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# Liberatory Embodiment: Love and the Body in the Works of American Women Writers, 1855-1945

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Liberatory Embodiment:  
Love and the Body in the Works of American Women Writers, 1855-1945

by  
Colleen M. Martell

A Dissertation  
Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee  
of Lehigh University  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in  
English

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Colleen M. Martell

Approved and recommended for acceptance as a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Colleen M. Martell  
Liberatory Embodiment:  
Love and the Body in the Works of American Women Writers, 1855-1945

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“Devotion is the Divine streaming through you  
From that place in you before time.  
Love's energy flows through your body,  
Toward a body, and into eternity again.  
Surrender to this current of devotion  
And become one with the Body of Love.”

*Vijnana Bhairava Tantra*, Sutra 98  
Translated by Lorin Roche in *The Radiance Sutras*

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## Abstract

In *Liberatory Embodiment* I argue that Mary Gove Nichols, Rebecca Harding Davis, Tillie Olsen, and H.D. craft a feminist ethic of emancipatory love that emerges from bodily experience. Their practices of love have multiple voices and are rooted in individual experience, but are also concerned about communities and share goals of justice and freedom. In general, American writers from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century rely on images and metaphors of the body to examine a range of socio-historical concerns associated with modernity. In fact, the literary traditions of this period—the grittiness of realism, the determinist and fatalistic plots of naturalism, and the experimental fragmentation of modernism—represent a crisis of embodiment caused by a confrontation between the body and burgeoning modernity. Women writers intervene in this crisis of embodiment by imagining and theorizing body-based love as liberatory. Recent theorists such as Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu argue in passing that feminists should work to resist oppression through the practice of love. By placing these feminist women writers at the center of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century literary traditions, my dissertation creates a genealogy of practices and theories of body-based love that provides a model for our thinking about love as method of resisting oppression.

Whether through metaphors or lived experiences of the body, Gove Nichols's *Mary Lyndon* (1855), Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861), Olsen's *Yonnondio* (1930s), and H.D.'s *The Gift* (1944) enact a double movement: they locate and articulate oppressive phallogocentric inscriptions on the female body; and in constant negotiation with



this effort, they develop radical practices of love emerging from bodily experience. Although they share a vision for social revolution, each author articulates a unique methodology of love. I elaborate their methods by examining the dynamic that motivates their emancipatory practices: healing through water-cure, empathic witnessing of others' suffering, reciprocal nurturing, and restorative remembering.

## Introduction

“I know no woman—virgin, mother, lesbian, married, celibate—whether she earns her keep as a housewife, cocktail waitress, or a scanner of brain waves—for whom her body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its bloody speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripening.”

Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*<sup>1</sup>

“Two or three people, with healthy bodies and the right sort of receiving brains, could turn the whole tide of human thought, could direct lightening flashes of electric power to slash across and destroy the world of dead, murky thought. Two or three people gathered together in the name of truth, beauty, over-mind consciousness could bring the whole force of this power back into the world.”

H.D., *Notes on Thought and Vision*<sup>2</sup>

In a recent yoga workshop, the instructor described the chakras in this way: the first chakra is about entering into relationship with our roots, our past, and our heritage; the second chakra is about entering into relationship with others; and the third chakra is about entering into relationship with ourselves. It occurred to me I might articulate the two premises of my dissertation in this way. First, the women in my study, Mary Gove Nichols, Rebecca Harding Davis, Tillie Olsen, and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), explore relationships with their pasts, with themselves, and with others. In the process of exploring ways of being with themselves and others, they reveal feminist ways of loving that work against oppression and move toward freedom, ways that I call liberatory loving. In a perhaps more subtle way, the location of the chakras in the body (the base or root chakra in the coccyx, the sacral chakra in the ovaries/prostate, and the solar plexus chakra in the navel area) gets at my second central premise: we have the possibility for entering into emancipatory ways of being with the past, others, and ourselves—that is,

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<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986 (page 284).

<sup>2</sup> H.D., *Notes on Thought and Vision*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1982 (page 27).

liberatory ways of loving—by returning to the flesh through metaphors, images, and lived experiences of the body. The progressive tense “entering” reveals the movement and flux underlying these writers’ approaches to love and the body. As part of this return, we make it possible to heal our troubled relationships with our own bodies, recognize our shared embodiment, and blow the dust off of old and confining (and patriarchal) notions of the body and explore what the body might teach us about loving in liberatory ways.

From Walt Whitman’s images of the Civil War in 1865—the “stump of the arm, the amputated hand,” and a “gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening”—to Frank Norris’ Trina McTeague (1890), who spread her hoarded gold pieces in her bed so that she could lay naked with them, “taking a strange and ecstatic pleasure in the touch of the smooth flat pieces the length of her entire body,” from the “stench of burning flesh” as Tom Burwell is murdered by a lynch mob in Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), to the repeated presence of Jake Barnes’ war wound which has left him impotent in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), and finally from the haunting scene in which Rose of Sharon “bare[s] her breast” and nurses a starving man in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) to the “[w]hite bodies naked on the low damp ground” in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), American writers from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century rely on images and metaphors of the body to examine a range of socio-historical concerns associated with modernity (“Drum-Taps” 19, 277, “Blood-Burning Moon” 36, 619, 37). These concerns include, for example, slavery and race, women’s rights, the origins and expansion of industrialism, political and economic injustice, and the wars that begin and end this period, the Civil War and World Wars I and II. Thus, the literary traditions in the

U.S. from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century—the grittiness of realism, the determinist and fatalistic plots of naturalism, and the experimental and fragmented language of modernism—exhibit a crisis of embodiment caused by the confrontation of the body with the burgeoning of modernity. In this dissertation I argue that throughout this period there is another, less recognized, literary tradition, and it is one that can decisively be called a feminist tradition. The writers in this tradition share a strikingly similar vision for responding to injustice and imagining freedom, one that both relies on and departs from the dominant conception of modernity as catastrophic. We can see this feminist tradition in Walt Whitman’s song of the body electric, in the “delicious” freedom Kate Chopin’s Edna Pontellier finds by standing “naked in the open air,” and feeling the “sensuous” “touch of the sea” as it “enfold[s] the body in its soft, close embrace,” and in Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie Crawford, who lies under a “blossoming pear tree” and allows the sensual beauty of the “sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight” to bury “in her flesh” (*The Awakening* 136, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* 10, 11, 10-11). Whether through metaphors or lived experiences of the body, this tradition, which responds differently to various socio-historical events, enacts a double movement: it participates in feminist work to locate and articulate oppressive phallogentric inscriptions on the female body, in Rich’s words, examining the “fundamental problem” of women’s embodiment; and secondly, in constant negotiation with the first, it recuperates the female body, transforming it from a

site of vulnerability and wounding to a locus of creativity, power, and liberatory love, or in H.D.'s words, revealing the "force" and "power" of the body.

The writers and texts in my study include Mary Gove Nichols' fictionalized autobiography *Mary Lyndon* (1855) as well as some of her many publications on water-cure, women's bodies, and health; Rebecca Harding Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861); Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* (1930s); and H.D.'s memoir, *The Gift* (1944). From their varied historical and socio-economic positions—an obscure health reformer from the mid-nineteenth century, for example, and one of the eminent Modernist poets of the mid-twentieth century—American radicals were saying remarkably similar things about relationships among women's liberation, the role of love in the quest for freedom, and the importance of voicing that love through the body. These women respond to a range of social institutions: medicine, politics, economics, motherhood, labor, illness, and war. Together they shape a feminist ethic of love and a theory of the body that has multiple voices, is rooted in individual experience but concerned about communities, shares goals of justice and freedom, and is part of the heritage of radical feminism on which current feminists stand.

Because of the dual movement in these texts, I take a dual approach in studying them: I explore the socio-historic particularities of each writer's understanding of the body marked by oppressive cultural constructions, and examine each writer's vision of how we can get to feminist, liberatory love through reclaiming the body. What kinds of love, what theories of embodiment, emerge from these women's voices? Liberatory love, as it is collectively expressed in these texts, is an experience of love that moves one or

more individuals toward revolutionary freedom and justice. It is characterized by movement and flux, but it is not flimsy or uncertain. It may be expressed in a brief moment, as in Olsen's *Yonnondio*, or through a life-long project, as with Mary Gove Nichols' writings. It destabilizes structures of dominance and is defined by pleasure, reciprocity, and non-harming. It is a personal emotion and, significantly, it is a political act. Liberatory love is an active practice, one that is constantly being negotiated. One of the most unequivocal expressions of liberatory loving, they argue, is experiences and/or metaphors of the body. So, for example, Gove Nichols inseparably links love and the body by articulating them both through water-cure, the most healing and liberating practice she knows of. Davis encourages her readers to express love between women across great divides through witnessing her character's suffering and ill body. These women articulate, finally, an active, mobile theory of embodiment and liberatory love. This can be seen in Olsen's negotiations between the patriarchal archetype of the mother and her feminist revision of the mother who claims her voice and desires. H.D.'s recursive remembering in her fictionalized autobiography *The Gift*, allows her to unearth symbols of embodied love and healing from the past. Whether through cleansing, healing, witnessing, mothering, or remembering, the dynamic of love within each text is activated by movement and fluidity.

The vision of these writers not only intervenes in the dominant narrative of mid-nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century literature; it also invites discussion with postmodern feminist theories of the body and love. I argue that these women writers present the body

as a locus of liberatory love. In doing so, my dissertation joins the current work of Toril Moi, those of the new materialist movement,<sup>3</sup> and others in challenging the dominant postmodern theoretical conception of the body as suspect and limiting, moving instead to a theory of liberation that both celebrates and offers a critique of the body. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf claims that “the body has become the most celebrated site for addressing a wide range of cultural configurations; for articulating contemporary experiences among feminists with divergent interests as well as social and cultural theorists” (*Feminist Theory and The Body* 312). The formulation of this sentence is telling: the body is a celebrated site for addressing cultural issues; the body is not, in and of itself, a celebrated site. This is not surprising when one examines feminists’ relationship to the body since the nineteenth century: from the nineteenth-century biological determinism from which the anti-essentialist response stems, to Judith Butler’s claim in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that “‘the body’ is itself a construction” (which takes the anti-naturalist stance to the extreme), feminists have long faced a dilemma put in place by patriarchal notions of woman: how to talk about the body without being relegated to the body. Feminists work (struggle?) to distance themselves from the limited realm of the body (a realm that has been historically excluded from the realm of reason, the mind) while also not negating that, in fact, inhabiting a (woman’s) body has material consequences in a patriarchal

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<sup>3</sup> According to Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “for new materialists, no adequate political theory can ignore the importance of bodies in situating empirical actors within a material environment of nature, other bodies, and the socioeconomic structures that dictate where and how they find sustenance, satisfy their desires, or obtain the resources necessary for participating in political life. This is in fact something that feminists and class theorists have often insisted upon, and we would add in this context only our concern that such material dimensions have recently been marginalized by fashionable constructivist approaches and identity politics. Of course, the latter have had a good deal to say about the body and its imbrication in relationships of power, but we are not convinced that they pay sufficient attention to the material efficacy of bodies or have they theoretical resources to do so” (*New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* 19).

society that must be addressed in the fight for liberation from oppression. Underneath this dilemma lies the fear that if feminists agree that there's something natural about the body, we've also implicitly agreed that women are essentially inferior to men. As Toril Moi noted in a March 2010 lecture entitled "The Body in Feminist Theory," postmodern theories distrust the body, indeed, they are "paranoid" about what the body conceals; I would add that many postmodern theories like Butler's and others are at the same time certain that the body reveals only injustice, inequality, and limitation. Postmodern feminist theory and most criticism about the body in literature during this period is anxious about the body as a repository of cultural injustices, participating in what Margaret Somerville calls "the erasure of the corporeal body in the somatophobia of essentialism" (1). Moi argues that postmodern and poststructuralist theories, and those that operate from the same premise, "try to answer the question of *how gender is created or comes into being*. No specific political or ethical conclusions follow from such theories. *Theories of origins simply don't tell us what we ought to do once gender has come into being*" (263). Rather than asking what the origins of gender are, then, my work here asks, what are ways of being in the body that limit and oppress, *and* what are ways of being in the body that liberate? My dissertation asserts that women writing from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries—before the question of the body got us caught between essentialism and social constructionism—were doing work similar to postmodern feminist theories of the body by speaking about the ways in which women's bodies are marked, constrained, and constructed by patriarchal language and ideologies of gender, but that they also celebrated the power of the body to engage in liberatory acts



of love, that is, the part the body can play in moving women toward freedom. During my years of research, I have been repeatedly struck by these women writers' seemingly effortless uses of the body to express a range of experiences, from suffering to love, while feminist theorists struggled over decades with where to situate the body. It's not that I don't value this feminist work. On the contrary, what most intrigues me is the dialogue that occurs between this literature and theory. The resonances and discordances between contemporary theory's discourse about embodiment and that of these literary figures revise stagnant notions about the gendered body's powerlessness against the markings of culture and breathe life into the concept of love as a method of resisting oppression.

The concept of love used as a liberatory tool against gender inequality can be elusive, yet its potential implications for the goals of feminism are inspiring. Part of the reason love seems so out of context for contemporary theory is a lack of scholarship about feminist paradigms that call for love or that exemplify methods of liberatory loving from earlier decades. Recent feminist theorists, including Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), Pierre Bourdieu in *Masculine Domination* (2001), and bell hooks in *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2002), argue that feminists should work to resist oppression in social and intimate relationships through the practice of love. However, this call for love as central to equality is often little more than a gesture or, as in Butler and Bourdieu, an underdeveloped afterthought discussed in final chapters. Writers tend to claim that the idea of love is a worthwhile response to gender inequality and gender oppression, but fail to attend to what characterizes love (besides liberation

and desire) and how to bring discussions of love into the philosophical and theoretical lexicon of gender studies and into the practice of our daily lives.

Bordieu's discussion of love is confined to the final section of *Masculine Domination*, entitled "Postscript on domination and love" (109). In it, he poses the question, "[i]s love an exception, the only one, but of the first order of magnitude, to the law of masculine domination, a suspension of symbolic violence, or is it the supreme—because the most subtle, the most invisible—form of that violence?" (109). His answer is, ultimately, that love is the exception: "Mutual recognition, exchange of justifications for existing and reasons for being, mutual testimony of trust... so many signs of the perfect reciprocity through which the circle in which the loving dyad encloses itself, as an elementary social unit, indivisible and charged with a powerful symbolic autarky" (112). But Bordieu's profound claims about the power of love to suspend symbolic violence are undermined by the limited space he devotes to discussing love (3 out of 117 pages), its location in a postscript to the last chapter of his book, and his failure to identify concrete ways of expressing love. My work here privileges the question: what are tangible ways of loving that liberate? The writers in this study respond with varied lived experiences of loving. They espouse love (rather than gesture toward it) both philosophically and tangibly—in political activism and psychological well-being; they do so in order to resist patriarchal gender dynamics, oppressive class and economic structures, and inequality in intimate relationships. And perhaps most importantly, they explore love through images, experiences, and metaphors of the body.

While feminist theory is often energized by a sense of the newness of its critiques of social power structures, it often unfortunately neglects a rich heritage of critique by earlier feminists and radicals. One objective of my dissertation is to flesh out a female tradition that deepens our postmodern conceptualizations of love and embodiment by providing a heritage from which it stems. As Virginia Woolf writes, “we think back through our mothers if we are women” (*A Room of One’s Own* 75). The time period I have chosen is especially rich because of the rapid changes that occurred in American society, but I do not claim that it is where feminist explorations of love and the body originated. A common narrative in feminist texts locates the origins of feminism in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft in the 1790s and then skips 180 years to the United States’ women’s rights movements in the 1970s. This is a disappointing account. Susan Rubin Suleiman, who offers a more detailed history of feminism in *The Female Body in Western Culture*, nonetheless highlights “[t]he waves of liberation that swept through American society in the second half of the twentieth century, freeing love from many constraints,” noting only the Abolitionist Feminism of “the antebellum period in America” and a very limited number of women from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (Woodhull, Wells-Barnett, Goldman, Sanger) as the heritage on which late-twentieth century feminism stands (4, 12, 14). Furthering my point, Suleiman argues that after the publication of Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* in 1969, women “had to discover and reappropriate themselves as subjects; the obvious place to begin was the silent place to which they had been assigned again and again, that dark continent which has ever provoked assault and puzzlement...” in short, women began by reclaiming their

bodies and “a voice with which to speak” (7). She goes on to discuss the way feminists, theorists, writers, and activists “embarked on” this “program” of reclaiming the body in the 1970s (7). This claim, that women “discovered” and “began” reflexively examining body and voice in the 1970s, deserves deeper examination. While it is true that the women’s rights movements of the 1970s were unique in that they were widespread, and in the type of media attention available in the late twentieth century, feminist texts that fail to speak of the deep roots from which the so-called “second wave” of feminism stems participate in silencing the women and men of earlier traditions. We need better accounts of the rich history of feminist thought, writing, and activism or we risk producing ahistorical theories that lack the dimension and vibrancy a strong foundation provides.

## **Methodology**

All of the writers in my dissertation situate their recoveries of the body within a historical moment especially bent on destroying it: Davis’ *Life in the Iron Mills*, for example, centers on the exploitation of the body for the rapid growth of industrial capitalism, while H.D.’s fictionalized memoir, *The Gift*, stems from the somatic crisis the poet experiences while living in London during the violent air raids of WWII. In the midst of such violence and exploitation—indeed, in response to these attacks on the body—each writer’s work reveals some potential for social liberation in bodily experience by reclaiming the body’s capacity for love. The progression of my dissertation, then, begins in 1855 with Gove Nichols’ *Mary Lyndon* which emerges from a historical moment that merged radical “utopian and pioneer efforts” and confining

notions of woman that aided the “epidemic proportions of nineteenth-century women’s ‘illnesses’” (Cott 18, Price Herndl 21). I then move to Rebecca Harding Davis’ novella *Life in the Iron Mills*, situated during the rapid development and expansion of industrial capitalism; and forward to the Great Depression of the 1930s when Tillie Olsen wrote *Yonnondio*. My final chapter examines H.D.’s memoir *The Gift*, which she wrote from 1941-1944, as she confronted the horrors of war in London. My chapters are arranged from earliest to latest in historical sequence, and although the historical moment is important for each woman’s writings, the feminist thought examined in each does not follow a linear progression. Each chapter primarily focuses on a single text, historically, socially, and biographically situated and in conversation with more recent theories. The authors’ own lives are beautifully interwoven into their fiction, and so I have included biographical sketches of each author. These sketches are meant to demonstrate some fluidity in the boundaries between each writer’s personal, political, and social life and their publications, rather than to suggest that I value the woman’s personal life more than her craft.

My approach to theory is based on Donna Haraway’s concept of situatedness (itself based on standpoint theory); “feminist embodiment resists fixation,” she argues, “and is insatiably curious about the webs of differential positioning. There is no single feminist standpoint because our maps require too many dimensions for that metaphor to ground our visions. But the feminist standpoint theorists’ goal of an epistemology and politics of engaged, accountable positioning remains eminently potent. The goal is better accounts of the world” (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 196). Taking Haraway’s cue that

“there is no single feminist standpoint” and Moi’s statement in a recent workshop that we need different theories to answer different questions, I don’t look to one theorist or one school of theory for a complete framework through which to examine literature (nor do I criticize and dismiss fields of theory for their incompleteness). Rather, I use theories where I feel they most productively open up fresh questions and thinking about a text, acknowledging that each theorist is entrenched in her or his own situated knowledge and as such should not be read for any sort of unity or totality. This approach also explains the organization of theory in my dissertation. Rather than pulling theory out into an introductory chapter, I use theory more locally, to extend, illuminate, and explore individual texts or even individual moments of texts. My purpose in not creating a unified theoretical lens through which to read each text is to fulfill one of the major intentions of my dissertation, which is to let these women writers speak.

My project adopts Deborah Slicer’s stance in “The Body as Bioregion” that there is a productive tension between reading cultural inscriptions on the body and acknowledging the body as something more than a signifier. In the sections I quote here at length, Slicer articulates two premises that ground my study. First, she argues for a return to the body:

[T]he invention of new stories about the body will necessitate that we pay attention to our bodies, that our bodies not only will place certain limiting conditions on the stories we invent but that they also will be active narrators, if we attend to them; they will interrupt, talk back, and rupture stories when we don’t attend to them. This is to leave room for plenty of

variation in bodies and in the stories we tell about them, but also to concede—as I believe some feminists who are overly enamored of language should concede—that such narratives cannot be generated out of pure imagination if they are to be of use to us. The disembodied view from the modernists’ “nowhere” and from the poststructuralists’ “everywhere,” as Susan Bordo notes, are equally dangerous fictions. (227)

Slicer wants to embrace feminist theory’s radical and important claims about culture’s mark on the body while also listening to the physical body. “To be nowhere or everywhere is never to be home;” she argues, “to be home, inside, or even *as* the body, requires that one acknowledge the body’s existence as more than a signifier, which is not to diminish the body’s significance. While I want to acknowledge the profound influence of cultural inscriptions on the body, I do not want to abandon the body to a noumenal realm that is ‘culture’” (114). What she wishes, finally, is “to put in a word for the organism” (114). This dynamic of body and culture is at the heart of my dissertation.

The second claim in Slicer’s work that is important to my own research is that, once we’ve allowed ourselves to listen to the body, we are able to examine it as a locus of power:

Men and women inhabit slightly different bodily regions by virtue of, mostly, our different reproductive capacities. The bigger difference has to do with the politics of the body. Most Westernized men and women stand in a similar confused and unhealthy relationship to both their bodies and the earth, and what we do to both, with frequency, is sacrilege. I’m not just

repeating here the old adage about your body being your temple. That adage reflects precisely the kind of world-view that I'm trying to debunk. It says that your body is an object that houses something *else* that is holy. I'm saying that your body is the sacred itself. Seek no further: you've found divinity in your toenails. (113)

Perhaps the body can teach us something about love, in a more powerful way than simply returning to the abject and oppressive embodiment to which patriarchy has consigned women, and in a more fundamentally transformative way than simply celebrating essence and/or difference. Maybe there's another kind of being in the body that is powerful and liberatory; one that demonstrates mobility and fluidity, one that has the potential to reach out to others, one that rethinks nurturing and care, and one that claims a rich and vibrant heritage long silenced by patriarchal culture. Perhaps seeing this potential would shift our conceptions of the body and deepen our theories of love.

The theory that I use flows in and out of Slicer's points above. I employ a range of theorists, including French feminist theorists Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, whose articulations of the female body in relationship to theories of liberation are, although often disregarded by more recent theorists, particularly powerful for my work because they take seriously the power of the body; psychoanalytic theorists Kaja Silverman and Jessica Benjamin; disability, illness and trauma theorists such as Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, Arthur Frank, and Susan Brison; anthropologists Ruth Behar and Carol Gilligan; poet Adrienne Rich; feminist philosopher Michelle Boulous Walker; postmodernist Donna Haraway; and feminist theologian Nelle Morton. As this



list may suggest, I employ a range of feminist theorists that explore love and the body in what are, to my mind, especially productive ways.

### **Chapter Summaries**

My choice to include texts by Gove Nichols, Davis, Olsen, and H.D. stems from the ways each writer and text has been important to my own evolving feminism, and because of the ways that they take up specific issues of love and embodiment. It is obviously impossible for me to include every American feminist radical who I consider to be part of this literary tradition, and there are others who contribute to this tradition, including writers/activists such as Sojourner Truth, Emily Dickinson, Margaret Fuller, Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin, Jane Addams, Willa Cather, Helene Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Agnes Smedley, Emma Goldman, and Meridel Le Sueur, and certainly many more. I regret their absences here, and hope my analysis does justice to the varied tradition of American feminist writing to which they belong.

Chapter One, “Mary Gove Nichols’ Feminist Recuperation of the Body and Love through Water-Cure,” argues that Gove Nichols’ fictionalized autobiography *Mary Lyndon* embarks on a particular feminist reclamation of embodiment, one that is mindful of culture’s marking on the body even as it works to understand the body more deeply than through the lens of dominant culture. Exploitative and authoritative medical practices commodify and make the gendered body sick. Through water-cure, Gove

Nichols reveals that the ability to love others emerges from a healthy and meaningful relationship to one's own body and in turn empowers other women to heal their sick bodies. Revising the traditional conversion narrative, Gove Nichols employs a gesture of continuous oscillation between body and spirit, self and other, past and present, all mediated by the practice of water-cure. *Mary Lyndon* demonstrates that oppression is inscribed on the body, so healing must start with the body.

The central concern in Gove Nichols' *Mary Lyndon* is the recovery of one's own body from cultural oppression; Chapter Two shifts this concern to that of observing the bodily suffering of others. In "Compulsive Suffering and Narrative Healing in Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills*," I argue that Rebecca Harding Davis offers a model of love based on the witnessing of physical suffering facilitated by Davis' narrator. Industrial capitalism makes a machine of the body, severing body from soul and reifying the distance between the working class and the leisure class. To love, for Davis, is to witness the speaking and suffering body of others not by observing from a distance, but by recognizing the self in the other. Bridging divisions of class and labor, Davis' narrator encourages us to become "vulnerable witnesses," in anthropologist Ruth Behar's terms. This loving witnessing is characterized by our ethical responsibility to listen to the ill body, asking us to allow the sick body's narrative to create an interdependent relationship between observer and observed. Thus, liberatory love requires us to imagine ourselves in each other's position.

Chapter Three examines embodied love through a more intimate self/other relationship than that of Chapter Two; the relationship between mother and daughter in Olsen's *Yonnonidio*. In "Breast Milk and Catalpa Nectar: Tillie Olsen's Negotiations of

the Maternal Body in *Yonnondio*,” I argue that through the imagery of breastfeeding Olsen both decries the dilemma of patriarchal mothering—the difficulty of caring for others without first claiming (and caring for) self—and imagines radical mothering that is reciprocal and mutual. The domestic violence and illness that are often an outgrowth of desperate poverty disrupt Anna’s ability to mother, turning her breast milk into poison that she feeds to her malnourished and sickly young daughter. But while poverty is inscribed on the maternal body in a way that reveals the problems inherent in the ideology of selfless nurturance, Olsen also imagines a radical kind of nurturance, one that is reciprocal and sensuous. For Olsen, love is mutual nurturance between mother and daughter in their fullest expressions of self. Love is caring touch, unrestricted breath, and intimate partnership. She offers a vision of maternal care that gives and receives love freely, in a sensual reverie outside the boundaries of poverty. This love may not ultimately liberate, but it brings relief and is a sign of hope for real change.

Expanding the relationship between self and the body and self and other from my previous chapters into a dynamic of the self on a broader historical scale, Chapter Four examines the liberatory potential of recursive remembering. At the heart of my final chapter, “Coming Home: Memory and Vision in H.D.’s *The Gift*,” is a call for feminists to return to their roots. Indeed, H.D.’s most painful and powerful task in *The Gift* is to return home. Living through German air raids on London, H.D. experiences first-hand the threat of war to the body. H.D.’s radical revision of war’s violent devaluing of the body is her assertion that the body is a sacred expression of divine love. H.D. practices love by returning to an ancestral home that stands in opposition to violence, war, and

competition, and by accepting the burden of carrying the wisdom of this home forward to the present. Through a mobile expression of memory, a memory that returns again and again, H.D. reconstructs and revises the past and present, articulating a vision that resoundingly responds to the destructiveness of war. Her memory's journey home teaches us that one can revise destructive historical and cultural narratives through an expression of one's individual memories. For H.D., then, an embodied experience of recursive memory is a central component of liberatory love.

My dissertation reconstructs a crucial era in the heritage of feminist writings on liberatory love and radical embodiment. Due to the rapid growth of modernity from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, this historical period is especially ripe with reactions to and criticisms of social institutions. While many writers use images and metaphors of the body to mediate their social concerns, a distinctive tradition of feminist writers emerges that embraces the body in particularly productive ways. These writers reclaim the body from such institutions as medical authority, the factories at the heart of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, patriarchal motherhood and poverty, war and religion. They do so by exploring the body's potential to love radically, healing deeply held prejudices and entrenched social inequalities. Over and over again these women espouse and practice love that is characterized by mutual nurturing, love that is selfless but also strengthens the self, and love that reaches across divisive boundaries of class, race, and even time, acknowledging difference while getting to the roots of what we share.

## Chapter One

### Mary Gove Nichols' Feminist Recuperation of the Body and Love through Water-Cure

“People write always of the doings of the mind; the thoughts that come to it; its noble plans; how the mind has civilised the universe. [. . .] Those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia, are neglected. Nor is the reason far to seek. To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer; a robust philosophy; a reason rooted in the bowels of earth.”

Virginia Woolf, “On Being Ill”<sup>1</sup>

“The living body is a loving body, and the loving body is a speaking body. Without love we are nothing but walking corpses. Love is essential to the living body, and it is essential too in bringing the living body to life in language.”

Kelly Oliver, “Kristeva’s Revolutions”<sup>2</sup>

Mary Gove Nichols’ (1810-1884) life and work attest to the interconnectedness between body and soul. She identifies the liberatory potential that is activated when we heal the body and nourish the soul so that we love fully: this effort, she suggests, works to resist oppression. Her fictionalized autobiography, *Mary Lyndon: Or, Revelations from a Life: An Autobiography* (1855), relates her own struggle to know her body, to privilege the truth of God’s love as she understands it, and to resist patriarchal norms. This text exemplifies Gove Nichols’ paradigm for social, individual, and spiritual revolution, emphasizing a dynamic of the interdependence of meaningful embodiment and liberatory love. *Mary Lyndon*, part autobiography, part fiction, plays with the boundaries of fiction and truth, of essentialism and social constructionism, of body and soul, of self and other,

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, “On Being Ill.” *The Moment and Other Essays*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948 (page 10).

<sup>2</sup> Kelly Oliver, “Kristeva’s Revolutions.” Introduction to *The Portable Kristeva*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 (page xxv).

and of the tangible and the transcendent worlds. Coerced into abject embodiment through the patriarchal ideologies that informed allopathic medicine and traditional marriage in the nineteenth century, Gove Nichols responds with a feminist vision of physical and spiritual healing. Decades before Virginia Woolf's lament that people write the mind while ignoring the body, Gove Nichols courageously writes the body, looking its vulnerability and interruptions "squarely in the face." In doing so, she brings the living body to life in language; maintaining, as Kelly Oliver and Julia Kristeva do, that the speaking living body is also a loving body.

*Mary Lyndon* revises the traditional religious conversion narrative in a number of ways. The title "Revelations from a Life" is a play on the Quaker "doctrine of Special Revelation"<sup>3</sup>—a religion and practice that Gove Nichols comes to know as utterly corrupt (150). Thus, her autobiography is a revisionist story of the traditional Christian transformation. Rather than the usual progression from sinner to saved, the character Mary's religious conversion is from a traditional and Puritanical belief in an angry God in heaven toward a belief in a progressive, loving, compassionate God present both in heaven and on earth. It is also the story of her conversion to feminism: she converts from a disempowered, unhealthy young girl into a self-taught physician who argues for women's rights and social reform, from oppressed and abject embodiment to empowered embodiment of Divine love. The arc of Gove Nichols' narrative also challenges the traditional linear progression of a conversion narrative, which has a definitive end, into one that is characterized by a series of transformations. While her narrative begins in her youth and concludes in her adulthood, the journey has a more diffuse than linear

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<sup>3</sup> Gove Nichols provides a full account of Mary's thoughts on this doctrine in *Mary Lyndon*, page 150.

progression because she incorporates elements of the past and the present in any one moment. Further, Mary does not experience only one life-changing moment; rather she is continuously open to revising, looking back, and crossing over into new territory. With this mobility Gove Nichols invites others into her recursive dynamic of movement and change across space and time through the record of her life. Gove Nichols' use of the conversion trope hints at the full meaning of the word "conversion," which not only denotes a religious experience (a change toward God), but which also more broadly means, "the action of turning round or revolving," "turning," and "turning back or returning" (*OED*). Considered in its more complete meaning, "conversion" means both to turn toward a new state of being and to return, but also means simply the act of revolving. Her rhetorical use of conversion in its multiple meanings suggests that the gesture Gove Nichols' most employs is that of the turn, in its various incarnations.

Gove Nichols argues not only that there is a turning between fiction and truth, past and present, body and soul, self and other, but also that to consider these entities in a holistic rather than divisive way opens up the space for social change, individual and social freedoms, better individual and social health, and a closer relationship with God, which, for Gove Nichols means more space to love oneself and others. In particular, Gove Nichols argues that if we consider either the body or the soul in isolation we become imbalanced, unhealthy, fragmented. "Our lives are so false," Gove Nichols writes in the *Water-Cure Journal* in 1850, "so filled with over exertion, and want of exertion, so unbalanced, so chained to the low and the gross, that life or vital energy is continually wasted, and imperfect performance of functions is the universal result" (47).

Her paradigm for liberation then is concerned with working against extremes of dualism, and in doing so she articulates the problem of transcending the material world and the problem of abject embodiment. What I mean by the problem of transcendence, and what Gove Nichols identifies in her work, is the problem of privileging heavenly rewards over social and material good. If we experience love, beauty, and liberation only in terms of religious reward in heaven or in terms of transcending the obstacles of material reality, then we neglect to work toward or to see love, beauty, and liberation in the social realm. At the other end of the spectrum, abject embodiment presents the problem of privileging an embodied, physical domain devoid of spiritual meaning.

For Gove Nichols the fragmentation and emptiness experienced by society and individuals is caused by a loss of the turn toward the healthy body and toward a liberating God figure. She argues that this fragmentation is reified by capitalist and patriarchal society which encourages us to divide our bodies from our souls so that our (gendered) bodies are more easily commodified. In response, Gove Nichols claims that we need to discover love and freedom in the transcendence of an unhealthy and oppressive societal and material reality and then work to express love and compassion with and through our bodies, working in the material realm to resist oppression. In turn, the beauty of our material world, including what is present in our bodies, in each other, and in inanimate objects, should inspire us to aspire toward what Gove Nichols would call God's love, which exists beyond, but is present within, the material world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> My thinking about the turning motion of Gove Nichols' writings was influenced by Julia Kristeva's work, in which she argues for a similarly interdependent relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic as a way to combat the fragmentation experienced in modern society. See Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984).



Gove Nichols uses water as both a metaphor for her recursive, confluent paradigm and as a material “cure” for the ills of society. As a water-cure practitioner, Gove Nichols believed and taught that water could stimulate and sedate, replenish and expunge. The centrality of fluid in Gove Nichols’ work is a feminist recuperation of the repudiated female. Water is powerful, flexible, and recycles through multiple forms. For Gove Nichols, water is love, it sustains the body, and it empowers people (especially women) against a medical institution that commodifies embodiment and consolidates knowledge and power. Culture fundamentally shapes the body, but that does not mean we focus our attention solely on culture. We need to listen to our bodies, she argues. We need to look to healthy bodies beneath culture. And this is what water does—it allows bodies to reveal themselves, to heal themselves, and to love more freely.

### **Fiction Meets Autobiography**

Even before she became a self-taught water-cure physician (one of the first women to do so), Gove Nichols was one of the first women in America to speak publicly to women about their bodies (sometimes in front of men as well, a controversial practice at that time), including lectures on menstruation, childbirth, and the ills of restrictive clothing (Silver-Isenstadt, Danielson 249). Later in her career, she was one of the first women’s rights activists to argue that suffrage alone would not liberate women; she argued that revolution in more intimate practices, like marriage and sex,<sup>5</sup> would be

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<sup>5</sup> This point picks up on eighteenth-century feminist arguments, including specifically those of Mary Wollstonecraft. Gove Nichols herself does not pay homage to feminists who came before her. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) shares striking similarities to Gove Nichols’ feminist beliefs, but there is no mention of her having read or been influenced by Wollstonecraft.

necessary for women's true freedom. Like feminist activists at the Seneca Falls convention in 1848, Gove Nichols used Christian language to argue for progressive social change, but she went even further in her understanding of both religion and social reform. She argued that in the truest sense, God advocated free love,<sup>6</sup> the empowerment of women, intellectual stimulation and physical health for all people, and communal living, among other things. As a physician she fought for a new, holistic way of treating bodies; as a feminist she fought to end the institution of marriage, at least as it was structured in the mid-nineteenth century, and other oppressive practices for both women and men; as a spiritual person, she argued that God's love was not to be found in the hierarchies of churches run by men, and that the greatest human potential is the ability to love one another as God loves; as a radical, and thus often isolated intellectual, she craved a community more in tune with health, liberty, and love and less concerned with fashion, profit, individual gain, and hierarchy.

Women's illness in the nineteenth century, as Diane Price-Herndl argues, included both genuine physical maladies and "culturally accepted, expected, and even culturally induced" conditions (22). Thus, *Mary Lyndon* is in part the story of Gove Nichols' body: plagued by illness for a good portion of her early years, Gove Nichols is forced to attend to the needs of her body as well as to become aware of the social structures that she comes to believe make her body sick. Gove Nichols narrates a sort of interdependence of embodiment, love, and feminist resistance to oppression: her belief in

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<sup>6</sup> Nineteenth-century Utopians were often advocates for free love, which, according to Estelle B. Freedman and John D'Emilio, "referred not to promiscuity—or sex with multiple partners—but to the belief that love, rather than marriage, should be the precondition for sexual relations" (113). Further, "[f]ree lovers embraced the idea of individualism, extending it to its logical extreme and elevating love and desire, rather than reproduction, as the basis for sexual union" (*Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* 112).

God provides her with the belief in spiritual love that transcends the confines of oppressive gender hierarchies and social decorum, and her focus on the health of the body, especially women's bodies, inspires Gove Nichols to seek that love *within* her body rather than to offer her suffering up to God and pray that her pain will grant her reward in heaven. She suffers abuse and terror within the confines of marriage because her husband (who does not work) forces her to support the family financially while she is gravely ill. This instills in Gove Nichols a belief in the utter necessity for women to have the right to their own wages and property, including intellectual property, and to their own bodies.

Since Gove Nichols argues that there is no linear formulation between meaningful embodiment and feminist resistance to oppression, nothing dictates which comes first in her autobiographical account of her feminist coming to consciousness. However, sickness, or an intensely negative experience of embodiment plays a crucial role in Gove Nichols' narrative of her early subjectivity. The eponymous heroine of the narrative, Mary, experiences a childhood centered on physical illness, painful solitude, a strong desire to learn that was often stifled by her parents, and an almost obsessive feeling that she should atone for her sins, though she often could not say what sins she had committed.<sup>7</sup> She begins, "I was born in sickness" and a few paragraphs later repeats a

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<sup>7</sup> Gove Nichols gives a somewhat complicated description of her parents. Her father is her hero and friend but he still confines her to certain standards for girls; and in Mary's youth, her mother is strict, dislikes Mary, and thinks children should be useful and that girls should act in tune with proscribed femininity (*Mary Lyndon* 16, 20). As Jean Silver-Isenstadt writes in her biography of Mary Gove Nichols, *Shameless: The Visionary Life of Mary Gove Nichols*, "[b]oth William and Rebecca Neal [Mary's parents] held extreme views" in politics and in thought, introducing Mary to "a world of radical ideas" (*Shameless* 13, 14). She goes on to note, however, that "William discouraged Mary from learning how to write" and her mother Rebecca insisted that girls needed to be "useful" and worried over Mary's love of novels (*Shameless* 14). Many years later, around 1850, Mary and her mother grew close, because her mother "had come to take a supportive interest in her daughter's life work" (*Shameless* 173). Mary's mother died in 1854, just as she was finishing *Mary Lyndon*, which explains her footnote to her descriptions of her

similar sentiment: “my first recollections are those of pain—of mental and bodily misery” (14, 15). Not only is Mary frequently ill, she is also considered ugly; her mother and sister often remind her of her “stooping form,” “large nose,” and “cross eyes,” and while Mary’s pretty sister Emma has lovely dresses, Mary is clothed in “ill-shaped hangings of ugliness” (44). Her parents limit the time she can devote to reading and they adamantly “refused to allow [her] to learn to write” though she teaches herself in secret (44). Sickly, plain, and bookish, Mary craves friendship and intimacy, but says that “no one loved me as I loved,” and she is mostly in the company of her pets (22).

Due to her frequent illnesses, Mary comes in contact with numerous physicians and begins to learn about the interiority of her body. She is shocked by her lack of knowledge, remarking, “I had no idea of the complex machinery of my body. I did not even know what he meant by my lungs” (62). At the same time that she learns from physicians, she becomes increasingly anxious and distrustful of nineteenth-century allopathic practices such as overmedicating with dangerous drugs, ordering a woman into “complete confinement,” use of “leeches” and razors to drain bad blood, and “electricity applied to the genitals” (Price Herndl 29). Mary soon begins to reject this advice. Some of her early efforts to gain strength include bathing, exercise, and reading, and she decides to stop eating meat, although these practices are far from a daily regimen and are furthermore often thwarted by her parents. In this early period Mary’s relationship to her body is mostly antagonistic. She is ignorant about the physiology and anatomy of her body and thus powerless to treat herself. She intuits that allopathic medicine is not

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unloving and cruel mother: “[a]s she advanced in years, she advanced in wisdom and goodness, and in her last days a devotion to the same truths made a bond of union between us, stronger than any mere tie of blood. But for this, I had to wait many years...” (*Mary Lyndon* 20).

helping her but she is almost entirely at the whim of physicians and her parents. Constant illness causes Mary to “[meditate] self-destruction” and she comes to understand her sickness as punishment for sin and “long[s] to make sacrifices that would give me peace” (65).

Alongside the influence of illness and her struggle against mainstream medical treatment, religious dogma overwhelms Mary’s youth. Neither of her parents is religious, yet she insists on arguing the importance of following God’s laws and often debates with adults about what she sees as their need for humility and atonement. Her father, an atheist, encourages Mary to question her Christian faith. He asks,

“Tell me who is a Christian.”

“The being who acts from love,” I answered readily.

“Everyone acts from love, but the little word self comes before it. There are a great many kinds of love, Little One.”

“I only mean Divine love, father.”

“I grant that *you* mean always just right. Let us look at those who call themselves Christians. Those who acknowledge themselves such plead guilty to intolerance, a persecuting spirit, uncharitableness, and pious pride. How much Divine love is there in all this?” (17-18)

Mary fears the sinfulness of questioning Christianity though she adamantly asserts the importance of acting from love, even in its imperfect application. Her father argues quite realistically about the selfishness and intolerance of human beings, including especially those who claim to be religious even as they denounce others. Mary, however, stands

firm in her belief that individuals can act from Divine love, a love that would ostensibly know no intolerance or selfishness. This is the kind of love she will eventually preach and practice, one that will also be balanced by the wisdom and truth of her father's statements. In these early years, though, her belief in the need to atone is greater than her desire to revise Christian institutions. Mary decides to become a Quaker. The asceticism of these "simple, truthful, self-denying people" appeals to her; and though she's grown out of the awkwardness of her early childhood and has come to enjoy the beauty of her hair, she denies herself any ornament or beautiful thing in accordance with the plain Quaker style (74). This decision eventually leads her to her first husband Albert Hervey, a Quaker friend of Mary's uncle, and their marriage inadvertently causes one of Mary's most significant transformations.

The Quakerism of Mary's young life provides an interesting doctrine with which to understand her religious conversion and compare her later spirituality. As Mary understands it, being a Quaker requires repressing ego and desire and taking up the cross, that is, embracing suffering as the way toward God. Long before becoming an empowered woman, this abnegation appeals to Mary: "I longed to make sacrifices. I wanted to present myself before God as one who humbly accepted the atonement made by Christ" (74). Choosing the Quaker, or more broadly, the traditional Christian lifestyle demands not just humility, but denying beauty: "I was to deny all vain loves; in other words, my taste for beauty was to be crucified. A dress without ornament, a language singular and strange, was to set me apart from the world, satisfy God, and make me a happy Christian" (74). But beauty is found not only in superficial things like dress and

hair; Mary laments that she must abstain from the beauty she enjoys in her imagination: “I loved beings of my own creation, with which peopled my world of fancy;” in others: “all those about me, who showed me even slight favor;” in nature: “the flower-starred meadow, white roses, and white lambs;” and finally, in experiencing other women: “most I loved the beauty of woman” (75). She writes that “the struggle between what I considered my love of the world and my love of the cross was long and severe,” nonetheless in this early period Gove Nichols describes Mary as so wedded to her belief in the necessity of atonement she chooses to repress all the beauty she experiences from the material world (75).

The only socially acceptable alternative to the utter entrapment in the body Mary experiences in childhood at the hands of allopathic medical practitioners (and the strict gender roles enforced by her parents) is a transcendence that denies that body through conventional religion. Mary’s religious fervor can be understood as similar to the desire of the celestial spectator identified by Kaja Silverman. In *World Spectators*, Silverman argues that metaphysics sets up a problematic divide between what she terms “world spectators” and “celestial spectators.” She describes the world spectator as a desiring subject who has acceded that nothing but communion with God, or in philosophy “the Good,” will fill the void—or lack—that characterizes the human being. Not only does the world spectator accept this lack, but “he has learned to take pleasure in his own insatiability” because “nonsatisfaction [...] is the wellspring of beauty” (11). The celestial spectator, in contrast, marks the end of desire, and only wants to be satiated. The world spectator finds pleasure in the temporal, the celestial spectator only in the

fulfillment of her desire, which is “desire for the end of desire,” beyond the imperfect, material world (11). In Mary’s Christian formulation, much like that of the celestial spectator, the world is only a reminder of the misery of the human condition. And like the celestial spectator, Mary turns her gaze away from the world toward the promise of Divine fulfillment. In doing so, she feels that she is obeying God’s will: “My reverence and diseased conscientiousness were satisfied by my course. My love of the beautiful was continually crucified” (76). Part of the dis-ease of Mary’s early life, then, is that she seeks a “rarefied place in the sun of a single and nonsensuous Good,” a place where meaning is otherworldly and detached, as opposed to a place “where beauty is multiple,” where meaning and love are worldly (Silverman 35).

This confining and lonely childhood develops into a similarly repressive young adulthood. Mary is tricked and coerced into marrying Hervey both by her uncle and Hervey himself. While boarding away from home and working as a school teacher,<sup>8</sup> she is invited to visit her uncle who introduces her to an older Quaker friend of his who is looking for a wife. She initially agrees to marry Hervey out of fear and pressure, but realizes the mistake she has made in doing so and tells Hervey that she has changed her mind, breaking off the engagement. He becomes furious and terrifies her with an accusatory speech about the sinfulness of breaking a vow, inviting other Quakers to the place where she is staying to “enforce the condemnation” (122).<sup>9</sup> Once married, her life deteriorates. This quick decline in health and spirit causes Mary to pray for death: “day after day the thought of self-destruction haunted me” (126). Mary sums up her life with

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<sup>8</sup> Silver-Isenstadt informs that Mary worked as a schoolteacher during the 1820s.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Neal married Hiram Gove on March 5, 1831.



Hervey (Hiram Gove) in her 1854 publication *Marriage*:<sup>10</sup> “The ceremony performed, I became the property of this man” (194). She goes on to explain that “Public opinion and the law demanded obedience to this man, who had no true understanding of my character or wants” (194). Hervey’s jealousy and insecurity structured the many limitations of her life:

I was to work and not read... I was not to write... I was to go only to his meeting, unless on funeral occasions. I was to hold no friendship with any not of his denomination. I was not to send a letter to any friend, unless he read it, and if a sentence in it displeased him, I was obliged to destroy the letter. (194-195)

His demands silence her voice and keep her isolated. Mary feels this emotional and social destitution deeply, but his tyranny also grips her physical being. When Mary is allowed a visitor, a Quaker physician, Hervey keeps vigil from the doorway. Mary writes, “he glowered in upon me, a specter at a feast” (138). This metaphor suggests that Hervey regards his wife as something to be consumed. Hervey knows he cannot have complete access to Mary’s feelings or her private thoughts, and in this sense his control is limited to what he can touch and see: her body. Mary’s words here also characterize Hervey as a sullen, terrible, ghost-like entity, who cannot consume her or enjoy her, though he tries. Mary compares her experience of their marriage to the threat of consumption, a threat that works in spiritual, emotional, social, and corporeal ways.

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<sup>10</sup> The full title of this publication is *Marriage: Its History, Character, and Results; Its Sanctities, and Its Profanities; Its Science and Its Facts. Demonstrating Its Influence, As a Civilized Institution, on the Happiness of the Individual and the Progress of the Race*. Gove Nichols and her second husband Thomas Low Nichols each wrote their own sections of the book. For more on which sections were attributed to either, see Jean L. Silver-Isenstadt’s *Shameless*.

Her life with Hervey exacerbates the ill health she suffered as a child,<sup>11</sup> adding reproductive problems to her previous struggles. Of five pregnancies only one child survives, although Gove Nichols doesn't record the specifics of these losses because "the maternal portion of my life was too bitter to be told" (127). She calls her only child Eva a "child of sorrow, of tears, of unutterable misery" (127). While Eva's birth represents the direst of circumstances, Eva's life becomes the kernel of love that sustains Mary. Critics agree that one of the more abusive aspects of Mary's marriage to Hervey is their sex life, a depth of abject embodiment which Gove Nichols chooses not to explore in her autobiographical novel or other publications.<sup>12</sup> That husbands had absolute control over their wives' bodies, that Mary suffers through five unhealthy pregnancies, and that every time Hervey comes near or touches her, "a convulsive shudder ran over my whole system, giving me indescribable pain," is clear indication of the intimate violence Mary endured (137).

Her frailty is also caused by Hervey's refusal to work; Mary, already susceptible to illness, works endlessly "with her needle" providing the family's only income, while every profit earned belongs to Hervey (127). It is during this period that Mary acutely feels the economic aspect of women's oppression: "Here is the key to the dungeon of women—man owns the property" (151). Mary later clarifies that the ability to do good work is necessary and beneficial for any individual. It is the economic inequality—the

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<sup>11</sup> Silver-Isenstadt notes that one specific ailment that Mary's suffers upon marrying Hiram Gove (Hervey) is failing eyesight: "[i]t was during her own wedding ceremony that Mary first experienced trouble with her eyesight—a literal dimming of her visions. This incapacitating symptom would recur in her life at times of tragedy" (*Shameless* 25).

<sup>12</sup> See Dawn Keetley's article, "The Ungendered Terrain of Good Health: Mary Gove Nichols' Rewriting of the Diseased Institution of Marriage," and Silver-Isenstadt's *Shameless* Chapters One and Two for a more in-depth discussion. Gove Nichols' most forthcoming account of her sexual encounters is in her 1854 tome *Marriage*.

fact that by law Hervey owns her labor, her earnings, her body, her child, even her books and letters—that locks the door on her disempowerment.

Hours of needlework take their toll on Mary. The work doesn't bring in much money so she is forced to take in more than her body can handle. Mary spends many hours squinting and hunched over her work and often she works late into the dark night. She enjoys little to no exercise or fresh air and no contact with anyone other than Hervey and her small daughter. Thus, Mary's health consistently declines. After she becomes so ill that she nearly dies, Hervey consents to let Mary teach because she convinces him that the exercise, sunlight, and air will keep her in better health. This opens up social, intellectual, and economic possibilities. Outside of the home and away from Hervey's watchful eyes, Mary walks around, converses with her young students, and in precious (and dangerous) stolen moments, reads, studies, and even conceals some of her earnings. Mary starts taking greater interest in her own well-being: "I began to see that I was a being—that I had the right first to live, and second to enjoy life in some degree" (129). She develops a position on marriage, claiming that "a conviction had long been growing within me that marriage without love was legalized adultery" (135). Soon after, Mary leaves Hervey.<sup>13</sup> When presented with the opportunity to move back home to care for her sick father, Mary resolves to leave and never share a home with Hervey again. Though she is not entirely free of him—he kidnaps Eva, spreads vicious rumors meant to disparage Mary everywhere she goes, and of course never entertains the thought of

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<sup>13</sup> Mary left Hiram Gove after eleven years of living together as a married couple, in 1842 (*Shameless* 54-55).

divorcing her (until it benefits him)—this break represents the last time Mary is physically imprisoned by Hervey.

Gove Nichols blurs the line between past and present and between fiction and narrative especially during the years of Mary's life in which she begins to use the water-cure, participates in a philosophically liberal Lyceum, and leaves Hervey to live with her parents. For example, she narrates her move from her home with Hervey and their final confrontation, and then "go[es] back a little to a time previous to [her] separation from Hervey" (163). She tells a detailed story of the illness she experienced once Hervey has gone before she tells of her "last terrible illness from the bleeding of [her] lungs" which occurred while she still lived with Hervey. This "last terrible" illness narrative contains few details and seems much less severe than her later illness in her parents' home (163). This is also the period in which Mary makes her most significant transition within the scope of her fictionalized autobiography. She spends this time clarifying and articulating her major transformation from invalid sinner desiring heavenly atonement to empowered social reformer desiring love in its embodied form on earth. The Lyceum and the education she gets from other social reformers, as well as a growing confidence in herself and her own critique of society, help give her the strength to separate from Hervey. Likewise, her misery with Hervey encourages Mary to seek out more progressive-minded individuals and solidifies her belief in the need for reform and revolution. During this period, Gove Nichols imposes no definitive line between what she was and what she has become; like the healing water that is her life's most unequivocal metaphor, her transition

ebbs and flows, consistently moving forward even as she frequently looks back, revises, and learns.

The Lyceum,<sup>14</sup> started by a local (and in Mary's estimation a liberal if hypocritical) pastor, whom Gove Nichols calls Reverend Silkenby, included "a somewhat novel constitution and by-laws," allowing women to vote and give lectures (164). When Mary is in her early thirties, in or around 1841, she gives a speech here about the general condition of women (*Shameless* 53). With the pain of her life with Hervey still lingering, yet with newly realized strength in her own voice, Mary preaches: "full of my subject, impressed with a sense of its terrible importance, I spoke of the sphere of woman, that undefined, and seemingly undefineable [sic], thing; that space which has no center, and can have no circumference, no divine limitation, fixed by the achievements or failures of a fair and free trial of all her powers; because no such trial has ever been allowed her. Ministers and laymen have attempted to define and limit her sphere, but as yet no individual woman has been left free to do this for herself" (165).<sup>15</sup> This speech is evidence of the process of Mary's transformation. Though the Lyceum allowed women to

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<sup>14</sup> This is one of the many places where Gove Nichols' fictionalized autobiography does not perfectly match her biography: Silver-Isenstadt argues that Mary was introduced to the Lyceum while still living with Hiram Gove (Hervey). The lyceum took place in Lynn, Massachusetts, where the Goves moved in 1837 (*Shameless* 29). Speakers at the lyceum included communists, socialists, free love advocates, Fourierists, vegetarians, and water-cure practitioners. Gove Nichols also makes a brief reference that she was treated by a homeopathic physician during this time. She does not give his name but states that he was trained by Hahnemann (*Mary Lyndon* 168).

<sup>15</sup> Mary initially believes that the wisdom of her speech was heard by the women and men in attendance but realizes later that they only hear in the moment and they forget it soon after. She adds that "some years after," when "'woman's rights' became a fashion," she sells the speech to an anonymous man—who she claims gives it publicly as his own—so that she can get money to buy food: "its price gave bread to my child and myself" (167). Ironically, physical and economic need force her to sell her intellectual property so that she has money to feed herself and her daughter. Mary is formulating a theory of women's oppression that locates the cause of women's oppression in cultural structures even as she repeatedly reminds us that the body's needs must be heard and that those needs must be negotiated in the marketplace of the society at large.

speak, Mary claims that Reverend Silkenby “had no notion that any woman would ever dare to avail herself of [this right]” (164). In doing so, and in choosing women’s rights as her topic, Mary expresses her commitment to reforming patriarchal notions of women and femininity. Yet even as this speech argues quite radically that women’s (or woman’s) potential cannot be measured while society restricts and fixes their entire beings, her language speaks of a disembodied, impersonal “thing,” the “sphere” of woman. This word choice indicates that at this moment in her autobiographical novel, Mary’s rhetoric of embodiment is not yet fully integrated into her public activism, and she points us to her feminism rather than toward her work as a health reformer which she has yet to discuss in any detail in *Mary Lyndon*. Biographically, Gove Nichols spoke publicly about women’s anatomy while still married to Hervey, as early as 1838—years before she connected (publicly at least) the importance of scientific and biological knowledge about the body to her feminist and radical assertions about marriage, economic and sexual inequality, and individual freedom.<sup>16</sup> The discrepancy between her memoir and her life blur the origins of her progressive philosophies, suggesting that there is not one moment in which Mary’s transformation occurs, nor that either women’s rights or corporeal knowledge necessarily comes first in the formation of her paradigm of resistance, at least in the way that she relates this process to her readers. There is no linear formulation between meaningful embodiment and feminist resistance to oppression. For Gove Nichols, they commingle and evolve interdependently.

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<sup>16</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of Gove Nichols’ origins as a lecturer, see Silver-Isenstadt’s *Shameless*, Chapter One: The Formative Years. According to Silver-Isenstadt, Mary began lecturing publicly when she was twenty-eight years old, in 1838 (*Shameless* 35-36).

Leaving Hervey represents a change in her beliefs about the institution of marriage, but this particular moment of transition also includes revisions in her religious beliefs and strengthens her resistance to allopathic medicine. Her parents' home, once a place of restriction for Mary, becomes a place of freedom and healing. This is in part because Mary has for the first time related to her parents the horrors of her marriage to Hervey and in part because Mary's mother has had her own transformation, coming to appreciate Mary's life work. Her experiences with social reformers in the Lyceum and her freedom from Hervey in her parents' home crystallize her new consciousness, and she asserts: "the time for oppressions, atonements, and self-sacrifice is well-nigh past" (193). Having hit rock bottom in her life with Hervey, Mary's bodily, radical, and feminist sensibilities coalesce into a paradigm for individual and social liberty.

It is fitting that she would have physical manifestations of her escape from Hervey. During final negotiations between Hervey and Mary's father concerning Hervey's right to his wife and daughter and to her labor, Mary writes, "at that moment I would have been torn to pieces, drawn asunder by wild horses, sooner than have returned to that man. But I could only see darkly, and I felt as if choking all the time" (158-159). The day after Hervey's departure and his grudgingly agreeing to Mr. Lyndon's terms, Mary experiences physical manifestations of this choking sensation: "I felt very heavy about my lungs and heart, and my head was a little giddy, but I thought walking would do me good. I had gone near half a mile, when there was a rushing into my throat, and a strangling sensation. I coughed, and threw up a quantity of blood. I instantly retraced my steps, but the blood rushed so rapidly into the trachea, that it was with great difficulty that

I threw it up fast enough to avoid strangulation” (159). This story presents an interesting dynamic in Mary’s physical illness, foretelling a similarly imbricated relationship between body and liberty in the method of her feminist resistance. On one level this is a story about how physically sick she is: heaviness in the chest and coughing up blood suggests that she is most likely suffering from consumption, or tuberculosis, a dangerous, widespread infection in the nineteenth century. Framing this story of her illness with her final move away from Hervey, Mary also suggests both that the illness is less a biological infection and more a product of the diseased state of her marriage, and that her sickness is a metaphor for cleaning Hervey out of her system. His presence makes her feel that she is choking. Once he is gone she throws up infected blood to keep herself from choking, symbolically cleaning the cause of her suffocation out of her body. Here Mary’s language works on different levels at the same time: corporeal, cultural, and metaphorical. The consequences of living in such diseased and miserable conditions reverberate in the psyche and in the body. Whatever the origins and effects of this illness, her body demands its own time to heal. That the body speaks was not lost on Gove Nichols.

Once Mary leaves Hervey’s home, expunges him from her body, steals her child from his custody, that is, claims ownership of the product of her labor and love, she moves to New York in the hope of securing financial independence. Her work in New York brings together her philosophies: here she teaches school and administers the water-cure and other health advice to many women, teaching them to care for themselves. In doing all this, she develops a professional reputation for herself. She also makes enough money to support herself, lives communally with like-minded intellectuals, and



eventually marries Vincent, the fictionalized Thomas Low Nichols, in a partnership based on love and equality. Mary states that the communal living in New York is one of “waifs and strays from a sick world, seeking to go higher” (311). This community works to heal body and soul as it works to reform and revolutionize the society that made them sick. Mary’s narrative traces movements in which her body progresses through illness toward health, her intellect from uneducated toward self-taught physician, her Christian ethics from atonement to empowerment, her self-consciousness in isolation and destitution toward communion with others.

### **Gender and the Body**

What is most compelling about Gove Nichols’ formulation of the body is that her rejection of the construction of a “natural” femininity in no way neglected the importance of corporeality. While culture, including femininity, is inscribed on the body, there is also a power inherent in the body. Dawn Keetley argues that one of the most problematic aspects of Gove Nichols’ writing about the body for nineteenth-century critics is that Gove Nichols’ claims about the way society affects women’s bodies breaks down the public/private boundary: “For Gove Nichols, the seemingly private body is instead the repository of oppressive power relations and also the site of social transformation” (118). In doing so, Keetley continues, Gove Nichols asserts that what the medical institutions claim is natural about women’s bodies is actually socially constructed. That is, “Gove Nichols adapted the tenets of the water cure to posit an architecture of the body and of the self as shaped by culture and not by biology; femininity, she argued, is inscribed *on* and

not inherent *in* the body” (119). This is one of the most revolutionary aspects of Gove Nichols’ work. Yet even as Gove Nichols argues that culture shapes our understanding and treatment of the body, she maintains that we should not ignore the body in favor of consulting the culture. Instead, she argues that even as our perceptions of the body are constructed by culture, the body has innate wisdom. The more we listen to the body, the better we can construct society: “we must learn the truth for every passion of the soul, for every function of the body, and bring harmony with this truth” (qtd in Silver-Isenstadt 162). Gove Nichols argues that the culture is destroying our bodies and with it our minds and souls, since “the body [is] the fulcrum on which the soul rest[s] its lever for action... my soul *must* be ill at ease while my body was poisoned” by cultural “evils” (66). If culture is written on the body, we can see that the culture is unhealthy as long as our bodies are sick and weak. In order to heal the culture, she claims, start listening to the body. In Gove Nichols’ formulation, we must revolutionize culture by taking our cues from healthy bodies. In powerful contrast to more recent feminists’ discomfort with essentialism, she locates the mark of culture on the body and the potential for resistance innately in the body.

Certainly Gove Nichols saw the body as sexed. Her life’s work was the study and treatment of women’s bodies, issues of menstruation, menopause, sex, masturbation, childbirth, miscarriage, and abortion. She also lectured extensively about female anatomy. She herself suffered with and eventually died of breast cancer. But she did also dedicate her life to eradicating gender inequality and challenging stereotypes about the frailty of women’s bodies, arguing that culture marked and weakened the body. In *Mary*

*Lyndon*, Gove Nichols asserts, “what do you mean by equality? If sameness is needful to equality, then it certainly does not exist. That a porcelain cup is as honorable as an iron pot, few will deny—not equal in strength, but beauty is a good that we need not exchange for the ability to bear blows” (173). It is clear she believes that sameness and equality are not analogous terms. However, to ask whether or not she believed that gender was biological or social is perhaps posing the wrong question because it devolves into an unproductive stalemate. Instead, Gove Nichols encourages us to ask what our understanding of gendered bodies gains when we consider biology and culture holistically and interdependently. How can we improve our thinking by seeing the overlap rather than the divide; the interchange rather than the hierarchical privileging of one over the other?

At the heart of *Mary Lyndon* and all of Gove Nichols’ work is both the ability to change or convert as well as the need for oscillation or balance between two interconnected entities. The turning gesture present in her transformations is also enacted in her method of liberation, in her expression of the relationship among embodiment, love, and resistance in her writing. For Gove Nichol, when a person participates in an act of turning which recognizes the interconnectivity of two realms between which there is a productive tension, that person is made more capable of change, becomes more spontaneous and supple. Gove Nichols’ adheres to an understanding of embodiment and love that is both material and transcendent, and her paradigm for liberation and health claims that liberatory love emerges from the productive interplay between body and soul. This process is activated by the water-cure.

Gove Nichols returns to her formulation of the interplay between body and soul, the tangible and the intangible, again and again. In *Mary Lyndon* she does so most specifically by giving voice to the men who are her mentors.<sup>17</sup> Soon after Mary has left Hervey, she begins an intimate friendship with Mr. Lynde, a lecturer at the Lyceum. During their first time alone together they have a discussion that reflects Mary's evolving philosophy:

“All evenings are pleasant in the depths of Being, when we feel our oneness with the inflowing Infinite. There are deeps that the storm does not disturb. There in a peace which the rack reaches not.”

“But we live in the body,” said I.

“We do, and we do not. There is a Yes and No to all questions....” (195)

The productive tension between the “inflowing Infinite” of spiritual life suggested by Lynde and the embodied life of humanity that Mary introduces is characterized by the *and* rather than an *or*. Here she insists that no matter how peaceful and pleasant the Infinite, the fact that we live in the material body necessarily grounds and gives weight to the spirit. What Lynde suggests by claiming that there is a “Yes and No” to all things, and what Mary herself espouses, is that we are both in the materiality of the body and capable of accessing the “deeps that the storm does not disturb” that is made possible in the spiritual realm. While Gove Nichols puts this ideology in Lynde's voice in *Mary Lyndon*, she made a similar claim in her frequent articles published in *Water-Cure Journal*. In an article entitled “To Applicants for a Water-Cure Education,” Gove Nichols

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<sup>17</sup> This ventriloquism interestingly echoes the interplay between semiotic and symbolic: the poetic creativity of the female space is articulated (and regulated) in the male-dominated realm of the symbolic. What Gove Nichols imagines, these men speak.

proclaims, “[t]he Gospel of moral and material health presents its claims in the noonday light of this 19<sup>th</sup> century. Let none dare deny them” (11). Even in this more impersonal article Gove Nichols is sure to note that this “Gospel” is that of both “moral and material health.” In another article, “Letter from Mrs. Gove Nichols,” Gove Nichols again links materiality to the immaterial: “[w]hatever is an injury to our moral, intellectual and material nature, and we cannot hurt the one without harm to the others, we should put away” (112). We “live in the body,” but we inevitably follow a set of less tangible social and individual principles, which, as a “Gospel,” are informed by God’s love. Physical health and moral health are inextricably linked.

Another mentor, Mary’s close friend Father Pierson, instructs that, “Nothing is lost. Look through all the world, and you will find that this is true. The same particles that once helped to make up the Indian’s body, have gone back to dust, and live perhaps today in the maple tree that supplies me with sugar—nay, the very particles of sugar that sweetened my tea at breakfast, may have been used many times in making the red man, and the deer, the sugar tree, and the wheat, that go in turn to make me” (92). Mary shares Father Pierson’s claim that there is a materiality to our bodies that is “not lost;” that the fibers of our bodies are shared and recycled through space and time. One of her earliest series of articles in the *Water-Cure Journal* is organized in the autobiographical format of *Mary Lyndon*. Here, she discusses her practice as a physician: “And for every individual thus relieved, an added joy will spring in my life, whether I know the fact of such relief or not. ‘We are all members of one another,’ and the universal life-spirit circulates in every heart more freely and joyously, for every new influx of wisdom, and goodness, and

consequent health that is received by the world” (7). Gove Nichols echoes the sentiment of Father Pierson that individuals are all part of a collective whole; further, that energy and goodness, like particles, are shared over time and space. Like Lynde, she references a “universal life-spirit,” which she argues here is literally affected by our bodily health. A few years later, the *Water-Cure Journal* published a commencement speech given to the graduates of the Nichols’ American Hydropathic Institute. In her portion of the speech Gove Nichols states, “I have given you the life of my life. I feel that through you the hot blood of my heart is poured out for the revivification of the world” (41). Like Father Pierson’s belief that the particles of our bodies do not die but recycle into new life, Gove Nichols suggests that doing social good—specifically and in this instance, teaching others how to minister to human bodies through water-cure—extends the reach of our physical bodies and sustains life. Recognizing our interrelatedness, Gove Nichols inspires us to work for social good because the social good represents our own health and happiness. She not only gives meaning and significance to our physical bodies, she goes further to claim that our bodies have meaning beyond their physicality. A healthy body can be more than itself: it can reach out to the “universal” spirit and it can heal other bodies beyond its tangible limits. Health is not just physical but also spiritual and social.

**“To me, water cure is love and truth cure:”<sup>18</sup> Water-Cure and Meaningful**

### **Embodiment**

If a healthy body is necessary for a healthy soul, and in relationship to this a healthy society, how does Gove Nichols suggest we tend to the body? Gove Nichols

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Gove Nichols, *Mary Lyndon*. New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1855.

demonstrates her understanding of healthy bodies in the many facets of her life's work. She argued for dress reform and taught women about their lungs and other internal organs that were suffering because of tight-laced corsets. She was unwavering in her mission to educate women (and men) about the biological workings of their bodies. One advertisement states that a lecture of Gove Nichols' was "illustrated by some hundreds of *papier mache* and wax models imported and manufactured by J. C. & D. Hyatt 449 Broadway, representing with accuracy every portion of the human system in health and disease, and giving such an opportunity for scientific study and practical improvement as has never before been opened to women in the branches of physiology, and medicine most vitally important to the sex" ("Lectures to Ladies" 123). In Gove Nichols' lectures, notes Silver-Isenstadt, "[c]ertain themes received repeated attention, the most prominent of which all related to *breathing and motion*" (*Shameless* 37). The core of her education was: know your body and allow it to move—from within with the breath and externally with physical movement. Beyond education, she recommended daily exercise, intellectual and mental stimulation, a simple, vegetarian diet, and regulation of passions and excitements: "Health [...] is maintained by a simple diet, pure air, exercise, cleanliness, and the regulation of the passions" ("The Water-Cure" 70). Most importantly, she prescribed the health benefits of water and the water-cure, a practice which "relie[s] on the body's capacity to heal itself when aided by proper regimen" (Danielson 250).

A foremost scholar and practitioner of water-cure in the United States, Gove Nichols believed that cleansing the body inside and out would release disease and cure

ailments. She believed that unhealthy social habits were the cause of illness and that in its purest state the body would heal itself. Again, Gove Nichols engenders a productive relationship between cultural causes and “natural” solutions. Water-cure was a change in lifestyle and was meant to be used both to heal and prevent illnesses. Water-cure physicians prescribed different baths for different ailments, including early douches, and their advice about diet, exercise, and other major lifestyle changes treated the whole person rather than a specific localized problem. An example of a basic water-cure application for scarlet fever included, “packing in the wet sheet, and pouring baths, sponge bath, and sleeping in a wet night-dress, wet bandages, and if the extremities are cold, much friction with the bare hand. Drinking water constantly and gargling the throat with cold water, and often cleansing the mouth and throat, a very slight nourishment, with frequent changes of clothing, and fresh air” (“Mrs. Gove’s Experience in Water-Cure” 167). In a water-cure, water is applied and utilized in a number of different ways, including the bath, drinking and gargling, and wet sheets. Water-cure often required physical touch, or “friction with the bare hand,” which is much more personal than allopathic medical practices that often called for using razors to drain blood and ingesting potent medicines.

Julia Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic illuminates Gove Nichols’ belief in water as capable of restoring what patriarchal and capitalist society represses and distorts. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) Kristeva argues that “our philosophies of language” employ ahistorical theories which silence or repress the body. She claims that “these static thoughts, products of a leisurely cogitation removed from historical turmoil,



persist in seeking the truth of language by formalizing utterances that hang in midair and the truth of the subject by listening to the narrative of a sleeping body—a body in repose, withdrawn from its sociohistorical imbrications, removed from direct experience” (27). Theories of language, she argues, remove language from its relationships to historical, social, and embodied experiences. However, “this thinking points to a truth, namely, that the kind of activity encouraged and privileged by (capitalist) society represses the process pervading the body and the subject, and that we must therefore break out of our interpersonal and intersocial experience if we are to gain access to what is repressed in the social mechanism: the generating of significance” (27). The semiotic generates significance because it restores the poetic, musical, and enigmatic that has been repressed by capitalist and patriarchal social ideologies through the speaking body in the realm of the signifier, the symbolic. Water generates significance by recuperating the beauty, wisdom, and meaningfulness of the living body that has been coded by societal conventions as (the denigrated) feminine. Like the semiotic, water provides mobility *and* stasis. It brings balance to the body and soul. It is therapeutic, healing, invigorating, and continuous. Just as the semiotic is “associated with the rhythms, tones, and movement of signifying practices” so water provides rhythm, tone, and movement for the living body (Oliver 24). Water resists concretization and as such resists commodification and oppression; Gove Nichols understood water as free and available to all regardless of social position. The water-cure revises traditional notions of power because it reappropriates authority over women’s bodies from institutions like medicine and

marriage and gives it to the marginalized and voiceless. Water-cure also brings people together through touch and service.

Water is a productive symbol of Gove Nichols' liberatory philosophy because it evokes a number of images and has unique qualities.<sup>19</sup> Its fluidity resists boundaries; it cleanses and nourishes; it is an element of the natural world and a major component of the human body; it suggests the body's tears, sweat, a pregnant woman's amniotic fluid (her "water" breaking), as well as movement and flowing though not necessarily in a romantic way, in fact the flow of rivers and oceans is often quite severe. Water ebbs and flows; it recycles from oceans and streams up into the clouds and then back again when it rains, and in that cycle and in other ways, water converts into other forms. Water's potential to be multiple, to have more than one incarnation, is reflected in its healing

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<sup>19</sup> The properties of water not only promote physical health and a more fluid subjectivity; they also work against normative patriarchal conceptions of power and identity. The project of Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977) is to articulate a feminine discourse out of male-centered discourses, including those of Freud and Lacan which posit the feminine as the Other or the lack in binary opposition to the masculine Self. In "The Mechanics of Fluids," Irigaray claims that science has underprivileged fluids in a binary relationship similar to those espoused by psychoanalysis and philosophy, solids/liquids. Thus, she works to characterize and consider fluids in a way that science has not. She expresses the potential of a liquid or fluid in this way:

That it is continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductible, diffusible, . . . That it is unending, potent and impotent owing to its resistance to the countable; that it enjoys and suffers from a greater sensitivity to pressures; that it changes—in volume or in force, for example—according to the degrees of heat; that is, in its physical reality, determined by friction between two infinitely neighboring entities—dynamics of the near and not of the proper, movements coming from the quasi contact between two unities hardly definable as such (in a coefficient of viscosity measured in poises, from Poiseuille, *sic*), and not energy of a finite system; that it allows itself to be easily traversed by flow by virtue of its conductivity to currents coming from other fluids or exerting pressure through the walls of a solid; that it mixes with bodies of a like state, sometimes dilutes itself in them in an almost homogenous manner, which makes the distinction between the one and the other problematical; and furthermore that it is already diffuse 'in itself,' which disconcerts any attempt at static identification. . . (111)

In Irigaray's poetic and scientific estimation, liquids are in part powerful (and not powerful in the sense that power is masculine, consolidated, and hierarchical) because they resist being counted; they also resist any "static definition." This state of being difficult to define in any finite way resembles their ability to mix and exchange with other liquids, in defiance of "distinction" between entities. They are also vulnerable to and capable of exerting pressure, suggesting that liquids are neither all powerful nor all weakness. Irigaray's descriptions of liquids define power, movement, and physical boundaries in non-normative ways.

capabilities when used in the water-cure. In an 1849 article entitled “The Water-Cure,” Gove Nichols writes that “the applications of water, according as they are made, are cleansing, exciting, tonic, or sedative” (71). With only minor changes in its application, water can be both “exciting” and/or “sedative.” Gove Nichols expands this statement:

As nature is making constant efforts to free the body from disease, and as Water-Cure strengthens and invigorates all the powers of nature, and assists in its great processes of dissolving and expelling morbid matter, it is applicable to every kind of disease, and will cure all that is curable. It cools raging fevers, and gives tone and energy to the most exhausted nervous system; it soothes the most violent pains, and calms the paroxysms of delirium; it brings out the poisonous matter of scrofula, and gives firmness to the shaking hand of palsy. (71)

Water simply aids the body in its natural functions. As a single entity, it is capable of strengthening, invigorating, toning, calming, and soothing. Water-cure “assists” in “dissolving and expelling morbid matter.” Water not only produces different, even opposing effects, but it also encourages the body to cycle naturally, releasing toxic matter and ingesting healthy nutrients: “Water-Cure equalizes the circulation, cleanses the system, invigorates the great organs of health, and, by exciting the functions of nutrition and excretion, builds up the body anew, and recreates it in purity and health” (71). Ingesting water provides “nutrition,” promotes “excretion,” and within this cycle, creates a healthier biological system. As water itself can both calmly and violently flow, it produces the same effect in water-cure patients; as water has its own cycles, through

water, moisture, rain, so too does it produce a cycling effect in patients. Thus, for Gove Nichols, water-cure practitioners take on the properties of water. This is reflected in their biological and physical health, and it is represented metaphorically in the formation of a more fluid subjectivity.

“[M]obile” and “amorphous,” the semiotic is a fluid space that is movement and creates movement for the subject; just as water-cure is movement and creates movement in the body (44). Kristeva describes the semiotic chora as “a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated” and also as “an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases” (35). Access to this space, which is both mobile *and* static, is Kristeva’s therapy for the subject, because by turning toward the semiotic we find meaning which we then bring into the realm of the symbolic through the speaking body, or expressed in our bodily drives. We can understand the semiotic, Kristeva explains, “as a psychosomatic modality of the signifying process; in other words, not a symbolic modality but one articulating (in the largest sense of the word) a continuum: the connections between the (glottal and anal) sphincters in (rhythmic and intonational) vocal modulations, or those between the sphincters and family protagonists, for example” (38). Water-cure too articulates a continuum of holistic body functioning and affirms a bind between body and spirit. Just as water expels and cycles the body, so does the semiotic: “[g]enetic programmings are necessarily semiotic: they include the primary processes such as displacement and condensation, absorption and repulsion, rejection and stasis” (38). Like poetic language and music, the water-cure practitioner’s

submersion in gently cleansing waves of water activates something like a semiotic chora. Gove Nichols' strong belief in the water-cure calls for a dynamic like the continuum of the semiotic, one that centrally takes up the relationship between body and spirit: water, an element which can provide both calmness and energy, which creates movement in the body as it fortifies it, creates meaning in the body because it sustains health. We then bring this meaningfulness into the social realm. The water-cure works against abject embodiment literally by healing illness but also by creating access to a space like the semiotic chora where motility, balance, and freedom from the censure of the symbolic, social realm exist.

The water-cure gave Gove Nichols the opportunity to connect personally with many people: to touch them, to heal them, and to hear their stories. Because the nature of the water cure movement involved making individuals more responsible for and informed about their own health, it was also an important means of empowering women and destabilizing capitalist consolidation of wealth.<sup>20</sup> In her series of autobiographical essays in *Water-Cure Journal*, Gove Nichols writes, "I have endeavored to give plain, practical, *home* directions. Many women are ill and wretched, and feel life to be a burden instead of a blessing, who cannot go to a water-cure house to recover their health. But they have wells and springs of pure water at home. What they want is instruction. Many of them display a heroism in the endurance of suffering equal to that of [great historical figures of

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<sup>20</sup> However, the practice of water-cure was not necessarily free from oppressive societal norms. As Elizabeth Dolan notes in her book, *Seeing Suffering in Women's Literature of the Romantic Era*, spa facilities in Europe during the Romantic era were often financially exploitative and enforced strictly regulated daily regimens. Dominated by "authoritarian medical supervision," such facilities were not the utopian spaces envisioned by Gove Nichols (139).

war] Washington, or Bonaparte; and give them knowledge, and that same heroism will save them—will restore them to health and usefulness” (7). Ministering to and empowering women through water-cure, Gove Nichols transforms abject embodiment into more meaningful embodiment. That is, she turns their experiences of their bodies from “ill and wretched” and a “burden” into experiences which are not only physically more full of health and vibrancy but also more intellectually informed and self-sufficient. Gove Nichols’ celebration of an entity so versatile, powerful, and accessible as well as therapeutic and healing speaks to what she thought was missing in her culture. Through the literal application of water and in embracing the symbolic properties of water, Gove Nichols worked to give positive meaning to corporeality. In spite of her meaningful work with the water-cure, Gove Nichols claims to have disliked working as a physician. Her real passion came from writing fiction and “the highest ambition of [her] heart and soul [...] was to write a book” (44). However, she felt that it was absolutely necessary that she do this work in order to liberate “her sisters” (318). For her, healing sick women “was a great life-duty. It was like rolling the stone away from the door of the tomb of Love incarnated in woman” (318). Her capitalization of love suggests that this is a kind of healing that helps women find the divine within. Gove Nichols also perceives that attending to the body is a method of freeing women from their entombment, loving them and giving them better space to love, thus inviting others into her dynamic of transformation and mobility. Gove Nichols’ work as a water-cure physician resists the urge to love only the self, and in doing so increases her range of identification as it works in each patient to expand love for others.

Thus one of the central gains of Gove Nichols' work with the body is the expansion of love. Kaja Silverman's *The Threshold of the Visible World*, helps elucidate how this works. Silverman argues that deconstructionist practices call for the rejection of psychoanalytic idealizations. This call is an attempt to resist hierarchy: because as a culture we idealize arbitrary qualities in hierarchical organizations, such as whiteness and thinness, our psychological idealizations reify unequal constructions of power. This system is destructive because we love ourselves only in the elusive moments when we are these arbitrary idealized things and others only when they represent those idealizations we wish we were but are not. However, Silverman suggests that the solution deconstruction and psychoanalysis offer—to continuously reject or resist idealizations—only offers a different problem because it negates the possibility of love for the self and for others: “those of us writing deconstructively about gender, race, class, and other forms of ‘difference’ have made a serious strategic mistake. We have consistently argued against idealization, that psychic activity at the heart of love, rather than imagining the new uses to which it might be put” (2). One new use of idealization, Silverman argues, should be the expansion of the ideal, so that rather than loving a limited collection of objects, we love broader, in turn providing greater potential for loving ourselves. As she indiscriminately cares for and heals the bodies of women and men, Gove Nichols expands notions of the ideal body: the ideal body is not defined by shape or size, but by its participation in healthy, life-giving practices.

**“The subject for whom there is meaning is also fluid and relational:”<sup>21</sup> Liberatory Love**

Gove Nichols frequently refers to love and its potential to free human beings from their pain and oppression, but how are we to understand what she means when she refers to love that liberates? The more prominent characteristics of love that emerge in Gove Nichols’ work are that it is like water, and thus heals; it is both self-less and gives meaning to the self; it is spiritual and transcends the confines of the material world; yet it is embodied and present in material forms, and as such is vulnerable to the markings of culture. For her, every manifestation of love that is given freely and not coerced from within the confines of social institutions resists cultural oppression. Gove Nichols’ paradigm of love transcends the material realm in its proximity to God yet it is embodied and socially ethical. Her rhetoric of love is often bound up in the body in that she recognizes loving as an emotional, mystical act that is manifested throughout her whole body.

For Gove Nichols, love provides the support to reconnect body and spirit, and in healing the subject, love more fully connects one person to another. Love, she argues, is like water and therefore is therapeutic, resists definition, erupts in multiplicity, redefines power from something external to something internal and free from social confines such as marriage, religion, and gender. Just as the water-cure encourages an interdependent relationship between body/soma and spirit/soul, love reaffirms relationship to self and to others. Shortly after Mary’s first marriage to Hervey, she speaks with the first man whom she truly loves and now cannot be with, concluding, “[l]ove is like water, and every

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<sup>21</sup> Kelly Oliver, ed. *The Portable Kristeva*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.



thirsty spirit may drink” (123). The body would be deeply impoverished without the ability to give and receive love, as it would be without water. As a water-cure practitioner, Gove Nichols consciously relates love to water, and to all those qualities and properties that water represents. She goes on to suggest that her marriage to Hervey (and marriage without love in general) turns this love-water into the Biblical “waters of Marah” that are too acidic to consume: any “spirit may drink” as long as they are “not in bond to that accursed lower law, which says, Thou shalt thirst forever, if the spring that is set apart for thee is like the waters of Marah, a bitterness that cannot be healed” (123). This lower law is the social law which presumes to satiate thirst with bitter water. In Gove Nichols’ formulation love is as nourishing as water and is equally available to all, just as water-cure is available to all. However, loving is most often experienced outside of confining social institutions like marriage which in her experience mediates love through patriarchal and capitalist mandates. Thus love requires social resistance because the restrictions placed on love and subjectivity in normative patriarchal and capitalist culture inhibit the potential for meaningful relationships. Oliver, too, claims that love and fluidity overlap: “Insofar as meaning is constituted in relationships—relationships with others, relationships with signification, relationships with our own bodies and desires—it is fluid. And the subject for whom there is meaning is also fluid and relational” (xviii). As water heals, so does love. Oliver argues that in Kristeva’s estimation, “love provides the support for fragmented meanings and fragmented subjectivities. Love provides the support to reconnect words and affects” (xxv). Love provides the support to reconnect body with spirit and language with meaning. By healing the subject, love more fully

connects one person to another. In Kristeva's words, "[t]he subject himself/herself is merely a subject: a provisional accident, differently renewed within the only *infinite* space where we might unfurl our loves, that is, the infinity of the signifier" (170). Love produces meaning for the "mere" subject and our love is expressed through the beautiful infinite creativity of signification. Through signification, love is "like stylistic variants of the *cure*" (170). Love is similarly a cure in Gove Nichols' feminism. Embodied, selfless and self-affirming, love heals and liberates.

Mary falls in love with the man she calls Lynde while she is married to (but separated from) Hervey. Mary describes Lynde as both her mentor and her equal. Gove Nichols' narration of Mary and Lynde's relationship is one of the more fully realized expressions of love in *Mary Lyndon*, and it is partly characterized by a lack of boundary between self and other. Note, for example, that the fictional name "Lynde" echoes Gove Nichols' own fictional name "Lyndon." Gove Nichols describes her love for Lynde as intimately embodied: "I knew that his love possessed my being, that every globule of my blood, every fiber and filament of my body and spirit were instinct with new, and delicious, and divine life" (213). Their love so inhabits her body and spirit that though he is physically away from her, his love courses through her veins, entirely within her body. With Gove Nichols' emphasis on not being owned, it is interesting that she describes this experience of love as like being "possessed." However, her language here is important: "his love" possesses her being, and this is different than legal possession. This love also gives her "new" life—not the imposition of Lynde's life but a "divine" life within Mary's being. Gove Nichols describes the love that they share as especially intimate. While it is

not an imposing or enclosing love, it is nonetheless one that blurs the boundaries between two bodies, so much so that he is incorporated into her physical being.

The intimacy of Lynde and Mary's love does not efface either's identity; rather, it reinforces Mary's self-worth. Mr. Lynde stays with Mary's parents for a short time and he and Mary spend time together in her room which has no curtains. She comes to realize that there is some danger in holding hands with Lynde by the open window and that "it would be death to my reviving usefulness if it was known" (209). This causes Mary to agonize over whether or not to put curtains on the window and reveals a tension between her desires and society's watchful eye. It also sparks questions about her right to privacy that are concerned with keeping others out and with creating a private space within; in this case the interiority is literally her home and metaphorically her body. She argues that she has spent so much of her life "shunning" the touch of a man as a result of "proper" behavior and though she fears losing the reputation she has developed for herself she longs for intimate human touch (210). In the end Mary decides that "I had begun to be somewhat conscious that, as a human being, I had 'a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'" and she puts up the curtains (211). Loving Lynde encourages Mary to assert her right to privacy, to articulate her intimate desires, and to privilege those things above the desire to please others.

The reciprocal nature of liberatory love requires a particular relationship between the self and others. Kaja Silverman makes a similar claim about the relationship between becoming ourselves and loving others:

The relation between ourselves and the world should not be thought in terms of cause and effect; we do not first embrace our “thereness,” and then care for others. Rather, we become ourselves by caring for others. Arendt clarifies this principle with admirable precision in her Augustine book. As she makes clear, she learned it from Augustine himself, one of her earliest intellectual love-objects: “Since man is not self-sufficient and therefore always desires something outside himself, the question of who he is can only be resolved by the object of his desire...: ‘Such is each as his love.’” Once again we are obliged to conceptualize “essence” in a profoundly nonessential way. (*World Spectators* 24)

When Silverman uses the term “thereness” she is referencing Heidegger’s use of the word *Dasein* which means “there-being” (23). “Thereness” refers to each human being’s “specific vantage point” which reflects the “highly particular” but “universal human condition” of being “in-the-world” (23). In this particular quote, this means that we only discover our place/purpose/being in the world by caring for others. There is a relationship of dependence between self and other that is both selfless and essential to the formation of the self. In order to develop as a subject, we must care for others; this is a central aspect of liberatory love.

One of the major functions of healthy embodiment is to love: we love through the living body. Gove Nichols undergoes a conversion that turns her repudiation of the body into a profound love and reverence for the body. It does so because she comes to believe that God’s love is present in every living thing. Her expressions of love, then, are as

spiritual as they are bodily. In opposition to traditional Christian meditations which emphasize God in heaven, Mary's very embodied, liberating love for Lynde inspires her to exclaim,

Blessed be life on the earth; though it bears prisons and crosses, fire-racks and soul-screws, and dungeons for body and mind; for angels like him at times walk among men; flowers spring in their footsteps; sunlight and spirit-light are warmer and brighter; the brooks murmur a sweeter music; the dew-drop reflects a purer heaven, and the whole earth is more fragrant that they have lived. Blessed be life on earth! (216)

The focus of Gove Nichols' prayer is the divine good that is present on earth and in another human being. While the materiality of earth often brings pain and imprisonment for the body, it also produces *jouissance* for the senses; as Mary states, the earth provides a multitude of pleasures to be smelled, seen, heard, touched, and perhaps even tasted. Certainly her vegetarianism reflects an ethically-informed kind of tasting: all bodies are sacred, and further, consumption is a life-giving act rather than reflective of slaughter and "other horrors compounded of the corpses of animals" (180). Like her Catholic belief that the sacred body of Christ, through transubstantiation, is shared with others, all sentient beings are sacred for Gove Nichols. Playing with the boundaries of corporeality and spirituality—discovering the spiritual in the corporeal and the inanimate—Gove Nichols constructs a corporeality that is infused with meaning. In her celebration of the sacred in the corporeal, Gove Nichols becomes like Silverman's world spectators: she "acknowledged the presence of those sitting around [her], and [is] ready to begin

listening to their language and speaking [her] own” (127-128). As she shifts the direction of her spiritual gaze, she creates more possibility for social responsibility and change because meaningful embodiment is more pleasurable and valuable than abject embodiment.

If love is not felt and practiced through the body it does little social good because it orients instead toward transcendence of the social and material, and this is the problem of transcendence, or the problem of an excess of spirituality or immateriality that is not balanced by the reality of corporeal being. While Gove Nichols’ model for love is based on the most liberatory elements of Christian spirituality, including peace, social justice, and social responsibility, she does not relinquish the importance of her body’s needs—or its wisdom. Gove Nichols writes, “starving souls must be fed; and when the communion of life, which is love, is denied us everywhere, then must the angels walk again with man, and give him the love that without which he must utterly perish, and which, in his insanity, he denies to his brethren and sisters in the body” (168). Again Gove Nichols’ language suggests a dynamic between physical and spiritual realms in which one energizes the other. She uses “communion,” a corporeal symbolic ritual in Christianity in which the body of Christ is consumed and thus shared by other, living bodies, and “starvation,” as a way to explain the more intangible concept of love. For Gove Nichols, we are literally and figuratively hungry; we can be fed, as in the ritual of communion, by an actual act of consumption and by metaphorically internalizing and radiating love.

In *Mary Lyndon*, Gove Nichols argues that listening to healthy bodies and practicing liberatory loving are feminist, political acts. Ultimately, Gove Nichols asks the questions, “when shall we become worthy of the boon by giving fully as we receive; by daring to live the higher law of love, instead of being bondmen and bondwomen to laws, manners, morals, and our own selfishness,” and “when will man recognize woman as her own, and accept her love as a free and vivifying gift, instead of claiming it as a property in an arbitrary fidelity, which may be false and full of death,” that is, when will we exist and love freely, beyond the confines of a society that keeps us clinging to property even as we consistently devalue that property (385-386)? Perhaps because her own journey begins in illness, a state of intense embodiment, or perhaps because in her practice as a water-cure physician she was confronted with the overwhelming sicknesses of her fellow human beings, Gove Nichols asserts that bodily health is absolutely necessary if we are to be spiritually whole. Yet health is always more than physical: “As a physician I assert, that the want of our age is health; and this word to me comprehends the ability to fulfill our duty to God and man; to power to work and worship acceptably. It comprehends all beauty and all sanctity; the highest art, the truest nature, the most glorious and most delicate achievement, and the utmost conceivable of human enjoyment” (“Woman the Physician” 73). She begins with the health of the body, that realm of the physician, but goes on to explain that health also includes spirituality, beauty, and pleasure. This is a familiar turn in her rhetoric. In a later publication she clarifies what she means when she says “health:” “Health is the result of the natural performance of all the functions of life. It gives development, beauty, vigor, and happiness; and is characterized by strength of

body, power and serenity of mind, and a keen enjoyment of all the blessings of life” (“Letter from Mrs. Gove Nichols” 112). Health encompasses body, mind, and pleasure in “the blessings of life” which invariably include love. Not less important than good health in all its meanings, is the need to make those more libratory aspects of Christian love central to humanity. Gove Nichols proclaims that it is our right and duty “to live as if to live and love were one” (“A Lecture on Woman’s Dresses” 35).

The relationship between Gove Nichols’ radical philosophies, including her understanding of love and liberation, and her participation in religious institutions presents some problems for the contemporary critic. Silver-Isenstadt claims that the seeming contradiction between Gove Nichols’ progressive feminism and her more traditional choices, namely, her marriage to Thomas Low Nichols and her recurring turn toward organized religion, especially the Catholicism of her later life is a provocative tension which ignites Silver-Isenstadt’s “drive to biography” (9). While Silver-Isenstadt does suggest that these “unsettling departures” were not, in context, as shocking then as they seem now, she resolves to argue that Gove Nichols, like all or most prominent figures, is a more complicated individual than we may want her to be, and that in spite of her religious beliefs, the record of her work secures her place as a pioneering feminist in American history. In my view, however, Gove Nichols’ fictionalized autobiography argues that she is committed to religion not *in spite of* her feminism but *because of* it, because of the tenets of Christianity that ultimately aligned with her assertions about love and life: that her life’s work is to “tell the growth of true love, or vital freedom, and its inevitable happiness” and because she believes that the greatest expression of love is



embodied in and among human beings (315). What seem like contradictions or departures are really just more evidence to support that Gove Nichols saw productive interplay where others continue to see opposition.

Gove Nichols' fictionalized autobiography, books, essays, and speeches also assure us that she does not simply submit to the laws of organized religion—does not simply ignore contradiction or tension—but that she actively subscribes to or rejects particular practices and rituals according to her own sense of morality, plays with boundaries, and in effect continues to enact the turn. In fact it is through the lens of religion, or more appropriately, spirituality, that Gove Nichols offers her paradigm of the interconnectedness of love, embodiment, and resistance to injustice and inequality: bodies are sacred and have meaning because they are manifestations of a most profound and liberating love, which is expressed through language and ritual as God. By tending to the health of the body, the intellect, and the soul, we do the work of love; we love each other and ourselves, honoring the divine within one another. In doing so, we can no longer accept the chains of oppressive social or personal laws and are inspired to work for social revolution.

Gove Nichols' act of telling her stories is an act of love and one that gives meaning to her corporeal being. Kristeva says that “love is something spoken, and it is only that” (277). Oliver expands on Kristeva's meaning:

Our lives have meaning for us, we have a sense of ourselves, through the narratives we prepare to tell others about our experience. Even if we do not tell our stories, we live our experience through the stories that we

construct in order to 'tell ourselves' to another, a loved one. As we wander through our days, an event takes on its significance in the narrative that we construct for an imaginary conversation with a loved one as we are living it. The living body is a loving body, and the loving body is a speaking body. Without love we are nothing but walking corpses. Love is essential to the living body, and it is essential too in bringing the living body to life in language. (xxv)

As readers we are the loved ones with whom Gove Nichols holds her imaginary conversation, one that continuously gives meaning and significance to her life. She encourages us to be living, loving, and speaking bodies, as she was. She encourages us to resist the abject embodiment institutions like capitalism and patriarchy benefit from and to work toward meaningful embodiment. This type of embodiment emerges from the oscillation between body and spirit and self and other as well as from a mobile and fluid subjectivity, modeled in the water-cure. It is created through and characterized by loving relationships. Gove Nichols asks us to see the world holistically and to enact the turn, to be strong and passionate, dedicated to liberation and progress.

## Chapter Two

### Compulsive Suffering and Narrative Healing in Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861)

“‘Adjustment’ to a sick and insane environment is of itself not ‘health’ but sickness and insanity.”

James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*<sup>1</sup>

“The ill body is certainly not mute—it speaks eloquently in pains and symptoms—but it is inarticulate. We must speak for the body, and such speech is quickly frustrated: speech represents itself as being about the body rather than of it.”

Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*<sup>2</sup>

Rebecca Harding Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills*, first published anonymously in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1861, marks the introduction of a serious consideration of working class lives into American literature. In *Iron Mills* Davis envisions a kind of feminist liberation similar to the one laid out in Mary Gove Nichols' fictionalized autobiography, exploring love, embodiment, water, and conversion. However, the hegemony of industrial capitalism undermines Davis' every attempt to activate this feminist vision for her characters. The centrality of unrelenting industrial labor in *Life in the Iron Mills* intensely alters the paradigm of feminist liberation articulated by Gove Nichols, and as such the novella portrays a confrontation between radical feminism based on love on the one hand, and the divisive reality of patriarchal industrialism on the other. My inquiry identifies two features of *Life in the Iron Mills* as the key to what the novella says about class, embodiment, feminism, and love. First, with her central female working-class character, Deborah, Davis explores constructions of class and the gendered, disabled

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<sup>1</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1966 (page 282).

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995 (page 2).

body in late-nineteenth-century industrial culture. Second, Davis' use of second-person storytelling models a kind of feminist witnessing that encourages love between women across class hierarchies. Both the character Deborah and Davis' storytelling complicate the feminism that was possible for Mary in *Mary Lyndon*. While Mary replaced allopathic medical practices with the feminist healing of water-cure, Deborah and the narrator are so trapped in the industrial labor system that they instead evoke Agee's observation: "[a]djustment' to a sick and insane environment is of itself not 'health' but sickness and insanity" (282). Davis' Deborah "adjusts" to a polluted, exploitative, and oppressive environment, an adjustment that serves as a symptom of sickness and insanity rather than of health. Liberation is only possible within the framing of the narrative when we, as readers, recognize our ethical responsibility to witness Deborah's sick and suffering body.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Rebecca Blaine Harding was born on June 24, 1831 to Rachel Leet Wilson and Richard W. Harding. Although her parents lived in Florence, Alabama at the time of her birth, her mother traveled to her sister's home "in Washington, Pennsylvania, for the birth of her first-born" (Lasseter and Harris 2). When Rebecca was six years old, in 1837, her family moved to Wheeling, Virginia. Wheeling,<sup>3</sup> a "recently chartered steel-

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<sup>3</sup> Adam Sonstegard informs that *Iron Mills* "takes place on the regional borders that make for great differences in individual lives. Wheeling... sits on a narrow strip of Southern land between the free states of Ohio and Pennsylvania. Davis's autobiographical *Bits of Gossip* (1904) locates Wheeling on the national road between the North and South, on the paths of West-bound settlers, and at a multi-ethnic crossroads for European immigrants (*Writing Cultural Autobiography* 24-25). The seemingly remote outpost becomes a check-point on nearly every cultural journey that matters. Wheeling belonged to Virginia, but when that state seceded in 1861, the town provided the meeting hall for an assembly that reversed Virginia's decision.

manufacturing town,” was situated on the Ohio River and the National Road, “a bustling thoroughfare of western migration” (Atteridge Rose 2). Her younger siblings included Wilson [Wilse], Henry, Emilie, Ellen, Florence, Richard, and William, “who was born between Rebecca and Wilson” and “died in infancy” (Lassester and Harris 2). Davis’ mother was well educated, as was her father, who “managed the financial affairs of the town of Wheeling” and loved literature, especially Shakespeare and “other British literature” (3). Lassester and Harris note that Rebecca’s “father’s literary legacy and her mother’s sophisticated education and linguistic virtuosity endowed Rebecca with the gifts that encouraged her own writing life to emerge and thrive” (3). Davis was “schooled in her Wheeling home by her mother and various tutors until she was fourteen,” when she “entered Washington Female Seminary in 1845” (4). She graduated as valedictorian of her class in 1848 at age seventeen, and then “returned home to help her mother manage a bustling household of seven” (4). During the next twelve years, “Rebecca immersed herself in the books her brother Wilse brought home from his college courses at Washington College,” learned German, and “honed her writing craft by working intermittently for the *Washington Intelligencer*” (4). At the age of thirty, the publication of *Life in the Iron Mills* transformed her from “obscure spinster to renowned writer” (4). She met her future husband, Lemuel Clarke Davis, when he began corresponding with her after reading *Iron Mills*, visiting him in person in Philadelphia on the way home from traveling to Boston and Concord where she was “houseguest of James and Annie Fields and Nathaniel and Sophie Hawthorne” (5). She married Clarke Davis on March 5, 1863.

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Wheeling and much of Northern Virginia soon voted to leave the Secessionist State, and to rejoin the Union as New or West Virginia” (101).

In a January 1863 letter to Annie Fields Rebecca wrote, “I must have leave to say my word in the Atlantic [sic] as before, when the Spirit moves me. It is necessary for me to write—well or ill—you know every animal has speech and that is mine” (qtd in Lasseter and Harris 5). Married life inevitably made it more difficult for Rebecca to write and she “suffered a severe bout of depression” from “the summer of 1863... until the fall of 1864” (5). During the first years of their marriage, Rebecca and Clarke lived with his sister and her family, making Rebecca’s transition into married life especially “physically and emotionally taxing” (5). She planned “to write at the Philadelphia Library” but a series of illnesses kept her from doing so. First, she made an “unexpected return to Wheeling to nurse her dying father” (5). Back in Philadelphia, Davis “was forced again with nursing the sick—her husband and his sister” (5). Rebecca soon became ill herself and then discovered that she was pregnant (5). Lasseter and Harris point out that “[a]s was typical for women in the nineteenth century, her illness was considered to be ‘nervous exhaustion,’ which was generally thought to be the consequence of women dabbling in intellectual pursuits” (5). Thus, as is so often the case, “domestic demands threatened her self-definition as a writer” (5). Her first child, named after her recently deceased father (he died on March 20), Richard, was born on April 18. She had two more children, Charles (1866) and Nora (1872). Despite the complications and challenges of marriage and motherhood, Davis went on to have a successful career as a journalist,<sup>4</sup> fiction writer, and “as a social historian and commentator” (6). *Iron Mills* was the first

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<sup>4</sup> Her two sons, Richard and Charles, also had successful careers as writers, and Davis’ commitment to social justice and realism can be found in her sons’ writing. Her son Richard was an international celebrity both for his writing and as the “Gibson man” (7). While she was very proud of her son’s accomplishments, little is known about her relationship with her daughter. Lasseter and Harris write that “[i]t is a mystery why Rebecca’s correspondence so rarely mentions her only daughter, Nora” (7).

publication in a “fifty year career, which yielded a corpus of 500 published works, including short stories, novellas, novels sketches, and social commentary” (1-2). Davis’ writing is characterized by her “fresh realistic voice and relentless attention to social justice issues” (4). Her husband Clarke died in 1904; they were married for forty-two years. Davis continued to publish after her husband’s death, partly out of economic necessity, although her eyesight was failing and she had a good deal of trouble reading and writing. She died on September 29 in 1910 of heart failure “at the age of seventy-nine” (9).<sup>5</sup>

The setting of *Life in the Iron Mills* is a mill town similar to Wheeling, Virginia where Davis was born and lived until her thirties. Told by an unnamed narrator, who some argue is Davis herself (evidenced by the similarities between her hometown and the setting of *Iron Mills*),<sup>6</sup> it is the story of Hugh Wolfe, an uneducated and impoverished laborer in one of the “mills for making railroad-iron,” and his cousin Deborah, who is a “picker in some of the cotton-mills” (15). It centers on one night, a night which is “the

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<sup>5</sup> While Davis enjoyed a successful career in her own time, her work fell into relative obscurity after her death. It was not until Tillie Olsen published the first modern reprinting of *Life in the Iron Mills* with the Feminist Press in 1972, that Davis received renewed critical attention. Davis is buried in Leverington cemetery in Philadelphia, where her grave is only marked by a headstone that reads, “Wife of Lemuel Clarke Davis.”

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this chapter I refer to “the narrator,” “Davis,” and “Davis’ narrator,” as a way to suggest the possibility that Davis is her narrator while also keeping in mind that, regardless of how Davis herself witnessed the working class in her hometown, the narrator is a construct of Davis’ who witnesses in particular ways. On a related note, critics hypothesize about the gender of the narrator—and what it might mean that Davis never tells us. Andrew Scheiber states: “it is true that nowhere in the story is there an explicit acknowledgement that the tale’s narrator is, like its author, a woman. But there are rhetorical reasons to assume that the voice speaking to the reader in *Life in the Iron Mills* is implicitly female” (115-116). Although I struggle with the word “implicitly,” for the purposes of this chapter, I also read the narrator as female. Kirk Curnutt claims, in “Direct addresses, narrative authority, and gender in Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills*,” that Davis uses the ambiguous gender of her narrator to use both masculine and feminine styles of address that were popular in the nineteenth century, in order to reach a larger audience.

crisis of [Hugh's] life," the events of which seal the fates of both Hugh and Deborah (26). Hugh is gifted; beneath all the markings and trappings of poverty and hard labor, he is an artist. One rainy night, Deb brings Hugh dinner at the iron mill. While she sleeps on "a heap of ash," a group of wealthy men come upon Hugh and a provocative carving of a woman cut in korl that he has made (21). As the men wait out the rain in the mill, discussing Hugh's carving and the ethics of capitalism, Deb steals a wallet from one of them. The stolen wallet, which she presents to Hugh, eventually causes both Hugh and Deb to be arrested and imprisoned, where Hugh commits suicide. Deborah serves her time and subsequently lives out the rest of her life in a Quaker community. Kirk Curnutt states that "*Life in the Iron Mills* houses two narratives:" Hugh's story, and one that "centers on Wolfe's cousin Deborah, a hunchback whose unrequited love dehumanizes her" (2). My argument rests on Deb's story because I agree with Hassell Hughes that, "Davis's story and the history it inscribes begs to be read through the eyes and body of Deb. She is the character—poor, disfigured, female—who suffers most profoundly. She is also the only one who can bear to look such suffering in the face, in the faces of those around her, and go on" (124). It is Deb's story that most acutely articulates the suffering of the impoverished, ill, and gendered body.

I argue that any potential for a dynamic of oscillation between body and mind/spirit, self and other, past and present, and the material and the transcendent realms is incapacitated in Deb's world as a result of the exploitative nature of industrial capitalism.<sup>7</sup> The capitalist industrialism of the mid to late nineteenth century, which

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<sup>7</sup> See Emily Martin's *The Woman in the Body*, especially Chapter 3, "Medical Metaphors of Women's Bodies" for a detailed anthropological and historical account of how, in the nineteenth century, the



dominates Deb's life, renders the body a machine for production, and makes the mind and spirit irrelevant and without value, casualties of a culture of greed and mechanized productivity.<sup>8</sup> This severing of body and mind from meaning causes Deb to be driven by a kind of compulsion rather than by the liberatory oscillation enacted by Mary Lyndon. I read *Iron Mills* through Jennifer Fleissner's theory of compulsion in naturalist fiction, namely that compulsive behavior is like a "stuckness in place," and that this stasis raises questions about individual agency as well as about the relationship between the social and the natural. Reading this kind of compulsion in *Iron Mills* is helpful for exploring Deborah's exploitation as a working class woman as well as her gendered experience of love, embodiment, and conversion.

A "stuckness in place" permeates numerous aspects of the novella; it marks the limited mobility of Deborah's disabled body and the repetitiveness of her labor, it frustrates Deborah's experience of conversion, and it stultifies the novella's landscape.

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"spending-saving" business logic (loss and gain) of capitalism informed medical metaphors of the gendered body which privileged the male body over the female body ("women spent and men saved") (34).

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Bromell's study of work in the nineteenth century, *By the Sweat of the Brow*, argues that with the rise of industrialization in the nineteenth century, work became divided into two types: manual and mental. This dichotomy is directly linked to conceptions of mind/soul and body: "during the antebellum period work was understood primarily by way of a distinction between manual and mental labor, which in turn rested upon an assumed dichotomy of mind (and soul) and body. Virtually all antebellum attempts to account for the nature and meaning of work (including professional work, domestic labor, artisanry, factory labor, writing, and so on) rested, finally, on increasingly unstable notions about the natures of, and relations between, the mind and the body" (7). Nineteenth century concepts and constructions of work not only represented a dichotomy of body and mind/soul, but also signaled a separation between the people who labor in these ways and the value placed on what they produce. Bromell claims that "[t]he fact that one kind of work is performed by the mind, another by the body, means not just that the performers of those different kinds of work will be separated from one another by their different physiological and psychological makeup and their different class position. It means also that their products will be fundamentally, ontologically different. The mind will work with ideas, the body with things" (9). See also Anson Rabinbach's *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*, for an analysis of nineteenth- and twentieth-century metaphors of the body as a human motor and the fascination with the potential to "cure" fatigue as the source of modern malaise. Caroline S. Miles' "Representing and Self-Mutilating the Laboring Male Body: Re-examining *Life in the Iron Mills*" in the June 2004 *The American Transcendental Quarterly*, also touches on the issue of labor in nineteenth century in relationship with *Iron Mills*.

Deborah's body symbolizes incapacitation: immobility is written on her body in her spinal deformity, or "hunchback." Physically, Deb's spinal deformity reduces her flexibility and makes movement limited and often painful; the metaphor of a hunchback/humpback suggests that Deborah's subjectivity is closing in upon itself and is not open or mobile. The conversion that liberates Gove Nichols in her autobiographical novel is a motif that leads to a dubious conclusion for Deborah as she ends the novella in the quiet of a Quaker community. A failure of motility is also symbolized by the oppressive landscape of the novella. Unlike healthful, plentiful water that healed Gove Nichols, water in *Iron Mills* is a polluted, remote, and sluggish symptom of the propagation of industrial capitalism.

Although the relationship among the women who participate in *Iron Mills*—Davis, the narrator, and Deborah—could potentially be a unified voice for effecting social change, it ultimately slides in and out of class and bodily hierarchies. These hierarchies within the novella are supported by historical studies about the particular dynamics among women of different classes in an increasingly industrial world, that is, the cultural privileging of upper class women above working class women, able-bodies above disabled bodies. On the other hand, the attempt of an upper-class, able-bodied woman (Davis' narrator) to tell the story of a working class, disabled woman (Deborah), along with the Quaker woman's act of rescuing Deb from the working class, expresses what Carol Gilligan would call a feminist ethic of caring because she sees a web of interconnected people even in the face of hierarchical relationships.<sup>9</sup> The narrative

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<sup>9</sup> See Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982), especially Chapter 2, "Images of Relationship," pages 62-63.

structure of *Iron Mills* opens up the space for this caring in part because it portrays women reaching out across socially constructed divisions (of class, of physical ability) to bear witness to oppression; Davis' narrator cares by simply giving voice to Deborah's otherwise censored experiences of illness, embodiment, and love. But it is the narrator's appeal to the reader to witness Deborah's suffering that offers the most potential for liberatory love. Arthur Frank argues that "[w]e must speak for the [ill] body" and Deborah's is certainly an embodied story (2). Yet Frank's analysis primarily focuses on speaking for *one's own* body; although Deb's body speaks, she cannot speak for it. Employing Frank's theory of first-person storytelling, I pose the questions, how are the ethics of telling illness narratives changed when the story is told in second person? What does it mean to tell *someone else's* story of illness, disability, poverty, and love? In what ways and to what extent can we tell each other's stories, and what kind of loving and/or social activism does this create? How do bodies speak to and through other bodies—and can bodily experiences be shared across social divides? To respond to these questions, I explore the relationships among Davis' narrator, the reader, and Deborah and the dynamic of storytelling that connects them. I analyze how Davis' narrator's body interacts with the text, especially in light of Deborah's intensely embodied being; suggesting that while Deborah and Davis' narrator are trapped in incompleteness—Deborah is trapped in the voiceless body while Davis' disembodied narrator speaks—it is primarily the relationship between the reader's body and Deborah that produces the greatest potential for expressing liberatory love. What especially interests me about Frank's version of witnessing suffering is how much it relies on speaking the body; but in

the case of *Iron Mills*, this theory needs modification. I incorporate Ruth Behar's theory of the "vulnerable observer" with Frank's "wounded storyteller" to argue that the liberatory feminist potential of *Iron Mills* is the model of witnessing suffering Davis' narrator invites the reader into. Although the narrator's storytelling engages in a kind of compulsion, as the narrator is caught between identifying with and distancing from Deborah, she nonetheless invites the reader into an act of witnessing that opens up the space for the reader's love for Deborah.

### **Stuck in place**

The term "compulsion" describes much of the plot, setting, and characters of *Iron Mills*. Most broadly it names the attempt to cross boundaries and construct a shared humanity that is repeatedly frustrated by the material forces of industrial labor and the class divisions it enforces; more specifically it characterizes the environment, Deborah's body, and her religious conversion. Fleissner argues that compulsion is the central gesture at work in naturalist literature, texts that share a plot that "is marked by neither the steep arc of decline nor that of triumph, but rather by an ongoing, nonlinear, repetitive motion—back and forth, around and around, on and on—that has the distinctive effect of seeming also like a stuckness in place" (9). Replacing the determinist plot with one guided by a nonlinear, cyclical motion, Fleissner argues, allows us to read naturalist literature as a genre that exposes (and wrestles with) the interrelatedness of the social and the natural, the historical and the modern, and the individual and the society. Such a meeting of seemingly opposing forces, she argues, is most often represented in naturalist

fiction through central women characters who “get stuck” in various life stages (adolescence, courtship, marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, etc.). More specifically, each heroine gets stuck as a result of her “failure” to fulfill one of these womanly roles. Fleissner links each heroine’s “stuckness” to particular “forms of compulsion” (“endless description, domestic time, the fad, drift, preservation, and the rhythmic back-and-forth of the death drive”) as well as to broader social and historical issues (32). Her argument is, finally, that we should read naturalist fiction not as the natural determining the social (or its opposite) in some fatalistic way; rather as literature that utilizes forms of compulsion to articulate the repeated confrontation of forces of opposition that ultimately expose a more modern way of thinking about history, narrative, femininity, masculinity, individual agency, etc. While compulsion might be read “as merely the stagnant, repetitive opposite of the will to act” it might also be understood as “creative potentiality” (39). Compulsion can be read as such because the obsession it displays represents not a mastery of chaos but a “*lacking* in the order” it is attempting to create; it might also “generate possibilities—that is, be creative—through the same process by which it struggles to attain mastery over all that it surveys” (48). There might be freedom and creativity in recognizing lack of control and in exploring the details and rhythms of the compulsive process. This reading of compulsion rethinks the linear plot that dominates both literature and history, and supplements “a plotline that does not move up or down but ongoingly wavers in place—back and forth, around and around, on and on” in a rhythmic motion that in its focus on details and repetition, and the “*impossibility* of

completion,” denotes “a serious new gesture of opening and questioning” (25, 30). In realizing the futility of totality, we might begin to be liberated from prescribed narratives.

However, there are numerous ways in which Fleissner’s argument does not work with Davis’ *Iron Mills*. First, although *Life in the Iron Mills* shares characteristics with naturalist fiction,<sup>10</sup> it does not fit neatly into the naturalist genre, evidenced by the fact that Fleissner does not reference *Iron Mills* at all in her book. Further, the naturalist heroines in Fleissner’s analysis attempt to create order and have control over their lives through their compulsive habits: “obsessively counting, cleaning, structuring their lives according to a painstakingly organized set of repeated habits and routines, these figures embody the way that hyperbolic forms of control can bespeak their polar opposite, a deep anxiety about the chaos that seems ever to threaten” (42). Naturalist writers, too, suffer from this compulsion: “what we see is an entrapment in a ‘compulsion to describe,’ an endless, excessive attempt to gain control over one’s surroundings that reveals one’s actual lack of control and concomitant frozenness in place” (42-43). Davis’ writing, and Deborah and Hugh as characters, do not suffer from compulsion in the same way that Fleissner argues here. Davis does not endlessly describe the daily routines of Deb and Hugh. Hugh and Deb do not participate in compulsive behaviors as a way to gain control over their surroundings; when we meet them, they are already painfully aware of how powerless they are.

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<sup>10</sup> In their introduction to Rebecca Harding Davis’ autobiography, *Rebecca Harding Davis: Writing Cultural Autobiography*, editors Janice Milner Lasseter and Sharon M. Harris note *Iron Mills*’ place in the literary traditions of realism and naturalism: “[t]he unprecedented, stark realism in the novella inaugurated literary realism twenty years prior to the period usually cited as the advent of Realism” (1). Furthermore, Davis’ “pioneering realist fiction with a naturalistic strain was published two decades before that written by William Dean Howells and six years before Emile Zola. Her work anticipates Kate Chopin’s portraits of women’s lives thwarted by social confines, Stephen Crane’s depiction of the individually tragic dimensions of the Civil War, and Upton Sinclair’s indictment of industrial capitalism” (4).

Yet compulsion is particularly useful in analyzing *Iron Mills*. Fleissner's initial (and the traditional) reading of compulsion as entrapment, stagnation, and futile meeting of forces articulates the drama of Davis' formulation of class, gender, and body. The compulsive motivation, I argue, is present in the confrontation of the natural (the river) with the social (the industrial town), the back-and-forth movement of workers to and from the mills, and the sense of the impossibility of completing the work of industrialism. It also informs the narrator's anxiety about Deborah's disabled and repulsive body, Deborah's unfulfilling end in the Quaker community, and the overall "constraint, obligation, and coercion" of all of Deborah's actions (*OED*). The body's confrontation with industrialism and patriarchy produces these compulsive movements. To understand the compulsion at work in the novella's constructions of class and embodiment, I first explore the stifled landscape of *Iron Mills* and then connect Davis' language about the natural world to her language about Deborah's poverty and gendered and disabled embodiment. Finally, I argue that Deborah's "conversion" represents another variation of immobility, an ambiguous ending that raises questions rather than provides a sense of completion.

Davis introduces her readers to the places and people of *Iron Mills* with an appeal to the senses through the natural landscape, signaling the particular experience of embodiment expressed in the novella: "The air is thick, clammy with the breath of crowded human beings. It stifles me" (11). She goes on to describe the people of this mill town, these "[m]asses of men [and women], with dull, besotted faces bent to the ground, sharpened here and there by pain or cunning" (12). Oppressive air and the masses of

heavy, pained faces introduce the reader to a world of coerced and exploited labor. Especially descriptive are the conditions of their physical and spiritual beings, their “skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes; stooping all night over boiling caldrons of metal, laired by day in dens of drunkenness and infamy; breathing from infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness for soul and body” (12). Sickly embodiment results from compulsory labor. The narrator picks the body apart as skin and muscle, calling attention to the body as severed from wholeness. The description of laborers “stooping all night” and “laired by day” provides a sense of repetitive obligatory behavior. This vile and burdening environment, just as the story the narrator tells, is “foul and dark as this thick vapor about us, and as pregnant with death” (14). Laborers are assaulted by the weight of the air, the presence of death and human suffering, dirt and grime, and constant labor relieved only by the consumption of alcohol. The city itself is caught between life (“pregnant”) and “death,” similar to the space of abjection that is neither subject nor object. Attending to the feelings and effects of industrialism, the narrator emphasizes bodily experience and a sense of imprisonment by the repetitiveness of work.

The early pages of the novella introduce a water motif, explored in the river, the rain, and the damp and mildewed mill town. Davis’ narrator remarks that the stifling smoke that strangles the air also pollutes the surrounding natural landscape, in the “[s]moke on the wharves, smoke on the dingy boats, on the yellow river” (11). She goes on to associate the yellow river, overburdened with providing power and transport for industrial factories, with slaves and mill workers: “The river, dull and tawny colored, (*la*



*belle riviere!*) drags itself sluggishly along, tired of the heavy weight of boats and coal barges. What wonder? When I was a child, I used to fancy a look of weary, dumb appeal upon the face of the negro-like river slavishly bearing its burden day after day” (12). The river carries the burden of industrial production without its consent, polluted and exploited by industrialism. Evoking the labor done by the factory workers, the river compulsively “drags itself sluggishly along.” Like the slow and constant flow of the polluted river, the movement of factory hands is sluggish and ritualized. Davis’ narrator recalls “the slow stream of human life creeping past, night and morning, to the great mills” (12). The mill hands have in effect become the muted water that quietly and continuously acquiesces to the exploitative demands of industry.

Yet the river, the narrator maintains, is unlike the factory workers in one particular way: “My fancy about the river,” that it is like the enslaved laborers, “was an idle one: it is no type of such a life. What if it be stagnant and slimy here? It knows that beyond there waits for it odorous sunlight,—quaint old gardens, dusky with soft, green foliage of apple-trees, and flushing crimson with roses,—air, and fields, and mountains” (13). Twenty-first-century readers will recognize that no matter where the river goes, the effects of the factories go with it. However the point Davis’ narrator makes here about the movement of the river away from the laborers is important: unlike Gove Nichols, who found water to be plentiful and easily accessed, the water in Davis’ novella moves away and not toward her characters. If clean and ample water maintains the health of the body in a literal sense, and maintains healthy subjectivity metaphorically through the mobility and fluidity water symbolizes, the pollution and remoteness of water signals the state of

the bodies and subjectivities of Davis' laborers. The contrast between the river and the laborers also highlights their imprisonment in the mill town, in their work, and in their bodies. As industrial capitalists pollute and exploit the river, they also pollute and exploit human beings, creating a compulsive movement of back-and-forth, a sluggish, oppressive driving force that turns in upon itself and not out, as the river does.

The only forms of water that remain near Davis' mill town are those that are stagnant, murky, dirty, and cold. Davis' narrator continues her thematic of water by asking her readers, "Can you see how foggy the day is? As I stand here, idly tapping the window pane, and looking out through the rain at the dirty back-yard and the coal-boats below, fragments of an old story float up before me" (13). The story itself is in the polluted water, and remembered in response to the dirt of industrialism that moves through and near the river. Water is present in multiple forms: "nightmare fog," rain, the dirty river, "and mud and foul effluvia" (14, 13). Mold, mildew, the weight of air thick with water, and dirty puddles are the only water available in this town. Hugh and Deb live in contrast to the movement and flow of the water away from the town, and subjected to the grimy wet state of the mill town and the river's pollution and enslavement. They share in only the forms of water that are suffocating or dirty and none of its healthy or mobile potential.

In contrast, the other prevailing element in the mill town is fire. As Hassell Hughes notes, the novella "essentially begins in hell, and descends through all its manifestations: from the dark cellar where the laborer lives, to the 'city of fires' where

[Hugh] works” (116). The stifling smoke that covered the wharves, boats, and river is caused by the many fires kept going in the mills. On her walk to the iron mill,

Deborah looked in on a city of fires, that burned hot and fiercely in the night. Fire in every horrible form: pits of flame waving in the wind; liquid metal-flames writhing in tortuous streams through the sand; wide caldrons filled with boiling fire, over which bent ghastly wretches stirring the strange brewing; and through all, crowds of half-clad men, looking like revengeful ghosts in the red light, hurried, throwing masses of glittering fire. (20)

Fire suffocates the mill town and is visible everywhere Deborah’s eye can see. There is a supernatural aspect to these conflagrations, as if the flames have a power of their own as they wave in the wind and writhe through the sand. Laborers seem like ghosts and witches, brewing unknown concoctions and haunting from the shadows. There is a compulsory element in the “tortured” flames and in the way the “wretches” bend, stir, and haunt the blazing scene. So much fire inspires the narrator to remark that “[t]he idiosyncrasy of this town is smoke” (11). Like water, fire has the power to produce and sustain just as it has the power to destroy and suffocate. In Davis’ town, however, the destructive powers of fire and water outweigh their productive potential because fire here represents never-ending labor, stifled air, and mortal danger.

Capitalist industrialism exploits and oppresses Deb and her fellow laborers. Their lives are, according to Davis’ narrator, a daily routine of “incessant labor, sleeping in kennel-like rooms, eating rank pork and molasses, drinking—God and the distillers only

know what” (15). The word “incessant” indicates the never-ending dominating role of work in their lives; the progressive tense used in the verbs “sleeping,” “eating,” and “drinking” produce the feeling of an ongoing compulsory routine that leaves little room for individual agency. Mill workers are so unfairly reimbursed for their incessant labor that, even in a shared household with Hugh and his father, they have no decent shelter or food. The harsh reality of Deb’s daily life is that she has no bed to sleep on, no good food to eat—hardly any food at all—a sickly and abused body, and faces the constant lure of alcohol. For industrial laborers, health was increasingly subordinated to productivity, and the body had little value to mill owners and investors other than what it could cheaply produce. In *The Lowell Offering*, Benita Eisler argues that the specific conditions of cotton or clothing mills, where Deb works, were especially unhealthy. She notes that there was little ventilation in these mills,

Where the air was polluted with flying lint and fumes from whale-oil lamps that hung on pegs from each loom. Moreover, to maintain the humidity required to keep the threads from breaking, the air had to be sprayed regularly with water and the windows nailed shut. Such an atmosphere undoubtedly aggravated the vulnerability of lungs exposed everywhere to tuberculosis, the “white death” that ravaged urban and rural American alike throughout the nineteenth century. (16)

In Eisler’s description, these laborers are literally locked in the factory by the “windows nailed shut.” The polluted and humid air is strikingly similar to the narrator’s descriptions of the suffocating atmosphere of the mill town. Thus Deb always breathes thick, stagnant

air, and her work in the factory requires repetitive tasks carried out in a tomb-like building.

Deb experiences the same imprisonment in her home as she does in the factory. Far from the nineteenth-century ideal home as a locus of domesticity, Deb lives in a cellar with Hugh and his father. This room they inhabit is “low, damp,—the earthen floor covered with a green, slimy moss,—a fetid air smothering the breath” (16). Once again Davis uses water, through dampness and moss, to portray the gritty, stifling experience of this place. Like Deb’s hunched-over body, their “low” dwelling suggests crouching and difficulty in moving about; a closed space rather than an open one. Dampness and moss signal the threat of illness (especially tuberculosis) and the lack of physical or emotional comforts in this residence. Again the narrator points to Deb’s suffocated breath. This is not a place of life, warmth, or rejuvenation. Deb’s home, the exemplary home of the working class, is a space of sickness, dirt, darkness, and cold. In each place—the mill or the home—Deb is besieged by unhealthy conditions, exploited labor, devalued embodiment, and poverty.

Such labor and poverty is inscribed on Deb’s body and she is bound to her body in much the same way as she is imprisoned by work. Deb experiences abject embodiment in two ways. First, the nature and relentlessness of her labor and the severity of her poverty produce and foster ill-health. Second, Hugh’s need for beauty and, more broadly, social ideologies of normative corporeality both view or code Deb as a monster. Capitalist industrialism severs Deb from the products of her labor and divides the body from the self or the mind. This is best expressed in Mitchell’s reaction to Hugh’s carved

korl woman. Mitchell, one of the wealthy men who tour the mill, who is “touched [...] strangely” by the figure, and who “saw the soul of the thing” says, “Look at that woman’s face! It asks questions of God, and says, ‘I have a right to know.’ Good God, how hungry it is!” (34). Mitchell conflates hunger with a longing for the right to knowledge, conjuring up images both of physical and mental needs. Like Deb, the korl woman is a figure of abject embodiment:<sup>11</sup> “There was not one line of beauty or grace in it: a nude woman’s form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with some one poignant longing. One idea: there it was in the tense, rigid muscles, the clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf’s” (32). Strikingly, this woman’s form, naked with muscles, limbs, hands, eager face, and hungry expression, evokes in Mitchell a craving for the right to know. The mingling of body with mind emphasizes a tension between the two: she *is* a body, but one that starves not for edible food, but for knowledge. Andrew Scheiber argues that the image of the korl woman empties the female body of meaning beyond patriarchal exchange. In the korl woman, “the female body has been turned into a currency, a totem of masculine creativity which allows both producer [Hugh] and consumer [Mitchell] somehow to claim that body, or its symbolic transformation as ‘theirs’” (108). Symbolizing the state of Deb’s body—a disposable commodity of capitalist production and patriarchal consumption—the korl woman can

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Davis seems to equate the korl woman with Hugh more so than with Deb. However, the emphasis on Deb’s grotesque embodiment is strikingly similar to the ugliness and intensely corporeal korl woman. Furthermore, as much as Davis suggests that Hugh is womanly [lacks “the strength and instinct vigor of a man, his muscles were thin, his nerves weak, his face (a meek, women’s face) haggard, yellow with consumption. In the mill he was known as one of the girl-men: ‘Molly Wolfe’ was his sobriquet... He fought sometimes, but was always thrashed, pommelled to a jelly” (24)], he is not a woman and thus enjoys certain rights and privileges over Deb. Hugh even admits to Deb that “Things go harder wi’ you nor me. It’s a worse share” (41). While I acknowledge and appreciate the permeability of gender present in the way Davis merges Hugh with the korl woman, the centrality of the embodied woman’s form in both the korl woman and Deborah suggests that there is also an affinity between these two.

only long for the *right* to know, because her mind and body have no intrinsic value in the system in which she is imbedded. What Hugh longs for is “a clear, projected figure of himself, as he might become... able to speak” (41). Unable to speak, Hugh’s body speaks for him: “His squalid daily life, the brutal coarseness eating into his brain, as the ashes into his skin” (40). With the “worse share,” Deb’s silence is more profound, the pain and suffering of her body speaks more audibly.

When we first meet Deb she is among a group of “half-clothed women;” this calls attention to their poverty, but also to their exposed and gendered bodies: half naked women are more visibly embodied and more visibly sexual objects (15). They are also more susceptible to cold, wet, and other external conditions. The narrator then describes Deb in relation to “Old Wolfe” who is “a pale, meek little man, with a white face and red rabbit-eyes” (16). Deb, “was like him; only her face was even more ghastly, her lips bluer, her eyes more watery. She wore a faded cotton gown and a slouching bonnet. When she walked, one could see that she was deformed, almost a hunchback” (16-17). Deb’s body is described in relation to someone else and not in its own right, highlighting her subordination. Her blue lips might refer to the cold weather and her lack of adequate clothing. The red, rabbit eyes that she shares with Old Wolfe might indicate that she is albino, but combined with the watery eyes they suggest an illness more specific to the eye. Deb’s watery, red eyes indicate that she suffers from an uncomfortable and most likely painful illness of the eye that contributes to the ugliness of her face.<sup>12</sup> Located on

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<sup>12</sup> In *Seeing Suffering in Women’s Literature of the Romantic Era*, Elizabeth Dolan observes that two “likely early-nineteenth-century medical explanations” for watery eyes include “epiphora” and “ophthalmia” (52). Dolan notes that “[e]piphora, or ‘the watery eye,’” occurs because either the individual “makes more tears than can be absorbed or s/he has blocked tear ducts” (52). Ophthalmia, on the other hand,

her face, Deb's illness speaks to the importance of female beauty and Deb's lack, suggesting just how repudiated Deb is in the social realm. Beyond the story of her face, Deb's hunchback, or spinal deformity, symbolizes the burdens she carries on her back. Like the low room she inhabits, a curved spine means that Deb hunches over and so her gaze is lower and limited, her heart, neck, and chest close in upon themselves rather than facing or opening to the world. Spinal deformities can cause severe pain and certainly make Deb's labor difficult. Ill, ugly, and disabled, Deb inhabits a miserable, socially rejected body.

This miserable body speaks in almost every scene in which Deb appears. As Rosemarie Garland Thompson argues, Deborah is "*tethered* to a body that *frustrates—even perverts—volition* as well as *obstructing the achievement* of her desires" (96, emphasis added). As Garland Thompson observes, Deborah's corporeality is a compulsive burden. Deb's body is, in Frank's words, "not mute—it speaks eloquently in pains and symptoms" (2). She is ensconced by physical pain, restricted by limited mobility, and reminded of her body at Hugh's every repulsed glance. Her ugly and deformed being is not a static entity and the reader confronts Deb's body in various states of suffering, hunger, and ill-health over and over again. "Deborah was stupid with sleep," the narrator informs, and "her back pained her sharply; and her teeth chattered with cold, with the rain that soaked her clothes and dripped from her at every step" (20). We know that "[s]he was hungry" (17). After work, Deborah "was weak, aching from standing twelve hours at the spools" (19). Again she is described as "weak" and a "flaccid wretch"

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is "a contagious eye disease" (52). Symptoms include "yellow eyes and a purulent discharge, accompanied by a gritty feeling and intense pain in the eye" (52).



(17). Just as Deb's work in the mill will never reach completion, she is trapped, undermined, and constrained by her actively painful body. The narrator tells us of Deb's "thwarted woman's form, her colorless life, her waking stupor that smothered pain and hunger" (21). When she sees Hugh for the last time, her grief inscribes itself on Deb's body: "the tired pain on her mouth just then was bitterer than death... her lips growing colder and more bloodless" (56). Deb is chained to embodiment, consigned to an ugly physicality, repudiated as a "wretch," a body that speaks of hunger, pain, and longing, with every experience written in painful details.

Davis portrays Hugh's response to Deb (and her understanding of his feelings toward her) as a direct reaction to her monstrous form. Deb "knew, in spite of all his kindness, that there was that in her face and form which made him loathe the sight of her" (22). More specifically, Hugh is repulsed by Deb's ugliness because there is something in him that longs for beauty, the kind of beauty found in Mitchell's world. The narrator remarks that Deborah "knew, that, down under all the vileness and coarseness of his life, there was a groping passion for whatever was beautiful and pure,—that his soul sickened with disgust at her deformity, even when his words were kindest" (22-23). Thus Hugh's giftedness, his eye for beauty and art, produces disgust in him at the sight of Deb. Tragically, Deb codes this as her fault, while Hugh is celebrated for his artistic instincts. Scheiber explores the dynamic between Hugh, Hugh's longing for beauty, and Deborah, as manifested in the korl woman. He ponders: if "the korl woman is 'an objectification of women's wrongs and women's potency,' what is one to make of Wolfe's indifference to—even revulsion toward—the actual woman, Deborah, whose inner hunger is the most

natural correlative of the sculpture's expression?" (107). Scheiber concludes that the very moment in which Hugh (and Mitchell) might comprehend Deb's gendered and embodied experience, might hear her body speaking, is the moment in which they deny her presence in the sculpture and use it as the space for their own (male) exchange: "the notion of the sculpture as the *cry* for Deb's love-hungry soul is occluded by its function as a direct expression of its creator's inner self," and the creator's desire to inhabit Mitchell's world (107 emphasis added). Representative of female embodiment, the korl woman signals Deborah's utter repudiation: both the censured longing that her body cries, and men's refusal to see or hear the suffering of that longing.

Deb does not have Hugh's artistic gift. During her nightly walk to the iron mills to bring Hugh supper, the narrator muses that "perhaps, if she had possessed an artist's eye, the picturesque oddity of the scene might have made her step stagger less, and the path seemed shorter; but to her the mills were only 'summat deilish to look at by night'" (19-20). Lacking Hugh's artistic soul, Deb has little to compensate for her ugly body and ignorant mind. Thus she is "[m]iserable," and "crown[s] the scene of hopeless discomfort and veiled crime" (21). She crowns this scene as an archetype of poverty and misery, "a type of her class," wherein Deborah is simply a characterization set against Hugh's unique and romanticized soul (21). Are we meant to consider Deb as an individual, with desires and struggles of her own, or as the crowning example of a generalized working class? Deb is tethered to a physical being marked by monstrosity, while at the same time the details of her suffering body are effaced in allegorical descriptions of an entire class of people.

Deb's conversion at the end of the novella registers the same sense of compulsion that characterizes the stifling landscape, Deb's labor and her ill body. In the final pages of *Iron Mills* Deb is released from prison and lives with a Quaker community beyond the mills. Deb's move into the Quaker community is the moment in which she displays the most mobility; she gains freedom from the unresolved confrontation between the river and industrialism, a release from incessant labor, and finds a spirituality that recuperates her overburdened body. This move is what propels William H. Shurr to describe *Life in the Iron Mills* as "a nineteenth-century conversion narrative" (245). Yet Deborah's conversion, rather than creating a feeling of conclusion, underscores the *impossibility* of completeness. This feeling of incompleteness is produced by the open-ended state of Deb's emotions after her conversion, by the ethics of Christian conversion itself, and, most crucially, by the sense that although Deborah may be "saved," the work of liberating the working poor is not finished.

The Quaker community is a sanctuary of love and rest far from the anguish of the factories. Removed from the unremitting hard labor of the factory, Deborah's economic, corporeal, and emotional states are vastly improved. Davis' narrator informs us that with the Quakers, Deb experiences "long years of sunshine, and fresh air, and slow, patient Christ-love," that make "healthy and hopeful this impure body and soul" (63). In the Quaker community Deb is not forced to labor long hours, taxing her already painful shoulders, back, and feet, nor does she have to worry about food or shelter. In contrast to the stifling air of the mill town, she finds exercise and fresh air with the Quakers. Importantly, she also finds "slow, patient Christ-love." Unlike her "urgent need" for

Hugh's love, the tone of love in this setting is serene; and because Davis characterizes this love as like Christ's, it does not judge Deb based on her lack of physical beauty, is unconditional, and enduring (17).

While Deborah's move away from the mills into a pastoral community where there is sunshine and air is a profound improvement, her conversion remains ambiguous. Curnutt notes that "[s]ignificantly, even though Deborah's story is resolved, the conclusion is open-ended" (9). He goes on to argue that "Deborah's emotions remain inconclusive and ambiguous, rendered in a manner that asks the reader to ponder their meaning more deeply" (9). Deb's emotions are conspicuously vague. Although she claims that "there is no need" to expand on Deb's happy life in her new home, the narrator also notes that "[t]here may be in her heart some latent hope to meet there the love denied her here,—that she shall find him whom she lost, and that then she will not be all-unworthy" (64). Davis' narrator continues, "[s]omething is lost in the passage of every soul from one eternity to the other,—something pure and beautiful, which might have been and was not: a hope, a talent, a love, over which the soul mourns, like Esau deprived of his birthright. What blame to the meek Quaker, if she took her lost hope to make the hills of heaven more fair?" (64). Deb emerges as painfully sad, maintaining a suppressed hope that Hugh might someday love her. She entombs her "lost hope" inside of her, waiting until death to reactivate this hope in heaven, or the spiritual realm. Though restful in a new life, her "soul mourns." As Curnutt claims, the language of Deborah's conclusion seems to reach out to the reader, asking questions rather than providing answers.

While the narrator's language about the love and peace Deborah experiences with the Quakers emphasizes the beauty of her new life, we should be wary of conversion because of its long history of colonizing the oppressed. As Hassell Hughes argues, "there is a danger that 'converting' the oppressed to the politics of elite ideologues only reinforces existing power relations" (126). Dawn Rae Davis cautions similarly that "love's discourse must be examined for the history it shares with colonialism in the context of the civilizing-Christian mission and Enlightenment ethics conditioned by reason" (146). Clearly, Deborah has taken on Quaker customs in dress, manner, and religious practice, and, as such, has converted to Quakerism; the narrator describes Deborah as "a woman, old, deformed, who takes a humble place among them: waiting like them: in her gray dress, her worn face, pure and meek, turned now and then to the sky. A woman much loved by these silent, restful people; more silent than they, more humble, more loving" (63-64). The question of whether or not Deb's conversion "reinforces existing power relations," however, is left unanswered since the narrator is not forthcoming about Deborah's feelings throughout the conversion, except for her abiding love for Hugh. Deb is more empowered with the Quakers than she was before, but she still does not speak for herself, and while Davis' narrator alleviates some of the sadness about Deborah for the reader, she doesn't relieve it all.

The conclusion of Deborah's story remains incomplete, finally, because a happy ending would conflict with the suffering the narrator insists on showing throughout the novella. Schieber argues that "we have to be suspicious of such consoling formulas, and recall the skepticism about language that is the key-note of the tale. For even this

formula, which some have taken as the normative value of the story, is undercut—a reminder of language’s ability to codify human suffering into a tidy package that allows the reader the luxury of aesthetic closure” (112). We have to be suspicious not just because language might code human suffering into a too-convenient narrative, but also because the narrator has urged us all along to become conscious of the suffering of other human beings. How can we enjoy the happy resolution of Deb’s story when we now know that so many others are still imprisoned by industrial labor? The narrator in fact encourages the reader to feel unfulfilled by her conclusion as she leaves us with the “bare arm” of the korl woman “stretched out imploringly in the darkness... with its thwarted life, its might hunger, its unfinished work” (64). In contrast to Deborah’s “consoling” finish in the Quaker community, the narrator reminds us that there is still work left unfinished.

In the conclusion to Deb’s story we are left with a feeling of incompleteness, as Fleissner puts it, we confront “the *impossibility* of completion” (30).<sup>13</sup> This incompleteness is yet another form of compulsion active in *Iron Mills*. As I have argued, it first emerges in the clash between nature and industrialism, and is present in the back-and-forth movement of factory labor and in Deborah’s stuckness in a body that thwarts mobility and speech. The stasis that repeatedly emerges in Deborah’s story is caused by structures of patriarchal and capitalist industrialism that oppress and commodify nature and the individual. Though Fleissner argues that the compulsive sensibility contains creative potential, Davis refuses that possibility in her formulations of class and the gendered body. Davis’ expressions of feminist love through witnessing suffering, on the

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<sup>13</sup> Many who work for social justice experience frustration and fatigue at this reality.

other hand, attempt to reach out beyond and heal class divisions, and as such create some potential for creativity and liberation in this compulsive motivation.

**“I know... I write:”<sup>14</sup> Witnessing Suffering, a Story of Feminist Love**

*Iron Mills*, as a story about working-class individuals written by an middle-class woman, lends itself to discussions about the politics of the relationships among Davis, her narrator and her characters. Speaking directly to the class difference between Davis and her characters, Tillie Olsen writes that “*Life in the Iron Mills* was not written out of compassion or condescending pity. The thirty-year-old Rebecca Harding who wrote it, wrote it in absolute identification with ‘thwarted, wasted lives... mighty hungers... unawakened power’; despised love; circumstances that denied use of capacities; imperfect, self-tortured art that could have only odd moments for its doing—as if these were her own. And they were, however differently embodied in the life of a daughter of the privileged class” (69). For Olsen, gender oppression gives even an upper-class woman insight into poverty.<sup>15</sup> Garland Thompson’s view differs from Olsen’s. She argues that Davis uses Deborah to validate the subjectivity of her more privileged woman narrator and that ultimately “[r]enunciation triumphs over identification... because the disabled body signifies a vulnerability so troubling that it seems to undermine the writer[’s] ambitions for middle-class white women” (101). The contrast between Olsen’s

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<sup>14</sup> Davis, *Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories*. Ed. Tillie Olsen. New York: The Feminist Press, 1985 (page 64).

<sup>15</sup> Jean Pfaelzer agrees, arguing that “[t]hrough observation and projection, Rebecca Harding Davis’ experiences as a woman allowed her to understand something of the family and factory experience of the working class. To be sure, because of her own class affiliation Davis distorted working class life, but because of her sex she was able to see oppression where others did not” (234).

claims of identification and Garland Thompson's analysis of renunciation (and the critics on either side of this debate) raises the question, is Davis an empathetic writer/narrator who aligns herself with her characters or one who "others" her poor, disabled characters in order to shore up or explore the subjectivity of able-bodied, middle-class femininity?

These diverging responses articulate a kind of storytelling that highlights both the limits and the possibilities of relationship between self and other. The precarious relationship of identification and subordination among Davis' woman narrator, Davis' own presence in the story, and her disabled woman character is the result of complex forces of gender, class, and embodiment (even ethnicity) that creates a shared experience of gender oppression and a hierarchical class relationship which puts these women in tension with each other. While renunciation may win out over identification, as Garland Thompson contends, the fact that Olsen can argue that Davis—who was mired in socio-economic ideologies of gender, embodiment, class, race, and labor—shared in experiences of suffering with her working class characters, suggests that Davis was at least working to practice a reciprocal feminist liberatory loving that productively negotiates boundaries between self and other. This is a complicated negotiation, and it gets at the heart of any attempt to witness. For anthropologist Ruth Behar, "the central dilemma of all efforts of witnessing" is the relationship of the observer to the observed (*The Vulnerable Observer* 2). Faced with the suffering of others, should the observer "stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand? Are there limits—of respect, piety, pathos—that should not be crossed, even to leave a record? But if you can't stop the horror, shouldn't you at least document it?" (Behar 2).



In response to her own questions, Behar argues for the “vulnerable observer,” a way of witnessing that “breaks your heart;” in other words, observation in which the observer remains aware of her own subjectivity, allowing herself to be emotionally affected by the observed. As readers, we cannot change Davis’ narrator’s relationship to Deborah, but we can examine our own role in the story. A more productive examination of *Iron Mills*, then, shifts the question from whether or not Davis’ narrator empathizes with or others Deb, to what kind of witnessing is possible in the narrative space Davis opens for us as readers? Are we able to extend Arthur Frank’s theory of the wounded storyteller so that the narrator’s telling brings us into a space of shared embodiment/suffering with Deborah, a character silenced by class and gender but whose body speaks? Can we see ourselves as vulnerable observers, not distant in our observing but, as Davis’ narrator asks, brought down into the “mud and foul effluvia” (13)? Although I agree with Garland Thompson and others who make meaningful critiques of the problematic witnessing between the narrator and Deb and Hugh, I argue that it is equally meaningful to explore the power of our witnessing Deb’s suffering. First I examine the ways in which Davis’ narrator is caught compulsively between identifying with and renouncing Deborah; arguing then that the narrator opens up the space for the reader’s witnessing of the ill body that provides this opportunity to express feminist love across divides between self and other. Because witnessing in *Iron Mills* is acted out through Deborah’s compulsively suffering body, I then examine Frank’s claim that the suffering body can be “a common bond of suffering,” to argue that the narrator’s claims on the reader invite us to serve as witnesses (xi). This witnessing asks us to “think with” Deb’s story (rather than

thinking about it): “to think with a story is to experience it affecting one’s own life and to find in that effect a certain truth of one’s life” (Frank 23). Finally, using Behar’s theory of the vulnerable observer, I argue that our location (or our privilege) need not make us dominant over Deb, but invites us to negotiate that relationship actively.

Telling someone else’s illness narrative is, as Garland Thompson perceives, troubled by class and body politics of difference and places responsibility on the reader to bear witness in a particular way. How can we reconcile these self/other relationships that seem inevitably to repeat a pattern of reaching out to the other but in the end always reaffirm division and hierarchy? Here once again *Iron Mills* produces a kind of “stuckness-in-place.” Like the frustrating stasis of industrialism, class, and embodiment (the sluggish, polluted river, Deb’s compulsory, repetitive labor, the limited mobility of her body, Deb’s consignment to her body, and her ambiguous “conversion”), the narrative relationships in *Iron Mills* betray of sense of compulsion. The narrator enacts a rhythmic back-and-forth between identification and repudiation: she works to espouse empathetic feminist love based on shared humanity that is often undermined by a surfacing anxiety about Deborah’s repulsive body, the filth of the impoverished class, and her subordination as female. However, this particular expression of compulsion is unlike those that I have examined above, because here we glimpse what Fleissner calls a “new gesture of opening” that is enacted between women of different class and body statuses. While the narrator’s attempt to bear witness to Deborah’s illness and the absence of the narrator’s body in relation to her storytelling indicates the compulsive dynamic between

the narrator and Deborah, Davis' narrator creates an "opening" for the reader to witness Deborah's suffering in a more liberatory way than she herself can.

*Iron Mills* displays the profound distance between classes, what Hassell Hughes terms the "great gulf of class [that] remains fixed," but this distance is also a divide between language and the body for women (116). This is especially evident in the varied individuals involved in telling the story of *Iron Mills*, which produces a sense of fragmentation and division. These include Davis who writes the story, her narrator (who might be Davis herself) who tells/remembers/sees the story, Deborah, whose wounded body is the story, and the reader who hears the story. *Iron Mills* is told and framed by an omniscient narrator, who announces that "from the street-window I look" (12). The location of the narrator watching from her window articulates the relationship between narrator and subject: the voices of the laboring class within the story speak through the words of the near, yet differently-situated, narrator. Curnutt argues that the narrator, like the reader, "is an outsider. Distance is symbolized by the fact that, throughout the narration, s/he never leaves the house" (4). It is from a safe distance, then, that the narrator recalls Deb's story. The act of storytelling sets the narrator apart as much as her spatial and economic distance from Deborah. As Garland Thompson notes, "[a] vast rhetorical disparity looms between the middle-class, presumably white, writer, whose entire characterization consists of acts of will such as 'I open,' 'I can detect,' 'I want,' 'I choose,' 'I dare,' and—most important—'I write,' and the mill workers, whose miserable lives and degraded bodies... she so frankly depicts" (96). While Deb is caught in a compulsive sensibility that precludes acts of will, the narrator makes her empowerment

known in these various ways. Deb does, however, make one act of will: stealing the wallet from Mitchell. With this act Deb achieves “a power akin to beauty,” and “her eyes glowed,” as she appears “young, in deadly earnest; her faded eyes, and wet, ragged figure caught from their frantic eagerness” (42, 42, 43). Yet this act is problematic in two ways. First, because she does it so that Hugh may free himself from the confines of poverty to live with another more beautiful woman, though Deb loves him; and second, because it is this act that leads to Hugh’s suicide (a painful consequence for Deb) and also to Deborah’s imprisonment. Therefore, even her will is silenced by her ugliness and her poverty.

On the other hand, Davis’ narrator makes rhetorical acts of will and has command of language, but she does not “act” throughout the novella; instead she remains largely disembodied and immobile. And while Deb makes no (or very few) acts of will and has no command of language, her actions speak; in fact her body speaks most loudly in the novella, conveying pain, longing, hunger, and more. Trapped in incompleteness, voiceless body or bodiless voice, the contrast between Deb’s impoverished and disabled woman’s body and the middle-class and disembodied narrator, reifies the divide between them, but also demonstrates that they both lack access to wholeness. Garland Thompson argues that “[b]oth the narrator and the Quaker woman are strikingly insubstantial, compared to the wretched mill workers whose bodily suffering floods us with vivid detail” (95). Furthermore, “[w]hile the narrator shapes readers’ responses with provocative descriptions and goading judgments, she reveals almost nothing about herself, particularly the details of her own body” (95). Curnutt agrees that “Davis’s

narrative stance... is strangely disembodied” (3). In contrast to Deborah’s embodiment which speaks in every scene, and the kohl woman that represents the commodified woman’s body, the corporeality of Davis and her narrator are eclipsed by their storytelling. This produces a seeming inequality: while Deborah is bound to her body, suffering intense pain and hunger, the narrator remains largely free of such constraint; yet she, too, suffers from being insubstantial. Garland Thompson argues that the narrator’s insubstantial body is a symptom of her own corporeal anxiety. By projecting illness, disability, and ugliness on Deborah, the narrator confirms her own status as above Deborah or as not-Deborah. Deb’s body speaks in pains and sufferings so that the corporeality of Davis’ narrator may remain unseen and silent. But it also suggests that the narrator is refused access to her body or at least access to a mobile body. *Iron Mills*, published anonymously, was assumed to have been written by a man. Perhaps Davis felt that by gendering her narrator as woman, she was marginalizing her own text. In this way, the narrator’s lack of a body is a sign of her disempowerment as much as of her power over Deborah.

While many critics argue, as Garland Thompson does, that the hierarchical relationship between the narrator and Deborah demonstrates that Davis’ narrator exploits her working class characters, I argue that the narrator’s physical absence also signals an open space for the reader to become physically present to Deborah’s suffering—for the reader to be, in Frank’s words, a “dyadic body.” Curnutt explains, “[h]owever pronounced the I-you relationship, Davis creates a space for difference in the reception act by not concretizing what [Robyn] Warhol calls ‘the message of the body,’ the visceral

response that signals the mental movement from identification, to compassion, to pain”

(3). The absence of the narrator’s body, her insistence on detailing the feeling of the mill town with an appeal to bodily senses, and her emphasis on Deb’s speaking body, invites the reader to recognize her shared condition of vulnerable embodiment with Deborah.<sup>16</sup>

While other forms of witnessing suffering in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries directed the reader to the protagonist’s own capacity to feel, e.g. the eighteenth-century “cult of sensibility,”<sup>17</sup> the version of witnessing suffering that Davis employs is more like that of Frank’s, wherein the reader is invited to examine her role in witnessing.

In Davis’ narrator’s effort to bear witness to Deborah’s suffering, she repeatedly makes claims on the reader, directly addressing the reader, and pleading for or demanding participation and attention. “You may think it a tiresome story enough, as foggy as the day, sharpened with no sudden flashes of pain or pleasure,” but the narrator urges her readers to “[s]top a moment. I am going to be honest. This is what I want you to do. I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me” (13). The narrator makes us as readers self-reflexive about our own relationship to the people of the mill town, and asks us to see not only what divides us, but what we share. Hassell Hughes explains that *Iron Mills* “thus confronts its readers with a literary realism that threatens a radical personal and social import. It invites them/us to do something more than to hear or observe” (121). I would modify this point.

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<sup>16</sup> We all do indeed share in the condition of vulnerable embodiment. Frank uses Susan Sontag’s (*Illness as Metaphor* 1978) metaphor of illness as travel to articulate this: “We are each citizens of two kingdoms, Sontag writes, the kingdom of the well and that of the sick. ‘Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place’” (9).

<sup>17</sup> See Janet Todd’s *Sensibility: An Introduction*, London: Methuen, 1986 or Claudia L. Johnson’s *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s—Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen*, University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Rather than “doing something more” than hear or observe, what *Iron Mills* invites the reader to do is to “hear or observe” in a particular way, by acknowledging the shared vulnerability of our bodies and allowing ourselves to be susceptible to Deb’s story.

Working to close the divide between readers and Deb’s story the narrator pleads for her readers to grasp the material experience of the suffering of the working class: “I want you to hear this story. [...] I want to make it a real thing to you” (14). The narrator attempts to make the reader a specific kind of watcher and listener, one who confronts her own subjectivity, and recognizes the limitations of her location. The narrator’s strategy—what Curnutt calls the “engaging strategy”—invites the reader into an act of witness. Bearing witness, Frank argues, is the central moral act produced by a narrative of illness. Frank states that “[w]hat makes an illness story good is the act of witness that says, implicitly or explicitly, ‘I will tell you not what you want to hear but what I want you to know to be true because I have lived it. This truth will trouble you, but in the end, you cannot be free without it, because you know it already; your body knows it already.’ In telling this story truthfully, the ill person rises to the occasion” (63). Although the reader has not “lived” Deborah’s story, Davis’ narrator allows the truth of Deb’s body to speak, whether or not the reader wants to hear it. It is not just the narrator’s responsibility to “rise to the occasion” and tell the truth of Deb’s embodiment. The role of the reader here is crucial, because, as Frank argues, “[o]ne of our most difficult duties as human beings is to listen to the voices of those who suffer” (25). He goes on to argue that the “voices” of the ill “bespeak conditions of embodiment that most of us would rather forget our own vulnerability to. Listening is hard, but it is also a fundamentally moral act” (25). In telling

the conditions of Deb's poverty, illness, and embodiment, the narrator co-opts Deb's story while at the same time engages the reader in a "moral act" of witnessing the story. Thus, the narrator facilitates witnessing for the reader. And witnessing is an opportunity for expressing liberatory love.

It is precisely the vulnerably embodied moments of *Iron Mills* that produce the potential for shared experience and a feminist ethic of care or love (Gilligan *In a Different Voice*). This is because, as Frank argues, our most universally shared condition as humans is the vulnerability inherent in embodiment, and illness narratives can remind us of or create this commonality: "[t]he ill person who turns illness into story transforms fate into experience; the disease that sets the body apart from others becomes, in the story, the common bond of suffering that joins bodies in their shared vulnerability" (xi).<sup>18</sup> Sharing Deborah's story transforms that which sets her apart (her sickly embodiment, her experience of capitalist exploitation) into an experience that can become a "common bond of suffering" (xi). Telling the story is important because, as Frank argues, "[s]eriously ill people are wounded not just in body but in voice. They need to become storytellers in order to recover the voices that illness and its treatments take away" (xii). Storytelling not only recovers the individual voice, Frank continues, but also participates in a social function: "In wounded storytelling the physical act becomes the ethical act. Kierkegaard wrote of the ethical person as editor of his life: to tell one's life is to assume responsibility for that life. This responsibility expands. In stories, the teller not only recovers her voice; she becomes a witness to the conditions that rob others of their

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<sup>18</sup> I read Deborah's disabled body, her red, watery eyes, and blue lips as illness. Poverty also shares some similarities with Frank's formulation of illness because the laborers in *Iron Mills* wear their poverty like a chronic illness.



voices. When any person recovers his voice, many people begin to speak through that story” (xii-xiii). Deborah is indeed wounded in body and in voice. Within the narrative, however, Deborah does not and cannot recover her voice. Robbed of her voice because she is poor, a woman (and, even worse, an unloved woman), disabled, ugly, and foreign, when she does speak in the novella, she is ignored, laughed at, or yelled at; furthermore, she is not easily comprehended because of her thick Welsh accent. Because of the various ways in which she is silenced, Deb has no voice. Without a voice, we as readers are drawn to her speaking body, invited into the ethical act of listening to her body. What we hear when we listen to Deb’s body is that “the stupor and vacancy had time to gnaw into her face perpetually. She was young, too, though no one guessed it; so the gnawing was fiercer” (22). As the narrator informs, “[t]here is a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for centuries” (13). The narrator hesitates to “put this [dumb] secret into words” because, “[t]hese men [and women], going by with drunken faces and brains full of unawakened power, do not ask it of Society or God. Their lives ask it; their deaths ask it. There is no reply” (14). While the men and women remain silent, their lives ask questions. The question posed to us is, in what ways are we listening?

Davis’ narrator invites the reader to bear witness to Deb’s embodied suffering, a radical and ethical act, enacting a relationship between self and other that expresses liberatory love. By making Deb’s story about bodily suffering, the narrator appeals to the reader’s own experience of embodiment. Frank encourages us to ask, “What is my relationship, as a body, to other persons who are also bodies? How does our shared corporeality affect who we are, not only to each other, but more specifically *for* each

other?” (35). Davis’ narrator asks similar questions. She asks, “if one looked deeper into the heart of things,” and still “[d]eeper yet if one could look, was there nothing worth reading in this wet, faded thing, half-covered with ashes? No story of a soul filled with groping passionate love, heroic unselfishness, fierce jealousy? Of years of weary trying to please the one human being whom she loved” (21). The narrator then becomes accusatory, equating Deb’s suffering with the reader’s: “You laugh at [Deb’s pain and jealousy]? Are pain and jealousy less savage realities down here in this place I am taking you to than in your own house or your own heart,—your heart, which they clutch at sometimes? (23). Again and again, Davis’ narrator asks questions of the reader, and often allows Deb’s body to do the asking: “Do you laugh at her, standing there, with her hunchback, her rags, her bleared, withered face, and the great despised love tugging at her heart?” (56). Read through the lens of Frank’s question, what the narrator asks is, Are you willing to hear Deb’s body speak? Are you willing to hear Deb’s body in relationship to your own body; to see that you share corporeality with Deb, and to allow that to affect who you are? Hearing Deb’s story through Frank’s theory shows us our shared condition of embodiment with Deb regardless of any division of class or gender, and this condition shows us the potential for love between self and other. Frank argues that “the shared condition of being bodies becomes a basis of empathetic relations among living beings” (35). He calls the shared bodily experience a “dyadic body,” saying that “the dyadic relation is the recognition that even though the other body is a body outside of mine, ‘over against me,’ this other *has to do with me, as I with it*” (35). The dyadic body presents us with a choice: “The dyadic body thus represents an ethical choice to place

oneself in a different relationship to others. This choice is to be a body for other bodies. Living for others means placing one's self and body within the 'community of pain'" (37). The community of pain means recognizing our shared embodiment, even (or especially) in its most vulnerable manifestations. In response to Garland Thompson's argument that the narrator celebrates her own role as "maternal benefactress" to Deb's disabled Other, we as readers can see our own relationship with Deb in a less hierarchical way. As Frank argues, "[l]iving *for* the other is not, as Levinas describes it, an act of exemplary goodness. Persons live *for* others because their own lives as humans require living that way. The self is understood as coming to be human in relation to others, and the self can only continue to be human by living *for* the Other" (15). Bearing witness through reading illness narratives is one method through which we can live for or with the Other: "[t]he moral genius of storytelling is that each, teller and listener, enters the space of the story *for* the other" (18). The narrator bears witness to Deb's story, however problematically, through telling the story of her ill body. By reading the story we have the opportunity enter "the space... *for* the other." In this space there are flickers of identification—and love—across the great divide of class, gender, and embodiment.

This kind of witnessing can and should make us vulnerable. Indeed, "[n]othing is stranger," Behar argues, "than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them" (5). Behar explains the experience of observation as one of "[l]oss, mourning, the longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant

hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something, are the stopping places along the way” (3). Davis’ narrator keeps us aware of our own position in relationship to Deb and we inevitably experience (as the narrator probably does) frustration, powerlessness, and uselessness at being observers. What Behar highlights is that observers are not unaffected by the act of observation, that the relationship between the observer and the observed is not one in which the observed are exploited by a disaffected watcher. On the contrary, the witness is vulnerable to those whom she watches. Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges is particularly useful here. Her theory is that knowledge is not objective and can never be whole; it is, rather, limited to the knowledge we each possess from within our own unique locations and, as such, is multiple and subjective. As Haraway argues, “location is about vulnerability; location resists the politics of closure [and] finality” (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 196). Haraway continues, “[a]bove all, rational knowledge does not pretend to disengagement: to be from everywhere and so nowhere, to be free from interpretation, from being represented, to be fully self-contained or fully formalizable. Rational knowledge is a process of ongoing critical interpretation among ‘fields’ of interpreters and decoders” (196). Thus, by calling attention to our location in relationship to Deb, and asking us to move around within that location, the narrator encourages our engagement, our ongoing critical interpretation of ourselves and our relationship to Deb. By recognizing our locations, we don’t need to come to the conclusion that we are subordinating, commodifying or objectifying Deb and Hugh. We can also become aware of the vulnerability of our positions, and make it so that from our explicitly limited

positions we actively negotiate the dilemma of self and other, rather than staying stuck in place. Our commitment to this practice of witnessing—recognizing our shared condition of bodily vulnerability and actively acknowledging and negotiating our location in relationship with that of the other—is a commitment to a dynamic of self and other that can be described as liberatory love.

I have been arguing that by engaging in a particular kind of witnessing of the suffering and speaking body we can glimpse moments of liberatory love professed by us for Deb even in light of the hierarchical nature of our relationship. I would like to offer, finally, that although these moments of love occur, the ultimate goal of the novella is not to be free from the compulsive dynamic. On the contrary, the reader is invited back down into the darkness when the narrator notes that “the room is yet steeped in heavy shadow” in the final words of the novella (65). Hassell Hughes argues that “neither writing nor reading the tale is equivalent to transforming praxis. Another descent into smoke must be the real end—and the beginning” (134). The work of bearing witness to oppression is not finished once we have heard Deb’s story. In fact, if we have heard Deb’s body speak, we are deeply aware that we have an ethical responsibility to bear witness to the suffering of others, and to make ourselves vulnerable to those that we observe. In other words, there is still much work to be done.

## Chapter Three

### Breast Milk and Catalpa Nectar: Tillie Olsen's Negotiations of the Maternal Body in *Yonnonidio* (1930s)

“Culture has taught us to consume the mother’s body—natural and spiritual—  
without being indebted.”

Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*<sup>1</sup>

“The body repeats the landscape. They are the source of each other and create each other. We were marked by the seasonal body of earth, by the terrible migrations of people, by the swift turn of a century, verging on change never before experienced on this greening planet. I sensed the mound and swell above the mother breast, and from embryonic eye took sustenance and benediction, and went from mother enclosure to prairie spheres curving into each other.”

Meridel Le Sueur, “The Ancient People and the Newly Come”<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of Tillie Olsen’s *Yonnonidio: From the Thirties* is a tumultuous relationship between a mother and her daughter(s). *Yonnonidio*, written during the early 1930s but not published until 1974, follows the Depression-poor Holbrook family—parents Jim and Anna, and their young children, Mazie, Ben, Will, Jim, and Bess—as poverty keeps them moving from a coal mining town in Wyoming to an attempt at “a new life” as tenant farmers in South Dakota and finally to the tenements of Kansas City near a slaughterhouse (*Yonnonidio* 22). Olsen develops numerous characters throughout the novel, but as Michael Staub argues the narrative “belongs primarily to Anna and to Mazie... and their efforts to be heard in a hostile environment” (131). Mazie, who is around nine years old at the opening of the novel, is the oldest daughter of Anna and Jim. Her father calls her “big-eyes,” underscoring her embodiment as well as her capacity for imagination and curiosity (24). Although “Mazie is a bright girl” she will never “get the

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<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*. Trans. Alison Martin. New York: Routledge, 1993 (page 54).

<sup>2</sup> Meridel Le Sueur, *Ripening: Selected Work, 1927-1980*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1982 (page 39).

chance to break the double bonds of being poor and female” (Staub 132). Her mother Anna is a strong and resourceful woman, bound to her gendered body through reproductive labor and poverty. Elaine Orr writes that Anna “is an exhausted woman, physically consumed by biological mothering and physical labor” (3). Exemplifying Irigaray’s assertion that “[c]ulture has taught us to consume the mother’s body,” Anna has little authority over her own body and she is consumed by the demands of her husband Jim and her children (54). The family moves in search of work and a sustainable life, and as their economic hardships increase and the family need becomes greater with each new baby, the mother-daughter drama unfolds. Indeed, *Yonnondio* brings us from witnessing suffering across the “great gulf fixed” between women of different class and body locations in *Iron Mills*, to Mazie’s often frighteningly intimate and claustrophobic witnessing of Anna’s abused body.

Women’s value in patriarchal culture is most often determined by their ability to inhabit an oppressive archetype of the maternal. As Michelle Boulous Walker asserts in *Philosophy and the Maternal Body*, “women are silenced most effectively by their association with maternity. The maternal body operates as the site of women’s radical silence” (1). The metaphor of and the physical mother’s body are contested sites in feminist scholarship. Some reject the figure of the mother because of its problematic embeddedness in patriarchal conceptions of woman; others argue that this rejection simply reenacts patriarchal oppression of the mother and call instead for a celebration of the mother as a figure of female power. Olsen’s narrative of motherhood, which precedes most of this theorizing, actively negotiates between rejecting the lie of patriarchal

constructions of motherhood and imagining the potential of the maternal for enacting feminist, liberatory love. Throughout much of *Yonnondio*, Olsen rejects oppressive patriarchal and romanticized notions of the maternal by articulating how this archetype silences the mother by denying her control over her own body. While patriarchal constructions of motherhood silence all women, the utter poverty of Olsen's characters reveals the trauma of this role in ways that, for example, middle-class motherhood is able to conceal. As a result of the availability of Anna's body to any and all external forces, she is trapped in an endless cycle of pregnancy and childbirth and is utterly silent about her own rape and miscarriage. This bodily suffering not only silences the mother but also her daughters, and Olsen powerfully depicts this legacy by showing us Mazie's traumatic witnessing of her mother's body. Olsen's dramatic deconstruction of the patriarchal archetype of the mother through violent and graphic scenes demands that we read her celebration of maternal nurturing toward the end of the novel—in what I call the dandelion scene—not just as a simple reclamation of patriarchal motherhood, but in more radical terms. Indeed Olsen imagines a kind of visionary maternal nurturing that is reciprocal rather than selfless. In contrast to the rape scene, in the dandelion field Mazie witnesses the speaking of her mother's censured body. Here Olsen voices the mother's pleasure through sensual language, situating her body in a reverie beyond the claustrophobic tenement and slaughterhouse in a field of dandelions and fresh air. Thus Olsen's revision of the maternal in *Yonnondio* help us reconceive motherhood in productive but not idealistic ways.



The mother's breast is a central image for Olsen's negotiations of the maternal. In *The Bonds of Love*, Jessica Benjamin writes that in psychological analyses of breastfeeding's effect on infants, "the nursing experience itself has legitimately been understood quite variously: in terms of oral sexual pleasure, reductions of tension, the sense of efficacy resulting from the caregiver's responsiveness, an intense merging or oneness, the 'creative illusion' that one has made the breast appear" (46). Because of its various meanings, she continues, "nursing, as a primary metaphor of infancy, encompasses all three kinds of relationships to the other that, according to Stern, appear in psychoanalytic thinking: being transformed by another (as in tension relief), complementarity (as in being held), and mental sharing (as in mutual gaze). The power of the breast metaphor, I believe, has always lain in the multiplicity of meanings it evoked" (46). I extend Benjamin's observation to include the mother's experience of breastfeeding as well. Taking Benjamin's assertion—that the metaphor of breast milk and breastfeeding holds power because it expresses multiple meanings—as a starting point, I argue that Olsen's breast imagery dismantles romanticized notions of motherhood and reclaims and redefines motherhood as a relationship with the potential to create space for experiencing liberatory (even if only momentary) and deeply embodied love. In the first instance, the illness Anna suffers as a result of a miscarriage and rape causes Anna's breast milk to make her infant daughter severely ill. As the breast milk dries up, Anna experiences intense physical pain, undermining her ability to nurture, the hallmark of patriarchal motherhood. In the second, Anna and Mazie share a sensual, creative, and reciprocal healing that is symbolized by Anna's own gentle suckling of nectar from the catalpa

tree's flower. Critics have noted that relationships between mothers and daughters (and less often, with sons), "are at the heart of almost every Olsen work," and that Olsen's writing "tells the truth about the body with all the marks of history on it" (Faulkner 153, Lyons 152). My analysis offers an investigation of the speaking maternal breast/body as the site through which Olsen explores mother/daughter relationships and tells the truth about the body, removing the censure of the speaking mother's body that is all too often (perhaps inadvertently) left in place.

Anna, Olsen's central mother figure in the novel, is bound by the "heavy" burden of "being poor and a mother," and this burden is manifest in her entrapment in a cycle of childbirth and domestic violence (*Yonnondio* 120). Rich examines what was in 1976 the "still relatively unexplored" realm of motherhood, arguing that "[t]he image of the mother in the home, however unrealistic, has haunted and reproached the lives of wage-earning mothers" (*Of Woman Born* 15, 52). A "dangerous archetype," patriarchal constructions of the maternal devalue and confine her as "the Mother, source of angelic love and forgiveness in a world increasingly ruthless and impersonal; [...] the symbol and residue of moral values and tenderness in a world of wars, brutal competition, and contempt for human weakness" (52). What Anna's inability to maintain this role (because of her poverty) reveals is the dilemma of patriarchal motherhood: that it is impossible to nurture and care for others without first asserting and caring for a self (or, that the kind of care one is able to give when one is denied voice, agency, and authority over one's own body, is not a sustaining, nourishing kind of care). Indeed, *Yonnondio* supports Joan Tronto's (much later) claim that maternal care is most often "an activity... more tied to

the realm of necessity than to the realm of freedom,” or in Rich’s words, an experience of “bitter-resentment and raw-edged nerves” (“Women and Caring” 175, *Of Woman Born* 21). Olsen’s descriptions of the maternal body—in birth, rape, and engorged breasts—speak what patriarchal constructions of the mother depend on keeping silent: the longing, resentment, fatigue, loneliness, and dreams deferred that accompany the role of selfless giver and nurturer in the family (and more broadly, in the social) system.<sup>3</sup>

Olsen also, significantly, imagines an experience of mothering that resists Tronto’s formulation of maternal care, linking it with freedom more than with necessity. Hélène Cixous offers a theoretical posture toward the maternal that, by embracing the female body, provides a poetic language through which to redefine the embodied maternal figure in feminist terms; reading the maternal body in the dandelion field with these theories illuminates Olsen’s revision of motherhood. Cixous uses mother’s milk as a metaphor for rethinking the nurturing relationship between mother and daughter. She “presents this nameless pre-Oedipal space filled with mother’s milk and honey as the source of the song that resonates through all female writing” (Cixous 114). In contrast to, but in negotiation with, the traumatic closeness between mother and daughter in childbirth, rape, miscarriage, and interrupted breastfeeding, Olsen also explores the daughter’s closeness to the mother “as the source of good.” This closeness, moreover, is capable of expressing radical maternal love, one “whose giving is always suffused with

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<sup>3</sup> In Olsen’s own words: “[m]ore than in any other human relationship, overwhelmingly more, motherhood means being instantly interruptable, responsive, responsible. Children need one *now* (and remember, in our society, the family must often try to be the center for love and health the outside world is not). The very fact that these are real needs, that one feels them as one’s own (love, not duty); *that there is no one else responsible for these needs*, gives them primacy. It is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant toil.... Work interrupted, deferred, relinquished, makes blockage—at best, lesser accomplishment. Unused capacities atrophy, cease to be” (*Silences* 18-19).

strength,” replacing Tronto’s equation with Cixous’: “[t]he more you have, the more you give the more you are, the more you give the more you have” (Moi 115, 230). Olsen’s dandelion scene enacts maternal caring that, like Cixous’ equation in which the mother gives and receives freely, or like Le Sueur’s relationship between the “mound and swell above the mother breast” and the “embryonic eye” that takes “sustenance and benediction, and went from mother enclosure to prairie spheres curving into each other,” is not defined by patriarchal and capitalist exploitation (39). Thus, the dandelion scene makes a series of revisions, expressions of the maternal body that are equally central to Cixous’ theories: in it Olsen transforms the “gift-that-takes” into the “desire-that-gives,” revises the nursing experience from painful and illness-ridden into one that is sustaining, sensual, and reciprocal, expresses touch that heals and transforms, and depicts a freedom of breath full of agency and playfulness.

### **Biographical Sketch**

With no record of her birth, critics find that “[s]ome details about [Olsen’s] early years are uncertain or ambiguous, lending a touch of mystery to her origins” (Pearlman and Werlock 9). Tillie Lerner, a “first-generation American daughter of Russian immigrants,” was born on January 14 in 1912 or 1913 either on a “Mead, Nebraska tenant farm” or in Omaha (Nelson xvii). Her parents Samuel Lerner and Ida Berber Lerner were never formally married. Identified as Russian Jews and “[a]theists and committed socialists,”<sup>4</sup> Olsen’s parents “were involved in the 1905 revolution in Russia”

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<sup>4</sup> Pearlman and Werlock describe Olsen’s mother as “nominally Jewish” (9). As Olsen puts it in “Dream Vision:” “As a girl in long ago Czarist Russia, [her mother] had sternly broken with all observances of

and fled to the United States when it failed, arriving first in New York and then settling in Nebraska (Nelson 57). To support his family, Samuel Lerner was variously employed as a packinghouse worker, farmworker, painter, paperhanger and candy maker and “in the early 1920s he was blacklisted after the failure of a packinghouse strike” (Pearlman 10). He was also state secretary of the Nebraska Socialist Party and ran in the mid-twenties “as the socialist candidate for the state representative from his district” (Rosenfelt 57).

Most critics note that “we know less” about Olsen’s mother and this is likely due to the fact that while Samuel Lerner was active in the public sphere of politics and labor, Ida Lerner performed most of her politics and labor in the daily duties of homemaker and mother (Pearlman and Werlock 9). Olsen repeatedly acknowledges her mother’s influence in her writing and as Coiner states, “[t]he strong bonds she had with her mother, Olsen has said, ‘are part of what made me a revolutionary writer’” (Coiner 142).<sup>5</sup> We do know that Ida Lerner “was illiterate until her twenties” (Coiner 142). Coiner thus locates Olsen’s “conviction that capitalism blights human development” in “the painful witnessing” of her own mother’s stifled potential. Olsen relates,

If you [could see] my mother’s handwriting, [in] one of the few letters she ever wrote me... she could not spell, she could scarcely express herself, she did not have written language. Yet she was one of the most eloquent and one of the most brilliant... human beings I’ve ever known, and I’ve

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organized religion, associating it with pogroms and wars; ‘mind forg’d manacles’; a repressive state. We did not observe religious holidays in her house” (*Mother to Daughter* 261).

<sup>5</sup> “Olsen acknowledges that Eva, the main character in [‘Tell Me a Riddle’] is a composite of Ida” and Russian revolutionaries “Seevya and Genya;” the short story collection *Tell Me a Riddle* is dedicated “To My Mother” (Pearlman and Werlock 10). Sadly, Olsen informs that “I had seen my mother but three times in my adult life” due to geographic distance, economic hardship, and the responsibilities of raising a family (*Mother to Daughter* 263).

encountered a variety of human beings in recent years, some of whom have a lot of standing in the world. (qtd in Coiner 142)

We can learn more about Ida Lerner from Olsen's story "Dream-Vision" (1984) which is Olsen's account of sitting with her mother who is dying of cancer. In it, Olsen says that much of her mother's "waking life had been a nightmare, that common everyday nightmare of hardship, limitation, longing; of baffling struggle to raise six children in a world hostile to human unfolding" (*Mother to Daughter* 261). Olsen goes on to credit her mother with providing her a "heritage of summoning resources to make—out of song, food, warmth, expressions of human love—courage, hope, resistance, belief; this vision of universality, before the lessenings, harms, divisions of the world are visited upon it" (*Mother to Daughter* 263-264). This sketch of Ida Lerner provides us with a wealth of information about the daily struggle, work, optimism and idealism, and resourcefulness that Olsen received from her mother.

The second of six children in a "depression-poor family," Olsen spent her childhood helping to care for her younger siblings and attending school (Rosenfelt 57). Nelson notes that young Olsen suffered from unspecified "childhood illnesses" which "provide[d] the major time for reading" (xvii). Olsen also stuttered, which Nelson argues developed her practice of "listen[ing] attentively" as well as inspired her "fascination" with all forms of speech, but it probably also made the young girl feel self-conscious, and Martin notes that she didn't "talk much" (xvii, 6). Although Olsen was "forced to leave high school before graduating" due to the onset of the Great Depression—she dropped out after the eleventh grade—in interviews she repeatedly credits her high school and an

“exceptional teacher” with exposing her to a wealth of literature,<sup>6</sup> including Shakespeare, Browne, Coleridge, and Dequincy as well as contemporary writers like Sandburg and Edna St. Vincent Millay (Nelson xvii, Coiner 144).<sup>7</sup> Supplementing school studies with her own readings, Tillie Olsen was a frequent visitor to the public library and used bookstores in Omaha and claims that “she was determined to read everything in the fiction category in the library, making it almost through the M’s” (Rosenfelt 58). By her mid-teens Olsen had developed a “familiarity with an extraordinary breadth of literature—popular fiction, the nineteenth-century romantics, [and] contemporary poets” (Rosenfelt 58). Work was economically essential, and Olsen was employed in a number of low-paying jobs from the age of ten on, including “shelling almonds,” childcare and “mother’s helper” for a Radcliffe graduate, “assistant in a grocery store,” “trimmer in a slaughterhouse,” waitress and “hash slinger,” “punch-press operator,” “mayonnaise-jar capper in a food processing plant, and checker in a warehouse” and, in her own words, “[t]ie presser, hack writer..., model, housemaid, ice cream packer, book clerk” (Nelson xvii, Rosenfelt 58, Burkom and Williams 34). The intersections between Olsen’s love of literature (and her commitment to it) and the economic need to work what were

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<sup>6</sup> Central High, “the only public college preparatory school in Omaha” (Nelson xvii).

<sup>7</sup> By all accounts, Olsen was incredibly well read. She was familiar with an “eclectic” groups of writers, including, “American populists like Walt Whitman; European social critics like Ibsen, Hugo, the early Lawrence, and especially Katherine Mansfield; black writers like W.E.B. Dubois and Langston Hughes; American women realists like Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow; as well as leftists like Upton Sinclair, John Dos Passos, Mike Gold, Guy Endore; and socialist feminists like Olive Schreiner... and Agnes Smedley” (Rosenfelt 58). Of course, she also read Rebecca Harding Davis, as well as “Ethel Voynich, Sarah Teasdale, H.D.; the Midwestern writers Selma Lagerlof, Susan Glaspell, Mari Sandoz, and Ruth Suckow; also Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sara Orne Jewett, Mary Austin, Zora Neale Hurston, Josephine Johnson, Adelaide Crespey, Dorothy Richards, Anna Seghers, Kate Chopin, and Toni Morrison” (Pearlman and Werlock 28-29).

ultimately dead-end jobs are evident in her reading interests, which were “predisposed toward what she calls ‘the larger tradition of social concern’” (Rosenfelt 58).

Olsen’s childhood was also characterized by the socialist ideology and activism of her parents, and their “political commitment... provided a rich dimension to her upbringing” (Coiner 143). Indeed, Olsen experienced a vibrant activist community in her childhood home, meeting “some of the most prominent socialist personalities of the time,” some of whom stayed in the Lerner home when they had speaking engagements in Omaha (Martin 7). Olsen even “remembers herself as a young girl sitting in Eugene Debs’s lap when he visited Omaha to speak at a socialist meeting” (Pearlman 11). Yet Rosenfelt calls Olsen’s decision in 1931 to join the Young Communist League a “turning point” because it encouraged Olsen to dedicate her life more fully to political work. The YCL sent her to Kansas City where she was jailed for “passing out leaflets to packing house workers” (Rosenfelt 60). Already sick with pleurisy “from working in front of an open window at the tie factory with a steam radiator in front of it,”<sup>8</sup> Olsen contracted “incipient tuberculosis” in jail and moved first back to Omaha and then to Faribault, Minnesota to recover (Rosenfelt 60, Nelson xviii). Illness encouraged Olsen to recognize the importance of the body in relationship to social activism and writing; during her recovery Olsen wrote in her journal, “I shall only care about my sick body—to be a good Bolshevik I need health first. Let my mind stagnate further, let my heart swell with neurotic emotions that lie clawing inside like a splinter—afterwards, the movement will clean that out. First, a strong body... I don’t know what it is in me, but I must write too” (qtd in Rosenfelt 66). Recovery offered Olsen precious time for reading and writing and

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<sup>8</sup> An inflammation of the lungs that causes sharp pain when breathing.



in 1932, while pregnant with her first daughter, Olsen began writing *Yonnonidio*. The first chapter was published in the second issue of *Partisan Review* (1934) under the title “The Iron Throat,” “and was much praised” (Martin 7). She continued to write after moving to California in 1933 where she helped with “waterfront organizing” and joined the General Strike of the Longshoreman, witnessing (and writing about) the tragedy known as “Bloody Thursday” in 1934 (Nelson xvii). She was jailed again for “vagrancy” along with “hundreds of strikers, activists, and individuals from the general populace” (Nelson xviii).<sup>9</sup> As the responsibilities of motherhood, political work, and wage labor added up, Olsen began around 1935 to write more sparingly—although, “her desire to write was always present” and she “seized every moment she could [to write]—on the bus... or late at night when the children were in bed” (Martin 10-11).<sup>10</sup> During the next two decades Olsen gave birth to three more daughters,<sup>11</sup> in 1938, 1943, and 1948, was involved in/organized PTA, “help[ed] establish the first child care center in San Francisco,” helped with unions and war relief, was victim to “harassment typical of the McCarthy Period,” and held various jobs (Nelson xix, Coiner 14). Her writing did, however, begin to receive some recognition and in 1959, with her youngest child now in school, “she was recommended for a Ford grant in literature and received it” (Martin 11). Olsen says that it

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<sup>9</sup> While in jail, editors from two publishing houses tried, with much difficulty, to locate Olsen to ask for more writing.

<sup>10</sup> In Olsen’s own words, “Time on the bus, even when I had to stand, was enough; the stolen moments at work, enough; the deep night hours for as long as I could stay awake, after the kids were in bed, after the household tasks were done, sometimes during. It is no accident that the first work I considered publishable began: ‘I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron’” (*Silences* 19).

<sup>11</sup> Coiner informs that “[w]hen Olsen learned she was pregnant with her second child she made an appointment with an abortionist and then, at the last minute, walked out of his office. After Julie’s birth, Olsen reports, she gave up her thwarted attempts to complete *Yonnonidio*; although she had “fragments for another 70 pages of the novel,” she had to go to work “typing income tax forms” (Rosenfelt interview)” (147). However, Olsen insists that “mothering four children did not fracture her selfhood. Being female and an artist are complementary, not contradictory, she believes” (Coiner 147).

“came almost too late,” because by that time she was “a partially destroyed human who pays the cost of all those years of not writing, of deferring, postponing, of doing others’ work—it’s in my body too (deafened ear from transcribing), etc.” (*Silences* 21). Periods of silence and some of writing continued until the 1970s when Olsen began to work inside the academy, publishing numerous short stories, working as a visiting lecturer at Stanford University, as Writer-in-Residence at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Distinguished Visiting Professor at University of Massachusetts at Boston, and continuing to receive grants, fellowships, lecturing positions, and publishing until her death in 2007 (Nelson and Huse xix-xxi).<sup>12</sup>

It was not until 1974, then, that Olsen published *Yonnondio*. She returned to *Yonnondio* as a mother of four daughters, and perhaps because of this she was cautious not to silence or censure the voice of her younger self. Therefore *Yonnondio* is the product of “the young girl and the mature woman” who “put together what is now the novel” (Martin 17). The published text is faithful to the one written in the 1930s: “[n]ot a word was added or changed, and the story remains unfinished, because Olsen realized that from the very nature of things, youth and inexperience cannot really collaborate with middle age and the viewpoint of middle age. The whole tone of the novel would have been spoiled, would have jangled into confusion if she had started to revise, to interpolate” (Martin 17). Even the story of the novel’s publication reveals nurturing

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<sup>12</sup> Nelson and Huse describes three phases of Olsen’s writing: the first is her most overtly political in the early to mid 1930s-1940s when she writes *Yonnondio* and other poems, short stories, and reports on political issues, the second from about 1950s -1970s, “fictions of struggle and survival,” when her youngest child is in school and her literary reputation affords her some opportunities to devote time to academic work and the third from 1970s-1990s, mentoring period.

between an older and younger woman, highlighting a kind of mothering that acknowledges and celebrates the distinctness of both voices.

Two memories of Olsen's mother Ida Lerner, who "was very conscious of the situation of women," perhaps best articulate the mothering within *Yonnonidio* (qtd in Coiner 143). The first anecdotally suggests the origins of Olsen's concern for the impoverished mother. Olsen "remembers in particular a photograph of a statue—featuring a woman on all fours with an infant 'chained' to her breast—that her mother had clipped from a leftist journal" (Coiner 143). The second is of Ida's death-bed "dream-vision," in which her mother tells Olsen that she was visited by a "babble" of "old country women" who sing and sway and cradle a new baby (262, 262). Her mother says that the baby is "[t]he joy, the reason to believe" but more specifically, it is "the human baby, before we are misshapen; crucified into a sex, a color, a walk of life, a nationality... and the world yet warring and winter" (263). Since the human baby is already inscribed with culture—by gender, race, and class (indeed, the fetus is already inscribed with cultural constructions of identity)—we can interpret Olsen's dying mother's "dream-vision" baby as one that exists out of time, in a space of perpetual becoming, like Cixous' mother's "inexhaustible milk."<sup>13</sup> In these memories of her mother Olsen provides the paradigm of mothering that she develops in *Yonnonidio*: the profound struggle of the prostrate mother with child shackled to her breast, and the "omnipotent

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<sup>13</sup> Olsen herself uses the language of inexhaustibility. In her 1993 *Newsweek* article "The '30s: A Vision of Fear and Hope," Olsen writes: "Sometimes the young—discouraged, overwhelmed—ask me incredulously: 'You mean you still have hope?' And I hear myself saying, yes, I still have hope: beleaguered, starved, battered, *based* hope. Through horrors, blood, betrayals, apathy, callousness, retreats, defeats—in every decade of my now 82-year-old life that hope has been tested, reaffirmed. And more than hope: an exhaustless store of certainty, vision, belief..." (26-27).

and generous” female community cradling a child that exists in a reverie “before we are misshapen” by inscriptions of gender, race, and class (Cixous 230). Between these two maternal images moves Olsen’s concept of resistance; resistance, she says, “doesn’t create isles of peace—maybe just aisles—what you walk down to get through” (Pearlman 8). This is her negotiation, not making a brand new world, but creating more room to move toward a better one; a negotiation that creates more space to move toward freedom and peace. As a result, Olsen’s speaking maternal body and its role in practicing radical reciprocal maternal nurturance declares that liberatory love is a political act. Although it might not make legal changes or feed the poor, Olsen’s vision of maternal love destabilizes patriarchal and capitalist oppression, creating aisles to walk down to get through.

**“[A]n infant ‘chained’ to her breast:” Patriarchal and Impoverished Motherhood**

Dismantling the notion of mother as the “source of angelic love and forgiveness” that silences the mother’s body, Olsen graphically details the ways in which patriarchy consumes the mother’s body in descriptive moments of intense confrontation between Anna and Mazie (Rich 52). Two particularly explosive scenes, in which Anna births Bess on the farm and Jim rapes Anna after she has a miscarriage in the city tenement, are told through Mazie’s eyes. This narrative structure, in which Mazie witnesses Anna’s suffering body, underscores the young daughter’s indoctrination into her mother’s confined role; they share a female body, and as a result of their intimate proximity to one another, Mazie’s witnessing tethers her to the violent reality of her mother’s position. The

narrative point of view shifts from Mazie to Anna during Anna's illness, brought on by rape, miscarriage, and economic destitution. In contrast to the rapid sequence of the first two scenes, this more lengthy section introduces Olsen's most sustained metaphor for Anna's experience of motherhood. Anna is forced to stop nursing Bess because her milk is contaminated by illness and milk engorges in her breasts, undermining her ability to nurture—to feed—her daughter.

From early in the novel Mazie intuits that her mother's body is a site of tension and pain. On a spring morning on the farm, just before her mother gives birth, Mazie sprawls on the damp ground hoping to find solace in the nature around her. Instead she confronts,

Ugly and ugly the earth. Patches of soiled snow oozing away, leaving the ground like great dirty sores between, scabs of old leaves that like a bruise hid the violets underneath. Trees, fat with oily buds, and the swollen breasts of prairie. Ugly. She turned her eyes to the sky for oblivion, but it was bellies, swollen bellies, black and corpse gray, puffing out baggier and baggier, cloud belly on cloud belly till at the zenith they pushed vast and swollen. Her mother. Night, sweating bodies. The blood and pain of birth. Nausea groveled. (60-61)

Mazie describes the changing of seasons using metaphors of the body: the earth has "dirty sores" and the sky is full of "bellies" and "sweating bodies." The human body she sees in the natural world is specifically the pregnant and sexualized body of her mother: she sees "swollen breasts," "fat" trees, "swollen belly," "cloud belly," and finally "her

mother” and “the blood and pain of birth.” Mazie is clearly already tormented by the continuous cycle of her mother’s pregnancy and the violent, dangerous reality of childbirth in poverty. Olsen asserts that the body is not a silent, passive entity—Mazie’s nausea grovels and pleads for her attention—and yet the sense of being swollen and nauseous reveals a stoppage of movement rather than mobility and freedom.

Mazie’s fear of and disgust at her mother’s body intensifies as the young girl realizes that they inhabit the same bodily space. Thus Mazie transfers her repudiation of her mother’s “ugly” and “swollen” pregnant body onto herself as she becomes “swollen” and “bloody” inside: “She could feel words swollen big within her, words coming out with pain, bloody, all clothed in red” (61). While Anna is swollen with pregnancy, Mazie is full of words that are only spoken with pain. She returns finally to, “Ugly. Swollen like bellies” (61). Recognizing her mother’s pregnant body in the environment causes pain in Mazie’s speech, as well as the “weakness” of her crying and her “ferocious” anger (61). Deborah Slicer paraphrases Rich, saying that “[m]y mother’s body is my most fundamental, problematic heritage” (“The Body as Bioregion” 108). Indeed, the young girl is coming to consciousness of what it means to inhabit a poor female body, and in her perception this is tethered to the loss of voice against swollen and painful pregnancy, a lack of control over access to her own body.

Mazie experiences her mother giving birth to Bess as “nausea,” depicting childbirth as further evidence of the trauma of the maternal body (61, 62, 63). In the middle of the night, Jim wakes Mazie and tells her to tend to her mother while he takes the male children to a friend’s house and brings the midwife. Mazie confronts her mother

“sitting, on her face a look of not seeing, although the black gates of her eyes opened in something too far to see” (61). With Mazie “frightened,” with “nausea... gathering into her breast, clotting there,” Anna instructs her to boil water and help set up the bed (61, 62). When her father and Miss Bess Burgum arrive, Mazie “flee[s] into the night,” looking to the natural world for comfort and to be away from the frightening look in her mother’s eyes (62). Out in the night air, Mazie “clutched herself and sank into the soft dust. A forlorn wind fingered her hair and went gently over her body. But the nausea contested there, unmoving” (62). Finding her sorrow reflected in the “forlorn” but gentle wind, Mazie then runs to hide in the “henhouse” where she can sense “[f]ull and quiet in the darkness the house lay and the fields beyond” (63). Soon her nausea mixes with hunger: “Food—the smell of it yearned in her nostrils. She found an egg, warm. It slipped down her throat, then it was washing up again, spurting over the ground” (63). The egg sliding down Mazie’s throat and back up again strangely mimics birth, suggesting the egg that is the reproductive mark of femaleness, and her mother’s full belly releasing fluid and infant. Mazie’s stream of consciousness moves through “stars above, known stars” and she walks “out into the yard, the earth under her feet like air, and turned her face to the heavens” (63). Transitioning from the “soft dust” of the ground and the warm egg in the henhouse, Mazie looks to the sky where she sees “[a] strange face, the sky grieved above her, gone suddenly strange like her mother’s” (63). Soon after, she hears rain “descend upon the earth, gentle and grieving” (63). Mazie expresses her complex emotions—fear, confusion, sadness, anger, etc.—by moving from place to place: outside, crouching down close to the earth, in the henhouse, and looking up at the sky. But she

also looks to her environment to speak for her, for the dust and wind to embrace her, the henhouse to calm her nausea, the sky to grieve—to cry—for her. Lisa Orr argues that her frantic movements suggest that “Mazie’s family circumstances are desperate; more to the point, as a girl, her returns to the house (unlike her brother, Will’s) are a reminder that she cannot fantasize an unhindered leaving. In looking at Anna, she sees herself” (3). From the moment she meets the “black gates” of her mother’s eyes, Mazie comprehends this hindered connection, and even her movements underscore her imprisonment. Discovering her mother everywhere (birth in the henhouse, face in the sky), Mazie becomes aware that she cannot escape the body marked by poverty and gender that she sees in the house and everywhere around her.

During pregnancy and childbirth, Anna has vacant eyes and is voiceless; as Mazie learns, her mother’s body is also silenced by domestic violence. Jim comes home drunk to their city tenement and forces sex on Anna, who is suffering from a miscarriage without knowing it. Mazie lies in bed listening to her mother being raped by her father: “Mazie, her head under the bedclothes, trying to stifle the fear and horror that retched within her” (107). Unlike the witnessing facilitated by Davis’ narrator that opens the space for a mobile relationship of empathy between self and other, Mazie’s horrific witnessing of her mother being raped and birthing Bess is too violently intimate to allow for any space or movement between mother and daughter. To Mazie, “[i]t seemed the darkness bristled with blood, with horror. The shaking of the bed as if someone were sobbing in it, the wind burrowing through the leaves filling the night with a shaken sound. And the words, the words leaping. Dont, Jim, dont. It hurts too much. No, Jim,



no” (108). In response to her mother’s pleading, Mazie hears her father say, “hold still” (108). Mazie also hears the bed shaking—as if it were crying—just as the wind shakes outside. Even the darkness is active and threatening as it “bristles” with “blood” and “horror.” The bed, the wind and leaves, the “words leaping” and the darkness are Mazie’s sensory experience of her mother’s rape. As Jim demands sex from Anna, refusing to heed her “Dont” and “No,” Mazie is frozen in bed, “the merciful blood pounding in [her] ears, battering away the sounds” (108). Only when Jim is through does Mazie see her mother collapsed on the kitchen floor: “Oh, Ma, Ma. The blood on the floor, the two lifeless braids of hair framing her face like corpse, the wall like darkness behind” (108). Urgently she thinks, “Be away, Mazie, be away” (108). Mazie’s thoughts are a grieving for the pain of her mother, “Oh, Ma,” and a stark realization of what the female body is susceptible to, even in the most familiar and intimate spaces. She alone witnesses her mother’s bleeding vagina, lifeless stupor, and the darkness pulsing all around. Looking between her mother’s legs, Mazie thinks, “Ma, just a stump a bleedin left. I didn’t know so much blood was in the world” (109). Elaine Orr maintains that “the effect” of writing Anna’s marital rape through Mazie’s eyes “is a powerful critique of psychological and sexual mythologies which jettison the mother’s body” (303). Olsen makes this critique in very material terms: Mazie encounters violence against women through graphic images of the intimate parts of her mother’s body. What voice is available to Anna and Mazie, especially in view of Anna’s disregarded “Don’t,” and “No” (108)? As Orr argues, “[I]teralizing the effects of a distancing sexual erotics, Olsen ‘cries’ the mother’s silence. Required to hear and feel the rape, Mazie occupies the daughterly position readers too are

forced to occupy, one closer to the mother than any seeing” (303). Olsen “cries the mother’s silence” through Mazie, but in fact both mother and daughter are voiceless against sexual violence. There can be no movement or freedom here and thus no liberatory love; witnessing that is closer than any seeing precludes any space from which to move between self and other. In terrifying proximity, with no self or other to express and share, Anna and Mazie suffer in silence.

The lack of control Anna has over her body makes her ill—metaphorically and literally subverting her ability to nurture (either herself or her children). Throughout the scenes of birth and rape, the mother’s voice is conspicuously absent. When the narrative shifts to Anna’s perspective we not only hear her voice, but are also more intimately attuned to her body. No longer limited to Mazie’s position in the psycho-sexual drama between mother and daughter, the mother’s voice and the mother’s body speak together for the first time, informing us of Anna’s physical pain, specifically, the pain in her breasts. Olsen writes almost ten pages punctuated with the wincing and suffering Anna undergoes as her swollen breasts ache and she endures illness after she is raped and miscarries a sixth pregnancy. Before the miscarriage, Olsen foreshadows Anna’s illness by narrating her fatigue as well as Bess’s difficulty suckling—“Bess tugging at her breast and pulling away and tugging again and giving out small frantic cries”—and the baby’s own rapidly worsening condition (77). During her mother’s illness, baby Bess “shrank and yellowed,” turned “blue around the mouth,” had cold hands, and “squall[ed] all the time” (80, 81, 81). The doctor later informs the family that the baby is severely

malnourished due to consuming breast milk from her sick mother.<sup>14</sup> After the miscarriage and Anna's subsequent collapse, she is advised not to breastfeed young Bess. During these bed-ridden days of illness, Anna wrestles against her body and her environment. The weight of poverty and the maternal body are manifest in her painful and swollen breasts. Like Jashoda in Mahasweta Devi's "Breast-Giver," who "doesn't remember at all when there was no child in her womb" and who is "a mother by profession," Anna is circumscribed by her role as mother (222). While breastfeeding is emblematic of that role, the engorgement of milk in her breasts is an interruption of her mothering, calling attention to the social and physical effects that make her breastfeeding—nurturing—impossible.

The process of drying up breast milk is painful for Anna. It begins as a heavy weight: "Once [Jim] heard her whimper: Oh my breasts, they sting so, they're so full" (117). But as the days progress the weight becomes an intense and burning pain: "Home,

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<sup>14</sup> The doctor's assertion that nursing infants consume the illnesses of their mothers has an interesting correlation to concerns about contemporary food production. Cindy Burke claims in *To Buy or Not To Buy Organic*, that "[o]ne of the most chilling pieces of information I read (in *Our Stolen Future*, by Theo Coborn, Dianne Dumanoski, and John Peterson Myers) while researching this book is that the most efficient method for ridding the body of organophosphates and other chemicals residues is through breastfeeding. Nursing babies literally drain the toxins right out of their mother's body in breast milk. Some scientists think this conveyance may be the reason why researchers have found that the more children a woman breastfed, the less likely she is to develop breast cancer" (16). She also notes a 2006 article from BBC news entitled "DDT 'link' to slow child progress." This article quotes "Professor Richard Sharpe, of the Medical Research Council's Human Reproductive Sciences Unit in Edinburgh," as saying: "The older the woman before her first breastfeeding episode and the longer and the higher her DDT exposure has been, the greater will be the amount of chemical delivered to the baby... So the first baby gets the worst of the chemicals stored in the mum's fat... There may also be a bonus to the mum in that she is ridding herself and her fat tissue of the chemicals in question and because some of these chemicals are potentially implicated in the development of breast cancer—the breast is mainly fat... This could be one of the ways in which early breastfeeding protects against breast cancer" (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/5145450.stm>). This medical study, like much of the social and medical writings on breastfeeding and child care (and like Anna's doctor), tends to make the mother responsible (and culpable) for the health of the infant, rather than the political and economic forces behind agricultural practices (or class divisions) that are all involved in the makeup of breast milk.

clutching the pillow to her inflamed breasts as if she still held Bess, she sank into exhausted sleep into which the distorted faces of pain marched round and round endlessly dragging regiments of themselves” (118). Anna relates the pain she feels to the masculine and alienating image of an army regiment marching within her body. Breast milk is welling up inside her and she longs to release it; in part out of physical discomfort, and in part because breastfeeding her infant is an intrinsic part of Anna’s identity as mother. In a “merciful numbness that was half sleep, half coma,” Anna tries to get up and feed Bess: “[o]nce Bess’s fretful piping pierced into her dream, and with trembling fingers she pulled her breast out, trying to rise to the baby” (115). Stepping in between mother and daughter, Anna’s friend Else “came in time to hold the struggling woman down, saying over and over, Lie still, honey, go on back to sleep” (115). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out that Devi’s title “Breast Giver” refers to Jashoda, and mothers, as “the giver of the breast” (267).<sup>15</sup> Unable to “give her breast”—literally kept from nursing Bess by Else’s intervention—Anna’s identity as mother is disrupted. Spivak goes on to argue that Jashoda’s cancer is a “parasite feeding on the breast in the name of affect, consuming the body politic, ‘flourishing at the expense of the human host’” (267). In a similar way the engorgement of milk in Anna’s breasts becomes “the signifier of the oppression” of the mother in poverty: Anna is sick because, as a poor woman, she bears the burden of childbirth and sexual accessibility to her husband without voice or authority to control

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<sup>15</sup> Olsen’s and Spivak’s (and Devi’s) articulations of mothering and breastfeeding are not perfectly matched; however, I use Spivak because, to my knowledge, she provides the most intellectually rich feminist examination of breastfeeding and breast milk, giving us a language through which to express patriarchal culture’s constructions of breastfeeding. Other useful texts include Linda M. Blum’s *At the Breast: Ideologies of Breastfeeding and Motherhood in the Contemporary United States* and Marilyn Yalom’s *History of the Breast*.

what happens to her body. The illness that this causes makes it impossible for her to perform her role as mother.

With feverish eyes, Anna sees the world as a confluence of body/self, tenement, nature, and her children. In a moment of profound physical and psychic suffering, the pain in Anna's body connects with the inside of the tenement and the space outside.

Anna,

is stirring in the night, in the great black and blue bruise of night, waking and creeping out of bed, groping along the wall, past Bess's basket to the open window where she kneels down and lays her hot forehead on the cool windowsill. Her fists are clenched, and behind unshed tears stand in knots of pain. (120)

Anna frantically attempts to create movement and freedom for herself within the confines of her gendered and impoverished body and in the claustrophobic darkness of the house, but like the stoppage of her milk flow, Anna is unable to move within or beyond the tenement. With her head on the windowsill she thinks, "sicknesses. Streets. Dirt" (120). Out from the window Anna senses "the smell of earth, expectant of rain" (120). Like the "black and blue bruise of night" inside the tenement, Anna notices "the mysterious blue light that is on everything" outside (120). In contrast to Anna's "stirring," "waking," "creeping," and "groping," outside she notices "the trees moving palsied against the sky" (120). In response to her clenched fists and "unshed" tears, she hears the "strident, strained, breaking, the sound of a freight starting up" (120). Her panicked thought, "My children, the children," is greeted with "[o]utside no answer" (120). Inside the house she

exhaustedly confronts “the potato peel turning black in the sink, the dirty dishes, the souring bottle of milk about which flies droned” (121). She wills herself up, and “[c]eaving to the table for support, disregarding the flame of agony in her engorged breasts, she swatted feverishly” (121). In rapid sequence, the pain in Anna’s body is repeated in the “palsied” and “strained” world beyond the window, and again in the decay inside the house. It is telling that after her illness Anna begins to spend every possible moment outside. She does so because “[i]nside suffocated her (outside too when there was packing-house stench) but a need was in her to be out under a boundless sky, in unconfined air, not between walls, under the roof of a house” (133). Place is related to Anna’s ability to recover. The weight in her breasts is like the heavy steel of the train, the dark stagnant night, or the rotting food. It is connected to the souring milk on the table. In response she craves the “boundless sky.”

As she starts to recover, Anna flexes her will against her bodily pain so that she can take up her domestic labor, but the pain in her breasts refuses to be disregarded. Working to overpower the body’s limitations, and failing, “her limbs were trembling, her bones seemed water, her heavy breasts burned, burned. All she could do was sit there, her head against the screen door, her eyes closed, waiting for the trembling and faintness to cease” (122). What power or agency does Anna have against or within her body? Spivak interprets the cancerous sores on Jashoda’s breast as an “Other” that “inhabits a hundred eyes and mouths, a transformation of the body’s inscription into a disembodied yet anthropomorphic agency, which makes of the breast, the definitive female organ within the circle of reproduction, (a) pluralized almost-face” (260). For Anna, too, the breast has

a certain “anthropomorphic agency” as the pain of her breasts undermines her desire to fight against illness, dirt, and poverty and care for her children. From under the veil of illness, “She opened her eyes and saw [Ben’s] eyelashes fluttering over the patches of rash on his cheek; the dirty sore on his unbandaged finger; the stubble ground, the harsh curtain that made netting on Bess’s basket, and beyond, far beyond, white foam of bridal wreath on the sea blue sky” (123). Anna is overwhelmed by work always in need of being done, including bandaging Ben’s infected finger and caring for Bess. In this moment she looks to the “sea blue sky,” which contradicts the endless strain of her life, “that task of making a better life for her children to which her being was bound” (127). This task is daunting, and “she felt so worn, so helpless; that it loomed gigantic beyond her, impossible ever to achieve, beyond any effort or doing of hers” (127). Insisting that we continue to direct our attention to Anna’s speaking body, Olsen shows us Anna’s ongoing struggle—her desire to nurture that is actively thwarted by her ill body and her poverty.

Anna’s prolonged suffering with illness and the pain in her milk-filled breasts demonstrates the complex relationship she has with her daughters. Her breasts are a symbol of sustenance that is easily tainted by illness; they are tactile markers of the limitations of her own body, and the role to which her daughters will also be relegated. Anna is betrayed by her breasts, alienated from them, as Mazie (and Bess) will be betrayed and alienated from their bodies as well through gender and poverty. When Anna tries to bottle feed her infant daughter, the pain in her breasts speaks of an explosive confrontation between mother and daughter: “Bess seemed so heavy in her arms, and the

feel of her made her breasts sting, sting. (The frenzy was ebbing, ebbing). And her head was faint, and the hand that held the bottle beginning to tremor” (125). The nearness of her infant activates her body’s desire to expel milk; this causes the ebbing of frenzy but the hand to tremor. Violated, bruised, and ill, Anna’s ability to nurse Bess, to nurture her with sustenance and intimate affection, is made impossible as a result of her lack of agency over her own body. The repeated images of Anna’s painful breasts and interrupted breast feeding represent the trauma of patriarchy and poverty for the mother, trauma that she passes on to her children. The psychic and physical family connection makes the daughter’s witnessing of her mother dangerous and entrapping rather than liberating.

### **“Inexhaustible Milk:” Radical Mothering**

Anna’s maternal body, the site of violence and tension between mother and daughter, shifts in the dandelion field to become the locus of liberatory nurturing, where healing, creativity, and transformation replace dominance and control, and care is mutual and reciprocal. Mazie recognizes the shift in her mother when she “[feels] the strange happiness in her mother’s body, happiness that had nought to do with them, with her; happiness and farness and selfness” (146). Mazie intuits that her mother’s pleasure directly relates to her farness from the mother she’s known; because, paradoxically, Anna can only nurture her daughter when free from her role as “mother” and all the lack of voice and agency that role implies. Anna’s experience of “selfness” involves, in Dawahare’s words, “creative and noninstrumental (or nonexploitative) relationship with



others and the world” (270). Olsen’s dandelion scene toward the end of the novel embraces both principles of Eléanor H. Kuykendall’s feminist ethic of nurturance: first, “that the power exercised by the nurturer toward the nurtured (as by mother toward the child) be not merely dominant or controlling, but primarily healing, creative, and transformative,” and secondly, “that the relationship between the nurturer and the nurtured be not merely symmetrical, but at least potentially mutual and reciprocal” (*Mothering* 264). But how can we understand Olsen’s images and metaphors of the maternal body as markedly different from a simple reclamation of patriarchal mothering, and her location of this creative exchange between self and other in the body as more than a return to romanticized notions of the fertile woman’s body? Cixous’ theories articulate the power of the mother’s body, both as metaphor and lived experience. “[W]hat nourishes life,” Cixous argues, is “a love that rejoices in the exchange that multiplies” (264). She locates this profound exchange of love in the metaphor of maternal body as “the emblem of a fluid and mutable identity” (Walker 139). What defines this maternal emblem for Cixous is movement and flux, nourishment (mother’s milk) and touch, desire-that-gives (rather than the gift-that-takes), sensuality and rhythm, and song and breath. These images are strikingly similar to Olsen’s much earlier narrative of mothering; in dialogue, Cixous’ work unfolds the power of Olsen’s radical re-imagining of the mother. Returning to Walker’s claim that the maternal body is the site of women’s radical silencing, what both Olsen and Cixous do, then, is speak the maternal body, and in doing so, envision a radical kind of mothering that directly responds to the patriarchal mothering played out in other sections of *Yonnondio*.

Like the “movement, flux, and undecidability” of Cixous’ maternal figure, Anna’s transformation, to once again use Tronto’s equation, from mothering out of necessity to mothering out of freedom initiates as a kind of sensual indeterminacy: “In the square of lemon light from the kitchen window, Anna picked up the laundry basket. The moistness and dimness were all around now. Mazie, slipping out to fetch Anna and Ben, stood transfixed in wonder and fear. Her mother was walking dreamlike round and round the yard, laundry basket on her head, disappearing in and out of the clutching mists; emerging, disappearing; an enchanted Ben following her. Her voice came dreamy and disembodied” (Walker 135, Olsen 137). When Anna takes her children for a walk to find dandelions, “[t]hey wandered on and on. It was a gentle morning; light and warmth flowed in ripples. ‘I don’t remember since when I been out just walkin like this,’ Anna said. Her lips were parted, her face uplifted to the blue seamless air” (140). This pleasant flow of movement passes on to Mazie who, when she sees her mother transforming, feels that a “peace and content began to drowse through her. Bees sounden, she whispered. Sweet smellin. Lady bugs. Butterflies like your dizzy. Unbidden” (144). As mother and daughter move farther and farther away from the tenement, they move deeper into mobility, indeterminacy, and breath.

Anna takes Mazie, Ben, and Jim for a walk to find “empty lots where dandelions grew” because she “hanker[s] for greens... [w]e been without a far time now” (139). Their forage for leafy green sustenance enacts Kuykendall’s reciprocal nurturing and Cixous’ desire-that gives. As Bonnie Lyons argues, the consumption of food is an important motif in Olsen’s work because it claims a self (most frequently in the face of

poverty).<sup>16</sup> “Eating is significant,” she writes, “because to eat is to assert and fulfill the claims of the self. Eating also means taking a part of the world, making it part of the self, absorbing part of the world” (*The Critical Response to Tillie Olsen* 150). Eating is, in this scene, sensual and communal. Anna “showed Mazie how to look for plants with fresh yellow flowers or just-opening buds, how to select only young, juicy leaves, telling them by their glossy green and tender feel” (139). She encourages her children to delight in the pleasures of tasting and touching: “Taste, Benjy. Taste, Mazie. Look inside. There’s black and gold and blue markings, beautiful. And the tiny glass threads standing up as if they was flowers themselves. Yes, Benjy, they feel velvet inside. Rub it on your cheek” (143). Besides the greens, Anna discovers a catalpa tree and teaches the children how to drink the sweet syrup from the flowers, how to “suck honey syrup out of the little end” (143). Anna initiates her children into the erotic sensory pleasures of discovering, examining, and drinking catalpa nectar,<sup>17</sup> and she also experiences pleasure in suckling: “her fingers were moving deftly, happily; cool slim mindless tracing down the notched leaves to the roots, the responsive tug, the tiny spurt of juice spilling its spicy smell” (144). Anna continues harvesting and drinking, and soon her “rhythm... slowed;” Mazie

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<sup>16</sup> The “incorporation of nature’s products” is Anna’s rebellion against the poverty that denies them healthy vegetables, but it is also a “communion” between Anna and the natural world. In this sense she is rebelling not only against poverty, but also against society’s exploitation of nature and women. Rejecting the patriarchal worldview that nature is a “nurturing mother” subject to “mastery and domination” by human beings, Anna’s walk away from the city and into communion with the natural environment also revises the figure of Earth as “nurturing mother” (Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 2).

<sup>17</sup> I refer to Audre Lorde’s definition of the erotic in *Sister Outsider*. Lorde says that the erotic is as “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” (54). It is “the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony” and “an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming” (55, 55). The erotic may function in various ways. For Lorde these include “sharing deeply any pursuit with another person,” “the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy” that reveals the depth of her “capacity for feeling” and sharing rather than using others’ feelings (56, 57, 57).

sees that “[i]n between gathering she sucked the blooms” (144). Both Anna’s and the children’s nursing here transforms Anna’s aching and interrupted nursing during her illness (that makes Bess sick) into sensual and shared bodily pleasure. She receives pleasure and sustenance suckling the sweet nectar while at the same time giving nourishment to her children—reciprocally nurturing in this reverie of space and time. This transformation of breastfeeding expands, also liberating the mother’s breath and song.

Just as eating asserts a self, breath declares life, and, as Cixous argues, refuses division. After Bess is born Anna longs for breath, saying as they leave the farm for the city, “[t]his hay smells good. I’d like to breathe it in so’s not ever to forget” (65). However, the first thing they notice in the city is “a fog of stink [that] smothers down over it all—so solid, so impenetrable, no other smell lives beside it” (67). In contrast, out in the dandelion field Anna breathes freely: “...Dont it breathe good... fresh? Let’s not go in. I declare I feel like a gypsy, wanderin and campin, everything outdoors, rolling up in the night too, sleepin out, never goin in” (139). As Anna wanders through the green field gathering dandelions, “Mazie saw that each time before, she drew her breath in deep to smell, deep as if she had to blow off dandelion heads” (144). Her breathing is also playful: “One lot Anna gathered a handful of the seedy puffs and, without warning, in one great breath, filled the air with white fluff” (140). Breath leads to song, and soon Anna “staggered, put her arms around Mazie, sang: ‘O Shenandoah, I love thy daughter,/ I’ll bring her safe through stormy water’” (145). As she sings, Anna “smiled so radiantly” that “Mazie’s heart leapt. Arm and arm they sat down together under the catalpa” (145).

Anna continues singing: “Around the springs of gray my wild root weaves,/ Traveler repose and dream among my leaves” and “Fair, fair, with golden hair,/ Under the willow she’s weeping” until Mazie, with leaping heart, feels the “strange happiness in her mother’s body,” her “happiness and farness and selfness” (145, 147). In the dandelion field, her uncensored body allows Anna to breathe and sing. The mother’s song brings Anna happiness and “selfness,” in turn bringing Mazie joy and the loving embrace of her mother’s arms. Mazie’s witnessing here differs from that of the earlier rape and birth scenes. Now that Anna has achieved “selfness,” mother and daughter are able to engage in an exchange between self and other; now there’s space between them for movement and flux. Liberatory love is not experienced through the collapse of the self into the other. Instead, it is a dynamic in which the self gives generously and in giving is also sustained. With the expression of her selfness, Anna opens the door to this dynamic.

Anna is able to nurture Mazie, to bring Mazie more deeply into the mother’s “unbidden” “peace” through touch, because she has found “selfness” and healing in the reciprocal nourishment of the catalpa nectar and found breath and song within her uncensored body. As she walked, she “began stroking Mazie’s hair in a kind of languor, a swoon. Gently and absently she stroked” (145). Anna’s touch heals and transforms Mazie: “fragile old remembered comfort streamed from the stroking fingers into Mazie, gathered to some shy bliss that shone despairingly over suppurating hurt and want and fear and shamings—the harm of years” (145). The pleasure of drinking the catalpa flower’s juice heals the suppurating suffering. Olsen’s description of touch between mother and daughter is explicitly sensual: “River wind shimmered and burnished the

bright grasses, her mother's hand stroked, stroked. Young catalpa leaves overhead quivered and glistened. Bright reflected light flowed over, 'luminated their faces' (145). Rhythmic touching soothes Anna's thoughts of past comforts into Mazie's body, resisting the spreading infection of pain, hunger, and shame. As Anna continues,

The fingers stroked, spun a web, cocooned Mazie into happiness and intactness and selfness. Soft wove the bliss round hurt and fear and want and shame—the old worn fragile bliss, a new frail selfness bliss, healing, transforming. Up from the grasses, from the earth, from the broad tree trunk at their back, latent life streamed and seeded. The air and self shone boundless. Absently, her mother stroked; stroked unfolding, wingedness, boundlessness. (146)

At the height of this intercourse, in deep contrast to their traumatic experience of bodily intimacy, Anna's touching and stroking brings Mazie into freedom, selfness, and gentle healing. With her hands, Anna cradles Mazie in a web or cocoon of liberatory love, flowing up from the grass, earth, and strong tree trunk. This web/cocoon is a pre-linguistic womb, healing and nourishing Mazie. It embraces her *and* gives her wings with which to unfold. And although the first sentence encourages us to read this moment as mother nurturing daughter, the rest of the selection suggests that both mother and daughter are being healed. The "seed," like the mother's ability to grow new life, streams from earth between mother and daughter. Rooted in the ground, the erotic love between Anna and Mazie is also transcendent, in its "wingedness" and "boundlessness."

Cixous understands the maternal figure as one “who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes” (“Medusa” 252). But how does she define “nourish”? For Cixous, nourishment sustains both the other and the self. It is “[a] process of different subjects knowing one another and beginning one another anew only from the living boundaries of the other: a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between, from which woman takes her forms (and man, in his turn...)” (254). Incorporating the movement of the maternal, Cixous defines nurture as a reciprocal, continuous, sharing between self and other. Touch expresses these encounters: “[t]ouch me, caress me, you the living no-name, give me my self as myself” (252). Moreover, the gift the mother gives is not selfless or self-effacing. As Cixous clarifies, “[w]oman is obviously not that woman Nietzsche dreamed of who gives only in order to. Who could ever think of the gift as a gift-that-takes?” (159). More precisely, “[t]he woman arriving over and over again does not stand still; she’s everywhere, she exchanges, she is the desire-that-gives. (Not enclosed in the paradox of the gift that takes nor under the illusion of unitary fusion...) She comes in, comes-in-between herself me and you, between the other me where one is always infinitely more than one and more than me, without the fear of ever reaching a limit; she thrills in our becoming” (263-264). Thus the mother’s nurturing is an exchange and in excess. The difference Cixous makes between a gift-that-takes and desire-that-gives transforms maternal nurturing from a gift given and taken by the other into a gift that arises not from the other’s demand but from the mother’s desire, flooding the maternal with agency. Cixous revises the figure of the

mother from one of a stable, fixed figure who is required to give but whose self is silenced, into maternal care that originates from and fulfills the mother's desires.

The mother's body speaks in breath and song. Walker explains, "[t]he mother's discourse is a language of voice and body, a maternal song. Cixous celebrates voice as a pre-symbolic fusion of body and breath, a continuum that refuses the division and separation of the father's speech" (138). This song and breath emerge from the liberated body. "In censoring the body," Cixous claims, "one censors at the same time breathing [*le souffle*] and speech" (qtd and trans. in Suleiman 17). Breath and voice, argues Suleiman, "come when censorship over the body is lifted" (17). Once uncensored, the liberated, speaking maternal body claims the creative power of her own desire: "I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst" (Cixous, "Medusa" 246). This power reveals new songs and excesses of pleasure. What we see in Olsen's dandelion scene, then, is a lifting of the censorship of the maternal body. Moving away from the tenement where her body is a gendered commodity and into the fresh air and lush sensual green of nature, Anna recovers (or discovers) breath, song, mobility, and most significantly, reciprocal nurturing that heals and momentarily liberates.

While the boundlessness of the natural environment stimulates this radical nurturing between Anna and Mazie, the smell of the slaughterhouse, reminding the body that it is bound within patriarchy and poverty, suppresses it:



The wind shifted, blew packing house. Something whirred, severed, sank.  
A tremble of complicity ran through Mazie's body; with both hands she  
tethered her mother's hand, to keep it, stroking, stroking. Too late.  
*Between a breath, between a heartbeat, the weight settled, the bounds  
reclaimed.* (147)

Significantly, their erotic love is lost because of the body's necessary movements (a breath, a heartbeat) and the stirring of nature (wind) that allow the stench of the slaughterhouse to invade their creative and healing space. As Mazie notices, "[t]he mother look was back on her face, the mother alertness, attunement, in her bounded body" (147). To be alive is to be bound to the material world, to the silenced mother's body. We as readers are not surprised by this shift—the mutual nurturing Olsen envisions in the dandelion field obviously cannot transcend the realities of poverty and patriarchy. As Lisa Orr claims, for Olsen, "[i]t is not motherhood that limits women, it is motherhood in these economic circumstances" (223). Rosenfelt explains the shift from this hopeful vision back to polluted desperate poverty in this way: "The transformation here is not the political conversion that was to have taken place later, but one based on human love, on the capacity to respond to beauty, and on the premise of a regenerative life cycle of which mother and daughter are a part" (80). She continues, "the hope *Yonnonديو* offers most persuasively... is less a vision of political and economic revolution than an assertion that the drive to love and achieve and create will survive somehow in spite of the social forces arraigned against it" (Rosenfelt 80). I would argue that the two—political and economic revolution and the drive to love—are not

necessarily mutually exclusive: Olsen offers a vision, however momentary, in which love survives in spite of destructive social forces, and this assertion of human love in the face of social forces *is* an act of political and economic revolution. More specifically, Olsen's speaking the (otherwise silenced) maternal body's ability to nurture radically is a political act—a subtle internal and shared momentary awakening that, in a profound way, destabilizes the foundation of patriarchy and capitalist exploitation that oppresses these women. If it does not do so for the characters in this book, then it does at least for those readers who are inspired by their story.

The maternal body is the site of women's silencing, but it can also be a locus of healing and love. Throughout *Yonnondio*, Olsen insists that the body deserves attention, that we cannot understand the effects of poverty and gender or paths to resistance and empowerment unless we listen to the body. The relationship between mother and daughter in *Yonnondio* reveals the severe limitations of embodying womanhood in patriarchy and poverty, and the healing power of love between them. Graulich claims that “although she sees her mother's life as ‘so cruel... so ugly,’ Mazie comes to feel the beauty in the world through Anna's nurturing” (19). But Anna can only truly nurture Mazie when she has claimed a self—transformed her experience of breastfeeding and discovered her own breath and song. Olsen's repeated images of Anna's maternal body, through pregnancy, rape, and milk-heavy breasts, reveals a central dilemma within the patriarchal archetype of the mother: that the silencing of the mother's body (and with it, her voice and agency), empties nurturance of reciprocity and pleasure, making it inherently unfulfilling. Although it occurs in only a brief moment of reverie, Olsen also

asserts that the metaphor of the maternal body is capable of radically nurturing (or loving), and as such, is a powerful emblem of feminist resistance to dominance and oppression.

## Chapter Four

### Coming Home: Memory and Vision in H.D.'s *The Gift*

“Take me home  
where canals

flow  
between iris-banks:

where the heron  
has her nest:

where the mantis  
prays on the river-reed:

where the grasshopper says  
*Amen, Amen, Amen.*”  
H.D., *The Walls Do Not Fall*<sup>1</sup>

“I found myself in the classic situation of women who, at one time or another, feel that it is not they who have produced culture... Culture was there, but it was a barrier forbidding me to enter, whereas of course, from the depths of my body, I had a desire for the objects of culture. I therefore found myself obliged to steal them...”  
Hélène Cixous, “Entretien avec Françoise van Rossum-Guyon”<sup>2</sup>

“Through incredible neglect and disregard, patriarchal traditions have wiped out traces of mother-daughter genealogies.”  
Luce Irigaray, *Je Tu Nous*<sup>3</sup>

In *The Gift*, Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961) uncovers through memory a bodily expression of mutuality and reciprocity that I have been calling liberatory love. More specifically, *The Gift* embraces elements of liberatory love discussed in each of my

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<sup>1</sup> Hilda Doolittle, “The Walls Do Not Fall.” *Trilogy*. New York: New Directions Books, 1973 (page 32).

<sup>2</sup> Hélène Cixous, “Entretien avec Françoise van Rossum-Guyon.” *Revue des Sciences Humaine* 44 (Oct-Dec 1977): 479-493. Quoted and translated in Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed. *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985 (page 18).

<sup>3</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*. Trans. Alison Martin. New York: Routledge, 1993 (page 17).

earlier chapters: the fluidity and mobility of Gove Nichols' fictionalized autobiography, the witnessing and "wounded storytelling" present in Davis' *Iron Mills*, and the refiguring of maternal nurturing that characterizes Olsen's *Yonnondio*. But H.D.'s most painful and powerful task in *The Gift* is to return home. Jane Hirshfield, editor of *Women in Praise of the Sacred*, argues that in H.D.'s "The Walls Do Not Fall," which H.D. also wrote during the World War II London blitz, "the task she set herself was finding a way to make of smoking ruined walls a temple open to the spiritual energies of past and present. H.D. . . . can be seen struggling to answer the questions posed by Anna Akhmatova in her poem ['Everything is plundered, betrayed, sold']: 'Why then do we not despair?'" (201). H.D.'s answer, Hirshfield writes, is that "in the broken-open heart there is a secret, a seed of inexplicable light that both nourishes and is fed" (201). *The Gift's* central gesture in response to suffering and oppression—H.D.'s response to her broken open heart—is a particular practice of remembering that is an act of feminist love and a return to the body—seeds of light—in order to heal the self in a world at war.

In the first section of this chapter I argue that H.D.'s mobile expressions of memory open doors of possibility for experiencing liberatory, embodied love. Living through the bombing of London in the 1940s reminds H.D. of moments of crisis from her childhood across the Atlantic in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Her remembering makes connections that reveal a crisis of inheritance as well as of gender. However, through these mobile expressions of memory, H.D. also reconstructs (and revises) the past and present, articulating her vision of the "seed of inexplicable light" that resoundingly responds to the destructiveness of war. As H.D. puts it, we must be able to "affirm in

positive and concrete terms, our debt to the past and our responsibility to the future” (*The Gift* 110). H.D.’s impulse to come home, her request, “take me home,” is not a return to a generic home; rather, what H.D. returns to is flowing water, mother’s nest, mantis in meditation, and grasshopper’s exultation, images full of movement and spiritual significance. With remembering that is flexible and active, amorphous yet concrete, H.D. incarnates over and again in her aunt, her mother, her younger self, and early Moravian settlers, revising, resurrecting, and healing ruptures along the course of her narrative. This is neither a returning to a stable place, nor a nostalgic returning that hides beneath illusions of the past; it is a return to a place with open doors, a returning that liberates.

In the second section of this chapter I argue that H.D. uses memory and vision to, in Cixous’ terms, “steal culture”—revising (destructive) images and signs of patriarchy to their status as healing symbols of feminine spiritual power—and to recover, in Irigaray’s words, “mother-daughter genealogies.” Her memory’s journey home teaches us, first, to distrust patriarchal narratives and reread codes and signs, and second, that to reclaim the body is to reclaim a heritage of spiritual mothers who are both all around and within our own flesh. To come home is thus in part a return to the abused, objectified body; yet it is seeing the body not as wounded, but instead as empowered and sacred. H.D.’s remembering returns to the roots of her matriarchal lineage in order to nurture the seeds of transformation. This remembering maps a radical geography of love, over generations and through time and space, and locates the perpetual messiah within the living female body.<sup>4</sup> To use Carol Gilligan’s words, “the body is a homeland—a place where

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<sup>4</sup> As Carol Gilligan asserts in *The Birth of Pleasure*, “The foundational stories we tell about Western civilization are stories of trauma” and they are patriarchal stories. “[T]he presence of women in a

knowledge, memory, and pain is stored” (134). Therefore, H.D.’s journey home involves a dual effort to recover the repressed feminine as well as the oppressed body. Like Gove Nichols’ project of healing bodies and minds with water-cure, Davis’ facilitation of empathic witnessing, and Olsen’s moment of reciprocal nurturing, H.D.’s strategy of recursive remembering is a practice of mobility that unearths possibilities for emancipatory love within bodily experiences.

### **Biographical Sketch**

*The Gift* was inspired by widespread, inescapable violence, a life full of much personal and bodily suffering mingled with visions of peace, love, and spiritual relief. It embodies H.D.’s sincere desire to reconcile the hostilities she saw around her. It was in many ways a coming home; home to an inheritance of giftedness that brought with it a terrible burden, an inheritance of being the only girl in a family of men, a woman in a patriarchal Christian society. Hilda Doolittle was born September 10, 1886 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Her mother, Helen Wolle, was the daughter of Reverend Francis Wolle, Moravian minister and principal (and amateur botanist) at the Young Ladies’ Seminary in Bethlehem until 1881; her brother was famous composer and founder of the Bach Choir, J. Frederick Wolle. She married Charles Doolittle in 1882, described in Barbara Guest’s biography *Herself Defined* as a “tall, alien, bearded stranger from Indiana who had fought in the Civil War,” an “outsider” who already had two children, Alfred and Eric. His first wife died in childbirth, their third child, a daughter named Fanny, died shortly after (14).

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democratic society,” she argues, “contains the seeds of transformation—a second coming, a new beginning, a civilization that is not patriarchal. This is the radical geography of love, the wildflower seeded from generation to generation, the messiah perpetually in our midst” (8).

Helen and Charles had four children between 1884 and 1894: Gilbert, Hilda, Harold, and Charles Melvin (Melvin) (Guest 14). Hilda, then, was the only girl in a family of brothers (and male cousins), a fact that she cherishes and bemoans throughout *The Gift*. Her father tells her that “his one girl was worth all his five boys put together,” but Hilda feels “he should not say that” because “it made a terrible responsibility” (96). Charles, an eminent astronomer, worked as professor of astronomy and mathematics at Lehigh University until 1895 when he took a position at the University of Pennsylvania, moving the family from Bethlehem to Upper Darby. Nine-year-old Hilda “resents” and fears this move away from her close-knit community (16). The move was also difficult for her mother, whose household duties (even with a hired cook) “remained unending” with a large family and many visitors to care for without the help of her community of family and neighbors in Bethlehem (16). Herein lies a dynamic that haunts all of Hilda’s life: she is the cherished only daughter, but it is an ambiguous role that bestows expectation and limitation. It also means being ignored, with the bulk of her parents’ attention focused on rearing all those boys.

Hilda, who “probably had been spoiled at the Moravian Girls’ Seminary,” was unhappy attending Miss Gordon’s school in West Philadelphia, and transferred in 1902 to the Friends’ Central School in Philadelphia, until 1905 when she “left for her disastrous year at Bryn Mawr” (Guest 19). It was disastrous not only because she felt like an outsider as a commuting student, but also because she did not do well academically, failing English. Her friendship with Ezra Pound (and Williams Carlos Williams) and her family’s comfortable financial situation provided her with the connections and means to



travel to Europe with friend and intimate Frances Gregg and her mother in the spring of 1911, where she enjoyed literary success and an exciting life in artistic circles of burgeoning modernism. She never permanently returned home to the United States, free from her doting but domineering father and from the expectations of her family and with a stronger sense of belonging in London. However, Guest describes her during the Second World War as “homesick H.D.,” and much of her writing suggests a longing to return to her place of origin (5).

The years before and during World War I were marked by personal and social strain, specifically the horror of war, miscarriage and illness, and the painful unraveling of her circle of friends and intimates. Her relationship with Richard Aldington, whom she married in 1913, became increasingly destructive and was made worse during and after his experiences in the service.<sup>5</sup> In 1915, “H.D. lost a daughter through a miscarriage precipitated, she was convinced, by her grief at the sinking of the *Lusitania*” (Gelpi 10). Around this same time both Pound and D.H. Lawrence, with whom she had complex and intense relationships, abandoned her. And the losses continued. Her older brother Gilbert was “killed in action” in France on September 25, 1918. Her father died “from shock” on March 2, 1919, before H.D. gave birth to Perdita on March 31 (*TF* v). H.D. prepared to give birth to her daughter Perdita, deathly ill with the influenza epidemic and all alone “in a pension in Ealing waiting to go into Saint Faith’s Nursing Home” (*Tribute to Freud* 163). She remembers that “there had been death in the house” (*TF* 163). She found

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<sup>5</sup> Albert Gelpi claims that Aldington, who enlisted in 1916, “sought to exorcise his obsession with impending death through compulsive sexual affairs that wounded H.D. deeply” (*Notes on Thought and Vision* 11). Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis add that H.D. “consult[ed] a doctor” regarding his behavior and was told “to regard Aldington’s behavior as shell-shock” (*Signets* 7).

herself facing the grim likelihood of her own death and most likely her unborn child's as well because her "doctors predict[ed] that mother and child would not both survive" (Gelpi 11). When they both survived, she and Aldington argued bitterly over Perdita (whose biological father was Cecil Gray); Aldington agreed to raise the child, but then rejected both mother and child and threatened to have them thrown in jail if H.D. gave Perdita his last name.

This avalanche of loss stayed with H.D. She remembers this time in *Advent*, a publication "assembled" in 1948 and taken from her notebooks about her analysis with Freud in 1933 and 1934 (*TF* xiv): "I cried too hard... I do not know what I remembered: the hurt of the cold, nun-like nurses at the time of my first London confinement, spring 1915; the shock of the *Lusitania* going down just before the child was still-born; fear of drowning; young men on park benches in blue hospital uniform; my father's anti-war sentiments and his violent *volte-face* in 1918; my broken marriage; my father's telescope, my grandfather's microscope. If I let go [...] I fear to be dissolved utterly" (116). Writing this passage in 1933, her fear of dissolution is infused with memories of loss (and perhaps what she saw as her failure as mother and wife) of the near past. Just as the losses threaten her sense of an intact self, so do the two forms of male vision; her subjectivity is threatened by the shadows of her father, whose vision comprehended and transcribed the immense and distant, and her grandfather, who saw through his microscope the minute and unseen. How can a woman—the only daughter—claim her self in the midst of such powerful, visionary men?

“Utterly alone,” H.D. is visited in the boarding house by Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman 1894-1983), who had known H.D. only a few months at this time (Gelpi 10). Bryher pledges to nurse H.D. and her child back to health. She remembers that “afterwards, I learned how shocked Bryher had been when she came to see me. The landlady had said, ‘But who is to see to the funeral if she dies?’” (TF 163). In what H.D. and scholars of H.D. often refer to as a miracle, mother and daughter survive. The two women begin a lifelong relationship. Soon after, Bryher, H.D., and Perdita travel to the Scilly Islands, where both women hoped that H.D. could recover from illness and emotional suffering. Gelpi writes that “1919 marked a turning point in H.D.’s life. The previous years had been a period so filled with both achievement and anxiety, so critical and traumatic that she would spend the rest of her life mythologizing it; rehearsing it in verse, in prose, in direct autobiography and in historical and legendary personae, again and again seeking to unriddle her destiny as woman and poet” (7). This turning point is propelled by a vision H.D. experiences on this trip, what she calls her “jelly-fish experience.” She transcribes this vision in her essay *Notes on Thought and Vision*, written July 1919, but published posthumously in 1982. H.D. begins *Notes* by stating: “three states or manifestations of life: body, mind, over-mind. Aim of men and women of highest development is equilibrium, balance, growth of the three at once” (17). Thus, this essay theorizes human subjectivity and the arc of human development, that is, the purpose of the manifestations of life as an interdependent relationship among body, mind, and over-mind, or the subconscious/spiritual self. The creative movement she saw in this process helped her make sense of her losses and suffering. But with the onset of World

War II, the flux of achievement and anxiety begin again, as H.D. relives the terror of war a second time.

H.D. wrote *The Gift* from 1941-1944 while living in her flat in London.<sup>6</sup> She stayed in London throughout most of WWII and endured sustained attacks on the city, including the Blitz of 1940-1941. In the years leading up to writing *The Gift*, H.D. experienced both peace and turmoil; she had intimate and loving relationships, went on voyages to beautiful countries, visited sacred and historical sites, and had other mystical visions, including those that inspired *Notes on Thought and Vision*. But she also experienced periods of deep emotional sadness, ill health, and was submerged in a world on its way to war yet again. She had an intense love affair with film director Kenneth Macpherson (1902-1971) from 1927-1932, which evolved for a time into the cohabitation of H.D., Bryher, and Macpherson and his (and Bryher's) adoption of H.D.'s daughter Perdita. Her mother, with whom she had a complex relationship, died on March 21, 1927. She had an abortion in 1928 "in November in Berlin" (*Signets* 39). Increasingly interested in the emerging field of psychoanalysis, H.D. worked with a number of analysts, notably Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud. Her work with Freud began in March of 1933 but was interrupted by the increasing Nazi threat in Vienna in June of 1933. Her analysis with Freud began again in October 1933 and ended in December of

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<sup>6</sup> She also wrote *Trilogy* during this time, from 1942-1944, and *Majic Ring* from 1943-1944. Because they were written during the same short time period, it is common for H.D. scholars to write about *The Gift* and *Trilogy* together and to read them as companion texts. Susan Stanford Friedman claims that "the bridge between H.D.'s poetry and prose was always there to be endlessly sought and resisted, as the clairvoyant memoir and intimate epic, *The Gift* and *Trilogy*, demonstrate" (355). Friedman argues that the relationship between H.D.'s prose and poetry traces a public/private split, that her poetry was her most public self, her prose more personal, and finally her letters the most intimate.

1934.<sup>7</sup> She suffered a “brief but severe breakdown” in August of 1934 on hearing of the death of an analysand of Freud’s whose hour preceded hers (*S* 41). Along with psychoanalysis, H.D. studied the hermetic tradition, the occult, séances, and spiritualism during this time period, as *Signets* chronicles (42). Between 1921 and 1946 she “alternate[d] residences between” Switzerland and London, and took “occasional trips” to Paris, Berlin, and Venice (*S* 38). H.D. and Bryher also traveled more extensively: to “Greece and Corfu” in 1920, in 1922 to “Italy, Greece, and the Asia Minor coast,” and in 1923 to Egypt, where they (H.D., Bryher, and H.D.’s mother) happened to see the opening of Tutankhamen’s tomb (*S* 37, 38). She also made various trips to the United States (including Bethlehem), and visited sacred sites in Delphi. She was present for the Second World War as she had been for WWI, thrust right in the midst of widespread violence and terror. Just as the final sections of *Trilogy* were being published in 1945 and 1946, H.D. suffered a number of illnesses, including a “major breakdown in the winter brought on by ill health (anemia and meningitis), the strain of World War II,” feelings of rejection from “spiritualist” mentor Lord Hugh Dowding, and “other factors” (*S* 43). She underwent “intravenously injected shock therapy” as treatment (*S* 43).

The movement in the years before the war—both the emotional lability and the geographical journeying—informs *The Gift*. *The Gift* is a collection of freely associated memories from the perspective of young Hilda (before the age of ten, she repeatedly reminds us) and her childhood in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania juxtaposed by “middle aged”

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<sup>7</sup> Her work with Freud was interrupted specifically by a bomb scare: she “leaves without finishing her analysis because of a bomb scare on the tracks of a tram on which she is riding” (*S* 40). H.D. discusses the increasing threat of Nazism in Vienna in *Tribute to Freud*. She was deeply shocked by Nazi presence, in part because of her emotional closeness to the Jewish analyst.

H.D.'s experiences in London during WWII (*TG* 214). H.D. states in her notes to *The Gift* that she chooses to "let the story tell itself or let the child tell it for me" (257).<sup>8</sup> This duality in perspective espouses a multiplicity within unity that works throughout *The Gift*; the boundaries between self and other are fluid. In this fictionalized autobiography, H.D. pieces together a familial and spiritual genealogy. *The Gift* works to cope with the vulnerability of the body as well as to understand the part corporeality plays in transcending or reframing the suffering of the material world. Throughout, narrator H.D. leads us into her world of vision, memory, and associative storytelling, uncovering balance and meaning amidst violent and seemingly disparate experiences. Her exploration "leads to an imaginary homeland—that space on the frontier of consciousness where [...] words fail, but meanings still exist; where meanings—unspoken, inchoate, raw, and throbbing with life—wait to be found, to be given a voice" (Gilligan 134). H.D.'s journeys home nurture and harvest these unspoken and raw meanings laying dormant in cellular and subconscious memory. Although "living a childhood and writing about it as an adult are fundamentally different experiences," what autobiography can create are "forms of embodied knowledge in which the (adult) self and the (child) other can rediscover and reaffirm their connectedness" (Gilligan 134-135). Facing a world divided by war, and striving (once again) to make a self in a patriarchal world that does not see her, H.D. returns home in *The Gift* in order to reclaim a gift of love that heals.

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<sup>8</sup> H.D.'s stance resonates with Olsen's decision not to edit *Yonnondio* when she published it later in life so that the older woman did not interfere with the younger woman's voice.

## Memory and Vision

*"I see what is beneath me, what is above me, // what men say is-not—I remember"*<sup>9</sup>

As modeled in her work with Freud, a prevalent theme of H.D.'s work during and after WWI and WWII was to revisit events from her past.<sup>10</sup> The major return to the past in *The Gift* is to that of her own childhood in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; but she also returns to her mother's childhood, her Grandmother's youth, other moments in her family's lives that occurred before Hilda was born, the period of early Moravian settlement in America (1740s), and to Biblical and ancient Egyptian and Greek traditions. This submersion into memories and the writing that accompanied it was, as Freud encouraged her to believe, a way of coping with suffering in the present, and as Miriam Fuchs argues, "writing *The Gift* was H.D.'s version of self-therapy" (89). "The closest H.D. came to a formal autobiography of her formative years in her family," *The Gift* is in some ways a love letter to her "inexhaustibly complicated family," as suggested by H.D.'s dedication to her mother, "To Helen, *who has brought me home*," and also in the privileging of memory in the text, which is an act of commemoration or preservation (Friedman *Penelope's Web* 330, Morris "Autobiography and Prophecy" 27, *TG* 30). The multilayered and multicultural symbolism of bees, woven throughout the autobiographical novel, remind us of the bee's ability to always find its way home, which is H.D.'s hope for humanity and the central movement in *The Gift*. Recursive

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<sup>9</sup> H.D., "The Flowering of the Rod." *Trilogy*. New York: New Directions Books, 1973 (page 121).

<sup>10</sup> Other prose texts written by H.D. during this time period that deal with her life and past include *Paint it Today* (written 1921), *Asphodel* (written 1921-1922), *HERmione* (written 1927), *Bid Me to Live* (written 1939-1950), *H.D. by Delia Alton* (written 1949-1950), and *End to Torment* (written 1958). Friedman explores the relationship between H.D.'s writing and her work with Freud in *Psyche Reborn*.

remembering as a practice of mobility and reflexivity opens up the possibility for a similarly liberated practice of love.

But it is not easy to travel home. Exploding bombs and falling buildings jolt H.D.'s memory because they point to significant and troubling childhood memories. H.D.'s fears in the present are for her mind, her body, her memory, and for civilization. "The mind, the body," she remarks during an air raid, "is not built to endure so much" (217). Indeed, "the psyche, the soul can endure anything. But one did not want the body broken—we must not think about that" (218). But more than her corporeal fears, H.D. worries that with her demise she will fail to pass on her grandmother's Gift: she "passionately regretted" only "[t]hat the message that had been conveyed to me, that the message that my grandmother had received," her grandmother's "Gift" and "Promise," "would again be lost" (213). Knowing the responsibility she bears as the keeper of the Gift, H.D. fears that "the roar outside" will "shatter my head, shatter my brain, and all the little boxes that have been all the rooms I have lived in, had gone in and out of, will fall... fall..." (212). The fear of death (or physical suffering) is linked to the fear that memory will fail, bringing an urgency of remembering, the need to claim what was once known (but not understood) and manifest it in the present. H.D./Hilda voice their psychic and physical terrors: as the ever-present threat of violent death, the fear of falling, of burning, and intense anxiety about remembering and communicating the Gift. As such her journey home is about facing and working to heal the past as much as it is about bringing sacred wisdom from the past to the present. H.D. points us to her father's mysterious wounding at a train station near their Upper Darby home as the key moment



of shock which links her memory to the violence of the 1940s, but what lies beneath her father's wounding is a crisis of gender and inheritance that can be traced throughout the memoir. Illustrative of these crises of the self are two memories. Both enter *The Gift* on the first page: the girl in crinoline and Hilda's dead sisters.

A powerful symbol of the problem of gender that H.D. inherits is a seminary girl dying in crinoline. The first lines of *The Gift* read: "There was a girl who was burnt to death at the Seminary, as they called the old school where our grandfather was Principal" (35). Fears of fire and being buried resurface throughout *The Gift*. As Hilda states, "I am not afraid of the dark, I am afraid more of a bright light that might be fire and a shooting-star, falling on the house and burning us all up" (173). Years later, middle-aged H.D. fears that she "would sink down and down and all the terrors that I had so carefully held in leash during the great fires and the terrible bombing of London, would now break loose" (209). These are graphic terrors that all lead back to the seminary girl: "I could visualise the very worst terrors, I could see myself caught in the fall of bricks and I would be pinned down under a great beam, helpless. Many had been. I would be burned to death. I could think in terms of one girl in a crinoline, I could not visualise civilisation other than a Christmas-tree that had caught fire" (215). Because she introduces the fictionalized autobiography, this unnamed girl who "wasn't a relation" is nonetheless central to H.D./Hilda's formation of the self (35). More specifically, "the girl who was burnt to death, was burnt to death in a crinoline. The Christmas-tree was lighted at the end of one of the long halls and the girl's ruffles or ribbons caught fire and she was in a great hoop" (35). Cast as powerless observers, "the other girls stand round," including

Hilda's Mama "who is a tiny child" at the time, as the girl "screamed" (35). Also helpless is Hilda's grandfather, Papalie, who acts to save the girl but cannot: "Papalie rushed to her and Papalie wrapped a rug round her but she is shrieking and they can not tear off her clothes because of the hoop" (35). The symbolism of this memory is stark: within the seminary, a hallmark of Christianity, a young girl suffers a violent death because she is imprisoned in the hoop of her dress, an elaborate symbol of patriarchal femininity. Other women can only observe, and even a heroic male figure is unable to free this girl from the incarnation of her womanhood. To young Hilda who grows up with this story, being a girl means being victim to the constraining and dangerous role of patriarchal Christian womanhood.

Merged with this story in the first pages of the memoir is the story of other dead girls; but these girls are Hilda's relations, causing Hilda to ponder her position as the only living girl in a family of girls who have died in infancy. Being a girl in a patriarchal culture means being held captive by a crinoline, but within Hilda's personal inheritance it also means bearing the entire expectations for the next generation of women. Because so many girls in her family died in childbirth or infancy, Hilda feels she inherits the burden and the gift of being all the girls. In this scene, which I quote at length, she speaks of her mother Helen's deceased sister Fanny, Hilda's deceased half-sister Alice, and Hilda's deceased sister Edith:

I seemed to have inherited that. I was the inheritor. The boys, of whom there were so many, the two brothers and later, the baby-brother, the two half-brothers, the five grown Howard cousins, not to mention the small-

fry, Tootie, Dick and Laddie (who lived with their parents, our Uncle Hartley and Aunt Belle in the house next to ours, on Church Street) could not really care about Fanny. I cared about Fanny. And she died. I inherited Fanny from Mama, from Mamalie, if you will, but I inherited Fanny. Was I indeed, Frances come back? Then I would be Papalie's own child, for Papalie's name was Francis; I would be like Mama; in a sense, I would be Mama, I would have important sisters, and brothers, only as seemly ballast. Why was it always a girl who had died? Why did Alice die and not Alfred? Why did Edith die and not Gilbert? I did not cry because Fanny died, but I had inherited Fanny. Mama cried (although I had seldom seen her cry) because Fanny died, so Mama had cried. I did not cry. The crying was frozen in me but it was my own, it was my own crying. There was Alice, my own half-sister, Edith, my own sister and I was the third of this trio, these three Fates, or maybe Fanny was the third. The gift was there but the expression of the gift was somewhere else. (37)

Hilda inherits Fanny and so it is her responsibility to care about Fanny and the other forgotten girls; but perhaps, she thinks, it is also her responsibility to be Fanny. In other words, Hilda feels her role is to fill the space the other girls leave in her family. We see deep family ties here as Hilda is not only her mother's daughter but also her grandmother and grandfather's daughter. She's part of a legacy of girls who not only die, but also are silent, absent, unknown, mourned over and then forgotten. She longs to understand why it is girls and not boys who are weak and die, but also longs to be a girl who has

“important sisters,” with brothers not as the center of the family but rather as “ballast,” or disposable weight. However, there is something special about Hilda’s position, because Hilda is part of a female trinity who seem to reincarnate with a gift that waits for expression. The threat of normative femininity looms, as does the terrible burden of being the girl who lives. But along with these fears is the blessing and responsibility of being the only one left to embrace and share the mysterious gift, creating ambiguity and tension that threaten and sustain Hilda’s and H.D.’s construction of self.

For H.D. the fear of burning or being buried is an old fear because of the girl in crinoline, and her feelings of displacement and disavowal during bombings is an old feeling,<sup>11</sup> like the ambiguous role of the only daughter; and as such she finds that she is not frozen by fear but mobile. Reigniting her desire and need to claim her gift even in the face of personal and political crisis, H.D. uses the fragmentation that violence brings to transform and break free of normative thinking with recursive memory: “Shock can also, like an earthquake or an avalanche, uncover buried treasure” (51). Perhaps the shattered brain, she ponders, can free the mind from linear, prescribed thinking, allowing it to move freely. While there is “no single formula” for uncovering buried treasure within the mind and body, H.D.’s shock unlocks the “boxes or cameras or ‘safes,’” where she might discover “the treasure of the individual life and of its racial and biological inheritance” which (“as a rule”) is kept “far too ‘safe,’ hidden, buried under the accumulated rubble of prescribed thinking, of inevitable social pruning and trimming of emotion and imagination” (50). Because it is hidden and buried, “there is no royal road

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<sup>11</sup> As H.D. describes it, “we shrink, we become time-less and are impersonalized because we are really one of thousands and thousands who are equally facing a fact, the possibility, at any given second, of complete physical annihilation” (109).

into this kingdom; you just stumble on it” but indeed, “it does exist” (50). It exists “not only in vague generalities or in sentimental musings,” but is “an actual psychic entity;” and this discovered “continent” is the “buried [...] self, which contains cells or seeds which can be affiliated to the selves of people, living or long dead” (51). In other words, H.D. believes that part of her “can really ‘live’ something of a word or phrase, cut on a wall in Karnak. But really ‘live’ it, I mean” (51). The treasure (or cells or seeds) hidden in the subconscious within the mysterious body is the ability to remember, construct, or intuit one’s heritage that has been silenced by patriarchal traditions and histories. It works in this way: “a little cell of my brain responds to a cell of someone’s brain, who died thousands of years ago. A word opens a door, these are the keys, it is like that little flower Mrs. Williams called a primula, that Mamalie called *himmelschlüssel* or keys-of-heaven” (51). A Gift lies dormant in bodily memory and/or the subconscious, a familiar shock unlocks it, and a particular kind of memory recovers it. The act of remembering itself reveals a way of being that maintains the self but merges, lives, with others.

Remembering is a coping mechanism, transporting the self into memory and vision. It also transforms the self into a stronger, truer self that accepts its own mobility and limitlessness. This remembering is not just about getting away from the present, it is about what the past can bring forward to heal the present. “I remembered,” she writes, “how my mind after a certain pause of tension and terror, had switched, as it were, into another dimension where everything was clear” (213-214). More specifically, “there would come that moment when I had left myself lying secure and it did not matter what happened to the frozen image of myself lying on the bed, because there was a stronger

image of myself, at least I did not see myself but I was myself, whether with attributes or pure abstraction or of days and in places that had been the surroundings of my childhood, or whether as sometimes, it seemed, in one of the vast cathedrals of Italy or in a small bee-hive” (211). H.D. gains strength by connecting present fears with those of the past, and with a liberated and active memory she returns home to claim her gift.

Remembering in *The Gift* has a specific formulation. Memory, or what H.D. calls “dream pictures,” opens through a fluidity of mind, involves creation and creativity, and a willingness to allow the past to be messy and imperfect; in fact, remembering requires taking pleasure in the mind’s ability to be open to disorder and movement. In *The Gift*, H.D. writes that in order for the dream picture or the vision of memory to be expressed in any true sense, for it to “come true,” the mind must not strive to be or make a “masterpiece,” rather “it must photograph the very essence of life, of growth, of the process of growing” (83). The past is not fixed; it grows. Thus, H.D.’s retelling of the past does not “strive to compose the picture, this is no formal garden” (83).<sup>12</sup> She continues her contemplation of memory: “unexpected related memories must be allowed to sway backward and forward, as if the sheet or screen upon which they are projected, blows and is rippled in the wind or whatever emotion or idea is entering a door, left open” (84). Further, “the wind blows through the door, from outside, through long, long corridors of personal memory, of biological and race-memory” (84). Memory flows through the door left open and emerges in concert between the outside world and memories stored in the tissue of the body. The mobility and openness of memory—its

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<sup>12</sup> This is similar to her assertions in *Notes* that life is “a great vineyard and grapes and rioting and madness and dangers,” that is, that life is not composed, orderly, or static, but made up of great beauty, paralyzing fear, and constant movement and change (41).

swaying back and forth, blowing and rippling—“is creation in the truer sense,” that is, not the creation of a “neat flat picture” that occurs when you “shut the door” but one that mingles reality with myth, past with present, dark unknown parts of the inner self with the “out-of-doors” (84). For “mythology is actuality,” H.D. contends, and in associative remembering that maintains the open door of the psyche, H.D. finds “an ecstasy of bliss” (84).

The past is indeed made real through fluid memory. “[B]ecause it had once been like that,” H.D. argues, it is possible to once again experience an event or place from the past (49). More specifically,

It would be possible with time and with the curious chemical constituents of the biological or psychic thought-processes—whatever that is, nobody yet knows—to develop single photographs or to develop long strips of continuous photographs, stored in the dark-room of memory, and again to watch people enter a room, leave a room, to watch, not only those people enter and leave a room, but to watch the child watching them. (49-50)

It is possible, then, with a certain (curious) alignment of body and mind to return to and observe the past.<sup>13</sup> The individual has the power to “develop” her own vision of the past, unearthing latent memories, and healing by her returning. Importantly here, it is possible to observe one’s younger self, adding layers of consciousness to events as well as to the self.

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<sup>13</sup> H.D. makes a similar point in *Notes on Thought and Vision* about the power of maintaining equilibrium of body, mind, and spirit.

H.D.'s remembering is characterized by memories of things she cannot actually know, and so portrays a sort of supernatural vision, a kind of sight characterized by mystical insight and revelation. Just as *The Gift* is concerned with remembering and reconstructing the actual past, it is about keeping the "door left open" for mystical visions.<sup>14</sup> "[I]nvolved in spiritualist séances" during the writing and researching of *The Gift* (including her research on Moravian and Native American relations), H.D. communicated with two Native American "spirit guides" named Kapama and Zakenuto (*The Gift* 17). In her introduction to *The Gift*, Jane Augustine writes that H.D. believed that Zakenuto "came through the medium with the specific intention to communicate with her because she was American, baptized Moravian, and gifted with her maternal great-grandmother's legacy of 'second sight'" (17-18). As H.D. informs us, the gift is itself one of vision: "The Gift was a Gift of Vision, it was the Gift of Wisdom, the Gift of the Holy Spirit, the Sanctus Spiritus" (214). Memory, for H.D., pairs the past with revelatory vision and as such is able to see what others have ignored or misunderstood, and taps into dark places in the (individual and social) psyche.

The process of H.D.'s remembering emerges in various ways throughout the fictionalized autobiography. What underscores each expression of memory is a

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<sup>14</sup> H.D. transcribed numerous spiritual visions, including her "jellyfish experience" the inspired *Notes*. Other mystical experiences include her "paradise vision aboard ship in Greece with the mysterious Peter van Eck at railside with her when the sea-surge seemed suddenly to move in rhythm with a cosmic harmony, the cryptic 'writing on the wall' in the hotel room in Corfu, which Freud would later help her construe; [and] the visitations from the magnificent Lady in the apparition of the flowering tree in the London Blitz which generated the war Trilogy" (Gelpi 8). These visions are all characterized by harmony, balance, the need to see unity in the face of opposition, and the centrality of a female figure to bring the world out of destruction. Each of these inform the narrative web in *The Gift* and suggests a playfulness in restrictive and limiting boundaries, a vision of making material reality more meaningful, equating memory with the present, and resurrecting from our subconscious and history maternal genealogies of spiritual power.



commitment to fluidity, at times chaos, vision, and multiplicity. H.D. herself describes the process as one of “letting loose or letting flow,” surfacing “continuous images like in a moving-picture” (50). Her store of “images and pictures” is one that is “*running over*” (50). Thus, in some moments the past and the present, Hilda and H.D., appear together. For example, Chapter IV “Because One Is Happy” quickly fluctuates from 1940s London to Hilda’s childhood. There is no clear delineation when the narrative moves from H.D.’s pondering “[t]onight there may be fire, how will we get out?” and “[t]he swaying of planes, the swaying of branches, the shattering barking of the guns, the gentle southing of the wind” into Hilda’s announcement that “Miss Helen let us draw on our slates, provided she said, the drawings were not too silly” (110, 111, 112). But these shifts are not only between past and present; the narrative voice often switches between Hilda’s stream-of-consciousness and H.D.’s reflections on topics such as war, photography, or ancient history. In this way, H.D. offers broad-stroke interpretations of the child’s memories.

Since H.D. chooses to let the child tell the story, we can develop a deeper understanding of H.D.’s process of memory by examining Hilda’s remembering. Stories in Hilda’s voice are in stream-of-consciousness, are recursive, and often develop out of word associations. One such scene begins when Hilda asks her mother, who is unpacking boxes at their new house, for her book of Grimm Tales and is told that her mother gave it away. Hilda tries to be grown-up and not care about the book (“I did not care. Why should I?”), but she is clearly hurt that she was not consulted about giving away the book (101). A moment later, “Papa’s hand was in my hand” and when he calls her his

*Tochterlein* (daughter), “it made a deep cave, it made a long tunnel inside me with things rushing through” (102). Yet she moves immediately onto “another book with a picture” and commences three pages of memories associated with books and pictures (103). “People do not cut out pictures from their books,” Hilda thinks, and then is reminded of Papalie’s book in which he used to write “about water-things that grow in water” seen under the microscope (103). The picture in the book conjures up a memory of a picture of “a girl lying on her back, she was asleep, she might be dead but no, Ida said she was asleep” (103). This reminds Hilda of another picture of a sleeping girl, the picture “called Nightmare” (103). This picture included “an old-witch on a broomstick, it was a horrible old woman with her hair streaming out and she was riding on a stick” (103). Hilda is told that the witch isn’t real, but the picture is from a book called *Simple Science*, and science “was to explain real things” (103). She continues asking adults to explain a Nightmare, including why it is a mare when “mare is a mother-horse,” but she receives no thorough answers (104). “But there are things that we must know,” Hilda insists, and finishes the chapter by moving in thought from a picture in their animal book of a dog rescuing a boy dead or asleep in snow, to the animal set her father had given Hilda and her brothers for Christmas (105). Strewn throughout Hilda’s train of thought are issues that repeat in *The Gift*: a doting but absent father, the vision and skill of her grandfather, an ambiguous mother/witch figure, and a dead or silent girl whose questions and desires are being ignored. The mother and father function on an especially deep level: her father’s intimacy carves and moves within Hilda’s body, and the mother’s betrayal—giving away her book—provokes Hilda’s profound worry about the relationship between mother and

witch, all underscored by fear of death that receives no response from others. From Hilda's perspective there are always vivid and tactile things, in this scene there are specific books, toys, microscopes, and Papa's hand, which ground and inspire memory. Perhaps most captivating for the reader as we flow from memory to memory is that our perspective remains with the curious and serious young girl; as she ponders or is confused, so are we. As she tries to make sense or be heard, so do we. H.D.'s remembering in Hilda's voice moves by embracing creativity and imagination, and maintaining curiosity.

H.D.'s remembering takes a different form in Chapter II "Fortune Teller." This chapter is told in Hilda's voice, but is actually her mother's memory from before Hilda was born; thus the chapter contains smooth switches in perspective such as "I am getting old, thought Mama" (61). As a result, Hilda can know and relate Mama's deepest thoughts while remaining separate from her mother. Inspired by fragments of a story Hilda hears about her mother visiting a fortune teller, this chapter is a fully fleshed out account of that encounter, including Helen's intimate thoughts and vulnerable fears. A central narrative within this chapter is Mama's illicit meeting in the summer-house with a younger "Spanish Student" from South America studying at the university and named only "Mr. Fernandez" (52). Here, Hilda/H.D. reveals her mother's long ago repressed and complicated feelings resulting from her passionate encounters with Mr. Fernandez. Hilda suggests that Mama felt ashamed and afraid that "I," responsible "Miss Helen, who had charge of the girls" and who knew that her Papa the principal "once almost expelled" a woman "because she lowered a little basket out of her window" for the University boys

to give her letters, would agree to meet a man in the summer-house (77). Moreover, she feels a sense of Christian guilt because of the sensuality and pleasure she experiences: “the summer-house was wreathed in fragrant sea-weed and the jasmine-flowers were froth and pearls from the sea, and she who was a mermaid, ageless, timeless, with a whole set of poetical and biological emotions that there were no names for, that were things having to do with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and that were not right” (78). In a similar mode of stream-of-consciousness, Hilda/H.D. combine memory with creative imagining that gives her mother a back story, a history that might explain something about who her mother is to the young girl and the middle-aged woman. The process of memory here is one that pieces together fragments of another’s story while adding dimension and explanation, at once allowing the daughter to empathize with her mother and providing the mother with depth and subjectivity.

H.D.’s creative remembering shatters proscribed thinking, which is essential because, as Nelle Morton argues in *The Journey is Home*, “once old images are shattered more positive images that allow for new forms of response to ever-changing conditions may come into play” (xxii). Exploring the fragmentation of the self during violent experiences, Susan Brison argues in *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* that “when your life is shattered, you’re forced to pick up the pieces, and you have a chance to stop and examine them” (20). For H.D., the potential for remaking the self by delving into her past is the glimpse of hope she sees; it is also a chance for remaking the world.<sup>15</sup> Thus, what H.D. does with her returns to the past are as important as the returning itself.

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<sup>15</sup> Barbara Guest quotes H.D. as describing herself after the war in this way: “My emotions are pre-War. My body exceedingly Post” (31). With her emotions remaining in the exciting artists’ community of

## Finding Home

H.D./Hilda inherits a patriarchal culture, a lineage of mothers who have fearfully rejected their own gifts, and a tradition of Christian fathers who celebrate their daughters only to cast them in traditional women's roles. Yet she also inherits a gift worth claiming. What, then, does H.D. unearth from the past? What has been forbidden that must be reclaimed in such a particular way? H.D.'s remembering "steals culture" and rereads patriarchal signs in order to reveal feminine genealogies of liberatory love and sacred embodiment. Susan Rubin Suleiman argues that "an integral part of the new 'feminine' poetics" is, for Cixous, "to reappropriate, by means of ironic rereading—and rewritings—the dominant cultural productions of the past" (*The Female Body in Western Culture* 18). Suleiman locates this point in a 1977 interview with Cixous, which provides one of the epigraphs to this chapter: "I found myself in the classic situation of women who, at one time or another, feel that it is not they who have produced culture... Culture was there, but it was a barrier forbidding me to enter, whereas of course, from the depths of my body, I had a desire for the objects of culture. I therefore found myself obliged to steal them..." (qtd. and trans. in Suleiman 18). One function of memory in *The Gift* is, I argue, the reappropriation of culture. The second, related project of H.D.'s remembering is the recovery of matriarchal genealogies. Upon realizing that a statue she is admiring of Mary and Jesus is actually Mary being cradled by her mother Anne, Luce Irigaray concludes, "I had before me an aesthetic and ethical figure that I need to be able to live without contempt for my incarnation, for that of my mother and other women" (*Je, Tu, Nous* 25).

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London before the war and her body suffering with the after-effects of living through war, H.D. reveals one aspect of her fragmented self.

A complex and often troubling process, recognizing our matriarchal lineages is nonetheless crucial because it means bearing the responsibility of loving the self. The dual work of memory, for H.D., is to reread and rewrite dominant patriarchal cultural productions of the past and to recover the mother-daughter lineages that have been wiped out by patriarchal traditions. Creatively moving between material and spiritual, self and other, and past and present, H.D.'s remembering opens possibilities for revisions of patriarchal traditions, healing the present by transmitting forward these new (old) stories.

*Stealing Culture: Hilda's Snake Dream*

One of the most powerful patriarchal images that H.D. steals is that of the serpent or snake; in doing so, she transforms a fearful, poisonous image into one that is peaceful and healing. The epigraph to Chapter IV of *The Gift* is a hymn that reads: "Then, when the storm of death / Roars, sweeping by, / Whisper, Thou Truth of Truth; / 'Peace! It is I!'" (107). This is a telling prelude to a chapter which begins with H.D.'s narration of a "time-bomb that had neatly nosed its way under the pavement edge, less than two minutes' walk from my door" and contains young Hilda's nightmare of being bitten by a poisonous snake (109). The hymn's sentiment, discovering peace in the face of death, encourages us to read hope in these narratives of destruction.

In the snake scene is it especially unclear whether H.D. or young Hilda has the nightmare; the story fluctuates freely between both speakers, suggesting their combined struggle to confront and embrace this vision. The serpent in the nightmare "has great teeth," and "he is drinking water out of a common glass-tumbler on Mama-and-Papa's

bed” (113). In the room are Hilda and her two brothers Harold and Gilbert. Hilda is not afraid—“there is nothing very horrible about this”—until the second snake on the floor wraps itself around the leg of her parents’ bed and “strikes” at her, biting the “side of [her] mouth” (113). She begins to process the meaning of this attack: “I will never get well, I will die soon of the poison of this horrible snake” (113). Reaching out for the family servants, Ida and Mary, with whom she is quite intimate, Hilda “pull[s] at Ida’s apron but it is not Ida, it is our much-beloved, later, dark Mary. She looks at the scar on my mouth. How ugly my mouth is with a scar, and the side of my face seems stung to death. But no, ‘you are not stung to death,’ says dark Mary, who is enormous and very kind. ‘You must drink milk,’ she says. I do not like milk. ‘You must eat things you do not like,’ says Mary” (113). The chapter continues in stream of consciousness, moving among the snake bite, conversations between Hilda and her Mama, and a walk in the snow with her Papa and younger brothers.

In her psychoanalytic reading of this scene in *Penelope’s Web*, Susan Stanford Friedman argues that H.D. sees her parents having sex and perceives that this snake, the phallus, hurts her mother. When the snake on the floor bites Hilda’s mouth, Friedman argues that this is Hilda’s fear that she will be hurt by the phallus, by patriarchy. In the final moments of the dream when the “dark Mary” appears and convinces Hilda that she needs to “drink milk” Friedman claims that H.D. is returning to the maternal, that is, the mother figure nurses her with breast milk. The paragraphs that follow the snake dream are, according to Friedman, about the danger and destructiveness of patriarchy and phallic power. She argues that the scene in which Hilda walks in the snow with her

brothers and father and will not follow her father because she is so happy by the street lamp, is Hilda's repudiation of the male's path and discovery of her own joy in the light of the lamp.

However, H.D.'s repeated reclaiming of the snake figure as the embodiment of female divinity and as healing and resurrection, in *Notes on Thought and Vision* (1919), *Tribute to Freud* (1933-1934), *Trilogy* (1944-1946), and numerous other texts, complicate this reading. In *Notes*, H.D. establishes that the serpent represents not only death to the human body, but also a kind of rebirth or transition from one form to another. She asserts in *Tribute to Freud* that "the serpent is certainly the sign or totem, through the ages, of healing and of that final healing when we slough off, for the last time, our encumbering flesh or skin. The serpent is the symbol of death, as we know, but also of resurrection" (*TF* 64-65). In *Trilogy* H.D. repeatedly invokes Caduceus, the staff of Hermes the scribe, which is entwined with two serpents and represents healing. H.D. wrote extensive notes to *The Gift*;<sup>16</sup> in them, she expands on the meaning of the serpent symbol: "I understand that *manito* is an Indian word that applies to the riddles of the supernatural, the unknown, the religious mysteries and so on. The word itself is sometimes used for serpent, as if the serpent and the supernatural power were the same things. Or the serpent had control of super-natural energies or was controlled by them" (246-247). Later in *The Gift*, Mamalie reveals to Hilda that the serpent represents the

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<sup>16</sup> As editor Jane Augustine notes, this was in part to add historical validity to Hilda's stories and memories and in part so that H.D. could insert more of her own voice without interrupting the child's recollections (see pages 14-15).



female Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup> In the moments that follow Mary's demand that Hilda "drink milk," Hilda refers to Gaia, mythic earth mother, and Python, mythic serpent that guarded Delphi. Gaia also points to Delphi, which is believed to stem from the Greek *delphus*, or womb, referring to the worship of Gaia. Thus, images of the serpent as related to worship of female divinity as well as healing and spiritual power are present as much as the interpretation that the serpent is destructive and phallic.

Hilda's poisoning by the snake attached to the leg of her parents' bed suggests the transmission of a gift from parents to the child. As H.D. informs us through her mother, *gift* is the German word for poison: "Gift? *Gift*? That was the German word for poison" (70). Hilda notes in Chapter I "Dark Room," in Chapter II, "Fortune Teller" and again in Chapter III, "The Dream," that her parents should have a child with a gift. The fortune teller tells her mother this, and H.D. leads us to believe it is passed down through her familial and Moravian heritage. The women who visit the "new house" wonder why the children aren't more gifted when their father is so "brilliant" (96). The fear that Hilda feels is not necessarily the fear of patriarchy, but is also the fear of what it means to bear the burden of giftedness, as well as the fear of experiencing divinity or ecstasy. As Hilda's grandfather explains, "the *Sanctus Spiritus* was the Spirit but it was the Spirit, he said, undiluted; we are not ready for such a spiritual in-pouring, he said, at least very few

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<sup>17</sup> Mamalie shares with Hilda that "The serpent shaped like an S, carved on the pole outside their lodges or painted in their picture writing, was the same serpent—it was not the Devil; it was not a question of witchcraft or devil-worship or snake-worship. The inner band of initiates, worshipped the same Spirit, the *Sanctus Spiritus*" (170). In "the breath of their singing" Mamalie can hear the words, "*be ye wise as serpents*—that is another kind of serpent than the Devil" (170). This *Sanctus Spiritus* is the "holy Ghost that nobody seems to understand" (171).

of us are” (179). For H.D., there is danger and fear associated with attaining spiritual knowledge and vision.

This fear of her own giftedness stems most explicitly from her mother. In Chapter II, dedicated to Helen, Hilda tells us of a crucial moment in her mother’s life, one in which she can decide to embrace sexuality, creativity, memory, autonomy, and love or can repudiate these things and become a respectable, responsible young woman. Helen chooses the life of responsibility, mostly because she is afraid of the chaos and uncertainty of embracing sexuality and love. She entirely represses any memory of her own gift: she “was proverbially afraid of snakes,” suggesting that she is unable to look beyond the monster image of the serpent and into its ancient and spiritual significance as (feminine) healer (73). “There was a trap-door under her feet sometimes when she was the happiest,” and Helen carefully avoids allowing herself to fall through this trap-door into ecstasy, sexually and otherwise (68). She feared that “She would fall down,” and the door would “shut over her head and she would fall and fall” (68). Thus, the “danger” of falling “lurked” everywhere (68). Perhaps most significantly, Hilda asserts that her mother’s fear of falling into the unknown kept her from analysis and memory: “She did not analyse any of her feelings. She did not look back, except in vague generalizations” (71). Further, she has “cut out the picture” of a Nightmare from Hilda’s children’s science book, that is, refused to “go to the darkness” in order to reclaim the feminine spirit (115).

Helen’s misrecognition of the snake, the trap door, the gift, and her memories as dangerous and deadly, her subsequent repudiation of these symbols, and her adherence to

normative womanhood, mean that Hilda must go beyond and against the example set by her mother if she hopes to embrace her gift. Hilda realizes, “you are the sun and the sun is too hot for Mama” and “we must go further than Helen, than Helle, than Helios, than light, we must go into the darkness, out of which the monster has been born” (114). Though he has claimed his gift—his brilliant scientific mind—Hilda’s father is sad, frequently alone, sleeps during the day and is awake, alone with stars, all night. It is no wonder Hilda is afraid of being bitten by the snake, of being infected with giftedness that in many ways represents pain.

In her shock at being bitten, Hilda makes a sort of incantation to female divinity. When she begins her matriarchal prayer which originates with “dark Mary,” she is not necessarily turning away from the phallus/snake and toward the maternal figure, but rather is beginning to understand the serpent and its bite *as* her “gifted” matriarchal lineage; in other words, she begins to see that the seemingly terrifying darkness is really a coded location of liberation and revelation. She prays:

Mary, Maia, Miriam, Mut, Madre, Mere, Mother, pray for us. Pray for us dark Mary, Mary mere, mer; this is the nightmare, this is the dark horse, this is Mary, Maia, Mut, Mutter. This is Gaia, this is the beginning. This is the end. Under every shrine to Zeus, to Jupiter, to Zeu-pater or Theus-pater or God-the-father, along the western coast of the Peloponnesus, there is an earlier altar. There is, beneath the carved super-structure of every temple to God-the-father, the dark cave or grotto or inner hall or cella to Mary, mere, Mut, Mutter, pray for us. (114)

This is in some ways an odd formulation: if it is the maternal that saves and protects, why does H.D. refer to Mary as “the nightmare” and “the dark horse” which in an earlier childhood pondering was the horse (mare) “with hooves rushing out to trample you to death” (104)? The final words of the prayer explain that this heritage of female divinity comes from the darkness because that is where patriarchal religious traditions have relegated it. Hilda fears the snake because she has not yet reclaimed this figure as feminine deity from the snake’s place hidden beneath the structure of male worship. In fact, she uses the pronoun “he” to describe the snake and then wavers: “the monster has a face like a sick horrible woman, no, it is not a woman. It is a snake-face and the teeth are pointed and foul with slime. The face has touched my face, the teeth have bitten into my mouth” (114). She is struggling here to discern the sex/gender of this fearful thing that she will eventually claim as her inheritance: “I must go on into the darkness that was my own darkness and the face that was my own terrible inheritance” (182). What society codes as dark, fearful, and monstrous is in fact the hiding place of the repudiated feminine. The bodily exchange between Hilda and the serpent is an exchange of fluids that punctures her skin, signaling their physical proximity; the snake is literally in her mouth. She asks, “Can one be stung on the mouth by the Python and utter words other than poisonous? Long ago, a girl was called the Pythoness, she was a Virgin” (114-115). If we understand poison to mean gift, and Python to be the serpent at the Delphic oracle, child of the earth mother Gaia evoked in the earlier prayer, H.D.’s meaning is less about the destructive power of the phallus, and more about the infectious power of feminine divinity; she is in effect asking whether one can be gifted with the vision of divine

wisdom and not share that vision or gift (or poison, as some would surely read it) with others?<sup>18</sup>

Reading the serpent as the embodiment of the supernatural, of healing, and of female divinity does not negate Friedman's reading of the serpent as a phallic threat, especially in light of H.D.'s reference to the snake as male and of her very real fear of the serpent or "monster" that is attacking and wounding her, but it adds the crucial aspect of revising patriarchal images into healing feminine symbols. The dream of the serpent is about a kind of fearful death as well as a kind of new life. As Morton points out, "Once the mind is cleared of accumulated blocks, it is free to embrace new images—positive images in all sorts of fresh new ways" (xxii). Hilda's snake dream transforms the image. H.D. steals the symbol of the serpent and rereads (rewrites) it, asking us to dwell in the multiplicity of images and symbols.

*Mother-Daughter Genealogies: The Gift*

In Chapter V, "The Secret," H.D.'s remembering recovers a gift of embodied liberatory love as a healing response to the violence of WWII. In this chapter Mamalie tells Hilda a story about her first husband, Christian Seidel, and the scrolls they translated in 1841 which uncovered a secret meeting of early Moravian settlers at a place called *Wunden Eiland* in 1741. During this "keystone chapter" time and subjectivity are especially fluid (Augustine 3). Mamalie repeatedly invokes a Secret, a Gift, and a

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<sup>18</sup> H.D. ponders this question again when Hilda explores "the word:" "The word is like a bee-hive, but there are no bees in it now. I am the last bee in the bee-hive, this is the game I play. The other bees have gone, that is why it is so quiet. Can one bee keep a bee-hive alive, I mean, can one person who knows that *Wunden Eiland* is a bee-hive, keep *Wunden Eiland* for the other bees, when they come back?" (154-155).

Promise, referring to the mysterious theological practices that she uncovered, and providing Hilda with a heritage of mothers who illustrate for her a way of being in the world that stands in opposition to war; in Adalaide Morris' words, what Mamalie relates to Hilda is "a tale of encounter, mutual recognition, and visionary gift exchange between two cultures," in other words, a tale of love ("A Relay of Power and Peace: H.D. and the Spirit of the Gift" 522). "This event," Morris points out, "is a ceremony with the Indians that took place in 1741, that Mamalie, deciphering secret records, acted out for herself in 1841, and that H.D. herself will reenact at *The Gift's* close in 1941" (521). On a warm summer night Hilda sits in bed with her grandmother, as the older woman enters a sort of trance, seeming somewhat like a symptom of dementia, during which memories flow through her and she repeatedly (mis)recognizes Hilda the child as different women from Mamalie's past. Mamalie recalls that the early Moravian settlers in Bethlehem had an "inner band" that worshipped the Holy Spirit as a female deity and practiced a "Wound Theology" that emphasized the corporeal and experiential life of (a female and male) Jesus.<sup>19</sup> Some of this inner band, namely David Ziesberger, John Pyrlaeus, John Cammerhof, and Anna von Pahlen, held a meeting with a small group of local Native American spiritual leaders, including Paxnous and his wife Morning Star, on *Wunden Eiland*,<sup>20</sup> Island of the Wounds, where sacred wisdom is shared, revealing that the Native Americans' spirituality shares characteristics with the "inner band." Once exposed, the

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<sup>19</sup> H.D. grants this theological philosophy to the small inner band and then to her grandmother and Christian, but in fact the entire Moravian Church subscribed to the belief that the Holy Spirit was female and practiced the Litany of the Blood and Wounds of a Jesus with male and female characteristics as the central figure for believers. See Craig D. Atwood's *Community of the Cross: Moravian Piety in Colonial Bethlehem* for an in-depth history of this theology and its origins.

<sup>20</sup> This island was located, according to H.D., in the Monocacy River, now the Monocacy Creek.

practices and beliefs of this inner band shame the Church, and Church authorities hide the Secret of the Spirit and the Litany of the Wounds.

Hilda's grandmother's tale also pieces together memories, symbolized by Mamalie's quilt which roots Hilda's experience of the evening in female genealogy. Mamalie's quilt "is made of patches of everybody's best dresses and some French stuff that was sent by one of the old-girls from New Orleans" (151). "This is the patchwork quilt," Hilda says as she pulls it over her, noticing, "here is the moiré silk, they call it, and the watered-silk that old Aunt Sabina, who I only just remember, had for her great-niece, Anna's wedding" (170). Made of many women's dresses and saturated with life experiences, the quilt is a matriarchal genealogy embracing Hilda. Mamalie's remembering—"I forgot all about it," Mamalie begins—is triggered by Hilda's question about a shooting star, and goes on to revise Hilda's fearful shooting star into another kind of fire (151). Thus the quilt and the story that emerges from it transform: "I can pull up the quilt and I can sit here and I am not afraid now to think about the shooting-star, because I think she is going to talk about the shooting-star in a different way" (151). Hilda's fear of the falling shooting-star recedes because Mamalie's tale transforms the meaning of the star. In a sort of ritual, Hilda encounters her maternal genealogy through the textures and voices within the quilt. She walks "round the quilt that is partly spread on the floor, and I do not step on the patch that was Aunt Sabina's moiré or old Cousin Elizabeth's watered-silk" (175). Like the quilt, Mamalie's tale is a collection of memories; at one time "afraid the Secret would be lost," Mamalie passes the Secret onto Hilda, who now bears its responsibility.

The secret of the gift of mother-daughter genealogies communicated to Hilda in the story entails a female Holy Spirit that is experienced through the women's ritual of exchanging (inner) names, and a celebration of the sacred body along with the reciprocal pleasure this knowledge brings the initiates. With her Moravian theological birthright as the foundation, H.D. develops a radical vision of healing. For H.D.'s initiates, sharing the gift leads to laughter, music, and intercourse with all of the material and spiritual world, that is, letting go of the pain and falling into the unknown abyss of pleasure, or love. If the Holy Spirit is female (bringing to surface all sacred feminine figures), and the Spirit becomes flesh, then the embodied feminine is a sacred Gift that gives and receives,<sup>21</sup> an act of liberatory loving. This is what we've lost/forgotten and what we need to remember/envision. This is our mother-daughter genealogy, "wiped out" by patriarchal traditions, and restored by creative, mobile remembering and actively reclaiming patriarchal symbols. This is returning home to the repressed feminine and the repudiated body.

Eighteenth-century Moravian theology is important to H.D.'s (and Mamalie's) tale because of their distinctive beliefs.<sup>22</sup> At the center of Moravian theology was their formulation of the Holy Trinity. As Aaron Spencer Fogelman describes it in "Jesus is Female," the Moravian Trinity included a "weak Father who was not really a father, a maternal Holy Spirit, and a female or androgynous Savior," and this "radically altered

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<sup>21</sup> As Adalaide Morris describes the gift in "Autobiography and Prophecy," it is "both the thing given and the potential or capacity to give in return. As it moves from one person to another, the gift confers power but also responsibility," the responsibility of continuing to move the gift (236).

<sup>22</sup> *The Gift* is autobiographical, after all, and H.D. did significant research on Moravian history and theology which mingles with family memories as the basis of this tale. Evidence of her research can be found in H.D.'s notes to *The Gift* as well as in those of editor Jane Augustine. The historical evidence I use here is simply to support H.D.'s research in the 1940s as well as to highlight certain aspects of Moravian Theology.



model of power and authority had more than mere symbolic significance. It led to practical consequences” (Fogelman 13). Some of these consequences were women preachers, educating women, treating sex as a “sacred and positive event,” and the dissolution of the nuclear family using instead a “choir system” in which men, women, and children lived in separate choirs according to life stages (Fogelman 17, 20). For those mid-eighteenth-century Moravians, the spirit is female, and Jesus is in part female, according to their theology, because he gave birth to the spirit through his side wound, or womb. The body is a locus of divine wisdom and love, as the Jesus figure suggests. Further, his blood and wounds remind us of our own shared suffering, of the universality of suffering. Based on the theology of Count Zinzendorf, Moravians believed that the Christian Trinity—God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus the Son—was modeled on the heterosexual family made up of Father, Mother, and child. Thus, the Holy Spirit, who was definitively gendered male by other religious groups, was the Mother of Jesus and the Mother of the Church, gendered female.

Moravian followers celebrated the corporeal aspects of Christ. Moravians attributed femininity to Jesus as well as to the Spirit,<sup>23</sup> and so they practiced a Wound Theology that did not privilege the male body over the female body. According to Fogelman, “[m]any of their protocols, poems, hymns, and iconography suggest female qualities of Christ, including sensuous descriptions of body fluids, adoring descriptions of a nurturing motherly Savior, and even graphic portrayals of the side wound in the form of

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<sup>23</sup> Fogelman points out that “the Moravians did not invent the female Jesus” (11). The female Jesus figure “can be traced back as far as the Gnostics, the far-flung, unorganized mystical movement that flourished from about 80 to 200 A.D.,” was “prevalent in the medieval period,” part of the spiritual life of numerous groups in the early modern period, and “female imagery of Jesus was also prevalent in eighteenth-century North America” (11-12).

female genitalia” (6). Although Jesus was biologically sexed male, they attributed metaphorical and gendered female qualities and functions to Jesus. Zinzendorf went so far as to argue that when Jesus’ body died on the cross, his female spirit (the Holy Spirit) was reborn from his side wound as a womb. Moreover, unlike many religious traditions which shied away from such discussions, Moravians celebrated (a somewhat egalitarian view of) sexuality and even “experienced erotic qualities in their relationship with the Savior. Many Moravian men and women celebrated a sensuous relationship and produced hymns, poetry and other writings that suggested erotic impulses toward Christ” (7). This sensual relationship was not only spiritual but also explicitly bodily: “Moravians directly linked an erotic female image to the side wound of Jesus,” and their hymns and writings graphically compare Jesus’ “side wound to women’s genitalia” (10, 12). The “scandal” of the Moravian and Native American meeting was not only the feminization of the Trinity, then, but perhaps also stemmed from the “uncontrolled female power” that was unleashed with their celebrations of the body (Fogelman 19). Indeed, one eighteenth-century critic of Moravian theology “blasted the dangerous sacralization of marriage and sex,” equating “the Moravians’ sacred celebration of sex and their shameless, graphic portrayals of male and female genitalia with female empowerment” calling a hymn “which celebrates the body, ‘the most completely maddening female hymn’” (19).

H.D. used her knowledge of these aspects of Moravian Theology as a foundation for her tale of the ritual at *Wunden Eiland*. The female spirit and the bodily liturgy are crucial aspects of the initiates’ meeting, literally unlocking the secret of the Gift. Hilda expresses the Spirit, which is in many ways beyond language, as “the thing” of the

Secret:<sup>24</sup> “The thing was symbolized by the star” and by the words carved into it: “*Father, Mother, Dearest Man*” (155).<sup>25</sup> Beyond binaries of language, the special Spirit has the power to disrupt and liberate. Or, in Hilda’s words, the Spirit is “one of those ‘things’ that happen sometimes, that there are no words for, that you find words for and the words disenchant it, like the other way round of an enchantment,” that is, one of those “things” that opens “a locked door” (160). Strikingly similar to memories that flow through a door “left open,” the return to the feminine spirit unlocks previously locked doors.

The first central part of H.D.’s ritual of the Spirit is exchanging names. The basis of this exchange is the belief that all religions and peoples share a common spiritual wisdom, which can be exchanged and shared. In this case the women of the groups, Morning Star and Anna von Pahlen, acknowledge and name each other, sharing their inner selves just as Mamalie gives Hilda many names. “They were exchanging hostages,

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<sup>24</sup>H.D. discusses another “thing” like the “thing” that is the Holy Spirit at the meetings at *Wunden Eiland*. This first thing, from Chapter III happens at Christmas when Hilda’s Papalie creates the *putz*. The “thing” of Christmas, the special “indefinable yet deeply personal” experience which connects the “Child in the manger” with all the other symbols of divinity throughout time and space, “was that we were creating” (88, 89).

“As we pressed the tin-mold of the lion or the lady into the soft dough, we were like God in the first picture of the Dore Bible who, out of chaos, created Leo or Virgo to shine forever in the heavens. ‘We’ were like that but we did not know it. Our perception recognised it though our minds did not define it. God had made a Child and we children in return now made God; we created Him as He created us, we created Him as children will, out of odds and ends; like magpies, we built him a nest of stray bits of silver-thread, shredded blue or rose or yellow coloured paper; we knew our power” (89). At Christmas, the “thing” is that we create.

The “thing” at Christmas is also a bodily experience. The smell of the pine tree, for example, has direct physical effects: “at this moment, a child’s very ribs and diaphragm would be changed for a whole year with that deep in-take of breath, as Ida or Mama or even the new gardener cut the thick cord that bound the limbs; living limbs were bound and cramped in their rope-cage” (89). The emotional experience of Christmas is similarly embodied, as breath: “There was that actual in-take of breath (and the almost unbearable out-breathing of joy bordering on ecstasy) when the cord fell on the floor and nobody cared, nobody stopped to pick it up” (89).

<sup>25</sup> This motto can still be seen today, engraved in an eighteenth-century Moravian building in its original German, at the end of Main Street in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

like in war,” Hilda discerns, “but it was a different kind of war. It was a war of the Spirit or for the Spirit, the Spirit was the Indian’s Great Spirit and the Spirit was (for this inner band of United Brethren) a Spirit like the Holy Ghost, which nobody seemed to understand but they understood” (163). The women’s exchange is a sacred event; “there was something very important about exchanging names because the inner band of Indians believed the name a person had, was somehow another part of him, like a ghost or shadow” or soul, “and Anna von Pahlen was to have the name of Paxnous’ wife, who was Morning Star in English” (163, 163). But they don’t just exchange their “ordinary” names, they exchange the “special inner-names” of their souls: Morning Star for Paxnous’ wife and Angelica for Anna von Pahlen (163). In turn, Hilda enters into the exchange: “For now I understood I had another name; now I was Agnes, now I would really be Agnes and Aunt Aggie’s name was Agnes Angelica, so perhaps they had named her Angelica because of Anna von Pahlen, then I would be part of Anna von Pahlen, too, and I would be part of the ceremony at *Wunden Eiland* and I would be Morning Star along with Anna” (164-165). Over and over during Mamalie’s story, Hilda shifts and moves through many names, constructing a genealogy: “she thinks I am Lucy,” “I must be old Aunt Lucia,” which brings a role reversal, so that young Hilda is now Mamalie’s older sister, and “I suppose I am nursing Mamalie” (172, 172, 174). The connections grow deeper and stronger as Hilda thinks “about that other Lady who was Papa’s first wife and it seemed she was a sort of mother, then Aunt Aggie’s father who was Mamalie’s first husband, would be a sort of grandfather” (157). Until she finally concludes, “I was one of them. . . it was really in the family” (157). Like the women’s

exchange in the ritual of *Wunden Eiland*, H.D. is drawn into the practice of sharing the self, which in turn opens the self to becoming multiple and mobile.

The privileged presence of women in this scene is significant because, as Morris argues, for H.D., women embody “the spirit of the gift: its bonding into kinship, its life-sustaining mutuality, and its generative power,” a grouping of traits I term liberatory love (522). Their exchange is characterized by a gift economy as opposed to a market economy. Morris argues that the Native American gift economy differs from the European market system: “Like Professor Doolittle and his ancestors, the Puritan fathers who fought with the Indians, they bargain shrewdly and lay up treasures. Indian givers, in contrast, pass the gift along: it crosses the boundary between two parties, and in time it or its equivalent is expected to return” (500). For H.D., however, the “real” gift “moves,” “comes from love, not calculation” and “it is intimate” (Morris 500). It trades in the currency of desire. “But the main point is that the gift entails gods, not goods, that it has a spiritual dimension” (500). Morris reveals that “the ingredients of the gift” are “it is alive and mobile, it binds those through whom it passes, it demands a labor of gratitude or creativity, and it follows the injunction to give, receive, and reciprocate” (521). This is the gift that the women exchange on *Wunden Eiland*, a ritual of sacred community; as Hilda points out, the ritual involved “communicating or even communing” (156). “The pact,” Morris argues, “was a plan to have a meeting at which they would enact one of the most ancient rituals of connection: the exchange of women” (522). Importantly, unlike patriarchal trading in women, “the exchange H.D. describes is not social but sacred” (522). Women are not victims in the exchange: because they “operate through *eros*” and

“worship ‘a special Spirit,’ a feminine soul or godhead that H.D. calls variously the Sanctus Spiritus, Sophia, or Holy Wisdom,” the initiates’ shift women from the role of currency to one of sacred wisdom and love.

The second central feature of Mamalíe’s Secret is a version of the Moravian Wound Theology that celebrates the sacred body. As Mamalíe puts it, “the Secret that my Christian explained to me seemed very simple. It was simply belief in what was said—*and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.* You see, those words were taken literally” (157). Christ is literally present in the material world; therefore, the sacred is in the material world and not just beyond it in the spiritual realm. As a result, the initiates saw value in the flesh that others did not. “The devotees of the Worship of the Wounds,” as H.D. calls them, worshipped the Savior “in a startling transparency, which showed the wounds, wide and red and blood dripping, when a candle was pushed forward, back of the frame, in the dark” (167, 178). The “blot” they brought on the church was not only their acknowledging feminine spiritual power, but also the “fanaticism” of the “Liturgy of the Wounds” that revealed in the side wound, or womb, of Jesus’ female spirit. Since women were relegated to the body, and the body was less valued than the mind, this celebration of the body disrupted patriarchal social norms (167). For H.D., a worldview that valued the body stood in opposition to that of London in the early 1940s, where evidence of violence against the body was everywhere the eye could see. Perhaps it is our denigration of the body along with our silencing of the feminine, she suggests, which allows such violence to exist.

The secret of the Gift is an embodied, sensual and relational experience of liberatory loving based on reciprocal and mutual pleasure. Mamalie and Christian had not only deciphered the words and songs, but had “recaptured the secret of *Wunden Eiland*” so that she “herself became one with the *Wunden Eiland* initiates and herself spoke with tongues, hymns of the spirits in the air, of spirits at sun-rise and sun-setting, of the deer and the wild squirrel, the beaver, the otter, the king-fisher and the hawk and eagle” (169). As with H.D.’s remembering, the memory becomes real for Mamalie. Moreover, what the initiates experienced with their sacred feminine ritual of exchange and their celebration of the body was communion with others, a boundary-less song. Experiencing what the participants (or initiates) experienced, Mamalie discovers ecstasy in becoming one with everything around her, in letting go of her boundaries (which H.D.’s Mama could not do); for Mamalie “it was laughing, laughing all the time” unlike Mama’s laughing, which was contained because of her fear of the “black rose growing in your garden” (169, 67). “Mamalie is remembering the blot when she says a black rose,” but as with other symbols, H.D. recharacterizes it, finding light instead of fear: “a black rose is really a shadow or a rose and you do not have a shadow, of course, without light” (172). The initiates’ pleasure is one of breath and communing. “The laughter,” Mamalie remembers, “ran over us and the deep tones of the men’s voices and the high pure silver of Anna’s voice, mingled in a sort of breathing hymn; it was breathing, it was breath” (169). What Hilda recognizes is that “the Gift was their all talking and laughing that way and singing with no words or words of leaves rustling and rivers flowing and snow swirling in the wind, which is the breath of the Spirit, it seems” (171). Communing not

only with one another but also with the living earth and its inhabitants, the initiates move “the transaction from the realm of barter into the realm of the sacred,” and open the “circle” of exchange “beyond a simple give and take between” two groups or individuals (Morris 501). The Gift of the sacred embodied feminine is one of reciprocal communion, song and breath. This body-based communion is the liberatory love H.D. hopes to restore to war-torn 1941.

Nelle Morton helps connect these two aspects—the initiates’ “special” female spirit and their celebration of the sacred body—of Mamalíe’s tale. Morton points out that “the earliest meaning of spirit that we can trace derives from the word *breath*—*breath* of the body (‘closer than breathing’), *breath* of life, then later *wind* of the cosmos. The root form in Hebrew is *ruach*, of feminine gender” (89). By this definition, spirit is not in opposition to body, but interdependent. Spirit is, further, intimately linked with the feminine: “Breath (spirit) was seen as provided by the mother at birth. Broadened to cosmic dimension the image became that of the early Goddess—the source and nurturer of all living. Out of her very dust came the first creature and in the stirring dust breathed the living energy (spirit) of life” (89). Morton’s examination of spirit reveals connections rather than tensions, as H.D. hoped to do with her writing. “In this creation,” Morton argues, “the body is not separated from spirit, nor spirit separated from woman, nor history separated from nature. Of the same movement derives *transcending*—rising up out of what already is” (89). Finally, Morton locates this lineage of the spirit alive and well amidst the patriarchal traditions which hoped to wipe it out; “The ancient and proud history of spirit may be seen as a clear thread—running through patriarchal literature,



suppressed and distorted but never entirely snuffed out” (89). By returning to the root of the word spirit, Morton reveals subtle (repressed) meanings. The spirit is linked to the feminine as the breath of, or the giver of, life; as such, the spirit is not only spiritual but also material, also the body. Both women and the body are repressed in patriarchal culture, and Mamalie’s (the initiates’, H.D.’s) ritual of exchange seeks to bring them out of their hiding places.

These returns do not view the feminine or the body through the lens of patriarchy. Instead, they seek to disrupt patriarchy by bringing forth radical manifestations. We can read Mamalie’s *Wunden Eiland* tale with Cixous’ theory of feminine value systems as together providing language for feminist, liberatory love. According to Cixous, feminine value systems are characterized by the Realm of the Gift, with “generosity” at the center of this realm: “If there is a ‘propriety of woman’, it is paradoxically her capacity to deappropriate unselfishly, body without end, without appendage, without principal ‘parts’... This doesn’t mean that she’s an undifferentiated magma, but that she doesn’t lord it over her body or her desire” (“Medusa” 259). She continues,

Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours, daring to make these vertiginous crossings of the other(s) ephemeral and passionate sojourns in him, her, them, whom she inhabits long enough to look at from the point closest to their unconscious from the moment they awaken, to love them at the point closest to their drives; and then further, impregnated through and through with these brief, identificatory

embraces, she goes and passes into infinity. She alone dares and wishes to know from within, where she, the outcast, has never ceased to hear the resonance of fore-language. She lets the other language speak—the language of 1,000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death.

(“Medusa” 259)

Critics have made compelling arguments against the essentialism of Cixous’ claim that all women are outcasts. Certainly not all women are outcasts, and in this sense Cixous’ theory is limited. However, her quotation above is valuable as a poetic expression of what it means to be an outcast seeking meaning and voice, the position in which H.D.—an expatriate, and a spiritual woman in a patriarchal and increasingly empirical and violent world—found herself. What tools does Cixous’ outcast use that might reveal provocative ways of being with others and in the world? Cixous’ feminist economy resonates with H.D.’s *Mamalie’s* tale quite specifically; both refer to breaking down boundaries between different cultures and self/other by speaking in tongues, and gift-giving that moves beyond simple give and take and into the realm of sacred exchange, which Morris so beautifully argues in her essay. But Cixous’ theory of feminine value systems also shares the corporeal language of *Mamalie’s* Wound Theology, and functions with a similar kind of movement or mobility. Here we glimpse a way of being in the world based on relationships that are generous, reciprocal, embodied, and fluid. Restoring (or creating) value systems of generosity and mutuality—practices of care that break down boundaries even as they maintain unique individual selves—by reclaiming repressed and denigrated

matriarchal genealogies and the devalued body opens up the space and possibility for this kind of relationship.

H.D.'s memory and vision, unlocked from proscribed thinking by violent crisis, embrace new meanings for patriarchal images and uncover repressed matriarchal genealogies. Both are linked with a return to the material world, including the body. Mother-daughter genealogies reassert the importance of home, which can refer to one's origins and also to the body as a homeland. The sacred exchange on *Wunden Eiland* transforms patriarchal traditions that devalue women into matriarchal stories that provide roots from which to grow. When H.D. returns, she comes home to the exiled mother and the oppressed body. Perhaps she inherits a patriarchal world that violently oppresses women and the body; but by rewriting symbols of patriarchy and going to the root of her matriarchal genealogy, H.D. also inherits an embodied practice of liberatory love.

*The Gift* concludes with H.D. and Bryher surviving a German air raid, checking their apartment and each other for damage, and calling out to neighbors as they walk through destroyed buildings. Emerging from the violence she experienced during the bombing, H.D. concludes that "it had been worth while. It had been worth while to prove to oneself that one's mind and body could endure the very worst that life had to offer—to endure—to be able to face this worst of all trials, to be driven down to the uttermost depth of subconscious terror and to be able to rise again" (219). Indeed the "trial" and "terror" had driven her deep into her subconscious, into memory, surfacing things remembered and things stored dormant in cellular memory. This drowning or submersion in the past allows H.D. to revise the narrative of going down in the dark and she emerges

grateful for breath. "Going down and down in the dark was a sensation to be watched," she can now assert, "to be enjoyed even. I had touched rock-bottom. I had gone down under the wave and I was still-alive, I was breathing. I was not drowning though in a sense, I had drowned; I had gone down, been submerged by the wave of memories and terrors, repressed since the age of ten and long before, but with the terrors, I had found the joys, too" (219). Once afraid of falling down into the darkness, H.D. is now aware of what can be reclaimed by revisiting the depths of being, including the healing serpent and her maternal genealogy. The final paragraphs of the fictionalized memoir are a chant or prayer: a "cry" and a "liturgy," that is the "litany of the wounds" (222). The chant, "like a swarm of bees around the deep bell ringing," casts the whole earth as "a wounded island" (222-223). With this incantation of the body, H.D. asks us to come home through revelatory remembering to our feminist heritage of radical, liberatory love.

## Conclusion

### Love as Activism

“The language of lovers can puncture through the everyday narratives that tie us to social time and space, to the descriptions, recitals, and plots that dull and order our senses insofar as such social narratives are tied to the law.”  
Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*<sup>1</sup>

Mary Gove Nichols’ *Mary Lyndon*, Rebecca Harding Davis’ *Life in the Iron Mills*, Tillie Olsen’s *Yonnondio*, and H.D.’s *The Gift*, each tell the story of a woman who is trapped in an oppressive social structure. Gove Nichols is confined in a marriage; Davis writes of being stuck in a harsh socioeconomic hierarchy; Olsen’s Anna is confined in impoverished motherhood; and H.D. confronts a history of patriarchal violence that keeps repeating itself. All of the authors write during historical moments when human bodies are especially in peril; Gove Nichols from medical imperialism, Davis from industrial labor conditions, Olsen from Depression-era poverty, and H.D. from war. From the perspective of their various roles—wife/doctor, working class laborer and writer, mother, artist and daughter—each author/character confronts hardship, inequality, and oppression, and explores possibilities for making space and claiming more freedom for herself and others.

More specifically, each protagonist/author is part of a world in which her relationships to herself, to others, and to the past are deeply problematic. For example, Mary Gove Nichols, like most of her female contemporaries, initially has a limited understanding of her own body, and as a result suffers not only from numerous illnesses,

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<sup>1</sup> Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000 (page 140-141).

but also from allopathic medical practices that make her sicker. Davis' narrator attempts to speak for sickly and voiceless Deb, but remains caught in divisions of class and labor. For Tillie Olsen's Anna, marriage means being susceptible to rape and violence, and mothering is a feverish burden. H.D. faces a past full of dead sisters who represent the contradictory expectations and limitations of being a woman. What we can glean from these different experiences is a social order that demands women's repression of self and the self's desires, that characterizes relationships with others by unequal power dynamics, that reveals histories of fear and loss, and that casts the body as a liability or as a tool of production and reproduction.

To resist these social narratives, the women in *Mary Lyndon*, *Life in the Iron Mills*, *Yonnonidio*, and *The Gift* engage in practices of loving others and the self that emerge from bodily experiences; practices that are neither sexual nor violent, but are variously healing across economic hierarchies, reciprocally nurturing, and restorative of matriarchal communities. In other words, in each text speaking bodies facilitate or express liberating love. Audre Lorde writes that the sharing of the erotic, or liberatory love, "whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (56). Practicing transformative, intimate, and restorative ways of being with self and others—including Gove Nichols' healing others through water-cure, Davis' empathically witnessing across class lines, Olsen's reciprocally nurturing even in the midst of crushing poverty and domestic abuse, and H.D.'s creatively remembering even as the world is collapsing in violence—the women

in these texts imaginatively articulate liberatory love. In doing so, they “puncture through the everyday narratives” that “dull and order our senses” and form bridges of understanding that lessen the threat of difference.

The liberatory love expressed by Gove Nichols, Davis, Olsen, and H.D. shifts the way we see or witness ourselves, others, and our pasts. Gove Nichols sees the body differently than allopathic medical practitioners, attending to women’s anatomy and sexuality, and trusting in the body’s ability to heal itself. Davis’ narrator facilitates a kind of vulnerable witnessing that makes empathy possible even across great divides of socioeconomic difference. Olsen explores intimate witnessing, writing about healing through gentle touch as a daughter witnesses her mother’s assertion of self. H.D. sees into the past by merging memory with spiritual vision, creatively revising and re-imagining her own heritage. Rather than reading the world through the given lens of a social order based on hierarchy and dichotomy, these authors see through a lens of love that is flexible, communal, and sensual.

Breath and movement are also essential to the practices of love examined in my project. In key moments of transformation, the physical body is allowed to breathe freely and move without restrictions. This breath expands, moving from individual to social realms. Gove Nichols untied her corset and donned pants in order to breathe and move freely, attended to the power of her own breath, and then taught others to do the same. Davis’ narrator calls the reader to witness Deb working in a city and factory with thick, stagnant air, and then, in contrast, to feel the sun and air Deb experiences in the Quaker community, reflecting back to the reader her own experience of breath in relationship

with Deb's. In Olsen's sensual dandelion scene Anna's breath and song encourage Mazie to breathe deeply and heal. And, finally, H.D. uncovers an old ritual called a "breathing hymn" that creates spiritual communion with others through space and time. Whether calling attention to one's own breath, listening for the breath of others, or encountering an ancient breath ritual, the breath and movement of the body metaphorically represent characteristics of emancipatory love. Breath, the life force of the body, encourages movement: the heart beats, the chest rises and falls, and the ribs expand. It also represents mutual exchange, as we breathe together with green living things.

These late- nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century practices of love might be thought of as precursors to the recent turn to theories of love in the work of third world and postmodern writers. According to Chela Sandoval in *Methodology of the Oppressed*, third world writers "who theorize social change understand 'love' as a hermeneutic, as a set of practices and procedures that can transit all citizen-subjects, regardless of social class, toward a differential mode of consciousness" (140).<sup>2</sup> More specifically, they "understand love as a 'breaking' through whatever controls in order to find 'understanding and community': it is defined as 'hope' and 'faith' in the potential goodness of some promised land; it is defined as Anzaldúa's *coatlicue* state, which is a 'rupturing' in one's everyday world that permits crossing over to another" (140). These practices and procedures of love are "what Cherríe Moraga calls a 'theory in the flesh'" (7). Like the writers in my study, these more recent third world activists and artists make connections between love as a liberatory practice and the need to attend to the body,

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<sup>2</sup> Sandoval refers to the similar theories of love within the work of Che Guevara, Franz Fanon, Gloria Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, Trinh Minh-ha, and Cherríe Moraga, "to name only a few" (140).



rather than transcend it. We have decades of rich and dynamic feminist work that rightly warns against essentialism. With these cautions in mind, the potential power of embracing the body in connection with these methods and theories of love promises to deepen the activist potential of love.

In proposing this project, I was struck by the number of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors who seemed to me to be doing work similar to that of Gove Nichols, Davis, Olsen, and H.D. That is, authors who resist oppressive patriarchal norms by valuing a diverse range of bodily experiences through which to fall in love with the self and with others in provocative and transformative ways. Katherine Butler Hathaway's *The Little Locksmith* (1942) is a particularly good example. Hathaway contracted tuberculosis of the spine at a very young age and, according to the most advanced treatments of her time, spent years immobile in a brace, and was nonetheless deformed with a spinal curvature. According to Nancy Mairs, the extraordinary thing about Hathaway's autobiography is that the author writes "frankly about the body"; and not just any body, but a disabled woman's body (250). The other powerful aspect of *The Little Locksmith* is Hathaway's profound insights about humanity and love. Love, she writes, is the human assertion "that life is not ordinary" (196). Hathaway continues, "I was a fanatic in my belief that life is not ordinary, and in my hatred for all the acts, manners, talk, and jokes which treat the mystery of life as if it were comic and obscene, to be handled with contempt and laughed at or kicked around like an old rag. I believed that the experience of being born, of living, and of dying was all a poem, and that it should be received—all of it, every part of it—with wonder and gratitude" (196). When

she saw people in love “regarding each other with an intense awareness of each other’s mystery and preciousness,” she “believed that those two had for the time being cast off the corruption of ordinariness which makes most people blind to the miracle of existence” (196-197). Hathaway argues, to use Sandoval’s terms, that love breaks through control and oppression, replacing them with understanding and community. In the same spirit as Gove Nichols’ “love and truth cure,” Davis’ empathy for others, Olsen’s “selfness” that strokes and seeds healing, and H.D.’s fertile remembering that transforms fear into empowerment, Hathaway is committed to love’s potential for making connections and effecting radical transformations.

Similarly, Emma Goldman’s autobiography *Living My Life* (1931) recounts the activist’s struggles with illness, disability, and as a result, her inability to give birth. Goldman, too, identifies love as an important method of resisting domination: “Love is that most powerful factor in human relationship which from time immemorial has defied all man-made laws and broken through the iron bars of conventions in Church and morality” (57). Love, she argues, has the potential to radically disrupt these man-made laws and iron bars of convention that commodify and distort our relationships to our bodies and to each other. In the rapidly changing world of the early twentieth century, these narratives focused on the body and liberatory love keep reasserting themselves as a form of social activism that is as concerned with the flesh of daily life as it is with the health of the spirit or soul. There are many writers who, in order to heal or make sense of their physical and psychic suffering, use their bodily experiences to inspire a discourse on love as activism. This reveals to me the importance of maintaining a fluid definition of

liberatory love—of adding expressions and methods of loving to the definition I have excavated from the texts in this project. Our definitions of love cannot be allowed to stagnate. Love is not a fixed, stable entity, but rather one that is mobile and recursive; and there is such pleasure and growth to be had by taking part in the continuous unfolding of liberatory methods of loving.

There are times when engaging in liberatory love requires little effort on the part of the lover(s); times when we simply fall into love for self and other as a result of a curious alignment of external and internal forces. There are hints of these serendipitous moments of revelation in H.D.'s work and in Gove Nichols' experience. Mostly, however, the practice of liberatory loving is hard work; best exemplified by Davis' narrator's witnessing Deb's speaking body. It requires a commitment to love as practice and activism in the face of numerous obstacles, from the criticism of others to a social order antagonistic to our caring for others. This practice demands our vulnerability to the suffering of others—both to strangers in time, space, and identity and to those who are perhaps painfully close. It requires our willingness to acknowledge our own “situatedness,” to use Donna Haraway's term, along with the limits, privileges, and blind-spots of those situations or perspectives. To be liberatory, love must be examined for power dynamics and for mutuality and reciprocity. Our practices of love must acknowledge the past, make peace with the past, and also actively make meaning from the past. As a practice, love must radiate from the body—not cut off from but emanating from touch, embrace, and breath.

With this in mind, I would like to put a final word in for the body as a potential locus of liberatory love. Deborah Slicer points out that,

A human body is sixty electrical jolts a minute, at rest; twenty-five feet of gut, containing a virtual hothouse of microbes, each with its own diet; ninety square yards of alveoli, all performing the elegant exchange of oxygen and carbon; a mind that blips continuously up and down an eighteen-inch rope of salty brain-stuff the thickness of a man's finger. To be 'home' is first to inhabit one's own body. We are each, as body, a biological ecosystem as complex, efficient, and as fragile as the Brooks Range, the Everglades, a native prairie. (113)

The body is inscribed by culture; but it is also a powerful and complex biological ecosystem that deserves to be considered when crafting a methodology of social liberation. As Nancy Mairs writes, "Unless they dress it up in veils of metaphor and view it from some distance, most writers, like most people in general, view the body with misgiving and even distaste" (250). No matter how much we long to ignore or repress the body, it inevitably demands to be heard; and what a shame anyway to let such a dynamic, active, and multi-layered entity exist in silence. To practice love we cannot remain fearful of the body or we run the risk of producing theories that are severed from the realm of practice and from the routine of our daily lives.

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### Education

Ph.D., English, Lehigh University, Expected May 2011  
Graduate Certificate in Women's Studies  
M.A., American Studies, Lehigh University, May 2005  
B.A., English, minor in Women's Studies, Bloomsburg University, May 2002

### Dissertation

*Liberatory Embodiment: Love and the Body in the Works of American Women Writers, 1855-1945.*

Dawn Keetley and Elizabeth Dolan, directors

My dissertation argues that American women writers such as Mary Gove Nichols, Rebecca Harding Davis, Tillie Olsen, and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) construct a methodology of revolutionary love through embodied experiences that nurture, heal, and effect radical social change.

### Publications

"Healing Embodiment: Mary Gove Nichols's Fictionalized Autobiography *Mary Lyndon* (1855)," under consideration.

"Breast Milk and Catalpa Nectar: Tillie Olsen's Negotiations of the Maternal Body in *Yonnonidio* (1930s)," under consideration.

Review of *Feminist Interpretations of Emma Goldman*, edited by Penny A. Weiss and Loretta Kensinger. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2007, forthcoming at *Feminist Teacher*.

### Conferences and Presentations

"The Roots You Need Are Where You Are Now: A Celebration of Tillie Olsen," Humanities Center at Lehigh University, November 2009.

"'To live as if to live and love were one:' Feminist Configurations of Love, Embodiment, and Resistance to Oppression in the Fictionalized Autobiography of Mary Gove Nichols." Society for the Study of American Women Writers, Philadelphia, PA, October 2009



“What does Sarah Palin mean for Feminism?” Roundtable discussion, *Feminism in Practice*, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA, Fall 2008.

“Tenements and Flesh: Poverty Writing the Body in Tillie Olsen’s *Yonnondio*.” Pennsylvania College English Association: *Celebrating American Literature*, State College, PA, Spring 2008. (Featured in Lehigh University’s *Graduate Research Review*)

“Tongues on Fire: Rerouting Feminist Speech in Nineteenth-Century Literature.” Boston College Colloquium: *Another Way In*, Boston, MA, March 2007. (Featured in Lehigh University’s *Graduate Research Review*)

“An African Vine in Philadelphia: Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* and Giving Voice to the Oppressed through Constructions of History.” American Studies Association, Bethlehem, PA, Spring 2004.

“To Well Up from the Abject: Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* and the Subversive Sexual.” Bloomsburg University: *Sexing the Color Line: Mutations of Race and Gender*, Bloomsburg, PA, Spring 2001.

### **Teaching and Research Interests**

Modernism

Realism and Naturalism

Regionalism

Working Class Literature

African American Literature

Feminist and Gender Theory

Women’s Studies

American Studies

Gay and Lesbian Studies

Literary Theory

### **Teaching Experience**

Literature

Speaking Bodies: Reading Embodiment in Literature and Film, cross-listed with Women’s Studies (Eng/WS 189), Spring 2009

Telling Stories: Folklore and Modern American Literature (Eng 011), Fall 2007

Women’s and Gender Studies

Feminism and Social Activism (WS 191), Summer 2011

Introduction to Women’s Studies (WS 101), Spring 2008

Introduction to Women’s Studies (WS 101), teaching assistant for Dawn Keetley, Spring 2006

Composition and Literature

As a Teaching Fellow, I independently design and teach courses in Lehigh’s First-Year Writing Program, Fall 2005-present

In Sickness and In Health: Conceptions of Illness in Contemporary American Literature and Culture (Eng 002), 2 sections  
 Literature of Protest (Eng 001), 2 sections  
 Issues in Contemporary American Culture: Class, Surveillance, and Consumer Culture (Eng 001)  
 Identity Politics: Investigations of Class, Race, Gender, and Consumer Culture (Eng 001)  
 Place, Borders and Identity in Modern American Writing (Eng 002)  
 Reading the “Other” in American Literature (Eng 002)  
 Reading Modernity in Classic and Contemporary Detective Fiction (Eng 002)

### **Awards and Fellowships**

- Nominated for the Stout and College of Arts and Sciences Dissertation Awards by Lehigh University’s English Department
- 2010 Mid-Atlantic Region Women’s Studies Association Honorary Mention for Graduate Research Paper in Feminist Scholarship, “Breast Milk and Catalpa Nectar: Tillie Olsen’s Negotiations of the Maternal Body in *Yonnondio* (1930s)”
- Senior Teaching Fellowship, Lehigh University English Department, 2009-2010 term
- Humanities Center Research Grant, Lehigh University, Summer 2009
- Dissertation Fellowship, Lehigh University English Department, 2008-2009 term
- College of Arts and Sciences Summer Fellowship, Lehigh University, 2008
- Teaching Fellowship, Lehigh University English Department, Fall 2005-Spring 2009

### **Assistantships and Employment**

- Writing Center, Tutor, Lehigh University, Fall 2007-present
- Writing Center, Tutor, Bloomsburg University, Spring 1999-Spring 2001
- *The Vault at Pfaff’s*, Research Assistant to Edward Whitley, Lehigh University, Fall 2006 to Summer 2007
- Society for the Study of American Women Writers, conference assistant, Fall 2006
- LGBTQA Graduate Assistant, Lehigh University, Fall 2005

### **Service**

- Library and Technology Services Department Representative, 2009-2010 academic year
- Honors Senior Thesis Examination Committee, for Christine Lee, Spring 2009
- Women’s Studies Advisory Board, panel member, Lehigh University, Spring 2008
- Humanities Center Steering Committee, Lehigh University, Summer 2007-present
- Liaison to the Department Chair, 2007-2008 academic year

- Feminisms, Co-Founder and Steering Committee Member, Lehigh University, Fall 2006-present.  
Feminisms is a feminist enclave that hosts readings of fiction, non-fiction and poetry, film screenings and discussions, fund raising events for local women's organizations, social outreach, and speakers/events on Lehigh's campus.
- African American Literature Reading Group, Co-founder
- Bethlehem Boys and Girls Club, volunteer tutor, activities coordinator, and mentor, Summer and Winter Breaks, 1998-2002

**Academic and Editorial Experience**

- Reviewer, *Thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture*, Fall 2006-present
- Williams Prize Judge, an annual undergraduate prize for excellence in writing, 2007-present
- Editor, Bloomsburg University Literary Journal, 1998-2000

**Professional Memberships**

American Studies Association  
 Modern Language Association  
 Rebecca Harding Davis Society  
 (founding member)

National Women's Studies Association  
 Modernist Studies Association  
 Society for the Study of American  
 Women Writers

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