought its possession in his words in a manner reflective of empire and capitalism. Such a reading of Romanticism’s project of literary possession intensifies the material problematic of literacy under empire that is the marginal writing experience. For example, Equiano also had to buy himself to free himself. How can we name such coerced complicity in an oppressive system?

<sup>139</sup> The postcolonial discussions of this dynamic have settled in terms like “hybridity” and “creole continuum,” though the rapidity with which “settled terms” become again contested reveals, I think, the very vitality of this aesthetic/linguistic space. Importantly though, such concepts of postcolonial linguistics set the “margins” as the center of inquiry, creating a space for “metatheory which takes linguistic variation as the substance rather than the periphery of language study” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 47).

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books as I thought they did, and so to learn how all things had a beginning. For that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent. (160)

This famous “Talking Book” passage<sup>140</sup> ostensibly makes comic the oral traditions of the African for whom literacy is supposedly foreign. But the cultural and linguistic friction this passage exploits also registers the ways in which empire “ignores” and will neither speak nor listen to certain peoples, denying them access to—literal—lines of power.<sup>141</sup> And the investigation and revelation of such mechanisms by which empire short-circuits linguistic power in the margins is fundamental to the work of Blake, Brathwaite, and Philip.<sup>142</sup> Standing in such stark contrast to his earlier “wonderfully surprised” recognition of the cultural norms in common between Ibo and Christian European culture, the lack of connection or communication implied here, is a distance intensified by a felt denial of access to origin, “to learn how all things had a beginning.” Read backward through this moment, an ear and voice “put” to the book, what earlier were commonalities read now as loss—underscoring Equiano’s personal loss of community and culture of origin. The book cannot talk. The book cannot listen. But the linguistic body “put” to physical text “taken up” makes visible a gap of possibility, a potential of be-longing wherein the text is

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<sup>140</sup>This was an anecdote subsequently repeated and revised in other slave narratives. The term “talking book” is used to this day, perhaps most familiarly by the songwriter and musician Stevie Wonder, for whom the term has meaning in addition to slave history, because of his physical blindness.

<sup>141</sup>Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” would seem relevant here—but this is also an echo of how the “sub-altern” may indeed speak, but the dominant culture refuses to either listen or respond.

<sup>142</sup>Even if Brathwaite hadn’t mentioned Equiano’s name in a poem, which he does in “mont blanc,” an early version (“Metaphors” 248) of “The Sahell of Donatello” (Middle 68-71), as a West Indian professor of history it would be highly unlikely he wouldn’t have read Equiano’s narrative. The same familiarity is probable of Philip as she cites numerous writers of African American and Caribbean literature and history in her critical essays. It is also likely that Blake either directly or indirectly had knowledge of Equiano’s narrative. Certainly the ubiquitous circulation of such narratives among the general reading public but particularly among the intellectuals and dissidents with which he associated, influenced his creative work. He engraved illustrations for John Stedman’s *Narrative* depicting the brutality of slavery, and he offers substantial critiques of the slave narrative genre in his poem “The Little Black Boy,” which I discuss in the earlier chapter, “Possession.”

embodied and the body is a text, both listening and speaking, casting and containing language.<sup>143</sup>

By seeking literacy “to learn how all things had a beginning” Equiano alludes to wanting to read the Bible and become a better Christian—again an important rhetorical (and often a deeply committed) stance for an abolitionist text.<sup>144</sup> But even as it is a tradition complicit in terrible violence (and likely for that very reason), Judeo-Christian narratives lend themselves well to the marginal artist centering the fiery importance of a transformative linguistic living: “And God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light,” and “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” and “the Word became flesh” (Genesis 1:3; John 1:1, 1: 14). For these writers, a linguistic living, articulated or not, is at the very core of violation and survival and change under and in and after empire. Blake’s personal form of Christianity is implicit in all that he visions,

And they conversed together in Visionary forms dramatic which  
bright/Redounded from their Tongues in thunderous majesty, in  
Visions/....& every Word & every Character/Was Human according to the  
Expansion or Contraction, the Translucence or/Opakeness of Nervous  
fibres.” (257-8, 98: 28-9, 35-7)

Brathwaite invokes the Christian symbol of the lowly and ubiquitous “mustard seed” from Jesus’ parable to construct economic theorist Walter Rodney as a prophet who both *walks* and *listens* the talk,

This is the message that the dreadren will deliver  
groundation of the soul with drift of mustard seed

that when *he spoke* the world was fluter on his breeze  
since it was natural to him like the water. like *the way he listened*

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<sup>143</sup> I here invoke Elspeth Probyn’s critical term “belonging,” a trajectory of “being/desiring to be other” from/in a marginal relation to dominant communities. See previous chapter “Tailing” for further discussion of this term.

<sup>144</sup> This statement also served the abolitionists by showing how Africans too share the “human” philosophical quests for origins.

like *the way he walked*...(55, emphasis mine)<sup>145</sup>

And Philip quotes directly from The Acts of the Apostles 2:1,2,3,4,6:

...the day of Pentecost was fully come...

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.

And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.

And they were filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues...

...every man heard them speak in his own language. (91)

All three writers seek to image the possibility of conversation—the linguistic flow, or word casting, that links humanity, speaking *and* listening, the text/body both materially productive and receptive, with voice and ears. The possibility of the double entendre of “word made flesh” in Christian cosmology draws these writers seeking an imaginative living in and amongst flesh torn by violence sanctioned and enforced through that language. Invoking both pain and promise, words are nervous fibres, hot sound sits upon and fills bodies, as together the message, a “groundation” of soul and tiny mustard seed, writes material potential and infinite future in these synaesthetic visions of language embodied. Vision, word, and tongue, these poets, one a White English working artist who lived in London 200 years ago, the others African West Indian and Canadian intellectuals still living, are closely linked across time and geography as artists writing explicitly under and against and within British Empire.<sup>146</sup> As they write against the material violence of

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<sup>145</sup> This Parable of the Mustard Seed appears in the New Testament Gospels of Matthew 13:31, Mark 4:30, and Luke 13:18.

<sup>146</sup> In addition to a brief association made by Philip, which I discuss later in this chapter, critics who have mentioned Blake in connection with Brathwaite include J. Edward Chamberlain in “The Language of Kamau Brathwaite” (36) and Gordon Rohlehr’s section on Apocalypse in “The Rehumanization of History” (179). Chamberlain writes of the performative quality of both of their work, of how the performance makes their language more material. He does not explore the possible reasons artists under oppressive systems, seeking transformation of their societies might, with words as their tools, want those words to have the solidity of weapons. Rohlehr briefly compares Blake’s and Brathwaite’s attitudes towards the energy of revolution, and then uses one interpretation of Blake’s poem “The Tyger” to suggest a possible interpretation of a specific character in Brathwaite’s poem “Xango.” Rohlehr writes of Brathwaite’s work: “[c]ompassion is necessary if the pure naked premoral energy of Spirit is to be contained for creativity; just as Energy in William Blake becomes anarchic without its outward circumference of Reason. Compassion, or ‘pity’ as it is termed in ‘Leopard,’ is the restraining

empire, the particular anguished materialities of *literacy* under empire surfaces and Equiano's speaking and listening, reading and writing body that takes up The Book becomes visible. These writers draw on their own particularities of that painfully embodied substantiality of language, forging it as a creative weapon for linguistic survival in the face of injustice and violence.

### **WILLIAM BLAKE'S JERUSALEM**

Just as Equiano, rooted in an orally based culture, ties literacy closely to the sensing body, “tak[ing] up a book, talk[ing] to it, put[ting his] ears to it,” so does Blake invest himself heavily in the word incarnate. His insistence on engraving his poems rather than just setting them in type and his careful work to complement text with illustration and coloring (illumination) are both demands for a creative particularity of material vision set against an empirical<sup>147</sup> system that tended and still tends to impose uniformity.<sup>148</sup> Struggling against the Enlightenment's privileging of reason, as “Abstract Philosophy war[s] in enmity against Imagination” (148, 5: 58), he creates words as active—“& their Words stood in Chariots in array/Curbing their Tygers with golden bits & bridles of silver and ivory” (205, 55:34-5)—and embodied—“& every Word & Every Character/Was Human” (258, 98:35-6). So closely tied is the sensing body to artistic creativity that, for Blake, words “stand” for humanity.<sup>149</sup>

In his art Blake seeks to image error in order to rend the veil of mystery and reason that through religion, philosophy, science, and the politics of empire blocks accurate and flexible sensory perception. And sensory perception in and of “Minute Particulars” is necessary to the survival of an energetic artistic conversation that can

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circumference which Brathwaite suggests to a Caribbean and Third World in which revolutionary upheaval is a perennial possibility, and in some countries almost an annual reality” (179). I think these two artists are working violence even closer than Rohloer's analysis implies: there is no denying Blake writes of energy, but he uses the words “wrath” and “pity” as contraries bound together; Reason is struggled against as dominating, or interfering with a progressive interaction of wrath and pity.

<sup>147</sup>Blake's resistance to “empiricism” was as strong if not stronger to his resistance to “empire.” That the roots of these words are the same is (of course) not coincidental.

<sup>148</sup> See Erdman's introduction to *The Illustrated Blake* for a more extensive discussion on Blake's particular interests in his materials (ink, paper, pen, plate and such).

<sup>149</sup> Blake might have appreciated reggae and dub, where the art “stand[s] up for your rights” (Bob Marley).

create/imagine a divine world rather than one in which humanity is violated through silence, sensual repression, and reasoned delusion. Equiano's text registers the contemporary cultural circulation of this tension between the general and the particular, between theory and experience, between empire and locality—and comes down on the same side as Blake in advocating for particular sensibility in the move towards both divinity and justice, albeit from a more conservative rhetorical position. He writes in The Interesting Narrative,

I early accustomed myself to look at the hand of God in the minutest occurrence, and to learn from it a lesson of morality and religion; and in this light every circumstance I have related was to me of importance. After all, what makes any event important, unless by its observation we become better and wiser, and learn 'to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God'? (96)

Equiano advocates attendance to the “minutest occurrence” because the work of such careful perception brings one closer to the righteous path of God. But that particular vision is also a creative and transformative act because by such “observation” of “every circumstance” we become “better and wiser.” And when he says that “in this light every circumstance I have related *was to me of importance*” Equiano speaks not only to particular vision, but also to situated vision that takes into account the position of the viewer's “/eye”.

Blake poetically focuses this cultural tension under empire between the totalizing general and the local particular, avoiding some of Equiano's pat rhetoric, but not straying far from his content. Blake writes:

Let the Human Organs be kept in their perfect Integrity  
At will Contracting into Worms, or Expanding into Gods  
And then behold!...  
...as the moss upon the tree: or the dust upon the plow:  
Or as the sweat upon the laboring shoulder (205, 55: 36-40)  
Labour well the Minute Particulars, attend to the Little-ones:  
And those who are in misery cannot remain so long (205, 55: 52-53)

And,

...so he who wishes to see a Vision; a perfect Whole  
Must see it in its Minute Particulars.....  
...  
.....& every

**Particular is a Man; a Divine Member of the Divine Jesus.  
(251, 91: 20-21, 29-30)**

Throughout his work, Blake rails at every turn against abstraction and allegory. Like Equiano, Blake grounds the importance of “Minute Particulars” to perception of a “perfect Whole” in the situated particularity of individual vision where not only must one “see [a Vision] in its Minute Particulars” but indeed “every Particular is a Man.” Moreover, as it is for Equiano, this is a “Divine” envisioning with such transformative power that if one can only “Labour well the Minute Particulars [and] attend to the Little-ones...those who are in misery cannot remain so long.”<sup>150</sup> The importance of the senses in this kind of vision, bound as they are to the body, also contributes to Blake’s careful consideration of the materiality with which the artist/poet creates. Deeply concerned with the casting of his work—with the importance of its form in shaping the content of both image and text, he opens his prophetic poem Jerusalem with a less than subtle commentary on non-local poetic forms, the “bondage” of traditional poetic form, rhythm, and meter,

When this Verse was first dictated to me I consider’d a Monotonous Cadence like that used by Milton & Shakespeare & all writers of English Blank Verse, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming; to be a necessary and indispensable part of Verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward, but as much a bondage as rhyme itself. I have therefore produced a variety in every line, both of cadences & number of syllables. Every word and every letter is studied and put in its fit place: the terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts—the mild and gentle, for the mild and gentle parts, and the prosaic, for inferior parts...Poetry Fetter’d, Fetters the Human Race! Nations are Destroy’d, or Flourish, in proportion as Their Poetry Painting and Music, are Destroy’d or Flourish! (145-6, Plate 3)

This may be the earliest defense of free-verse in the name of politics, used (from a poet’s perspective) most certainly to rationalize some laziness or, more likely, to feign indifference to irritating traditional “monotonous” forms. The explanation of form may as well be a move by Blake to use such indifference to differentiate his art from that of those

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<sup>150</sup> Of course, Blake’s use of “so long” first refers to time, but it is also a nice pun on “long” as “sad”—as well as a reduction of distance implied by negating the goodbye of “so long.”

he sees as predecessors; he first legitimates his work by naming it alongside Milton and Shakespeare and then raises it above them, surpassing simple mastery.<sup>151</sup> And, as this entire text will be about the form and deformation of perception and artistic expression, this passage also serves to foreshadow that theme.<sup>152</sup> But Blake's foremost goal here is to naturalize prophetic language as being beyond—at every point more particular and therefore more relevant than—traditional poetic trappings.

He certainly balks at entrapment. This preface ties the regulation of poetic language to slavery—to “bondage”—as well as to the survival of “Nations.” In an engraving, “The Laocoon” Blake connects Empire, Religion and Art with the following aphorisms (among many more):

“The whole Business of Man Is The Arts & All Things Common”

“Christianity is Art & not Money”

“Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists”

“Art Degraded Imagination Denied War Governed the Nations”

“Who first spoil & then destroy Imaginative Art For their Glory is War and Dominion”

“Empire against Art”

“No Secresy in Art” (272-3)

For Blake, art, the creative work of the imagination, is fundamental to human existence, physically, spiritually and intellectually. To deny Art, or obscure the Imagination, as Blake sees empire doing, is to foster very literal *oppression*, both locally and nationally. In terms of a text that will prove exceedingly terrific and violent indeed, this prefatory refusal of traditional poetic structures rings as an attempt from the outset to disengage the usual narratives of violence, of clear-cut perpetrators and victims, and re-cast violation in an embodied particularity and identity.

In doing so, Blake centers the biblical Jerusalem of both “Ezekial” and “Revelations” in his own particular geographic and sociohistorical context: eighteenth

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<sup>151</sup> See Harold Bloom's Anxiety of Influence for useful discussion of writing in competition with one's literary ancestors. Bloom's is, however, an analysis limited in attention to the very particularity of vision (Harraway's situated knowledge) that Blake calls for.

and nineteenth century London. His insistence on writing from England, with London at the center, is at once arrogant and humble. In Blake's poetry, all the world is drawn through England, a potentially very imperial vision:

All these Center in London & in Golgonooza. from whence  
They are Created continually East & West & North & South  
And from them are Created all the Nations of the Earth  
Europe & Asia & Africa & America, in fury Fourfold! (227, 72: 28-31)

Admittedly, for Blake, this “continual” building from London and Golgonooza is in error: It is the mistaken attempts of the emanations of Albion to systematize a material world. And he frames this “continual” construction as a very violent imperial vision. But the vision he has of a just and creative world, is on the face it, no less controlling. After describing the violent generations of the emanations above, he writes, “O Albion let Jerusalem overspread all Nations.” However, as one learns through the poem as a whole, in this latter “overspreading” vision, he seeks to envision the entire world in proper relation, rather than separated and thus violent (and violated) in rigid determinations. So, while Blake is clearly influenced in his expansive vision by the context of expanding empire, he works against its totality to envision appropriate relation and particular perspective from the only place he *can* accurately perceive—the place where he himself physically stands. In fact, Blake rarely left London; that he visions and writes from where he lives and works, lends a literality, a particularity of perspective (rather than—or, at least, in addition to—the totality of empire) to the geography, the bounding of his vision. There is no pretense of being able to see the sun as the center of the solar system—Blake doesn't live on the sun. His claim that the earth was indeed flat is perhaps less absurd when seen as a resistance to rational theories that totalize and impose on others a rigid perspective which is not theirs.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Hazard Adams, sees Chapter 3 as being particularly about form, but the theme (also) runs throughout Jerusalem.

<sup>153</sup> The tension in Blake's work between the individual creative artist and divine creation of the artist reflects some of the conflict circulating as romantic era poets try to claim individual authority from an oracular relation to the romantic imagination. Blake allows this tension to play out in his work in order to image error of the unconnected, rational creator who is finally silenced by his own error filled creation.

Blake thus locates the creation of landscape in “vision” and perspective.<sup>154</sup> In Chapter 3 of his prophetic poem *Jerusalem*, he works to perceive the violence of empire—to materialize the relation of power at the center to oppression in the margins (both domestically and abroad), to raise the “Mighty Polypus in the Deep.” He creates a double (at least!) vision of the violent landscape of empire cloaked in (and actually violating) pastoral England (the character Albion’s body). In Blake’s landscapes, in both image and text, everything is designed as connected, either by illustration or metaphor or both. In illustration, bodies are connected to landscape and the landscape to bodies. Bodies send forth roots into the soil.<sup>155</sup> Bodies send forth bare and leafy and fruiting vines.<sup>156</sup> Bodies metamorphosize from human to swan to snake to dragon creatures. And the local is always connected to the distant horizon. When Albion’s body “heaves,” the landscape—ground and mountain—is engulfed in earthquakes. When the character Los tries to put out the fires raging in his furnace, atmospheric storms ensue. By way of this continuity of human(ity) and landscape, the violent alienation of the human self can be externally manifest and thus imaged and perceived.

To make violence perceptible, Blake first images an externality of confusion; he thus draws obscuring clouds first in order to perceive and then to clear and re-internalize them. What seem initially to be external violations in Chapter 3—empire in the colonies, slavery, forced conscription, and war abroad—become imaged as confusions of violator and victim all really internal to the body of Albion. Albion is England, but as Blake identifies artist so closely with nation (“Nations are Destroy’d, or Flourish, in proportion as Their Poetry Painting and Music, are Destroy’d or Flourish!”), Albion’s body and Albion’s senses are also the body and senses of the artist. In the following scene of war and human sacrifice, ongoing perspectival efforts to rationalize and refusals to recognize the interiority of violence—which for Blake is not about self and other, subject and

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<sup>154</sup> For a good discussion of theories of vision and landscape see Mitchell.

<sup>155</sup> See especially plates 15, 40, 49, 71, 74 of *Jerusalem* for “enrooting” in *The Illuminated Blake*.

<sup>156</sup> Plates 34, 36, 42, and 85 are particularly good examples of leafing and fruiting.

object, but about identity—result in a violent repression of perception and so also of expression.<sup>157</sup>

Tracing the rippling effects of systems of violence, Blake's narrator links slavery with the plight of the common foot soldier. As he does so, Blake's speaker identifies himself with those conscripted and forced to fight:

We were carried away in thousands from London; & in tens  
Of thousands from Westminster & Marybone in ships closed up:  
Chained hand & foot, compell'd to fight under the iron whips  
Of our captains; fearing our officers more than the enemy. (2!6-17, 65:  
33-6)

Soldiers are portrayed as slaves, as victims. Alluding heavily to sentimental abolitionist literature, Blake's narrator draws the reader's sympathies to the "we" "[o]f thousands...in ships closed up:/Chained hand & foot, compell'd to fight under the iron whips." The narrator critiques the notion of voluntary heroism, astutely noting how "we" "[fear] our officers more than the enemy." But the "pity" elicited here for the soldier is—at least partly—in error.

For this peculiar narrative "we," that is both personalized in identification with and at the same time royally observant of the plight of "thousands," is not the whole story. Here the pity evoked distances the reader from the narrative "we." To correct for this distancing and separation of viewer and victim, as the narrative shifts now to one of omniscience, counter-intuitively the reader gets right up close to the "minute particularities" of war. In this way, the poem now critiques a vision that has presumed to portray war as in any way distant or glorious. The narrator dissociates from an identity with the soldiers evoking pity and becomes an observer—and so critic—of a contemporary pastoral ideal set apart from and eclipsing perception of the conditions of violence and oppression. Ironically, the "critic" (who sees and speaks from particular vision) is shown to be more closely connected to and able to accurately image the landscape of war than is the "sympathizer" identifying with "victims." This view is not at

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<sup>157</sup> In his resistance to the progressive self-determination (separation of human from creativity/creation) of the Enlightenment, truly Blake anticipates the current debate about "violence, identity and self-

all surprising in light of Blake's advocacy for a creative dialectic of conversation in place of the rigid political system under which he lived that—especially after the French Revolution—anxiously and brutally suppressed most dissidence.

With the construction of more accurate (critical) vision, Blake sets up and “rends” the pastoral landscape which obscures the traditional narrative of “going off to” a (contained and distant) war:

When the sun rose in glowing morn, with arms of mighty hosts  
 Marching to battle who was wont to rise with Urizens harps  
 Girt as a sower with his seed to scatter life abroad over Albion:  
 Arise O Vala! Bring the bow of Urizen: bring the swift arrows of light.  
 How rag'd the golden horses of Urizen, compell'd to the chariot of love!  
 Compell'd to leave the plow to the ox, to snuff up the winds of desolation  
 To trample the corn fields in boastful neighings: this is no gentle harp  
 This is no warbling brook, nor shadow of a mirtle tree:  
 But blood and wounds and dismal cries, and shadows of the oak:  
 And hearts laid open to the light, by the broad grizly sword:  
 and bowels hid in hammerd steel rip'd quivering on the ground  
 Call forth thy smiles of soft deceit: call forth thy cloudy tears: (217, 65:  
 43-54)

From a glorious vision of going off to battle, where “the sun rose in glowing morn, with arms of mighty hosts/Marching to battle,” a vision indeed so powerful that “who was wont to rise Urizens harps,” perception abruptly shifts to the terrible violence of bodies crying out and disemboweled upon this “trampled” landscape. Setting this scene of battle in England's cornfields and woods and refusing construction of the local as “pastoral” sanctuary, Blake brings war home.<sup>158</sup> When violence escapes pastoral containment it is no longer a distant abstraction and the reader can see it in its specific ugliness. Here is no noble “Charge of the Light Brigade”<sup>159</sup> for, “This is no gentle harp/This is no warbling brook, nor shadow of a mirtle tree” but rather an exact and horrific bodily violence more like that expressed by the poet of the trenches, Wilfred Owen. War is not just war. And violence to the land, for Blake, is a direct violence to the body/soul and vice versa. Not

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determination,” a debate explored in a recent collection of essays by that title edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber.

<sup>158</sup> And truly, when Blake calls out “This is no warbling brook, nor shadow of a mirtle tree,” I hear David Byrne’s “Talking Heads” lyrics: “This is not my beautiful house. This is not my beautiful wife.”

<sup>159</sup> Tennyson.

only does Blake image and re-place distant war as effecting local violence, but he makes clear that its effects also sound through time. When “the Past, Present & Future [exist] all at once,” things are not so easily contained by “history.” Constructing all things and times as connected in and through vision, Blake notes the destruction of crops during this battle that leads to famine later in the text.

Given Blake's prefatory insistence on particularity of form it is important to note that, here, carrying a content of terrible violence, the lines hit an almost perfectly regular and traditional iambic cadence, echoing the stride of Blake's “horses of instruction”—figures whose unthinking schooling in traditional systems Blake abhors (Marriage Plate 9). And while not strictly rhyming, the words “oak,” “sword,” and “ground” echo each other closely, setting up, together with the regular meter, a self-perpetuating word pattern that mirrors systemic cycles of material violence Blake saw. As he warned, “the terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts.” Collapsing violent content and form, Blake thereby intensifies his critique of rigid systems of perception and representation as perpetuating material suffering.

This continuous critique of inaccurate perception informs the reader's own sense of perception. Rather than just telling his reader how it is, Blake is teaching her to flex her own perceptions for accurate vision, apparently quite serious in his biblical reiteration: “Would to God that all the Lord's people were prophets.” Just how flexible the reader has become is evident later when she sees in the illustration of plate 70 in Chapter 3, three human figures standing under a huge druid stone temple, contemplating a pastel landscape of rolling hills, blue skies, green grass, groves of trees, and fluffy clouds. This might be a pleasant scene. But, after Blake's education (“this is no gentle harp/This is no warbling brook, nor shadow of a mirtle tree”), the reader knows these clouds are Albion's entrails earlier drawn from his body in violence; that this sun is in eclipse, for Blake signifying potentially great and dangerous change; and that, based on earlier text, these human figures are probably engaging in human sacrifice. Through the dissonance of text and illustration, the pastoral scene *and* the assumption of single “rational” framework through which to view it both become highly suspect.

During the course of this most violent chapter of the poem, Blake progressively uproots such traditional narratives of violation. Just as the reader may think she has perceived the violence aright, seeing the suffering of the captive soldiers, kidnapped and slaughtered, themselves victims of violence that will reverberate in the landscape through time, the text of a sudden announces

So sang the Spectre Sons of Albion round Luvahs Stone of Trial:  
Mocking and deriding at the writhings of their Victim on Salisbury:  
Drinking his Emanation in intoxicating bliss rejoicing in the Giant dance;  
(217, 65: 56-8)

The victims here cheer on the torture and sacrifice of “their” own “Victim” “in intoxicating bliss.” The speaking point of view here shifts from one of identity with those conscripted and forced to fight the war, to an omniscient but highly particular narrator, to the enslaved victim-soldiers turned tormentors at a human sacrifice, “Mocking and deriding at the writhings of their Victim on Salisbury:/ Drinking his Emanation in intoxicating bliss rejoicing in the Giant dance.” In these shifts Blake remarks cycles of violence and oppression and simultaneously reveals how narrative perspective is therein complicit. Just as these, the “slave-soldier-victims,” become implicated as “spectres/spectators” in acts of sacrifice, the reader is also implicated, once sympathetically identified with the once-enslaved, now complicit in their mocking voices cheering “round Luvahs Stone of Trial.” This confusion of victim with victimizer undermines perspectives of violation that rely on a narrative of externalized victimization—whether of self or of other.

In entering this scene emotionally and sympathetically the reader is brought closer to the distant landscape of violent oppression. Horrible as it may seem, this bringing together of reader and violator and victim, connecting and implicating all, is actually getting to the clarity of vision Blake seeks. And it is at this point of connection between reader and characters that a sort of “turn” in text occurs. For as the reader watches the newly and suddenly revealed scene of sacrifice, feeling somewhat shocked at her own gullible blindness to the victim soldiers’ role as victimizers and to her own implied

complicity in that role, the “chained” ones with whom the reader had been in sympathy, “these Stern Warriors,” now mirror *the reader’s* reaction and are

Astonishd: terrified & in pain & torment. Sudden they behold  
 their own Parent the Emanation of their murderd Enemy  
 Become their Emanation and their Temple and Tabernacle  
 They knew not. this Vala was their beloved Mother Vala Albions Wife!  
 (217, 65: 68-71)

Confusion of the perception of “victim” intensifies as the soldiers realize that “the Emanation of their murderd Enemy/[has] Become their Emanation” who is indeed “their own Parent.” There is a sort of comic relief in this recognition, the “be-holding” of “their beloved Mother” with an exclamation point, a sort of soap-operatic revelation of relation at a moment of profound tragedy. It is hard not to laugh at the drama, a relief perhaps textually calculated to prevent too much backpedaling by the reader from a violence which has just been quite seriously revealed as her own responsibility too. In this scene “Victim” becomes a meaningless (and terribly comic) term, unhelpful and indeed obscuring accurate vision of cycles of violence.

With careful awareness of an audience perhaps uncomfortable in its new complicity, the text here allows milder simile rather than metaphor: “While they rejoice over Luvah in mockery & bitter scorn:/Sudden they become *like* what they behold in howlings & in deadly pain”(74-5). But the issue of complicity remains, and in an effort to control and contain the “spasms” of guilt and horror which “smite their features” (76), these characters rationalize the violence and “build a stupendous Building.../of Reasonings:.../ thro which the Heavens might revolve and Eternity be bound in their chain./ ...a wondrous rocky world of cruel destiny” (218, 66: 2-6). The slaves enslave and fix violation; the “chain,” material and figurative, binds both victimizer and victim.

In Jerusalem the characters’ reaction to the revelation of their connection with violence reflects a danger of materializing and casting such connection: externalized, it can solidify into a rigid “system,” “a rocky World of cruel destiny.” Los’ subsequent reaction to the ensuing war for which he is, as blacksmith to the world, responsible, figures another danger: He tries to “put out” the landscape of violence with more

violence: “he pour’d his loud storms on the furnaces” (16). This is a tactic of reversal that Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have noted as “an alternative aesthetics” which

revalorize[s] by inversion what had formerly been seen as negative, especially within colonial discourse...turning strategic weakness into tactical strength. By appropriating an existing discourse for their own ends...they deploy the force of the dominant against domination. (31)

But clearly, for Blake, this strategy of reversal is in error, or, at least, does not go far enough. For Los’ *direct* reversal of violation just leads to more violence, as again the Daughters of Albion strip down to sacrificial work. To materialize violence clearly one precipitates it, but, for Blake, if it is simply a matter of re-presentation, then one repeats the violence. But Shohat and Stam are talking about a strategy of marginal empowerment along the lines of Butler’s “resignification” where one doesn’t exactly repeat the same violence because one returns the force, or signification, from a positioning situated in the “margins” instead of the “center.” Perhaps for all his identification with the margins (both in his own and others’ perceptions), he may not have been able to recognize the extent to which positioning here may affect the angle of force in redeployment of strategies of domination. Nevertheless, the shift in Blake’s view on the uses of the energy of “Hell” from his early Marriage of Heaven and Hell to the late Jerusalem suggest he did not dismiss redeployment of violence out of hand.

Shifts in his views of energy and violence are closely connected to his observation of their contemporary material operations. Aligned with creativity and social change Blake was deeply interested in the events of the American and French revolutions. And while the bloodletting in the aftermath of the French Revolution appears to have had a chilling effect on a number of writers’ enthusiasm for the revolution,<sup>160</sup> throughout Blake’s life he remained supportive of the values and goals behind this revolution in particular. However, his enthusiasm for (and identification with) the “Energy of Satan” that he gives positive—even righteous—platform against the hypocritical and stultifying “Angel” in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” (begun in 1790) is, by the publication of Jerusalem (in 1804), much tempered by an apparently fuller understanding of how

violence can perpetuate itself in vengeance even with the best of energetic intentions—as he shows in the case of poor Los in the foundry frantically returning force with force.

Forging and re-forging, casting for forms to lessen the world's misery, Blake's characters are therefore faced with the difficult question of Judith Butler's own later theoretical project for language in Bodies That Matter. She asks, "How to know what might qualify as an affirmative resignification—with all the weight and difficulty of that labor—and how to run the risk of reinstalling the abject at the site of its opposition?" (240). This question is of particular relevance for the artist writing from a position of relative *power* in relation to empire (Blake as compared, say to a West Indian "native"). By contrast, as I have noted, it is important to consider that for the person voicing violation from a position of relative *powerlessness*, the reversal of violation may be in itself be transformative. But for Blake it may simply appear to be a re-presentation, a mirroring, a direct reversal, and thus of little use in breaking cycles of violation.<sup>161</sup>

Error or no, each time violence reappears in this poem, the reader understands a little more about its conditions and mechanisms—but so do the characters who seek to gain power through violation. The next cycle of sacrifice is more than just bloody. Now the daughters work more effectively to protect their secret mechanism of oppression:<sup>162</sup>

The Knife of flint passes over the howling Victim: his blood  
Gushes & stains...  
...they bind his forehead with thorns of iron  
They put into his hands a reed, they mock: Saying: Behold  
The King of Canaan whose are seven hundred chariots of iron!  
...  
They pour cold water on his brain in front, to cause  
Lids to grow over his eyes in veils of tears: and caverns  
To freeze over his nostrils, while they feed his tongue from cups  
And dishes of painted clay. Glowing with beauty and cruelty:

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<sup>160</sup> A number of poets, Mary Robinson among them, decried the treatment of Marie Antoinette even as they espoused dissident views.

<sup>161</sup> Where Brathwaite in "Irae" calls out "grant me mercy give me sword/.../grant me vengeance with thy word," vengeance has no place in Blake's prefatory poem to Milton though he too closely associates words and swords, crying "I shall not cease from Mental Fight/Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand."

<sup>162</sup> For those who haven't read Blake, institutionalized religion's repression of sexuality and worship of the mysterious female is a major root of violence—nevertheless, the degree to which women do a lot of the sacrificing in this text has been appropriately noted and critiqued by others and deserves attention I cannot give it here.

They obscure the sun & the moon; no eye can look upon them.(218, 66: 20-34)

The daughters' secret mechanism is here revealed to be the repression of sensation and the resulting deadening of language, art, and communication. For Blake the artist, this violence is even worse than the prior bloodshed. Perception and sensibility are fundamental to imagination and expression. Block up the sensory organs and the "reed" in the hand becomes a mockery. The characters' frantic "building," and Los' desperate efforts at the forge, mirror the poet/artist's own effusive creation, an excess that at times overwhelms and numbs. The deployment of words alone are not enough—their positioning matters. In this poem, the excess of language expressed without accurate sensation is simply "regeneration," not creativity. It stuffs the mouth, silencing, blinding, and deafening.

For Blake, artistic creation is vision—and vice-versa. Whenever "vision" is blocked, words are of no use; things cannot be clearly imaged. Violence ensues. But through the artistic imagination this process of imaging violence may not only reverse but also transform the violation, casting and spelling the (blind) reasoning of empire and the repression of sensuality by institutionalized religion.<sup>163</sup> For here, at the moment sensory perception—and expression—is blocked, this most powerful mechanism of oppression that has led to so much alienation and violence is simultaneously rent and revealed. No longer are reader or characters spared the direct identity of metaphor, nor given the comfort of past tense (history as sealed away) as is the case when this scene first appears in Chapter 1. The narrative now pulls history and reader together into an immediate narrative present:

Ah! alas! at the sight of the Victim, & at the sight of those who are smitten,  
 All who see. *become what they behold.* their eyes are coverd  
 With veils of tears and their nostrils & tongues shrunk up  
 Their ear bent outwards, as their Victim, so are they in the pangs  
 Of unconquerable fear! amidst delights of revenge Earth-shaking!

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<sup>163</sup> For Blake, the druids are as bad as the Church of England in feeding systems of violence. Both idolize—the landscape or the female body—as mysterious and separate, investing in an external and totally authoritative, rather internal and individually creative sense of divinity.

(35-9), emphasis mine)<sup>164</sup>

Now characters cannot so easily reach outside themselves to build a city to stop their tremors—the “Earth-shaking”—for the outside is inside. The period placed between “All who see” and “become what they behold” leaves the reader a little longer with “all who see,” and reminds her that she is included in the “all,” experiencing and “seeing” the text through the act of reading. At once a description of the action in the “story,” this abrupt punctuation also turns the second phrase “become what they behold” into an imperative command to the reader for identification. The reader is now thrust firmly into the landscape of war and violence.

But seeing clearly that violence stems from being cut-off from perception, imag(e)/ination, and expression doesn’t make everything right. In fact, after the fusion of identity and violence the story seems to get much worse. As Haraway notes, “Fusion is a bad strategy of positioning,” limiting as it fixes (“Persistence” 194). But perhaps it is just that things finally appear as bad as they really are, and have already been. In the course of Blake’s chapter, the narrative positions of violators and victims have moved from total separation at the beginning, to simile where “they become *like* what they behold,” to the fusion of metaphor where finally “All who see. become what they behold.” Distant warfare moves along a chain of relation to become domestic human sacrifice (All in the Family!). And as the senses are shrunk in this con-fusion, this identity of violator and victim, Blake now images a landscape of profound and utter alienation, “And as their eye & ear shrunk, the heavens shrunk away/...the mountains fled away”(219. 66:40, 44).

And indeed finally the reader can *see* how it is that the landscape—the heavens and land and animals—fled: It has already happened, but only now can the text image it. The past is finally given presence:

The Human form began to be alterd by the Daughters of Albion  
And the perceptions to be dissipated into the Indefinite. Becoming

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<sup>164</sup> This recurring image of the artist whose sensory perception is blocked appears earlier in other of Blake’s works as well as throughout *Jerusalem*. In the final poem of *Song’s of Experience*, “To Tirzah,” added late to the collection, probably in 1801, three years before publication of *Jerusalem*, the narrator relates, “with false deceiving tears/Didst bind my Nostrils. Eyes & Ears://Didst close my tongue in senseless clay./and me to mortal life betray” (48). Here the question and problem of accurate sensory perception becomes the problem of our vegetative mortality—the body itself the limit of perception.

A mighty Polypus nam'd Albion's tree: they tie the Veins  
 And Nerves into two knots: & the Seed into a double knot:  
 They look forth: the Sun is shrunk: the Heavens are shrunk  
 Away into the far remote: and the Trees & Mountains witherd  
 Into indefinite cloudy shadows in darkness and separation.  
 By Invisible Hatreds adjoined, they seem remote and separate  
 From each other; and yet are a Mighty Polypus in the Deep!  
 As the Mistletoe grows on the Oak, so Albions Tree on Eternity: Lo!  
 He who will not comingle in Love, must be adjoined in Hate

.....

As the Senses of Men shrink together under the Knife of flint,  
 In the hands of Albions Daughters, among the Druid Temples.  
 (50-6, 83-4)

Landscape is altered as human perception and form alter: “perceptions...dissipated into the Indefinite.../.../They look forth: the Sun is shrunk: the Heavens are shrunk/Away into the far remote: and the Trees & Mountains witherd/Into indefinite cloudy shadows in darkness and separation.” As landscape is the violated body, externalized, this “separation” is alienation from oneself, an “indefinite cloud[iness]” that obscures one’s place in and connection to the world. The personification of these alienated conditions of oppression in the landscape which “shrinks away” in some sense perpetuates, by imaging or re-presenting, the obfuscation—a perceived disconnection from both the landscape and the Enemy. But in this violently externalized re-presentation of “cloudy shadows,” the image of how “He who will not comingle in Love” embraces war (so to speak) comes clear; the self and Enemy are shown strongly *connected* through hate, a connection which deforms Albion’s body into that of “a mighty Polypus in the Deep!”

Containing violation within the body and the text, Blake casts a claustrophobic and horrifically frictive repetition of revelation, clarifying mechanisms of violation under empire: from omniscient and partial narratives of victimization and externalization, to direct reversals of violation, to the repression of sensation and expression, to fixed identity and alienation. Through a shifting poetic vision embodying Harraway’s “partial perspective” and “specific embodiment,” Blake anticipates her call to “become answerable for what we learn how to see” (“Persistence” 192).

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**204 - 219**

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poet Michael Smith's whole material and linguistic body, initiates a transformative revelation where the linguistic body is both the cost and the prize.

Brathwaite sounds the marginal poet's linguistic living in the virtual stoning of Michael Smith. Here as the body is silenced it is also identified as linguistic, "& I was silent now because I had become that sound." The body exceeds its own finality illuminated in the "hobbledumb" of the stoning, achieving indeed a kind of photosynthesis as the linguistic life is fed and grows by "the sun.light morning washed the choral limestone harsh/against the soft volcanic ash/...& I was *slippin past me* into water. & I was *slippin past me*/into root...& I was/*slippin past me* into flower." In sounding violation, the poet "prophe/says" the power of a marginal linguistic life, constituted dead/ly and alive and moving "& I was rippin upwards//into shoot. I was." The "shoot" is of course the new and growing plant of promise at the same time it is the force of the rock shot. It is force materialized in the sounding of the body as the poet "takes on" rather than succumbs to the "shoot" shot for the force it imposes, using it in/destruction to reach beyond itself, beyond the silencing.

For Brathwaite, the stones in "Stone" are material words so violent they fill and disable the mouth "with beast & plunder." Using English means using the same linguistic "rocks" employed by empire to marginalize and effectively kill West Indian people. But it also means taking up the "rocks" that are of "our shore" and mobilizing them as verbs (11). Speaking in the first person, the poet/narrator both identifies with the man being stoned, and through his "manscape" of poetry finds himself implicated in t/his (own) death:

When the stone fall that morning out of the johncrow sky

i could not hold it back or black it back or block it off or limp  
away or roll it from me into memory or light or rock it steady  
into night. be

cause it builds me now with leaf & spiderweb & soft & crunch &  
like the pow.  
derwhite & slip & grit inside your leather. boot &

fills my blood with deaf my bone with hobbledumb & echo.







(Marriage Plate 26).<sup>176</sup> This is the European pre-figuration of indigenous peoples that Brathwaite too marks in “Damballa Noou” when in this poem the narrator takes on the voice of the European sending Columbus on his way to the New World with advice about what he will find: “big buttock women who preferred to mate with baboons.” Drawing on this violent history and potential of word/vision or prophecy to shape the material world we see and thereby act upon, Philip’s project for the marginal writer, as the narrator says in “African Majesty,” is to “adorn the word with meaning/[and] to mourn the meaning in loss” (49), to write at this painful edge of language, meaning and vision balanced in the “Stone” that “mourns.”

As Philip engages issues of language and empire, the role of language as both a repressive and expressive force, she wrests from what she calls a “culture of silence” a linguistic living. Philip is not merely paying lip service to an immersion in dominant language and culture. Educated in a postcolonial system of “British education” in both Tobago and Canada, Philip cites as many or more dominant European as Third World literary figures in her critical writings (Genealogy).<sup>177</sup> She mentions the European figures both for the direct ways in which they inform her ideas and for the many ways in which the margins appear (in them) at the “center” of art and culture. She works both these avenues to materialize the continuity of culture between the margins and the center that was visible in Equiano’s narrative. Her sense of the linked loss of West Indian and African language and history fosters an ongoing interest in the modernist project of “make it new” with a postmodernist intention of resituating that “newness” in the catastrophic history that gave it rise (Tries 71). Citing the ways in which modernist visual arts were particularly catalyzed through contact with “marginal” cultures, she also traces how modernist literature, its sense of European location, is ever ghosted by the “margins” of empire, which are in turn dislocated by this European space/time gravity.

A quote from T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding” opens her discussion of this ghosting and dislocation:

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<sup>176</sup> Though, admittedly, Blake names the body as fluid by this call—and thus, even when racist, resists a doctrine wherein human potential is limited by the fixed body.

<sup>177</sup> Philip uses the term Third World to categorize marginal writers.

.....There are other places  
 Which also are the world's end, some at sea jaws,  
 Or over a dark lake, in a desert or a city—  
 But this is the nearest, in place and time,  
 Now and in England.

The poem echoes Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, a novel centering itself in the colonizer's experience of Africa. In Eliot's writing and the work of other English writers, Philip particularly notes the ways in which, "[w]hile the European despised the colonies—the Caribbean—his attachment to *his* land and *his* place was unstintingly nurtured and developed" (Genealogy 61). But Eliot's words also reveal the destructive perceptions and resultant violent construction of landscape harbored in a European sense of place and time under empire. The narrator in Eliot's poem is clearly haunted by "other places" which, even as they recede in the face of "the nearest,.../Now and in England," they also pull as a vacuum of "dark" and "desert." It is by way of this exotic landscape of distance, partiality and vacuum, the abject, that "the nearest" land and time gains its solidity. Presenting the "other places" as so clearly distant, separate from England both in time and space, identified even with the end of time— "the world's end"—produces a dislocation, an absence of a particularly visible "other" landscape in the very literature taught to students in and of that "other" landscape. It is as if, in this dismissal of distant lands that Philip notes, Eliot here continues to spin the materialization of Blake's blocked sense of perception in an alienated landscape:

And as their eye & ear shrunk, the heavens shrunk away  
 ...  
 They look forth: the Sun is shrunk: the Heavens are shrunk  
 Away into the far remote: and the Trees & Mountains are withered  
 Into indefinite cloudy shadows in darkness & in separation  
 By Invisible Hatreds adjoind, they seem remote and separate  
 From each other; and are yet a mighty Polypus in the Deep!  
 (Complete 219, 65: 40, 50-54)

Across Europe; across Africa; in howlings & deadly War  
 A sheet & veil & curtain of blood is let down from Heaven  
 ...the Twelve Daughters [of Albion/England/artist]...  
 Themselves condensing to rocks & into the Ribs of a Man  
 Lo they shoot forth in tender nerves across Europe and Asia

Lo they rest upon the Tribes, where their panting victims lie  
(221-2, 68: 20-26)

As I have noted, Blake explicitly writes from where he stands, which is in some sense at the center of empire. And again, he is certainly not immune to the imperialist vision and racism of his time. But importantly, in his vision of “Jerusalem”—his name for the accurate perception and creation of the world and its peoples—the landscapes of “Europe,” “Africa,” and “Asia” that seem “remote and separate” are deeply connected. They are “By Invisible Hatreds adjoind.” Although “they seem remote and separate/From each other; [they] are yet a mighty Polypus in the Deep!” This is a connection that has been forced invisibly underground. Indeed the separation produced by a vision rooted in hatred materializes as violence that further obscures perception of connection, so that “A sheet & veil & curtain of blood” prevents a relational vision of the landscape and its peoples. This is a terrible violence, obscuring the profound error in perception that separates rather than relates and converses and connects. As I discuss more fully above, Blake seeks to overturn what seems a beautiful pastoral landscape of England to reveal the material violence that partial vision obscures and maintains. So that while Philip herself goes on to critique any overlaying of Blake’s vision on the Caribbean, resisting the “English” literature of place taught in the colonial schools, Blake himself would likely agree with her argument:

[t]hat [the] Blakean “green and pleasant land” of England which gives rise to [George Eliot’s] “affectionate joy in our landscape, which is one deep root of our national life and language” would, in the Caribbean, produce the “poor/land/less, harbour/less, spade” of Kamau Brathwaite’s The Arrivants. (Genealogy 61)

Philip argues, as does Brathwaite in his call for a “nation language,” for a particular poetry of place that can image the connections between European “vision” and the material landscape of the Caribbean peoples.

In her aesthetic critique of empire and her efforts to foster a “local” poetic Philip does not play the sizing and fonts of text to the extent that Brathwaite does (perhaps size doesn’t “mother/mammy/mummy/moder/mater” to her?), nor engrave and illustrate her text as does Blake (Triēs 58). However, she does indeed flex the poetic genre as a critical

medium, sidelining and pairing her lyrics with bits of traditional prose: scientific descriptions of physiology, reported history, linguistics and excerpts from published texts on gardening, mythology, and religion (Ibid.). Philip creates the page as plastic medium and poetry as plastic genre, running this mix of texts at times in vertical lines bottom to top of the page, employing side by side columns of text, or interweaving italics and plain text—all confounding a traditional top down, left to right, linear English reading. These patternings on the page demand multiple and recursive and partial readings, invoking a consciousness of the reading body as Philip works to materialize absence, the violence of her linguistic practice to “adorn the word with meaning/ to mourn the meaning in loss” (49).

Sounding absence and loss of history, of language, of female access to artistic freedoms, Philip holds the eye close to the page, arguing for tangible vision in her introduction to this collection:

Fundamental to any art form is the image, whether it be the physical image as created by the dancer and choreographer, the musical image of the composer and musician, the visual image of the plastic artist or the verbal image, often metaphorical, of the writer and poet...The process of giving tangible form to this i-mage may be called i-maging, or the i-magination...i-mage in this instance, does not only represent the increasingly conventional deconstruction of certain words, but draws on the Rastafarian practice of privileging the 'I' in many words...The power and the threat of the artist, poet and writer lies in this ability to create new i-mages...If allowed free expression, these i-mages succeed in altering the way a society perceives itself...For this...a society needs the autonomous i-mage-maker...(12).

Philip's own “explanation” of her poetic process and purpose can undercut the power of her poetry. The reasoned discourse she here engages serves as much—or more—to totalize a process or system of artistic postcolonial resistance and social change as it does to “explain” the particularities of where her poetry comes from. In this introduction, the “mage” that spells the “I” possessed gets lost in the obsessive self-possession of the “autonomous i-mage maker.” Where in the title “Word-Making Man,” Brathwaite freely gives space for the power of words over the writer as much as the other way around, so that (almost) indistinguishably, word and man create one another, in Philip's introduction

Western Romantic self-possession of the artist appears yet strong (Middle 1). The attraction to artistic autonomy and ownership is understandable, especially from an Afro-Caribbean woman engaging a history of material and linguistic dispossession. However, the power of her “i-mage making” is rooted less in autonomy than in the risky materialization of that dispossession. Philip’s, at times, reductive explanation of her own work also serves to underscore the dilemma of the marginal writer described by Cecilia Bustamente— (ironically) quoted by Philip herself in the service of that very explanation,

...within this radius (of language) she discovers that having adapted herself as a vehicle of communication for historical and cultural moments between a dominant culture and a dominated one, language is becoming one more tool of subordination, replacement, pressure and distortion. ...This is the dilemma of the dominated: to disappear or change at the prices of their lives (17).<sup>178</sup>

The marginal writer ever runs the risk of re-submerging, via dominant linguistic practice, the hidden violence she seeks to reveal. This difficult “dilemma of the dominated: to disappear or change” must be kept in flux by the marginal writer to avoid reproducing the violent erasure that language has helped ensure. Philip gets closer to what her poetry does when she writes, “The only way the African artist could be in this world, that is in the New World, was to give voice to this split i-mage of voiced silence...for that silence continues to shroud the experience, the i-mage and so the word” (Tries 16). In trying to voice silence, she names a creative effort akin to Blake’s work to rend the veil of mystery of religion, as he eviscerates the institutionalized hypocrisy of The Church that obscures and perpetuates violence, externalizing the cloudy shrouds of silence, illustrating and voicing the silence.

More explicitly than Blake and Brathwaite, (perhaps coming as she does from a background as a lawyer!), Philip theorizes about language as strongly in her poems as she does in her introduction to this volume. Many titles of her poems name and directly engage language and violence: “Meditations on the Declensions of Beauty by the Girl

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<sup>178</sup> I was unable to locate the source of this quote. Philip cites it from a title The Poet and Her Text. Neither Bustamente nor the title appear in Books in Print (or Out of Print), the MLA databases or the UW Library Catalog. Though Philip cites other texts she uses in her end notes, she does not give publishing information for Bustamente.

with the Flying Cheekbones”, “Discourse on Logic of Language”, “Universal Grammar” “The Question of Language is the Answer to Power,” “Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue,” and the title poem, “She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks.” The latter title allows the kind of play in and of language that Brathwaite’s aforementioned “Word-Making Man” sets up, and adds a historical dimension of the pain in that play. The density of readings in this title evokes as many words that aren’t there as that are, virtually materializing the violent silence of inarticulation experienced by Africans under colonization in the New World: She tries her tongue/ties her tongue, tries her tongue/tries her patience/tries her hand at; the pain and bondage tied/tried with effort and the patience and impatience ghosting the silence voiced/voice silenced, all, tongue/tried/silence broken “softly,” (almost) unheard. The punning and soundful allusions invite such handling of the text by the reader.

Indeed to claim and wield language as “at centre/soft/plastic/pliable/doing my bid as in /smash/the in-the-beginning word/centre/it at open/clean-split,” Philip continually creates a synaesthetic materiality of the text in her poetry (Tries 71). In the poem, “Discourse on the Logic of Language,” she sets up the historical tearing/tear, the weeping wound, the fissuring sound of empire made material by the practice of the dual edicts under slavery first to isolate Africans from others sharing their “mother” language, and second to cut out the tongues of those who continued to speak the “mother” tongue. The poem includes a factual restatement of these edicts together with a scientific description of the neuro-muscular mechanics of speech. A multiple-choice test on language (as both tool and biological process), in which all the answers can be correct, follows these descriptions. Along the side of the page, reading vertically, top to bottom, runs a story of a mother licking her newborn clean of the waxy white vernix which covers it at birth. Amid these many-tongued approaches to language, the central lyric begins:

English is  
my mother tongue.  
A mother tongue is not  
not a foreign lan lan lang  
language  
l/anguish

anguish  
—a foreign anguish.

English is  
My father tongue.  
A father tongue is  
A foreign language,  
Therefore English is  
a foreign language  
not a mother tongue.

...  
I have no mother  
tongue  
no mother to tongue  
no tongue to mother  
to mother  
tongue  
me

I must therefore be tongue  
dumb  
dumb-tongued  
dub-tongued  
damn dumb  
tongue (56)

This poem engages the complication and irony of linguistic displacement where the mother tongue is a father tongue is (also and again) a mother tongue, and where the mother tongue is not a “foreign lan,” and yet neither does the speaker stand on a home land. In further cycling of this linguistic feedback the poem continues,

...english is  
my mother tongue  
is  
my father tongue  
is a foreign lan lan lang  
language  
l/anguish  
anguish  
a foreign anguish  
is english— (58)

The “dumb tongue” resulting from this confusion of father and mother and loss of both and neither is more than a confusion of language and land, it is the linguistic

manifestation of a substantial violence that underwrites the practice of language and linguistic dispossession under empire. Under the dual edicts that prohibit use of the “mother tongue,” some words break into lifelong silence, separating communities and families and e/rasing whole languages; some words break into individual silence with the tongue cut from the slave that voices the “mother” instead of the father. And some words, sometimes the only words left, break as a lash upon the self/body: english, a l/anguish, a foreign anguish.

The “dumb tongue” is dis (re) membered ghost tongue, the haunted stone. Philip writes “I have no mother/tongue/I must therefore *be tongue*” (emphasis mine). To “be tongue” is to be the tongue, to body the tongue, to be language. To “be tongue” is to “be deck” as “with lilies be decked” in the parent’s lullaby at bedtime where death haunts sleep closely, under coverings of white sheets and lilies.<sup>179</sup> To “be tongue” is to “adorn” and “mourn” with meaning and loss as in Philip’s “African Majesty,” to heap with beauty and lick clean the protective covering between word-body and world in “Discourse on the Logic of Language” and “Testimony Stoops to the Mother Tongue.” To be tongued is to be assigned language, the words the mother blows into her child’s mouth after licking her clean. But there is no mother; the tongue remains dumb. By way of this dumb and/or severed tongue, Philip’s words image the violence of inarticulation, of materially enforced silence, the “*hobbledumb*” of Mikey Smith in Brathwaite’s “Stone.” This use of the severed tongue resonates with Blake’s sense of language as an act of desperation when he says of his characters in *Jerusalem*: “I call them by their English names: English, the rough basement/Los built the stubborn structure of the Language, acting against/Albions melancholy, who must else have been a *Dumb despair*” (*Complete* 183, 36: 58-60, emphasis mine).

But it is by way of this desperate severed tongue that Philip is able to image and wrestle with inarticulation and articulation, to overcome the deadening sensory deprivation of linguistic life under empire, which as the daughters cut round and circumscribe Albion’s brain causes what Blake characterizes as Albion’s immobilizing

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<sup>179</sup> My parents called going to bed “going to Lily White’s party.”

“melancholy.” Blake's onlookers, bearing witness to the violent “dumbing” of the artist's sensory perception, respond by mutilating themselves, when at the beginning of the Jerusalem “All that beheld him...gnawed their tongues/For pain: they became what they beheld” (178, 32: 8-9). Similarly, but in this first person narration much more directly, in part IV of Philip's “Testimony Stoops to the Mother Tongue,” the narrator, in a desperate attempt to survive “this//holy-white-father-in-heaven-/this/ai!ai!/tongue/that wraps/squeezes/the mind round/and around,” severs her own tongue—and goes one further:

this tongue that roots  
                   deep  
 in  
           yank  
           pull  
           tear  
           root  
 out  
 that I would  
 chop  
           in  
 pieces  
           a snake  
 each to grow  
           a head  
 (Gorgon—  
 to turn my tongue to stone)  
           a tail  
 and haunt the absence  
           that mourns  
 /haunted into shape and form (80)

She chops up her own tongue into pieces, the text moving chopped word by chopped word down the page, double-spaced and separated, to survive and materialize the violence that, “absen[t]” “shape and form,” undoes a linguistic living. Spitting out the tongue bits, word by word here “grow[s]/ a head...a tail.” Enacting linguistic violation “adorns” the severed tongue with “meaning:” the cut tongue can now, violently materialized, move towards a future as “pieces” grow “a head”—ahead and “a tail/”tale—history. The poem ends, the narrator now musing:

shall I  
 strike  
 under tongue and foot  
 them  
     —these words  
 hold in aloft  
         up  
 in either hand  
         harmless  
 the word  
         that claims  
 and maims  
         and claims  
         again  
         or  
         in my mother’s mouth  
         shall I  
         use  
 the father’s tongue  
 cohabit in strange  
 mother  
         incestuous words

to revenge the self  
 broken  
 upon  
 the word (82)

The poem itself belies this question of whether one can injure words, or hold them, apart from each other “in either hand/harmless.” For even as chopped and ragged as the text of this poem lies, it can stand, finally and only, balancing the full weight of the poem's text, for and upon the “self/broken/upon/the word.”

This “self/broken/upon/the word” must nevertheless “be tongue.” As Philip writes in the final section of the title poem that ends this collection,

That the body should speak  
 When silence is,  
 Limbs dance  
 The grief sealed in memory;  
 That body might become tongue  
 Tempered with speech  
 And where the latter falters  
 Paper with its words  
 The crack of silence;  
 That skin become  
 Slur slide susurrations  
 Polyphony and rhythm—the drum;  
 The emptied skull a gourd  
 Filled  
 With the potions of determinate  
 That compel the split in bridge  
 Between speech and magic  
 Force and word;  
 The harp of accompaniment the ribcage  
 Strung with the taut in gut;  
 Flute or drumstick the bones.  
 When the silence is  
 Abdication of word tongue and lip  
 Ashes of once in what was  
 ...Silence  
 Song word speech  
 Might I...like Philomela...sing  
 continue  
 over

into

...pure utterance (98)

Irrevocably sundered from the mother tongue, here “grief sealed,” the writer must *be* her own *tongue*. A laying on of tongues. Where, when the speech of the body fails, “Paper with its words/The crack of silence; That skin become Slur slide susurrations/Polyphony and rhythm—the drum.” Language and tongue become body, body language making visible and circumventing the missing tongue. But when body language “falters,” “paper with its words/The crack of silence” takes over, intensifying both risk and power. For “paper with its words” *is* “the [very] crack of silence,” created by the European imposition of language and literacy, into which the marginal linguistic body falls—or is pushed. It is the crack of the text that is the crack of the whip, the paper cut/crack in the body, the severed tongue. But, if read as mobile, as language in motion, as the verb “to paper,” then when the body falters one can also “paper with its words/the crack of silence.” The possessive “its” of “paper with its words” can be read simultaneously as the use of the body’s words to paper and as the identity of the words, as in oh that “paper with its words,” where “it” *is* “the crack of silence.” In both readings “its words” names the space of severance and gives it a shape, as paper machè materializes a form without substance—an invisible man in bandages<sup>180</sup>—and at the same time provides a virtual skin “that become[s] slur, slide, susurrations.” Language is given virtual body in text, the “paper” skin, in whispers by which the crack “papered” becomes productive (re-bridging, materializing a gap) rather than obstructive.<sup>181</sup>

But, as in both Blake and Brathwaite’s work on materializing violation in order to create, this tension of working in the written word is potentially self-annihilating for the marginal writer. Philip makes manifest Blake’s caution against disembodied reason, as “the emptied skull a gourd/Filled/With the potions of determinate/...compel the split in bridge/Between speech and magic/Force and word.” Entirely unlinked from the body, overdetermining, “with potions of determinate,” reasoned language of empire can

<sup>180</sup> An “invisible man” is, of course, entirely relevant to Ralph Ellison’s project in his novel by this name.

<sup>181</sup> My thanks here to another graduate student who once presented (in a seminar) the whale in *Moby Dick* as a “paper body.” I think there would likely be a wonderful essay in a comparison of Blake’s *Leviathan*,

“compel[s] the split in bridge/Between speech and magic/Force and word.” Overmuch “reason,” rigid “potions of determinate,” can and does undo and marginalize the particular spelling body. But the bridge, the spelling, where speech is magic and words have force, also becomes visible as it is split. And just as in Blake’s Jerusalem, when the narrative can accurately vision the relation of self and material violence, practicing language in a particular and flexibly sensing body, here perception, the powerful foundation of creativity, has already shifted. The world is seen transformed. And indeed at this point the narrative of Philip’s poem shifts into an imaginative realm of possibility. From the severed body/tongue comes the virtual body/weapon that is a linguistic living, now “loosed from the catapult pronged double with history” and “[come] upon a future biblical with anticipation,” where the narrator entertains the “might” of a soundful space of “pure utterance.”

But “pure utterance” risks fully de-materializing the body and losing the productive tension the body anchors and mobilizes in language. Brathwaite’s poetic narratives in the collection Middle Passages move from a deadly apocalyptic linguistic life in the violence induced inarticulation of the physical stoning in “Stone” as “your leather. boot &/fills my blood with deaf my bone with hobbledumb and echo./less neglect.....” to the celebration of the annihilation of time and space with the virtual materiality of the computer that enables Caliban to write to and be heard by his mother, “chipp/in dis poem onta dis tab./let/chiss. ellin dark./ness writin in light//like i is a some. is a some. is a some/body.” He raises the e/rased body from/with the virtual word. But for Philip, all too aware of the limits historically placed on the creativity of the African female body in particular, a virtual existence is a more problematic—or, at least, less accurate—space for perception and linguistic production. For her, at the outermost limit of a linguistic life, to “be tongue” is to de/mater/ialize, where only the ghost of the body remains; the utterance is not fixed text but singing—sound in motion, indeed an active, constitutive, silencing of “language.”

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his “mighty Polypus in the Deep,” Brathwaite’s “whales [which] inhabit [his] imagination” and Melville’s whale in Moby Dick.

To “be tongue” is to be without “mother/mammy/mummy/moder/mater” and to have power over one’s own silences so that “When silence is/Abdication of word tongue and lip... Might I... like Philomela... sing/continue/over/into/... pure utterance.” In reference to Philomela, this is a sense of a transformative sounding, where in the “sounding,” even of silence, language as process is emphasized—the verb. But, although “pure utterance” may come, there is also in that reference to Philomela, princess turned nightingale, no happy ending, but rather a sense that the history of the body so violated will forever re-sound in that “pure utterance.” Even as it is clearly powerful and transformative, there is something sad about this longing for pure utterance because it implies erasure of the (human) body in exchange for sounding the violation of that body.<sup>182</sup> Transformation is not transcendence.

Where Blake and Brathwaite prophecy, Philip locates propheseus interruptus. The colonial crack. That is woman. The future erased, irascible and balking as the children gone. Poems from Philip’s earlier collections explore, in part, the present day reproductive and familial (lack of) choices for African women in the “new world.” The poems trace the pregnancies, sterilizations, adoptions, abortions, and the painful sexual coming of age narratives that are part and parcel of the lack of reproductive control and poverty, which is in turn woven from a legacy of slavery, diaspora, and legal rape.<sup>183</sup> Blake and Brathwaite, men, link biological *infertility* with the *inability to articulate* and create under the oppressive linguistics of empire. Blake, in the above passage on the alienation of the landscape, sees the loss of perception and creativity as an inability to engender, as when the daughters of Albion perform something of a vasectomy on the artist/Albion figure and “tie the Veins/And Nerves into two knots: & the Seed into a double knot.”<sup>184</sup> And for Brathwaite’s narrator in “How Europe Underdeveloped Africa:

...the sun blott. ed out by  
paper a cane fires vamp.

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<sup>182</sup> This is much like the transparency Teresa Hak Kyung Cha achieves in her sounding/voicing, which I discuss in the final chapter of this project. It also echoes the character Horace Cross’ efforts (discussed in previous chapter) to transform himself into a bird (Kenan).

<sup>183</sup> See especially “Three Times Deny,” and “E. Pulcherrima,” (*Thorns*) and “You Can’t Push Now” (*Salmon Courage*) reprinted in *Grammar* (Morrell ed.).

<sup>184</sup> Interestingly, Blake had no children.

ires a ink wheels emp.  
 ires a status quo status quo status crows  
 that tell a blood tale toll/ing in the ghetto

till these small miss/demeanors as you call them  
 be  
 come a monstrous fetter on the land that will not let us breed (50)

Exhaustive physical work (whether in “cane” fields or “toll/ing”/toiling “in the ghetto) is tied to repression of vision and expression—and reproduction. Paper and ink domination of empire are conflated with the labor that deadens sensibility and creative change and growth. The paper “blott[er]” “vamp/ires” of the burning cane fields together with the “ink wheels” within wheels (Blake’s symbology for industrial England from Ezekial) obscure the local landscape and suck the African and indigenous peoples dry. Linguistic and material domination together maintain “a status quo.” These harsh (high) “status crows” sound a sterility of empire, and “tell a blood tale toll/ing in the ghetto/till these miss/demeanors as you call them/be/come[s] a monstrous fetter on the land that will not let us breed.” Continuing on this theme equating creative expression with biological reproduction later in the poem he equates Walter Rodney’s political message, “the message that the dreaden will deliver” with fertility, the “drift of mustard seed” “he dared to grow & growing/green” (55).

However, for Philip, a marginal woman writer, biological fertility is not as easy to equate with linguistic creativity. Indeed, the relation is at times inverted. There is the double interdict on women not to create linguistically, and to stay in their bodies/babies. For even as slave women were forbidden their “mother tongues” and literacy even in their “father tongues,” they were often forced to reproduce biologically, and mother other people’s children. Indeed, the work of bearing and raising children has often been seen as getting in the way of a woman’s linguistic life such that Alice Walker has said a woman writer should have only one child if she ever hopes to get her writing done (“One Child”).

Just as Philip’s narrator of “Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue” tears out her own tongue to create words to speak; the marginal woman writer, to engage in linguistic creation, may erase, may “tear out” her own children. In a poem from an earlier volume

she writes of choosing abortion (or infanticide), comparing it to the loss of children in exchange for survival under slavery,

never suckled  
never fed

three times deny now  
as then we sell them

then as now  
we kill them

...  
that I perfectly pierced each heart  
beat through with love  
to survive (Selections 111-2)<sup>185</sup>

And in another collection she writes of a woman having a tubal ligation, “to cut, crush, sear, burn/the twin tubed conduits of life,” directly invoking linguistic violation: “Words of violence—/cut crush, sear, and burn./Inner mutilation for outward freedom—that bodily balance of terror” (Ibid. 128). She later uses hauntingly similar language to describe the poet’s tongue in “She Tries Her Tongue,” describing the “blackened stump of a tongue/torn/out/withered/petrified/ burnt/on the pyres of silence” (*Tries* 92). For Philip, linguistic and biological creations do not painlessly invert. And so where Blake and Brathwaite assign the metaphor of biological reproduction for artistic creation with what seems an easy equi/valency, Philip figures the inverted relation of biological to linguistic creativity as an “inner mutilation,” a cutting of the fallopian “conduits of life.” She thereby marks the violence of what is clearly not an untroubled exchange (much less a metaphor) for linguistic “outer freedom.”

Tearing out one’s own tongue to write figures the ways in which some women have chosen to forgo fertility to have a life—and is shadowed by the ways in which some have had no choice. She thus materializes the marginal woman writer in the de-formed body. This is a vision of the lost tongue—the mother tongue, Derrida’s mother tongue he

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<sup>185</sup> Philip’s territory here is like that of Toni Morrison in *Beloved* where the characters materialize history to incorporate the infanticide practiced for survival under slavery. Also, see Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “The Mother” exploring abortion.

never had. Philip's woman poet is not only motherless, bereft of the linguistic origin and succor, she is herself the mother tongueless. That is, even from her own tongue (of which she is figured mother) she is cut/apart.<sup>186</sup> Thus in "She Tries Her Tongue" the poet/narrator is working to incorporate and absolve herself for her (necessary) s(v)i(o)lences, learning to re-vision that silence/violence as potential. In the blackened stump. The tongue foreshortened, foreskinned. The lost skin that went before. Was captured, sold, killed, "maimed" and claimed before. Where form has been claimed by mastery—the patter/Pater of little feet—the shape, the sound of the poem becomes utter matter, where matter is deformation, as in "what's the matter?" The matter is of "pure utterance." The "I-mage."

In this field of an embodied and painful relation to language, Philip creates a space to consider language *and silence* as "practice." She materializes absence and silence in "the question." In her poem "The Question of Language is the Answer to Power," language is articulated in the title as a "question," as a space under question, and a negotiation of possibility rather than (merely) a set of rules. At once language appears as a way to "get" power, as in "power is a question of language," but here language, in the shape of a quest/question forms a literal "answer" to power. In question form language converses with power, is conversant with the model that is power. The title proposes a question model of language as an alternative to the declarative model of language, the question that linguistically engages the (continuum of) power that would separate, dispossess, and disown, that tears tongues from mouths, children from parents, people from living their own geography. The interrogative form of linguistic practice evokes a bare and uncomfortable room, but it is a room brightly, if terribly, lit. Here is absence with focus and trajectory, "a state active with without and unknown!" where a history and culture and body of violent inarticulation has become "a future biblical with anticipation." Here absence and silence matter. Proposing "The Question of Language" both illuminates and questions language's place in power/in a power model/modeled

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<sup>186</sup> She explicitly plays on the severed tongue as a castration from the phallus in a multiple choice question comparing tongues and penises (*Tries* 59). Both kinds of castration were practiced on slaves—often to the same purpose.

power. See and question *and, see question* as another possibility for language. The rule. The question/ing of the rule. The conversation between rule and question tonguing a linguistic living in the torn place.

### THE WORD INCARNATE

As I discuss in the introduction to this project, language is at the center of postcolonial efforts to theorize the structures and flows of power under and in the aftermath of empire. Both Brathwaite and Philip articulate theories of a “Creole continuum” wherein language cannot be described “simply as an aggregation of discrete dialect forms but an overlapping of ways of speaking between which individual speakers may move with considerable ease” (Ashcroft 45). Even Blake, writing from the center of empire, argues for language that is particular to the landscape it constructs. Here defined by Ashcroft et al in The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures, this sense of language as a continuum produces linguistics as a conversation about margins and mobility.

The theory of the Creole continuum is an outstanding example of a post-colonial approach to linguistics because it reaffirms the notion of language as a practice and reintroduces the 'marginal' complexities of speakers' practice as the subject of linguistics. This undermines the traditional project of post-Sassurian linguistics. As Chomsky states: 'Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous speech community'. (45-6)

Although the figure of a “continuum” may construct language practices as linear (and so reproduce the specter of “progression” along that “line”), the sense of mobility it imparts to linguistics is helpful in thinking about what all three of the writers in this chapter do in their poetry. All critique the figure of “an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous speech community.” For homogeneous language is suggestive of a homogenous perspective (since language and perspective are inseparable for these writers), which in turn creates rational narratives of the past: “The Word.” They work instead to construct language as a mobile practice that can flex to image the violent particularities of the marginal local landscapes from which they write. And, for and

because of their differing particularities, theirs is a revelatory critique of the violence of a dominant linguistic practice that fixes the “status crows.”

Caught up in the moment of “be tongue-ing” and “beholding,” as in “all who see.become what they behold” or “i am the stone that kills me” or “that the body might become tongue/...paper with its words/the crack of silence,” this the substantiality of artistic vision, or “prophesay.” To “behold” is a word that makes *seeing* a kinesthetic experience, an experience of simultaneously *being* and *holding*, of creating connection, or constructing relationship. For Blake, the “sensory will” can flexibly, “at once expanding...at once contracting,” construct in the face of violation, “in pain and terror,” an image which does not negate its own relation/connection to the be-holder. In Jerusalem, characters—and readers— must “behold” war, must construct its presence as an alienation and violence which holds and literally shapes (or distorts) the human landscape. To “behold” in this manner is to recognize one’s own participation and engagement in that landscape, to “be” and to “hold” violence. Embedded in the sensing body of the artist, this is neither sympathy in the face of, nor a mimetic representation of violence. This is a potent/ially apocalyptic identity, one where Blake’s war of human sacrifice, Brathwaite’s stoning, and Philip’s tongue “torn” and “chopped” become quite literally self-mutilations. In Blake’s Jerusalem, the sacrificial victim, who is alternately the character Luvah, the country France in revolution, the King of Canaan, and the writer/artist, is tortured in large part by numbing his senses. In “Testimony” the speaker chops her own tongue into pieces to create monstrous (the Gorgon), “incestuous,” words/stones “to revenge the self/broken/upon/the word” (80-82). In “Stone,” the speaker’s voice is silenced by the very violence of the words/stones he tries to speak. And yet, there are no other words, no other way to be heard.

Blake and Brathwaite both embody voice and vision. Philip struggles to engage that silenced body, the body that does not speak, its tongue cut, under threat of erasure should it mater/rialize, mother tongue realize. It is precisely this recognition of particular relationship to, even identity with the local landscape of violation, the recognition of a “sensory will” (perception that can be flexed, as muscles) that enables these artists to

materialize the potential for shifting (deforming and destroyifying) the landscape of violative empire to make one of continuity and relationship (of minute particulars!). Poets' tools and materials are language and vision (or perception). And for Brathwaite, Blake, and Philip the two are intimately connected, sometimes one and the same thing. For Philip and Brathwaite, the connectedness of culture that Equiano was still able to express in his narrative, has been submerged by the linguistic and cultural dominance of colonial empire. Philip writes that the grammar she has been taught, a coerced use of the colonizer's language, is a "parsing" that has resulted in a "dis-membering [of] language into fragmentary cells that forget to remember." For Blake, clear vision, the ability to image the conditions and sources of oppression under industrial, capitalist empire, is obscured through dominant rigid and abstract systems of reasoning. To use the word "obscured" or "submerged" is to indicate that "it" is still there, but one no longer has a clear line of sight, of perception.

"Perception" is one of those words that slides easily from literal sensory observation (taste, touch, see, hear, smell) to the realm of thought and ideas about that world which we "see." "I see" means to understand as well as to visually note. For Blake, Brathwaite, and Philip the *literally* "blinding" effect that "rocky" empire has on direct "perception" and of experience and memory of historical events renders language ineffective. In Blake's Jerusalem, the torture victim who is alternately the character Luvah, the country France in revolution, the King of Canaan, and probably also the writer/artist, is tortured in large part by numbing his senses. In "Stone," the speaker's voice is silenced by the very violence of the words/stones he tries to speak "be/cause it builds [him]." In Philip's "Discourse on the Logic of Language" the loss of the slave's "tongue," both literally and figuratively, is a simultaneous loss of key sensation and expression.

For these poets, the British empire fosters a linguistic aesthetic, today as well as 200 years ago, that cannot ignore the violence of its own history. This is an aesthetic simultaneously stunted and developed in violence and violation. An artist resisting deadly cycles of injustice can draw on the substantial force that empire *and the resistance to it*

create, a substantial force which, when brought to words, can be formed, re-formed, raised and e-rased repeatedly targeting the “machinery” of oppression with an eternity of tries. Blake’s characters in Jerusalem die and are plowed under and live again repeatedly as he works the poem closer and closer to the clear perception and just world he seeks. Stephen Cox argues that “Blake proposed to move the world of intellect and emotion by using *accurate* vision, vision organized powerfully enough to change the world envisioned” (*Love and Logic*, 7). Brathwaite consciously and repeatedly engages a violent history of linguistic oppression from the Columbus myth to the death of a dub poet. He says in “Metaphors of Underdevelopment,” “for me, the *history* of catastrophe, the coming to grips with a person bitten by those ratchets; that archetypal labourer; ruined by that greed; requires a *literature of catastrophe* to hold a broken mirror up to broken nature” (235). Philip engages and materializes the space of inarticulation, the tongue torn out, in the incestuous position of the marginal woman writer, the father’s tongue in her mutilated mouth. Feeling that “the making of i-mages [in] poetry 'begins and ends in the body'” she “blazes” a postcolonial linguistic violation that traces “the conundrum” created as “the female African body became the site of exploitation...[with] forced reproduction along with forceful abduction and sale of children” and while “rape remains [an] amorphous threat” so that “the female body continues to be severely circumscribed in its interaction with the physical surrounding space and place” (Tries 24). The power and energy of such a particular and pressurized aesthetic offers Potential with a capital “P”—lethally focused and transformative. It is an aesthetic grounded in the specificity of individual perspective, connected to and affecting both dominator and resister (now transformed from the aforementioned violators and victims!) in the realm of empire.

I began this chapter with the investment these three writers have in poetic prophecy. Again: “Would to God that all the Lord's people were prophets,” “I prophesay” and with the fate of a slingshot stone catapult...I come upon a future biblical with anticipation.” For these poets, prophesy/saying brings to the process of marginal/ized artistic creation a powerful sense of the future, an explosion of violent identity with forward momentum to break numbing cycles of what Blake calls “regeneration” (a static

process opposed to creation), Brathwaite calls “status crows,” and Philip calls “the confusion of centuries that passes as the word”—a linguistic violence sensually ghosted by the material suffering under empire with which all three writers are concerned. As writers “*prophesaying*,” they stretch and play with the materiality of perception and language to make that momentum substantial. For poets William Blake and, two centuries later, Kamau Brathwaite and Marlene Norbese Philip, writing across history, against empire and slavery and intellectual and sexual domination, and centering their writing in particular cultural geographies, the frictional aesthetic that Equiano’s Interesting Narrative remarks has become one of linguistic revelation and apocalypse.

## CHAPTER 5: SPELLING VIOLATION (IN/CONCLUSIONS)

She says to herself if she were able to write she would continue to live (Teresa Hak Kyung Cha 37).

...and why does one type pages that only have the slightest chance of survival? I asked myself that, last night, with that acute sense of silence.

Then, in that soft *sound* of silence, I asked myself again, as I have a thousand times, why I should worry and what does it matter? If I am blitzed, I won't care what people make of my old pages and anyway they will be blitzed with me. But there was another answer in that silence, as of snow falling on snow.

I have had through the years, dreams of a book, a book that I have written... But this book had to be alive, that is what it was... I must let go my critical faculty, I cannot afford to criticize or re-consider these words. They are the words of the spell; no matter how haphazard, how apparently unrelated, how profuse, how illogical, they are the words that in a sense—this is what it is—keep me alive (H.D. 5-7).

**Violence:** violation, rending, fissure, chasm, walls, boundaries, self-determination, rape, murder, war, abuse, power, energy, friction, explosion, implosion, apocalypse, revolution, colonialism, damage, change, annihilation, silencing, deafening, blinding, roaring, flash, chaos, force(s), marking, identity, cutting

**Text:** shaping, imaging, defining, communicating, materializing, spelling, conjuring, virtual, narrativizing, ordering, sounding, constructing, re—(all these), deforming, formulating, formalizing, drawing, inscribing, marking, identifying, reducing, clarifying, simplifying, rendering, marking, lines, delineations, binding, pressurizing, protecting, entrapping, confining, inside/outside, embodiment, quarantine, zoning (urban growth boundary), imaging, relating, telling

I have on my desk one of those tall cylindrical, wax-poured-into-glass **SPIRITUAL POWER CANDLES**. The wax is a very dark purple-black. I used to burn it in the bathroom in my Oakland house, for baths, for parties. Its smoke blackened the wall above the bathroom shelf. Someone gave it to me as a joke. The messages printed in white on the outside say (in addition to **SPIRITUAL POWER CANDLE**): on the outline of a four leafed clover: **LUCKY CHARM**; on the drawing of an open book,

PRAY—BIBLE; under three witches stirring a cauldron and another flying a broom, RUN—DEVIL—RUN; and in tiny letters above a man waist deep in money towards whom a woman, also submerged in money, is sleep-walking, arms outstretched, FAITH~HOPE~ (and in larger letters) COMPELLING. Below all this are the words *Wishes and Dreams* in cursive.

These images and text catch me as I cast (for) an articulation of marginal linguistic violation in(to) some pleasing shape to share, into some body. To cast is to immobilize and reproduce a form—so Michel Foucault’s “mechanisms of normalization.” But to cast is (also) to reach beyond the body, with a line, with a spelling, with an extension, with a prosthesis in order to materialize—a fish from an empty day on the water, an essay from thought, Jacques Derrida’s “Prosthesis of Origin.” To cast, with rod and line, or words, is to technologically extend the body beyond its naturalized boundaries—to be Donna Haraway’s cyborg. To cast is to shape a fullness from the outer surface that is all contour, empty, yet definitive and bounding—the Postmodern quest to make the surface matter. To cast is to send out, as bad spirits from the body, but the casting writes a line in the air between the one who casts out to her castings, which, along with the (fishing) line, confuses issues of externalization. The desire to cast out is desire nonetheless, a momentum of absence and longing which connects— as Deleuze and Guattari’s “lines of flight” or Elspeth Probyn’s “be-longing.” And to cast broadly is to broadcast, as seed, as radio waves, marking not just one trajectory of movement but multitudes, tracing a genealogy of desire for—. We cast to eat, to bind and heal a wound or break, to enable a performance—Judith Butler’s “performativity.” Worm castings make good compost. “Let he who cast the first stone...” And to cast is to spell, to create, to form, to make material and sensible, to energize and re-make that materiality— as in the texts I explore in this project. Note in many of the titles in this project a sense of the spell, the oracle, and prophecy, the “visitation,” naming the ancestral relation. Teresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* works all these meanings, as the “lesson,” but also as the English connotation of dictation, of being the mouthpiece, the midwife to a text already set in motion by another. In this project I have traced the castings and spellings of these writers

as they engage textual violation, as they “set a spell” with violence—which they cannot, after all (it is they), set aside.

Violence may be ubiquitous, but it is also very particular; and to ignore the particularity of violence is to be complicit in the ways that violence is perpetuated, running hidden and smooth; the differences of rape, murder, domestic assaults, and gay-bashing submerged in one statistic of “violent crimes”; the catastrophic violence of war defined as something quite apart. This erasure of particularity is the omniscient vision of unmarked/untraced violation. All of the creative writers I discuss are concerned with particularity, with specifics, even as they *theorize* that particularity of violation.

Nevertheless, to cast, to spell violation, even and especially in particularity, is dangerous. At one extreme, in materializing the violence, re-presenting it, one risks (re)institutionalizing victimization and further loosing on others the violence one seeks to survive. As Donna Haraway says in her “Cyborg Manifesto,” “Innocence, and the corollary insistence on victimhood as the only ground for insight, has done enough damage” (*Simians* 157). At the other extreme, in binding the violation that shapes one’s very experience and identity to the speller—as any materialization does—one risks self-annihilation. The characters/speakers in these texts/works risk both extremes. At the level of writing literature, it seems to be this intensity of risk that is required/enables writers to get close enough to author/read the violation which shapes them—and live.

History, both ancestral and political, of linguistic possession and dispossession, infuses these violent texts. Teresa Hak Kyung Cha’s speaker in *Dictee* writes:

Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary. To *this* enemy people. The meaning is the instrument, memory that pricks the skin, stabs the flesh, the volume of blood, the physical substance of blood as measure, that rests as record, as document. Of *this* enemy people...

History’s recording...Not physical enough. Not to the very flesh and bone, to the core, to the mark, to the point where it is necessary to intervene, even if to invent anew, expressions, for *this* experience, for *this outcome*, that does not cease to continue. (32)

Like Blake, Brathwaite and Philip, Teresa Hak Kyung Cha is concerned with the violation of empire; from the particularity of one who is occupied and displaced by

occupation, her speaker seeks (under linguistic erasure) "to invent anew, expressions, for *this* experience...this *outcome*." Cha, like many of the writers in this project, plays image against text, space against fullness, poem against prose against history against letters, and is concerned with the violation of both articulation and inarticulation. The book moves through the violent effects of occupation of Korea by the French and by the Japanese, the partitioning of the country, and the signing of nation. Language, emerging from and marked in the body, is "history's recording." And as history is of, in, on and around bodies, so should its "recording" be "physical." Here, as in Barry's Cruddy, blood is the "measure" of an alphabet "pricked [in] the skin" as memory.

Like all the writers in this project, Cha emphasizes that articulating this particularly violent intersection of body and language is not without risk. The speaker asks,

Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound. The past emotions all over again. To confess to relive the same folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each fragment from the word from the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion. (33)

Her "project" here is to image the violations of history, its particular makings and its erasures—in the body. As shrapnel from an "old wound," one reopens the body (of language) to "extract each fragment from the word from the image." She notes here the risk of imaging "the old wound," the painful "emotions all over again," "the same folly." But she also remarks the necessity of the repetition, word and image, "word from the image," tailing the violations so as not to "repeat history in oblivion."

The first "section" of this text, "Disease," sounds a speaker who is framed in the moment before speech, perhaps before a recitation in French, the language of an empire and the language of schooling under that empire. This beginning ties the violence of language and of inarticulation closely to the material violence of occupation and war—and schooling to those contexts as well (as do Brathwaite and Blake). Like Philip's narrators with their tongues cut out, in Dictee "[s]he" is trying to speak, to have voice, to say "the pain that wishes it to speak." This is a telling in the minutest of detail of breath and muscle action of the neck and the tongue. This is a meticulous casting of violation, of

the state of inarticulation, "the pain that wishes it to speak," and the embodiment of the pain of inarticulation through voicing, "She allows others. In place of her. Admits others to make full. Make swarm. All barren cavities to make swollen. The others each occupying her. Tumorous layers, expel all excesses until in all cavities she is flesh." And like Octavia Butler, Robinson and Philip, she raises the question of reproduction as a gendered casting painfully tied to language, of "barren cavities to make swollen."

She, like Barry, notes the particular and sharp forms articulation takes for the marginal speaker, as speakers are "punctuated." Just as Kenan's character Ruth "takes on" her material violation through language, this narrator "would take on their punctuation. She waits to service this. Theirs. Punctuation. She would become, herself, demarcations. Absorb it. Spill it. Seize upon the punctuation. Last air. Give it Her. The relay. Voice. Assign. Hand it. Deliver it. Deliver." Here the speaker "takes on" "punctuation" as in a battle, turns the "Demarcations," from a *cutting of* her to a *seizing of* the punctuation as a desperate grasping at embodied survival in the face of inarticulation (4). This is a strategy of linguistic possession by way of turning on, taking, and so marking the ways in which one is, as was the slave body, dispossessed of language.

As during Blake's moments of violent identity, it is at this "seizing" of that which punctuates, in incorporation of the violation of demarcation, that linguistic expression is imminent:

Now the weight begins from the uppermost back of her head, pressing downward. It stretches evenly, the entire skull expanding tightly all sides toward the front of her head. She gasps from its pressure, its contracting motion.

...

She takes. She takes the pause. Slowly. From the thick. The thickness. From the thickness... The delivery. She takes it. Slow. The invoking. All the time now. All the time there is. Always. And all times. The pause. Uttering. Hers now. Hers bare. The utter. (4-5)

Both the minute slowness of "delivery" and the repetition of description even within this one act of expression point to a ritualization of speech as a casting out of violation, a "spelling" of the "pain to speak. It festers inside. The wound, liquid dust." This is a

casting out, Roberta's vomiting of language: "Inside her voids. It does not contain further"; but it is also a taking, an owning, a self-demarkation at the point (punctuation) of violation, "She takes it...Hers now. Hers bare. The utter." Here "casting" takes on a gendered sense in the word "delivery," an allusion to birthing while voicing, that points to a particularly "female" experience of empire and occupation, a sense altogether unmarked either in Blake or Brathwaite's poems, but everywhere in Philip's. And like Philip's "be-tongueing," the "pure utterance" of linguistic incarnation, this is the baring of violation, self-utterance, most base, most corporal, most available: "All the time now. All the time there is. Always. And all times." "The utter." Like all the writers I explore in this project, but especially those who concern themselves directly with colonialism and empire, Cha mobilizes history, releasing it from containment in the past to be available "Always. And all times."

Like Blake's rending of the veil of secrecy clouding the mechanisms and particularities of violation, like Brathwaite's work to uncover a landscape of creativity and oppression, like Kenan's characters who throughout the novel "confess" the secrets of their lives, stories of the particularities and constellations of violation that might have saved Horace, throughout *Dictee*, Cha spells to uncover what both language and inarticulation have veiled.

Appellation. Excavation. Let the one who is disease. Disease de bonne aventure. Let her call forth. Let her break open the spell cast upon a time upon time again and again. With her voice, penetrate earth's floor, the walls of Tartarus to circle and scratch the bowl's surface (123).

Here again is the emphasis on tailing, and indeed prospecting. For where the disease at the beginning of the book is only "the reciter," the "Disease de bonne aventure" 2/3rds of the way through is the utterance of the fortune teller, appellating, excavating with prophetic voice what has been historically hidden:

Shade shelter shield shadow mist covert  
 screen screen door screen gate smoke screen  
 concealment eye shade eye shield opaque silk  
 gauze filter frost to void to drain to exhaust  
 to eviscerate to gut glazing stain glass glassy  
 vitrification.

what one has seen, this view  
 this which is seen housed thus  
 behind the veil. Behind the veil of secrecy...  
 veiled voice under breath murmuration  
 render mute strike dumb voiceless tongueless”(127)

Here, as elsewhere, Cha’s speaker binds language so closely to the body that to speak is “to eviscerate, to gut” effectively emptying the body, “glazing,” making “glassy” and transparent what was once veiled and hidden and full to overflowing with the “pain to speak.” This makes “clear” the violation of speech, that of writing in this female, post-occupation context. For when one is so embodied and hidden by that silent body, upon speaking one actually becomes “transparent” in “vitrification,” losing visibility as that body—effectively tongueless. This inverse alignment of body and word, as in both Philip’s and Barry’s texts, creates the marginal negotiation of language as a painful materializing and dematerializing of the bodied self speaking and being heard. This is the risk Harraway names of “disappearing” just as one assumes a dominant voice that can be heard. It is the problem Spivak names of voicing subalterity.

Judith Butler writes,

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a “pure” opposition, a “transcendence” of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure.(Bodies 241)

This formulation is helpful to thoughts about writing violation, it is the history of marginal literatures of post-coloniality, or post-slavery, where the “marginalized” writing body, spelling in the colonial or master’s language engages in a particularly violative utterance. Writing is here always (always has been) a question of how to draw (on) the power of material violations in which the language and the very shape of the writing body is implicated—and survive as a writer materially affected by those violations: of how to write violation and not directly replicate material violation—because one is oneself so destroyed (made transparent). But Butler universalizes, saying,

This not owning of one’s words is there from the start, however, since speaking is always in some ways the speaking of a stranger through and as

oneself, the melancholic reiteration of a language that one never chose, that one does not find as an instrument to be used, but that one is, as it were, used by...the ambivalent condition of the power that binds. (242)

Even if one cedes that that, in the strictest sense one “never” chooses one’s language (as with one’s parents), the conditions under which one “doesn’t choose,” and the degree to which one “speaks a stranger” vary greatly. The (creative) writers in this project move through this general alienation in language to mark the particular ways in which language wounds. Writing out of a landscape marked by the enlightenment (Locke, Newton) that would regulate the world from a position of empirical omniscience (the unmarked “seers”), *and* from an artistic tradition that seeks to average and “type” the human form (as Reynolds), Blake seeks to particularize artistic vision, to accurately render violations. Octavia Butler researches historical documents to write the *particularity* of slavery and its effects on its literate descendants. Cha’s speaker(s) speak to claim the “demarcations” of linguistic violation under occupation, to “take on” the “delivery,” to seize the “punctuated” body/nation/voice.

As these writers tail genealogies of linguistic dis/possession to make them available for “always,” they in effect, and within the confines of that inevitable violent horizon, prophesy. For Cha’s speaker(s) each word, each act, exists in eternity, not limited in its reverberations by time. The speaker takes note of “*this* experience, this *outcome*, that does not cease to continue.” Philip’s speaker, “from the catapult pronged double with history” comes “upon a future biblical with anticipation.” All of these writers mix time frames; in the foreclosed narrative (the framed story) beginning at the end, the ghosts of the dead and the living populate the texts without concern for chronology, drawing on memory of the past as a way to spell the future. As for Blake, each word/act is eternal:

And all that has existed in the space of six thousand years:  
Permanent, & not lost nor vanishd, & every little act,  
Word, work, & wish, that has existed, all remaining still  
(Plate 13: lines 59-61)

...

I see the Past, Present, & Future, existing all at once (15: 8)

These efforts work against the linear time of history and traditional narrative form, short-circuiting a “traditional” relation to writing violation. All times, all words and acts become continuously available in relation to each other, foreclosing the totalizing erasure that a linear narrative can constitute, complicating and clarifying particular constellations of violation, and their far-reaching effects on bodies past, present, and future.

For a body bounded, if not entirely constituted, through material violations maintained through language, writing violation turns one inside out, eviscerates and externalizes the self projected as a world outside, projects upon the world one's insides; and projects the demon. And this is violence. Each of these texts points out the risk of externalization of violation—that it becomes fixed “out there,” as the demon, as the piles of bodies (on) which one writes. Externalization is violence, it can even be self-annihilation, but it simultaneously makes available, proffered, incorporated, and contained in the (bloody) word-cast, the spellbinding particularities of violation. Externalization makes violation available to sense, to perceive, to (re)“take,” to “invent anew, expressions for” as in Cha’s work to “extract each fragment from the word from the image,” each “so as not to repeat history in oblivion.”

These writers *incorporate*, cast and contain, violence through text, not as a shield to “bounce back” (I am rubber you are glue...) the “bad energy,” but because the image of violation forms one’s own outline. To simply reject violence—or to simply reflect it (in the rear-view mirror of cyclical re-presentation) is to lose one’s own form—in dissolution or destruction—a risky business indeed. But to voice one’s particular violation is at the same time to risk becoming transparent, invisible in a burning “vitrification.” And so to speak from the margins is an ongoing negotiation of language and materiality, imaged at the outlines of form and icon, at the surfaces of the cast, at the shorelines of sublime storms, in the coronas of the readers and writers that ghost the blinding and melted centers of their violations. These writers seek textual violation in order to negotiate form in linguistic spaces ghosted by profound material violation. For such spaces, when particularly negotiated, can offer the writing body creative potential—the very body of writing.

The container is the body; and writing, a writing sensibility, is as close to the body, to that container, as one can get and still make sense. Writing imitates the body in its visuality, its tactility, imitates the corporate junction of sense(s) and sensibility,

Contents housed in membranes, Stain from within dispel in drops in spills.  
Contents of other recesses seep outward. Too long. Enough already. One empty body waiting to contain...

Something of the ink that resembles the stain from the interior emptied onto emptied into emptied upon this boundary this surface. More. Others. When possible ever possible to puncture to scratch to imprint. Expel. Ne te cache pas. Revele toi. Sang. Encre. Of its body's extension of its containment. (Cha, 65)

To be bound and shaped by particularities of violation/violence as body-identity is chaotic and painful and deadening. Writing casts that marginal space in a *deliberate* mobilization—the (marginal) spelling. The making of order/purpose/future where there really is none. It is magic.

I opened this chapter with a quote from H.D. that is drawn from a series of journal entries written while she endured the air strikes on London during WWII. It was after reading this entry that I began toying with this project. For I began to notice how very many writers, especially those facing marginal and violent conditions, echoed this sentiment that equates writing with living. Again,

I must let go my critical faculty, I cannot afford to criticize or re-consider these words. They are the words of the spell; no matter how haphazard, how apparently unrelated, how profuse, how illogical, they are the words that in a sense—this is what it is—keep me alive.

Faced with the impersonal violence of an air war, a situation of violent non-address, H.D. returns to the ritual of language that is "spelling." Elsewhere in this entry she recalls the "first spelling," and so anchors her writing self in the utter materiality of making language with which all the writers in this project play. Here words are, before and after meanings, letters and characters. When she writes, "I cannot afford to criticize...no matter how haphazard" the words she writes, she may be voicing an anxiety (terror) of audience informed by her gender, but in this private journal, "pages [she hazards] that only have the slightest chance of survival," she is likely (also) affirming the significance

of the process of producing language itself over the significance of producing meaning—the book that is “alive.” The ways in which language is used with the idea that it must first of all “mean” is the force she here resists—for there is (planes above) no one to listen; “meaning” is not the point. Importantly, this is journal-writing that finds publication only many years after she has died, and then only in a limited “art” edition (300 copies). For H.D. “these [particular] words [that] are the words of the spell” “literally” rather than “literarily” “keep her alive.” One may be immortalized by publication but one lives by writing.

Indeed her words here spell a rush and intensity—“no matter how haphazard...how profuse”—that imply dire consequences should she stop. The intensity and risk of this spelling is echoed in many of these texts: Roberta's words, once set in motion, tumble forth in “chunks”; Horace writes his autobiography “without stopping,” in “one long suspended effort”; and even Blake's Jerusalem is packed nearly every page full of words, that, without his assurance otherwise, one might call “haphazard.”<sup>187</sup> In Dictee the speaker, like H.D., returns to language as a ritual and material spelling of the violation within which she finds herself (crucified). She writes,

go to the next line  
 Resurrect it all over again.  
 Bit by bit. Reconstructing step by step  
 step  
 within limits  
 enclosed absolutely shut  
 tight, black, without leaks.  
 Within those limits,  
 resurrect, as much as  
 possible, possibly could hold  
 possibly ever hold  
 a segment of it  
 segment by segment  
 segmented  
 sequence  
 ...  
 salivate the words

give light. Fuel. Enflame. (129)

"Bit by bit. Reconstructing step by step/...segment by segment" this speaker, creates from the "line," from the limits of the "bits" that are "tight, black, without leaks" "the words" that can constitute and energize a linguistic living—"give light. Fuel. Enflame." Under daily bombardment—of colonialism, of air strikes—lacking (meaningful) address, the ritual and tactile ("in a *sense*") production of the words themselves bind and constitute H.D and Cha, "keep [them] alive."

When Judith Butler reiterates her aforementioned question, "How will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose?" it is not a hard question to answer from the point of view of the violated body writing. For, if we take the writers' words for it (which of course we can't entirely), if H.D., Teresa Hak Kyung Cha and countless other readers and writers can be believed, we know "the difference" because it keeps us alive and still creating/voicing/writing (or because we are killed *for it*). Cha writes, "*She says to herself if she were able to write she would continue to live*"(141). Not a hard question to answer, but rather a hard answer to live. Indeed, I'm not sure it is a matter of *knowing* the difference, but rather, a matter of feeling it, of a sensibility from the nexus of sensation and voice that is the body/container "housed in membranes, spill from within." And of course, by Butler's own analysis, these "two" powers—"promote[d]" and "oppose[d]"—are simultaneous. They are, at a purely logical level (by the constitutive power of language/performativity) inseparable. For all her bodies that matter, she doesn't seem to articulate that it's the body that "tells" or "spells" the difference. Bringing material violation to bear (on) the equation of "bodies that matter" makes clear the distinction that the live body and the dead body do not matter the same. The writers in this dissertation are not just aiming at mattering/materializing, we are aiming at living. And therein lies the spell.

Violence in the foreclosed narrative, the foregone sacrifice, suicide, military occupation is a binding; it is a continual containment through imaging. It is an assumption of violation, of violence that in the narrative becomes a frictive heat that can

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<sup>187</sup> And his characters are in constant motion, building, building...

annihilate the one/s who bind it most closely to them, the ones most closely bound by violation. But, it is also a heat that propels the narrative out—makes a particularity of violation available to perception, to conscious action, even to accidental stumblings over the text. Certainly foreclosed violation does not preclude partial (and so mobile) perspectives. As body and language are bound and mutually constitutive, ink, text, voice, poetry, “sings again.” “of its body’s extension of its containment”: “*Render voices to meet the weight of stone with the weight of voices*” (Cha 162).

Even as textual violence may operate as a spectral projection of materiality, so we might also think of the “material” violence in texts as a *figuration* of linguistic violation. That is, while the inheritance of material violence constitutes a gruesome and painful material existence, and language operates as a tool and powerful force that underwrites such violent material existence, linguistic violence *also* shapes the linguistic living of a person, and the contours of this virtual living constitute, for those writing from the margins, a *particularly* painful in/habitation. I emphasize “particularly” because I do not deny that there may be some generalized “anguish” through which we must all pass to enter into a field of articulation or discourse. However, it is in particularity, where particularity finds itself only—or mostly—in and against the negative interpellations, or even at the non-address, linguistically constituted only on the very edges of inarticulation, that such anguish becomes an acute violation such that the stakes are literally linguistic survival.

## EPILOGUE

There was a reason, I know, that so many of us tried to separate from violence, and created myths and stories of peaceful, otherly origins. That reason was a certain kind of psychic survival. But it came from the poisoned and poisonous conscience of those privileged through violation (fantasizing around the brilliance of our mistakes), more than from those oppressed by violation. And in the grabbing, the greediness for our “own” peaceful past, we (the lot of undefined “us,” those with some access to the machinery of disseminating stories) did not see how many people we erased (again) in the present, how (very) much we swerved to avoid. And, how violent we were and are in this interdict

against being/spelling violent/violation. Is a myth of maternal order and peace any more helpful in constituting a living? Is it wrongly “opposed” to violation? When we called our fledgling undergraduate program at UC Berkeley in the early 1980s “Peace and Conflict Studies” we purposefully did not call it “Peace and War”—but the dichotomy stood there anyway. And even when we publicly (feeling ourselves brave) sought opportunity in conflict, we privately hoped all the while to build away from the dirty musk of violence.

And indeed there may be something to an aggregation of peaceful myth outweighing the tight knots of past violence. But while those of us with some privilege in relation to the reigns of language can materially stand that peaceful generation (and certainly all of us have some privilege in some variety of the language we use), those of us whose psyches and very bodies were and are more strongly constructed in violation, material and linguistic, cannot construct aside from such violence without erasing our own shapes. Moreover, the knots remain in the balance, full with the potential stored there, energy locked in the tying. Spelling is reading the knots, entering the hard twisted space of pain and proximity, and echoing, or sounding out those deformations of violation microscopic quantum by quantum; and spelling is in this sense also the untying, thread by thread, letter by letter. The science of magic and the magic of science. It is de/weaving the myth of Penelope’s survival, every day binding (through warp and weft, through song and story) in a shroud for the father the oppressive force of the men who would possess her, and then every night unbinding and releasing that energy as a means for her ongoing survival, her going on. And again, as Donna Haraway notes, “the constructed revolutionary subject must give late-twentieth century people pause as well. In the fraying of identities and in the reflexive strategies for constructing them, the possibility opens up for weaving something other than a shroud for the day after the apocalypse that so prophetically ends salvation history.” Deweave something livid, so that “words cast each to each” and “give light. Fuel. Enflame” the surviving spelling (Cha 177, 129).

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## APPENDIX A: "THE NEGRO GIRL"

### I

Dark was the dawn, and o'er the deep  
     The boist'rous whirlwinds blew;  
 The Sea-bird wheel'd its circling sweep,  
     And all was drear to view—  
 When on the beach that binds the western shore  
     The love-lorn ZELMA stood, list'ning the tempest's roar.

### II

Her eager eyes beheld the main  
     While on her DRACO dear  
 She madly called but called in vain—  
     No sound could DRACO hear  
 Save the shrill yelling of the fateful blast,  
 While ev'ry seaman's heart quick shuddered as it past.

### III

White were the billows, wide displayed,  
     The clouds were black and low;  
 The bittern shrieked, a gliding shade  
     Seemed o'er the waves to go!  
 The livid flash illumed the clam'rous main  
 While ZELMA poured, *unmarked*, her melancholy strain.

### IV

"Be still!" she cried, "loud tempest cease!  
     O! spare the gallant souls:  
 The thunder rolls—the winds increase—  
     The Sea, like mountains, rolls!  
 While from the deck, the storm-worn victims leap,  
 And o'er their struggling limbs, the furious billows sweep.

### V

O! barb'rous Pow'r! relentless fate!  
     Does Heav'n's high will decree  
 That some should sleep on beds of state,—  
     Some, in the roaring Sea?  
 Some, nurs'd in splendour, deal Oppression's blow,  
 While worth and DRACO pine—in Slavery and woe!

## VI

Yon Vessel oft has plough'd the main  
 With human traffic fraught;  
 Its cargo, —our dark Sons of pain—  
 For worldly treasure bought!  
 What had they done?—O Nature tell me why—  
 Is taunting scorn the lot, of thy dark progeny?

## VII

Though gav'st, in thy caprice, the Soul  
 Peculiarly enshrin'd;  
 Nor from the ebon Casket stole  
 The Jewel of the mind!  
 Then wherefore let the suff'ring Negro's breast  
 Bow to his fellow, MAN, in brighter colours drest.

## VIII

Is it the dim and glossy hue  
 That marks him for despair?—  
 While men with blood their hands embrue,  
 And mock the wretch's pray'r?  
 Shall guiltless Slaves the Scourge of tyrants feel,  
 And, e'en before their GOD! Unheard, unpitied kneel.

## IX

Could the proud rulers of the land  
 Our Sable race behold;  
 Some bow'd by torture's Ginat hand  
 And others, basely sold!  
 Then would they pity Slaves, and cry, with shame,  
 Whate'er their TINTS may be, their SOULS are still the same!

## X

Why seek to mock the Ethiop's face?  
 Why goad our hapless kind?  
 Can features alienate the race—  
 Is there no kindred mind?  
 Does not the cheek which vaunts the roseate hue  
 Oft blush for crimes, that Ethiops never knew?

## XI

Behold! the angry waves conspire  
 To check the barb'rous toil!  
 While wounded Nature's vengeful ire—

Roars, round this trembling isle!  
 And hark! her voice re-echoes in the wind—  
 Man was not formed by Heav'n, to trample on his kind!

## XII

Tom from my mother's aching breast  
 My tyrant sought my love,  
 But in the grave shall ZELMA rest  
 Ere she faithless prove;  
 No, Draco, thy companion I will be  
 To that celestial realm where negroes shall be free!

## XIII

The tyrant white man taught my mind  
 The lettered page to trace;  
 He taught me in the soul to find  
 No tint as in the face;  
 He bade my reason blossom like the tree,  
 But fond affection gave the ripened fruits to thee.

## XIV

With jealous rage he mark'd my love;  
 He sent thee far away;—  
 And prison'd in the plaitain grove—  
 Poor ZELMA pass'd the day—  
 But ere the moon rose high above the main,  
 ZELMA, and Love contriv'd, to break the Tyrant's chain.

## XV

Swift, o'er the plain of burning Sand  
 My course I bent to thee;  
 And soon I reach'd the billowy strand  
 Which bounds the stormy Sea.—  
 DRACO! my Love! Oh yet, thy ZELMA'S soul  
 Springs ardently to thee, —impatient of controul.

## XVI

Again the lighting flashes white—  
 The rattling cords among!  
 Now, by the transient vivid light,  
 I mark the frantic throng!  
 Now up the tatter'd shrouds my DRACO flies—  
 While o'er the plunging prow, the curling billows rise.

## XVII

The topmast fall—three shackled slaves—  
 Cling to the Vessel's side!  
 Now lost amid the madd'ning waves—  
 Now on the mast they ride—  
 See! on the forecastle my DRACO stands  
 And now he waves his chain, now clasps his bleeding hands.

## XVIII

Why, cruel WHITE-MAN! when away  
 My sable Love was torn,  
 Why did you let poor ZELMA stay, on Afric's sands to mourn?  
 No! ZELMA is not left, for she will prove  
 In the deep troubled main, her fond—her faithful LOVE.”

## XIX

The lab'ring Ship was now a wreck,  
 The Shrouds were flutt'ring wide!  
 The rudder gone, the lofty deck  
 Was rock'd from side to side—  
 Poor ZELMA'S eyes now dropp'd their last big tear,  
 While from her tawny cheek, the blood recoil'd with fear.

## XX

Now frantic, on the sands she roam'd,  
 Now shrieking stop'd to view  
 Where high the liquid mountains foam'd,  
 Around the exhausted crew—  
 'Till, from the deck, her DRACO'S well known form  
 Sprung mid the yawning waves, and buffeted the Storm.

## XXI

Long, on the swelling surge sustain'd  
 Brave DRACO sought the shore,  
 Watch'd the dark Maid, but ne'er complain'd,  
 Then sunk, to gaze no more!  
 Poor ZELMA saw him buried by the wave—  
 And with her heart's true Love, plung'd in a wat'ry grave.

## VITA

Alison Marie Mandaville received her B.A. in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of California, Berkeley in 1986. She earned a Graduate Certificate in Education and Teaching Credential from the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1988. After teaching in the Oakland public schools for seven years she moved to Seattle where she earned an M.F.A. in Poetry in 1987 from the University of Washington. From 1995 to the present she has taught courses in composition, creative writing, literature, teacher certification and interdisciplinary humanities at the University of Washington and Antioch University Seattle. In 2002 she earned a Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Washington in English Literature.

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