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## Permeable Boundaries: Globalizing Form in Contemporary American and British Literature

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**PERMEABLE BOUNDARIES: GLOBALIZING FORM  
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN AND BRITISH LITERATURE**

**BY**

**NANCY CARONIA**

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**OF**

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## ABSTRACT

Efforts to define globalization often are delimited by concrete articulations focused on and about the economic and political processes within a global sphere. These processes dominate global studies in economics, feminism, history, law, sociology, and literature. “Permeable Boundaries: Globalizing Form in Contemporary American and British Literature” is an interdisciplinary literary study that explores how gender, racial, and ethnic categories are connected not through economic models, but through the subjective processes of agency, self-identity, and narrative making. These discrete processes of consciousness expand how globalization is imagined through the human condition. Engaging with American and British texts focused on the global cities of London and New York offers new ways to think about how marginalized individuals and communities make choices and view themselves as central protagonists in their lives. Globalization can be viewed as more than an economic construction that leaves those without capital on the margins as victims and rubes. This examination is about finding the means to embrace an English vernacular as more than a construction of Western hegemony that marginalizes those with no economic or political clout.

I draw on feminist readings from second and third wave feminists in the development of this argument, but am not interested in a proscriptive fix that simply replaces a dominant gender or racial construct with another, just as constricting construction. Rather, I add to existing discussions of globalization and literary studies by raising questions of agency, identity, and narrative form in an effort to show how consciousness both influences and is influenced by the global sphere. The feminist readings are engaged with sociology, history, psychology, political science, law, as well as narratological theory that focuses on how narrative is formed through agency and self-identity. As case studies, my chapters offer readings of Bernardine Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe* (2001), Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), Louise DeSalvo’s *Casting Off* (1987), and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011).

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## **DEDICATION**

For my niece, Sabrina Marie Iraggi ~  
No matter the distance, you are always close in my heart.

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Introduction: From the Margin, Left of Center: Self-Definition in the Global City

The transformation of silence into language and action  
is an act of self-revelation  
and that always seems fraught with danger.  
Audre Lorde

In “Permeable Boundaries: Globalizing Form In Contemporary American and British Literature,” agency is a central form of narrative making in contemporary fiction.

Individuals who are normally objectified and marginalized are empowered by their ability to self-define and act rather than react. Objectification and marginalization by outside or oppressive forces are problems with which to deal, not modes of being that define worth. Life is viewed not through a dominant, oftentimes male, gaze, but through a lens of a self-defined agency.<sup>1</sup> Instead of objects who have things happen to them or on them or about them, the protagonists in Bernardine Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe* (2001), Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), Louise DeSalvo’s *Casting Off* (1987), and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011) are subjects who articulate agency—the ability to define and shape their own lives—no matter their gender, class position, ethnic or racial categorizations.

bell hooks argues that those who look for “legitimation” or “validation” outside their selves forfeit the “power to be self-defining” (*Feminism* 95). In giving up this right, the subject position is compromised, objectification becomes internalized, and agency is a reactive construct that supports a false notion of the self. Rather than thinking about agency as a byproduct of resistance or rejection to erasure, hooks insists that women

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<sup>1</sup>In film, according to Laura Mulvey, females are portrayed as images of male fantasies, based upon both desires and fears. This one-dimensionality empowers men as active participants who maintain “a controlling and curious [male] gaze” in the construction of their fantasies, but disempowers women since they are viewed and represented as passive objects with no desire for sexual pleasure or agency outside of a man’s needs (8).

define their worth free from the judgment of an outsider gaze entangled by hegemonic power constructs. Agency becomes an individual subjective process that supports and is part of a multi-vocal community. Women do not acquire agency, but learn how to use the agency they possess. They are not supplements or gaps in otherwise dominant narratives; they create the dominant narrative. This view of agency is rooted in second wave feminism, especially hooks' and Audre Lorde's theories of identity and agency, but is embraced by a third wave feminism that "foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate ... intersectional and multiperspectival" connections (Snyder 175).

Even when those personal narratives are privileged, these stories continue to be absent from what Carla Freeman notes are the "grand treatments of globalization" (1010). In order to upend how females are reduced in globalization studies to "generic bodies or invisible practitioners of labor and desire," Freeman suggests that more nuanced images of gender need to be "situated within social and economic processes and cultural meanings that are central to globalization itself" (1010). My aim in this project is not only to examine how self-identity and agency are central to narrative making, but also to consider how that agency propels individuals and communities that are regularly obfuscated, minimized, or co-opted within globality's economic calculations and wealth distribution towards a global multivocality and action that is made apparent through narrative form and structure.

In formulating my ideas on agency as a self-defined process of a third wave global feminism, I take my definition of globalization from Manfred Steger's synthesis of

globalization, globality, and cultural globalization.<sup>2</sup> Globalization is “a multidimensional set of social processes” that moves purposefully, if inconsistently, towards the “social *condition*” of globality, which is premised by a move from national allegiances towards global connections and relationships (Steger 13; 7). Globalization’s processes “create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges” and create “connections between the local and the distant” (13). Inherent in Steger’s definition is the multiplicity of how people think, interact, and ultimately associate. There is no good, bad, dominant, or submissive embedded within the definition. Everyone acts. It is a multi-vocal, multiperspectival construction. At the same time, those who reap economic and social benefits through these processes often become privileged in hegemonic constructions that weight certain characteristics, especially material wealth and both physical and technological mobility, as more valuable than others.

The phrase “permeable boundaries” in the title of this project is a mobile and positive concept that relegates to the sidelines static and rigid forms of a global imaginary focused on economics and consumer culture. It is a purposeful reference to how protagonists inhabit internal and external space in a multiplicity of ways. Permeability has the connotation of leakage, the way individuals who code switch may drop the veil or how social justice movements of the Civil Rights era and the Arab Spring create opportunities for juridical and cultural changes. The word also has to do with absorption and influence, which suggests there is no concrete or single way to act. The quality of diffusion inherent in permeability is about the ability to morph, but rather than

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<sup>2</sup>“The concept and discourse of globalization,” as Ulrich Beck argues, “is like trying to nail a blancmange to the wall” (20). This project is not a genealogy of globalization, but rather a snapshot of how narratives might privilege certain modes of agency and self-identity in a time of shifting terrain.

compromise or resistance, there is an inherent stability in knowing that the only thing that can be counted on is change—in circumstances and in forms. “Globalizing form” in the title refers to narrative structure and characters and communities—the way individuals self-define and then respond to their life situations cannot be separated from the narrative forms that shape and are shaped by the lives lived on the page. Taken together, permeability and globalizing form challenge a dominant ethos found in globalization theories that view those without mobility or capital as marginalized subaltern constructions or numbers in an economic calculation.

“The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action,” Audre Lorde’s theorization of how to detangle from heteronormative cultural scripts focuses on “self-revelation” as a necessary component to self-definition and the expression of that agency through language-based interaction (“Transformation” 21).<sup>3</sup> Lorde views self-revelation as the first step of a path aimed at claiming a self-defining agency and making active choices rather than submitting to stultifying cultural scripts.<sup>4</sup> Lorde suggests that the journey away from heteronormative cultural scripts “seems fraught with danger”

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<sup>3</sup>This essay was originally delivered as a speech for the Lesbian and Literature Panel at the Modern Languages Association (MLA) on December 28, 1977. At that time, second wave feminists focused mostly on nineteenth and twentieth century women writers like Virginia Woolf in order to make a case for a woman’s literary tradition. See Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*; Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*; and Annette Kolodny’s “Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism.”

<sup>4</sup>See Adrienne Rich’s “Claiming an Education,” a convocation speech for Douglass College delivered three months before Lorde’s speech. Rich’s piece has become ubiquitous in introductory gender and women’s studies courses for its admonishment to understand that “responsibility to yourself means that you don’t fall for shallow and easy solutions: predigested books and ideas, ... [and] taking “gut” courses instead of ones you know will challenge you” (24). Both Lorde and Rich ask women to consider agency and self-identity in matters both intellectual and communal.

(“Transformation” 21). Her use of the word “seems” indicates that the “danger” in this self-reflective transformative and transforming experience is not only or necessarily external (“Transformation” 21). The linking verb is not designed to minimize the actual physical, mental, and emotional threats that those on the margins face for transgressing dominant scripts, or simply being viewed as an *other*, but provides a context for how those individuals become paralyzed when contemplating choices that point away from a socially inscribed submission and silence. The silence is double-edged. Following cultural scripts and being trapped by oppressive ideologies silences in one direction—an external silence, but the fear of breaking that silence can create another kind of blankness that is read as ignorance or apathy by the dominant culture.

The verb “seems” is the tension between the lived reality of those individuals and groups on the margins of a heteronormative society’s expectations and what Lorde later names the “*mythical norm*,” which causes already marginalized individuals and groups to interiorize difference as a personal deficiency rather than positive external action (“Age” 116). This “*mythical norm*” is akin to the dominant imaginaries with which structures like nation-states, empires, and global homogenization are constructed. Any decision for those systemically silenced by these dominant imaginaries is “fraught with danger” (“Transformation” 21). We are human beings, not human perfects, but those who magnify their imperfections (or have had them magnified through judicial, cultural, or political means) may believe that they are mistakes rather than that they make mistakes. The danger is perceived whether the possible exposure is manufactured rather than actual. Lorde is suggesting that the *appearance* of danger becomes overwhelming in the face of acknowledging one’s rights. Each word and choice is weighed against the

possibility of actual threats no matter how inconsequential the decisions may be. Silence and fear are viewed as siblings pitted in competition with each other, which may work for hegemonic institutions, but only serves to silence those without power in those systems. Paralysis is not just about a fear of what will be done or discovered about an individual, but what she becomes capable of doing if she allows the difference to define her.

There is a third way of thinking about silence that Lorde never names directly, but permeates her theories on language, self-reflection, and agency. Silence can be an observant, active process, not simply a state of mind that produces paralysis and isolation. This observance, both as witness to the self and in the world, fosters a language that is transformed into action or series of actions that breaks down isolation and builds up community and connection. Without the active silence of observer and witness, (mythical) heteronormative scripts, knee-jerk responses to those scripts, and non-choices that focus on others' desire and expectations obscure the ability to self-identity and self-define agency. Silent observation breaks down the lie that the dominant narrative is the only one, or the only one that counts. In unwinding the conflation between an outside and an internal gaze, the external connection to like minds is not something that foregrounds introspection, but is a process that fosters witnessing and the ability to be witnessed.

Like Lorde, Manuel Castells' ideas on identity are tied to a "process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes, that is given priority over other meanings" (6). Castells states individuals have a plurality of ways in which to view them selves and interact with larger communities. He delimits this multiplicity by bifurcating his network theory between "the conflicting trends of globalization and identity" and he privileges economic processes, particularly

neo-liberalism's rise in "the restructuring of capitalism" (71; 1). Castells is fairly pessimistic with regards to how much a dominant script can be unwound or resisted since the network society makes it "impossible, except for the elite inhabiting the timeless space of global networks and their ancillary locales" to build "reflexive life-planning" (11). This model suggests that there is no choice but to resist or conform, reifying the dominant imaginary and the economic reality of a top-down construction.

Castells forms at least part of his identity theory through Anthony Giddens's definition of "late modernity," a position where there is "an increasing interconnection between the two extremes of extensionality and intentionality" (1; 5). Giddens argues that this construction is actually a restructuring of self-identity through "a dialectical interplay between the local and the global," giving individuals greater choices, while destabilizing cultural traditions and prescribed roles (5). Self-identity is viewed as both a reflexive project that is contingent on knowing one's "biography" and "what one is doing and why one is doing it" (32). This definition mistakes the reflexivity of memoir for the linear and mundane biographical details of one's life that is without self-reflection. Giddens focuses on the external, the intentional plan that prescribes outward action. Nowhere in this definition is an individual's interiority considered—except if Giddens posits that as a given premise of late modernity and then it would presume a hegemonic point of view. As such, Lorde's theory of self-revelation is a reminder that agency and self-reflexivity are not merely after-thoughts or assumed, but foreground the form and substance of identity. This assessment is integral in examining the multi-perspectival view that exists, but is often ignore in globalization studies, particularly those connections to cultural globalization.

Steger defines cultural globalization as “the intensification and expansion of cultural flows across the globe” (69). He then divides the term into three discrete categories: economic, political, and cultural. The first two categories deal with consumption and power, but the third, cultural, is viewed not as an active or actual exchange, but a “symbolic construction, articulation, and dissemination of meaning” (69). Steger further argues, “language, music, and images constitute the major forms of symbolic expression, [and] assume special significance in the sphere of culture” (69). I do not view literature as a representation or symbol of culture, but culture itself. In examining the narrative within a novel or memoir as a symbol rather than a process of someone’s becoming or an articulation of a voice that is real, Steger’s definition comes across as an unconscious disregard for marginalized and silenced voices. Voices that speak to how black men feel in a militarized zone become a symbol of the capitalist culture rather than a resistance to that ideological construction of capitalism or a natural and functional response to oppression. If the power of the Arab Spring is a symbolic representation of the frustration of displacement, or Danielle Henderson’s *Feminist Ryan Gosling*, both a website and a book that presents easily consumable memes of feminist theory through the voice of Ryan Gosling, is transitory, impermanent, or simply fun, the interventions into and upending of processes that do not take these positions into account remain codified within a linear model of top down constructions.<sup>5</sup> More important,

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<sup>5</sup>The most recent post on the Tumblr site is an article by Katie Rife that cites a University of Saskatchewan study that “has shown that men are more likely to agree with feminist statements after looking at Ryan Gosling memes. Specifically, they respond positively to pictures of Gosling from *Feminist Ryan Gosling*, which layers feminist text over pictures of the actor staring directly into the camera with his piercing baby blue eyes.”



making meaning becomes an unreal endeavor except for those who excel in the economic and political spheres of cultural globalization.

But cultural globalization is more than a view of how the privileged live or how communities are deprived. The normally silenced and marginalized voices of local and global discourses can be recognized as narratives of agency and self-identity, not merely ones of resistance or representations of a type of objectification. These narratives do not stand outside the dominant discourse. They are their own dominant discourses even if they are not recognized within a hegemonic rhetoric or their stories are reduced to stereotype and symbolic meaning.

Lorde's demand for self-reflection and action is useful in thinking through the global imaginary of women and men of color in global cities of the twenty-first century. The self-revelation necessary to claim agency and consciously create narrative is at once a marker of how networks emerge that are more than resistance narratives, conforming portraits of giving up in globality's economic wake, or symbols of cultural globalization. Community, genuine community cannot be made without the strength of those who engage in self-reflection and speak up for who they are and how they wish to be in the world. The active silence that Lorde advocates is an important component of this narrative making. As James Phelan states: "Cultural narratives fulfill the important function of identifying key issues and values within the culture or subculture that tells them, even as they provide grooves for our understanding of new experiences" (9). Phelan's argument suggests that these "new experiences" not only place communities within a continuum, but also define class, race, gender, and kin relationships (9). Phelan's reading, however, focuses on how marginalized cultural narratives can be read by

dominant subjects. I am more interested in how those considered marginal or secondary characters read themselves.

I purposefully chose novels that can serve as examples of a larger continuum that privileges a vast landscape of experience that is not “new” to the protagonists (9). These *lived* experiences craft the written cataloguing of long-standing familiarities ignored or repressed and pushed to the margins by those with economic and political power. The “complex back-and-forth” of life in a global city is emergent not as a product of economic or political constraints, but as one of the subjective processes of consciousness in claiming individual agency within various communities (Jay, *Global Matters* 3). The protagonists in the texts I examine make uncomfortable decisions, sometimes to their detriment, but their lives, although clearly ensconced in global cities and taken up with the processes of cultural globalization, are products of their choices and agency. Their lives are not judged or viewed solely through an economic lens that finds them wanting if they do not have a certain income or inhabit a certain kind of home or are of the middle, working, or poor classes. Instead, their choices are products of facile minds and pragmatism. They are an alternative to views of globalization that only deals with the economic processes or focuses on white, heteronormative, financially successful members of globality or one-dimensional stereotypes of the desperate and poor, i.e., anyone who is not living in a condo in New York or London.

By privileging marginal communities who inhabit the center of a global city, “Permeable Boundaries: Globalizing Form in American and British Contemporary Literature” is a casebook study of multi-vocal stories where agency is a self-defining act of narrative making. Novels like *The Emperor’s Babe*, *Brick Lane*, *Casting Off*, and *Zone*

*One* are rich sites that delimit connections to a dominant imaginary through protagonists' whose agency is connected to an internal rather than external rhythm. This interdisciplinary feminist intervention shifts the view away from the dominant imaginary within the field of literary studies to shine a light on those groups and individuals who are either unheard of or stereotyped by current theories of globalization and the global city.

### *The Global Imaginary*

The “global imaginary,” as Steger and Paul James argue, “remains in continuing intersection with prior dominant imaginaries such as ‘the national’ and ‘the sacred order of things’” (“Three Dimensions” 70). The phrase “dominant imaginaries” push ideas about globality towards a hierarchal synchronic history based upon a collective hegemonic unconscious that evolves from one dominant refrain to another. But globalization, like nation-building or imperial constructions, is not simple, fixed, or assured; it is permeable in its mutations and flows. Steger and James, like Castells, suggest the “‘objective’ dynamics linked to economics and technology” are at the forefront of this global imaginary (“Three Dimensions” 53). This construction is similar to the same way Benedict Anderson suggests, “the convergence of capitalism and print technology ... created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation” (46). Those on the lower rungs of global ideologies regarding capital and mobility are dismissed or viewed only as resistant entities of the global future.

Cynthia Enloe argues globalization “can happen to anything,” but views the processes as “a shorthand label ... for the worldwide sprawl of capitalist business

organizations and flows of technology, labor, and capital designed to enhance the profits of those businesses” (3).<sup>6</sup> Her assessment suggests that globalization just *happens* to people or groups, denying self-identity and agency within globality. The objective processes of economic calculations and political governments are intriguing and important, but their dominance in discussions and theorizations of globality and the processes of globalization obscure the subjective processes of individual and group consciousness that is not central to these concerns.

What Steger and James refer to as the “‘subjective’ processes, particularly the thickening of our consciousness of the world as an interconnected whole,” become marginalized or remain, like Anderson’s calculation that consciousness arises out of socioeconomic concerns, products of objective material processes (“Three Dimensions” 53). Roland Robertson points out, “Anderson’s contributions to the theory of nationalism are centered on the theme of connectivity, with consciousness ... arising out of or from ... socioeconomic relationships” (“Global Connectivity” 1338). In a similar manner, the subjective processes of globality have also been limited. Steger and James privilege “economic infrastructure” over “self, identity, and belonging” even though they view the shift to globality as inevitable and encompassing both the objective and subjective processes (“Three Dimensions” 70). Those who reside outside the dominant imaginary are viewed as possessing a consciousness that envies, desires, or must fight for the

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<sup>6</sup>Anke S. Biendarra states: “For a long time the study of globalization was situated primarily in economics and political science, where it has been analyzed as a series of objective, material shifts linked to the increasing mobility of capital, the transnationalization of trade and production processes, the spread of neo-liberal policy norms, the decline of national autonomy, and a retreat from the practices of the Keynesian welfare state and social democracy [Rosamond 657]” (10).

technological and economic wealth available in globality rather than as individuals or groups who have or create processes of cultural globalization.

Zygmunt Bauman views globalization as centered on economic processes of a capitalist consumer culture that lead to “progressive spatial segregation, separation, and exclusion” (3). Those who are most affected by this delimitation are vagabonds “on the receiving end of globalization” since he views them as victims of and to globality (3). The individuals “at the globalized top” are tourists whose wealth gives them freedom of mobility (3). His binary construction reduces everyone to images of those who eat and those who are eaten even though he admits the line between the tourist and vagabond is “tenuous and not always clearly drawn” (96). This sentiment suggests that there is more than a simple binary at work, but Bauman only focuses on how those marginalized in globalization’s processes have their ontology compromised through a purely economic-based series of social processes.

Saskia Sassen’s focus on an economic model examines the “highly specialized [producer] services” that have emerged in global cities like New York, London, and Tokyo (99). She views these service provider cities as models of a “growth of a high-income stratum and a low-income stratum of workers” (13). Her calculations reinforce a hegemonic construction of economic profiteering that ignores those caught in the middle of this economic process—in other words, those who work at the bottom rung of service provision are not even worthy of calculation. They are neither vagabonds nor conformers—they are numbers in a service provider’s calculation. Their dislocation from certain conversations and aspects of cultural globalization is read as a product of a capitalist equation that is focused on the influx of service. How marginalized people

adjust or do not privilege these modes of discourse is not as important as their erasure from the upper echelons of the service model. The model proffered by Sassen, and Bauman for that matter, leaves those on the margins of society, through ethnicity, race, class, gender, and disability constructions, as expendable.<sup>7</sup> They are not viewed as collaborators in the objective processes of globalization since, as Enloe argues, globalization is about capital and wealth accumulation. Their contribution to the collective unconscious is only viewed through the lens of object and victim—a gaze that is patriarchal and hegemonic in construction.

The feminist sociologist Manisha Desai uses “a gender lens” to examine how “economic, political, and cultural arenas are shaping globalization” (10). She argues that transnational feminisms are “important, not so much for seeing the presence of women’s agency, as for understanding the contribution of feminist organizing in shaping a new ‘global politics’ and in providing further possibilities for global justice movements” (7-8). She suggests these are the “better stories” that “shape not only our imaginations, but also our actions” (89). Desai’s feminist interrogation reveals how women and men without capital or with limited labor choices resist or penetrate the dominant global imaginary. These individuals and groups are not passive actors waiting for something to happen to them or objects without a life outside of labor or bounded political positions. Desai’s focus is on the female gaze and action, and is akin to what Castells names resistant identities—those who create networks focused on fighting economic and political injustices. These narratives challenge the singular view of globality as an

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<sup>7</sup>See Kimberly Crenshaw’s “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” and Audre Lorde’s “There is No Hierarchy of Oppression” for insights into how hegemonic narratives dominate the way narratives of oppression are read and divisions are created.

economic nightmare that destroys local communities. . They do so, however, by focusing on the economic narrative. Although Desai suggests agency is a prerequisite, but that agency is used only in service to resisting the processes of politics and economics within cultural globalization.

Individual and group culture becomes reduced to how much one makes or how one resists an encroaching erasure due to a lack of capital, but culture is more than economics. London and New York are particularly interesting since as Sassen points out, they have been transformed into sites of service provision for global business concerns. London and New York are also the only two global cities that have received an Alpha ++ rating for “advanced producer services using the interlocking network model” from the Globalization and World Cities Research Network (GaWC).<sup>8</sup> Transnational discourse is often conflated with globalization’s processes, but in attaching the national to the global, there is a reinforcement of a dominant imaginary that marginalizes those without material wealth or position, recreating national class systems like those found in New York or London on a global scale. In examining the social processes of those who understand the power of self-definition, agency can be foregrounded as a global imaginary that does not deny economic hardship or social injustices, but continues to focus on ontology as a mobilizing narrative action. At the same time, even as the wealth base shifts and a larger percentage of the global population is at a disadvantage economically, the multiple communities occupying space in the global service provider sites of New York and London cannot be delimited solely through globalization’s economics processes. The individuals in these communities cannot and do not necessarily pledge allegiance merely

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<sup>8</sup>New York and London have received this distinction in 2000, 2004, 2008, 2010, and 2012, each year the GaWC has released a report.

(or even or only) to local or national discourses. Self-definition within the localized and globalized landscapes offers a productive way into imagining a multiplicity of individuals and communities beyond economic calculations. These individuals must be viewed as more than victims, rubes, or resistance fighters of and within a globalized world that only sees how many toilets they clean in investment banking institutions or how many protest marches they organize.

In “A Genealogy of ‘Globalization’: The Career of a Concept,” Paul James and Steger’s introduction to a special issue of *Globalizations*, James and Steger “fill ... in [the] knowledge vacuum by examining the under-researched and genealogical and epistemological foundations of the concept ‘globalization.’” (418). Discursively mapping out the concept’s “obscure origins in the 1930s” through the present, James and Steger rely upon Raymond Williams’s “seminal study on the concept of ‘culture’” as well as his “insightful investigation of what he called *Keywords*” (418). James and Steger conclude with the idea that globalization is a “concept [that] draws most of its power from a condensation of associations across all four levels of the formation of social meanings”—ideas, ideologies, “‘imaginary’ layer of the formation of meaning,” and “the deepest sense of the human condition” (431-432). In detailing how self-revelation leads to the ability to self-define and act, both physically and linguistically, it is clear that I am most interested in the human condition aspect of globalization. Focusing on this layer of cultural meaning offers rich and complex possibilities for examining how individuals on the margins interact, respond, and create ideas and ideologies separate from dominant imaginaries having to do with economic sociocultural global relationships. In order to elevate these individuals and communities beyond stereotype or value-laden economic



calculations, engagement with these multiple communities must be viewed through an interdisciplinary lens, one that reaches beyond resistant identities and capitalism consumer culture.

### *Literary Studies in the Global Sphere*

Literary studies offer an opportunity to move beyond the economic and political borders of globalization. Agency and self-identity that is not contiguous with the dominant assessment of a singular view of overarching social conditions does not mean that empire or the nation-state does not or did not exist, but that there are those who consciously and unconsciously ignore or, as Castells suggests and Desai examines, resist that particular telling of how the shifts occur. But, as Suman Gupta notes, the concepts of globalization do not “emerge ... so to speak, from *within*, but somewhat resistantly as a term that batters ... [literary studies] from *outside*” (6).

What that means is American and British literature continues to dominate conversations through stultifying categories of national belonging. Jay argues that the condition of contextualizing through national boundaries within literary studies has to do with the arbitrary nature of the “*choice* to study literary texts and other cultural forms as national productions, and that organizing literary studies around departments of English, Spanish, German, Japanese, or French literatures is in some senses an arbitrary decision” (*Global Matters* 73). But even that reason is suspect since we do not categorize literature outside of a (primarily) European construct with the same level of discretion. European influence is different than the lived reality of individuals and narratives that come into being through multiple and complex connections that have little to do with national

concerns or with national ideologies that are not contiguous with what is considered a dominant European model. If European languages deserve their own compartmentalized disciplines, Africa or Asia cannot be served up as discrete constructions focused on national constituencies. This adherence to European national boundaries becomes a sham devised to keep a dominant narrative (that is not necessarily actually dominant) in place.

James and Steger rightly point out that “globalizing relations are still discussed today in terms of *international* relations, *transnational* connections, and ‘a *world system*,’ but the anachronistic hold of those terms is what Raymond Williams would call ‘residual’” (432). This idea is important to understanding why literary studies conflation of globalization studies with transnationalism is not simply a bad idea, but an unproductive and, in some cases, inappropriate, one. Transnationalism suggests an adherence to national boundaries that create patriotic allegiances, but, as mentioned above, the ways in which categories of literary studies are often divided between European countries and then entire continents suggests the exchange privileges Western hegemony rather than how globalized individuals transcend national or transnational boundaries.

At the 2015 MLA panel on “The Global Novel: Theories, Form, Histories, Controversies” when the scholar and writer Mukoma Wa Ngugi posited: “How do we get out of the English metaphysical empire?” he was referring, of course, to how theories of the global novel continue to focus on Western texts, themes, and publication histories. Until a novel like Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is read in Achebe’s native tongue of Igbo, Ngugi argues, any discussions regarding global novels emanating out of the English language are lacking the foundations of what makes something global. The

original does not, but could exist in Achebe's case, as Ngugi argues, the way in which Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), written in English, was translated into Polish, Conrad's native language. Ngugi was making a point not just about translatability in globality, but what, for him, is the continued domination of Western discourse and how the English language shifts from the form of the nation-state to the emerging social condition of globality.

Two years before, at an MLA panel entitled "Between the Postcolonial and the Global," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests that the conflation of global English translatability and world literature means that scholars do not need to learn a foreign language, contributing to the monopolization of the Western lens on literary interrogations. Spivak is suggesting that English has become a monopoly of a sort that conflates transnationalism with comparative literature studies, shrinking the ability to offer readings of texts that are not bounded by the English language. This idea is important as it refers to literary studies as a discipline that continues to only examine English texts through British or American nation-state lenses. English language novels can and do construct heterogeneous environments and characters that smash preconceived notions of the past or present as well as challenge the heteronormative stance of dominant and submissive forms of Western discourse. These changes within contemporary American and British literature must be acknowledged if contemporary literature is to be viewed through a global lens that can decenter the Western lens of a dominant hegemony focused on economic processes. Literary studies scholars must break down the nation-state categories as discrete forms of study if we are to move beyond stagnation in reading texts written by authors who live or have lived in the US or Great

Britain. Once we can begin to acknowledge the multiplicity of ways authors and texts interact across global networks, a more eclectic categorization that recognizes the complicated and permeable nature of contemporary literature of the twenty-first century can be forged.

I include the descriptors American and British in the title of this project not as an attention seeking descriptor to do with a national or transnational status regarding the narratives. The novels chosen are not transnational discourses between the US and the UK or London and New York. Nor do they move as a point of national concern between London and the Commonwealth. The narratives operate from places that have to do with the concerns of cultural, political, and economic globalization processes having to do with populations distanced from a Western heteronormative discourse, but housed within two global cities where globalization's economic processes have shifted labor markets from manufacturing concerns to sites of service provision.

New York and London house multiple communities who speak more than English—in some cases communities have members who are bi- or tri-lingual and participate in multiple mobilizing linguistic communities. The common and dominant language of each city continues to be English for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the cities' locations within countries that privilege English as the national language through traditional if not legal means.<sup>9</sup> This language may in and of itself be a contentious form in thinking about and through a global discourse, especially as it relates

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<sup>9</sup>As Eric Miller notes, "'English-only' advocacy in the United States dates at least as far back as 1919, when President Theodore Roosevelt declared: 'We have room for but one language in this country, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house.'"

to marginalized communities, but English also offers the possibility of examining the processes of cultural globalization through figures who may be affected by white hegemony, white privilege, and Western heteronormative cultural scripts, but do not themselves privilege these discourses in the decisions they make or how they live their daily lives. To ignore or berate the confines of the narrative form written in English or reduce it to another example of Western hegemonic discourse would be a mistake, especially as it relates to the global cities of New York and London. In these cities, individuals who are bi- or trilingual influence and are influenced by the dominant English vernacular.

At the same time, Ngugi's question is a reminder that the terms of globalization and globality continue to be not only contentious, but also contain tendentious strands focused on Western, most especially British and American, privilege—another reason I purposefully use these descriptors. This privilege is at the foundation of those who view English as a transnational vernacular, what Steger and James name “the global imaginary [and] continuing intersection with prior dominant imaginaries” (“Three Dimensions” 70). But Ngugi's suggestion that Achebe's Igbo voice is silenced because *Things Fall Apart* has not been published in Igbo is complicated by the award winning writer Chimamanda Ngozi's Adichie's assertion that although she is the sibling most interested in her family's cultural traditions and history, she cannot participate in those discussions “because Igbo culture privileges men, and only the male members of the extended family can attend the meetings where major family decisions are taken. ... [She] cannot have a formal say. Because [she is] female” (“We Should”). Adichie understands that in order

for her voice to be heard, she cannot fully participate in Igbo culture and therefore cannot be fully heard in Igbo.

Adichie, who grew up in Nsukka, Nigeria in Achebe's former home, embraces English vernacular as the form that allows her female voice to be heard in Nigeria, but she freely includes Igbo in her fiction and non-fiction. In *Americannah* (2013), she chose to offer no translations of the Igbo words or sentences that are strewn throughout the narrative and explains that when she read as a child "[she] didn't necessarily understand every single thing—and [she] didn't need to" ("NBCC"). As a third wave feminist, she also suggests that readers today have access to an entire globe through "google .... If people are interested, they can look something up" ("NBCC"). Adichie's writings have been translated into thirty languages, but her insistence that not everything is translatable or needs to be translated suggests that English can be viewed as more than an oppressive language or a means of coercion. Adichie's view of English as a means to express her intrinsic connection to Igbo fosters an understanding that autonomy is possible in the midst of domination or oppression from multiple hegemonic constructions within and outside Western global discourse.

Thomas Peyser explains in his reading of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) how literary scholars "need ... to think about novels ... depicting a globalized world not simply because we can show that art is 'grounded' in social circumstances, but because novels themselves may have a crucial role to play in the very process of globalization" (256).<sup>10</sup> Literature, like music, television, social media, and other forms of narrative

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<sup>10</sup>Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman argue globalization "can only be grasped through its realization in a variety of narrative forms ... literature no doubt has a role to play in how we produce ... contradictory narratives about globalization" (604).

making, are not symbols of the world in which we live—they are how individuals bring their consciousness to bear on the world, and in some cases, resist the collective consciousness of a hegemonic narrative. The constructions are not abstract ruminations about the nature of being, but pragmatic narratives that reveal how people think through their understanding of how they want to live and interact.

Novels like Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003), Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2007), Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) satirize the social conditions of globality in productive ways, but each of them adheres to heteronormative scripts that denigrate, stereotype, and marginalize female characters. The male gaze is often lacking in self-reflection and is sexist and misogynistic, whether the male figures have economic power or not.<sup>11</sup> Each of these novels falls into a kind of lockstep in thinking through global imaginaries that privilege men as central actors of globalization, and economics as the only and most important process of globality. The networks created

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<sup>11</sup>Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* may be the most scathing portrait of US white male privilege in the age of globalization, but the late revelation of the protagonist Packer's fractured childhood blames the havoc he wreaks on a vulnerable and fragile emotional state. Packer's excessive privilege—he lives in a 48-room \$104 million condo near the United Nations—is a seemingly parodic presence since his solitary figure calls into question how and why wealth and power is accumulated. His excessive wealth does not keep Packer from wanting something to penetrate or breach the safety net that his money provides. He marries a woman he barely knows in order to pretend an intimacy that does not exist. He tells an assistant, Jane Melman, that he is “more excited” by her presence as he receives a rectal exam than his “first burning nights of adolescent frenzy” (49). She is dressed in her running suit, sweaty and fresh from a jog. Part of his desire is the voyeuristic nature of Melman watching him being penetrated by the doctor and the doctor's presence as the penetrator. Parker is a voracious appetite who is “packed” to maximum sensory and material occupancy and it is still not enough to satiate him. The material can never satiate him, and the people in his life are pawns on a chessboard that he constantly manipulates for his own pleasure or pain. No one matters in this story except Packer and he is a loathsome solipsistic workaholic whose self-hatred consumes him and everyone around him.

are filled with narcissistic portrayals of men who behave badly and are rewarded or men who desire to be more centrally located within a dominant Western discourse.

In focusing on the global cities of New York and London, I have purposefully chosen novels that work against these types of heteronormative scripts and global imaginaries. The narratives of *The Emperor's Babe*, *Brick Lane*, *Casting Off*, and *Zone One* are complicated and pragmatic encounters with a global imaginary that upends the dominant scripts focused on consciousness as a byproduct of socioeconomic processes. They are populated with female and male protagonists who shape their agency and make narrative. The texts focus on subjective processes of consciousness rather than the objective processes of economic conditions through the protagonists' self-reflective stances. The women and men of these novels have an intricate and sometimes complicated network of interactions that allows them visibility, even in dire circumstances. Most important, the protagonists' lived experience marginalizes and even dominates those imaginaries associated with Western constructions of globalization viewed in a continuum with ideologies of the nation-state and empire.

Culture is, as Jay suggests in an early and now iconic essay on literary studies and globalization, "now being defined in terms less of national interests than of a shared set of global ones" ("Beyond Discipline" 32). But in his volume on literary studies and globalization, he views transnationalism as a continuum of globalization even as he argues against the "center-periphery model" that sees globalization as a linear path of "power, commodities, and influence flowing from urban centers in the West to a peripheral developing world" (*Global Matters* 3). He suggests that the increasing lines of technological mobility create "complex back-and-forth flows of people and cultural



forms in which the appropriation and transformation of things—music, film, food, fashion— raise questions about the rigidity of the center-periphery model” (*Global Matters* 3). Most specifically, Jay argues that “urban centers” like New York and London influence those who reside in the “peripheral developing world,” but this construction belies how those thought on the periphery actually influence those who reside in global cities (*Global Matters* 3). In other words, other cultural models of globalization are ignored, erased, or co-opted. In reframing the discourse, the periphery is privileged as an influence not only on Western culture, but also on globality as a whole. This move away from the center-periphery model is not about ignoring how Western culture appropriates and dominates, but acknowledging how the dominant narrative is not the only way to view globality or the individuals who are affected by and affect it. Those outside of the dominant cultural narrative of globalization inhabit their own sense of privilege and singularity. A singularity that oftentimes has nothing to do with the dominant narrative.

Jay’s intervention mixes literary texts from the British Commonwealth, South Africa, and the global cities of New York and London. He is foregrounding a way around the center-periphery model that focuses on English language texts and makes use of post-colonialism, nationalism, and globalism as centers of narrative making, including Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Life of Oscar Wao*. Unlike Jay, I choose texts that privilege female protagonists and men of color who are not embedded in masculinist traditions. *The Emperor’s Babe*, *Brick Lane*, *Casting Off*, and *Zone One*, like Jay’s examples, reject the center-periphery model, but embrace a global construction centered on a female or feminine gaze. This narrative move delimits the dominant center completely and privileges the center of the marginalized—women and men of color who

have no economic game in globality. This narrative making offers a more expansive view of the possibilities in examining narratives that seem to be of the center, but are as much outside the dominant imaginary as texts that examine globalization processes outside of models of Western discourse. These texts are an important revelation of the permeable nature of the dominant imaginary even within service provider global cities like New York and London.

Although written by authors considered citizens in the US or the UK, these novels offer numerous opportunities for comparison, locally, and globally, through the way in which urban-dwellers meet the challenges of twenty-first century globality. Networking emerges not merely as a mode of resistance or conformity, but as the extension of the self-defining processes of agency that then can be related to basic community building that fosters connectivity. This connectivity is not a static posture or a one-sided, linear process, but a series of permeable constructions, or networks, focused on individuals and narratives that are grounded in and by change in both glocal and global communities. As such, these novels are examples of active entities not only through the stories that are told, but also how the narratives are structured. They expand the boundaries of what it means to be a scholar of English vernacular literature and work that transcends not only periodization, but also the archaic boundaries of nation-states still embraced by literary studies.

### *Shaping Global Form*

The novels of “Permeable Boundaries: Globalizing Form in Contemporary American and British Literature” are especially poignant examples of narrative frames that use English

to upend stereotypical portrayals, actions, and expected outcomes. I have chosen these narratives as examples of images of agency through unusual or interesting renderings in English, but also, and especially because, they do not focus on work as the central conceit of living in a global city. New York and London are places where desire, ambition, creativity, and fear intermingle. These emotions may have something to do with economic disparity or an inability to be accepted within the upper echelons of New York and London society, but that is only one small component of what it might mean to live in a global city. Work cannot be the central conceit of individual or group sustenance since so many people are not fulfilled by this work, especially if we are thinking about how globalization is dividing people into the haves and have nots, or as Zygmunt Bauman categorizes people—tourists and vagabonds. Focusing on labor and labor production or how marginalized people are further marginalized through their inability to work, their categorization as disposable labor, or their active resistance to these notions are not the only narrative choices that globalization is. Communities and individuals are more than their work, and if reading about disposable women is not enough to tell us, that work is not enjoyable or where they find meaning.<sup>12</sup> Work does not define who they are or how the choices they make in the rest of their lives are structured. How an individual treats him or her self may have consequences to the positions they are faced with occupying in their work and home life, but ultimately these individuals participate in cultural activities and multiple communities, and work is only one facet of their lives and presence in the world. The connections and relationships in a global city and agency of

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<sup>12</sup>See Melissa Wright's *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*.

individuals emanates from an ever expanding sense of movement that is not merely external, but internal.

As hooks and Lorde make clear, identity is not about what someone else thinks of me, it is how I perceive myself. *The Emperor's Babe*, *Brick Lane*, *Casting Off*, and *Zone One* work are examples of how narratives work against the center-periphery model even as they are situated within a continuum of Western narrative making. The novels are challenges to the globalizing form of a dominant view of social processes and groups of people through protagonists who are thoughtful, brash, and dangerous in how they reject that view of globality. Whether action emanates out of silence from the child bride Zulieka in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, a migrant forced into an arranged marriage and relocated to London like Nazeen in Ali's *Brick Lane*, an adulterous suburban housewife like Helen in DeSalvo's *Casting Off*, or the suburban "B" student Mark Spitz surviving the post-apocalypse in Whitehead's *Zone One*, each protagonist works through their fears of both invisibility and visibility. They risk being known, to them selves and to others, without embracing a dominant discourse. In this way, their identities transcend their socially prescribed roles and upend hegemonic narratives that privilege dominant social processes of cultural globalization.

The novels are examples of contemporary literary texts that disrupt homogenization within global literary studies through protagonists who mobilize the narratives across long distance and in the most intimate and confining of spaces—internally and externally. These protagonists combat or give in to their fears often before transcending the fear of being seen, especially to them selves. They embrace self-reflection as an active mode and enter into a swarm of local and global connections to

discover more about who they are and how they are connected. The novels, as such, privilege the voices of those normally silenced and marginalized figure and the protagonists are recast as actors and active witnesses.<sup>13</sup> Each text offers a clever take by the protagonists on consumer culture and the ubiquity of a free market capitalistic system, but I focus on individual identity and agency to reveal the ineffability of how and why people operate in the world the way in which they do. Narrative making is an intrinsic part of and connected to these modes of agency and identity.

In Chapter One: “Resisting Displacement in Bernardine Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe*,” I examine how a novel in verse upends both imperial and nation-state narrative forms to embrace multiethnic constructions of the twenty-first century. The protagonist Zuleika’s subject position as a black female on British soil before the English arrive upends notions of the purity myth surrounding present day constructions of whiteness or token multiculturalism in London. The eleven-year-old Sudanese migrant married to a Roman senator and mistress to the Roman Emperor uses her writing—rhymed verse couplets and anachronistic language that swerves between Latin and contemporary English slang—as a mode of self-reflection, self-identity, agency, and history making.

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<sup>13</sup>A novel like McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* eschews difference or diversity in favor of a kind of multicultural homogenization. The narrative is populated with ethnically and racially diverse characters, but continues to privilege a national narrative of dominant white privilege that denies and mitigates New York’s impact as a global city except as it is rendered through constructions of white privilege. This palimpsest lumps descendants of European immigrants into one homogeneous group and depicts the main black female protagonist, Gloria, as a variation on the stereotype of the magical Negro. We never find out anything of substance about these women or their dead sons, even though their deaths in Vietnam are what bring these women together in the transplanted white Southern belle Claire’s Upper East Side penthouse. Only Claire’s son, who volunteered to go to Vietnam as a computer programmer, is given a back-story; Gloria and Marcia, Janet, and Jacqueline, the homogeneous group of European ethnicity—have sons who were drafted and died, but their stories, much less their names, are never mentioned.

Zuleika's writing is a remapping of the geographic boundaries of Englishness and she positions herself, a black female, within the center of Londinium 1,500 years before the English arrive in Britannia. This narrative takes the modes of madness usually prescribed to the female in British colonial literature, and turns these conventions onto the maddening discourse of those who quest for power and wealth—homogenizing multicultural experiences in the name of privileging a static and rigid English myth. Madness becomes an institutional construction rather than a psychological problem or behavioral flaw found in renegade or biracial women. Zuleika's narrative reveals how Britannia's dominant imaginary has always been shaped by illogical forces. Her witnessing of this madness is not passive. She is an active angel of history whose presence is at once the recognition of the erasure of the black female in Britannia and the inscription of that presence onto the historical record as an antecedent of English arrival in 1099 AD.

In Chapter Two: "Narrating Female Choice in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*," London becomes the site of the most obvious story of (im)migration within a post-colonial context. The narrative structure is complicated through the use of the traditional *bildungsroman* and epistolary narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the early twentieth century modernist structure found in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. At the same time, the protagonists Nazneen and her sister Hasina forge a bond that transcends cultural taboos of gender prejudice and cruelty outside of Western notions of female agency and identity. Nazneen and Hasina are not stereotypes of third world disposable women; they are strong, resilient, characters who learn that silence is not a mode of discourse unless one is willing to break it. The forms inherent to the narrative

making are upended since the sisters have an innate ability to self-reflect on their situations. Their marginalized positions outside the public sphere suggest that the solitude with which both women live forces an interiority to the characters that upends notions of the subaltern found in postcolonial literature and the woman as victim in epistolary novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like Zuleika's first person accounting, the sisters emerge as central figures of a global landscape that does not privilege the Western model of cultural globalization's economic processes even as they are trapped by consumer capitalist culture.

Chapter Three: "Fierce: Female Appetite in Louise DeSalvo's *Casting Off*" is an examination focused on narrative structure, character agency, and literary production. The novel, published in the UK in 1987, was reprinted in the US in 2014. As such, the novel offers a pointed look into late twentieth century suburban married life and how women might claim their own space outside the bonds of marriage. Influenced by Virginia Woolf's long, languorous sentences and written at the height of post-modernism's solipsistic interiority, *Casting Off* is a second wave feminist treatise on marriage, agency, and narratives devoid of male presence. The protagonist Helen offers up a transgressive picture of what adultery not only looks like but also feels like to a New Jersey suburban housewife who runs to New York City to find her creative voice. New York City is mapped as the location of Helen's awakening to her creativity and the recognition that she does not need a man to fulfill her needs. *Casting Off* is an incisive critique of the male gaze and female sexuality of the late twentieth century that remains relevant in the twenty-first century.

Third wave feminists still find themselves denigrated for enjoying sex or being sexual beings—and while males are still called studs for their sexual exploits, females continue to be slut-shamed and marginalized for sexual appetites. As such, Helen and her friend Maive are dangerous and radical women who feel no guilt and are not punished for their extra-marital activity. This guilt-free existence may have been considered outrageous for the late twentieth century, and the main reason why the novel was not published in the US until 2014, but the protagonist's attitude towards marriage and adultery continues to challenge notions of female sexuality and creativity in the twenty-first century.

This chapter also examines how literary production is affected by publisher whims, trends in literature, and literary histories. DeSalvo, although a respected Woolf scholar at the time she wrote  *Casting Off* , was not part of an Italian American literary history as her peers Toni Morrison and Alice Walker were central figures of an African American women's literary history. Networking is integral in shaping literary histories outside a static canon. The advances made in Italian American literary studies and Italian Diaspora studies alongside DeSalvo's extensive publication record have made the reprinting of  *Casting Off*  in 2014 possible. The novel's production history is important in thinking about how global production does not need to be dependent upon dominant narratives, but can emerge through discrete glocal networks that focus away from the center and shore up the margins.

The female protagonists in the examples I have chosen are all married women who cheat. Helen and Zuleika do not feel guilty for their extra-marital affairs, but unlike Helen, who suffers no consequences and instead gains her creative voice, Zuleika, as the



wife of a Roman senator, is punished once the emperor dies. Although her husband poisons her for her marital transgression, she does not find fault with her behavior, nor does she attempt to escape her fate. She is like Socrates who drinks the hemlock rather than place his friends in jeopardy. She relishes the idea that she has been able to actualize the life she wanted rather than survive the one handed to her. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen does feel guilty, but that guilt does not dissuade her from stopping the affair with the much younger Karim. Rather, it forces her to understand that her life with her husband Chanu has been limited and she wants more. She rejects both men, but remains married to Chanu. Even when these women are punished or feel guilty, they remain positive of their choices. These narratives suggest there is a possible shift in how marriage and domesticity could be viewed in globality. These protagonists cannot erase the horrific ways in which women are still punished for their sexuality or remain objectified by an increasingly more brutal and violent male gaze, but the interactions between the women and men in these narratives offer up a variety of ways to view how women perceive their own sexuality and heteronormative relationships free from a male gaze.

Chapter Four: “Eating the Neighbors: Images of Gender and Race in Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*” is not merely a counter to the previous three examples. Although the protagonist Mark Spitz seems dissimilar to the married lives of these women of the global sphere, he is, as a single black man in the US, marginalized and threatened by the post-militarization of US law enforcement after 9/11. Mark Spitz’s self-reflection in wake of a zombie apocalypse is akin to the ways in which Zuleika, Nazneen, and Helen embrace agency and choice to emerge as the narrative makers of their lives. His ability in the pre-apocalypse to refrain from interactions with a dominant structure through his

ability to blend in and appear mediocre allows him to emerge as the dominant narrative in the post-apocalypse. The narrative structure embeds the popular zombie genre into a literary narrative that at once pushes the boundaries of post-modernism and is a palimpsest of modernist African American literary texts as diverse as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* (1958). Before the apocalypse turns 95 percent of the human population into reanimated corpses looking for their next meal, Mark Spitz is forced to live with the veil that has been constructed in the stop and frisk and broken windows policing of the twenty-first century. It is only in the post-apocalypse that the skills he learned to avoid confrontation can be put to good use and he can be free of the role that kept him from doing anything but staking out and accepting a mediocre existence. In the post-apocalypse, he eschews hope and faith as forms of the future and is finally able to destroy those who would kill him first. Out of the each of the protagonists examined, Mark Spitz is the most ironic in detailing consumer culture, but that consumer culture is marginalized in favor of a more basic examination of how consumption works and the choices that are made in the face of certain and overt annihilation.

If globalization, as James Annesley suggests, is "not ... a stable, defined reality," these novels make the case for a shifting view within the discipline of literary studies, particularly as it relates to notions of American and British contemporary literature (113). In using an interdisciplinary feminist approach focused on literary texts as the site of culture, I place narrative theory alongside sociology, history, political science, globalization, and feminist readings. The mobility inherent in these cultural constructions privileges agency and identity and upends the socioeconomic constructions and theories

that have proliferated and dominated discussions about globality. These novels are not exceptions, but primary examples of a growing body of literary work that transcends notions of nation-states and makes way for more expansive categories that does not tie author or narrative to political or economic categories or the boundaries of nation-state or transnational discourse, but demands a more radical view of how individuals within globality interact and relate one to the other. The discrete portrayals of individuals and their narrative making is integral in mapping new ways to examine how literary production has pushed the boundaries of cultural globalization. In reframing the parameters of how subjective processes influence globality, the discipline of literary studies must be at the forefront of a movement to expand upon the shifting terrain of globality.

Resisting Displacement in Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*

ain't no one never gonna write

about your life but you. Once you're dead,  
you never existed, baby, so get to it.

Venus to Zuleika in *The Emperor's Babe* (Evaristo 45)

That victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be victim:  
he, or she, has become a threat.

James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (115)

Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* is a literal and literary remapping of London.

Set in 210 A.D. in a fictionalized version of Roman Londinium, Evaristo's idea for the novel emerged after she read Peter Fryer's assertion that a "[black] presence ... [in England] goes back some 2,000 years" (xiv).<sup>14</sup> Evaristo notes that the British landscape has "always been ... mixed racially and culturally" and predates her novel by "about fifteen hundred years before the beginning of British Colonial expansionism" ("Alastair Niven in Conversation" 19; "On the Road" 14). In *The Emperor's Babe*, Londinium's global population is drawn from throughout "the Roman Empire[, which] stretched ... over 9,000 kilometers into Africa and Asia" ("On the Road" 6). Immigrants and migrants colonize the metropolis and enslave the indigenous of Britannia.

The black female protagonist charting Londinium's multicultural landscape is Zuleika, a child of immigrants, former slaves to the King of Meroe, and the eleven-year-old wife to Felix, a middle-aged Roman bachelor.<sup>15</sup> Her character is the establishment of black life on British soil in the city now called London well before any ancestral presence

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<sup>14</sup>Evaristo was also "inspired by" Ivan Van Sertima's *African Presence in Early Europe*, J. A. Rogers's *Sex and Race*, and Florence Dupont's *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* ("Alastair Niven in Conversation" 15).

<sup>15</sup>Meroe is present day Sudan.

that could be viewed as consanguineous to a present-day white English population.<sup>16</sup> Zuleika's mapping of Londinium erases homogeneous depictions of the city, especially the "reign of 'Cool Britannia', when [newly elected Prime Minister] Tony Blair's New Labour Party rebranded London as the global capital of coolness" (Urban 39). Zuleika records her Londinium life through unrhymed couplets interspersed with Latin and anachronistic references to London. At once a diary, a memoir, and a cultural history, Zuleika's history mashes up contemporary views of London at the Millennium with the long ago past in an unsentimental brand of linguistic cool that subverts the couplet form of Roman epic and Romantic poetry—genres that elevate the heroic. She ignores the verse ascribed to gods, warriors, or artists and uses the slang of a merchant class black female subject. Her writing includes a copious amount of expletives, fashion by Armani, Gucci, and Valentino, and a reference to drinking "Dom Falernum," an allusion that at once recalls the twentieth century's popular champagne Dom Pérignon, a sweet syrup used in cocktails connected to the Caribbean during the height of British expansionism, and the name of a Roman wine popular during the Roman empire (Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* 170).<sup>17</sup> Her epoch splitting verse is a deflection against notions of the black woman as mad in order to rationalize oppression and marginalization. Instead, Zuleika is an inscription of a strong black female subject onto Londinium's landscape,

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<sup>16</sup>The Anglo-Saxon migration did not begin until the fifth century AD and the Normans' win at the Battle of Hastings occurred on October 14, 1066 AD. Queen Elizabeth II is a direct descendent of William II of Normandy.

<sup>17</sup>According to Andrew Dalby, "In Roman literature of the late Republic and early Empire, Falernian is the almost ubiquitous symbol of fine wine and convivial pleasures" (138).

which destabilizes notions of English purity and sanity in the present day global city.<sup>18</sup>

In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's now iconic reading of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's death by suicide, Bhaduri's cultural narrative casts suicide as a political act inherent to avoiding institutionally and culturally constructed erasure. Bhaduri asserts agency and control of her life and death within the madness of a post-colonial system that chooses to ignore her humanity much less her actions and her voice. Her death sounds a warning regarding any endemically flawed and illogical system. Listening becomes key, not for what is absent, but to what information, groups, or individuals are pushed aside. Cultural narratives, like Bhaduri's, signal a warning that moves beyond economic calculations. The cost of repression focuses on how ideas that offer alternatives to material wealth become obstructed when a single-minded focus is placed upon economics rather than cultural traditions or gender roles. Like Bhaduri, Zuleika's action, in this case, her written account of her Londinium life, is her resistance to erasure. Her anachronisms destabilize the couplet form of heroes and focus on the life of a black female mapmaker who lays bare the madness of those who objectify her and close off any avenues of agential identity she cultivates. Her words acknowledge the black female in Londinium, and by consequence, London.

### *The Ethos of Madness*

Jennifer DeVere Broday notes that male authors as diverse as Daniel DeFoe, Lewis Carroll, and Salman Rushdie have each privileged a "muddied, muddled, and meddled

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<sup>18</sup>See Pilar Cuder-Domínguez's "Ethnic Cartographies of London in Bernardine Evaristo and Zadie Smith" for Evaristo's use of "Romanness" as "a clever stand-in for 'Englishness'" (178).

with (hence impure)” English history (6). Broday also notes how “‘black’ ... women were indispensable to this construction of Englishness as a new form of ‘white’ male subjectivity” (7). Broday argues that black females of the British Empire were not considered subjects, but were subjugated. Any resistance they offered was ignored or erased, especially if their responses to subjugation were viewed as madness or hysteria. Anne McClintock argues that female characters in Western literature since the nineteenth century are cast as flawed objects that *are* mistakes who bring ruin and failure to privileged white males through what are deemed their “degenerative” and “*behavioural* flaws” (10). These characters are believed to be pathologically “immoral” and scapegoated as impure, and are forced or coerced—especially those who are partly or wholly black—into internalizing the personal and institutional abuses they face (11). Their “flaws” are an obfuscation that legitimizes the dehumanization that occurs from miscegenation and slavery to unfair immigration policies.

Jane Ussher notes that contemporary feminist theorists have “reinterpreted” notions of “hysteria” as “an expression of women’s anger [and] oppression” (75). In this view of hysteria, Lynette Goddard suggests, “women’s madness ... [is] a resistance to patriarchy, a refusal to enter into the symbolic world where the laws of the father prevail” (99). In promoting agency, hysteria and madness become choices women make, but if their actions cannot be separated from “cultural racism *and* (hetero-) sexism,” as Goddard points out, “misunderstandings and misdiagnoses” will occur, especially to and for British Black females (99-100).

In *The Emperor’s Babe*, the British Empire and any white English presence does not exist on Zuleika’s map. She writes memories of her life because she knows if she

does not, it will be as if she “never existed” within the confines of the Roman Empire (Evaristo, *The Emperor’s Babe* 45). In carving out that space, she destabilizes the familiar colonial and post-colonial tropes of the black female as blank canvas, muse, or madwoman in the attic.<sup>19</sup> Zuleika is not marked impure or with a *behavioural* flaw. Any anger she exhibits is not a strategic resistance to her husband’s denial of her position. She is not a post-colonial subject stuck in what Homi Bhabha has marked the “in-between” of “the colonialist Self and the colonized Other” (64). Her critique of Londinium society is fashioned as an insider’s perspective and suggests that Zuleika embodies Fanon’s insistence that “I am not a potentiality of something; I am fully what I am” (114). In this embodiment of self, she offers a sharp contrast not only to Charlotte Brontë’s Bertha or Jean Rhys’s Antoinette, but also to a white English embodied female protagonist such as Jane Austen’s Elizabeth (Lizzie) Bennet.<sup>20</sup>

Zuleika and Lizzie are connected, if not through London, then through their mercantile fathers and upwardly mobile marriages. They possess intellect and stubbornness that bring them strife. They offer incisive critiques of the lives they are forced to live. But in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Lizzie’s commentary is focused on white English society—a society that emerges 1,000 years after Zuleika’s

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<sup>19</sup>See Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*; Gubar’s “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity”; Jane M. Ussher’s *Women’s Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness*; and Lynette Goddard’s “Middle-Class Aspirations and Black Women’s Mental Health in Zindika’s *Leonora’s Dance*, and Bonnie Greer’s *Munda Negra* and *Dancing on Blackwater*.”

<sup>20</sup>In *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Brontë uses the trope of the madwoman in the attic to throw a chink in the romance between a rich and arrogant Mr. Rochester, and a poor, but honorable Jane Eyre. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Jean Rhys reimagines Brontë’s minor character, Bertha Mason, as the protagonist Antoinette, a Caribbean creole whose mental state deteriorates after her marriage to an Englishman, aka Mr. Rochester.



Londinium life—and is used to find a man worthy of controlling her destiny. A profitable marriage for the Bennet family is the end game in Lizzie’s social critique. Zuleika’s reflection begins *after* she is married and becomes aware of the horrors that being a Londinium wife and subject of Rome entails. She may be marginalized like Lizzie, but she is not a map holder waiting to discover where she will wind up. Zuleika is a mapmaker, “rewrite[ing]” Londinium history and etching the ignored and suppressed voice of the black female onto Britain’s literary and historical archives (Evaristo, *The Emperor’s Babe* vii).

#### *A Maddening Discourse*

In *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era*, Kathleen Paul asserts that “the policy-making elite[s]” strategically orchestrated political maneuvers have disenfranchised the Black British population from citizenship rights in England (xii). Since the *Windrush*’s arrival at London’s Tilbury Dock from Jamaica in 1948, lawmakers, including Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher, espouse a “single and singular British imperial national identity” (xii). Policies are refashioned continuously so that “residents of the United Kingdom [are viewed as] ... white, Christian, conservative, and true custodians and owners of the title ‘British’” (22). In his infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech, Powell, argued that any group “claim[ing] special communal rights ... leads to a dangerous fragmentation within society [that should] be strongly condemned.” He only believed this condemnation need be practiced against British citizens of color. Three years before the 1981 British Nationality Act, Prime Minister Thatcher gave an interview where she stated: “people are really rather afraid that this country might be

rather swamped by people with a different culture.”<sup>21</sup> Those “rather afraid” were white and Thatcher played into a rhetoric that marginalized an already constricted Black British population. Thatcher’s confabulation and Powell’s diatribe contribute to a maddening rhetoric that justifies the legal strictures impugned on the Commonwealth’s black citizens.

If policies like the 1981 British Nationality Act are the legal means to marginalize Black British citizens, London’s Millennium celebrations are a cultural displacement of maddening proportions. *The Emperor’s Babe* is a challenge, most directly, to this culturally myopic and marginalizing view that emanates from the rebranding effort of the New Labour Party in the 1990s. In *Britain<sup>TM</sup>: Renewing Our Identity*, Mark Leonard calls for a “renewal of identity” that “find[s] a better fit between [British] heritage and what [it is] becoming” (5). The radical shift that Leonard inscribes is not done by “casting off what has gone before,” but by recasting the “enormous success” of the British Empire for a twenty-first century global economic model (5). In erasing the notion of Britain as a “backward-looking has-been, a theme park world of royal pageantry and rolling green hills” that creates bad product, Leonard’s suggests a return to how “our ancestors invented a new identity that proved enormously successful ... free from any sentimental attachment to the traditions they had inherited” (1; 5). This avoidance of sentimentality would be done through websites that would link to all the major cities of the British Commonwealth, a “‘living museum of the future’ ... or ‘Millennium City’ in Greenwich

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<sup>21</sup>The 1981 British Nationality Act ostensibly divided the British Commonwealth into three tiers of nationality: “British citizenship, British Dependent Territories citizenship, and British Overseas citizenship. ... All three categories of citizen created by the 1981 act may travel on a British passport; all three may seek British consular protection; yet only the first enjoys the right to live in the United Kingdom” (Paul 182-183).

to act as a showcase of the future of health, learning, retailing, and democracy,” and a “monarchy” tour of the sites of “Britain’s past—from Ireland to Iran—to heal difficult memories and to signal that Britain has moved beyond its imperial heritage” (5).

This branding of “Cool Britannia” in Leonard’s 70-page outline is disingenuous at best and at worst is a dangerous designs that uses multiculturalism and globalization as touchstones upon which to re-inscribe white hegemonic authority, both economically and culturally, during the Millennium celebrations. Seen in contrast to how politicians like Thatcher and Powell used legal means to disenfranchise the Black British population, the cultural displacement that occurred in the 1990s through a rebranding effort that reduced migrants’ heritages to a Disney—like theme park attraction and ignored the more violent episodes of the British Empire’s history creating a cultural displacement of maddening proportions. Formed in 1993, London’s Millennium Commission was tasked with creating “a national ‘festival’” that would recall the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the Festival of Britain in 1951 (Gray 442). These preparations were, according to Denis Cosgrove and Luciana Martins, “locally significant in terms of urban regeneration, [but were more important to] London's claims to global centrality: once represented through the figure of empire ... [and] exercised today largely through mastery of financial space/time in the City of London” (102-103). The commission chose site-specific installations along the Thames leading to Greenwich, where the Millennium Dome—now called the O<sup>2</sup> Dome—would serve as the city’s centerpiece of the global future. Through Greenwich, which had been made the universal Prime Meridian in 1884, “London ... proclaim[ed] ... its centrality in the measurement of secular time and the representation

of global space” (99).<sup>22</sup> Prime Minister Blair used this notion of space and time when he said that he wanted children who visited the Millennial Dome “to take from it an experience so powerful and memories so strong that it gives them that abiding sense of purpose and unity that stays with them through the rest of their lives” (qtd. in Cosgrove and Martins 102). He further proclaimed that the exhibits housed there would remind everyone that Britain was not only “a country with a glorious past,” but also one “with a powerful future” (“All Mod Cons”). Blair’s *glorious past* normalizes objectification and erasure in the same way that Thatcher’s *swamping* metaphor marginalized the history of colonized subjects two decades before. In expressing the future as a homogeneous economically lucrative enterprise, Blair reinforces a cultural imaginary of imperialism and ignores those who do not further a global agenda except as public relations or tourist board fodder.

In thinking through slavery and post-slavery discourses of sex, violence, and desire, Christina Sharpe argues “the everyday mundane horrors that aren’t acknowledged to be horrors” create a bridge between what is familiar and expected and what is violent and accepted (3). She calls these connections “monstrous intimacies” and focuses on the subjugation and subjection of the black female subject from slavery to present day.

Thatcher’s and Powell’s rhetoric of a homogeneous England conflates the familiar and

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<sup>22</sup>The Millennium Dome cost the government both in resources and reputation. Twelve million citizens were predicted to pass through the dome, but only 5.5 million actually made the trip to Greenwich. According to Clive Gray, “By the time [the Dome] closed for business, it had cost £628 million in grants from the government, the Millennium Commission and the National Lottery” (441-442). Other structures built for the celebrations included the Millennial Wheel [now the London Eye], “located opposite the Palace of Westminster” and the Millennial Bridge, “the city’s first new river crossing in a century, [which] connect[ed] the financial heart of London ... to a new Tate Gallery of Modern Art at Bankside” (Cosgrove and Martins 102). Substantial technical and financial problems also caused a late opening—so much for the global future.

violent through a national narrative that normalizes the continued legal scrutiny that is meted out to its Black British citizens. Most important, Blair, who espouses to work against these kinds of rhetoric, makes a maddening proclamation of a unified London, which ignores the continual political and cultural disenfranchisement of the global city's black citizens and instead uses them as theme park attractions of globalization.<sup>23</sup>

In meeting new global paradigms for economic wealth, memories of slave trading that not only occurred on, but also fueled the economic success of the docks along the north side of the Thames, across from the Millennium Dome, were eliminated from the millennium map. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these docks had been “funded primarily by the commercial and mercantile classes” (Draper 437). In the last thirty-one years of the trade—from 1776 to 1807, “more than 40 docks investors are identifiable as slave traders, and between them they organized half of the identified slave voyages” from London (Draper 442).<sup>24</sup> These docks are also where Sarah Baartman, infamously named the “Hottentot Venus,” arrived in London in 1810. According to Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, Baartman “has been the object of an external gaze (in body and text) for 200 years” (12). Baartman’s body was used as an economic model of success, and, through “scientific objectification,” also was used as proof of the white race’s superiority (Hobson 67). As Janell Hobson notes, Baartman’s body “was turned over to scientists by her ‘animal trainer’ in Paris in 1815” so that her “brain” and “genitalia” could be “pickled” (67). Like Spivak’s suggestion that Bhaduri’s death by

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<sup>23</sup>Edward Said argues, “To ignore or otherwise discount ... the interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonized co-existed and battled each other through projections as well as rival geographies, narratives, and histories, is to miss what is essential about the world in the past century” (xx).

<sup>24</sup>By the time the slave trade ended in 1807, “more than 2,500 ships [had] cleared the port of London for Africa” (Rawley 19).

suicide was a political act that no one could read, any resistance on Baartman's part was erased by the disavowal of her humanity.<sup>25</sup>

Slavery, whether institutional or insinuated, is the paradigmatic clash between economics and ethics. Blair's rhetoric suggest that they map Great Britain, and London especially, as sites of what Paul Gilroy names, "natural, inevitable events" (11). Yes, slaveholding was terrible, just as Baartman's *pickled* genitalia is terrible, but that was the past, not the present where one worries about *swamping* or maintaining the illusion of a *glorious past*. During the Millennium celebrations, the Thames was integral to branding London as a space of global innovation and economic growth and "'race' [was pushed] outside of history" (Gilroy 11). The river as a site of degradation and enslavement was ignored to map "Cool Britannia" onto present day London as another mode of "England for the English."<sup>26</sup>

In *The Emperor's Babe*, Zuleika's language can be viewed as a challenge to Blair's suggestion that British citizens focus on the *glorious past* in order to create a *powerful future*. The *glorious past* Zuleika inhabits has no "English" citizens and those indigenous to the area are slaves fighting to return to the "jungle" of Britannia (Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* 12). Like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, who is witness to eternity's ever growing "pile of debris," Zuleika cannot turn away from the storm that "irresistibly propels [her] into the future to which [her] back is turned" (Benjamin 260).

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<sup>25</sup>See Natasha Gordon-Chipembere's edited collection, *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman*, for ways in which Baartman's resistance is being read today.

<sup>26</sup>See David Morrissey's "The National Front Disco." Although Morrissey has insisted the song is not racist, he did admit: "black people and white people will never really get on or like each other" ("Interview by Adrian DeVoy"). In 2007, he reiterated that position when he stated: "Although I don't have anything against people from other countries, the higher the influx into England the more the British identity disappears" (qtd. in Duff).

And like the angel of history, Zuleika sees the entirety of the past, not as “a chain of events” in a fixed linear story, but as “one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of [her] feet” (259). This wreckage is a reminder that history repeats itself, but there is more to this repetition than an endless cycle of chaotic destruction. This “pile of debris” is humanity’s disavowal of responsibility—humanity creates the wreckage and *is* the wreckage (260). A witness who names specific events may create an expansive dialogic, but it is just as likely that s/he is caught up in and by history’s maelstrom.

Zuleika is not a slave of or to empire. She is also not a warrior like Virgil’s Aeneas who establishes an empire or a postcolonial subject caught in the *in-between* like Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988). She is a young and inconsequential black female who linguistically transforms Londinium through self-reflection and observation. Her voice is flexible and mobile—it shifts as her circumstances change and she moves from self-identification as one of the “wild girls of Londinium,” to her husband’s “*Illa Bella Negreeta*,” her proclamation that she is *The Emperor’s Babe*, and her final declaration that she is “Zuleika, / *Who in her final summer / Lived a life fuller than any other*” (Evaristo, *The Emperor’s Babe* 9; 3; 249). She desires “[t]o leave a whisper of myself in the world, my ghost, a magna opera of words” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 159). She wants her writing to survive and recognizes that she must act to inscribe her place in Londinium. Her resistance is formed by what she can manage to control—her words and actions.

Zuleika pins herself with the moniker: “Londinium Tour Guide (Unofficial)” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 9). She is neither Lizzie Bennet nor Mary Poppins, dressed in a prim

outfit, carrying an umbrella, and pointing out the monuments; instead, she roams Cheapside with her “porcelain” skinned friend Alba (*The Emperor’s Babe* 93). These pre-teens “tour the tenements / of Aldersgate,” “raid” a local bakery after closing where they find the owner dead “in a cloud of flour,” and “go to the [Thames], / sit on the beach, look out towards the marshy islands of Southwark, / and beyond to the jungle that was Britannia” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 12). They slough off the “off-duty soldiers / who loitered” on the docks (*The Emperor’s Babe* 12). Zuleika interacts with “the fucking Scots, Pict and Saxon Bastards” and the employees of Zuleika’s father’s shop who are “Syrian, Tunisian, Jew, Persian, / hopefuls just off the olive barge from Gaul, / ... anyone who’ll work for pebbles” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 42; 4). She and Alba are friends with Venus, née Rufus, a Camulodunum born transgender who owns “Spank ... / a shop for the lady with a prick and no tits” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 48).<sup>27</sup>

Zuleika’s tour offers nothing that is found in a *Baedekers*. She knows the out-of-the-way restaurants and shops touted in a *Lonely Planet* guide, not as someone who is searching for those places as an exotic experience of the local, but as a local who is claiming ownership of her space. Zuleika views her neighborhood as an adventure with a rotating cast of zany, but not especially dangerous, characters. She operates as a free agent and privileges an impure torrent of interaction as the foundation of the globalized metropolis. She is neither sentimental nor naïve enough to believe that anyone, except her friends Alba and Venus, are interested in her opinion. Her freedom of movement reveals how people use each other to gain access to goods, jobs, and sex.

Her understanding emanates from the knowledge, learned by “aged three,” that

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<sup>27</sup>Camulodunum is the Roman name for the Celtic settlement that today is known as the town of Colchester in Essex, England.



her brother, Catullus, would “inherit the key to the Kingdom of Pops” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 20). She may be envious of her brother’s position as son and successor, but she also likes her unfettered independence since her parents do not pay much attention to her daily shenanigans. Zuleika’s only sense of herself as an object arrives by way of the neighborhood brothel’s pimp, “a Gaul with a wet donkey’s tail / of a moustache,” who tells her he “need[s] a Blackie” to complete “the Woppy, [the] Chinky, [the] Honky, [the] Paki, / [the] Gingery, [and the] Araby” prostitutes he already employs (*The Emperor’s Babe* 45). His list reads like the possibilities on a contemporary South Asian sex tour, not the local house of prostitution. Her friend Venus intervenes, “slap[ping his] face,” and Zuleika remains naïve about the pimp’s insinuation (*The Emperor’s Babe* 45).

Not until the Roman patrician Felix “thrice [her] age and thrice [her] girth” spies Zuleika “at the baths of Cheapside,” does Zuleika understand that her autonomy has been limited (*The Emperor’s Babe* 4). Like a slave being looked over for flaws at the docks, Felix examines Zuleika and deems her a perfect specimen. She is a commodity to be sold by her father, who has waited for her to ripen like a prized vegetable. When she returns to her old block as Felix’s new bride, the local pimp is dumbfounded by her transformation into a “real uptown chick” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 46). Her newly manicured body and the haute couture she wears remove her from his sphere on the cheap sex tour circuit; Zuleika becomes the ultimate and untouchable commodity. In a similar vein to Fanon’s understanding that “the black man ... at the first white gaze, ... feels the weight of his melanin (128), the married Zuleika confronts what it means to be female in a world run by men. Upward mobility comes at a cost to those not in a position to negotiate and Zuleika pushes against this tide throughout her life. Naming herself a tour guide on the

trip of her life gives her a measure of control as to how her story unfolds. She insists she is the explorer, not the object being explored.

Immigrants like Zuleika's father, a former slave and refugee from Meroe, have come to conquer. In the global metropolis, men who have been victims can emerge as victors and perpetrators if they learn how to deal with men like her husband Felix. Zuleika's agency and role as witness "unsettles" what Gabriele Griffin argues is "the imaginary which nostalgically retains coloniality" (7). Like Benjamin's angel, she is released into the inescapability of time. She is a mapmaker and messenger who bears witness to a history that is palpably expressed in her body and on her body and about her body and in and on and about the body of Londinium.

#### *Recasting Time and Madness in the Global City*

Felix views Londinium as a "less than dazzling little colonia," but when he spies the eleven-year-old Zuleika at the baths, after years of "enjoy[ing] bachelorhood," he is reminded "of the girls back in Ægyptus, / where [he] spent most of his teenage years" during his father's reign as "governor" (Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* 15). He remembers these girls as "mysterious, dark ones" who "oil[ed] his limbs" and "waft[ed] soundlessly around him" as they did their duties (*The Emperor's Babe* 15). He does not know their names or what might have become of them. Moreover, he does not care. Like Thatcher or Blair, he has a mono-cultural view of connections and rights. Felix's needs supersede everyone else's humanity.

His possession of his "*Illa Bella Negreeta*" has to do with maintaining an illusion of youth, virility, and desirability (*The Emperor's Babe* 3). Zuleika names Felix's

objectification of her an “awful desire,” and unlike Elizabeth Bennet, Zuleika is not destined for a blissful ending since Felix is no Mr. Darcy (*The Emperor’s Babe* 19). He traps her within a “white stucco villa [in] Cheapside” that he inhabits only “three months a year” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 17; 156). When he is home, he uses her sexually without thought for her desire or physical limitation. She regularly “pass[es] ... out” during intercourse, but Felix continues to pleasure himself with her body (*The Emperor’s Babe* 29). Zuleika likens the “villa with its very own latrina” to the underworld and Felix is a Pluto who likes his Proserpine compliant (*The Emperor’s Babe* 27).

Felix does not need to snatch Zuleika away as Pluto snatches Proserpine. Her father eagerly accepts Felix’s marriage proposal since he is a “hot-shot senator in Rome” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 3). This union will elevate him to the position of “father-in-law to Lucius Aurelius Felix, no less” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 4). As a merchant and an immigrant, he focuses on selling product and investing wisely. Zuleika’s father will allow nothing to stand in his way of becoming a top tier merchant along the Thames. The phrase “no less” tagged onto his son-in-law’s title suggests Zuleika’s father has been hopeful that his daughter would bring a good price. His exploitation of his daughter is a business transaction that will enlarge his mercantile territory, but Felix’s birth status, as a Roman citizen with multiple properties strewn throughout the empire, means he needs to risk nothing.

His sister Antistia reinforces Zuleika’s place as possession with the warning, after three years of marriage, that Zuleika is “no longer a novelty” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 53). She reminds the young wife that “[she] will never be one of us” and her position is limited by how long she continues to delight Felix (*The Emperor’s Babe* 53). The phrase

“never be one of us” echoes Thatcher’s *swamping* metaphor, but also recalls more emphatically, Enoch Powell’s 1968 speech to the London Rotary Club where he ended with his assessment that “the West Indian or Asian does not, by being born in England, become an Englishman. In law, he becomes a United Kingdom Citizen by birth; in fact he is a West Indian or an Asian still.” If Antistia is suggesting that Zuleika can never be Roman, then the rhetoric of the way she states this notion boomerangs to how Black British citizens will never be English in Powell’s or Thatcher’s constructions of national identity and ownership. Antistia does not visit often, but when she does, the siblings mix the sinister with the sexual; they exhibit sexual depravity and “*behavioural* flaws” reserved in nineteenth and twentieth century Western discourse for those of Zuleika’s station (McClintock 10). Zuleika is left out of these sex parties and Felix “bolt[s her] door” in order to maintain his young wife’s status the way an art collector protects his favorite painting (Evaristo, *The Emperor’s Babe* 52). When Zuleika hears “screams” from what she imagines are children, she is jolted towards an empathetic response (*The Emperor’s Babe* 53). More than the sex with Felix she endures, the screams of the children force Zuleika to understand the precarious situation in which she lives. Their pain, like Zuleika’s, is for other people’s entertainment.

Until Zuleika meets the emperor Severus, sex is a duty to be performed and recover from—she has no idea what happens to the children she hears when Antistia visits. The emperor, who wears Armani and shouts “Basta” to his adoring masses, recasts Zuleika notions of sex and desire (*The Emperor’s Babe* 171). She names *him* as her sexual object in spite of Alba’s and Venus’s admonishments that “he’ll be having a different townie tart every night” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 118). Though Zuleika’s desires

objectify him, the emperor's view of Zuleika is similar to Felix's. She reminds Severus of a "desert girl in Londinium. So beautiful," and he feels a nostalgic connection to home whenever he is in her presence (*The Emperor's Babe* 220). He promises Zuleika that he will "take [her] out of the city, many times" to "Greenwich," "Hyde Park," and "the jungle of Notting Hill," but he can offer her nothing beyond a quick affair that will leave her vulnerable to Felix's rage (*The Emperor's Babe* 158). Zuleika blinds herself to any danger even as her verse reveals how she is being objectified. She thinks being with Severus will make her "world larger," but this expansion is contingent upon her sexual promiscuity (*The Emperor's Babe* 220). If Felix views her as his personal exotic recreation of home, the emperor casts Zuleika as a sentimental vision of home, one that he "will never see ... again" (*The Emperor's Babe* 220). In these constructions, neither Felix nor Severus imagines what Zuleika needs or who she is when they are absent.

In order to keep her in his sight, Severus takes her to the opening of the new "Mithras Gladiators Training Academia" in Greenwich (*The Emperor's Babe* 169). This event is a boring job for him, but to Zuleika the collective madness of suppression, submission, and sacrifice in the arena is a metaphor for her life. In Zuleika's telling, this scene reclaims Greenwich, not as a site of Great Britain's control of global space and time, but as the place where that attempt to control time and space can most blatantly be viewed as depraved and maddening.

Upon the emperor's arrival, the "ecstatic crowds" roar "*Vivat Emperor Sevva!*" (*The Emperor's Babe* 171). Like any good politician visiting his constituents, he "smil[es] indulgently" and "swish[es] his toga like a toreador" (*The Emperor's Babe* 171). Zuleika, part of "[h]is posse of the great, good and yours truly," lives vicariously

through the crowd's adoration of him (*The Emperor's Babe* 171). Her epoch hopping slang recalls Queen Elizabeth's and Princess Diana's public appearances, not only in London, but also throughout the globe. The horde's uproar elevates everyone's status and concretizes positions of power and fame. The fans, gladiators, and their victims are supporting characters in the emperor's visit, which legitimizes the Roman colony as an important global metropolis.

Zulieka fantasizes how she might appear to the crowds in order to legitimize her position: "straddle[ing the emperor, and] send[ing] the masses into a frenzy" (*The Emperor's Babe* 174). The word "frenzy" does not signal the "degenerative" and "behavioural flaws" found in women of the British empire, but does suggest Zuleika's excitement and fear surrounding the event, including being seen in public with the emperor (McClintock 10). She imagines her exhibitionism as a declaration of ownership regarding Severus, her "shiny, black, shimmering arse" hanging out for the entire arena to witness (Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* 174). This exposure of her backside, a sly recognition of Baartman, reveals her desire to be seen and the impossibility of that occurring. She craves the power she associates with visibility that she imagines her husband, her father, and her emperor possess, but she is unable to imagine a powerful female public persona in any other construct besides sex or commodity.

She does not recognize that she is casting herself as an "*objet d'art*" (*The Emperor's Babe* 75). She fantasizes herself a spectacle in order to declare how formidable she feels and how much of a connection she has to the ultimate power source: the emperor. She wants to "SHOCK [THE] NATION" in order to receive "recognition" and "commitment" (*The Emperor's Babe* 174; 175). She wants to "straddle him" in

public in order to see her name “sprawled all over the *Daily Looking Glass*,” an anachronistic reference to London’s *Daily Mirror* (*The Emperor’s Babe* 174). The gossip and half-truths found in tabloids are a means of safety in celebrity, even if the visibility only comes from an infamous act. Her daydream reveals her fear and the only way she can see to rectify her situation. She is married to a Roman senator and is not the emperor’s “official consort” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 174). She dreams that if pushes the affair into the public arena, she will remain safe from the emperor’s disinterest or her husband’s anger. Whether visible or invisible, legitimate affair or not, she has been in danger from the moment Severus’s “desert eyes ... roam[ed] over / [her] voluptuous corpus” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 114). In other words, he made her body his temple for the remainder of his stay in Londinium, which he views as “pigs’ ca ca in comparison” to the beauty of the Sahara, his vision of home (*The Emperor’s Babe* 221). Once he leaves, Zuleika will be exposed, but not in the way she fantasizes.

When the gladiators are “marched / into the arena” to pledge their honor to the emperor, Zuleika learns the truth that is hidden from readers in tabloids and historical accounts. She is surprised to see not the well-oiled “Über-hunks” who were “Guests of Honor at feasts,” but “old slaves, convicts, / Christians, prisoners of war and the poor” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 175; 176).<sup>28</sup> Her language changes when she sees “the back row [of] female[s], / beast-fodder, several noticeably pregnant” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 176). Her desire “to leave a whisper of [herself] in the world” is transformed by the reality of

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<sup>28</sup>For example, the New Zealand-based popular Starz television series *Spartacus* (2010-2013) is an anachronistic tale that makes eye candy of those who are enslaved. The HBO series *Rome* plays it straight, but the Roman Empire begins to sound like the British Empire since everyone talks and acts like Englishmen. Perhaps English accents are the bridgeable difference necessary for American audiences to understand resisting imperial constructions.

pregnant women as prey (*The Emperor's Babe* 159). There is nothing *glorious* about what happens to “beast-fodder” (*The Emperor's Babe* 176). These women are the epitome of subjugation and reveal not their “degenerative” and “*behavioural* flaws,” but society’s fear and depravity (McClintock 10).

Even though she has taken notice of the women and heard the talk, Zuleika is unprepared for the effect the women’s end will have on her. She has learned to internalize the irrational rationality of the power dynamic. She embraces her ability to dress as she wants and has happily purchased personal slaves—Valeria and Aemilia, “two ginger girls ... captured / up north the freckled sort (typical / of Caledonians)” —who resent her attempts to have them conform (Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* 55). Now that she is in love, she is no longer interested in rebelling against the dominant class. It is not until the pregnant women reappear at the end of the games, after “five pacing lions were rolled noisily / across the sand by mules,” that Zuleika is jolted to a deeper understanding of her actual position within Londinium (*The Emperor's Babe* 178). Once the cages are set in the center of the amphitheater “five naked women were led out of a trapdoor / ... chained at the wrists and ankles, // wild-eyed ... gagged // [and] heavy with child (*The Emperor's Babe* 178). Gone are the joyous anachronistic declarations of a “cool” Londinium. Zuleika’s couplets throw back the veil on the dehumanization of females in and through global time and space.

The women emerge from underground, like Proserpine emerging from the underworld after her mother Ceres strikes a deal with Pluto. And like Proserpine, they do not speak. Unlike the Roman goddess, they are “chained,” “gagged,” and pregnant (*The Emperor's Babe* 178). These women are not deity or human, but animals led to the



slaughter. The witnesses in the arena watch from a distance, as if the lion's lunch is a puppet show or temple ritual. Unlike the children Zuleika hears screaming as Antistia abuses them in her S&M game nights, these women are the ultimate construction of devocalization. More than sex with Felix or Zuleika's displacement to her bedroom during her husband and sister-in-law's sex parties, this scene strikes at the heart of a maddening and illogical system where dehumanization and sacrifice are the privilege of those at the top of the food chain and the expectation of those who hope not to be caught in the bottom. As the angel of history, Zuleika's recording of this scene can be piled onto the endless number of slaves who have been erased completely from the annals of British history. No names, no histories, and in the case of slavery, no final scene or tableau—only the sense of what has been lost by those who continue to lose.

Any autonomy Zuleika possesses is upended by the pregnant women's submission. They cannot compete against the lions; they are not meant to be a challenge. They are bound—hand, foot, and mouth—but they are also “heavy with child” (*The Emperor's Babe* 178). Zuleika's phrasing is a reminder that the women are human. They would give birth to another human being: an infant, not a cub or a calf. The women are sentient and the only clue of their fear emanates from their “wild-eyed” demeanor (*The Emperor's Babe* 178). They cannot be deemed subhuman because they are hysterical; they are legitimately terrified for their lives. They are being placed in cages with hungry lions without any recourse or escape. The crowd too is trapped—everyone must conform to and accept this equation. Sacrificing these women means survival for another day, especially for those at the margins of power.

The crowd, including the musicians, is silent for the first time since the games

began, and only the lions chomping on “chunks // for the butcher’s block: raw tenderloin / breast, brain, liver, heart” breaks the spell (*The Emperor’s Babe* 178-179). These women may be reduced to beef stew, but Zuleika remembers their humanity. She transgresses what is normally hidden behind flowery language like *glorious past* and *swamping*. She details what remains of these women’s human features: “breast, brain, liver, and heart” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 179). She names those body parts and organs that allow the females to nurture, to think, and to feel. The last detail of their living has to do with their hearts, the organ that opens itself to love—what she feels for the emperor. Their deaths, a phantasmagoria of horror and human remains, shore up her lover’s position and keep those who would climb higher in place.

The women’s annihilation occurs during the hottest portion of the day, when “[t]he amphitheatre was a brazier, / [making] it ... too hot to look up at the sky” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 178). The heat of the sun blazes as if nothing must be hidden any longer. The pregnant women’s sacrifice reveals the vulnerable position in which everyone lives. Their deaths are an acknowledgement of the power constructions that force the crowd to worship the emperor no matter what he does or does not do. No one turns away or raises a voice in horror or consternation—no one attempts to stop the killings. It is a collective madness that must be borne in order to maintain the status quo. To negate the women’s presence as life and as life force acknowledges the crowd’s position both as decision-makers and the negation of real decision-making. The Emperor’s presence forces everyone, including Severus, into a submissive posture.

Broday suggests that “the unspeakable cannot be rendered forever inexpressible; the most persistent mode of forgetting is memory imperfectly deferred” (7). Zuleika’s

selective memory, hidden away in “Pandora’s Box,” is unleashed during this event (Evaristo, *The Emperor’s Babe* 180). She recognizes her life in these women’s end. The pregnant women’s total debasement and objectification mirrors Zuleika’s relationship with her husband—how her sister-in-law Antistia views her, how Felix and his sister treat their entertainment, how she treats her personal slaves. When the orchestra breaks the silence, the crowd, including Zuleika, “stood / and roared” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 179). The sassy girl disappears behind “boiling red drops” of tears as she remembers “the girl / who so long ago had been stillborn // inside the woman” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 179-180). Like these women, she has been forced to live in the underworld. And like the end these women come to, she fears what her husband will do without the emperor’s protection. She has pretended that painful, dehumanizing sex is the only price for living in the “villa with its very own latrina” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 27). When he returns home after each of his trips, she needs “months of recuperation” after the doctor’s “sewing is undone” from intercourse with her husband (*The Emperor’s Babe* 33). In the arena, Zuleika admits that while she has always known Felix views her as an object, she now understands that he will never recognize her humanity. Recalling the collective sexual abuse meted out by her husband as one endless string of nights where she “woke up ... in the Kingdom of the Dad, Dead, Father,” Zuleika cries for the first time since her wedding night (*The Emperor’s Babe* 179). She no longer denies her forced subjugation at home.

Zuleika’s private pain, hidden even from her, is burned into her consciousness when she seeks legitimacy for her affair with the emperor. Her place, silent at the side of the emperor, forces her to witness the women’s deaths, which, in turn, unhinges the memories of her own dark nights. Through her tears, she recognizes that she cannot

escape her husband's depravity any more than those women could have fought the lions and triumphed. The arena spectacle unleashes emotions long suppressed, and she wants to believe the emperor can and will protect her. She disregards his inability or desire to save the pregnant women. She does not factor the emperor's view of her. Theirs is a public affair—they meet at the theater, he invites himself to her home, he takes her to the arena—all of these things amuse him. She amuses him. Their intimacy allows him to indulge in a bit of nostalgia for a place to which he will never return.

Even his attempt at alone time is a public event. After the arena, he whisks her from Greenwich to Notting Hill for a quiet overnight. This Notting Hill is not an affluent and upscale neighborhood filled with trendy high-end shops and restaurants, but an untamed “jungle” where the surrounding area must be cleared by the emperor's “soldiers [who] ... cut ... a path with axes” (*The Emperor's Babe* 218). Severus is “Pluto,” driving “four furious stallions” “in an open carriage” “down the Strand,” “[up] the winding path of Haymarket,” “over the sloping grassland of Mayfair,” and “across the wheatfields of Hyde Park” (*The Emperor's Babe* 217-218). They arrive to a quiet domestic set up of a Bedouin tent with accouterments for a prolonged sexual encounter. There are soldier camps “stationed at every stage // of the journey ... // and beyond to Kensington High and way out to Fulham” to protect him (*The Emperor's Babe* 219). Zuleika questions none of this attention; she is naïve enough to think he has created this time for her. Only her naming of him as Pluto suggests she has some understanding of her position within his entourage. After all, the implications are clear—wherever the emperor travels, he sets aside time for extracurricular activities.

Zuleika is there to take care of her emperor. She “squeeze[s]” and “massage[s]”

his “tension” away (*The Emperor’s Babe* 222). She acquiesces because she thinks it is for her pleasure, but something shifts in her demeanor and she “tie[s the emperor’s hands] above [his] head” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 223). This action might not have progressed to anything but a game of “slap and tickle,” but the emperor smiles in amusement and she “slap[s]” him (*The Emperor’s Babe* 223-224). Her fury rises and she “kick[s him] hard in the ribs” and he calls her a “silly girl” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 225). She demands he go “outside” and he crawls, on his “tied hands and knees” through the mud, but “laughing / hysterically like a naughty child” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 225). He does not read her anger as anything but a young girl eager to show her emperor a good time. Or perhaps he too does not want to face the implications of the arena’s events. Zuleika repeats the question “who’s the boss now?” until the emperor stops laughing. She refuses him sexual completion until he cries, “you are the boss ... // Don’t leave me now, come home / with me, // maman, take me home” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 227). If Greenwich is the site of death and destruction on a global scale, Zuleika inscribes Notting Hill as life emerging from out of mud. When they orgasm, she dreams of married life with the emperor “on the Palatine Hill” complete with a daughter named “Claudia” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 229). Her fury reveals the god Pluto to be a lost boy searching for home. Zuleika, as Proserpine, unleashes the rage she has suppressed not only for the way Felix has abused her, but also for her inability to take charge in the way she sees her emperor, her husband, and her father do. Her fantasy of a home life is her way of mitigating the rage she feels, and her inability to change the situation into which she was sold.

### *Resituating the Word*

Hershini Bhana Young argues: “Illness must be seen as a logical consequence of the physical, epistemic, discursive, and linguistic violence of the colonial and postcolonial machine” (28). She draws from Fanon’s ideas regarding the *epidermalization* of the colonized so that those who are oppressed internalize feelings of inferiority that are made manifest through the oppressor’s language and actions. Like Sharpe’s construction of monstrous intimacies, Young suggests oppression is not a static or linear construction that only affects “the individual psyche in the present” (28). Those in the present have ingrained in their DNA a history of “the hegemonic quotidian violations of people and spirits long embroiled in colonial and postcolonial struggle” (28). In *The Emperor’s Babe*, Zuleika responds to madness, but that madness is not in and of itself hers. Zuleika has no “degenerative” or “*behavioural* flaws” that make her psychologically unstable, although she is injured, like the children she hears screaming from the other side of her bedroom door during her sister-in-law Antistia’s visits (McClintock 10). Zuleika maintains an emotional and psychological stability that would not be possible without Venus’s and Alba’s support and her decision to write. If her assertion: “Civis Romana sum”—I am a Roman citizen—is legally untrue, she is a radical and transgressive person of its creation (Evaristo, *The Emperor’s Babe* 54). Zuleika’s choice to write her history, to reveal what she has seen and heard inscribes her as belonging to a Londinium that forces her to confront the darkest parts of humanity. She views both Felix and Severus as Pluto, her guides in this underworld.

In turning to the Roman myth of Proserpine, Zuleika recalls a complicated male/female relationship that triangulates mother and daughter and leaves both wanting within a power structure that is dominated by male lust. Unlike Proserpine’s mother

Ceres, Zuleika's mother cannot rescue her daughter. She is caught in the underworld, married as she is to her brother, both children to one of King Meroe's concubines. They are "a human chain, belonging to King Meroe, / with no breakages for generations" (*The Emperor's Babe* 24). Zuleika cannot unwind if her mother is "[her] aunt," if she is her mother's "daughter and niece," or "[her] own cousin" (*The Emperor's Babe* 24). The mother/daughter relationship has been tainted by another imperial construction and her father's ambition is a further contamination in the Londinium colony. As a child, Zuleika watches as her father uses her mother's "sweet cakes" to set up his first "kerb[-side]" business when they arrived from Meroe (*The Emperor's Babe* 4). She notices that the only time her mother relaxes or shows affection is when "she rocked [her son] Catullus / to sleep" (*The Emperor's Babe* 20). She cannot turn to this damaged woman, a victim, any more than her mother can reach out to her daughter. Only her father—who states: "When you're a slave you dream / of either owning slaves or freeing them"—is glad for his ability to create his own destiny after "a famine, plague or flood," killed the king and allowed him and his wife/sister to migrate with Zuleika (*The Emperor's Babe* 25). As a freed male, that is her father's birthright, but Zuleika and her mother's choices are narrower. Once Zuleika is married, her father receives economic recompense and the mother/daughter rift is complete.

If neither female is safe, Zuleika does not realize the psychic devastation that both of them suffer until the scene in the arena. Both female characters learn to navigate the treacherous waters of a home where ambition kills those who are viewed as obstacles or deterrents to the right of privilege. Her mother is married to her brother in a loveless marriage, far from anything or anyone who is familiar. She hides behind "voluminous /

black robes over her head, slumped / into a corner, still as a sack of potatoes” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 19). Unlike her mother, she is not caught in the *in-between* and does not “yearn” ceaselessly “for the city of Meroe, and safety” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 27; 25). Zuleika views her marriage as a business deal for her husband’s pleasure. She acknowledges that her father has used her to advance his own career. The males’ privilege highlights how those with institutional power are cognizant only of their “desire,” whether carnal, materialistic or political (*The Emperor’s Babe* 22). The women become minor voices in the weaving of the dominant script.

Like Proserpine, her arranged marriage forces her to mature quickly and learn how to split time and life between two worlds. The upward mobility of which she and Alba dreamed turns out to be far from fact. They imagined that they “were gonna steal from the rich, // give to the poor ... // live in one of them mansions // with a thousand slaves feeding us cakes” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 9-10). Instead, Zuleika’s married life clamps down on her freedom. She cannot spend money, take a walk, or visit with friends without Felix’s permission. She doesn’t have a thousand slaves who wait on her lovingly. She wants her personal slaves, Valeria and Aemilia, to be her “devotees,” but instead Valeria insists that her “Mammy an Faither were chieftens” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 56; 57). Zuleika dismisses her claims with a “where had I heard *that* before,” but worries that “these wretched girls will play [her] / like a lyre” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 57; 108). After she denies their request for “manumission,” she can feel “pure odium oozing out of every freckled pore / in their bodies” (*The Emperor’s Babe* 206; 208). They view her as “Public Enemy Numerus Primus” and they turn on her once her lover, the emperor, is dead (*The Emperor’s Babe* 209). In exchanging information with Felix about her affair with



Severus, these women gain their freedom and flee Londinium. These indigenous females refuse to play by the Roman Empire's rules; they have no loyalty to Zuleika and reject her view that "life began for the girls when we met" (*The Emperor's Babe* 207). If Zuleika embraces her role as their master out of some sense of wanting to control someone's life, they refuse to accept her as having control over any part of them. Zuleika uses these females to give herself a sense of privilege, but she forgets that her position is a temporary one gained, ostensibly, through her body, like theirs, being sold to the highest bidder. For her slaves, Zuleika's affair becomes information to be traded for freedom.

Felix's discovery of her affair unleashes a misogynistic and classist rant. He believes that he "created a lady / out of a sewer rat" and her affair has made him a "laughing stock" (*The Emperor's Babe* 241). His outrage echoes Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech where Powell suggests that in order to avoid a "preventable evil"—"a black man [having] the whip hand over the white man"—it would be best if Commonwealth Black citizens did not migrate to England since allowing them any legal sanctions was akin to giving them the upper hand. Gilroy argues, "[Powell's] horror was at the prospect of blacks being afforded limited legal protection and it was this debasement of the legal sanctions which appalled him rather than the issues of mass migration itself" (86). In the same way, Felix is rethinking his placement of Zuleika in a high position within *his* household. His idea of trust, like Powell's desire to control the movements of the Black Commonwealth citizen, is to lock Zuleika away and allow her in public only when he deems necessary. He is "*utterly* humiliated" when he realizes his cage has not held her. He never saw her as his equal and has no understanding of how she

was able to gain closer access to the emperor than he ever did (Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* 241).

Antistia has made Zuleika feel subordinate since the Roman siblings “had dined with the emperor’s children, [while Zuleika’s] father spoke pidgin-Latin, / [and they] ate off [their] laps in the doorway,” but this couplet belies the fact that Felix has never met the emperor (*The Emperor's Babe* 54). Felix recognizes too late that the Libyan born emperor Severus has played him a fool and sent him “to lead a trading / expedition to India” in order to fuck his “*Illa Bella Negreeta*” (*The Emperor's Babe* 238; 3). His rage is directed not at the affair proper, but at his lack of control over her person and his new awareness that he has totally misread who his wife is. Despite his “selfish[ness],” emanating out of a fear that he has married beneath him, he feels that he has been bested (*The Emperor's Babe* 33). If he had set up their meeting and orchestrated the emperor sleeping with Zuleika for profit, he would not be angry. It is not about the sex as much as Felix has not recognized that his “knock-out *objet d’art*” has a power and intellect separate from him (*The Emperor's Babe* 75). She has been able to reach further, without the proper pedigree, than he ever could.

He reasserts the only control he has ever had over her—the power of life and death. He has his servant Tranio poison Zuleika with “arsenicum hidden in spicy sauces” (*The Emperor's Babe* 243). His privilege allows him to run from difficulty and clothe himself in the falsity that he is the one who has been wronged. He leaves her alone, travelling to Severus’s funeral in Rome—after all, Felix must pretend as if nothing is wrong in his household, and act as if he does not know that the emperor has cuckolded him—but he is not the victim as Mr. Darcy is constructed in Jane Austen’s tale.

Felix's behavioral flaws of pride, selfishness and depravity are presented as a counter to Zuleika's integrity, even in death. She refuses to ask her friends Alba or Venus for assistance in escaping since she knows "Felix would hunt [her] down and make them pay" (*The Emperor's Babe* 242). She cannot "be angry with [Tranio]. ... Because he had not spilled the beans, / as he should have" (*The Emperor's Babe* 243). She refuses to escape her "fate" and views "the actual act of dying [as] mere procedure" (*The Emperor's Babe* 244; 245). She suggests, "Felix isn't a bad man .... He's the person he was brought up to be," which is, ironically, a bad man, and I would add, a mad man (*The Emperor's Babe* 247). Her ability to put others' needs over her own, to have compassion even for her perpetrators negates Felix's reassertion of his power over her. His right has nothing to do with Zuleika's humanity. He views her as a piece of art that can be bought and sold. When he sees that she is not mere ornamentation, he could have a real relationship with her as his partner, the lifeblood of Londinium. Instead, he views her agency and self-definition as a threat. He chooses to destroy her.

Zuleika's understanding of herself within Londinium is what allows her to accept her death. She avoids the "crisis of genesis narratives" where contamination is connected to "the race that strays too far from its proper place" (McClintock 9; 12). She has not strayed from imperial constructions of power; her husband has not seen her humanity—he is the one who is mad. Her presence, her will, cannot be erased by his abuse. Although she is the daughter of a merchant immigrant and interacts with those considered low by Roman society—prostitutes, pimps, freed slaves, and laborers, it is not until Zuleika marries that she meets the worst that humanity has to offer. Her residence in the "villa, grander than any [she] and Alba / imagined" is a place of outward beauty, but inward

degeneration (Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* 33). If Greenwich and the arena are the eye of the storm, what occurs on the block with the “white stucco villas” is marked on Zuleika’s map of Londinium as the dark side of town. The heart of Londinium is not where the expensive houses and pampered people reside, it is located where people, in all their permutations commingle. Her remapping of the city becomes a threat to Felix, both actual and figurative, since if the emperor had lived, he might have had Felix killed in order to maintain his connection with Zuleika. Like Proserpine, Zuleika’s “metamorphosis,” initiated by her abductor and acted out with her lover, acknowledges the madness of desire—her husband’s, the emperor’s, and by proxy, the Roman empire’s (*The Emperor’s Babe* 33).

In *The Emperor’s Babe*, Zuleika cannot avoid the psychic devastation that the ongoing abuse and marginalization has caused to her person. Once she “articulates” her position within her husband’s household, she succumbs to some of the pleasures her position enables, but her agency also becomes a threat to her husband (Baldwin 115). Zuleika’s negotiation of the power dynamics within her household reveals the depravity and double dealing necessary to maintain hierarchal models of success. At the same time, her epoch skipping verse upends notions of present day homogenization and purity in London. As Londinium’s mapmaker, Zuleika decimates the false strength of those in power in Rome, but as the angel of history, she smashes notions of “cool Britannia” and London’s role in marginalizing its globally located population, especially the Commonwealth’s Black citizens. Throughout the narrative, Zuleika writes herself into the annals of British history—a global citizen who looks the madness of power in the eye and continues to write her tale.

Narrating Female Choice in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

I decide what to do. ... I will say what happens to me. I will be the one.  
Nazneen in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (301)

*Amma always say we are women what can we do?... She wrong. So many ways. At the  
end only she act. She who think all path is closed for her. She take the only one  
forbidden.*  
Hasina in *Brick Lane* (322)

In *The Emperor's Babe*, Zuleika upends notions of homogenization and whiteness in London through her tale of life in the fictional Roman outpost Londinium. Her anachronistic writing reveals the political and cultural markers designed to maintain control over a vast empire, but also establish a thriving multicultural and global city. Zuleika, a figure who would normally be viewed from the margins, if given a space at all, emerges as a voice that matters in detailing the global community who reside in Londinium. At the same time, she reveals the madness of power as it resides in those who wish to maintain their positions and are willing to subjugate and destroy anyone who might reduce their control or economic advantage. Not unlike *The Emperor Babe's*, *Brick Lane* is a recasting of those from the margins to the center of the story. In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali develops Naila Kabeer's well-documented research on Bangladeshi garment workers into a fictional construct that navigates beyond rhetoric of the global economy to articulate the nature of agency.<sup>29</sup> The narrative revolves around the Bangladeshi migrant Nazneen, "the wide-faced, watchful girl," who is sent to London by her father in an arranged marriage to a much older man named Chanu, and her sister Hasina, who "kicked

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<sup>29</sup>In *Brick Lane's* acknowledgments, Monica Ali states, "I am deeply grateful to Naila Kabeer, from whose study of Bangladeshi women garment workers in London and Dhaka (*The Power to Choose*) I drew inspiration. Thank you to Naila for her comments on the manuscript" (371).

against her fate” and lives in Dhaka (Ali 4; 9).<sup>30</sup> Beginning with the myth of Nazneen’s birth—“How You Were Left to Your Fate”—and concluding with an ironic twist on an insidious colonial aspiration—“This is England. . . . You can do whatever you like”—the plot moves in a linear fashion between a third person narrative and a fragmented epistolary transmission (4; 369). The third person narrative follows Nazneen through her birth, her arranged marriage to Chanu and her relocation to London, the birth of her three children, the death of her oldest and only son Raqib, her affair with the much younger Karim—the middle man who brings her piecework, and her decision to remain in the Tower Hamlets section of London with her two daughters when Chanu returns to Dhaka after the event of 9/11. Hasina’s correspondence retraces and maps the sisters’ pasts and records how Hasina’s decision to marry a man she loves instead of obeying her father and entering an arranged marriage like Nazneen throws her from one precarious situation to another.

Much of the scholarship that examines *Brick Lane* is focused on social mobility and female agential identity gained through work in the global marketplace, but these examinations are reliant upon an economic algorithm that only examines Nazneen’s migration to the global city of London and her status from piecemeal garment worker to fashion designer.<sup>31</sup> Her agency, decision-making skills, and actions are never linked to her sister Hasina. Furthermore, Hasina is rarely acknowledged as more than an annoying

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<sup>30</sup>*Brick Lane* opens with a signification of post-colonialism: Nazneen is born in “Mymensingh District, East Pakistan” (Ali 1).

<sup>31</sup>See especially Alistair Cormack’s “Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form: Realism and the Postcolonial Subject in *Brick Lane*”; Jane Hiddleston’s “Shapes and Shadows: (Un)Veiling The Immigrant in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*”; Francoise Kral’s “Fictional Contexts, Actual Contexts, and Virtual Contexts in *Brick Lane*, by Monica Ali”; John Marx’s “The Feminization of Globalization”; and Garret Ziegler’s “East of the City: *Brick Lane*, Capitalism, and the Global Marketplace.”

and simplistic, stereotypical sub-plot that moves Nazneen's story forward or the subaltern example of what happens to women unable to migrate and/or who rebel against their families' cultural traditions, which leaves them unable to create an agential identity. Those readings ignore Nazneen's and Hasina's pre-existing agency, and how their choices are and are not contingent on economic stability. Nazneen learns through her tactical agential choices how to negotiate for her and her daughters' safety and wellbeing, but she has always been the agent of her life. Hasina's choices may be more problematic to contextualize, but cannot be judged solely on her inability to gain economic stability in Dhaka. The economic constraints in which both sisters live is undeniable, but what makes their stories unique is the focus away from central power sources and on Nazneen and Hasina, as sisters and as individuals with rich inner lives.

Framed through their mobility within Dhaka and London's Tower Hamlets neighborhood, Nazneen and Hasina's sisterly bond shapes how they wrestle with moral, ethical, and pragmatic dilemmas. Nazneen's and Hasina's choices sometimes cost them happiness or worse, but they adjust and reevaluate with each new situation they encounter. They are autonomous even when they are victimized—and whether they are working or not. If the men in Nazneen's and Hasina's lives prefer them silent and accommodating, the sisters reconfigure these silences to be tactical agential choices rather than oppressive constraints. And unlike the men in their lives, they have no expectations that their agency—their decision-making skills—will create a certain outcome. Their mother's inability to act until she dies by suicide forces the sisters to recognize, in part, that they must make choices. Nazneen's and Hasina's agency contrast Chanu's post-colonial position and Karim's rebellious pride to push the narrative from a

simplistic answer to subaltern and post-colonial discourse or an exotic rendering of the *bildungsroman*. The narrative is a palimpsest of epistolary, modernist, and realist techniques that reveals the local, national, and global powers with which the sisters interact and by which they are held in abeyance. The narrative's mobility is a mirror to Nazneen's and Hasina's mobility where they learn the power of their choices, including the power of making mistakes.

*Beyond the Subaltern: Agency at the Margins*

In her now iconic treatise on the subaltern, Spivak argues, "the context of colonial production" renders the female subaltern "deeply in shadow" ("Appendix" 257). Relegated to a limit position as an "Other," the female subaltern is framed within patriarchal and imperialistic systems where the "*elite*" are privileged, visible subjects and she is without representation ("Appendix" 254). This lack of a subject position means her feelings, motivations, and actions are hidden behind or are invisible to the dominant discourse. She has no recourse economically, socially, and legally within her family, local community, or nation.

When gauging "the *international* division labor," Spivak insists, "there are people whose consciousness we cannot grasp" because in "constructing a homogeneous Other [we] refer ... only to our own place in the seat of the Same or Self" ("Appendix" 259). Spivak is suggesting that those with privilege through power within the dominant discourse or agential identity that gives them some measure of control cannot comprehend the female subaltern's position. This inaccessibility is due how they shape



subalternity through what they know and is familiar to them, not what must be discovered and paid attention to.

Desire—for work, basic necessities like food, shelter, and clothing, and most especially for a life not lived in isolation—forces female subalterns to find ways to “to put aside the surplus of ... subjectivity and metonymise,” so they can “connect” (“Scattered Speculation” 480). These female subjects create an agential identity that is familiar to those in power, but does not necessarily speak to the conditions or desires that place these women in positions of invisibility. They purposefully “put aside difference” in order to be seen and read by the larger community. When “social mobility” becomes compromised or becomes impossible, as Spivak suggests it does through global labor displacement and militarized intervention, there is no “recognizable basis of action” and subalternity is once again reduced to a limited “position without identity” (“Scattered Speculation” 475-476). Their deepest desires may never be known, but their desire to survive is also thwarted in this configuration.

In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen and Hasina work in the garment industry and their jobs bring them varying degrees of visibility and economic success. Once Hasina is viewed as “*behave[ing] in a lewd manner*” with Abdul, a male co-worker, at her low-wage factory position, her social mobility decreases (Ali 113). Whether her female co-workers are jealous of her beauty and her ability to attract Abdul or if they are afraid that their factory positions will be compromised and they will all be reduced to sex objects, they refuse to engage with her once her interactions with Abdul become more overt. She cannot understand that she cannot be part of and separate from her co-workers, and once they deem her a “*bad*” fruit, it is only a matter of time before she is “*sacked*” “*for untrue*

*reason*” (112; 119). In this configuration, Abdul’s agential identity is not compromised. He is allowed to remain in his position and turns away from Hasina once she is let go. Without the ability to find other factory work, Hasina is forced into prostitution, another role where she is objectified and rendered invisible. Her inability to “metonymise” forces her into isolation, but she continues to believe that her choices matter (Spivak, “Scattered Speculation” 480).

If Spivak worries that a lack of mobility will marginalize female subalterns’ agential identity, Kabeer’s examination of Bangladeshi female garment workers in London and Dhaka suggests that reliance on crude economic calculations does not reflect agential identity or actual agency.<sup>32</sup> The problem is that “rational choices” exemplify the “achieve[ment of] maximum possible satisfaction of ... desires, given unlimited desires, but limited means,” but female garment workers are displaced in this type of data crunching (Kabeer 17). No matter how many hours they work, these women’s salaries will not allow them to reach much beyond the bare necessities required to survive. Concerned with dominant norms about economic success and materialism, low-wage workers’ social mobility is compromised by an agential identity that struggles to survive, not fulfill desires. When an individual’s “desires” are reduced to acquiring material goods, mobility within and in-between different communities is ignored and agency is reduced to how one makes money (17). Low-wage female workers’ life circumstances, cultural traditions, and even actions—their “tastes and preferences”—are discounted as

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<sup>32</sup>Richard McIntyre argues: “[I]n public policy discussions .... all that noneconomists often know is the neoclassical version of orthodoxy. The study of worker rights is by necessity interdisciplinary, including law, moral philosophy, history, and sociology, as well as economics” (4). I would add cultural studies to this interdisciplinary list since agency is more than economics, but low-wage workers’ agency is often reduced to work, class, and gender rank in each of the above fields of study.

counterintuitive or irrational and considered un-chartable in any comprehensive manner (17). For example, Hasina's lay-off could not be calculated since her dismissal had to do with the cultural climate inside the factory—a climate that looks down upon male and female interaction and forces co-workers to isolate from one another.

To combat a mono-cultural view of rational choices and make visible those “tastes and preferences” normally ignored, Kabeer argues that examining “value-laden rules” alongside the “rational choices” model could bridge the gap (17; 22). Value-laden choices treat as intrinsic the home-life and cultural traditions that rational choices ignore when examining workplace productivity and success. Value-laden rules establish “the core identity of individuals” and examine “who matters more in society, why they matter, and how they matter” (22). They take into account why garment workers in Dhaka may not exhibit traits considered good workplace habits compared to their migrant peers in London. When a woman does not show up for work, it may have to do with a husband who no longer wants his wife to work or a family situation that values her position within the home more than income from an outside job. Or it could be, like Hasina, she is let go for a cultural taboo that cannot be calculated in the factory's charter much less the national or global consciousness.

What becomes problematic is that in both the rational choices and value-laden rules models certain choices these women make are classified as weak or negative. Circumstances are ignored that force women to make certain decisions, especially if these decisions appear to be against their best interest. These kinds of choices are considered “‘inertness’ or non-decision” (21). The women seem to make wasteful or indecipherable choices that play against their economic success. They are relegated to a subaltern

position because their choices are only constructed around examples of material success in the public sphere. Economic success becomes the arbiter of agency formation—a kind of preference of its own.

Women like Hasina, and even Nazneen, are dismissed because their value-laden rules make it difficult for them to assert themselves in ways that a dominant discourse recognizes and rewards. Hasina's inability to ignore Abdul—her desire for an interpersonal, even love, connection, costs her a marginal, but good livelihood. If she could have remained silent when Abdul spoke to her or found a way to not fall “out from favor” with her co-workers, she would not have lost her low-wage job (Ali 111). When focusing more predominately on a value-laden rules rubric, Nazneen as a London female migrant would rate higher than Hasina, a Bangladeshi-based garment worker. Nazneen acquires the urbanized status of inhabiting space within the global city, but as Kabeer argues, the point is to view the groups with which these women belong alongside one another as subjects rather than objects. What remains constant in any of these calculations is agency remains contingent upon and connected to women's work and mobility in the public sphere. Until they leave their homes, they are considered subalterns without mobility and choice.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>David Harvey argues, “the feminization of the global labour force, the feminization of poverty almost everywhere and the use of gender disparities as a means of labour control make emancipation and eventual liberation of women from their repressions a necessary condition for class struggle to sharpen it's focus” (*Enigma of Capital* 258). Harvey's assessment is not suggesting that women do not have agency or learn it through work, but that changes to class structure and economic conditions are made when women are treated as more than objects or subaltern figures. This view is different than suggesting that women must learn agency through liberating work. Like Spivak, Harvey locates necessary change in the recalibration of those with power.

Where Spivak argues that social mobility is central to subalternity's agential identity, Kabeer privileges work for Bangladeshi women in both London and Dhaka as a liberating experience, whether or not it liberates them financially. She reads "inertness" as part of these women's make-up and sees work and agency formation as intrinsic to their survival in the same way that education is viewed as a model of moving someone from a state of ignorance to a place of wisdom (Kabeer 21). This configuration returns the subaltern to a place of invisibility unless she interacts with hegemonic discourses and institutions on the set terms of the subaltern as object, not subject. Kabeer is interested in how including and privileging value-laden rules makes transparent the ways rational choices obfuscate identity formation, but I would argue that even asking the question avoids seeing these women as subjects until they are workers.<sup>34</sup>

Whether or not Nazneen and Hasina are considered subalterns within an increasingly westernized and globalized world, *Brick Lane*'s narrative is a rejection of their objectification. These sisters are not silent, even when they lack words. They may be victimized by an "elite" subject position, but they do not view themselves as victims or objects of the privileged system (Spivak, "Appendix" 254). Their self-identification stands in contrast to their significant others—husbands and male lovers—who do feel oppressed by governmental and institutional systems even though they have a certain modicum of social mobility. The difference is the sisters have no expectations of these

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<sup>34</sup>Ivy Pinchbeck argues, "It is often assumed that the woman worker was produced by the Industrial Revolution, and that since that time women have taken an increasing share in the world's work. This theory is quite unsupported by facts ... for centuries ... the greater part of [women's] work was carried on in the home and there taken for granted. It was only when new developments brought about the separation of home and workshop that a far greater number of women ... bec[a]me wage earners in the outside world" (1). In other words, women have always worked. They may not have received monetary compensation for that work, but they worked.

systems. They make choices that may seem foolish, but allow them mobility even when the “*elite*” views them as invisible or static (“Appendix” 254). What remains is that their choices do not seem foolish to each other, and their correspondence allows them to serve as each other’s witness to the choices they make and the actions they take.

Nazneen and Hasina inhabit the subject position of sister and this connection alongside their lived experience—both singular and communal—upends the expected narrative of the subaltern as an exotic object.<sup>35</sup> The sisters’ inertness in the public sphere is countered by their familial connection and their rich inner lives. They inhabit a space that can be construed as what Mieke Bal’s names a countercoherence to hegemonic discourse. Bal rereads “the reality of gender-bound violence” in the Book of Judges through a model of countercoherence that focuses on the political implications for reading female figures, already present in a text, as silent and marginalized rather than looking at why or how the silences or marginalization is being used. I use Bal’s countercoherence to suggest that Ali’s novel is a purposeful construction that does not need to be read through a countercoherent model, but is itself a countercoherence not only where the subaltern is an expected absence, but also in other contemporary fictions like Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, which privilege female absence over presence, female

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<sup>35</sup>See Sarah Brouillette’s “Literature and Gentrification on Brick Lane” for a description of how Ali’s novel invokes “anger” in “residents of the neighborhoods around the real Brick Lane, the high street of Bangladesh area of the East End” because they did not like the author’s “depiction of the area” or the fact that “their ward might be used to shoot the 2007 book-to-film project” (427). These residents resented Ali’s depiction of the Bengali community not because she rendered them as exotic, but what they believed were ignorant peasants.

as object rather than as subject, or read women's subject position as somehow inferior to the male's.<sup>36</sup>

In *Brick Lane*, the sisters' plot strands are stylistically distinct and in conversation.<sup>37</sup> The women are seen as subjects who stand as equals if not superior to the men in their lives. Hasina's epistolary transmissions are written in a kind of halted and simple English that might suggest she is illiterate and must struggle to communicate effectively. Her words are the only indication of her life and subject position, but this does not mean she is a subaltern figure to herself. Her words and the subject matter she shares are indicative of how difficult her life is and the kinds of choices she faces. To write these events down takes effort and these letters indicate that in a patriarchal world, she is viewed as nothing more than an object of labor or marriage. She is the ultimate subaltern figure, one is only coveted for her looks and when they disappear through the hard turns her life takes, she is viewed with pity and derision. In her construction of her narrative, she is the subject with agential identity who pains over how to give her sister information without causing alarm. When she writes that her husband's beatings have become intolerable, she minimizes the result and focuses on his action by insisting that

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<sup>36</sup>In *The Satanic Verses*, the women are often represented as pedagogical objects used to establish male agency. As Homi Bhabha points out, Rosa Diamond appears as an extended metaphor of the British Empire since her physical presence "represents ... [t]he pageant of 900-year-old history pass[ing] through her frail translucent body" (240). Even Zeenat Vakil, Chamcha's love interest, is constructed as an object that offers him the means to maturity.

<sup>37</sup>Garrett Ziegler argues that "Nazneen['s transnational subjectivity] in the time and space of globalized London" is "the cause of Nazneen's liberation and development" (150), but he ignores Hasina's epistolary transmissions from Dhaka, which is problematic since Nazneen's agency is contrasted to and seen alongside her sister's choice and the Dhaka narrative. Although Ziegler closely reads the value-laden rules script in Nazneen's narrative, he does not imagine how a reading of Dhaka and Hasina would enrich his argument and problematize the notion of agency as a learned subjectivity rather than a birthright.

she would rather be beat by strangers since they do not say, “*they love [her]*” while hitting her (Ali 37). Her choice to leave him is predicated upon her mobility since she will “*go away to Dhaka,*” which her landlady “*say it is not good decision,*” but where she knows she will find work (36-37). Each letter ends on a positive note, or she closes with advice for Nazneen like “*ghole is good for stomach ulcer*” for Chanu’s intestinal troubles (121). Hasina may be living in the most despondent of conditions, but she remains socially mobile through the physical act of writing and connecting with her sister Nazneen.

The letters that Nazneen writes to Hasina never appear. Hasina’s notes serve as a summary of what her sister has written to her in a kind of compacted exposition. After Raqib dies in 1988, Nazneen disappears from the narrative for almost thirteen years until January of 2001. Hasina’s responses to Nazneen’s letters are the only indication of the depth of Nazneen’s grief in losing her first born. The letters describe not only Nazneen’s death and the birth of her two daughters Shahana and Bibi, but also go into detail about Hasina’s loss of her factory job, her rape by Mr. Chowdhury—her landlord, her descent into prostitution, her marriage and subsequent loss of said marriage to her client Ahmed, and later on in the narrative, their mother Rupban’s death by suicide. Hasina emerges as a strong woman and survivor. She is the repository for the sisters’ most painful memory, the loss of their mother, and the sense that she is more emotionally connected than Nazneen to the reality of who their mother was.

Jane Hiddleston argues that Hasina’s “attempts to speak out against the restrictions of tradition ... [are] bewildered, faltering, desperate to please and unsure of how to take control of her fate” (62). This assessment belies the fact that Hasina is



writing to her sister, who is thousands of miles away and without any recourse to assist Hasina, especially when she is dealing with a traumatic event. If Hasina appears to falter, she is tempering her news and attempting to convey the emotional depth of her connection with her sister. When she writes about her rape at the hands of her landlord Mr. Chowdhury, she cannot be “faltering” or “unsure,” as Hiddleston argues—her correspondence suggests that she is still in shock when she writes to Nazneen (62). She recognizes that she is powerless in Mr. Chowdhury’s company due in part to living rent free in his building. Although he has intimated that he sees her as a “*daughter*” and would do anything to assist her, he has kept her in a dilapidated building away from all who know him (Ali 114). He rapes her because he thinks he has been a “*fool*” and believes the story from the factory that she is a “*whore*” (116). When he shows up at her living space in the middle of the night, he is enraged and “[*she*] say nothing [*she*] do nothing” when he beats her with his cane and then rapes her (116). No one in her building comes to her aid. She has no one to speak to or go to for recourse against Mr. Chowdhury. She is alone, lacking any social mobility in her local community. Only her letter allows her to remain visible—someone will be sympathetic even if Nazneen can do nothing to lessen Hasina’s physical and emotional pain.

After Mr. Chowdhury leaves, Hasina questions if “*God ... curse [her life]*” (117). She believes nothing will ever go well for her, but soon turns this idea on herself when she states:

*Little and little I getting stronger. I pray God forgive me. I sick then inside my mind. Everything has happen is because of me. I take my own husband.*

*I leave him. I go to the factory. I let Abdul walk with me. I the one living here without paying. (116-117)*

Her phrase “*getting stronger*” could be an indication of how deep the physical and emotional pain from the rape and beating are (117). At the same time, Hasina understands that her rebellion of cultural traditions and social expectations compromise her safety. Rejecting her role as “an unspoilt girl. From the village” brings punishment (9). She blames God, but knows she is, in some part, responsible for her position. Her inability to conform to stultifying and repressive cultural traditions is a choice. Her decisions are not “‘inertness’ or non-decision,” but active assertions of her subjectivity (Kabeer 21).

In corresponding with Nazneen, Hasina acts. She reaches out so she can cope with what has happened to her. Her letters serve as the request for her sister to be her witness, knowing that Nazneen cannot act on her behalf. She ends the letter stating she is “*getting stronger*” because she does not want Nazneen to worry about something neither of them can change (Ali 117). She recognizes that her choices have put her in danger, but she refuses to stop making decisions about how she wants to live her life. This way of living is not indicative of a person who is “unsure of how to take control of her fate,” but one who recognizes that no matter how much control she has over her decisions, she has no control over others’ actions or the expectations of a patriarchal and misogynistic society (Hiddleston 62).

Hasina’s written word is the only way she can communicate with the person who has known her throughout her life’s ups and down. Her letters are italicized to delineate how far apart they live—Hasina in Dhaka and Nazneen in London. Instead of revealing these stories at night, when the women are in bed and talking in the darkness across a

short distance pillow to pillow, or even talking on the telephone, the sisters are forced to share their most intimate moments across time and space through spare words on the page. Hasina hesitates because her sister Nazneen knows how to read between the lines. She can be angry because they both know what Hasina's rebellion has cost her even as they know she refuses to disappear. The italics separate Hasina from Nazneen's narrative strand and are a reminder of the intimacy the women share as sisters.

The letters are confessional and communal for Hasina, but for Nazneen they are a reminder not only of what life would have been like if she had stayed in Dhaka, but what might happen to her daughters, Shahana and Bibi, if she returns to Bangladesh as her husband Chanu wants. They recall their father Hamid's abuse and how he has ingrained in them the notion that women are only as valuable as they fulfill his needs, including the price they will bring in an arranged marriage. He sarcastically refers to their mother Rupban as "a saint" whenever she expresses a need or displeasure at his visits to the local brothel, threatens to cut off the head of "his whore-pig daughter" after Hasina elopes, and marries Nazneen to Chanu, an older London migrant, after a tornado "flattened half the neighboring village" and he needed the cash to keep his farm up and running (4; 5; 5). Before the mourning period is over for their mother, he remarries, but this new wife leaves "quick" (120). According to Hasina, "that is the way with men," which could be part of the reason that she always chooses to run when her situation becomes violent (120). In this regard, Hamid is an abusive male who lords it over all the females in his life, but he is also their means of communication and transport. His abusive nature is the thrust that sends the sisters away from what they know into the unknown. Hasina cannot

break from the cycle of this abuse and winds up in a brothel, but Nazneen lucks out with a gentle, if indecisive older husband who is “kind and never beat her” (79).

If Hasina’s economic and cultural constraints complicate her life so that she does not have any “power to change her immediate context,” as Francoise Kral states, she continues to stay emotionally connected to her desires and actively continues a bond with her sister in London through her letters (114). In contrast, Nazneen’s move to London shows how her economic life is exponentially more positive. She could become paralyzed each time she hears of her sister’s life, but instead, her sister’s circumstance reminds her to seize the opportunities presented to her or make opportunities where none exist. Nazneen learns, through her sister’s thwarted attempts at freeing herself from patriarchal abuse, the power of tactical choices.

Michel de Certeau suggests strategies are “organized by the postulation of power” and those with “*absence of power*,” like Nazneen, Hasina and even Nazneen’s husband Chanu, must use tactics instead (38). Chanu has no understanding of his position. No matter how much he embraces English society and traditions, post-imperial London will never accept him as English in the same way that the sisters’ mobility is constrained by cultural traditions focused on gender. If Hasina does not care that she cannot move strategically, Chanu does not understand he cannot either. Caught in the “in-between” of the spatial terrain and the subject’s need for mobility, Chanu’s constant miscalculation of situations and his position within them isolate him (Bhabha 64). His misinterpretation of post-imperial life becomes Nazneen’s testing ground for tactical maneuvers.

Early in the novel, when Nazneen and Chanu are still newlyweds, she asks him for a new sari by suggesting, “the pink with yellow [fabric] is very nice. ... Do you think

so?” (Ali 25). Chanu avoids answering and instead begins to “translate” the eighteenth century Scottish philosopher David Hume’s treatise on “Relations of Ideas, and Matters of Fact” (25). He clears his throat with “aaah, ahem” and this vocalization indicates that not only is English “difficult,” but there is an art to translation (25).<sup>38</sup> Chanu speaks in a circuitous way throughout the novel, but if, in this instance, he was attempting to woo his wife with his intellect, Nazneen’s response to how “difficult” it is to “translate” Hume cuts off his flirtation (25). She interrupts him by announcing: “I think it is nice, but I don’t mind” (25). She understands that Chanu does not need to go on about Hume if he does not want to buy her the sari or he does not want to choose a favorite. Her ability to return him to her basic request forces Chanu to “laugh” and purchase the sari (26). Chanu may be amused by his wife’s inability to understand Hume. He may even see her statement as a flirtatious trick to get what she wants. The exchange is important for two other reasons. It reveals how different Nazneen’s marriage is than any of Hasina’s and upends the idea that Nazneen is without agency or power in her marriage.<sup>39</sup>

Later on, when Nazneen first tells Chanu that she is pregnant she asks, “Does [the bed] make your backache?” (32). When his response is no, she states, “I’ll get a bedroll. That is what we village girls are used to. Of course, when our child is born, he will sleep

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<sup>38</sup>See Sukhev Sandhu’s “Come Hungry, Leave Edgy,” and Ali Ahmad’s “*Brick Lane*: A Note on the Politics of ‘Good’ Literary Production” for review essays that confront Ali’s use of English to conjure the Bengali language. See also, Sarah Brouillette’s “Literature and Gentrification on Brick Lane” (2009) for an intriguing discussion on the significance of Ali’s inability to speak Bengali as well as the ways in which *Brick Lane* helped to speed the gentrification process in the Brick Lane neighborhood.

<sup>39</sup>Only Hasina’s pimp Hussain ever treats her with kindness. He is the one who tells her to marry her second husband Ahmed, an albino client, because “*this man is odd like five-leg donkey. ... What chance he has? You are damaged beyond repair. What chance you has also? ... My liver is gone I cannot last much longer. Who will protect you if not him? I let you go*” (Ali 121).

on the floor with his mother” (32). Although she never actually claims to want one, this line of passive-aggressive inquiry ostensibly assures her of a new mattress. She plays into his sense of superiority and his feeling, which she overheard during one of his late night phone calls to his family back in Dhaka, that she is “an unspoilt girl. From the village” (9). She controls the situation because she knows more than Chanu realizes she knows. She cannot frame her subject position as having power since Chanu must approve her every need and desire. Chanu frames her passivity as a willing submission to something greater and outside herself, but he does not know that it is a tactical agential identity with “a degree of plurality and creativity” that allows Nazneen to craft a temporal space within the oppressive constraints of the marriage (de Certeau 30). Her tactics benefit the both of them since she gets what she wants—in this case a new mattress—and Chanu gets to feel generous and accomplished.

Similar to Chanu, Karim can be unbalanced by Nazneen’s desire and simple logic and she uses tactics to engage him as well. When they first meet, Nazneen notices Karim has a “stutter,” but assumes he is “hesitant” in Bengali (Ali 338). When she shifts to English, he continues to speak in Bengali and she thinks, “she had made a mistake” because he kept up the conversation, stammer and all, in Bengali (151). She views Karim as proud and recognizes that “he would not disown himself” by reverting to the language he understood best so she chooses to speak only Bengali in his presence (151). Nazneen has read the situation incorrectly. It is not until she breaks off the affair that she learns from Karim that he had “stammered” as a child. The hitch in his language only re-emerges “when [he is] very nervous” (338). She didn’t know English well enough to realize that he was also stammering in English. In the bedroom, Karim “moaned” “S-

slow down” in response to Nazneen’s “reckless” behavior (218). After love-making sessions, “he uttered caresses, whispered promises, moaned and mumbled his love ... humbled by his stutter” (251). Nazneen comes to view Karim’s words as untrustworthy as Chanu’s and after his pillow talk, “she got up and went to wash and rinse his words away” (251). Neither of these men takes actions; they move pieces around the board with seemingly no plan even though they spend time attempting to see every contingency. Nazneen breaks off the affair with Karim despite the fact that she is not returning to Dhaka with Chanu because Karim is as indecisive as her husband.

Nazneen and Hasina are not the ones who falter—it is the men who do. Hasina’s letters foreground and develop the tension inherent in embodying an agency that seesaws between their mother Rupban’s words: “I don’t want anything from this life. ... I ask for nothing. I expect nothing” after living with an abusive husband and Hasina’s insistence that “If you ask for nothing, you might get nothing!” (70). The sisters’ live in a value-laden rules system that demands they all but erase any needs and desires in order to serve as the perfectly invisible “unspoilt girl[s]. From the village” that Nazneen’s husband Chanu, her lover Karim and Hasina’s two husbands and landlord so clearly desire (9). The sisters’ refusal to be the object means they must learn how to combat power without disrupting it. Their inability to be perceived as anyone but from the margins of society means they cannot strategize. They are mobile, but there are constraints as to where they may go and what they may do.

Nazneen sees in her husband Chanu and her love Karim the isolation that is wrought by misjudging the parameters of how to construct agential identity. After September 11, 2001, she wishes that Chanu would speak to the other men in Brick Lane

because “he is too alone with his thoughts” (271).<sup>40</sup> She recognizes in Karim a proud young man who is frustrated in his inability to engage with his peers through peaceful discourse, and unable to gain access to other forms of power in London. In contrast, Nazneen and Hasina’s ability to engage tactically allows them to recover from tragedy and dismissal. They acknowledge the presence of colonial, post-colonial, and patriarchal power, but choose the agency of childhood myth and indirect action as the birthright of social mobility rather than a constructed agential identity fighting against the label of the Other. Nazneen and Hasina learn to negotiate the space between their mother, their lovers, and their neighbors. Hasina’s letters are one way that, the women, unlike Chanu or Karim, engage in a mobile and mobilizing community. But the inherent tension and intertextuality of the realist structure, the modernist sensibility, and the pre-determined colonial authority of a post-colonial discourse also reveals how Nazneen and Hasina use their tastes and preferences to engage tactically.

### *A Mobilizing Narrative*

Nazneen’s and Hasina’s stylistically distinct plot strands reveal a spatial palimpsest that borrows from the epistolary novel of the seventeenth and eighteenth

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<sup>40</sup>Both men’s sense of masculinity is compromised after the events of 9/11 in New York and Washington DC. They understand that their brown skin makes them targets. They can no longer pretend they are negotiating for a stable and permanent space in London even though Karim was born in London and Chanu has been a resident for more than 20 years. If Chanu had any doubts about being viewed as English, the planes change his mind. His belief that there will be “backlash” after the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon force him to activate and tactically moves forward with his plans to return to Dhaka. He recognizes that “[a]ny day, any moment, life can end. There’s been enough planning” (Ali 271). Once he feels the threat is real, he moves, but his movement does not allow him to create a home in London. He finally acts like the outsider he has always been.



century, the *bildungsroman* structure of the nineteenth century, the modernist structure of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), the postcolonial narrative structure found in novels such as *The Satanic Verses*, and a nonfiction memoir like Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976).<sup>41</sup> In particular, Nazneen's life is conspicuously absent of overt manifestations of colonial authority except through the structure of the novel itself and the schematics of the city of London proper. Even the novel's title, which is also the name of the neighborhood where Nazneen and Chanu reside, suggests a collision of canonical forces that strengthens rather than subsumes or subjugates both Nazneen's and Hasina's positions. Like bricks need lanes, the female agency mobilized in *Brick Lane* is routed along the movement of community interaction, whether it is Hasina's correspondence or Nazneen's movement through the city of London and the Tower Hamlets. What becomes apparent, however, is that while this movement may be instigated by outside sources—Hasina runs away when relationships become violent and Nazneen often reacts to Hasina's letters by walking the streets of London or losing

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<sup>41</sup> According to John Marx: "Ali's novel invokes a realism as identifiably canonical—reviewers have placed *Brick Lane* alongside the works of Dickens, Dostoevsky, Hardy, and Thackeray (see Kapoor; Mishra, 42; Abu-Jabber, 25; and MacDonald)—as it is canonically post-colonial—Selvon's *Lonely Londoners* and Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* ... (see Kapoor, and Gorra 9)" (24). Alistair Cormack suggests the text's realist form is the driving force that allows Nazneen to "grow[] into the form in which she is rendered" and views Nazneen's liberation as "a new manifestation of the sovereign bourgeois subject who could, should she so desire, write a realist novel" (712-713). Susan Stanford Friedman posits, "*Brick Lane* deliberately echoes *Ulysses* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, embeds epistolary narratives from London and Bangladesh, and deals centrally with what migration scholar Nikos Papastergiadis calls 'the restless trajectories of modernity,' the dialogic and contrapuntal psychologies characterizing the 'turbulence of migration'" (476). But then asks is *Brick Lane* a "modernist novel"? (476). This conjecturing reveals that *Brick Lane* is a mobile narrative that purposefully borrows from all these forms and structures to re-evaluate, reconsider, and replace the female object, viewed as helpless in much of canonical literature, with a female subject who embodies agency.

herself in her piecemeal work—the sisters choose action no matter how deleterious the circumstances become or no matter what form the novel stylistically takes.

Hasina's letters are reminiscent of Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady* (1748). Although Richardson's novel is polylogic in nature—letters from multiple characters move the plot forward and reveal different points of view about Clarissa and her fate, Hasina's is a monologic discourse that butts against the third-person narrative of her sister Nazneen. This narrative technique is striking in that the one individual who could be read as a subaltern figure is the only one throughout the novel who possesses the actual "I" voice. When Nazneen reacts to the letters she reads, her responses are viewed through a third-person narrative that takes on various stylistic lenses. Most prominently, Nazneen's first time alone on the London streets, distraught that her sister has left her abusive husband and moved to Dhaka, is configured like another Clarissa—Clarissa Dalloway in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Although Nazneen has followed Chanu's dictum to not go out without him since although he "doesn't mind," he "will look like a fool" to the "ignorant" neighbors, her walk is constructed as partial rebellion (Ali 27). She finds Chanu suffocating at times and controls her impulse to harm him when she is required to cut his corns by "*not* let[ting] the razor slip" (27) [my emphasis]. Her decision to remain passive stands as a tactical maneuver that honors her father's choice of husband and emulates her mother's dictum: "If God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men" (53). No matter how dissatisfied Nazneen is with her father's choice of husband, she chooses silence over complaint and learns the tactical arts of pretense and obfuscation that permit Chanu to believe that her desires are actually his and allow Nazneen to acquire what she needs.

When Nazneen reads her sister's letter, she cannot fathom that Hasina is not lost, but instead reconfiguring the spatiality of her corporeality as necessary. Nazneen remembers their father's rage when Hasina eloped with the sawmill owner's nephew Malek at sixteen when "her beauty was becoming almost unbearable" (5). There is an implication in this description of Hasina's attractiveness that she has robbed her father of a monetary gain, but as the narrative makes clear, Hasina "listened to no one" (4). This phrase could be the title of Hasina's mythic construction—her identity is predicated upon her inability to do anything but what she wants, no matter the danger. She refuses to give up her personal innate agency to choose even if those choices bring one humiliating incident after another.

After Nazneen reads Hasina's letter, Nazneen feels as if her heart has been "pounded ... on a rock" and "did not try to calm herself" (32). The phrase "did not try" implies Nazneen's agency as the phrase "listened to no one" suggests Hasina's (32; 4). When Nazneen gives up control, she is expressing not only fear for what she perceives as her sister's singularity—Hasina knows no one in Dhaka, but also what she believes is the precariousness of her state of mind. Nazneen's agitated state propels her into the unknown and she wanders into the London streets and enters the same state of "lost[ness]" in which she perceives her sister to be (36).

If this scene shapes the myth of Hasina as the one who "listened to no one" (4), it also defamiliarizes not only Nazneen as the stereotypical migrant, but also the canonical space of London after World War One—a space that Clarissa Dalloway inhabits at the beginning of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Nazneen paces the streets in a state that both contrasts and draws from Clarissa Dalloway's stream of conscious images as the middle-aged woman

makes the trip to “Mulberry’s the florists” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 17). If Nazneen’s sister’s letter is the cause of her mental shake-up, her view of white English subjects and London is both defamiliarized and exoticized in this instance. Unlike Clarissa’s walk to the florist, Nazneen’s journey into downtown London begins, like her birth, with the mark of physical pain. Before she even leaves the Tower Hamlets she “took the steps two at a time until she missed a ledge and came down on her ankle” (Ali 33). Ignoring this ache, she plunges into traffic and equates the chance of “being hit by a car [with] walking out in the monsoon and hoping to dodge the raindrops” (34). A car “horn blared like an ancient muezzin ululating painfully” and she notices “a pair of schoolchildren, pale as rice and loud as peacocks” (34). More than a description of the Tower Hamlets of London, Nazneen constructs the myth of London as home—conflating images of Bangladesh with the London landscape.

Sara Upstone argues, “references to sadhus and muezzins (Ali, *Brick Lane* 13, 43) belong to a larger strategy of connecting to the past in order to secure emotional survival” (337). She sees these touchstones as a “conventional dislocation, echoing Sam Selvon’s *the Lonely Londoners*, George Lamming’s *The Emigrants*, and V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*, [which all] characterize migrant experience” (337). I do not disagree that there is an emotional connection that is directly related to the migrant story in Nazneen’s references, but I would argue these references are also, like Rushdie’s overlaying of historical event with landscape and multiple narrative strands, an attempt to reframe canonical literature, especially the subject of said literature. Nazneen is creating a globalized palimpsest where London is not sophisticated and sleek, but a maze of unknown and unknowable dangers and adventures. What is familiar is that which is exotic to Londoners, what is

unfamiliar to Nazneen is that which is normal to English citizens. The pain in Nazneen's ankle makes each step she takes away from Tower Hamlets more frightening, overwhelming, and real.

The car horn as "muezzin" defamiliarizes the image in *Mrs. Dalloway* of "the violent explosion" of a backfiring "motor car," which is a stark reminder of World War One and causes Clarissa to "jump" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 19). But where the sound that emanates from the car results in everyone "com[ing] to a standstill" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 20) and, after the initial shock, focusing on what "greatness was seated within" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 23), Nazneen "stopped and the car swerved. Another car skidded to a halt in front of her and the driver got out and began to shout" (Ali 34). Nazneen's position is one of mobility. There is no "greatness" in Nazneen's narrative—no power to swoop in and focus or reconfigure grief and confusion (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 23). There is only Nazneen, in pain, but still moving. She is an actor in and of the city. She does not wait for someone to tell her what to do or expect assistance. She does not become paralyzed and maybe even a little star struck by the thought of power moving past. Her pain is not obfuscated by an outward assertion of nearby power. She may be frightened at being discovered all alone outside of her apartment, but she willfully runs away from the traffic jam that she has created. She rebels against Chanu and her community's cultural traditions; there is no guarantee she wants any part of London culture.

Nazneen's flight from the familiar renders her invisible to those she passes. She surmises the people on the street "were not aware of her" and she "enjoyed" this idea that "unless she did something, waved a gun, halted the traffic, they would not see her" (Ali 35). She relishes her ability to pass unnoticed, especially after Chanu's warning that if

anyone saw her walking alone, she would make him look like a “fool” (27). This walk then, although taken in solidarity with her sister in Dhaka, further exposes the complicated existence she must maneuver with regards to Chanu. Her doubts do not allow her to recognize that she wandered into and stopped traffic and the world did not end. What she does register is that Chanu has been proven wrong since no one notices her. This knowledge assists Nazneen in “us[ing], manipul[at]ing, and divert[ing]” the spatial construction of her relationship with Chanu (de Certeau 30). Nazneen separates from this idea that she must obey her husband in all matters. She must mask this new knowledge through a continued use of passively conceived tactics, but enacting them so that they continue to assist rather than detract from their marriage.

Nazneen’s embrace of her invisibility stands in stark contrast to Clarissa Dalloway’s fear of it. As a woman past childbearing years, Clarissa “had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 14). She viewed herself as “being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 14). Clarissa only regards herself in relationship to her husband’s identity, not her relationship as a mother or an individual separate from her family. Her personhood disappears, literally, in the name of her husband.<sup>42</sup> She is a category without identity, a shadow of someone who was procreative at one time, playing a role in the building of family and community, but now her role is sterile. In *Brick Lane*, there is an implicit reckoning that England, like Clarissa, will no longer give birth and expand her nation or stretch the bounds of empire. These contradictory modes do not

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<sup>42</sup>In *Brick Lane*, Dalloway is also the name of Chanu’s supervisor. Chanu hopes Dalloway will grant him the promotion to an office job that Chanu talks about only in abstract terms. Like DeSalvo’s *Casting Off*, the white male characters are relegated to the sidelines in favor of the female narrative journey.

privilege the spatiality or surety of structure, but the temporality of the wandering subject that is Nazneen, the global citizen, as she moves through the ever-changing London streets.

Where Clarissa is menopausal and fearful of losing her self in middle age, Nazneen is fertile.<sup>43</sup> The walk is filled with the constant reminder of Nazneen's pregnancy since "[t]he baby made her want to urinate about eight or nine times in the day" (Ali 37). Those things that gave Clarissa meaning and which she fears losing, her roles as wife and mother, for Nazneen are derivative and relational. Nazneen's identity is laid over Clarissa Dalloway's memory of who she was. The canonical palimpsest embeds the end of World War One and the collapse of the British Empire within the space of a globalized London that Nazneen brings to life.

The contemporary white British female Londoners that Nazneen sees on her walk through downtown London offer up a contrast to Clarissa Dalloway, who only sees herself as a product of white British male hegemony. When Nazneen encounters these women, she recognizes in them a modern day warrior sensibility. They "had strange hair [that] puffed up around their heads, pumped up like a snake's hood" and looked "as though they were angry" (35). One in particular wore clothes that "were armor, and her ringed fingers weapons" (36). With their outrageous 1980s hairdos and over-size shoulder pads, Nazneen is witnessing female mobility within contemporary London's

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<sup>43</sup>Clarissa's sense of erasure is also conjured ironically from her remembrance of her first love Peter, who "married a woman met on the boat while going to India!" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 10). It is not clear if Peter has married an "Indian" woman or not, Clarissa is clearly threatened by this woman since she remembers Peter said Clarissa was "[c]old, heartless, a prude" in contrast to "Indian women" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 10). When seen in this light, *Brick Lane* could be considered the coming to fruition of Clarissa Dalloway's fear of south Asian women rendering her invisible.

business district. Nazneen's lack, she is "without" the armor necessary to exist in modern day London, allows her to feel "[a] leafshake of fear—or was it excitement?" (35). She has no idea that she is in a business district, but her empty, rather than invisible, status is situated alongside the women's attire and coiffures. She has no sense of herself as being participatory in their mobility since she is "hobbl[ed]" by her ankle injury and, if not totally immobile, her gait is "halting" (35). She cannot fathom that she has an equivalent agency to these women. She has a difficult time seeing her mobility on the London streets, passageways that connect beings, as anything more than being "lost" and Hasina's struggle for survival as dangerous (36).

In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen upends the ideas of patience and fortitude throughout the narrative. When she wanders downtown London, she is upset and is not looking to calm down. Earlier in the novel, the concretization of an exotic tale of the other is upended through a mythical reading of Nazneen's birth much in the same way that Maxine Hong Kingston's canonical narrative of Asian American immigration, *The Woman Warrior*, opens with a mythical birth and suicide.<sup>44</sup> *The Woman Warrior's* narrative is a space of silence where female agency is often rendered through tales of fortitude and patience. Kingston's tactical agency first emerges through the forbidden narrative of her aunt, the "No Name Woman." Her identity is bound to this aunt who cannot be, but is

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<sup>44</sup>*The Woman Warrior's* first section, entitled "No Name Woman," tells the story of an unnamed aunt, a sister who does not exist to her father and his three brothers. The first lines of the novel reveal their secret: "You must not tell anyone," my mother said, "what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well" (Kingston 3). This is a shameful family secret of a past she could not know unless her mother exposed the silencing of her aunt's existence. Once known, she is never again allowed to refer to this event. This mythic reconstruction places the female in the camp of commodity and possession—not important enough to remember, but privileged enough to choose suicide in order to re-establish family integrity.



remembered. In remembering how her aunt lived and died, Kingston recalls the women of her past, creating the female history that is often lost in family lore. Her aunt's story is placed beside stories of Kingston's mother, the mythical Mulan, and finally Kingston's childhood in the US. Kingston navigates through her female community's stories before she acknowledges or even recognizes her own agency.

Her birth manifests around the same kind of temporal mobility that Kingston uses in constructing her agential identity. The difference is that Nazneen does not learn how to be a subject through recreating the stories of her ancestors' past; she is the subject from the beginning of her existence. Inscribed as a mythic tale: "How You Were Left to Your Fate," Nazneen's birth is read by her mother Rupban as a triumph of her own "wise decision" not to bring Nazneen to a hospital (Ali 4). For five days, the newborn withers away before she finally "clamped her mouth around [her mother's] nipple" and Rupban "cr[ie]d out for pain and for the relief of a good and patient woman" (4). Rupban's decision not to spend money on a hospital for her daughter is cast as a heroic moment even though it is more likely a tactical decision intuited from her husband's dismissal of the birth of his daughter. Until Nazneen makes her presence known by administering pain in her search for sustenance, this construction attributes female agency to a decidedly mobile and slippery temporality that places pain and pleasure in close proximity. Pain cannot be avoided and is (and may necessarily be) at times pleasurable in the same way that Nazneen finds London while "hobbling" about on a sprained ankle (35).

Pain then is a central conceit of the mobilizing temporality of female agency as it wanders in the "cracks ... of the proprietary powers" (de Certeau 37). Most clearly, this idea of pain is communicated in Hasina's letters, but it is also evident from the moment

of Rupban's first interaction with her husband. When Rupban tells him that she has given birth to a girl, Hamid replies, "I know. Never mind. ... What can you do?" (Ali 3). Nazneen's mother attempts to obfuscate Nazneen's gender victimization by ascribing Nazneen's agency to a mythic construction of fate. This smokescreen allows Rupban to displace her husband's disappointment without feeling guilty for not allowing a doctor to treat her girl child's illness. When Nazneen does not take to her mother's breast right away, Rupban suggests, "Probably it is her Fate to starve to death" (3). Fate is not a state devoid of choice, but the female subject learns that the myth of fate is indistinguishable from her survival, the pain that will ensue in living, and how agency is ascribed to her. The decisions made for her are predicated upon chance and error as much as is in making choices.

Nazneen's precarious birth serves as a reminder of what occurs when one naively believes that England's possessions have been acquired through a simple fulfillment of fate rather than the application of strategic planning and more than a modicum of mistake and luck. The myth locates the novel within the canonical discourse of Anglophone literature that character is destiny, which differs from Rupban's notion that fate chooses one's destiny. At the same time, the characters in question are decidedly female, not male, and the focus is on their pain and how they work through it in spite of little chance to succeed in any large or public ways.

What becomes apparent in "How You Were Left to Your Fate" is that female agency is not a simple construction with an assured or successful outcome. Nazneen is thought to be stillborn until her aunt Mumtaz, anxious to hold the "dead" child, lets the "small, slick torso slide through her fingers to plop with a yowl onto the bloodstained

mattress” (2). While the ancient mid-wife Banesa suggests that the “yowl” is only “a death rattle,” the infant “flailed her arms and yelled,” kicking against fate (2). Underlying the farcical elements of this construction is the complicated relationship of the female subject to agency. These females have made the incorrect decisions at each turn in Nazneen’s birth. Her survival allows her “to become the wide-faced, watchful girl,” who agrees to an arranged marriage and moves complacently to London to be with “the face like a frog” Chanu (4; 5). This myth is ironic then. Agency is not predicated on what you do in this story, but who you are. In Nazneen’s case, although she does not comprehend it until Hasina reveals their mother took her own life, there are advantages to being a silent, watchful figure, kicking only when necessary.

This myth of her birth also keeps Nazneen in a state of suspension regarding the agency she does possess. She spends most of the narrative comparing herself to her mother—even imagining her mother is berating her from the beyond—and falling short. She cannot behave as her mother taught her and like Hasina, fights against the dictum: “*we are women what can we do?*” (324). The difference between the sisters is that Hasina does not feel guilt, while Nazneen makes herself sick with worry for all the ways in which she has gone against her mother’s sense of propriety. It is only when Hasina reveals Rupban’s last and only action was to take her life that Nazneen is thrust into a new understanding of how her actions are not wrong, but define who she is. Hasina reinforces this notion when she tells Nazneen that it was Rupban who was “*wrong*” to only accept life as sufferance and inaction (324).

Rupban’s death by suicide is an interesting construction within the narrative. It collides with the suicides of the subaltern figure of Spivak’s great aunt Bhubaneswari

Bhaduri and the modernist construct of shell-shocked masculinity Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Spivak suggests that the meaning of Bhaduri's death is erased until Spivak digs through multiple readings to make sense of what she finally understands was a politically motivated act. Smith's shellshock from his military service in World War One is an indictment of the emotional paralysis with which many individuals met returning soldiers from the front. In *Brick Lane*, Rupban's death is not erased because Hasina witnessed it. Hasina follows her mother to the storeroom and watches as her mother, dressed in her "*fineries*," "*take spear and test on the finger*" (325). Hasina, who hides herself "*behind the kalshis*" does not quite understand her mother's action and "*go[es] away*" before her mother completes the act (325). Hasina's observation makes visible the mother's life and forces both Nazneen and herself to reconfigure their perspective not only about their mother, but also their places as women. At the same time, like those who witness Smith's death in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Hasina is forced to recognize that isolation and misunderstanding can trigger someone's paralysis or force them into a "*forbidden*" act (324). This isolation is not only a construct of military men or middle-aged white women, but also those who reside outside the boundaries of dominant English discourse. Hasina reveals Rupban's death to Nazneen after her friend Monju—who is dying after her husband poured acid on her face and body—insists that "*[t]hese secret things will kill us*" (304). Hasina frees Nazneen in telling her about Rupban. She also upends the myth of the subaltern woman as an individual with no witnesses, community, or agency and places her in London through Hasina's correspondence, adding her story to the canonical construct of Smith's death in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.

If Hasina is insistent that they not repeat the mistakes of their mother, Nazneen awakens to the idea that the passive tactics she uses are her choices; indeed, she now recognizes that she has been making choices all along. Nazneen does not acquire agency in or through the global market, but she comes to recognize that she possessed it all along through her sister's revelation about their mother.<sup>45</sup> The female performative subject, here Nazneen, but in other instances Hasina, recognize agency as a birthright. They may need to interiorize their agency as they wander in and out of communities, but any human being needs both the interiority of self-reflection and the exteriority of interaction with community. Nazneen may need to push against Chanu's decision to leave for Dhaka, but she does what is necessary for her daughters' wellbeing. Armed with this knowledge about her mother's life and death, Nazneen makes the first untroubled and guilt-free decision of her life: "The plane left tomorrow and she would not be on it" (326). She continues packing her daughters' clothes in order to fool not only her husband, but also her daughters. This tactical move will keep Chanu from his equivocating behavior; there will be no time to argue if she tells him she and his daughters are staying in London only a few hours before their flight. This tactical maneuver also leaves him with some measure of dignity; there will be no time to beg.

The most important encounter in this narrative, however, is the one Nazneen has with Mrs. Islam, the neighborhood Nosy Parker and resident loan shark. Alastair

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<sup>45</sup>Francoise Kral suggests Karim is "a go-between who allows [Nazneen] to discover the world outside, which makes their relationship all the more taboo. [It is this] gradual emancipation[,] which takes her from the confines of her house to that of her neighborhood and to the heart of the city (Kral 112). Perhaps following this line of inquiry, I could focus on how sex with Karim helps Nazneen acquire agency. This calculation dismisses the strength of Nazneen and Hasina's sisterly bond and the meshing of epistolary and third person narrative.

Cormack argues, “Nazneen’s confrontation with Karim is perhaps the most important” in terms of “straightening out problems through her own agency” (706). Cormack’s calculation ignores how she assists Karim in his activism and makes him feel powerful the same way she tactically maneuvers her husband to feel powerful when she is the one in control. Nazneen’s affair with Karim is a distraction to the interiority that is privileged in Nazneen’s agency. Nazneen tells her much younger lover Karim that she “[doesn’t] want to marry [him]” because “[f]rom the very beginning to the very end, we didn’t see things. What we did—we made each other up” (Ali 337; 339). No matter how physically attracted she is to Karim, she understands he is not her equal. Unlike Chanu and Karim, Nazneen refuses to live in a fantasy.

Nazneen understands that in order to survive financially, she must get out from under the loan that Chanu took from Mrs. Islam.<sup>46</sup> When Mrs. Islam arrives at Nazneen’s apartment with her two sons to collect what she imagines is the last loan payment that she can extract from the family before they leave for Dhaka, Nazneen is armed with the knowledge that her mother chose not to act until her death. She is worried for Hasina’s wellbeing, and anxious for her daughters as well. Like Rupban, Mrs. Islam pretends not to have expectations and to believe fate is something outside of her power; however, she is nothing less than ruthless by taking advantage of her neighbors’ needs and sending her savage and sadistic sons to break a few bones when necessary to collect loan payments.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Unbeknownst to Nazneen, Chanu bought a computer and sewing machine with the loan. The computer, which is Chanu’s, collects dust. The sewing machine becomes the family’s life preserver since Chanu has never been much of a breadwinner.

<sup>47</sup>In his preface to *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, Mario Puzo suggests, “Whenever the Godfather opened his mouth, in my own mind I heard the voice of my mother. I heard her wisdom, her ruthlessness, and her unconquerable love for her family and for life itself, qualities not valued in women at the time” (xii). Mrs. Islam’s identity manifests itself in

Mrs. Islam avoids a direct request for the money. Instead, she appears generous by stating that she “brought something for the girls” (328). This charade is nothing new. Each time Mrs. Islam has visited, she comes with advice for Nazneen and gifts for the girls. Nazneen is used to this equivocation, but Mrs. Islam’s sons are impatient. These two thugs are never given names and are referred to only as Son Number One and Son Number Two. Their construction is the single most direct displacement and erasure of the singularity of male authority. It also, in denying individuation, reconfigures the association of gender and agency. Mrs. Islam and Nazneen hold the power in the room. Mrs. Islam’s sons are buffoons and hotheads, stripped of all charisma and sex appeal, in the manner of Don Corleone’s eldest son Sonny Corleone. Unlike Sonny, they are rendered as impotent and inflexible males. They inhabit a narrative imagination that does not swoop or wander or understand how it is engaged with plurality, but can only sing one note and that off-key. The sons mirror the way men in this narrative are weakened by their insistence on strategically asserting an agency they do not possess.

This immobility and inflexibility, which manifests in Son Number One’s impatience with his mother’s tactical web of gift giving as subterfuge, causes him to demand: “Make her give the money first” (329). Rather than asserting his authority, this outburst serves to send his mother into a paroxysm of coughing. He denies Mrs. Islam her misdirection, but she must tactically avoid berating her son in public. She moves from

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the same way that Don Corleone’s does in Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* (1969). Her appearance is that of a long-suffering, sickly, and devout Muslim woman in the same way that Don Corleone dresses as a peasant fruit seller instead of the head of an organized crime family in New York City. Mrs. Islam’s actions, like Don Corleone’s decisions, place family first, in spite of a seemingly congeniality towards the neighbors. In this way, Ali’s novel is not engaged solely with Anglophone literary constructions, but also American contemporary constructions of gender and oppression.

tactical generosity to deploy her standard mode of avoidance—her sickly stature. She has no compunction speaking of how long she has to live. Of course, she has been threatening to die for fifteen years. Nazneen sizes up Mrs. Islam’s greed against her moral high-handedness and confronts the foundation of who the woman is.

Nazneen states, “We paid what we owed ... I am not going to pay any more. ... *riba*” (331). Mrs. Islam is taken off guard—her sons, through a lack of identity, cannot understand the implication of what Nazneen has accused the old woman, an expert tactician and survivor. Mrs. Islam attempts to recover from this direct insult by denying Nazneen’s accusation: “Do you think, before God, that I would charge interest? Am I a moneylender? A usurer? Is this how I am repaid for helping a friend in need?” (332). Nazneen does not back down; she is accusing Mrs. Islam of being a moneylender.

The noun *riba* is important for a number of reasons. This word is one of less than a handful of times when Nazneen speaks or thinks in a language that is not represented as English. *Riba* is connected to Islamic law and the Qur’an. The noun connotes both “interest and the prohibition of” such moneylending (OED n.p.). By accusing Mrs. Islam of demanding *riba*, she is reproving her for committing extortion, which is a grave sin. Nazneen is calling into question the old woman’s spiritual devotion to Islamic creed, the very foundation upon which Mrs. Islam has built her reputation as a loan shark. By using Mrs. Islam’s cultural tactics against her, Nazneen is confronting Mrs. Islam’s position as the moral arbiter of correct and proper behavior. After all, even her name, Islam, signals that she is connected to Qur’anic codes. Mrs. Islam has depended upon the stability of her identity and her sons’ invisible authority, but Nazneen assaults the barrenness of these claims. *Riba* confronts the exteriority bound up in Mrs. Islam’s insistence that she only



means to help her neighbors. Nazneen's attack forces Mrs. Islam to confront the hypocrisy of not only her work, but also the agential identity she thinks she has created for herself in front of her neighbors.

Nazneen pushes the charge further by removing the Qur'an, which explicitly forbids *riba*, from its honored place on the top shelf and dares Mrs. Islam to swear on it. Although "Mrs. Islam was perfectly still" (Ali 332), Son Number One cannot tolerate Nazneen's disrespect and threatens her with bodily harm. She turns his threat into a dare and commands him to "break my arm. Break them both" (332). Nazneen, like Hasina and the women on the London streets who always "looked as though they were angry," will not allow herself to be compromised by bullies even if it means she walks around with two casts on her arms (35). She may even understand that if the sons cause her physical action, it will, indeed, break Mrs. Islam's hold over the community.

Mrs. Islam defaults to the only thing she thinks will threaten Nazneen's wellbeing: to tell Chanu about Nazneen's affair with Karim. Nazneen embodies the full power of her agency by "not looking away" from Mrs. Islam's gaze when she announces that Chanu already knows about it, which makes "the impossible happen. Mrs. Islam looked surprised" (332). Like Chanu and Karim learn, Mrs. Islam now too knows Nazneen is not an "unspoilt girl. From the village" who submits to everyone's whim but her own (9). She is a woman who will no longer allow anyone else to choose her fate.

Mrs. Islam does what she has to do to maintain some modicum of dignity; she "forgives" the debt, but when she leaves Nazneen's apartment she "let out a cry, a low animal noise of despair" that signals Nazneen's victory is complete (332). The precariousness of Mrs. Islam's agential identity has been displaced in as complete a way

as Clarissa senses her erasure in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The confrontation between Mrs. Islam and Nazneen has been nothing less than a primordial battle for control of Nazneen's agency. Nazneen's victory becomes a stabilizing moment since it shores up her ability to act no matter how dangerous or threatening the situation might appear. She may suffer and feel pain, but she will no longer pretend to be someone without choices; she will "decide what to do" (301). She feels "exhilaration" at beating Mrs. Islam at her own game (301). She breaks free of her misreading of fate and discovers choice not in spatial dislocation, but in temporal mobility; she turns inward for the changes she seeks, but she acts when needed. This internalized reflection allows Nazneen to be confident in her actions and sure of her decisions. She has had agency all along, but now she is aware of her power to act.

### *The Post-Colonial Identity*

*Brick Lane*'s realist and modernist tropes are not antagonistic reminders of British colonialism or "the colonialist Self," but are intrinsic components of the intertextual palimpsest that places *Brick Lane* alongside canonical literatures (Bhabha 64). The novel is not a post-colonial alternative to those texts, but a driving force of a canon that wanders through multiple sites and genres. Neither denying the British Empire's influence nor privileging it, *Brick Lane*'s narrative is a multiplicity that exposes the female figure's distance from the privileged post-colonial subject of hybridity—the male figure as seen in Bhabha's theoretical dissection. Bhabha's exemplum of fictional hybridity is found in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Chamcha and Gibreel literally and literarily fall from the sky and land in Britain as the ultimate performative subjects

confronting the “in-between” messiness of a “hybrid national narrative” (Bhabha 240). These two figures’ disruption of the authority of the colonizer places an ambivalent agency within reach of the dispossessed. These figures embrace or struggle with their hybrid status similarly to the way white hegemony in Julian Barnes’s *England, England* (1998) privileges its own power.<sup>48</sup> The male figures in each of these novels may fail, but they do so spectacularly. They are victimized and only usurped by those who learn to play the system in smarter, savvier ways. Their victimization does not allow them to recognize who they are within the national narrative.

The difference between Chamcha, Gibreel, and Chanu is the way in which *Brick Lane* unwinds Chanu’s quotidian of failure. Nazneen’s husband’s failures are naive, mundane, and ubiquitous. Like Chamcha and Gibreel, his failures emanate from a post-colonialist’s assumption that he is a respected member of the British Commonwealth, but this assumption is complicated by Chanu’s inability to act. Chanu’s thoughts come to no fruition and are juxtaposed alongside Nazneen’s and Hasina’s ability to “make do” (de Certeau 29). In other words, while Chanu only has time to think himself towards paralysis and invisibility, these women think themselves towards action.

Chanu’s neediness is not a monstrous configuration of the mongrel nation. He lives in London for “sixteen years[, n]early half [his] life,” before he marries Nazneen

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<sup>48</sup>In *England, England*, Sir Jack Pitman, the entrepreneur who founds the Disney-like theme park of English history on the Isle of Wight, is a mysterious and complicated figure. Although he uses the title of “sir,” there is some contention as to his background. He operates as a white privileged male within English society; even after his desire to be treated like an infant is revealed, he loses his position and stature only temporarily. After his death, the decision to keep him alive through adding a historical tract of his life is made. The new Sir Jack Pitman emerges as “a popular figure,” one the original Sir Jack “would have approved” (Barnes 258). Even when he is no longer dominant, he dominates the narrative.

(Ali 18). In sixteen years time, he has found no woman, has no lasting connections within the city boundaries, and made no friends beyond Dr. Azad, who befriends him, Nazneen realizes, because the doctor wishes to witness “unhappiness greater than his own” (79). Chanu can be viewed as a mimic, one who, in Bhabha’s terms, is an “imposter” whose “representation can no longer guarantee the authority of culture” (Bhabha 195). But Chanu is something more than a mimic. He is paralyzed by his inability to read a situation fully.

Chanu divides himself from each and every community and the narrative structure plays up his isolation by having him stand forlornly in doorways or reading alone in his and Nazneen’s bedroom. With his protruding belly and ever-present noisy bodily functions, he could be dismissed as a comic figure, but he is also a steadfast, if overbearing husband, even after he realizes that he has been cuckolded. He plays against stereotypical tropes of Arab masculinity found in Western culture by being a “kind [husband who] never beat [Nazneen]” (Ali 79). This construction stands in stark contrast to the men with whom Nazneen’s sister Hasina becomes involved. Hasina is beaten by a number of men who would laud authority over her. If Chanu possesses any brutality, it plays out through his linguistic distortions, which paralyze him. He believes he and Dr. Azad are “intellectuals” who must stick together (19). He has no compunction in pointing out that “the white underclass” are prejudiced since they see him and any intellectually ambitious migrants as “the only thing standing in the way of them sliding totally to the bottom of the pile” (21). He dismisses his co-worker Wilkie as competition for a promotion. Wilkie supposedly lacks credentials, which Chanu possesses. But Chanu falsely believes his “degree from Dhaka University in English literature” makes him

English since he can “quote from Chaucer or Dickens or Hardy” and does not understand that Wilkie has the only credential necessary—he is a white Englishman (21). Chanu may have a sense of the difficulties he faces as a hybrid figure of national distress, but he miscalculates and misunderstands his position as a Black British citizen relocated to mother England.

Chanu astutely points out London’s white residents prejudices, but his prejudice against the Sylhet community (a migrant community from Bangladesh), exhibited as facts of birth, hinders his ability to make friends and lasting connections. He recounts how the Sylhetis:

all stick together because they come from the same district. They know each other from the villages, and they come to Tower Hamlets and they think they are back in the village. Most of them have jumped ship. That’s how they come. They have menial jobs on the ship, doing donkey work, or they stow away like little rats in the holds. ... And when they jump ship and scuttle over here, then in a sense they are home again. And you see, to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan. But these people are peasants. Uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition. (14)

As Chanu’s speech intimates, these words could be spoken by any number of white London citizens, including Enoch Powell. Chanu’s insistence that he is better than other migrants aligns him with a “position of authority[, but he does not realize that he is] part of a process of ambivalent identification” (Bhabha 208). His categorization of the Silhetis as the monstrous other serves to elevate his status, a status that marginalizes his

opportunity and oppresses his ambition. Chanu accuses the Sylhetis of isolation and stasis, but he is the embodiment of these traits. He and Nazneen never leave the Tower Hamlets complex and live in a two-room apartment with an overflowing toilet. After he quits his desk job, he moves from one menial job to another—that is when he is not paralyzed in his bedroom, either sleeping or reading clothed only in his underwear. His assessment of the Sylhetis that they are “uneducated” and without “ambition” reveals his own fears (Ali 14). He strives to obtain another degree, but he never finishes. He attempts to strike numerous business deals, but they do not materialize.

Chanu does not know how to make connections and so he points the finger at those he believes—as he suggests the white underclass believe—reside one-step below him. His prejudice may be born of fear, but it keeps him from reaching out for assistance when he most needs it. His own inability to acknowledge a connection to the larger community on any level renders him invisible. He believes that he is smarter and better schooled in British culture than any white Londoner and he rejects the Sylhetis as peasants since they are willing to hide like “little rats in the hold” in order to migrate to London (14). Later on, he suggests that the British do not make distinctions between migrant populations since “[they] don’t know the difference between me, who stepped off the aeroplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat possessing only the lice on their heads” (18). This pronouncement is a revelation about where Chanu’s prejudices are born. Usually subaltern refers to women of color or women’s private practices, but Chanu’s narrative configuration reveals him not as a subaltern of silence, but one who cannot stop speaking and makes himself unintelligible to those around him. He marginalizes himself at every turn, and after the event of 9/11 he

forces Nazneen to put all the money she earns as a piecemeal worker into their return to Dhaka. He does not attempt to reach out to the local community. He cannot.

Nazneen recognizes that Chanu “can see .... can comment. But he cannot act” (63). It is only after the couple’s first child, their son Raqib, becomes ill that Nazneen softens towards him and recognizes that “where she strove to accept, he was determined to struggle; where she attempted to dull her mind and numb her thoughts, he argued aloud” (84). In this construction, Chanu cannot accept his position as a hybrid figure of post-colonialism, but he also does not know what tools he needs to subvert this position or usurp the dominant culture’s position of power and privilege. He does not learn to adapt to the hostilities found in London since he believes that he has as much right to the commonwealth and to London as any born and bred Londoner. In Dhaka, he may not have had material success, but he believes that he would “be big. [A] Big Man” (93). He moved to London because he believed that he knew how to negotiate with the authorial presence of the “colonial Self,” but he never learned that the colonial Self would not welcome his presence nor did it want to negotiate with him (Bhabha 64).

His presence is predicated upon a false sense of self that has been developed as a proud post-colonial subject. He arrives in London with the same sense of privilege that a figure like Sir Jack Pitman in *England, England* possesses. These men believe their ideas are worthy of enactment. Only Jack Pitman, as a white Londoner, is able to enact his ideas, although he eventually receives his comeuppance. Chanu’s narrative arc suggests that he must come to terms with the fact that in London he is not a subject, but an object of derision. He cannot strategize because he has no place; he is unhomely in his hybridity. His inability to judge his situation means that any action he takes causes harm.

He “resigns” from his position while Raqib is sick and in the hospital and never finds another one (Ali 93). He talks about, “[a]ction ... All matters, in fact, are matters for action. Talking is finished. From now on, I act,” but his actions only leave his family in a precarious position (93). He is as powerless in London to find employment as any of the “illiterate,” and “close-minded” Sylhetis (14).

Juxtaposed beside Raqib’s death, a connection emerges that suggests Chanu, as a father, is not productively procreative. He is isolated from the ways in which he might find comfort or community. Chanu emerges as an impotent entity unable to act in his own or his family’s best interest. His action creates loss, an absence in the fabric of the family’s economic and domestic structure. He can be no comfort, no strength to his family; instead, he leaches their strength. Reduced to driving a cab, he pays more money in fines than he earns in fares. His devotion to rational choice impinges on the family’s actual choices. His impotence forces Nazneen to become the breadwinner in the family, but she tactically maneuvers the situation so that Chanu believes he is still the primary income provider.

At the end of the novel, Nazneen tells Chanu that she and their daughters will not return to Dhaka. Her ferocity is tempered by the life they have shared. She tactically whispers the endearment “Big Man” (358) and allows him to construct the impossibility of her going or his staying as his idea. This exchange between husband and wife owes more to Nazneen’s conquest of Mrs. Islam than any dismissal of her lover Karim. She and Chanu speak in the quietness of their apartment where she has succeeded in vanquishing Mrs. Islam only the day before. When she tells Karim that she does not want to marry him, they are standing in the midst of a juggling show in Covent Garden. This



carnival space contrasts with the domestic realist space of the apartment. The difference between the two mobilities is apparent. Home is the stable construction, but once she triumphs in her home, it does not matter if the world is thrown helter-skelter around her; she stands her ground and communicates her decisions with clarity and confidence.

### *Emerging Narratives*

Nazneen winds up being neither a proper London housewife nor a simple Bangladeshi girl. If Nazneen chooses to work in the global marketplace, she labors not as someone who has acquired agency through work, but for the sake of her daughters. These girls could no more survive purdah and the restrictions placed on females in Bangladesh than Hasina could go to London and become a fashion model. They do not have the skill set to survive the immobility required of them and she does not want them to suffer unnecessarily when she can make do for them in London. Nazneen and her friend Razia choose to adapt their traditional Bengali garb for the world of English couture, not as a symbol of their otherness, but as a way in which to view and stand with, and even laugh at, the strangeness of the London fashion scene. They enter the construction of the global marketplace with the female and presumably white boutique owners who pay Nazneen and her friend Razia exorbitant fees to make chic versions of traditional kameezs for their wealthy, white female customers. Their work, however, is not assured. Fashion is a mobile cultural construction. Nazneen, like her sister Hasina, has chosen an unsecured identity, one that will necessarily shift as tastes change. Nazneen and Razia may make a go of it, but it is just as likely that their couture kameezs will go out of style before the season is over.

Neither Nazneen nor Hasina have the last word of the novel. That is assigned to Nazneen's Union Jack wearing friend Razia. Her declaration, "This is England. ... You can do whatever you like" (369) is not about notions of freedom, but about the responsibility of committing to choice. It stands as a hopeful sign of agency and a warning of what it means to choose nothing or to choose irresponsibly. Razia's words suggest that England's history is not written with a permanent marker, but is a complicated and often painful encounter. New configurations are the norm, not special circumstances that threaten what came before. No one and nothing lasts forever, as the layering of multiple narrative structures suggests, but to not choose or to believe there is no choice is more painful than to choose wrong. The promise of pain with pleasure in these last words ironically refers to all the British Empire has wrought not only to its colonies, but also to itself. Nazneen cannot actually do whatever she likes, but she can choose to do what is necessary. She has the ability to pragmatic choices that will assist her daughters' choices in the future. These last words then do not assure anyone's success in their endeavors, but they do suggest each individual has a subject position that cannot be ignored.

Fierce: Female Appetite in Louise DeSalvo's *Casting Off*

I now remember what women who do anything without their husbands are called. *Puttana*. Whores. I remember hearing stories in my childhood about how women like that were stoned to death in the old country.

Louise DeSalvo, "A Portrait of the *Puttana* as a Middle-Aged Woolf Scholar"

Published twenty-five years ago by England's The Harvester Press and reprinted in the US by Bordighera Press in 2014, Louise DeSalvo's *Casting Off* privileges New York City in the 1970s as a site of creativity for Helen MacIntyre, a suburban housewife. Each week, Helen travels by bus or car from her New Jersey suburban home to her young lover Julien Liebault, a photographer who lives in a pre-gentrified, post-Stonewall West Greenwich Village. Her affair makes transparent her feelings of invisibility and irrelevancy at the age of 37. Helen uses New York City and its environs to free herself from the strictures of her marriage vows while still remaining married. Where *Brick Lane*'s Nazneen has an affair with *her* young lover Karim to risk safety in a stultifying marriage and confront her seeming inability to make choices, and Zuleika's affair with the Roman emperor in *The Emperor's Babe* causes her death, Helen's adultery is a guilt-free affair that serves as the impetus towards her autonomous creative self. These protagonists rely on female companionship as they move from ambivalence and fear to an acceptance of the fullness of their subjectivity. They reject reifying male narratives that position women as objects or erase them completely. They are not merely taking up male narrative tradition, like the picaresque, for themselves. Nazneen focuses on the letters of her sister Hasina to connect with her agential identity, Zuleika has her friends Alba and Venus, and Helen has her best friend Maive Macnamara, another suburban housewife who engages in multiple extramarital affairs. The narratives of *Brick Lane*, *The Emperor's Babe*, and *Casting Off* are mobilizing entities that privilege these

women's agency and upend the male gaze as a site of privilege and singularity.

Helen's journey is not a voyeuristic view of adultery as the seamy side to an unhappy marriage. The affair is a physical experience that forces Helen to confront what is lacking in her life. It makes transparent her suppressed desire to write poetry and fiction. Helen engages in a transformation with and through her writing—a writing that is based upon her view and experience. According to Helene Cixous, this kind of women's writing (*écriture féminine*) embraces “*the very possibility of change ... [and] can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures*” (879). Cixous insists that for women to “write [themselves],” the body's lived experience must be “heard” (880). Cixous's declaration is tied to freeing the unconscious, which she argues is where a singularly female language emerges. Even when women writers focus on issues of sexism or oppression, they may not be able to embody a female perspective without privileging the male gaze.<sup>49</sup> The writing then is a challenge that can at once be freeing and paralyzing as Helen discovers throughout *Casting Off*'s narrative and Zuleika learns in *The Emperor's Babe*.

In discussing twentieth century Western female discourse, Susan Rubin Suleiman points out: “male theorizing, male desires, male fears and male representations [of the female as *object*]” have compromised the female's ability to occupy the *subject* position (7). If women have internalized male desire for and perception of them, they struggle to “reclaim ... what ha[s] always been theirs but ha[s] been usurped from them: control over their bodies and a voice with which to speak about it” (7). The obstacles to seeing oneself

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<sup>49</sup>In discussing Beyoncé's May 12, 2014 *Times* cover, bell hooks suggests the singer “is colluding in the construction of herself as a slave ... it is not liberatory” (“Are You Still a Slave”). In other words, Beyoncé, who has no need of the male gaze in her artistry or in crediting her success, continues to construct her identity through its lens.

as more than an object for someone else's pleasure or convenience are internalized through cultural expectations or social conventions. In Suleiman's casting of female sexuality and empowerment, she cites Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1983) as a work that "[is] a self-conscious reversal of stereotypes" (9). In this reading, Jong's novel is not eliminating the male perspective, but equates female desire with male sexuality. The protagonist Isadora Wing's needs are parsed through a masculine lens and she experiences her sexuality by directly occupying the male's perspective of her body as an object. The male gaze remains dominant and Isadora is simply a female substitute for the male protagonist in a picaresque narrative rather than an individual creating her story free from the male perspective.

Moving away from a male gaze to a female centric reality can be fraught with external and internal difficulties. Audre Lorde argues that the largest interference to a woman's transformation is fear: "of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation" ("Transformation" 21). In Lorde's understanding, women "have been socialized to respect" these myriad faces of fear "more than [their] own needs for language and definition" ("Transformation" 23). Without this recognition and a willingness to work through the fear, the *subject* position—as in Jong's *Fear of Flying*—is nothing more than imitation. Homi Bhabha argues that "the *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (126), but mimicry in this sense would mean that a person or character purposefully understands the place in which she stands has a double connotation. Suleiman's point is that Jong is wrestling with sexist notions of the female by using the male gaze as a female construction of subjecthood. It is a parodic

intervention, and Jong's work is disruptive only as it parodies male sexuality and behavior. The male gaze remains dominant and the perspective shifts towards another view of the same stereotypical image or timeworn trope. Isadora does not struggle with this notion of the subject and instead the male view of the woman as a sexual object ready—whenever a man desires her—for a “zipless fuck” is reinforced.<sup>50</sup>

Lorde is arguing that mimicry avoids confrontation with the fear that permeates sexist discourses. Mimicry aligns itself with the dominant discourse and those who are most able to suppress knowledge or truth of a people's existence. It may disrupt authority, but it also, as Frantz Fanon points out, creates those who “forget the purpose of the struggle” (13). Fanon was arguing for decolonization and focused on the pitfalls of the “colonized intellectual,” but his argument is important when thinking about gender inequalities (13). Lorde's reading of fear as the obstacle to subject definition suggests that women must drop parody and mimicry as a mode of safety to self-expression. Her argument suggests that educated women, especially white second wave feminists, forget the goal of the struggle—to forge independent, creative lives—in order to make inroads within academic, economic, and political institutions. Her insistence that a woman must confront fear has more in common with Cixous's notion of women's writing as “a process of becoming” that acknowledges how “histories intersect with one another” (882).

*Casting Off*'s narrative is focused on women's lived experience, histories forgotten or marginalized not only in history books, but also in fiction. In this construction, women's desire is decoupled from the male gaze. The novel is a challenge

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<sup>50</sup>In 2011, Jong repudiated this term. She recalls “one night stands and zipless fucks ... [as] terrible,” but that “[women] never completely give up the fantasy” (qtd. in Rickman).

to the view that the male gaze and the expectation of female fidelity in marriage can be the only gauges of women's sexual and creative presence. Helen is not working towards a subject definition; like Nazneen in *Brick Lane* or Zuleika in *The Emperor's Babe*, she is already an embodied subject. Where Nazneen is coming to terms with her right to occupy that space and make choices and Zuleika sassily claims it throughout her writing, Helen's search for a deeper connection to her creativity foregrounds her agency. *Casting Off* ignores the male gaze and male desire and foregrounds a singularly female perspective. Helen's affair is the catalyst that turns her gaze and her writing upon herself and her experiences. DeSalvo—the Woolf scholar, second wave feminist, and creative writer—crafts this narrative as an embodied discourse of female sexuality and creativity. Helen's narrative arc is a way women might experience their lives as fully realized subjects without the light of a male gaze shining upon them.

### *Bad Girl in the Big City*

In *Casting Off*, Helen and her friend Maive Macnamara experience sexual freedom in mid-to late-1970s New York City—an area, at the time, of financial and political instability. According to David Harvey, “in 1975 a powerful cabal of investment bankers ... refused to roll over the [city's ever-mounting] debt and pushed the city into technical bankruptcy” (*Brief History* 45). This move signaled a change for the city's urban residents, who were faced with “wage freezes and cutbacks in public employment and social provision” (*Brief History* 45). “Investment bankers” plotted these changes in order to create a “restoration of class power” in the city (*Brief History* 46). When New York City turned to the federal government, then Secretary of the Treasury William Simon

“strongly advised President Ford to refuse aid to the city” and the *New York Daily News* ran the headline “Ford to City: Drop Dead” when it became clear there would be no assistance from Washington (*Brief History* 46). Investment bankers and government officials used New York City as the test case. If New York City could be tamed through a denial of services, creating unrest and crime spikes, then cities—big and small—would be forced to consider policies that countermanded the working and middle classes’ best interests. What made New York City unique—small neighborhoods comprised of mom-and-pop shops and active churches and synagogues, free public education from pre-K through doctorate degrees, close proximity between poor, working, middle, and upper class neighborhoods, and an international array of artists—also made it vulnerable. Free market capitalism and class restructuring pushed those with the least economic clout outside the city’s borders. In *Casting Off*, it is the history of New York City’s local and international populations that draw Helen and Maive to the city. They grew up within the city’s borders and moved to the suburbs after marriage. Their return is as much a signifier of the city’s openness and vulnerability as their own.

The novel’s plot is seemingly simple: two suburban housewives travel from their suburban homes to New York City in order to engage in sexual liaisons outside their marriages. I use the adverb “seemingly” since US publishers did not believe its premise was either simple or honest. US editors agreed that, as DeSalvo conceived and wrote it, *Casting Off* was “immoral,” “perverse,” and “totally unrealistic”—adjectives that were also included in much of the debate about whether to assist New York City or not



(DeSalvo, *Adultery* 27).<sup>51</sup> Editor after editor was outraged by DeSalvo's fashioning of female characters who were married and "polygamous" without being "discovered" (*Adultery* 26). They didn't care (or believe) that DeSalvo's narrative—grounded in extended research—offered a realistic depiction of women's thoughts and actions regarding monogamy and marriage. As DeSalvo put it, "women [US editors] were more horrified than men," but no editor could fathom how Helen and Maive would not feel guilty or be punished for their seeming infidelities.<sup>52</sup> These women, like the city itself, were reaching beyond their proper role in a free market enterprise system.

*Casting Off* also challenges late twentieth century narratives that embrace the myth of the New York-based female taking charge of her sexuality and suffering the consequences. Novels such as Sue Kaufman's *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1967), Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* (1966), and Judith Rossner's *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1975) privilege the male gaze and the contingent objectification of the female subject. New York City is a dangerous place with no regulations in these novels. In *Casting Off*, the city is the safe space; the suburban home with its stultifying traditions and heteronormative expectations is the death trap. New York City is a space for these women's desires—both sexual and creative. Neither Helen nor her friend Maive are discovered or punished or suffer for their transgressions. They wouldn't view themselves

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<sup>51</sup>In addition to detailing editors' reviews revulsion of the *Casting Off* manuscript, DeSalvo ends the first section of *Adultery* with an extended section about the challenges and limitations of the "erotic" in love before including an excerpt from the novel (*Adultery* 35-40). It was the first time that any portion of *Casting Off* appeared in print in the US.

<sup>52</sup>Throughout, unless otherwise cited, quotations from Louise DeSalvo are taken from interviews I conducted either alone or with Edvige Giunta in 2011, 2013, and 2014.

as unfaithful.<sup>53</sup> They love their husbands and do not neglect them, but Maive and Helen, over their New York City lunchtime chats, do not spend time conjecturing about what their husbands would think if they discovered their wives' affairs or knew of their tactics to capture male attention.

In Maive's case, Helen views her friend as "the most appetitive woman [she] had ever known" (DeSalvo, *Casting Off* 4). When she was a young girl, Maive's mother pointed out the women whom she believed were adulterous. Her mother's attitude taught Maive: "after you got married, you could get down to some serious screwing, but not with your husband. After you got married, you could commit adultery" (*Casting Off* 60). Maive's mother "the demon Blackjack and poker player of the Lower East Side, who'd swilled beer out of bottles as she took on the men in the neighborhood and beat them hands down every Friday when they got paid" was not a typical nurturer and Maive's mothering instinct consists of a "kind of benign neglect that she'd learned from her" (*Casting Off* 5). But Maive's children do not suffer for her maternal disinterest and Maive emanates a tough street attitude even though the Lower East Side she knew no longer exists. Maive is fearless—a character trait she well could have learned from the woman who knew how to best the neighborhood men at cards.

Less shocking, perhaps, but still as outrageous for the decade, is Helen's sexual involvement with a much younger lover, Julien Liebault, a "sexually voracious" photographer who she believes was probably watching "*Captain Kangaroo* on television

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<sup>53</sup> Adulterous women who are punished are ubiquitous in literature. Some of the well-known figures appear in Euripides' *Hippolytus* (428BC), Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1623), Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878), and Wharton's *Ethan Fromm* (1911). Punishing those who are viewed as sexually libidinous women, whether they are or not or whether they have been manipulated or not, has been the rage for eons.

while she and [her husband] James were getting married” (*Casting Off* 11; 29).<sup>54</sup> Their sexual liaison reignites not only her sense of touch, smell, and taste, but also her sense of wonder—about herself and her life. Julien is not her muse, but his Manhattan lifestyle as an artist who travels the world taking photographs is seductive. Until she meets her young lover, her only creative outlet is cooking for her husband and son. The imbalance between creativity for others’ sakes and creativity for oneself is made transparent when, the night before Helen embarks on her affair with Julien, she begins to write a short story while baking cornmeal muffins for her teenage son Christopher.

Focusing on the creative attributes of aesthetics and intellect rather than the economics of what might happen to an adulterous woman if she is caught, may have also fed female editors’ revulsion. The book was sent out to publishers and editors throughout the early to mid-80s, when New York City was at the height of a restructuring that would “sell the image of the city as a cultural centre and tourist destination” and encouraged “the narcissistic exploration of self, sexuality, and identity” (Harvey, *Brief History* 47). This exploration would seem to be attached primarily to men since the novel embraces a female ethos of sexual exploration and self-identity. Chandra Mohanty observes that the

US culture and naturalization of capitalist values has had its own profound influence in engendering a neoliberal, consumerist (protocapitalist) feminism ... [that] focuses on financial ‘equality’ between men and women and is grounded in the capitalist values of profit, competition, and

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<sup>54</sup>In the twenty-first century, older women who date younger men are now called cougars and panthers even though women, including Madonna, Jennifer Lopez, Demi Moore, Mariah Carey, Geena Davis, and Julianne Moore, are regularly involved in long-term relationships with or marry much younger men. There are no terms for males who date much younger women, except perhaps *sugar daddy*. Of course the women who date these men are known as *gold diggers*.

accumulation. (6)

This calculation normalizes feminist struggles through the lens of economic equality while continuing to marginalize and denigrate women culturally, intellectually, and institutionally. *Casting Off* is a narrative of and about creative and intellectual equality, which breaks with heteronormative scripts that equate American women's economic stability and stalwart behavior as the only legitimate markers of success and equality.<sup>55</sup> As such, it fights against an encroaching neo-liberal agenda by making transparent those modes of discourse that minimize action by any group other than a financial and intellectual elite.

If there is any profit in Helen's and Maive's actions, it has to do with Helen's recognition that she is unfulfilled without creatively connecting to writing. Her poetry and fiction are interspersed throughout the text, and she emerges as the narrative's anchor structurally, thematically, and artistically. The novel opens with Helen's poem, "Thirty-seven is the unraveling time" and ends with her first short story. Thematically, these two creative pieces bookend Helen's journey from a sheltered middle-aged suburban housewife too afraid to acknowledge her desires to her emergence as an independent and

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<sup>55</sup>To contrast, best selling romance writers of the 1970s and 1980s, including Barbara Taylor Bradford, Jackie Collins, Judith Krantz, Danielle Steel, Mary Stewart, and Jacqueline Susann, played into a formula that allows women to be men's economic equals, but continues to treat them like submissive, naïve objects. Their heroines rarely have close female friends. The underlying message is that financial stability and sexual and intellectual experimentation can only be maintained by minimizing female choice and action, by strengthening the ideas of separation from one's gender, and by silencing one's needs and desires—after all, the right man will figure it out. In *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture*, Janice Radway argues that romance readers have "an ambivalent attitude toward the reality of the story" found in romance novels (187). This ambivalence belies the fact that the plots of these novels are most often focused on gaining economic freedom and finding stable relationships—a construct of white second wave feminists beginning with Betty Friedan.

creative woman. Helen's understanding that what she seeks has nothing to do with finding a better or more understanding husband or excitement outside the marital bed forces a transformation; what she needs is self-identification as a writer.

Although the plot focuses on Helen's journey, the chapters shift point of view in surprising ways. The novel opens with a third person omniscient narrator detailing Helen and Maive's luncheon. The next chapters shift focus either through this omniscient narrator or a third person limited voice that homes in on Helen's and Maive's points of view. Sometimes the narrative is an internal monologue, a scene of domestic normality, a moment of sexual pleasure, or Helen struggling to find her creative path. Helen's point of view is opened up through her fiction and poetry, which is interspersed at pivotal points in the story. There are subplots that feature female contemporaries of Helen and Maive, women they've never met, and mythological female characters, including Medea. These interludes are presented not as separate from the linear narrative of these women's lives, but as part of a larger web not unlike the way Virginia Woolf experimented with form in *The Waves* (1931), *Three Guineas* (1938), and *Between the Acts* (1941).<sup>56</sup> In *Casting Off*, the scenes without Helen and Maive contextualize the political, cultural, and institutional means by which these women's desires are suppressed, and how they choose to behave within and break free from the cultural confinements.

As such, the narrative exposes the typical adultery narrative as a series of flimsy stereotypical patriarchal tropes that reward men and punish women for enacting the same behavior. Men are removed from the plot's central conceit in the same manner that

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<sup>56</sup>Woolf's influence is understandable given that DeSalvo edited or wrote numerous books by and about Woolf, including *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work*, which she wrote soon after completing the manuscript for *Casting Off*.

authors such as Thomas Pynchon, John Updike, and Richard Ford create their female characters as insignificant or femme fatales fated for a degrading comeuppance. The narrative moves back and forth between Helen's affair, her writing, and other women's struggles, both real and mythological, as a corrective to the stereotypes perpetrated in literature about women's sexuality and creativity. Helen's life is not merely an alternative viewpoint; falsehoods about middle class suburban housewives' behavior are upended. Helen actively resists invisibility by learning to take charge of her needs and desires without relying on men.

A return to a novel like *Casting Off* asks readers to consider the nature of female agency and creativity. Helen and Maive are not suburban white ethnic females who learn about "true" love from a much older man or thirty-something females who willingly do unspeakable things for their ambition or naïve females who find that submission and BDSM are the ways to truly discover who they are.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps this book's re-emergence is a necessary reminder that women can survive without abusive partners, do not deserve to

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<sup>57</sup>These are the narrative plot points to Stephanie Meyer's *The Twilight Saga* (2008), the television series *Scandal* (2011-present), and the novel, now a major motion picture, E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012). *The Twilight Saga* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* promote romance as female submission and female desire constructed through a male gaze. The men in each of these texts ask their female love interests to trust them even when (or especially when) the men's actions are most untrustworthy. Kerry Washington's Olivia Pope, the first African American female protagonist since Teresa Graves starred in the 1974 television series *Get Christie Love!*, is an ambitious, powerful "fixer" for troubled Capital Beltway politicians in the television series *Scandal*. According to Kelly Ehrenreich, "[she] often looks horrified, disturbed, humiliated, and shamed during interactions with the supposed love of her life." Her lover, the married US President, behaves like "an abusive spouse .... He expects everyone, especially the women around him, to serve him, please him, and not only make his life better, but make *him* better. When the President has his temper-tantrums, Olivia bends to his will, looking terrified; the exact same reaction she has to her father. She has moments of standing up to both of them, but she always comes crawling back." It would seem Olivia Pope is the person most in need of a fixer since all the men in her life are duplicitous, power hungry, and selfish individuals who do not listen to what she says she needs and wants.

be in relationships with violent men, and do not need to submit their desires to male whim and ambition.

In the first scholarly article devoted to *Casting Off*, “‘Thirty-seven Is the Unraveling Time’ and Other Fictions of Fidelity in the Works of Louise DeSalvo,” Jenn Brandt argues that the novel confronts notions of adultery as “the means by which to understand the possibility for self-fulfillment within the structures of patriarchal and heteronormative society” (173). Maive and Helen learn to navigate within a system that marginalizes them as women for their sexual desires and middle class marriages, not purposefully, but as a matter of course. Their marriages are not discussed as places of emptiness, but reveal how an individual, any individual, cannot survive and thrive creatively if she depends upon one person for fulfilling all of her needs. If the needs and differences of one half of a couple are ignored, no marriage can be a safe haven. The male gaze is purposefully absent although the ideological strictures that place it in a position of importance are never invisible.

If women have been forced to squash or to compartmentalize desires that do not fit with societal norms, Maive and Helen are dangerous characters since, as Brandt points out, they “are sexual beings in their own right, separate from conventional notions of romance and marriage” (173). They fight against the expected submission and repression of the suburban housewife that Betty Friedan documented in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Maive’s and Helen’s insatiable appetites are not about sex any more than their obsessions with cooking and eating are about nurturance.

Until Helen’s explosive affair, she is not able to acknowledge that her sexuality is tied to her creativity. Her lover Julien confronts her obfuscation of her creativity after she

praises one of his photographs to the point of mania. He takes her to a pre-gentrified section of Brooklyn, where the photograph was shot, and thrusts his camera at her, demanding she “shoot” the image for herself (DeSalvo, *Casting Off* 191). When she refuses, he shouts: “How do you think I feel with you carrying on week after week about how wonderful I am, and how beautiful my pictures are, and how I deserve to have someone cook for me? ... I don’t need anyone to take care of me” (*Casting Off* 191). Julien’s anger is directed at Helen’s passive aggressive compliments. He intuitively understands that her incessant praise indicates her unconscious approach to her life. He accuses her of using him as “something to take [her] mind off the fact that [her] life started falling apart and [she] couldn’t figure out why” (*Casting Off* 191). In this case, Helen is fetishizing not only Julien, but also the space of New York City. She runs to what her immigrant forebears ran from and leaves the net of suburbia for a more authentic experience of the creative. She finds the emptiness and decay illuminated in Julien’s photos “beautiful,” but when he admonishes her to look directly without his gaze, Helen is tongue-tied and fearful. Only months after he breaks off the affair does Helen admit that she was most attracted to Julien as an artist. She recognizes she was not in love with him, but was enamored of the freedom she equated with his creativity. She realizes that she needed the affair to assist her in breaking through her fear of herself as a writer.

In the previous decade, the success of a novel like Jong’s *Fear of Flying* depended upon the male gaze for its erotic charge; Jong did not so much break free from conventionality as she took liberties within a conventional patriarchal and heteronormative framework. A reappropriation, like *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, changes



the focus of the frame, but still keeps the male gaze as the central conceit. And a novel such as *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* chooses to reveal the inherent danger that young, single women meet if they choose not to attach themselves and take protection from one man. A decade later, DeSalvo's removal of the male gaze forces readers to view females as the purveyors of their own fantasies and performers of their own sexuality. This narrative choice directly contradicts Jong's work as well as white male authors like Scott Turow's *Presumed Innocent* (1987) and Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987).<sup>58</sup> US editors and publishers, perhaps confused by the unimportance of male characters and the emphasis on female thought and action, insisted again and again that one of the two female protagonists needed to feel guilty or to die as a result of her sexual activities.<sup>59</sup> DeSalvo refused, and no US publisher was willing to take a chance on the novel as written.

#### *Publication and the Italian American Woman Writer*

Throughout her career, DeSalvo has overturned canonical and stereotypical narratives to reveal the disturbing underbelly of simplistic rationalizations that deny extended and

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<sup>58</sup>In 1987, the year *Casting Off* was published in Great Britain, Scott Turow's *Presumed Innocent* and Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* were on *The New York Times* bestseller list for their fiction debuts. Both Turow and Wolfe were primarily non-fiction authors, not unlike DeSalvo. The difference between these authors is that these male writers' first novels focused on *men* who committed numerous venal and mortal sins and had no remorse for their *actual* crimes, including murder.

In "Best Sellers from 1987's Book Crop," Edwin McDowell states, "[o]nly two newcomers made the hard-cover fiction list, both of them authors previously identified with nonfiction, both of them first novelists—and both published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux: Scott Turow, author of *Presumed Innocent* (No. 2), who turned down a higher offer to sign with Farrar, Straus, and Tom Wolfe, author of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (No. 10)."

<sup>59</sup>See DeSalvo, *Adultery* (26-27).

institutionalized sexual abuse, of stereotypical views regarding the female gender, and even of romantic renderings of immigrant assimilation.<sup>60</sup> Written in the 1980s, *Casting Off* is a bridge between various strands of DeSalvo's writing past, present, and future as between Italian American women's literature and other women's literary traditions, including authors like Monica Ali and Bernardine Evaristo writing in the UK. As a bridge, it is imperative to understand how *Casting Off* was erased from the American publishing marketplace and re-emerged twenty-five years after its publication in England.

When DeSalvo made the turn towards fiction, she was a respected feminist literary critic whose textual scholarship focused mainly, although not solely, on Virginia Woolf, a writer, like DeSalvo, who moved between the genres of fiction, non-fiction, and literary criticism.<sup>61</sup> In the early 1980s, DeSalvo also served as a co-editor, alongside the feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick and the feminist educator and writer Carol Ascher, on the important volume *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers and Artists Write about their Work on Women* (1984), where she contributed her landmark

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<sup>60</sup>See especially, for upending romantic views of immigration and assimilation, *Vertigo*; breaking down the safety net of institutionalized sexual abuse, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work*; and, for upending assumptions regarding the female gender, *Adultery*. See Hagen's "Furthering the Voyage: Reconsidering DeSalvo in Contemporary Woolf Studies"; Hussey's "The Contexts of Louise DeSalvo's *Impact*: Incest in Virginia Woolf's Biography"; and Wisor's "Versioning Virginia Woolf: Notes toward a Posteclectic Edition of *Three Guineas*" for how DeSalvo's textual and biographical scholarship continue to influence current modernist and Woolf studies scholars; and Giunta's *Writing with an Accent* for how DeSalvo inspires Italian American women writers and scholarship.

<sup>61</sup>DeSalvo had worked painstakingly, as part of her PhD dissertation, on putting together an earlier draft of Woolf's first novel, which she published in 1980 as *Virginia Woolf's First Voyage: A Novel in the Making*. In addition to her textual scholarship on Woolf, in 1985 she published, with her co-editor Mitchell A. Leaska, a collection of letters by Woolf's friend and lover Vita Sackville-West, and in 1987 she published a critical study of Nathaniel Hawthorne and his female characters for the UK-based The Harvester Press's Feminist Series.

essay, “A Portrait of the *Puttana* as a Middle-Aged Woolf Scholar.”<sup>62</sup> It was her first piece of non-fiction that was not focused on someone else’s writing process or literary creations, but on her process and desire to create.

Other contemporary literary critics and second wave feminists like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Toni Morrison, Adrienne Rich, and Alice Walker straddled genres, creating poetry, plays, novels, and memoirs while writing feminist literary and cultural criticism. Like her contemporaries, DeSalvo’s research publications as well as her numerous publications on both sides of the Atlantic should have made publishing *Casting Off*—a daring and radical narrative about fidelity and women’s creativity—a simple and clear-cut enterprise, but it was not. Only Atwood, Morrison, and Walker have had continual mainstream success, and only Morrison’s writing is

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<sup>62</sup>In Italian American literary circles, the piece is known as the “*Puttana*” essay. In 1978, according to Edvige Giunta, “DeSalvo accepted Sara Ruddick’s exhortation to write a [creative non-fiction] piece for *Between Women*” (Giunta, “My Stories” xix). Once completed, DeSalvo feared losing the “‘insider position’ she thought she ‘had achieved working on Woolf and doing textual scholarship’” (“My Stories” xx). She viewed herself as part of a “formidable” contingent of “the next generation of Woolf scholars, in incubation” (DeSalvo, “*Puttana*” 35). Her “work,” combing through Woolf’s writings and history in The New York Public Library’s Berg Collection, was the culmination of “The American Dream” for a tomboy from a working class immigrant family in Hoboken, New Jersey (“*Puttana*” 36). She broke Italian tradition by becoming a scholar and researching far from home without her husband in tow. According to DeSalvo, this break with Italian cultural tradition cast her as a “*Puttana*. Whore” (“*Puttana*” 36). Alongside this revelation, she cites criticism made by Quentin Bell, about her work on an earlier draft of Woolf’s first novel. Bell viewed this research as tantamount to “scratch[ing] the bottom of the barrel” to search for “impurities” (qtd. in “*Puttana*” 46). Her scholarship upended not only expected cultural roles of Italian American women, but also women in academia. These acknowledgements left her vulnerable. Instead of showing the piece to Ruddick, she tore it up and threw it away. The essay would have been lost, only the single hard copy existed—after all, there were no computers, hard drives, or Clouds—if her husband Ernie had not retrieved the pieces from the trash and helped DeSalvo tape it back together. The essay was daring beyond acknowledging her “working-class Italian origins” in relationship to her scholarship and Bell’s scurrilous review of her research (Giunta, “My Stories” xx).

considered part of a mainstream canon. Each of these women carved out spaces within minority communities focused on gender or ethnicity and race, and their work, like DeSalvo's, reaches beyond these niche communities to connect to a larger web of women's writing tradition. What Morrison had that DeSalvo did not have were ties to a literary heritage outside the canon.

In *Buried Caesars and Other Secrets of Italian American Writing*, Robert Viscusi argues that defining Italian American literature has been problematic since

*Italian and American* are both names for national projects, each of which has its own imaginary and its own literature. They constitute overwhelming presences in Italian American writing ... [But] because Italian American literature does not belong to a national project, it has no large established force of its own. (xiii-xiv)

Viscusi alludes to Italian Americans self-fashioning as outsiders. Part of this disconnect may have to do with World War II.<sup>63</sup> Italy was deemed an enemy combatant and the self-silencing of ethnic identity was most evident in the prohibition to speak Italian. Nancy C. Carnevale argues:

Wartime American accepted Italian American to a greater degree than before, but it did so within clearly circumscribed limits. The new American cultural pluralism, ostensibly based on an appreciation of the unique cultural contribution of all ethnic groups, in practice discouraged certain overt expressions of ethnicity including language. (178)

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<sup>63</sup>In 1939, before the US's entry into World War II, Pietro DiDonato's *Christ in Concrete* was chosen as the Book of the Month Club's selection over Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. DiDonato was hailed as "the Italian Richard Wright" (Viscusi 100).

Italian immigrants and Italian American citizens learned English as quickly as possible. They were fearful of showing any allegiance to Mussolini and terrified of being aligned with Fascism. Although the outsider status was strong before World War II, Italy's alignment with Germany forced many immigrants to abandon ties to their homeland.<sup>64</sup>

Second wave Italian American female scholars, like DeSalvo, Sandra Mortola Gilbert, and Josephine Gattuso Hendin lived through the limitations placed upon them not only by this Italian tradition of silence and assimilation as protection, but also by a white male academy. They dared to upend Italian American female stereotype by focusing their research on white Anglo female figures. In addition to DeSalvo's work on Woolf, Gilbert with Susan Gubar wrote the ground-breaking *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979) and Hendin wrote *The World of Flannery O'Connor* (1970) and *Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction since 1945* (1978).<sup>65</sup> At the same time, Helen Barolini edited *The Dream Book*, the first volume dedicated to an Italian American women's literary

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<sup>64</sup>David R. Roediger notes: "In 1909 Jane Addams ... wrote of the rapt attention paid by the Hull House audience of 'Mediterranean immigrants' to the words of Du Bois. They listened with 'apparently no consciousness of the race difference which color seems to accentuate so absurdly.' And for good reason, according to Addams. Some in the crowd faced physical assault 'simply because they are "dagoes"' [which meant] Southern Europeans ... cared deeply about 'the advancement of colored people'" (259). See *Are Italians White?: How Race is Made in America*, eds. Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, which includes DeSalvo's "Color: White/Complexion: Dark" and Donna R. Gabbacia's "Race, Nation, Hyphen: Italian-Americans and American Multiculturalism in Comparative Perspective," in addition to Roediger's "Afterword: "Du Bois, Race, and Italian Americans."

<sup>65</sup>Since that time, each of these authors has written on Italian American literature and has helped to shape an Italian American women's literary tradition. See especially DeSalvo's "Paper Fish by Tina De Rosa: An Appreciation"; Eds. DeSalvo and Giunta's *The Milk of Almonds* (2002); Gilbert's "Mysteries of the Hyphen: Poetry, Pasta, and Identity Politics"; and Hendin's "A Usable Past: Writing to the Hybrid Future."

tradition.<sup>66</sup> Barolini argued that “Italian American women were taught to keep out of public view: don’t step out of line and be noticed, don’t be the envy of others, don’t attract the jealous fates who will punish success”—a central struggle of Helen in *Casting Off* (Introduction, *The Dream Book* 27). Once women writers dared to emerge from the private sphere and write for a reading public, the work of creating a literary tradition is still not certain. Women may write, but if no one publishes their work or the work is not read, it cannot be viewed historically. Part of the mission of *The Dream Book* was to contextualize these voices, to bring them to a reading public, but a more important goal was to create a published group of Italian American women writers connected to other women writers.<sup>67</sup> Alice Walker wrote a back cover blurb for *The Dream Book* and named

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<sup>66</sup>In addition to reprinting DeSalvo’s “*Puttana*” essay, it included excerpts from little known or remembered Italian American women writers such as Antonia Pola (*Who Can Buy the Stars?* [1957]), Julia Savarese (*The Weak and the Strong* [1952]), Sister Blandina Segale, (*At the End of the Santa Fe Trail* [1912]), Mari Tomasi (*Deep Grow the Roots* [1940] and *Like Lesser Gods* [1949]), and Frances Winwar (*Poor Splendid Wings* [1933]). According to Barolini, Winwar was “the only writer of Italian American background listed in the multi-volume set of *American Women Writers: A Critical Guide from Colonial Times to the Present* published from 1979” (113). Born in Sicily, Winwar anglicized her first name Francesca to Frances and translated her last name Vinciguerra into English, Winwar. That name—Frances Winwar—became her public identity. See Gardaphe’s “Autobiography as Piecework: The Writings of Helen Barolini” (1990) and Giunta’s “Blending ‘Literary Discourses: Helen Barolini’s Italian/American Narratives” (1998) for an overview and incisive commentary of Barolini’s work on *The Dreambook*.

<sup>67</sup>Since *The Dream Book*, there have been numerous texts attentive to Italian American female authorship and writing. These include *The Voices We Carry: Recent Italian/American Women’s Fiction* (1994), edited by Mary Jo Bona; *VIA: Voices in Italian Americana—Special Issue on Women Authors* (1996), edited by Edvige Giunta; *Curaggia: Writing By Women of Italian Descent* (1998), edited by Nzula Angelian Ciatu, Domenica Deleo and Gabriella Micallef; Mary Jo Bona’s *Claiming a Tradition: Italian American Women Writers* (1999); Edvige Giunta’s *Writing with an Accent* (2002); *The Milk of Almonds: Italian American Women Writers on Food and Culture* (2002), edited by Louise DeSalvo and Edvige Giunta; *Maria Mazziotti Gillan: Essays on Her Works* (2006), edited by Sean Thomas Dougherty; *American Woman, Italian Style: Italian Americana’s Best Writings on Women* (2011), edited by Carol Bonomo Albright and Christine Palamidessi Moore; and *Personal Effects: Essays on Memoir, Teaching, and*

it “a book of heroic recovery and affirmation” (Giunta, *Writing with an Accent* 7). Giunta notes that this blurb “acknowledged the connection between the work of African American and Italian American women writers” (*Writing with an Accent* 7). The Dream Book was a book that enabled Italian American women writers and literary scholars to see a connection to each other and to a larger community of writers and literary criticism.

As Trinh T. Minh-ha argues, for women especially, “publication means the breaking of a first seal, the end of a ‘no-admitted’ status ... [and that w]ithout such a rite of passage, the woman-writer-to be/woman-to-be writer is condemned to wander about, begging for permission to join in and be a member” (8). In DeSalvo’s case, she feared that the “*Puttana*” essay had no larger literary context and her “insider position” as a respected scholar would be vulnerable (Giunta, “My Stories” xx). When DeSalvo’s idea for *Casting Off* emerged in 1967, she had no sense of an Italian American women’s literary tradition. A new housewife, pregnant with her first child, she witnessed the aftermath of her friend’s destruction of her home after discovering that her husband had cheated.<sup>68</sup> DeSalvo’s own husband had a brief affair with a co-worker after the birth of their first son, Jason, but it would be fourteen years—years that included earning her PhD, giving birth to her second son Justin in 1971, and writing and editing numerous scholarly books—before she wrote, in her own voice, about “people’s responses to adultery” (DeSalvo, *Adultery* 26).

Helen and Maive, *Casting Off*’s female protagonists, first appeared in two separate short stories, written three months apart, in the latter part of 1981; these stories

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*Culture in the Work of Louise DeSalvo* (2014), edited by Nancy Caronia and Edvige Giunta.

<sup>68</sup>See DeSalvo’s “Author’s Note.2.24.14” in *Casting Off* for a complete history of how and when the novel was written and published.

were DeSalvo's first attempts at fiction. Helen MacIntyre, the female protagonist in "Gluttony and Fornication," and Maive, in "No One Ever Said Adultery Was Going to Be Easy," were adulterous white ethnic suburban housewives and their narratives centered on their actions and desires, while their ethnicity was only hinted at.<sup>69</sup> DeSalvo brought these female characters together in the summer of 1982 when she wrote the first draft of what would eventually become *Casting Off*. For DeSalvo, not having an Italian American women author like Tina De Rosa to emulate or a novel like De Rosa's *Paper Fish* to read forced her to look elsewhere for writers to model, and even though she sees "glimmers of the Italian-American woman [she is in *Casting Off*] ... there are places where it is clear [that she is] trying to think of [her] literary mother as Virginia Woolf" (DeSalvo, "*Paper Fish*" 250). Writing about Woolf became a rite of passage and a way in which to create visibility for many second wave feminists.<sup>70</sup> Writing in Woolf's style meant DeSalvo had found a woman author she could emulate and her influence can be viewed most clearly in the long sentences punctuated with semi-colons and the stream-of-conscious monologues that permeate the UK edition of *Casting Off*'s narrative.<sup>71</sup> But this imitation did not mean that DeSalvo abandoned who she was—a sassy and smart daughter of a working class Italian American immigrant family. Her sardonic humor and an allegiance to contemporary working class culture emerge within the long, languid sentences.

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<sup>69</sup>The "Puttana" essay appeared in *Between Women* in 1984. DeSalvo's short story "Gluttony and Fornication" appeared in *Chicago* magazine in 1982, making it the first published creative writing by DeSalvo.

<sup>70</sup>See Laura Marcus's "Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf" for an interesting historical perspective on how second wave feminism altered the view of Woolf's brand of first wave feminism and gender politics.

<sup>71</sup>See DeSalvo's Afterword for how she revised "the punctuation and paragraphing to make the text [especially the internal monologues] more readable" (*Casting Off* 222).



Once DeSalvo completed the draft of *Casting Off*, she spent years trying to find a publisher. It was not until 1987 when DeSalvo approached Sue Roe, the editor of Great Britain's The Harvester Press Feminist Series on male authors, that she found a willing editor. Roe championed *Casting Off* and did not ask DeSalvo to alter Helen's and Maive's sexual liaisons, but the marketing for the book focused on the adulterous behavior of the two female protagonists rather than the intellectual, political, or cultural concerns that the novel privileged.

The dust jacket's black and white graphic depicts a woman with a leopard print scarf on her head and dark sunglasses that reflect the New York City skyline. She wears dark lipstick that suggests the color red and she looks out at the reader with her head tilted to the left. The inside flap states: "This major new novel about female sexuality, set against the dazzling background of present day New York, brilliantly captures all the exciting, hilarious and emotionally devastating aspects of two women's explorations into the world of extra-marital affairs." DeSalvo's radical narrative that succinctly politicizes gender and sexuality was ignored in favor of exploiting a distorted image of these women's sexual appetites against a globalizing notion of New York City as the city where anything goes. It was a small print run and the press was sold in 1989, which meant the novel was remaindered and went out of print fairly quickly. Why the publisher who bought out The Harvester Press did not pick up *Casting Off* is not known, but the mismanaged marketing of the novel is not unusual.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>The same thing had happened to Barolini's *Umbertina* (1979), published almost ten years before DeSalvo's *Casting Off*. *Umbertina* was marketed as a romance novel, but was actually a sweeping intergenerational Italian American family epic. Even when The Feminist Press agreed to reprint *Umbertina*, then director Florence Howe only wanted to reprint the section of the novel that dealt most explicitly with Italian American issues of

The plight of DeSalvo's search to find a US publisher for *Casting Off* is fairly typical for stories having to do with or written by Italian American women. Once a narrative deviates from the accepted immigrant assimilation experience or the accepted trope of the immigrant's children's middle class lives, the story is less simply contextualized and thus less marketable. Narratives that closely adhere to expected stereotypes and heteronormative narratives regarding Italian American immigration, like Jerre Mangione's *Mount Allegro* (1942), Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969), and, more recently, Joseph Luzzi's *My Two Italies* (2014), are more likely to find publication success.<sup>73</sup>

DeSalvo wrote another novel—"Bad Girl"—which she completed in 1993. Like *Casting Off*, the narrative structure of "Bad Girl" pushed away from linearity, but it more overtly dealt with issues of Italian American tradition and stereotype through her fictionalization of events from her childhood and adolescence. It also played more concretely with notions of young girls escaping to New York City although DeSalvo still refused to punish her protagonist for her radical sexual behavior. The shift from "Bad

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immigration and assimilation. The other two sections of the epic, focusing on contemporary Italian American women were, at first, of no interest to her. (This information was gleaned in a telephone conversation with Edvige Giunta on 14 March 2014.) This publication history suggests that even a publisher known for publishing radical and feminist texts did not understand how to contextualize a book about Italian American women's experiences beyond the stereotypical assumptions of Italian American immigrant stories where women cooked, raised children, and submitted to their husbands.

<sup>73</sup>For example, Mario Puzo's Corleone family saga continues to baffle, intrigue, and serve as the guidepost for numerous scholarly anthologies, critical studies, and popular culture books about Italian Americans, Mafiosi, immigration, *la famiglia*, and the American Dream. See Christian Messenger's *The Godfather and American Culture: How the Corleones Became "Our Gang"*; Fred Gardaphé's *From Wiseguys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities*; and George De Stefano's *An Offer We Can't Refuse: The Mafia in the Mind of America*.

Girl” to writing her memoir *Vertigo* came after DeSalvo finished *Conceived with Malice: Literature as Revenge in the Lives and Works of Virginia and Leonard Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, Djuna Barnes, and Henry Miller* (1994). DeSalvo realized that she “[didn’t] want to write about other people, [she] want[ed] to focus on [her] family.” DeSalvo, like other second wave feminists, recognized, according to Kym Ragusa, how she could use “personal experience to say something about a larger collectivity and about the time in which [she] lived” (108). She wrote a proposal for *Vertigo* mapping out a narrative that would include “15 chapters, to total between 280 and 300 pages.” Editor Rosemary Ahern accepted it immediately and encouraged DeSalvo’s process in writing her first full-length memoir.<sup>74</sup>

DeSalvo freely took events from “Bad Girl,” which was never published, and incorporated them into *Vertigo*’s narrative. In this way, she moved from life to fiction to memoir. “Bad Girl” emerges as the transition piece between DeSalvo’s fiction and memoir—creative narratives grounded in the New York-New Jersey landscape—from *Casting Off* to *Vertigo*. In moving to creative non-fiction, she was able, according to Giunta, to do more “relentless digging in the territory of memory, and its multiple, even conflicting, viewpoints and accounts” (Giunta, “My Stories” xxiii). She also, according to Ragusa:

enacts the process of coming to voice from the margin through play with

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<sup>74</sup>Earlier in her career, DeSalvo suggested that Ahern was the impetus for writing the memoir. According to Giunta, “[DeSalvo] would have never thought to write a memoir because she did not think her life was ‘significant enough’ or that ‘she had anything of value to communicate’” (“My Stories” xxiii). In preparation for my interview about *Casting Off*, DeSalvo dug out an old process journal and discovered that she had mapped out the memoir before talking to Ahern. Even feminist writers unconsciously minimize their own contributions to their work.

form and content. Like [Maxine Hong] Kingston, [Meena] Alexander, and [Audre] Lorde, DeSalvo uses multiple shifts in time to signal various states of consciousness: as a perceiving child, as an enraged teenager, and as an adult woman shifting through the shards of her memory to make sense of the events she is presenting. (109)

In writing *Vertigo*, DeSalvo embraces her Italian American heritage, not as a sentimental notion of assimilation, but as a complicated history of violence, silence, and strength. She presents Italian American working class life from the margin rather than as a completed tale that guarantees success.<sup>75</sup> Like Lorde, she walks through fear to recreate her life through a political lens designed to find connection to other ethnic and racially marginalized groups. She writes, in order to break the stultifying silence of *omertà*. In courageously mining her life, DeSalvo opened up herself and her work to an audience both within a growing Italian American women's literary tradition and an American creative non-fiction literary field.<sup>76</sup> This connection has subsequently connected Italian

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<sup>75</sup>See *From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana*, ed. by Anthony Julian Tamburri, Paolo A. Giordano, and Fred L. Gardaphé; and *Beyond the Margins: Readings in Italian Americana*, ed. Paolo A. Giordano and Anthony Julian Tamburri for an examination of Italian American literature and scholarship that upends mainstream and stereotypical views of Italian American culture and traditions.

<sup>76</sup>In *Personal Effects: Essays on Memoir, Teaching, and Culture in the Work of Louise DeSalvo*, Caronia and Giunta point out that "*Vertigo* was the first of many groundbreaking Italian American memoirs by women— including Mary Cappello's *Night Bloom* (1998); Flavia Alaya's *Under the Rose: A Confession* (1999); Carole Maso's *A Room Lit by Roses: A Journal of Pregnancy and Birth* (2000); Maria Laurino's *Were You Always an Italian? Ancestors and Other Icons of Italian America* (2000); Beverly Donofrio's *Looking for Mary: Or, the Blessed Mother and Me* (2000); Diane di Prima's *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years* (2001); Mary Saracino's *Voices of the Soft-Bellied Warrior* (2001); Susanne Antonetta's *Body Toxic: An Environmental Memoir* (2001); Theresa Maggio's *The Stone Boudoir: Travels through the Hidden Villages of Sicily* (2002); Cris Mazza's *Indigenous: Growing Up Californian* (2003); Danielle Trussoni's *Falling Through the Earth* (2006); Kym

American women writers with other women of the Italian Diaspora, including those in Italy and Canada as well as those residing in the UK, and South American countries, including Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.

This community needed the same attention to textual and critical scholarship that DeSalvo, Gilbert, and Hendin had done with regards to nineteenth and twentieth century British and American canonical white women writers. Viscusi sees the project of Italian American literature as a discourse of people with no national allegiance—the permanent outsiders. Mary Jo Bona argues, “Italian American writers and scholars have been ... engaged in *claiming* Italian American literature as part of the American literary tradition” (*Claiming a Tradition* 4).<sup>77</sup> Bona takes the phrase “claiming” from Adrienne Rich, who encouraged young women to take responsibility for their education and leave nothing unasked. Bona is thinking past Viscusi’s argument about national projects and looking towards local connections to create, as Rose Basile Green insists, “Italian American

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Ragusa’s *The Skin Between Us: A Memoir of Race, Beauty, and Belonging* (2006); Marisa Acocella Marchetto’s *Cancer Vixen: A True Story* (2006); Jean Feraca’s *I Hear Voices: A Memoir of Love, Death, and the Radio* (2007); Cappello’s *Awkward: A Detour* (2007) and *Called Back: My Reply to Cancer, My Return to Life* (2009); Laurino’s *Old World Daughter, New World Mother: An Education in Love and Freedom* (2009); Leonilde Friero Ruberto’s *Such is Life: An Italian American Woman’s Memoir* (2010); Joanna Clapps Herman’s *The Anarchist Bastard: Growing Up Italian in America* (2011); Annie Lanzillotto’s *L Is for Lion: An Italian Bronx Butch Freedom Memoir* (2013); Christa Parravani’s *Her* (2013); Domenica Ruta’s *With or Without You* (2013); and Susanne Antonetta’s *Make Me a Mother* (2014)” (“Habit of Mind” 19 FN42).

<sup>77</sup>Bona delineates the Italian American women writers’ mission as “complicat[ing] the meanings of American identity by emphasizing cultural and sexual identity, influenced by regional provenance, modification of family control, changes in generational relationships, and attainment of education” (*Claiming a Tradition* 4). Even writers like Hendin or Rachel Guido DeVries, in her autobiographical novel *Tender Warriors* (1986), purposefully play with and upend images of sentimentalized Italian American domesticity, but writers like DeSalvo, Maso, and Rossi, at least when the former wrote *Casting Off*, reveal Italian American cultural and sexual identity markers without directly engaging in an expected Italian American plotline that revolves around issues of immigrants or assimilation between and among first and second generations.

literature, in English, exists” through “its distinctive traits” and “peculiar imprint” (Pei 10). Basile Green’s work concentrates, with the exception of Winwar and Tomasi, on Italian American male authors, and serves as a model for how scholars and critics such as Barolini, Bona, and Giunta contextualize Italian American female authorship. Basile Green’s assertion that in the ensuing decades “Italian-American writers will be judged as Americans with a certain advantage in having come of Italian ancestry” (384) bypasses the complicated discourse of Viscusi’s search for an imagined community by foregrounding a rich male Italian literary tradition. Barolini, Bona, and Giunta were at the forefront of imagining a community of women writers. As Giunta states, “The work of the literary critic ... cannot take place in the silence and isolation of the secluded library, nor in the brief social respite of academic conferences. Working closely with publishing houses ... can prove central to achieving the goal of building a *new* kind of public” (*Writing with an Accent* xvii). Even after the publication of *The Dream Book*, Anthony Tamburri notes that during the early twentieth century “there were few women who engaged in creative writing” (25 FN16).<sup>78</sup>

Reprinted works such as Tina De Rosa’s *Paper Fish* (1980) and DeSalvo’s *Vertigo*, according to Giunta, “[have] positively affected Italian American women’s literary history” and “[have] had a profound impact on what [she] choose[s] to write

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<sup>78</sup>Francesco Duarte’s edited collection *Italoamericana: The Literature of the Great Migration, 1880-1943* is now available in an American edition from Fordham University Press. Duarte, with translation and editorial assistance from American edition editor Robert Viscusi, translation editor Anthony Julian Tamburri, and bibliographic editor James J. Perriconi, has painstakingly chronicled writings by Italian immigrants in both Italian and English in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This collection will hopefully assist in contextualizing Italian women immigrants within an Italian American literary tradition and a larger women’s literary history while contributing to Italian American and to Italian Diaspora studies in general.

about [and] how [she] write[s] about it” (*Writing with An Accent* xvi-xvii).<sup>79</sup> When Italian American scholars collaborate with presses as diverse as Bordighera Press, The Feminist Press, Fordham University Press, Guernica Editions, and SUNY Press they help to maintain and grow an Italian American women’s literary tradition.<sup>80</sup> They make visible that which has been rendered obsolete. Since 1989, the non-profit Bordighera Press has dedicated itself to Italian-American literature. Additionally, The Feminist Press has published Italian and Italian American women writers (see FN60), Fordham University Press has a new Critical Studies in Italian America series, SUNY Press has an Italian/American Culture series, and Guernica Editions dedicates a large portion of its editorial calendar to Italian American and Italian Canadian novelists, memoirists, and poets.

When taken in this context, the year 1987 can be viewed as a turning point in Italian American women’s literary tradition and global studies in Italian Diaspora. Two years after Barolini’s *The Dream Book* was published, Great Britain’s Harvester Press

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<sup>79</sup>For scholarly criticism on De Rosa’s *Paper Fish* as a marker of the Italian American female voice see Mary Jo Bona’s “Broken Images, Broken Lines: Carmolina’s Journey in Tina De Rosa’s *Paper Fish*” (1987) and Edvige Giunta’s ““A Song from the Ghetto”” (1996).

<sup>80</sup>In the 1990s, under the direction of Florence Howe, and with support from Italian American scholars and literary critics Mary Jo Bona, Fred Gardaphé, Edvige Giunta, and Janet Zandy, The Feminist Press reprinted numerous works by Italian American women writers. In addition to Barolini’s, De Rosa’s, and DeSalvo’s works, the press published Flavia Alaya’s *Under the Rose: A Confession* (1998), Dorothy Bryant’s *Miss Giardino* (1976) and *The Test* (1991), Hendin’s *The Right Thing to Do* (1988), as well as DeSalvo and Giunta’s edited collection of established and up-coming Italian American women writers, *The Milk of Almonds: Italian American Women Writers on Food And Culture*. Since 2001, the press has turned to Italian women writers and published their work in translation, leaving behind a rich history of Italian American women writers. Without sympathetic publishers, many of these Italian American women writers continue to stay out of print, to disappear, or—as in the case of DeSalvo and her novel *Casting Off*—to find no publisher.

published DeSalvo's *Casting Off*, and other Italian American female authors, including Carole Maso (*Ghost Dance*), Josephine Gattuso Hendin (*The Right Thing to Do*), and Agnes Rossi (*Athletes and Artists*), were published in the US. Like DeSalvo, these Italian American women writers challenged, in what happened to also be their fiction debuts, the ethos of a closed and limiting patriarchal system. Maso wrote a first novel that, according to Fred Gardaphé, "presents the experience of the third-generation ethnic who, unlike earlier generations, has the option of picking and choosing from the many traditions that make up American culture" (*Italian Signs* 149). Maso may be the most widely read Italian American female writer, but that may have to do with the absence of overt ethnic markers in her fiction and non-fiction.

Hendin's first novel differs from Maso's since it directly confronts notions of Italian American patriarchy and father-daughter relationships through a *bildungsroman* focused on female identity. *The Right Thing to Do* received an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation and Bona argues Hendin's novel "stands out in its deft evocation of Italian Americana," which "reinforces an Italian American emphasis on both the restrictions and rewards of ethnic communities" (Bona, "Escaping the Ancestral Threat?" 213; 215). The novel went out of print until The Feminist Press reprinted it with Bona's afterword in 1999. Rossi's first published work, a collection of ten short stories, was the winner of the 1986 NYU Creative Writers Competition, but like Maso's and DeSalvo's first novels, it avoids any of the overt cultural markers of Italian American heritage.

At the same time, these Italian American women writers have found ways to write and publish. Maso has written eleven books of fiction, essays, prose poem sequences, and



memoir—although few of them deal directly with Italian American culture in obvious ways. A professor of English at New York University, Hendin has devoted the last two decades to Italian American studies serving as a past president of the Italian American Studies Association. Hendin's scholarship and creative work appears in numerous journals and collections, including a piece on teaching experimental ethnic fiction in the MLA volume *Teaching Italian American Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*. Rossi has published four books of fiction that tackle the liminal space between white ethnic communities and is currently at work on a novel about adultery. And DeSalvo, with eighteen published works, continues to write memoirs that contextualize Italian American culture as part of the larger project of America and Italian Diaspora Studies.

*Recasting Old Myths / Writing New Truths, or Why Were Publishers Worried?*

“So, are you going to fuck him or aren't you?” (DeSalvo, *Casting Off* 1).

*Casting Off*'s opening sentence crushes the notion of female vacillation or submission. The vernacular phrase, “fuck him,” signals sex—talking about it, engaging in it, and acting on it. There is no coyness to the question. It is direct and warrants an active response. The question suggests that the woman is in charge. She is not waiting for a man to decide if she is worthy to “fuck”—the choice is hers to make. Female sexuality emerges through the imagination of the woman who desires, not the woman who is desired. She is subject rather than object or objectified. As Maive's provocative question to Helen suggests, these women are absorbed in their own thoughts, actions, and appetites. Their unapologetic and defiant stances, where men become marginalized figures, free female desire from the male gaze and reveal women as powerful,

independent, and creative.

Sex on her terms is an integral component of Helen's transformation. When Maive confronts Helen about her sex life, she is not asking for the gossipy details of her affairs, she wants to know who Helen wants to be and how she wants to live. What becomes apparent after Helen engages in the affair with Julien is how she has repressed certain Italian cultural markers. Most especially, her denial of who she is becomes evident in her rejection of and sudden interest in Italian food.<sup>81</sup> This relationship is not a nostalgic or a sentimental reminder of the good old days when mama stayed in the kitchen and cooked a husband or son's favorite foods.<sup>82</sup> Instead, food becomes a significant marker of Helen's lack of creativity. Before Julien enters her life, Helen conducts a "nice and predictable," "illusion of infidelity without the risks" affair during weekly 75-minute lunches at a mid-town New York Italian restaurant with a tax accountant (*Casting Off* 15). She eats "melon and prosciutto" and "spumoni" while her lover recounts the mundane details of his suburban existence (*Casting Off* 14; 15).

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<sup>81</sup>DeSalvo suggests that Maive's obsession with food stems from "the burden of Irish history." Helen's connection to food may be based around her Italian heritage, but Maive's food issues suggest that she is dealing with "what it means to be an Irish American woman ... [knowing] the British tried to kill the Irish by starving them to death. How does food and colonization manifest itself in [a suburban Irish American woman's life]? The way you are eating. Another way you try to exert control by thinking that you are a free woman in a mythic kind of way and it's not going to affect you. Maive is a sorrowful woman in a deep way and a glib woman in a shallow way."

<sup>82</sup>DeSalvo states, "you can tell how enslaved the women of any country are by the kind of preparation their traditional foods require. Any recipe that begins, "Take a mortar and pestle" ... now drives me into a feminist frenzy. Well, pasta making is something like that. Women who really care about their families make it fresh every day. Purists insist that if the sacred pasta dough is touched by metal pasta machines (i.e., twentieth-century labor-saving devices), it becomes slightly slippery—a quality in pasta that is akin to infidelity in wives" (*Puttana* 36).

Helen's presence in the restaurant upends notions of the Italian American woman who cooks her way into a man's heart. Their extended lunch sessions revolve around his ordering for both of them; he "eat[s] his first course" while he waits for her arrival since she is pathologically late to each lunch date (*Casting Off* 13). She succumbs, silently, to the meal and his conversation, including his ongoing narrative about his wife's Buick, a car that "fell apart ... in ways Helen had never before considered possible" (*Casting Off* 14). Like John Updike's creation Rabbit Angstrom, the tax accountant is never satisfied with what he has, complains to his mistress about his wife's inadequacies, and never takes into account what she might be feeling, thinking, or needing. Unlike Updike's creation, DeSalvo's tax accountant's chatter becomes background noise for *Helen's* dissatisfaction. Helen spends much of the lunch "let[ting] her mind wander," especially when he "talk[s] about his wife and her sexual inadequacies" since Helen believes "his wife might be paying him back in the only way she could because her fender had fallen off for the second time on the Long Island Expressway" (*Casting Off* 15). She rejects his wishy-washy behavior and, in a moment of frustration with the situation and his inability to act, initiates sex. She shows up after hours at his mid-town office with a bottle of wine and they "fornicate desperately and quickly ... on the top of his desk amid tax forms and debentures" (*Casting Off* 18). His inadequacy is made clear when Helen recalls that this sexual encounter is the only one that occurs; they return to "their routine of cappuccino and sympathy, a banal and boring substitute for what Helen had come to regard as the real thing" (*Casting Off* 19). The Italian restaurant, rather than a cutting edge signifier of the global metropolis, is a place of sterility and empty connections, both sexual and

ethnic. As the site of return, it reinforces Helen's disconnection to her desire, her heritage, and her sex life.

After a childhood spent "attend[ing] wakes and watch[ing] her aunts on her mother's side ignoring the drunkenness of their husbands and the vacuity of their lives," Helen "suppressed" her half-Italian heritage (*Casting Off* 19-20). She reignites a connection to her Italian heritage after getting a glimpse of John Travolta as Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever*. Lusting after a white-suited, disco dancing Travolta,

she caught herself with some amusement reading recipes for lasagna and for meatballs and spaghetti, dishes from a cuisine she'd studiously avoided for much of her adult life, although she'd explored the intricacies of Indian curries, French casseroles, and Middle Eastern ground-meat dishes. For some reason, Helen had come to think that serving her family pasta was, somehow, not serving them dinner at all. (*Casting Off* 20)

Helen is self-consciously aware of the way in which she claims her heritage. The phrase "studiously avoided" suggests that Helen is not merely rejecting her aunts' behavior, but is also a product of the assimilation tactics taught to first- and second-generation Italian Americans during World War II. Lawrence di Stasi argues that the strictures after the attack on Pearl Harbor adversely affected Americans of Italian heritage who learned quickly the rhetoric of "Don't" (175). At that time, every Italian immigrant was silenced, "not just ... those who were targets" (175). The consequences of such a loss were seen not only in oral communication between family and community members, but also, according to Carnevale, in "a 40 percent reduction in the number of Italian language periodicals from 1942 to 1948 along with a decrease in the number of Italian radio

broadcasts during the war years” (178).

In *Casting Off*, Helen’s silence is never made culturally explicit, but she does lose her father during World War II. The secrecy surrounding his status is never made clear to the young Helen. Her father was:

missing in action. ... Her mother had received a few official and semi-official reports, and her father’s buddies had written their accounts, but no one knew for certain whether he’d died in a ship or a plane that had gone down in the sea or over land or if he’d been taken or killed by the enemy or one of the head-hunting tribes that officials hoped would be friendly to the United States throughout the war. (DeSalvo, *Casting Off* 163)

Helen’s mother waits ten years to tell her daughter that “her father wouldn’t be coming home to them and that he’d been officially declared dead” (*Casting Off* 163). Helen creates fantastical stories to replace what cannot be known. What she does remember is that she cannot speak or ask questions about her father’s disappearance. She learns silence through loss—not simply the loss of being born a woman, but of being of Italian heritage. She has been taught that to speak could be dangerous for the survival of her family and community. At thirty-seven, in the middle of a crisis of self, her viewing of *Saturday Night Fever* awakens not only primal desire in the viewing of Travolta’s Manero character, but also recalls her cultural heritage. Her betrayal of the forced assimilation accorded the progeny of white ethnic immigrants during World War II and the rejection of her female relatives are as much markers of her Italian heritage as the lasagna she makes. The traditional Italian American dishes offer some comfort as she recalls not wanting to be like the women of her childhood. Still, she does what these

women did. She makes food for the men in her life; and these men are unconscious about the implications.

When she serves her husband James and her son Christopher “her first lasagna,” they chalk up her newly acquired curiosity for Italian food to “a mid-life crisis” (*Casting Off* 20). Only Helen’s son reacts directly to the changes in Helen by “sulk[ing and] swear[ing]” (*Casting Off* 95). He also is demanding and “disapproving” in ways that her husband James is not—Christopher refuses to eat “unless she made him wholesome meatless meals without additives” (*Casting Off* 95). In that regard, he senses his mother’s breaking with familial tradition even as she cooks Italian food.

Helen’s burgeoning recognition that she is cut off from her creativity blends with how she has been cut off from and reconnects to her Italian roots. Her need to embrace a creative life forces her to reconnect to her heritage, but it is not simply a struggle between first and second generation immigrant roles; Helen is fighting for her right to write.<sup>83</sup> She reconnects to a heritage that she remembers through numerous viewings of *Saturday Night Fever* and then her subsequent cooking of family foodstuffs like lasagna. Her inability to cook for Julien, whose apartment—most likely occupied at some point by Italian immigrants—lacks any food or cookware, signals his mobility through a global cosmopolitan attitude rather than the domestic stability to which Helen has become used, but by which she feels suffocated.

Helen’s journey begins in the kitchen where she cooks instead of writes or needs

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<sup>83</sup>Marie A. Plasse argues that in Josephine Gattuso Hendin’s *The Right Thing to Do*, “there is perhaps no more complex or divisive conflict within Italian American culture than that between *la via vecchia*, the traditional, Old World Ways which Southern Italian immigrants brought with them to America, and *la via nuova*, the New World values endorsed by Anglo-American society in the United States” (145).

to cook in order to write or writes as she is cooking and sometimes even writes about cooking. As Giunta and DeSalvo argue, “Food-writing and life-writing in Italian American culture are interconnected, for to examine our relationship to food is to examine ourselves, as well as the relationship between these selves and the family, the community, and society at large” (Introduction, *Milk of Almonds* 8). Helen’s connection to a creative self is a happier, more fulfilling narrative than that found in Marguerite in Barolini’s *Umbertina*. Giunta points out that *Umbertina*’s narrative “makes a powerful argument for the importance of cultural memory, without which one is doomed to experience an all-consuming displacement, as Marguerite does” (*Writing with an Accent* 44). A woman not unlike *Casting Off*’s Helen, Marguerite has no stability of friendship and “captures Barolini’s perception of the fragility of her position as an aspiring artist and emblemizes Italian American women authors’ self-doubt and anxiety of authorship” (45). While Helen finds self-fulfillment, Marguerite only finds despair. Helen recognizes that she can make choices that are not directly connected to her family; Marguerite does not and dies by suicide. In this regard, *Casting Off* anticipates twenty-first century memoirs like Domenica Ruta’s *With or Without You* (2013) and Annie Lanzilotto’s *L is for Lion: An Italian Bronx Butch Freedom Memoir* (2013). These third generation immigrant daughters do not let go of tradition, but they do not allow it to swallow their desires or creativity either. Their Italian American traditions propel them into artistic lives, much like Helen’s propulsion into the kitchen by the vision of John Travolta in a white polyester suit assists in opening her to her creative self.

Helen returns to her writing, first poetry and then short fiction. She shares tentative creative steps with her trusted friend Maive. With Maive’s insistence, Helen

admits her desires. Helen comes to acknowledge that when she does not write, she is killing her most passionate of selves. Her sexuality, like her culinary skill, is tied to creative expression, not her roles as wife, parent, and chief nurturer. Helen's writing assists her in transforming the domestic space from a place of asexual homemaking and childrearing to her creative experimental space. She becomes nurtured as an individual and an artist. Her writing becomes her priority. In order for the domestic space to be alive, she understands that she must have a life separate from her roles as wife and mother.

Helen learns to organize her priorities through her fiction and poetry. Unlike Marguerite in *Umbertina*, who never learns to move beyond stultifying tradition, Helen's changed mind—both mentally and emotionally—is revealed at the end of the novel by the inclusion of her short story. Helen works through her confusion and embraces her creativity before the narrative repeats—at the end of the novel—the night Helen decides to have an affair with Julien. This ending does not reduce her connection to a libidinous sexual liaison, but becomes the moment she sets upon the path to her creative life and chooses to ignore limitations set by institutional ideology or cultural tradition. Julien's presence in her life is transitory. He remains only until she can recognize that she does not need him, or any man, to create. Her short story, as the gateway to this realization, is the most important moment of Helen's story and, as such, it appears as the climax rather than as exposition.

Helen's affair with Julien is the least outrageous thread in the novel, and I would argue, not the reason why US editors were too shocked to publish it. Rather, the novel has certain fantastical elements, italicized like Hasina's letters in *Brick Lane*, which



destroy long-standing myths through the assertion of female anger and agency. These strands, while not exclusively rendered in first person voice, nonetheless are the only place within *Casting Off's* narrative where the "I" appears and unwind institutionalized fear. Additionally, although Helen's narrative is an assertion of female agency and autonomy, the unraveling of the primordial myth of Medea, rendered in first person by the wife of the tax accountant with whom Helen has her affair, is the most direct assertion against patriarchal ideology.

Like Morrison's realignment of Medea in *Beloved*, DeSalvo's narrative is a complicated story of women's agency that denies a male gaze and through an understanding of patriarchal power and privilege. Morrison manifests the Medea myth through Sethe's connection to the institution of slavery. Sethe is ensconced in an untenable situation, but she is not viewed as a perfect victim. Sethe commits infanticide—an act she considers just—to counteract the injustice of slavery, but her community indicts her even though they know the horrors of slavery first hand. The ramifications of Sethe's public infanticide must be borne or buried by the entire community since this act disrupts the semblance of peace these individuals have found away from life on the plantation. Sethe's action brings the entire brutal legacy of slavery to the surface and jeopardizes not only the community's actual freedom from "whitepeople," but also its collective burial of the degradation and horrors of slavery—a burial that has been necessary to survive life in a free state (Morrison 209). The narrative is an assertion that *none* of slavery's immoral and inhumane legacy can be denied if the community is to truly move beyond it to fashion a new life. Communal understanding and action are privileged over solitary autonomy.

In *Casting Off*, the Medea myth is crafted so that a woman's right to punish a man's unjust act is at stake. In the guise of Jason and the tax accountant with whom Helen has her first affair, men are nothing more than weak, frightened boys whose gender status accords them privilege. This part of the narrative is set off by italics and is told through the first person voice of Augusta Dollsworthy, the tax accountant's wife. Augusta's revision of Medea's infanticide is a shocking portrayal of female agency and the most important within the novel in terms of recasting women from monstrous entities to justifiably angry females. Before Augusta speaks, she appears twice—once, in the moment of her never named husband's confession of infidelity and, second, in Helen's dream as “[a] *red-breasted, red-crested bird*” (DeSalvo, *Casting Off* 15). From Helen's dreamscape, the narrative seemingly goes off on a tangent and Augusta, who never meets Helen or Maive, emerges as the central figure and expert on how to respond to a philandering and ineffectual husband. She receives a given name, a surname, and an imaginative inner life, qualities not accorded to her husband. She dreams of extracting revenge for her husband's ability to discard her since he believes she is an invisible, sexless creature, not by punishing those close to him, but by directly compromising his masculine sense of self. Her sexual appetite, which her husband has denounced as “inadequat[e],” is her means to revenge and she turns to Medea, the symbol of a wronged woman gone mad, to make her point (*Casting Off* 15).

If *Beloved* tackles the institution of slavery and the ramifications to those who were freed or born into freedom through the Medea myth, *Casting Off* focuses on the patriarchal privilege of acquiring trophy wives once their first wives are beyond their procreative primes. Augusta casts aside Medea's infanticide as the mythic creation of a

man. Instead, she reminds Medea that “[t]here was no need to brutalize [her] children .... to butcher them to get ... revenge. That was a man’s version of what [Medea] should have done (*Casting Off* 23).<sup>84</sup> By discarding the “man’s version” of feeling inadequate and being discarded, Augusta’s statement is a pointed diatribe against the male ego. Augusta suggests that Medea search for a young boy who she could “deflower” in front of a “bound and gagged and pinioned” Jason (*Casting Off* 22). In this scenario, the young lover is “an eager pupil” who is willing to learn “how to do the things [Medea] had once wanted Jason to do” (*Casting Off* 22). Augusta makes husbands responsible for their own inadequacies and unwillingness to learn about their wives’ desires and bodies. She describes a passionate love-making where the emphasis is on the woman’s fulfillment—that which gives Medea’s young lover pleasure is figuring out what turns on Medea. If Jason is to learn a lesson, Augusta states, Medea must “blind [Jason] with the whiteness of [her] passion” (*Casting Off* 23). In this passion is her power. Augusta’s vehemence and anger serve as reminders that women are sexually desirous even if their

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<sup>84</sup>Bernard Knox and other classical scholars suggest that the infanticide by Medea is pure “Euripidean invention,” and his representation became the canonical standard (Knox 296). Other versions of the myth, including Pindar’s “Pythia Ode 4” and Apollonius’s *Argonautica*, privilege the Colchian princess’s divine nature as well as her helper maiden status. In one version, Medea is even a victim of the Corinthians when they murder her children without her provocation. It’s worth noting that Knox states that in one version of the myth Creon’s kinsmen “spread the rumor that Medea had” murdered her own children (Knox 296). This evidence may come from the *Oechaliae Halosis*, which states that Medea kills Creon, flees to Athens, and stands falsely accused “for the murder of her children whom Creon’s relatives killed in revenge” (Braswell 8). Euripides abandons these strands and shifts responsibility to Medea as the sole perpetrator of infanticide. Most nineteenth and twentieth century scholarly and artistic interpretations follow Euripidean invention and, no matter what narrative they are reading, label her a foreign monster bent on revenge. See James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston’s critical anthology *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art* (1997), especially Fritz Graf’s and Sarah Iles Johnston’s essays, which outline various strands of the Medea myth, including its relationship to the cult of the Hera Akraia.

husbands no longer find them sexually attractive or have never viewed them as sexual beings. Augusta reminds women to not suppress their desires or divert their anger and frustration onto inappropriate targets. Augusta's revenge fantasy can be read as a manifesto that places women in a position of power. No woman needs to be crushed by an inadequate husband who does not pay attention to his wife's needs and desires.

In Augusta's rewriting of the Medea myth, she reads Medea as a feminist scholar would—like DeSalvo herself would and does through the undoing of Medea's mythic metanarrative: the wife and mother as jealous infanticidal monster. Augusta's claim on Medea as a woman who would direct her anger appropriately towards her philandering and abandoning husband—not at her children—joins the revisionist trend among women writers that includes Woolf, who rewrote traditional plots in texts like *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Orlando* (1928), Morrison, most especially in *Beloved*, and Atwood, in *The Penelopiad* (2005). This tradition is carried on by twenty-first century writers like Evaristo, whose verse novel, *The Emperor's Babe*, uses contemporary slang and Latin verse to challenge claims to the mono-cultural view of the British Empire. The sassy Zuleika, the daughter of Sudanese merchant immigrants in the Roman Empire's outpost Londinium, is the narrator of the story that pre-dates the British Empire by 1,800 years. These novels refuse the history of the victors as the final word. They refuse to accept a generational trauma without working through it. Each of these artists purposefully set out to destroy myths that portray women as silent and submissive objects or monstrous creatures.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>These stories are a natural counterpoint to the MTV videos produced in the 1980s and early 1990s by Madonna, who, like DeSalvo, was another Italian American artist inspired by New York City. By 1987, Madonna had already released *Like a Virgin* (1984), which

In the twenty-first century, women are still objectified and punished for their sexual desire, still denigrated with the terms whore and slut while men proudly wear the badge of stud. The internet proliferates with blogs and negative commentary about artists like Miley Cyrus and Lady Gaga and sympathy for young men like the Steubenville high school football players who were convicted of sexually assaulting a fourteen-year-old girl and posting, proudly, a video of their assault. Laci Green's YouTube video channel, *Sex+: A Frank Video Series About Sexuality* has tackled everything from gender fluidity to feminism in her quirky teaching videos and seems to be a generally accepted authority on issues related to sex, but Anita Sarkeesian, the founder of the web channel *Feminist Frequency*, has received death threats for her videos most directly related to the gaming industry. Slut shaming, rape culture, and the micro-aggressions found in everyday misogyny and sexism make this reprint of *Casting Off* all the more timely.

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spoofed patriarchal views of female empowerment and sexuality with songs like "Material Girl" and the title track. By 1990, she was considered an icon, but when she released "Justify My Love," MTV refused to give airtime to what it considered a too sexually explicit video. Madonna made the savvy business decision to "release ... it as the first-ever single in VHS format .... It hit stores at just under \$10 a copy and later became the top-selling video single of all time" (Grossman). The video focused on "controversial themes: androgyny, sadomasochism, bisexuality, sex with multiple partners" (Grossman).

In defense of the "Justify My Love" video, Camille Paglia states: "Madonna has a far profounder vision of sex than do the feminists. She sees both the animality and the artifice. Changing her costume style and hair color virtually every month, Madonna embodies the eternal values of beauty and pleasure. Feminism says, 'No more masks.' Madonna says we are nothing but masks." Paglia's simplistic notion of feminism denies the ways in which authors like DeSalvo play with notions of masks and personae. And in *Casting Off*, DeSalvo offers a profound look at marriage, sex, and femininity. The novel is a strong counterpoint to Madonna's challenges to the music industry and the roles women have been forced to play in order to obtain a record contract. Madonna's music videos and DeSalvo's writing are markers of how outrageous Italian American women need to be in order to break free of prescribed roles. At the same time, their work locates Italian American women as artists and purveyors of culture in the late twentieth century within the global city of New York.

*The Thread That Binds*

When texts re-emerge—like Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), De Rosa’s *Paper Fish*, and, now, DeSalvo’s *Casting Off*—they most often reveal to what the dominant culture was not listening or to what it wanted to bury. Even the now iconic *Vertigo*—so important to the construction and visibility of an Italian American women’s literary tradition—went out of print five years after publication, which speaks to the fragility with which these literary traditions are built and maintained. One of the jobs of literary critics and scholars is to make visible forgotten or unknown communities and individuals, while creating a foundation that enables these works and writers to remain relevant and visible. DeSalvo’s review of De Rosa’s *Paper Fish* contextualizes and politicizes why an author like De Rosa was not supported by publishing houses, and reminds us that it was through the dedication of academics like Bona, Giunta, and Gardaphé that the work was reprinted by The Feminist Press.<sup>86</sup> These Italian American scholars and literary critics had, as examples, individuals such as Alice Walker, who rediscovered Zora Neale Hurston’s work in 1970, when she stumbled upon Hurston’s folk stories while researching the subject of voodoo for one of her own short stories. Walker’s commitment to multiple genres and her concerted effort to re-contextualize and remember the past came after the height of the Civil Rights movement, but also on the heels of second wave feminism. During this time, Italian American women writers like Barolini, DeSalvo, Gilbert, and Hendin were also publishing scholarship while writing

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<sup>86</sup>As Giunta notes, “Apart from a handful of academics who occasionally taught the book in Italian/American culture courses by giving their students photocopies, *Paper Fish* was excluded from literary history” (“Song from the Ghetto” 123).

creative work, but it would take another twenty-five years before the fruits of their labor would emerge through a specifically Italian American female lens, and would allow DeSalvo's *Casting Off* to finally be published in the US.

In 1997, I wrote in "Setting the Table," the introduction to *the girlspeak journals*, about Italian American women artists who "had come together to discuss individual creative processes and how we wanted to develop our voices as a community of women, first, and Italian Americans, second" (vii). This endeavor was a result of my engagement with the work that feminist writers like Barolini, DeSalvo, Gilbert, Lorde, Morrison, Adrienne Rich, and Walker did in the 1970s and 1980s. In the mid-1990s, the group of Italian American women artists who sat around Giunta's dining room table in Jersey City and ate broccoli rabe, risotto, and fresh baked bread from a local New Jersey Italian bakery wanted to build upon the foundation that Barolini had begun in the Italian American literary community—they wanted to be part of that larger artistic and scholarly community. I wanted to be part of the foundational work that would remember and contextualize authors such as DeSalvo, both inside and outside the Italian American literary circle—on local, national, and global levels.

As Giunta states, our work is clear: "That so many works by Italian American women writers remain, to this day, unpublished or out of print is a practical matter: if books are not available, they are not read, taught, or written about" (*Writing with an Accent* 29). Thirty years after Barolini's *The Dream Book* emerged from the shadows—and fifteen years after I published *the girlSpeak journals*—Italian American critics and scholars engage in a transatlantic movement that is both interdisciplinary and global in its view of Italian American women's writing.

At the time of *Casting Off*'s publication in the UK, women in the US, on many margins, were working, writing, and publishing; they were “dislodg[ing] and debunk[ing] the negative stereotypes” that Anthony Tamburri suggests is “one of the goals of ethnic literature” (12-13). But literary stereotypes cannot be broken and new or rarely heard from forms cannot emerge without dedicated workers who bring these writers’ works to readers and teach them how to read texts outside a heteronormative paradigm. DeSalvo’s narrative was met not with excitement or acceptance, but with derision and indignation. If, as Tamburri argues, critical readers are necessary to “engage ... in a process of analytical inquiry and comparison of the ethnic group(s) in question with other ethnic groups as well as with the dominant culture” (13), DeSalvo’s novel had no chance for engagement in the US since it had no publisher and no champion to help a publisher understand its importance.

Today, a lack of support from larger and even smaller independent publishing houses does not deter Italian American scholars, critics, and writers. Founded in 1989, Bordighera Press has four imprints and a literary journal. It emerges as a seminal and stable publishing house that upholds and transforms Italian American literary tradition alongside a larger American canon. Bordighera’s dedication to Italian American literature—both new and emerging authors as well as forgotten texts—counteracts the ease with which digital books and web buying marginalizes an Italian American literary tradition.<sup>87</sup> It provides a foundation for that tradition to grow and thrive. In reprinting

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<sup>87</sup>In the twenty-first century, publishers who have always promoted certain authors while ignoring others suddenly must contend with Internet-only businesses like Amazon that purposefully push certain authors while marginalizing others in order to increase profits and force publishers to sign agreements that benefit only Amazon. Amazon is well known for its bullying strategies, which distances and disenfranchises authors not only



*Casting Off*, Bordighera has strengthened its commitment to build upon and maintain an Italian American women writers' literary tradition. With the publication of *Casting Off*, DeSalvo's connection to an Italian American women's literary tradition and more inclusive Italian Diaspora studies are now more fully contextualized than was possible when *Vertigo* was reprinted by The Feminist Press.

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And now it is time for my confession. I did not recognize DeSalvo's radical nature when I first read her biography of Woolf. It took many years and a colleague like Edvige Giunta to assist me in my journey as we worked together on *Personal Effects: Essays on Memoir, Teaching, and Culture in the Work of Louise DeSalvo*. As I read the nineteen essays offered by an array of inter-disciplinary scholars, critics, and creative non-fiction writers, I became astonished at the breadth of DeSalvo's influence in multiple genres and fields. Her work is embedded in the ethos of second wave feminism and New York City, but it is an integral piece of the movement towards a globalized third wave feminism, especially having to do with theories of intersectionality, class, ethnicity, and gender. During the thick of Giunta's and my research for *Personal Effects*, I bought a copy of *Casting Off* from an independent online bookseller and waited patiently for the copy to arrive on my doorstep. I had never read it; I had had no idea of its existence. I recognized the familiar brown packaging on my doorstep one late spring day, the scent from my lilac tree greeting its arrival. After I carried the box inside, I ripped it open before carefully

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from their potential audiences, but also from their royalties. See David Streitfeld's "Writers Feel an Amazon-Hachette Spat" for Amazon's specific strategies, including willfully withholding available books for two to three weeks and suggesting other books in place of a book that has a publisher with which Amazon is in dispute or negotiations. As Sherman Alexie suggests, "Like all repressive regimes, Amazon wants to completely control your access to books" (qtd. in Streitfeld).

removing the novel from its plastic casing. Except for its yellowing pages, *Casting Off* was in excellent shape. I devoured the book in one sitting, making notes, and throwing my head back and laughing at especially timely passages. I had to keep reminding myself that the book was written in the 1980s. What I discovered was that DeSalvo has always been a writer unafraid of difficult choices. She has always worked for the unexplained and unexpected results. She has always searched for the shocking material of life lived truthfully. In reading *Casting Off*, I began to know DeSalvo as a woman who understands that privacy is different from a private life and that the private and public spheres are permeable boundaries that mix and commingle more than we would like to admit. I have come to appreciate the risks that she took and the roads that she could not travel in order to write and live her life.

If *Casting Off* had found a US publisher all those years ago, we might today be writing and thinking primarily about DeSalvo as a pre-eminent novelist, but instead, memoir became her genre, her *raison d'être*. We have been fortunate to read her work as she contextualizes an American life lived in New York and New Jersey as an Italian American working class daughter, wife, mother, and grandmother, as a Woolf scholar and second wave feminist, and as a teacher of creative non-fiction. Mostly, we are fortunate that DeSalvo chose diligence in her writing and living processes—that rejection in any sphere did not suggest to her that she give up, but simply turn another way. *Casting Off* reveals a stalwart nature that relies on honesty with one's self in order to share that self with the world.

“Eating the Neighbors: Images of Gender and Race in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*

The real truth, which is a taboo to speak, is that this is a culture that does not love black males, that they are not loved by white men, white women, black women, or girls and boys.

And that especially most black men do not love themselves.  
bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*

I can't breathe.  
Eric Garner

In “A Psychotronic Childhood,” MacArthur fellowship recipient Colson Whitehead admits he is a self-avowed “shut-in,” who, as a pre-teen in 1970s Manhattan, “preferred to lie on the living-room carpet, watching horror movies” rather than playing in Central Park. Whitehead’s obsessive viewing may also have had something to do with growing up during a time, he suggests, “New York was at its pitiful worst” (qtd. in Fassler).<sup>88</sup> In 1975, Felix Rohatyn tried to “‘save’ the city [from an encroaching neoliberal agenda] . . . by satisfying the investment bankers while diminishing the standard of living of most New Yorkers” (Harvey, *Brief History* 46).<sup>89</sup> Caught in a perfect storm of ideological change, New York City’s bailout “restore[d] class power” and weakened the “physical” and “social infrastructure of the city” (*Brief History* 46). The restructuring ate away at the city’s working and middle classes’ protections, but Whitehead saw these changes through the eyes of a precocious pre-teen caught up with horror movies and dystopia cinema about New York City. His particular fascination with the horror genre, and zombies in particular, emanates from his “demonic . . . attachment” to George Romero’s *Night of the*

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<sup>88</sup>See also Eric Sunderman’s “Q&A: Colson Whitehead Talks Gritty New York, *Zone One* Zombies, and Frank Ocean’s Sexuality.”

<sup>89</sup>US Secretary of Treasury William Simon argued: “the terms of any [city] bailout,” should be so “‘punitive, the overall experience so painful that no city, no political subdivision would ever be tempted to go down the same road”” (qtd. in Harvey, *Brief History* 46).

*Living Dead* (1968) and love for *The Omega Man* (1971) (qtd. in Fasler).<sup>90</sup> Films like *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Escape from New York* (1981) shaped Whitehead's view of New York as much as the city's loss of public services.<sup>91</sup> More than thirty years later, Whitehead had no trouble imagining the city as an apocalyptic zombie-infested island for his novel *Zone One* (2011).<sup>92</sup>

DeSalvo's *Casting Off* is a feminist take on New York City in the 1970s and early 1980s; the city, falling into ruin, is an exciting and freeing place for suburban women who feel constricted by their marriage vows and cut-off from their creativity. In Whitehead's *Zone One*, the city is a compressed and dangerous site filled with the detritus of consumerism run amok. Like Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, *Zone One*'s narrative is a shift in historical perspective, but instead of mining the past to upend the myth of homogenization and white superiority in a multicultural and global present, the narrative focuses on New York City as post-apocalyptic nightmare. Ninety-five percent of the global population succumbs to a plague-like virus and reanimates as

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<sup>90</sup>*Night of the Living Dead* featured Duane Jones, the first black actor cast as a lead in a horror film. *The Omega Man* starred Charlton Heston and Rosalind Cash in an interracial romance.

<sup>91</sup>Whitehead has stated that "[New York] was so dirty [in the '70s], you were constantly on guard from predators ... thinking about how it used to be with the danger and the garbage and buildings on fire. [sic] I didn't have to do that much research to present a post-apocalypse New York in *Zone One* because I basically grew up in that New York" (Shukla).

<sup>92</sup>On the homepage of his website, Whitehead suggests that "a film festival covering the master texts for *Zone One* would screen the following (1956-1985): The first [of the] Romero Trilogy (Sane Black Man Vs. The Crazy White People); John Carpenter's Urban Blight (*Assault on Precinct 13*, *Escape From New York*); Heston as Last White Guy on Earth (*Planet of the Apes*, *Omega Man*, *Soylent Green*); S.A.V.'s—Sick Armored Vehicles (*Damnation Alley*, *The Road Warrior*); My Lover, My Monster (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* 1956, 1978); Mr. Dan O'Bannon (*Alien*, *Return of the Living Dead*); and '70s NY as Crucible of the Soul (*Dog Day Afternoon*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Warriors*, et al.)."

skels: zombie-like cannibalistic consumers.<sup>93</sup> Those with their memories intact are on the run and forced to defend themselves.<sup>94</sup>

In *The Emperor's Babe*, the teenaged Zuleika is sassy and street smart; she has attitude and leaves no part of her history unexamined. *Zone One*'s narrative is a third person omniscient tale with a post-apocalypse hero nicknamed Mark Spitz, whose pre-apocalypse life must be read in the gaps in his sharing of the most basic elements of his Long Island heritage, including his childhood dream "to live in New York" (Whitehead, *Zone One* 3). A lifelong "survivalist," Mark Spitz finds his calling with a citizen brigade made "sweeper unit" to hunt down and destroy what remains of the post-human population in downtown Manhattan, the "zone one" of the title (*Zone One* 9; 7). Before the plague, the middle class suburbanite suggests he "would have been Most Likely Not to Be Named the Most Likely Anything" since from a young age he "staked out the B or the B chose him" (*Zone One* 9-10). After college, he works as an online customer service representative for a multinational coffee company akin to Starbucks that "doesn't require any skills" (*Zone One* 149). He is a self-avowed "mediocre man"; the "B" has kept him from being noticed or making a mark (*Zone One* 148; 9). Mark Spitz's self-denigration fosters a portrait of an apathetic and semi-productive upper middle class man-child in the

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<sup>93</sup>Like George Romero, Whitehead does not call those who have no memories zombies. The television series *The Walking Dead* does not use the moniker zombie either although the comic series it is based upon has used the word sporadically. In both the comic and television series, those who reanimate are most often called walkers, biters, or skin-eaters. Creator of the comic series and *The Walking Dead* producer Robert Kirkman states: "we felt like having them be saying 'zombie' all the time would harken back to all of the zombie films which we, in the real world, know about ... So by calling them something different, ... these people don't understand the situation" (qtd. in Potts).

<sup>94</sup>Whitehead states that when he conceived *Zone One* he did not think zombies would become a popular trope in twenty-first century culture. He was wrong. See Brooks Landon's "Is Dead the New Alive?" for an overview of the ubiquity of the zombie in twenty-first century film and fiction.

pre-apocalypse's capitalist consumer culture. Even when the plague hits, he and his childhood friend Kyle are ignorant to the global disaster unfolding. The pair weekend in Atlantic City "adrift among the dazzling surfaces," where "possibility and failure enthralled them in a perpetual and tantalizing loop" (*Zone One* 65-66).<sup>95</sup> When they arrive back on Long Island, they become lost to each other. Mark Spitz's history, including his name, is wiped clean with the plague.

Not until a third of the way through the narrative does Mark Spitz recall how he received his nickname. He single-handedly fought off skels that were accidentally freed from a trailer on one of Connecticut I-95's viaducts rather than jump to safety in the water below with the rest of his team. After the "incident," his "dependable comrades" bestow him with the Olympic gold medalist's name when they learn he cannot swim (*Zone One* 21; 147). Although there is reason to believe he could have been "affront[ed]," he was not since that attitude was a "luxury" (*Zone One* 21). It is another three-fourths of the way into the narrative before Mark Spitz admits to his fellow sweeper Gary that his inability to swim was not the only reason he received the nickname. Mark Spitz casually mentions that "the black-people can't-swim thing" was the real deciding factor (*Zone One* 231). Gary does not understand the punch line. Mark Spitz's skin color is inconsequential in the post-apocalypse.

This anecdote, buried in two different sections of the narrative and separated by one hundred and fifty pages, is central to understanding Mark Spitz's desire to be "typical," "average," and "live in New York" (*Zone One* 9; 9; 3). This longing to fit in and disappear into the urban landscape cannot be examined solely from the place of an

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<sup>95</sup>See Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* for his discussion regarding surfaces, modernity, and postmodernity.

apathetic thirty-something being eaten by neo-liberal consumerism or that individual's nostalgia for his previous mediocre life during the post-apocalypse.<sup>96</sup> In a world with "no more gossip and no more news," -isms like racism and sexism become secondary to survival in the present moment (*Zone One* 12). The understanding that "intellect and ingenuity and talent were as equally meaningless as stubbornness, cowardice, and stupidity" subsumes the hierarchies of pigment and ideological prejudices (*Zone One* 148). Mark Spitz accepts his new moniker and refuses to dwell on a racist past although his survival instincts were developed by it.

Like Zuleika, Helen in *Casting Off*, or Nazneen in *Brick Lane*, Mark Spitz has hugged the margin his entire life. These female protagonists evade gender stereotypes and upend their roles as wives within heteronormative constraints of a dominant male patriarchy. Mark Spitz is not fighting a gendered battle so much as a racist one in his pre-apocalypse life. His suburban middle class life, revealed in flashbacks that break up his present post-apocalyptic situation, offer up, through the absence of racial discourse, the way in which racism has affected his every behavior and thought. He has learned that any attention is bad attention. Until the virus infects the world, he has accepted the view of himself as someone who could only "dog paddle" (Whitehead, *Zone One* 131). He trusts the larger community's verdict that he is mediocre, and does not question its actions towards him as an indication of the world's mediocrity. The survival tactics he uses to

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<sup>96</sup> Although in *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, Derek Maus focuses on close readings of Whitehead's texts through Whitehead's understanding of craft and personal impetus, the chapter entitled "Whitehead's 'New York Trilogy': *The Colossus of New York*, *Sag Harbor*, and *Zone One*" offers a small discussion of New York and nostalgia as related in these three works. For a more nuanced discussion of nostalgia in *Zone One*, see Kimberly Fain's "Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*: Postapocalyptic Zombies Take Over Manhattan in the Age of Nostalgia, Despair, and Consumption."

minimize notice and stay away from trouble become normalized in a global disaster that makes ontology impossible. Mark Spitz's actions, even how he remembers the details of his past, emanate from a post-9/11 consciousness where US society accepts a militarized police force that uses racial constructs to criminalize men of color. From pre-9/11 broken windows and stop and frisk policing to the post-9/11 Patriot Act, men of color are marginalized, harassed, and incarcerated.<sup>97</sup> The antecedents of these policies are lodged in slavery, reconstruction, and Civil Rights era policies and protests. *Zone One*'s narrative is grounded in the foundational cinematic texts of dystopian horror from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—films that allegorized the Cold War fears of attack and homogenization, but uses the Civil Rights era as its point of departure. Moreover, Mark Spitz's self-identity is rooted in a post-soul rhetoric that fears the militarized 9/11 era of racially profiling men of color.

bell hooks argues that, as the objects of “envy, desire, and hate,” black males are the least loved people on the planet (*We Real Cool* xi). This cacophony of feeling that often takes a turn toward violent action confuses black men since they begin to equate fear with love or mistake “envy and desire” as “aspects of love” when they are the markers of how feared black males are and how much those who fear them seek to control black males' behavior (*We Real Cool* xi). Fooled by “a culture of domination,” black males become caught in “a life locked down, caged, confined” rather than learning to reach “beyond containment” (*We Real Cool* xii). They hide who they are and what they are feeling, even from themselves. They embrace “masculine patriarchy,” a mode of

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<sup>97</sup>In his grand jury testimony, Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson stated when he saw Michael Brown and Dorian Johnson “walking in the middle of the street,” he became suspicious (State of Missouri 207). He also noted Wilson's “yellow socks [with] green marijuana leaves” (208).



discourse that focuses on “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” based upon “the image of the brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling” (*We Real Cool* xii). hooks’ argument focuses on how white patriarchal society desires and lusts after black males, but ultimately wants to destroy them, especially when they embrace this image of the white masculine patriarchy. In order to break free, according to hooks, black males need to “radicalize their consciousness” and recognize the damage done not only to their physical bodies and mental states, but also their emotional psyches (*We Real Cool* xiv). In refusing to let go of masculine patriarchy, they cannot embrace intimacy and remain tied to notions of power focused on white dominant heteronormative forms of abuse.

Paula M. L. Moya and Hazel Markus argue that race has “social, historical, and philosophical processes” that become “*actions* that people *do*” (4). Moya and Markus’s configuration grounds individuals and communities through a network that relies on cultural, political, and economic interactions for formation. It is not about personal intention or identity, but what place an individual is expected to occupy in the larger community and communities with which they come in contact. Actions may enhance or elevate socio-cultural tradition, but they can also, just as easily, legitimate oppression of certain groups or individuals. In *Zone One*, Mark Spitz’s expectation of mediocrity reveals the expectations of a society that is threatened by this presence as a black man, and his inability to extricate his identity from society’s expectations of him as an object of lust and hatred. His identity becomes radicalized in the post-apocalyptic landscape. The traits that kept him “caged” in a masculine patriarchal society free him once 95 percent of the population is decimated (hooks, *We Real Cool* xii).

Mark Spitz's self-identity in the post-apocalypse is a counter-discourse to a post-9/11 militarized and hostile law enforcement system that does not love black males and views them as terrorists, demons, and skells.<sup>98</sup> Until the plague, Mark Spitz has held his breath. His nickname is a veil that does more than hide the color of his skin; the drawn out anecdote is a commentary on how US society consumes black males.<sup>99</sup> The specter of racism plays out not in communal action or ideological thought, but in Mark Spitz's ability to activate pre-apocalypse learned survival skills in order to live another day in the post-apocalypse.

#### *Militarization, or What's Love Got to Do With It*

In Michael Omi and Howard Winant's thesis of "*rearticulation* of racial ideology," they suggest that reconstruction and Civil Rights era activism "challenge[d] pre-existing racial ideologies," and federal policies were put in place to "absorb ... and insulat[e]" these demands (84). The policies are not "crucial to the operation of racial order," but merely

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<sup>98</sup>"Skell: In New York: a homeless person or derelict, *esp.* one who sleeps in the subway system" (*OED* online). On George De Stefano's Facebook page, he reposted a status from "Dale Corvino: '... Too many [NYPD officers] are suburban, aggrieved, white ethnics who look down on ALL people of color as 'skells.' That's their term; they say it when they'd like to use another'" (qtd. in De Stefano). The use of a term like skell imbues suspects with animal-like qualities. After Wilson fired his first shot at Brown, he noted that "[Brown] looked up at me and had the most intense aggressive face .... it looks like a demon" (State of Missouri 224-225). Wilson dehumanizes Brown to an "it" and uses the most basic racial stereotypes, ignoring how Brown might present once shot.

<sup>99</sup>By and large, zombie narratives, including the graphic novel series *The Walking Dead* (2003-present) and Max Brooks's *World War Z* (2006), have white male heroes and leaders. In the dystopian young adult novel *The Hunger Games* (2008), readers ignored the description of the tribute Rue as having "dark brown skin and eyes" (Collins 45). When fourteen-year-old Amandla Stenberg was cast as Rue for the film adaptation, white youths' tweets stated that Rue could not be black because they cried at her death. A particularly vitriolic tweet called Stenberg: "A FREAKIN BLACK BITCH" (qtd. in Stewart).

placate the masses—whether radical or conservative—who demand change (81). Policies give legislators, policy makers, and law enforcement time to re-establish control. They may also offer people of color more protection or provide more opportunity, but, as Michelle Alexander argues, “new extraordinarily comprehensive systems of racial control,” like the prison industrial complex, emerge to counteract any forward movement (231). Without a commitment to change the ideology that makes prejudice a productive form of control, the only option for the dominant power is to find new ways to suppress those already oppressed. M. Alexander views the twenty-first century prison industrial complex as a “new caste system” that disproportionately incarcerates people of color, marginalizing and decimating communities (211).<sup>100</sup> Through unofficial policies and biased laws, “black and brown men [are labeled] as criminals early,” normalizing a discourse that equates black men as immoral, dishonest, and dangerous (216).<sup>101</sup>

This criminalization is complicated through articulations formed during the abolition movement and continued throughout the Civil Rights movement. M. Alexander points out, “racial justice advocates have gone to great lengths to identify black people who defy racial stereotypes ... [to] evoke sympathy among whites” (215). After the 1960s, civil rights advocacy moved from “grassroots organizing and the strategic mobilization of public opinion” to a “centrality of litigation to racial justice struggles” (213). This “professionalization” of civil rights advocacy “disconnected [groups like the NAACP] from the communities they claimed to represent” (213). Especially after 9/11,

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<sup>100</sup>See also Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton’s *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*.

<sup>101</sup>See also David Harris’s *Profiles in Injustice: Why Racial Profiling Cannot Work* for an overview of racial profiling studies and how police officers are discriminatory in their profiling practices.

the white gaze continues to dominate views of race and racial profiling, but as M. Alexander is arguing, instead of mobilizing grassroots support, civil rights activists look toward the judicial system and then find themselves caught in a web of confusion when a victim has or is perceived to have a “less than flawless background” (215).

In August 2014, videotape showed NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo administering an illegal chokehold to Eric Garner. Pantaleo’s arms are wrapped around the forty-three-year-old asthmatic’s neck, four other officers hold him down, and Garner can be heard stating: “I can’t breathe.” The cellphone video was not enough to indict the NYPD officer for a hold that had been banned since 1993.<sup>102</sup> NYPD officers viewed Garner as a troublemaker who refused to listen to them; in other words, he resisted arrest even though he never touched them and his protests were verbal.<sup>103</sup> Though Garner could not literally breathe in that moment, figuratively, he had been holding his breath for decades. Since the grand jury hearing, Garner’s last words—said eleven times—have become a ubiquitous hash tag on social media sites and an oft-repeated chant at protests around the

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<sup>102</sup>The NYPD banned chokeholds in 1985. The policy’s only “exception was when an officer’s life was in danger and the chokehold was the ‘least dangerous alternative method of restraint’” (Fisher). That exception was removed in 1993 after “concern about the rising number of deaths in police custody ... [in the previous] eight years, including that of Federico Pereira, a 21-year-old Queens man who in 1991 died of what the medical examiners called ‘traumatic asphyxia.’” (Fisher). No officer was charged in Pereira’s murder.

<sup>103</sup>NYPD Police Commissioner Bratton argued that charging those who resisted arrest with “a felony would be ... helpful .... We need to get around this idea that you can resist arrest. You can’t” (qtd. in Bredderman). This stance ignores suspects who show up at a precinct with bruises or wind up in the hospital. According to the Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) records, almost forty percent of the NYPD’s 35,000 officers have never had a complaint lodged against them, but approximately 1,000 have had ten or more complaints with one officer “rack[ing] up 51” (Lewis and Veltman). CCRB chairperson Richard Emery suggests, “some complaints do not have a basis ... but ... many people who could complain legitimately don’t” (qtd. in Lewis and Veltman).

globe.<sup>104</sup> *I can't breathe* has emerged as the verbal embodiment of the most recent incarnation of a caste system that consumes black men through militarized law enforcement and mass incarceration and the hypocrisy of the US's stance on human right violations in other countries.<sup>105</sup>

Kimberlé Crenshaw points out, if “we are a nation of laws .... [we must remember that] some of the worst racist tragedies in history have been perfectly legal. We've been ... able to use these processes to create kangaroo courts, legal lynchings” (qtd. in McDonough).<sup>106</sup> The rule of law to which Crenshaw alludes is one that marginalizes some in order to elevate others. She contextualizes the legacy of slavery and the violence against blacks during reconstruction and the Civil Rights movement alongside post-9/11 policies that target black men and boys. Like M. Alexander,

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<sup>104</sup>According to *The Yale Book of Quotations* editor Fred Shapiro, “I can't breathe” was 2014's quote of the year. He suggested: “‘I can't breathe’ wouldn't be an ephemeral slogan, but rather a phrase with real and lasting impact” (qtd. in Izadi). The backlash to this phrase included an Indiana police officer who made t-shirts with the slogan: “Breathe Easy: Don't Break the Law” (Golgowski). The parody has come under fire. South Bend District Council President Oliver Davis stated: “We believe that people should be able to breathe easy no matter what they're doing. Police should not take the right to breathe into their own hands” (qtd. in Golgowski).

<sup>105</sup>See Carimah Townes and Dylan Petrohilos's “Who Police Killed in 2014” for an unofficial and partial listing of people of color who died at the hands of police officers in 2014. For example, in Cleveland, Ohio 26-year-old officer Timothy Loehmann, who “had been deemed unfit for duty at a previous police department and was in the process of being fired when he resigned,” shot twelve-year-old Tamir Rice (Mai-Duc). See also “Irony of America's Finger-Pointing at China”; “#DeconstructingFerguson and Lessons for Black South Africa in Black America”; and Paula Mejia's “Ferguson, Eric Garner Protests Spread Worldwide” for examples of global conversations regarding the grand jury hearings in Ferguson, MO and Staten Island, NY.

<sup>106</sup>In “Firearm Deaths by Law Enforcement,” James R. Gill, M.D. and Melissa Pasquale-Styles, M.D. detail the use of deadly force by NYPD from 2003-2007 and note that gun shot wounds caused “42 homicides ... inflicted by law enforcement in New York City” (186). Twenty-six of these victims were black (186). See also Sarah Ryley, Nolan Hicks, Thomas Tracy, John Marzulli, and Dareh Gregorian's “In 179 Fatalities Involving On-Duty NYPD Cops in 15 Years, Only 3 Cases Led to Indictments—and Just 1 Conviction.”

Crenshaw views the legal disparity as a racist construct that purposefully creates division through a common sense approach to rule of law.<sup>107</sup> Protests after the murders of Eric Garner and Michael Brown serve as a counter-discourse to the stereotyping and targeting of black men, but the distorted narrative led by law enforcement and state government is not enough to deny the damage that mass incarceration or a militarized police force wreaks on communities, especially people of color.<sup>108</sup> M. Alexander states, “civil rights protests were frequently depicted as criminal rather than political in nature” (41). After police officers were not indicted in either Garner’s and Michael Brown’s murders, the protests that followed were manipulated by law enforcement, local government, the judicial system, and the media to highlight differences of and create division within local, state, and national constituencies. If there is injustice in meting out justice, there is also injustice in who is allowed to express outrage at systemic abuses—those who are feared—or, to use hooks configuration: not loved—are silenced, ignored, discredited, and debased.

M. Alexander argues, “each new system of control may seem sudden, but history shows that the seeds are planted long before each new institution begins to grow” (22). US law enforcement’s desire for control and authority over local populations and communities mirrors the US armed forces’ actions in the Middle East. As Cynthia Enloe

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<sup>107</sup>David Harvey takes his meaning of consent from Antonio Gramsci’s definition of common sense as “the sense held in common” (*Brief History* 39) According to Harvey, this “common sense is constructed out of longstanding practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions. ... [It] can ... be profoundly misleading, obfuscating, or disguising real problems under cultural prejudices” (*Brief History* 39). In other words, rule of law can be shaped by a disingenuous common sense based upon racist ideas and prejudicial concerns.

<sup>108</sup>After 100 days of peaceful protest, Ferguson officials waited until 8:00pm CST to announce a decision they knew by 2:00pm CST. See Anne Steele’s “Why Did Ferguson Officials Wait Until Dark to Announce the Decision?”

points out, “globaliz[ing] militarization” is “taken not in the name of international security but in the pursuit of *national* security,” and the US government’s willful disregard for the UN Security Council’s ruling regarding Iraq reveals how the US deals with people of color outside its nation’s borders (39).<sup>109</sup> Any disavowal of international protocol reverberates within the nation’s borders. US law enforcement takes the military’s equipment, embraces aggressive policing strategies, and shows the same disregard for black lives that guards or interrogators have for prisoners at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib.<sup>110</sup> Even with photographic or video proof of the dehumanizing event(s), guards and police officers are often not indicted.<sup>111</sup> Soldiers and police are not trained to see a person on the ground or on a chain; there are only thugs, demons, or terrorists refusing to acquiesce to rule of law.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>In 2003, the US entered Iraq without the permission of the United Nations (UN) Security Council. According to then UN secretary general Kofi Annan, “I have indicated [the Iraq invasion] was not in conformity with the UN charter. From our point of view and from the charter point of view it was illegal” (qtd. in MacAskill and Borger).

<sup>110</sup>Seymour Hersch reveals that before the photos from Abu Ghraib were leaked, “Human Rights Watch complained to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that civilians in Iraq remained in custody month after month with no charges brought against them. Abu Ghraib had become, in effect, another Guantánamo. . . . these detentions have had enormous consequences: for the imprisoned civilian Iraqis, many of whom had nothing to do with the growing insurgency; for the integrity of the Army; and for the United States’ reputation in the world.” I would argue these photographs also became a benchmark for US law enforcement. See also Mark Danner’s *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror*.

<sup>111</sup>Eleven US soldiers did receive various sentences for the abuses at Abu Ghraib through military courts. But as the more recent news about interrogation techniques has indicated, these convictions did not curtail the torture of prisoners in other venues.

<sup>112</sup>In addition to the video of Eric Garner’s homicide, there are other videos, including one taken of the murder of 12-year-old Tamir Rice. Lynching photographs taken in the early twentieth century and the images taken at Abu Ghraib in the twenty-first century also capture horrific incidents of abuse directed at black and brown males. The difference lies in who captures the images and for what purpose they are taken. Those of Garner, King, and Rice are to gather evidence and offer proof; the other images revel in the abuse meted out. Most recently, video taken by witnesses at the beating and unlawful arrest of



In testimony before the US Senate's Subcommittee On The Constitution, Deputy Chief Operating Officer for Public Safety in DeKalb County, Georgia, Cedric Alexander stated: "Militarization of police has become a growing concern and interest ... [with the rise of] the use of tactical equipment and gear to combat everyday crimes."<sup>113</sup> Radley Balko argues it has become normal for "police departments across the country [to] sport armored personnel carriers, [helicopters, tanks, and Humvees] designed for use on a battlefield" (xii).<sup>114</sup> These military grade vehicles and equipment suggest a shift in the mission of law enforcement from protecting the public to policing certain factions of the nation's citizenry.

According to C. Alexander, this shift perpetuates a "lack of trust and understanding of law enforcement by communities of color" and the "pervasive belief (right or wrong) that the lives of minorities are of less value than that of their counterparts." "[T]raining, community policing, and technology to ensure that America is secure both domestically and internationally" could counteract this perception, according

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Jonathan Daza on September 14, 2014 in Sunset Park, New York was used to dismiss charges of assault and resisting arrest brought against Daza. The video "proved that the officer who accused [Daza] couldn't have witnessed the crimes [Daza] supposedly committed" (Jaeger).

<sup>113</sup>According to ranking member of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, State Senator Claire McCaskill, in fiscal year 2014, "the Department of Homeland Security's [DOD] 1033 program[, founded during the Clinton administration in 1997] ... gives away DOD's surplus equipment, for free, to state and local law enforcement." McCaskill further notes that of the 624 Mine-Resistant, Ambush-Protected (M-RAP) vehicles given away, "at least 13 law enforcement agencies with fewer than ten full-time sworn officers received an M-RAP in the last three years." According to McCaskill's testimony, these "heavy armored vehicles [are] built to withstand roadside bombs and improvised explosive devices."

<sup>114</sup>As Jamelle Bouie states, "Image after image [in Ferguson, Missouri] shows officers clad in Kevlar vests, helmets, and camouflage, armed with pistols, shotguns, automatic rifles, and tear gas .... Ferguson police have used armored vehicles to show force and control crowds." This description recalls the images of tanks bearing down on Tiananmen Square in 1989.



to C. Alexander, but unfortunately, as the recent announcement by NYPD Commissioner Bill Bratton suggests, no such real training is imminent—at least not in New York City. The newly formed NYPD Strategic Response Group (SRG) will be “specially trained to use heavy weaponry,” and will “deal ... with events like ... [the] recent protests, or incidents like Mumbai or what just happened in Paris” (qtd. in Friedersdorf).<sup>115</sup> Bratton’s solution is to equate protesters with the murderers who attacked Paris’s *Charlie Hebdo* office. In other words, in the same way that civil rights protesters were treated as criminals, any citizens who speak up are threats to law enforcement’s authority.<sup>116</sup> The increased use of military grade equipment and weaponry by US law enforcement and the increasing numbers of people of color who are incarcerated suggest that at every stage of development, black males’ behavior is scrutinized and found wanting. They are targeted as the trouble that keeps police from maintaining tight control over a community. No matter how much they alter their attitude, physical appearance, or language to appear less threatening, black males are viewed as a danger.

In *Zone One*, Mark Spitz’s “gentle upper-middle class” status suggests that his parents are beneficiaries of the Civil Rights era (Whitehead, *Zone One* 7). At the same time, Mark Spitz’s pre-apocalypse memories suggest that there was an undercurrent of

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<sup>115</sup>Mychal Denzel Smith points out: “It doesn’t seem like special units for counterterrorism (the SRG) would offer any greater degree of harassment and violence to Arab and black communities than already exists, just more specialized and with bigger weapons.”

<sup>116</sup>When Mayor Bill de Blasio acknowledged that he has talked with his son about how to behave when in the presence of law enforcement, NYPD officers took that as an attack on their authority. At the funerals of slain officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos, NYPD officers turned their back on the mayor after union president Patrick Lynch blamed the officers’ murders on “the office of the mayor” (qtd. in Flegenheimer). No mention was made of the murderer’s shooting of his girlfriend and his numerous brushes with the law before his arrival in New York City.

some kind of “social control” (M. Alexander 223). He is the epitome of the “B” student: one who does enough work, asks the right amount of questions, and shows enough feigned interest so that no one red flags him as a problem for “detention,” makes him a target for improvement, or pushes him towards the “honor roll” (Whitehead, *Zone One* 9; 29; 29). He is not a class clown, a lothario, or a math genius; he is not a star of the football or basketball team. He has learned to be present and fade into the background simultaneously. He renders himself perfectly invisible and reveals only as much as necessary to allow those around him to feel comfortable and not name him a threat. This attitude, developed early, helped him “attain ... the level of socialization deemed appropriate for those of his age and socioeconomic milieu” (*Zone One* 9). Mark Spitz’s “almost soulful contemplation of ... instructions” causes authority figures to dismiss and/or trust him (*Zone One* 9). The adjectival phrase “almost soulful” suggests he is someone not bent on enjoying the privilege of an upper middle class environment, but a person cynically masquerading so as not to lose that status. If Mark Spitz is not loved, he learns to accept his upper middle class status as a marker of safety. He learns what his teachers, parents, friends, and co-workers want from him and strives to meet their low expectations. Mainly, he wants them to know he is “harmless” and not to be feared (*Zone One* 173). Until the apocalypse, Mark Spitz has spent his life holding his breath.

The word soulful recalls the legacy of both W.E.B. Du Bois and the Civil Rights movement. Du Bois used the word soul to humanize African Americans for a white society unwilling to believe that blacks were more than beasts of burden, but also and especially for blacks who felt used by a system that continued to threaten their wellbeing and refused to count them as equals. Having a soul turned the focus from skin color to

matters of the spirit. It suggested that there was dignity in maintaining one's humanity and humility in the face of severe degradation and dehumanization. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois states: "Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: .... How does it feel to be a problem?" (43).<sup>117</sup> Du Bois examines what being "a problem" means through his formulation of double consciousness. In order to survive, he argues a black man had to hide his true self away from the white public gaze. He remained aware of "one's self through the eyes of others, [and] measure[ed] one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (45). Sharing private thoughts and dreams could lead to humiliation or worse; danger lurked outside of the boundaries marked by white society.<sup>118</sup> Double consciousness provided safety through

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<sup>117</sup>Omi and Winant tackle this question through their examination of the purposeful "unstable equilibrium" of racial politics (80). Racial movements are designed to stabilize communities and assert basic rights of citizens. In doing so, these movements "challenge the position of blacks [and] challenge the position of whites" (84-86). White individuals would need to take responsibility or be willing to decline or restructure modes of privilege in order for real change to occur. Both Du Bois and Omi and Winant suggest that those in power do not want to take responsibility for the changes that would need to be made in order to dismantle racial ideologies and inequalities based upon socially constructed racial differences.

<sup>118</sup>See especially Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) for an examination of how the unnamed black male protagonist feels danger with every interaction with white society and comes to distrust black activists, no matter whether he resides in the South or lives in New York City.

In addition to Ellison, there are numerous other examples of African American authors who have confronted race, identity, and stereotyping of the black male in their art. A few of the more well-known novels include Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Another Country* (1962), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1998), Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001) and Everett and James Kincaid's *A History of the African-American People (proposed) by Strom Thurmond, as told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid* (2004). Dramas include Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958), LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman and The Slave* (1964), Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play* (1981), George Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* (1986), August Wilson's trilogy *Fences* (1985), *Joe Turners Come and Gone* (1986), and *The Piano Lesson* (1987), and Suzan-Lori Parks'

one's spiritual contemplation and connection with the soul, even if there was no assurance of protection for the physical body.

Mark Spitz's parents are the heirs of Du Bois's ethos. Upper middle class, they raise their son to be culturally aware through yearly excursions to New York City to see "the season's agreed-upon exhibit or good-for-you Broadway show" (Whitehead, *Zone One* 3). Their Long Island home, which they've occupied since their honeymoon, is their refuge. It is also a safety net against the dangers of the urban landscape. If Mark Spitz's "father wanted to be an astronaut when he was a kid," he accepted suburbia as the space of his most laudable explorations and accomplishments (*Zone One* 7). Their lives are a coda to Lorraine Hansberry's Younger family's move to a predominately white Chicago suburb in *Raisin in the Sun*. They have attained the American Dream of Civil Rights era laws and policies, through economic parity and the suburban landscape, but as Omi and Winant point out in their theory of "absorption and insulation," strides forward are meant to obfuscate a re-entrenchment of the state (81).

"[H]oldouts in the digital age of multiplicity," Mark Spitz's parents reject cellphones, digital cameras, and flat screen televisions and embrace home renovation projects and each other (Whitehead, *Zone One* 3). They accept the limitations of half measures and turn to each other rather than the larger world. They even use their adult son's return as an excuse to "retreat" in middle age to "their old honeymoon nest after dinner," and leave the living room "with its high-definition enhancements and twin leather recliners equipped with beverage holsters" in his hands (*Zone One* 69). On "Last

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*Topdog/Underdog* (2002). In addition to poets such as Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Kevin Young, Cornelius Eady's *Brutal Imagination* (2001) is one of the most powerful poetry collections regarding the damage that stereotyping and racial profiling of black males do in the contemporary landscape.

Night,” when Mark Spitz returns from Atlantic City, he finds them in their bedroom (*Zone One* 71). His mother who “had been feeling not so red hot” before he left, was “gnawing away in ecstatic fervor on a flap of ‘his father’s] intestine” (*Zone One* 70). The couple’s last encounter is a grotesque reminder of when he walked in on them as a child and his mother was “giving his father a blow job” (*Zone One* 70). Their son’s memory reduces their familial connection to a non-procreative sex act, an irony given how those born after the height of the Civil Rights movement, in what Nelson George names the “post-soul era,” feel about those who came of age during it (2).

George argues that the next generation of African Americans “display multiple personalities” and take into consideration “style,” “aesthetics,” and “cash money” since “[e]conomics is ... a part of the framework” (2). Those of the post-soul world judge those who came of age during “the soul world” as “anachronistic” and “technologically primitive” (7).<sup>119</sup> Mark Spitz reveals the split between his parents’ ethos and his through his understanding of their rejection of technology and endless need to renovate as a desire to “outwit death” (Whitehead *Zone One* 69). He does not agree with their actions, yet he benefits from them and even acquiesces to his parents’ desires rather than assert his own.

Mark Spitz’s “soulful contemplation” is one that is grounded in the surety of his parents’ suburban home and their renovation projects. His striving is not towards a stable home life with a devoted partner, but towards invisibility (*Zone One* 9). If he is free from “the shoals of responsibility,” he has no real career ambitions, only what he has been told

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<sup>119</sup>Daniel White Hodge offers further contextualization to George’s argument by suggesting “the Civil Rights generation tends to see the post-soul person as immoral, disrespectful, irreverent, and ‘secular.’ The post-soul person tends to view the Civil Rights generation person as old school, out of touch, hierarchical, and extremely judgmental” (62).

to do in order to look as though he has succeeded in the larger world (*Zone One* 7). He chooses a mid-level dead-end job and if anyone, pre-apocalypse, asks him what “his plans” for the future are, he tells them “lawyering” (*Zone One* 7). He hopes for “a sweet internship from one of the globe-strangling midtown firms,” but his attitude and his plans are steeped in the world of post-soul multiplicity that allows material goods to take the place of real agency or choice (*Zone One* 131). He skates the surface of life, craving something to make him feel worthy “walking down the New York streets,” but “its untold snares and machinations—intimidated” and “scared” him (*Zone One* 131). The New York of his childhood dreams is a monster that only welcomes him when the entire population is rendered physically and mentally monstrous, not merely ideologically ruinous.

When he moves back home after college, he is sent to the converted basement “rec room,” since his old room had been turned into “his mother’s home office” during one of the parents’ endless renovations (*Zone One* 68). This renovation is the only one that suggests Mark Spitz’s parents expected their son to move on, but he is incapable. If he rebels against his parents’ striving attitude or a world that expects him to make and spend money without regard for how it feels or what he does, his apathy is his rebellion to all of it. Mark Spitz recognizes there is no meritocracy, only use. He has learned from his parents’ endless renovations and their willingness to allow him to move home not how to “outwit [the] death” of old age, but how to stay out of trouble with authority, which in the post-9/11 world could be the same as “an attempt to outwit death” or a desire to stay alive (*Zone One* 69). Mark Spitz is stuck in the “in-between,” not of a

colonialist and post-colonialist world, but a Civil Rights era discourse and a post-9/11 global and glocal militarized landscape (Bhabha 64).

Du Bois's ethos of soulfulness and double consciousness become a twisted lesson in visibility and success when viewed through the post-soul lens of "multiple personalities" and "goin'-for-mine materialism" alongside the lenses of the prison industrial complex and militarized law enforcement (George 1-2). Mark Spitz embodies the split between past and present through his desire "to live in New York," inhabiting a lifestyle similar to his uncle's, in a "city gadget, something well-stocked and white-walled, equipped with rotating bosomy beauties" (Whitehead, *Zone One* 3; 7). At the same time, he does not live in a New York skyscraper, and is, ostensibly, hiding out in his parents' basement. He is "scratching at his law-exam-prep notebooks at night in the rec room," but has no real plan to leave his dead end job (*Zone One* 151). Mark Spitz may be a part of the post-soul generation, but he is failing at the "goin'-for-mine materialism" that marks upwardly mobile African American twenty-something-year-olds (George 2). Instead, he is caught up in monotonous tasks that elicit no real pleasure or pain for him or others. When he meets the new incarnation of his parents in their love nest, Mark Spitz is finally able to make a decision and let go of his inability to act out of his own need or desire.

Once Mark Spitz recognizes that his parents are not some aberration, but part of a worldwide pandemic that has passed him by, he views the plague as his chance to wake up. Soren Forsberg suggests that those left with their brains intact in *Zone One* are "either ... freedom fighter[s], or ... fast food on the verge of being served" (131). The skels that emerge out of the pandemic are the ultimate consumers and without brain matter or

necessities except food; they are reduced to being pure consumers of flesh. They exhibit no discrimination in their consumptive choices. They do not see skin pigment or bank account or youth as a marker of privilege or oppression; they only want to consume. Those who remain living have no choice but to run from them. Mark Spitz's change of mind has something to do with necessity, but it also has to do with the fact that he no longer needs to be in denial about who is chasing him. He can do something about his existence even if that existence may only last for the next five minutes. Mark Spitz becomes optimistic about his future for the first time in his life because he feels his present. He is awake to the life that he has and no one is in denial about what is happening to him because it is happening to everyone who is not infected, i.e., the rest of the still living human population.

If the skels make up ninety-five percent of what was the human global population, Mark Spitz's pre-apocalypse routine mirrors the one percent of the undead who are not insatiable consumers—the stragglers. These undead are viewed as “mistakes” because they have not “converted ... into the perfect vehicle for spreading copies of (themselves)” (Whitehead, *Zone One* 49). The skels' brains and memories of acculturation have been melted to remember only the action of consummation, but the stragglers do not consume and are trapped in “an interminable loop of repeated gestures” that becomes enshrined as their “discrete and eternal moment” (*Zone One* 49). They “do not move,” which makes them easy to kill (*Zone One* 49). There is no hierarchy to the mundane tasks they perform: the psychiatrist with her “feet up on the ottoman ... waiting for the patient who was late” to the “brain-wiped wretch standing at the fry station” all exhibit the same attention to this, their last moment. Their repetition suggests the horrors of daily



routine—acts done unconsciously. The stragglers’ tautology also suggest that if they could skip to the next moment, they might unwind the damage done to their brains (*Zone One* 49).

Mark Spitz and his fellow citizen sweepers are relegated to taking down these immobile stragglers. Until the apocalypse Mark Spitz has spent his life as “a ghost. A straggler” (*Zone One* 155). He makes himself into what others expect of him and tries to remain invisible to those who would chase him down. In the post-apocalypse, each day, with no breaks for the weekend, he kills a little bit more of what he was. Mark Spitz’s life was the groove in a skipped record. If he were a straggler, he might return to the moment where he sits on the sofa staring at “the striving high-rises” and “tar-paper pates of tenements” from his Uncle Lloyd’s apartment on Lafayette while watching horror movies on the wide-screen television (*Zone One* 5). As an adult though, he and Kyle are the stragglers of life. When “Last Night” arrives, they are hitting the tables and the slot machines at Atlantic City, as they always do for a break—for fun, because they do not know what else to do with themselves (*Zone One* 71). They are automatons caught in the rinse cycle. They choose the neon and florescent of the casino, the repetitive shuffle at the card table, the metallic song of the slot machine—gambling, gambling, smoking, and more gambling with drinks and food brought to their tables in order to avoid feeling like their lives are meaningless. They miss the most important night of their lives and instead focus on the mundane, repetitive, and dark atmosphere of the casino. They literally miss the fact that their lives are changing in order to make small change at the casino. The virus is Mark Spitz’s push out of the groove of the skipped record of a post-9/11

militarized zone and onto the refrain of life in the post-apocalypse where everyone is being chased and marked for death.

If his parents' are the coda to Hansberry's Walter and Ruth Younger, Mark Spitz is the post-soul answer to the unnamed protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. His parents engage in non-procreative acts, but in the pre-apocalypse world, Mark Spitz maintains an impotent attitude and his inability to break with a mundane routine expresses his fear of ambition and striving for more or something different than what has been carved out for him. Like the unnamed narrator of *Invisible Man*, Mark Spitz is reborn when he gives up his birth name. The difference is the protagonist of *Invisible Man* purposefully withdraws to the basement to discover his identity without the pressure of society—both black and white. Mark Spitz retreats to hide from himself and his desires and “the gents in the black van parked a discreet distance across the street” from school who gave him a “hearty thumbs-up” (*Zone One* 9). Only the plague helps him to break free him from his routine and the basement.

Before the apocalypse, Mark Spitz was not responsible to himself, but his “soulful contemplation” neutralized authority figures, including his parents, potential love interests, and the police, who could deem him a threat, a demon, or a thug (*Zone One* 9). Although this stare is no guarantee to his safety, before the apocalypse he subsists without being a bother, without actually asking for anything from anyone. His “aptitude” and “expertise” were laid in “gathering himself for what it took to progress past life’s next random obstacle” (*Zone One* 10). It takes effort to figure out how to avoid becoming a target. Mark Spitz is not lazy or unintelligent. He uses the “soulful contemplation” of a pre-Civil Rights era veil to avoid, as best he can, any dangerous confrontations with

authority, which includes a militarized police force (*Zone One* 9). What this costs him is his authentic self. The basement, the dead-end job, the casino jaunts to Atlantic City reveal Mark Spitz's incapacity for connection and his fear of not being enough. His parents' basement is a security net that allows him to wallow in mediocrity without sensing danger.

In the post-apocalypse, he must take care of himself if he wants to live. He abandons any pretense in believing in souls or having faith in a higher power to save him or anyone else. There is no such thing as humility or dignity when ninety-five percent of the population wants only to take a bite of living human flesh. His motto—"Hope is a gateway drug, don't do it"—keeps him in the present and away from thoughts about the "future," which he believes could signal his demise (*Zone One* 179; 26). Wanting, striving, and believing in meritocracy or privilege become pointless ideas when any thought about the past—a return to the past routines in the present—marks those around him for death. In emerging from his underworld in the basement of his childhood suburban home, he embraces his mediocrity as success. He no longer needs to want material objects or pretend that no one has profiled him. Ironically, that is what finally allows him to thrive in New York City. This iteration of New York City is more itself with the endless skulls consuming everything in their wake. But the skulls' inability to curb their consumptive habits also makes the city unrecognizable since that consumption must be managed if the city is to survive and thrive.

On the day Mark Spitz receives his new name, it is as if he is reborn, not in the waters under the viaduct, but in standing his ground against the onslaught of the undead. He admits he is not afraid of the "water" because he knew "his dependable comrades"

would help him (*Zone One* 147). The boy who could not make a decision before the plague, suddenly becomes a man of action. “[H]e leaped to the hood of the late-model neo-station wagon and started firing” because he believed “[h]e could not die” (*Zone One* 147-148). Mark Spitz views the world as ruined, but sees in that devastation his chance to live, to finally be a part of something other than the margins.

This was his world now, in all its sublime crumminess, where intellect and ingenuity and talent were as equally meaningless as stubbornness, cowardice, and stupidity. ... Only in the middle was their safety.

He was a mediocre man. He had led a mediocre life exceptional only in the magnitude of its unexceptionality. Now the world was mediocre, rendering him perfect. He asked himself: How can I die? I was always like this. Now I am more me. He had the ammo. He took them all down. (*Zone One* 148)

Mark Spitz has been groomed for this moment since he was a child. The world has made him perfect to hunt down the undead and win because they cannot see him. He becomes the solution. His ability to adapt to any situation and wait, patiently for the wind to change makes him the ultimate killing machine. His invisibility is based upon his ability to understand their single-minded need to consume every living person in their sphere. These undead, like those who would target black men and boys, exhibit no discretion. In recognizing that the only thing that matters is the ability to survive, Mark Spitz has found his true calling. He has been a survivor—now he can actively pursue his life. He no longer needs to be in denial of his desire to live. He can breathe.

Once the world no longer finds him threatening and those that consume are seen for the threat they are, Mark Spitz emerges as the self he always wanted to be. Like Zulieka in *The Emperor's Babe* learns about the madness of power in the arena, Mark Spitz acknowledges that life is a precarious chance that must be embraced. He learns he is an expert marksman. He should not be able to kill all the skels that he does, and yet, in his mediocrity, his need for invisibility and riding the margins, he has become an excellent shot. Others might find his “knack for last-minute escapes and improbable getaways ... an insult,” but Mark Spitz no longer cares what anyone thinks of him or how he lives his life (*Zone One* 26). His namesake, an Olympian swimmer who won seven gold medals at the Munich games, trained for excellence in the swimming pool. Mark Spitz, the citizen sweeper of downtown Manhattan, has been in training his entire life to disappear and subsequently surprise any and all attackers.

After “Last Night”—the night his parents’ “honeymoon nest” becomes their tomb—Mark Spitz finds his purpose (*Zone One* 71; 69). He understands he must fight back. There is no more ironic or deceptive “soulful contemplation” (*Zone One* 9); now there is only action. His sense of worth emerges in his ability to defend himself, even if he is only alive for another five minutes. Mark Spitz is optimistic, but refuses his cohorts’ nostalgic optimism that shapes how they view their future—a future they envision as nothing more than a return to the past’s order and civil discourse. He does not want to return to that “containment” (hooks, *We Real Cool* xii). He feels alive, no longer worried what people think of him or how they perceive his every action. Mark Spitz views emotion, particularly those emotions which hook into a futurity as hopeless expressions. Before he apocalypse he eschews emotion and wears the armor of patriarchal masculinity

rather than risk being vulnerable. In the post-apocalypse, he views emotion as a dangerous entity that could get a person killed.

If emotion creates a situation of vulnerability, accepts that shift in his relationships with women in the post-apocalypse. When out on the “wastes” of Connecticut, he encounters Miriam “Mim” Cohen Levy, a suburban housewife and mother of two, at a big box toy store (Whitehead, *Zone One* 169). Mark Spitz views the months he spends with her as “the healthiest relationship he ever had, and not because they had a lot in common, such as the need for food, water, and fire” (*Zone One* 194). There is nothing else to distract him from this relationship—they are alone in a toy store, trying to survive. He no longer has to hide who he is and can embrace their forays into domesticity and safety. His time with Mim forces him to contemplate how he made his former girlfriends into objects or “something less than human” (*Zone One* 194). He “radicalizes [his] consciousness” by uncoupling from what hooks argues is a damaging “patriarchal masculinity” that “endangers black male life” (*We Real Cool* xiv). When any of his pre-apocalypse girlfriends expressed an emotion or made a “lachrymose display,” he felt “they had been replaced by this familiar abomination, this thing that shared the same face, same voice, same familiar mannerisms that had once comforted him” (*Zone One* 194). In the post-apocalypse, he tempers how he judges women. His approach continues to be cautious, but the women he encounters, including Mim, are strong, resilient characters who teach him how to survive. In the case of Mim, he recognizes that she “did not change,” but it might “have happened to her in time” if he could not continue to view her as a fully developed person (*Zone One* 195).

In the post-apocalypse, he has arrived, as Fanon states, at the place where he is “fully what [he is]. [He does] not have to look for the universal. There’s no room for probability inside [him]. [His] black consciousness does not claim to be a loss. It *is*. It merges with itself” (114). He is no longer afraid of who is he or how that self is perceived. He is free. With Mim, he embraces a relationship based upon a moment-by-moment narrative that does not harp on past actions or look towards a future. When she disappears, he searches for her, but soon recognizes she is lost. He has no time to mourn, but she is the only one in the post-apocalypse that he chooses to keep close in his memory of the past in the post-apocalypse.

After his time with Mim, but before he came in from the “wastes” and worked on Connecticut’s I-95 and his entrance into New York City life in the post-apocalypse, he spent three days in a farmhouse in Northampton, Massachusetts with Jerry, a local real estate broker, Margie, a pickle salesperson, and Tad, a scriptwriter of “interstitial narrative sequences for a video-game company that specialized in first-person shooters” (*Zone One* 169; 175). The setting is a pastoral ideal, and for a moment Mark Spitz gives in to the notion that he could ride out the apocalypse with this curry-eating trio. When he first meets them, Margie recognizes that Mark Spitz “is harmless” (*Zone One* 173). This harmlessness has to do with the “soulful contemplation” that disarms everyone who knows him, a valuable trait when running from skels and searching for a night’s respite (*Zone One* 9).

But Mark Spitz is thrown off the track as to Margie’s mental state. She is the reason he is with them when the skels overrun the farm rather than outside served up as the appetizer, but she also causes the skels to breach the farmhouse. When Mark Spitz

recognizes that things will go as they have gone each time before—the skels will overrun them—he wants “to save [her] if possible,” in spite of the fact that “she wore her motocross gear for the final forty-eight hours” (*Zone One* 181; 182). He does not recognize that Margie has had a mental breakdown and the two men do not actually know how to survive beyond hiding out. When the military breaks through, only Mark Spitz knows enough to yell: “I’m alive in here! I’m alive in here!” and he is once again saved from an impossible situation (*Zone One* 185). Neither Jerry nor Margie are saved. Jerry falls to his death from the second floor of the farmhouse, but Margie’s ending is more ambiguous. Although she survives the skel onslaught, “she disappeared into the woods when the convoy took a piss break” (*Zone One* 185). Captain Childs, the woman who saves them, refuses to wait for Margie since she was “the kind that get you into trouble” (*Zone One* 185).

Once he is brought in from the “wastes,” Mark Spitz calculates that the entire “world was mad” and suffering from “PASD, or Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder” (*Zone One* 69; 54). He views the efforts of those in charge of reconstruction as the maddest of all, believing a day that will never arrive—a return to the past. Even though the power grid is non-existent and the Internet is no longer available, the attempt at law and order and civility is marketed as if social media was still available. The US is rebranded as the American Phoenix and citizens are now called “pheenies”—short for phoenix (*Zone One* 42). To avoid the reality of their PASD, they focus on the health of the Tromanhauser Triplets, the first babies supposedly born after the virus decimated the global population and they willingly turn to Buffalo, NY, “the Nile, the cradle of Reconstruction,” for local, national, and global agendas (*Zone One* 35). Those in Buffalo deem New York City as



the place where other survivors from around the globe would want to summit if only all the undead on the island could be permanently destroyed. The American Phoenix even has a new anthem—"Stop! Can You Hear the Eagle Roar? (Theme from *Reconstruction*)," designed, like the triplets to engender "localized hope" (*Zone One* 110; 42).<sup>120</sup>

Mark Spitz refuses to believe any of the reconstruction efforts. He has become awake to the life that he has and realizes each move he makes is up to him and may well be his last. His understanding of what it means to have his skin mark him a target for law enforcement, school authorities, and anyone else who doesn't love men of color leaves him flexible in the post-apocalypse. He learns to love himself in all of his pre-apocalypse mediocrity, which renders him "perfect" for the post-apocalypse world (*Zone One* 148).

#### *Night of the Living Dead redux*

In Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, the male hero Ben slaps the hysterical Barbra, as the two are trapped in an old farmhouse where the undead are breaching Ben's security measures. This scene is formulaic and tame by contemporary horror movie standards: no blood is spilled and the slap does not escalate to more brutality. Duane Jones' portrayal of the mild-mannered, yet focused Ben was the first time an African American male had been given the starring role in a horror film, and as such, his performance offers a defiant depiction of the African American male body in the late 1960s. Jones's portrayal, rooted in the rhetoric of the Civil Rights era, is a refusal of the stereotypes of the angry,

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<sup>120</sup>Song titles with parenthetical phrases have a long tradition, including Sly and the Family Stone's 1969 hit single "Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Again)," an intentional mondegreen. For an interesting list of songs with parenthetical titles, see Jolie Kerr's "169 Song Titles with Parentheticals (In Order of Parenthetical Charm)."

threatening black man and the Magical Negro, a denigratory posture that affords black characters supernatural or intuitive powers used to assist white individuals in and with their personal struggles.<sup>121</sup>

Jones's performance reveals the precarious position in which Ben, and all black men, reside during the Civil Rights era. Ben is not merely a hero preparing for the impending invasion of the undead, but also a black man trapped with a white woman. The anger that Ben evinces when Barbra slaps him is returned with a slap, but his response quickly dissipates into regret. Barbra, portrayed by Judith O'Dea, is a stereotypical blonde. She cannot fend for herself, and she is unable to remain calm. But Ben responds with concern when she faints and does not hesitate to carry her to the sofa. He is efficient and direct. Only when he leans over to unbutton her coat, does Ben hesitate. The camera's view does not allow the audience to witness Ben's face. Only his back and the movements of his arms are in focus. For a moment, the undead are not the most threatening elements to Barbra. Quickly, Ben straightens his body and walks away from Barbra to attend to security concerns. Barbra's body is limp, but she is not in any disarray; Ben has only undone her coat buttons.

In Jones's performance, Ben does everything right. Even his slap is not an overreaction given the pair's circumstance. He is responding to an already hyper-real

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<sup>121</sup>Jones states: "It never occurred to me that I was hired because I was black. But it did occur to me that because I was black it would give a different historic element to the film" (imdb.com). Jones, an English professor, was cognizant that audiences might view any type of physical aggression, even justified, as a reinforcement of the stereotype of the black man as a threat to white women. Romero thought it would be "unhip" to remove the slap. Romero's white male privilege overrode Jones's reality. Romero believed people would understand his point as director. After Jones died in 1988, Romero expressed regret that he had "not taken Jones' concerns more into consideration, and thought that [Jones] was probably correct" (imdb.com).

situation. The female is weak-willed, hysterical, and her gestures are hyper-sexualized—she does not know how to defend herself against any threat, especially the threat of the black male body. In this construction, the black male cannot overcome his primal urges and takes advantage of the white woman’s soft and sexual nature. Only Ben does not.

If Mark Spitz’s narrative is an inverse of Ralph Ellison’s protagonist in *Invisible Man*, he is also a later incarnation of Ben in *Night of the Living Dead*. Like Ben, he embraces his role as the “angel of death,” but instead of being stuck in a rural outpost, he inhabits the complex web of downtown skyscrapers, pre-war buildings, and abandoned subway tracks (*Zone One* 16). There he hunts daily with his unit members Kaitlyn and Gary, two more survivors of the global plague. Kaitlyn, Mark Spitz’s team leader when they are sweeping through the buildings in Zone One, lower Manhattan, can be thought of as an evolutionary iteration of Barbra. Self-assured, bubbly, and raised in the mid-west, Kaitlyn is proud of the fact that she had been elected to the Student Council Secretarial position, twice. This position suggests she is not an elite product or the most attractive or influential of her former sorority sisters, but like Mark Spitz, she believes this ability to do the grunt work, to carry out a task to completion makes her valuable. Unlike Mark Spitz, she never loses optimism while making tough decisions, and Mark Spitz and Gary, the third person in their sweeper team, accede to her authority at every turn, even though they are not military trained and operate as individuals within zone one. The only thing that matters is who infected and who are not.

The difference between Ben in *Night of the Living Dead* and Mark Spitz is that the primary women in Mark Spitz’s post-apocalypse life—Mim and Kaitlyn—are his teachers. Margie from the Northampton farmhouse is most like Barb character in

Romero's film, but she is only present for a short moment before Mark Spitz knows he must move on. He does not try to help her or take care of her. He does not have to watch out for her or protect her. In *Zone One*, everyone must fend for them selves. But like Kaitlyn, Mim teaches Mark Spitz how to survive, remain human, and attain his full humanity in the post-apocalypse. These women are his compatriots, and in the case of Mim, his lover. They refuse to give in to the fear of being consumed and forgotten. Even as Mark Spitz is afraid of creating a past with someone, these women offer him a way to be made new without his old fears of visibility in the pre-apocalypse. He cares about them and their wellbeing and they his. These two women do not conform to gender stereotypes; they are strong, rational individuals who teach him how to survive. In the post-apocalypse, these are the first real connections with women where he is vulnerable without being defensive. They are agents who do not turn into monstrous objects who might want to cage him in a marriage bed. At the same time, the world makes it impossible to dwell on their departures. When Mim disappears, he only takes a few days before he leaves their nest in the toy store. By the time he is separated from Kaitlyn, it is only a few hours before he must be on the move again. The world is being consumed and he cannot look back if he hopes to survive.

The conflation of the cinematic zombie narrative with the post-soul black male treats the history of African Americans not as one singular journey to freedom or equality, but a series of escapes from an ever-encroaching monstrous entity. In turning away from a singular notion of African American life, *Zone One's* narrative is a reminder that being chased and thought of only as a piece of meat is a product of a society that consumes anyone it can if given the opportunity. By obfuscating the color of Mark

Spitz's skin, the narrative is a challenge to the present day militarized police presence that profiles black males. Mark Spitz emerges as a man who thinks quickly on his feet and is not afraid of action. At the same time, he cannot escape the present moment even as it becomes the only moment since the skels "never came when you were vigilant; they came for you when you had one foot in the past, recollecting a dead notion of safety" (*Zone One* 86). The inevitability of the finite state flattens differences of race, color, and gender. Socio-political or civil rights agendas or initiatives, and juridical or social pressures mean nothing with the advent of skels who cannot discriminate except between the living and the undead. Those left alive do not have time to create discrete social boundaries or harness their social media know-how into causes or prejudices. There are no networks. There are no traditions except for the sharing of the Last Night story, how an individual came to be on the run. In one way, the narrative is a recreation of the state in which those on the African continent found themselves when they were kidnapped and enslaved. At the same time, the narrative is an examination of the state of mind of the black or brown man who feels targeted for breathing the same air as those around him.

In creating an apocalypse, *Zone One's* narrative is a rejection of the tropes of the magical Negro and the privileged white man as natural authority figure found in such narratives as Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978) or the television series *The Walking Dead*. Whitehead's narrative is a refusal of the color line even as it is an allegory for what that color line sets up in terms of marginalization and otherness. What emerges in this narrative is mediocrity as the height of perfection. Mediocrity will allow a black man to survive to fight another day. Forget Du Bois's Talented Tenth, mediocrity will enable the black male to retain some semblance of himself in the midst of a terror so large that

sometimes the only thing he can remember is when to pull the trigger. Those who survive Last Night—that moment when the world turns, are those who hold back, wait, and play the margins. Those who wish to be heroes or save the day, perish all too quickly.

Mark Spitz understands that the world's rules are arbitrary and changeable. He knows before the apocalypse that in order for him to survive, to have a life, to remain alive, he has to make himself smaller, learn to not offend or call attention to his physical presence. He recognizes that those codes are always changing. The narrative is a fragmented nightmarish landscape that refuses Mark Spitz any escape from the past that caged him and the present that is a cage for all those left with brain function. In remembering his past, Mark Spitz understands how free he is in the post-apocalypse. Every step he takes is his choice, devoid of cultural, juridical, or governmental interference. If he wants to survive, he must keep moving in the same way that the fragmented narrative is a refusal of a whole story.

Whitehead's construction of a world filled with flesh eating monsters can be viewed productively as an ironic construction of what it takes to level the field and eliminate race from the cultural equation. In order for the world to reorder itself, the past must be wiped from memory. Those who truly forget, however, become consumers of the most grotesque kind—they do not steal people's money through penny stocks or re-financing or breaking down and selling off companies, they simply and voraciously eat anything with a brain that remembers and wanders onto their paths. These skulls are the ultimate consumers and force human beings with brains to reorder their connections to the past and their ways of seeing. The narrative becomes a disjointed memory bank that allows Mark Spitz to only remember what he needs in order to take the next step. If the

skels cannot discriminate, Mark Spitz recognizes that he must fight against the encroaching and inevitable consumption. He does not want to remember a past that might cause him to stumble and be consumed.

## Finding Grace

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body.  
bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*

In the summer of 2002, my father and I walked along the Atlantic City boardwalk reminiscing about the old Steel Pier where, as a five-year-old, I'd seen Tiny Tim play his ukulele and watched as the Diving Horse dove into a 12-foot pool. As we walked closer to where the US Navy's Blue Angels were flying overhead, I interrupted my father's story about how Donald Trump—"that 'asshole'"—was turning Atlantic City into a wasteland when I noticed New Jersey police officers in full tactical gear, including bulletproof vests, hand grenades, and automatic weapons.

"Should we leave? Is something wrong?" I asked. I had moved to central New York a year before the September 11, 2001 and few changes had occurred in my daily life after 9/11.

My father shrugged and said, "no, why?" When I pointed towards the officers, he stated, "Oh yeah, maybe they're here for the Blue Angels. But, I don't know. Since the buildings went down, they all dress like this."

"All? Even on Long Island?"

"Well, I don't know. But all the cops I see wear vests," my dad answered.

I looked around. No one on the boardwalk was shocked by this militarized police force except for me—their dress and presence had become normalized in the minds of Atlantic City beach-goers and tourists, including my father, a Korean War veteran.

Ten years earlier, my arrival at the Malpensa airport in Milan, Italy caused me the same sense of culture shock. At customs, passengers were greeted by *polizia* wearing



bulletproof vests, carrying Uzi automatic weapons, and walking with German Shepard dogs that looked as if I could have been their morning snack. I was terrified and thought something was happening, *had* happened, but I was wrong. The military presence was normal procedure. I was a protected American who did not understand the hazards of air travel or terrorism. By 2002, the US was beginning to catch up with European modes of militarized law enforcement.

What I recognize in this narrative is my pragmatism, ability, *and* desire to be an active witness—a state of being Lorde deems necessary for self-revelation and transformation. The guns on the Atlantic City boardwalk and in the Milan airport were not an abstract connection, but, to me at least, real threats. I am not fearful of a police state although a militarized global police presence is real. My father, the Atlantic City tourists, and the air travelers to Milan more than twenty years ago have accepted this shift in law enforcement as part of the life of a global citizen. I am more resistant. Parsing the reasons why militarizing law enforcement is detrimental to everyone, not just people of color. How this presence is not merely a mirror to European law enforcement, but more about the US's military presence around the globe.

I think about my father's ease on the boardwalk that day. The way he was happy I wanted to reminiscence about my childhood. How that nostalgic imaginary is more real to him in some ways than the present moment. How he pursed his lips when he said the phrase: "when the buildings came down," and how the day after the event, when I checked in on them, he had revealed to me, "I don't like to think what he's gonna do." "He," in my father's language, was the president of the US. My father told me that morning of September 12, 2001 that he regretted voting for him and that he would have

cast his vote differently if he knew what was going to occur. My father is a war veteran and does not trust those who have not been to war. My father is a war veteran who never saw combat and does not trust those who inscribe heroism to every day events. My father is a war veteran who feels he owes his life to the man who became a jumper allowing my father to take his place in Germany during the Korean War.

I use my father as an example of how a dominant imaginary attributed to a homogenizing Western discourse cannot tell the entire story of an ethnic group, a gender, a nation-state, or—in the twenty-first century—a global city. I occupy the space next to him in this memory as both witness and subject. “Permeable Boundaries: Globalizing Form in Contemporary American and British Literature” is about the ways in which narrative making emerges from agency. The literatures I read are not symbols, but examples of the productive ways in which literary scholars might turn away from Western discourse as the center when examining narratives that are written and produced in that center, but do not privilege it. In the same way I read literary texts I also read the text of my father’s and my lives. In the preface to *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks defines how black Americans in Kentucky are marginalized, not as part of a periphery far from the center, but one that lives within and alongside the center. hooks states:

We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminds us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. (*Feminist Theory* ix)

In understanding, if not inhabiting, the positions of outside and inside, or center and margin, hooks has developed a “willingness to explore all possibilities” (*Feminist Theory* x). This knowledge base allows a more expansive view of what the margin looks like, and how individuals and communities housed on the outside of a dominant imaginary self-identity and behave. Like hooks, I see the margins not only outside of Western discourse, but also within. It could be hooks’ rural Kentucky community, Aldersgate’s tenements in Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe*, or my family’s home in Queens. What each of these spaces has in common are individuals whose agency contributes to their narrative making, both individually and communally.

The globalizing form of this project is about moving purposefully away from the economic processes of cultural globalization although I chose to focus on narratives that take place in the only two global cities that have received GaWC’s Alpha++ for production services and global integration. The cultural processes of cultural globalization, a tautology that seems perfectly nonsensical to return to discussions of economics, offer a way to view how those within the margins of the center are still part of the periphery. There are an infinite number of stories to tell and just as many lenses with which to understand agency and self-identity. Interdisciplinary engagement is key. For me, the feminist notion of the “personal is political” is more relevant than ever. When Spivak wrote “Can the Subaltern Speak?” she admonished scholars to pay attention to those places where they could not listen. For me, that means understanding my agency, and my place as a literary scholar and teacher. This listening also refers to Lorde’s witnessing and being able to empathize with narratives that are not familiar, looking not for the symbolic meaning, but revealing cultural processes inherent to the margin, but

influencing the center. Third wave feminist scholars like Jennifer Baumgardner, Barbara Findlen, Amy Richards, and Rebecca Walker insist upon the multiplicity of stories, connections, and histories that eschew a dominant imaginary, whether it is local or global.<sup>122</sup> R. Claire Snyder argues third wave feminists “accept the messiness of lived contradiction, and eschew a unifying agenda” (177). This notion may be frustrating for those who want a contained theoretical field, but I find the messiness useful when attempting to move away from dominant imaginaries constructed around economics in both global and local spheres. People’s lives—what I think of as narrative making—are just as messy as their offices or the marginalia in the books they read. The personal connections and experiences are also important since literature is personal. How one reads, what one reads, and when one reads are all contingent on self-identity, agency, and the ways one constructs narratives.

There is another story about my father that seems appropriate. When I was that little girl who was fascinated by Tiny Tim’s ukulele playing, I went to my father’s workplace at One Chase Plaza in downtown New York. It was before the tradition of Take Your Daughter to Work Days, but my mother had just given birth to my baby sister and my father brought me with him for a reason I do not remember. We were walking hand in hand down one of the side streets returning to One Chase Plaza after lunch at a coffee shop. I wore my favorite bright red coat and pink mittens with a black knit hat. I think, but do not remember for sure, the hat had a red rose on the left side placed so that it sat directly above my eye. What I remember most that crisp November morning was the

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<sup>122</sup>See Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards’ *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*; Barbara Findlen’s *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*; and Rebecca Walker’s *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*. The

feel of my father's hand in mine—not too tight, but assuring his place by my side. He was walking on the outside, protecting me from the street traffic, but this side street did not have any cars on it. It was one of those routes carved out in the early twentieth century that gave you the feeling Manhattan had been small and close—it was not part of the gridded city, but wound between the east and west side of lower Manhattan. I loved these kinds of streets as a child because when you spilled out onto a big thoroughfare like Broadway, it always felt like a surprise, or I felt like the surprise for which everyone had been waiting to emerge.

My father was aware of my size and we didn't move too fast, but just fast enough so he wouldn't be late returning from his lunch break. I looked up, my gaze moving from him to the grey buildings that enveloped us on our trek back to his office. But then a man, a white man with gold wire-rimmed glasses in a camel hair coat and a brown fedora came barreling down the street and bumped into my father. Before my father could say anything, the man called him a “stupid nigger” and my father's hand tightened around mine. The man kept moving. My father did not respond. We kept walking, a bit faster than before. The silence of that return has stayed with me. How I have processed that event is, I am sure, much different than my father, but I do not know. We have never discussed what happened. It seems important to mention that my father is first generation Sicilian, meaning that he is the first generation to be born in the US. His skin color is the darkest of his four siblings and he has been mistaken for Indian, African American, and Native American all depending on the season. But then I think about my place at his side. Either the man did not notice me or if he did, he assumed I was black as well. And that has given me pause throughout the years—read as invisible or racially constructed as

“dumb,” dehumanized by a Western racist term denoting a person not as a person, but a beast.

In arguing for why this word is appropriate in some circumstances, Ta-Nehisi Coates argues, “‘Nigger’ is the border, the signpost that reminds us that the old crimes don’t disappear. It tells white people that, for all their guns and all their gold, there will always be places they can never go.” Coates is suggesting that black people must use the word as a revolutionary act, one that inscribes their personhood and places the lie back onto those who committed or continue to commit the crime. But my father never mentioned what had happened. He did (does not?) consider him black, but in the introduction to *Are Italians White?: How Race is Made in America*, Jennifer Guglielmo opens with a quote from Chuck Nice, an African American deejay at WAXQ-FM in New York City, regarding Italian Americans: “*Italians are niggaz with short memories*” (1). Guglielmo uses Nice’s statement, made in June 2002, to address how Italian Americans, particularly those whose ancestors are from southern Italy, have chosen to forget that their relatives’ arrival in the US was complicated not solely by economics, but also by cultural and legal racialization. Guglielmo points out that Italian immigrants “were not always white” when they arrived to Ellis Island and their demarcation as *other* continued after they made it to the mainland (1). In the twenty-first century, Nice is a reminder that Italian Americans, particularly southern Italians, and most specifically Sicilians, have always hugged the margins, or as Louise DeSalvo once said to me, “Italian Americans are still not seen as humans.”

In “Color: White/Complexion: Dark” Louise DeSalvo details how “until 1952, people not considered white were not eligible for naturalization” (“Color” 22). Her

grandmother chose to become a naturalized citizen during World War II, a time when DeSalvo suggests it was “dangerous” to be Italian (“Color” 22). DeSalvo calls her grandmother’s naturalization papers “a strange and terrible document” (“Color” 25). The document is filled with the usual markers of personhood—color, age, height, weight, hair color, but DeSalvo points out how the US legally racialized those deemed white, but not quite white enough. Next to color, there is another category for complexion, and DeSalvo is sure that her grandmother was not the one to fill it out since, according to the season, she was “Sometimes fair; sometimes dark” (“Color” 26). She is sure that a clerk filled in her grandmother’s complexion as “dark” (“Color” 25).

When a people cannot know who they are, when it is buried under layers of paperwork or silence, they cannot self-identity. Their agency becomes one of reaction against rather than a move towards something. The margin becomes a deniable entity even as they inhabit that space. They imagine the space of the center even if they cannot actually inhabit it. DeSalvo’s grandmother’s narrative is no more unique than my father’s, but in these narratives are the means to self-revelation—perhaps not for those who dealt with these legal and cultural abuses, but for those who come after and bear witness.

I am sure that my father was called a “nigger” more than once in his lifetime just as I am sure he would never admit that it has happened. But what that racialization does is place him, and me since I was the young girl walking with him, on the margins of American society even as he had a middle management banking job located on New York’s Wall Street. If gender and skin color play into how scales of privilege are set up, then it is important to recognize how even within Western discourse there are hierarchies

of meaning that are attained due to these categorizations. At the same time, Lorde refuses a hierarchy of oppression. She cannot choose between the color of her skin, her sexual orientation, or her cancer; she will not play the victim Olympics, but she will transform those narratives in order to claim agency and self-identify. If we are to unwind the ways in which we view people, and examine narratives in literary studies, I want to move away from abstract theorization that levels people to aesthetic concerns and return to pragmatic approaches to experience and the ensuing narrative making that place.

My father's silence in the face of this white man's view of him, and my witnessing—my active silence—has a lot to do with how I view agency and understand self-identity. I would like to believe that we approach literary studies from an objective place, but that is not true. We are attracted most to what we want to know about ourselves and how we believe the world works or could work. This project has caused me as much pain as joy, but it has fed my curiosity for the ways in which individuals might turn away from static, rigid, stultifying dominant narratives and embrace self-identity and agency in a time when many see globalization's processes as confining and homogenizing.

Within disciplinary divisions of the academy, scholars, researchers, and critics are stymied by the weight of the ubiquitous *posts*, including postmodernism, postcolonialism, and postfeminist, which offer a seemingly never-ending Kafka-esque journey into terms and modes of being that force contiguity with hegemonic theorizations. At times, I have felt this state of intellectual discourse as weariness deep in my bones. I attempt, however successfully or unsuccessfully in this moment, to move away from those –isms that keep literary scholarship tied to a hegemonic past and canonize the dominance of certain ubiquitous Western narratives in the present. For me, witnessing and agency is key to this



move away from the normative or dominant phrase and mode of being. I strive to discover that open space that Helene Cixous privileges where women are able to “write [themselves],” once the body’s lived experience is “heard” (880). As I acknowledge through this memory of travels with my father, developing access to that bodily memory creates a need in me to connect his story to other stories that struggle to be free of the silence of oppression.

Literary texts that are of globalization deal with this conundrum in numerous ways. The examples in this project focus on how individuals’ self-reflexivity can assist in maintaining access not only to intellectual concerns, but also body memory, expanding consciousness and creating an internal and external mobility no matter how little these individuals may actually travel. New York and London are useful global cities since they are the key sites of service provision, but the ideas in this project regarding agency and narrative making are useful to think about in terms of literary production in other global cities, whether they have received Alpha + ratings like Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Paris or Beta + ratings like Bangalore, Cairo, and Cape Town. What concerns me most is not the economic wealth or opportunity in these service provider cities, but how those with and without capital articulate agency and make meaning.

There are times when my twelve-year-old niece Sabrina cannot find words. We text each other regularly, but I can tell when school is overwhelming or she is struggling with some sense of who she is in the midst of the pressures of being an only child in a confining Italian immigrant household and as the only niece to an aunt and uncle—my brother and sister—who want her to be their child substitute. Her texts become devoid of words and she sends me strings of Emoji. The other night, as I was drafting this

conclusion she texted a string of hearts in blue, pink, and red after I sent a picture of a cute giraffe and wrote, “I love you.” I am learning her language—not dependent on others, but separate from them. I do not want to silence her. So I often respond in kind. I’ve downloaded at least five different Emoji sets and we converse until one of us says we have to move on to the next thing in our agenda.

When my family wants to make her feel guilty or do not want to do what she wants—her curiosity seems boundless, they say, “you’re just like your Aunt Nancy. Too smart for your own good.” I know the pain of that phrase “too smart”—I allowed it to diminish me for too long. I let it feed the doubt of who I was and the attempt, failed again and again, of trying to be perfect. We are, as I stated in my introduction, human beings and not human perfects. I’ve told her this, but I know right now, she cannot understand. The desire to prove them wrong or be what they want her to be is too strong in her. She wants their love too much. They are her dominant imaginary. I know convincing her otherwise is an impossible task, and so I continue to speak in Emoji when necessary and have Face Time sessions that are a combination of how to develop a writing practice, a virtual party with her stuffed animals and, of course, making fish faces. We communicate through various lens of consciousness because we can. We are not marginal figures in our lives. We are agents trying to figure out how to lead with self-identity rather than the forms of someone else’s desire or gaze.

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