RAPE CULTURE AND THE ILLUSION OF EMPOWERMENT IN CONTEMPORARY TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation interrogates myths of empowerment centered on individual choice within a global rape culture. While rape culture is increasingly a fixture in contemporary U.S. and European news, especially with the rise of social movements such as #MeToo, sexual assault and sexual violence have for many years been an abiding concern of transnational literature, literatures from former colonies and impoverished regions, and literature from developing nations. This dissertation explores instances of rape culture in novels from a range of regions including South Asia, Korea, Latin America, and Africa. In doing so, the objectives of this dissertation are threefold. First, I theorize rape culture as a ubiquitous and transnational form of violence against women in the contemporary world, which functions systematically as a condition of violence that is structural, routine, and rendered obscure by its pervasiveness in everyday life. Second, I examine the ways in which literature exposes individual sexual empowerment as a myth that obscures systemic manifestations of rape culture, leaving women open to the dangers of sexual exploitation. I draw upon recent postfeminist debates on the commodification and individualization of feminism that recognize the failures of empowerment feminism within the individuated and less socially connected modes of neoliberalism. Finally, I investigate the possibilities of transnational feminist solidarity against a global rape culture after various myths of empowerment are unmasked. Ultimately, this dissertation is concerned with the ways in which literature not only reveals empowerment as a myth, but also offers possibilities for women's

empowerment within rape culture. My research concludes that empowerment is sustained not in individualized modes, but rather on a structural level, particularly in transnational contexts.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> "Rape and colonialism are not commensurate, but they are kin. When we talk about sexual violence as feminists, we are—we have to be—talking about its use to subjugate entire peoples and cultures, the annihilation that is its empty heart. Rape is that bad because it is an ideological weapon. Rape is that bad because it is a structure: not an excess, not monstrous, but the logical conclusion of hetero-patriarchal capitalism. It is what that ugly polysyllabic euphemism for state power does."
>
> —So Mayer[1]

Rape culture is increasingly a fixture in today's U.S. and European news, especially with the rise of social movements such as #MeToo. Rape and sexual violence have, however, for many years been an abiding concern of transnational literature, literatures from former colonies, impoverished regions, and developing nations. While literature offers possibilities for women's empowerment within rape culture, it also reveals empowerment as one of the myths that leaves women open to the dangers of sexual exploitation. My purpose is to investigate these instances in which women's putative empowerment colludes with systemic violence, which I define as a condition of

[1] From "Floccinaucinihilipilification" in *Not That Bad: Dispatches From Rape Culture*

violence that is structural, routine, and rendered obscure by its pervasiveness in everyday life.[2]

This dissertation is written in the particular political context of an increasing public awareness of rape culture, an awareness exemplified by the #MeToo movement. #MeToo represents in various ways an important development in contemporary feminist activism. Its emergence on social media and its subsequent remarkable visibility are situated within the intensifying incorporation of media, especially social media, into intimate lives, the explosion of self-representation in the articulation of sexual identities, and the popularization of feminism. While the #MeToo campaign was sparked by the exposure of the experiences of white heterosexual women in the U.S., it has quickly expanded into a global platform for building feminist solidarity across lines of class, race, and sexuality with the MeToo hashtag circulating in 85 countries, even beyond the global North, including South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and Palestine.[3] More broadly, #MeToo is fundamentally concerned with the intersection of sex and power, and its concerns are framed in terms of social justice. This concern has crystallized in Harvey Weinstein's indictments in June 2018. Consent is a focal point of the #MeToo-inspired debate, surfaced by stories such as that initially reported in January 2018 on Babe.net, by an anonymous 23-year-old woman writing about being coerced by comedian Aziz

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[2] I draw on Slavoj Zizek's notion of structural violence and Gyanendra Pandey's notion of routine violence. Zizek and Pandey both claim that the pervasiveness of violence in everyday life renders it obscure, but do not explicitly address the gendering of that violence. I elaborate on both works of theory below.

[3] See *Me Too Rising* (2017).

Ansari into a sexual encounter. At the same time, notwithstanding the shift from moral panic to political engagement, many of the fundamental problems identified regarding rape culture persist in the context of #MeToo.

Although assumptions about rape culture and its ubiquity are widespread, the actual scholarship is virtually nonexistent. Our understanding of rape culture has not advanced significantly since Susan Brownmiller's classic intervention in *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975), which provided the grounds for the assumption that rape is about power rather than sex. While the term "rape culture" has been in use since at least the late 1970s, my research indicates that the definition provided by feminist scholars Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth in their 1993 anthology *Transforming a Rape Culture* is both the first and last articulation of the term, which is now in widespread use without any further development, as I will demonstrate below. In this regard, rape culture becomes a *donnée*, something that everybody assumes is so well known that nobody has given it careful consideration; it is a concept without a theory. It is both ubiquitous and common knowledge, yet at the same time under-recognized as an object of crucial inquiry.

My dissertation addresses these gaps in rape culture scholarship by theorizing rape culture as a form of structural violence that is masked through myths of sexual empowerment. I ask, is it possible to conceptualize women's empowerment as the exertion of agency through a transnational form of feminist solidarity against a precondition of an established, structural oppression? In the context of this dissertation, this oppression is a structure of gendered violence identifiable as rape culture. The

exertion of agency and feminist solidarity involves the fundamentally transnational notion of rethinking established borders and boundaries of discourse; thus my project aims to theorize rape culture and rethink empowerment in connection to this notion of transnational feminism. How can women be self-empowered against structural violence, especially within our social constructions of gender and sexuality?

The individual exertion of agency is crucial to conceptualizations of empowerment, yet recent scholarship on feminist agency defines the term as crucially functioning within social confines that delimit agency. Lois McNay (2015) theorizes feminist agency as resistance grounded in less prescriptive ideas of emancipatory action as subversion from within, rather than as relational autonomy. Claudia Leeb (2017) conceptualizes feminist agency in terms of the "subject-in-outline" that coexists with the holes or gaps that mark her delineations as subject; Leeb argues that the limits placed upon the subject neither fence her off from the outside nor define her, but rather serve as the site where she encounters herself as a subject—this embrace of limits allows the subject-in-outline to emerge in her own right, untethered from predetermined forms of domination. In the same vein, Katharine K. Baker and Michelle Oberman write that young women perceive themselves as having significant sexual agency, which they rarely exercise during sexual encounters: "Even as they act within the persistently gendered scripts governing sexual interactions, many contemporary young women have internalized a belief in their own agency that allows them to construct away the injury of rape" (66). Kate Lockwood Harris, Megan McFarlane, and Valerie Wieskamp (2019) likewise establish that the kinetic qualities of agency can highlight how the systemic

aspects of harassment and other forms of violence become hard to notice, whereby maintaining sexual assault as an individual act and obscuring how organizational dynamics make sexual violence more or less likely to occur.

Objectives

The objectives of this dissertation are threefold. First, I examine a range of national, cultural, or historical instances of gendered violence that demonstrate that rape culture is a ubiquitous and transnational form of violence against women in the contemporary world. The texts I explore in my chapters are books from a range of national, cultural, and historical contexts that feature various routine and structural forms of gendered violence representing rape culture.[4] In order to fully examine specific contexts, the chapters are divided roughly by region: South Asia, Latin America, Korea, and Africa. This division is not to suggest that rape culture should be categorized by region, but rather to establish an intersectional view of women's empowerment while privileging underrepresented voices. Examining the texts by region effectively reveals the specific structural manifestations of violence in each culture while resisting any assumptions of chronological progress. At the same time, I am interested in exploring the commonalities among the various texts that transcend geographical locations, which are largely based on women's daily experience of rape culture. With each novel, I

[4] Pandey's *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories* (2006) develops the notion of a form of routine violence that surrounds people and manifests within their everyday lives, becoming a general and continuous aspect of modern life.

examine regions with colonial histories in which sectarian violence between men were enacted on women's bodies in sexualized or rapacious acts. Such historical events of violence continue to manifest themselves systemically in the daily lived reality of women's lives, creating what Kali Tal defines as a perpetual condition of trauma that women suffer collectively from their constant vulnerability to male sexual violence.[5]

Second, I examine the ways in which myths of empowerment mask and obscure the systemic manifestations of rape culture. At the core of these empowerment myths is the contemporary postfeminist notion that female sexuality is empowering.[6] Contemporary literature often reflects this idea in its portrayal of women who use and express their sexuality to exert agency in ways that appear empowering. However, that sexuality is also exploited in rape and ancillary physical violations. In many of the texts I explore, individual instances of empowered female sexuality are often met with the consequence of sexual violation. These instances are central to the narrative and representative of a larger cultural institution of male domination, which is often difficult

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[5] Tal's argument centers on the function of trauma literature to make the traumatic experience "real" to both the victim and the community; her purpose is to trace what it means for women to bear witness to sexual assault by examining the issue alongside other major traumatic events. In her book *Worlds of Hurt* (1996) she develops the notion of gendered violence as a collective condition that transcends the boundaries of nationality, class, or social status.

[6] This postfeminist sensibility manifests largely in contemporary pop-culture media, as demonstrated in the Superbowl 2020 halftime show featuring Shakira and Jennifer Lopez as symbols of a popular brand of feminism that promotes the physical expression of female sexuality as empowering instead of objectifying. While the show purportedly forwarded a political message affirming Latin pride and cultural diversity, it received public backlash via Twitter and other social media platforms for the sexualized gestures that went well beyond typical Latin dance moves. In a February interview with *Elle*, Lopez defended the performance as "a celebration of women and our Latino culture" as well as a "message of standing up for yourself, being a woman" (Interview with Hilary Weaver).

to identify because of its pervasiveness. This invisibility results in an undue emphasis on the more visible yet incredibly fleeting agency women exert over men who are attracted by their sexuality. Following theories of modern violence that conceptualize violence as invisibly rooted within social structures, I focus on the ways in which this structural violence is gendered.

Finally, I investigate possibilities of transnational feminist solidarity against a global rape culture when various myths of empowerment are unmasked. Global, postcolonial, and transnational relations have created modes of sexual liberation that coincide with global structures of gendered violence. As I examine rape culture through transnational literature, I hope to reveal the limits of individuated modes of liberation and postfeminist responses that are not attuned to the nuanced production of gendered violence across the globe. The individuated modes of liberation I discuss here refer to the idea that one can liberate oneself individually by choice and behavior, with no regard to social context. This idea characterizes the postfeminist view that feminism has succeeded and is no longer necessary as an activist movement, resulting in a widespread use of the language of feminism without its political commitments, emphasizing choice without a critique of structure. Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih conceptualize transnational solidarity amongst different global minority groups in terms of increasingly lateral and nonhierarchical network structures; Chandra Mohanty likewise emphasizes the need for a transnational feminist solidarity to address increasingly globalized forms of violence. In keeping with this notion, I hope to establish a transnational model of

women's empowerment that is sustained not in individualized modes, but rather on a structural level.

Rape Culture

In this dissertation I define rape culture as a predominant structure that constitutes women's daily lives, that renders women vulnerable to sexualized violence. This structure, though normally regarded as an exception or an eruption of the system of daily life, is actually the system itself. The pervasiveness of sexualized violence indicates that it is not an exception to the culture, but rather, the culture. Rape culture functions as a system not only in physical acts of rape, but also in the symbolic dimension of language, enforcing specific ways of constructing violence against women as normal. For example, the language of rape is frequently used to describe unrelated forms of violence, such as in metaphors (e.g. the "rape" of the environment). The pervasiveness of the language of rape symbolically diminishes the severity of rape, and reinforces the structure of a normative sexual culture.

Much of what is understood about rape culture belongs to a large body of sociological literature on sexual violence beginning with Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975), which established that rape is a crime of violence rather than passion as well as the mainstream assumption in much feminist writing of the 1970s and 1980s that radically insisted that rape was about power rather than sex. Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth's 1993 anthology *Transforming a Rape Culture*, which provides the first definition of the term "rape culture," and which is always quoted when

the term is used, draws on this view. Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth establish rape as a crime of violence against women that results from "a complex of beliefs" that encourage male sexual aggression (ii). Joanna Bourke, in her 2007 book *Rape: Sex, Violence, History,* adds to this definition by emphasizing the sexual as a crucial component of rape.[7]

This dissertation builds on Bourke's definition of rape as "the embodied violation of another person" to which sex is crucial, precisely because the sexual component is what so often enables violence to be excused and dismissed by being misconstrued as empowering (6). The boundaries between women's acting on their desire and being subject to the aggression of another are not always clear. I am not suggesting that women invite this crime, but rather that, culturally, there are many ways in which the boundary is established to be violated and to place blame on women for not controlling the results of their sexual presence or desire. In the texts I explore, women are led to believe that they are empowered by their sexuality because it enables them to attract, influence, or manipulate men, as in the powerful "female magnetism" of the Indian women in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, or the "bottom power" Nigerian women exert in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*. Yet the violence these women suffer from the men who are sexually attracted to them becomes easy to socially condone, often because of problematic cultural constructions of sexual consent. Public

[7] Drawing on Catharine MacKinnon's observation, "if it's violence not sex why didn't he just hit her?," Bourke counters Brownmiller's view and maintains that rape is a phenomenon in which "violence is sexualized" (13).

discourses on rape often slip casually between discussions of consensual and coerced encounters in part because they are based on what Bourke describes as "a male-who-acts and a female-who-reacts (through uttering a 'no' or 'yes')" (11). As Bourke points out, the absence of consent is not the sole definition of rape, and it is important to consider the conditions of coercion that are "deeply rooted in specific political, economic and cultural environments" (7). I build on Bourke's contribution to register the importance of the structural condoning that takes place in rape culture, which is more than just an accident or temporary breakdown in an otherwise equitable set of power relations but rather is built into the system. I conceptualize the myth of women's empowerment within this system, in which sexual consent becomes not an indication of agency, but rather a product of social coercion.

While the term "rape culture" has been in use since at least the late 1970s, the definition Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth provide in their 1993 anthology is both the first and last articulation of the term, which is now in widespread use without any further inquiry or development. According to this definition, rape culture is:

> […] a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm. (ii)

While this definition links violence and sexuality, albeit in a slightly circular explanation of "violence […] as sexy and sexuality as violent," it does not further establish how or why these terms are linked. My project aims to explain this connection by establishing that rape culture is a form of structural and routine violence based on cultural and social constructions of female sexuality as a way of enforcing idealized, unrealistic, male expectations upon women's bodies.

Increasingly relevant, particularly since the #MeToo movement, the term has become the conspicuous focus of a number of popular books.[8] Most of these books explore the term through the origins of the movement as well as increasingly through rape survivors' personal stories and experiences. Roxane Gay's *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture* (2018), published right in the wake of the movement, is a collection of personal accounts of sexual violence told in confessional first-person by various contributors, including male voices, trans representation, and the intersection of mental illness and the effect of sexual violence. Katie Rose Guest Pryal's *Even If You're Broken: Essays on Sexual Assault and #MeToo* (2019) is another such book. Amber J. Keyser's *No More Excuses: Dismantling Rape Culture* (2019) examines case studies to

[8] Books about rape culture before the #MeToo movement encompass a range of topics starting from rape and women's sexuality to sexuality in general, sex, and feminism. Kate Harding's 2015 *Asking For It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture—and What We Can Do About It* views the term's manifestations in contemporary popular culture. Jon Krakauer's 2015 *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town* focuses on its effects on the U.S. justice system and college culture. Other popular books about rape culture include Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti's *Yes Means Yes!: Visions of Female Sexual Power & A World Without Rape* (2008), Jody Raphael's *Rape Is Rape: How Denial, Distortion, and Victim Blaming are Fueling a Hidden Acquaintance Rape Crisis* (2013), Laura Bates's *Everyday Sexism* (2016), Nickie D. Phillips's *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape Culture in Popular Media* (2016), and Vanessa Grigoriadis's *Blurred Lines: Rethinking Sex, Power, and Consent on Campus* (2017).

explore the patriarchal constructs of rape culture and examines how they can be dismantled. Sohaila Abdulali's *What We Talk About When We Talk about Rape* (2019) similarly examines rape culture through the perspective of a survivors, drawing on interviews from the author's work at a rape crisis center.

The most recent scholarship addressing rape culture, Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller's 2019 book *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*, borrows and repeats Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth's 1993 definition as a "complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women" (7), implying the lack of an authoritative alternative since 1993. Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller describe the term's absence from popular vernacular for several decades before its recent emergence into popular discourse as a rallying point for feminist activism since 2011, linking its development to its "unprecedented popularization" within a postfeminist context and via digital technologies (8).

The explosion of increased critical and political discourses about rape culture that continue to unfold in the public domains of media and social media exemplify Rosalind Gill's and Shani Orgad's observation about the narratives and discourses produced in the aftermath of #MeToo, namely, that they remain highly personalized and individualized: "a significant part of the debate remains framed in terms of 'bad apples' and 'monsters' who did horrible things, not about the monstrous capitalist, patriarchal and sexist system that has produced, sustained and rewarded these 'bad apples' over decades" (Gill and Orgad 1320). In spite of their titles, within the volumes, rape is

presented as an eruption into a system rather than the system itself. As Gill and Orgad go on to note, the discussion about the sexist and violent abuse of female actresses by some senior Hollywood men (dominated and exemplified by the case of Harvey Weinstein) has "been mostly divorced from critical discussion of the huge role played by films (the commodity produced and distributed by this capitalist industry) in naturalizing and normalizing violence against women" (1320). Thus despite the proliferation of discourses about rape culture following the #MeToo movement, theorizations of the concept continue to remain underdeveloped.

Apparently, then, the concept of rape culture is frozen in the 1990s despite being applied with increasing frequency a quarter century later. Due to this lack of theorization of rape culture compared to its relative ubiquity, my dissertation, while drawing upon Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth's definition, will theorize the term based on the subtle exploration of rape culture as a form of structural violence in an array of transnational literary works. In doing so, I make three points about the rape culture cliché that is both ubiquitous and ignored. First, I shift the focus onto rape culture as a "culture," away from its prevalent use to indicate individual trauma. While the term is widespread, it is often used with less attention to the structures that produce it, beyond gesturing vaguely to patriarchy or capitalism. Second, I address the deceptiveness of the notion that female sexuality is empowering by situating rape culture as rooted within social structures. Rape culture is perpetrated by a dangerous romanticization of women's sexuality that stems from the age-old notion that women are primarily sexual objects, a notion through which sexual coercion is often masked as consent, and through which even romance facilitates

violence. Lastly, I theorize rape culture in terms of its pervasiveness and routineness, which renders it obscure. I conduct my examination through theoretical frameworks that view violence not as isolated events, but rather as systemic and routine.

Slavoj Zizek's notion of structural violence, which he illustrates in his 2007 book *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, provides one such framework. In this book Zizek distinguishes three forms of violence; subjective violence refers to the visible acts of aggression that disrupt the status quo; systemic violence consists of the oppressive and destructive workings of economic, social, and political systems; symbolic violence describes the fundamental violence inherent in language as it enforces specific ways of constructing and interpreting reality, a process Zizek refers to as the "imposition of a certain universe of meaning" (1). Central to Zizek's book is the idea that instances of subjective violence generate a constant sense of "fake urgency" that distracts one from considering the deeper issues of systemic and symbolic violence rooted invisibly within social structures. The urgency with which Harvey Weinstein's legal situation is discussed, for example, generates such a "fake urgency" through which one may feel that resolving this "subjective" instance of serial violence will suffice. That urgency masks the structures that empowered a single man's predations and that persist even during his trials. Yet there is little discussion of that structure, little policy debate around women's vulnerability, and little address to the precarious conditions that allowed women to be harmed. In turn, the term "casting couch" perpetrates symbolic violence by normalizing the sexual violence through which careers are managed, leaving specific women to conclude that violation of their bodies is a structural norm in their industry.

By focusing with urgency on specific cases of subjective violence, symbolic and systemic violence are masked as the normal condition of everyday life.

Gyanendra Pandey's notion of routine violence provides another framework for exploring the invisible processes of violence in daily life. As Pandey develops in his 2006 work *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories*, routine violence refers to a form of violence that surrounds people and manifests within their everyday lives and "insinuates itself into the economy, domestic life, language, consciousness" (11). Thus routine political practices such as the "construction and naturalization of particular categories of thought" as well as the "mundane, banal, everyday exercise of power" over a group's vulnerable segments become the primary conditions of modern violence (15). Central to the concept of routine violence is its mundaneness; it functions by rendering hierarchies of domination and subordination so familiar and unremarkable that they become invisible. For example, popular culture stereotypes produced and distributed by capitalist industries such as film, mainstream novels, and advertising often cast women and girls in the role of the seducer, reinforcing the idea that that women who say "no" mean "yes," and that they provoke men into assaulting them. The "construction and naturalization" of this stereotype of women normalizes violence against women in daily life, yet the proliferation or "mundaneness" of such stereotypes render this violence invisible. According to Pandey's theorization, violence is not merely temporary, extraordinary, and spectacular, but rather a general and continuous aspect of modern life. In a study of on-campus sexual violence at Stanford University, Jia Tolentino likewise emphasizes that sexual assault in college occurs as events "embedded within the fabric

of everyday life, which both perpetrator and victim understand based on their background, their habits, their state of mind," making those experiences "obvious and ordinary" rather than "lurid and dark and complex."

While Zizek and Pandey both claim that the pervasiveness of violence in everyday life renders it obscure, neither addresses the gendering of that violence except in passing. In my theorization of rape culture, I focus on the ways in which this structural violence is gendered. Rape culture operates as a form of routine or structural violence in the works I explore in this dissertation. Operating behind isolated instances of rape are a series of toxic social thought categories that constrain women in everyday life and render gendered violence so pervasive and ordinary that it becomes difficult to even identify as violence. This crucially leads to questions about women's empowerment and agency within the violent structures into which their daily choices, especially choices in regard to sexuality, are invisibly rooted. The issue here becomes not only that gendered violence is rendered invisible, but also, more specifically, that it is done so through common myths regarding women's sexuality that create an illusion of empowerment. It is my view that fiction is particularly effective in rendering these issues visible because it defamiliarizes symbolic systems, registering and exposing the forms of routine violence that normalize sexual violence as well as the myths constructed around empowerment.

Empowerment

Soon after the trending of the #MeToo movement, *Sports Illustrated*'s 2018 Swimsuit Issue came out with an empowerment-themed shoot titled "In Her Own Words." Commissioned by female editor M. J. Day and photographed by female photographer Taylor Ballantyne along with an all-female crew, the issue features nude models whose bare flesh is painted with descriptive words of their own choosing, including positive words such as "mother," "nurturer," "creative," "progressive," and "human." The issue was reported by *Vanity Fair*'s Erin Vanderhoof as an attempt to make a magazine "where models were as much participants as objects," and which gave "models a voice in a silent medium." In an article for *The New Yorker*, however, Alexandra Schwartz called out the irony of "removing models' remaining scraps of clothes in the name of empowerment," which, she wrote, does not "so much give the impression of women speaking their truths as of women who cannot speak at all." Although the idea behind the issue is to allow women to be "heard" rather than merely seen, countering the *Sports Illustrated*'s long-held tradition in taking commercial advantage of the male gaze, it is simultaneously clear that, ultimately, as Schwartz points out, "seeing remains the important part." "In Her Own Words" exemplifies the ways in which "empowerment" has been coopted by postfeminist, consumerist rhetoric, a use that has since become common in popular culture.

Not unlike the term rape culture, empowerment is an extremely ubiquitous yet relatively under-theorized term. In this dissertation I define empowerment largely as a myth with the capacity to make women more vulnerable to violence within a rape culture. In social work, empowerment generally refers to a group of individuals coming

together to collectively improve their living conditions. In mainstream feminism, however, empowerment seems to be conflated with individual agency. I refer to this conflation as a myth because, in the novels I explore in this dissertation, women who exert individual agency to resist oppressive conditions end up becoming more vulnerable to violence. Resistance does not necessarily lead to empowerment for women who live in a rape culture that commodifies their sexuality and does not recognize their boundaries, to the extent that even their political resistance becomes an invitation to violence. Thus in my chapters I make a distinction between resistance and empowerment. In the same vein, although being active instead of passive is generally conflated with being empowered, actively exerting agency does not always lead to empowerment in the novels I examine. For example, in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, passivity is an intentional political attempt to regain agency over one's body. Consequently, unlike mainstream feminism, I do not define empowerment so much as point out how frequently the term is used when no power actually results. The most ambivalently hopeful moment of empowerment in this dissertation is in my examination of Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*, which portrays women coming together to improve their life circumstances, but not with unalloyed success.

While the concept of empowerment has a long history in social change, the term remains both oblique and multifaceted. Scholars tend to emphasize the limitations of any single definition of the term. Lorraine M. Gutierrez, for example, explains in "Working with Women of Color: An Empowerment Perspective" that the use of empowerment is often "vague" and "can mean different things" due to its scope, which encompasses both

macro and micro levels of society, but goes on to define the term as "a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situations" (149). Robert Adams's 2008 book *Empowerment, Participation, and Social Work*, continues to describe empowerment as a "contested concept," writing that we often fall into the trap of "compartmentalizing" the term (3). His book provides a "working definition" of empowerment as "the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives" (17), which appears, if anything, more vague than Gutierrez's older definition. Moreover, most definitions of the term come from social work, but are apparently adapted to the field of literature without further development, as I indicate below.

Many of the complications that arise in determining individual sexual empowerment derive from the fact that empowerment is fundamentally seen as a process that takes place within structural confines. Even as empowerment scholars are quick to acknowledge the limitations of any single definition of the term, its origins in the realm of social activism seem to assume an interaction with or within one's social environment. Empowerment scholar Marc A. Zimmerman, in his synthesis of various definitions of the term, establishes that empowerment is a "process in which efforts to exert control are central," and that "participation with others to achieve goals, efforts to gain access to resources, and some critical understanding of the sociopolitical environment" are basic components of the construct (44). This definition aligns with

Gutierrez's description of a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals can "take action to improve their life situations," on both micro and macro levels (149). Zimmerman writes that the processes and outcomes of empowerment differ across levels of analysis, and stresses that each level is inherently connected to others: "Individual, organization, and community empowerment are mutually interdependent and are both a cause and a consequence of each other" (46). I would like to emphasize both the participatory method and the sociopolitical critique as central to any productive theory of empowerment, as I demonstrate in my final chapter with an exploration of Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*.

As a theoretical framework, empowerment is considered an essential component of feminist theory. Andrea Cornwall offers a history of the use and development of the term, writing that women's empowerment came to be articulated in the 1980s and 1990s as a "radical approach concerned with transforming power relations in favour of women's rights and greater equality between women and men" (343). In a synthesis of writings on empowerment from this era, Cornwall identifies three important insights that complicate narratives on women's empowerment in contemporary mainstream development; first, she points out that the conception of women's empowerment is "fundamentally about changing power relations"; second, that they emphasize the "relational nature of empowerment," in which the "essential sociality" of the concept is crucial; and third, that empowerment is a process rather than a "fixed state" or "end-point" (344). In short, the centrality of power and control to the conception of women's empowerment is primarily based on structural gender inequalities rather than individual

self-assertion; Cornwall, however, crucially notes that the emphasis on the relational nature of empowerment has fallen out of frame in today's mainstream development institutions (Cornwall 345).

What Cornwall identifies as some of the "limits" of current approaches that de-emphasize the relational nature of empowerment is explored by scholars via the neoliberalist individuation of the term in contemporary postfeminist discourses. Feminist sociologist Eva Cox encapsulates this concern in her contention in *The Conversation* that "'empowerment' feminism is not working" in the more individuated and less socially connected modes of neoliberalism. Andi Zeisler explains this phenomenon in terms of the commodification of feminism in popular culture, maintaining that the language of empowerment has been modified from a radical social-change strategy to fit the consumerist purposes of a "glossy, feel-good feminism" that fails to actualize its political goals (xv). Joni Meenagh points to a similar phenomenon when she writes that the concepts of sexual agency and empowerment, where women are encouraged to act as "autonomous subjects in pursuit of their own self-interest," become "problematic" within an era of neoliberalism and postfeminism (447). As such, while feminist scholars continue to explore and debate the concept of empowerment, many are concerned with what they identify as the dilution of the term in mainstream discourses, which fails to address the structural basis of gender equality.

Such concerns center on the dilemma of conceiving individual choice as the bottom-line value of empowerment, particularly within a neoliberal, postfeminist context that assumes that all women's sexual practices are freely chosen in a contemporary

society where systematic and structural factors contributing to women's oppression have largely been removed. For example, women's sexuality is viewed as being liberated from male desire or approval, and instead based on women's own desire to sexualize themselves. Avelie Stuart and Ngaire Donaghue write that neoliberal discourse enables women to attribute their actions to their own desires and capacity to make choices, despite the fact that those choices are predicated on being "beautiful first, and then being free" (100). This reflects the postfeminist view that, as long as a woman's actions or circumstances are considered a result of her own choices, no further questions are welcome nor warranted. Yet this view undermines a contextual understanding of agency, which Meenagh describes as "the individual ability to self-determine one's actions within the constraints of one's specific sociohistorical context" (448). The danger of assuming women's autonomy in a structurally oppressive society is explained by Rosalind Gill in terms of a "grammar of individualism" that characterizes the postfeminist sensibility in media culture, which frames even experiences of violence in exclusively personal terms that almost totally evacuate notions of politics or cultural influence (153).

It is within this vein that Nicola Gavey contends that "feeling empowered is not necessarily the same as *being* empowered," suggesting that the concept of empowerment may not be the most useful theoretical tool when it comes to understanding women's sexuality (719). Catharine MacKinnon's assertion that a feminist theory of sexuality that "seeks to understand women's situation in order to change it" must first "identify and criticize the construct 'sexuality' within its situated social meanings" can be applied here

(317). Women's individual feelings of sexual empowerment often mask the embedded social meanings of sexuality as a construct; Gill, for example, maintains that modern female sexual agency represents an internalization of objectifying male standards that form a new disciplinary regime: "Girls and women are invited to become a particular kind of self, and are endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy found in pornography" (152).

The extent to which sex can be considered empowering has been a subject of debate among feminists since the early 1980s.[9] While radical feminist critics such as MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin thus argue against a sex-positive empowerment, largely within the context of anti-pornography, liberal feminists view sexual freedom as an essential component of women's empowerment. Gayle Rubin, for instance, is sex-positive in a way that subtly recognizes the social constructions within which sex is practiced, and critiques ways in which sexuality can be limited and hierarchized, as she writes in her essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" (1992): "Like gender, sexuality is political. It is organized into systems of power, which reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others […] But if the disputes between labor and capital are mystified, sexual conflicts are completely camouflaged" (309). Naomi Wolf, with her famous line,

[9] The period of intense debate and conflict between sex-positive and anti-pornography feminists during the 1980s is often referred to as the feminist sex wars.

"Orgasm is the body's natural call to feminist politics," identifies women's sexual liberation as crucial to the women's empowerment.[10] Wendy McElroy defends sex-positive feminism with her book "XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography" (1995), which opens with the sentence: "Pornography benefits women, both personally and politically." Sex-positive feminists generally reject sexual essentialism, instead viewing sexual orientation and gender as social constructs that are heavily influenced by society.

In literary studies, the social construction of gender is generally assumed in a way that delimits the possibility of agency. Yet whenever "empowerment" is evoked, social construction is elided and the question of agency's source omitted. In her 2018 article "Covert Ops: Female Empowerment in the Twelfth-Century French *Partonopeu de Blois*," Melanie McBride defines women characters' empowerment "in the sense that they are in control of their own choices, confident in the pursuit of their own desires, and successful in achieving those goals" (5). Similarly, Julie R. Voss, in her 2015 article, "Brothers and Sisters: Incest as Empowerment in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Novels," defines empowerment specifically in terms of agency within marriage in relationships "resulting from the women's own choices and resulting in safe and satisfying marriages" (500). Remke Kruk's *The Warrior Women of Islam: Female Empowerment in Arabic Popular Literature* (2014) does not define empowerment but refers to the representation of active rather than passive women heroines in Arabic epics. These works either reference "empowerment" without further definition or use the term

[10] See Wolf's article "Feminist Fatale" for *The New Republic* written in March 16, 1992.

to indicate an individual subjectivity or agency rather than a collective empowerment that critically views the social context or symbolic system. I argue that the assumption of agency outside social construction may actually contribute to the victimization of women. Thus my purpose in this dissertation is to examine the ways in which sexuality is socially constructed in the contemporary novels I explore, the ways in which women's sexual desire and freedom of choice are embedded within the social reality of gender inequality—specifically, a reality in which sexuality remains, as MacKinnon puts it, "constructed under conditions of male supremacy" (331).

Contemporary Literature and Transnationalism

Paul Jay, in his book *Global Matters* (2010), defines the "transnational turn" as one of the most significant transformations in literary and cultural studies. Since the 1960s, social movements such as civil rights, feminism, the antiwar movement, and other social justice crusades have transformed literary canons, placing gender and sexuality as well as race and ethnicity at the center of the study of culture. More recently, hemispheric, transatlantic, and postcolonial frames have reshaped literary studies, bridging boundaries that have long confined cultural inquiry within narrow frameworks of nation, ethnicity, or language. According to Yogita Goyal in her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature* (2017), transnational approaches "radically reformulate the basic object and scope of literary analysis," no longer viewing literature as the expression of a national essence (7). In *Minor Transnationalism* (2005), Lionnet and Shih likewise conceptualize the

transnational as a "a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur," and thus "can be less scripted and more scattered" in contrary to the logic of a centripetal and centrifugal globalization that assumes a universal core or norm (5). I return to this question of the transnational process of hybridity in my final chapter in an examination the concept in Castillo's novel. Rather than simply resorting to a celebration of a post-national or globalized world, transnationalism thus becomes a questioning of nation and alternative formations to the nation such as world systems and world literature, by emphasizing lateral and nonhierarchical flows of migration.

As a literary trend, transnationalism fundamentally rethinks borders and boundaries in ways that challenge their stability and expose their artificiality and constructedness, creating new spaces for study. Border scholars refer to basically the same concept; Walter Mignolo's 2000 essay "Border Thinking and the Colonial Difference" conceptualizes "colonial difference" as a space in which "border thinking" takes place—referring to the process by which indigenous, local perspectives meet, challenge, and influence Western perspectives. Ambreen Hai's defines "border work" as textual interventions in male, colonial narratives and historiographies. Pheng Cheah defines a literary "heterotemporality" that provides alternatives to dominant Western colonial temporality. These critics reinforce the transnational concept of challenging and destabilizing established borders while problematizing a Eurocentric core or norm.

Agency is an important aspect of such conceptualizations of the transnational. According to Jay, transnational agency is defined not as a cultural autonomy that resists transnational flows, but rather as an "intelligent and imaginative negotiation of cross-

cultural contact" (3). Jay's framework identifies gender as crucial to the enabling and circumscription of transnational agency, linking the study of minority, multicultural, and postcolonial literatures to emerging studies of globalization; he maintains that the study of globalization, both inside and outside of literary studies, will not work without attention to gender difference, and emphasizes the importance of engagement between globalization studies and feminist studies (3). Concurrently, feminist empowerment is being reconfigured in global transnational terms as violence against women is increasingly discussed as a global transnational phenomenon, a connection Mohanty demonstrates in her book, *Feminism Without Borders* (2003). Her revisitation of her original 1984 essay "Under Western Eyes," in particular, emphasizes the need to identify increasingly globalized forms of violence against women as well as the need for a transnational feminist solidarity based upon anti-capitalist activism. She writes that knowing differences and particularities among women across the world allows us to "explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately," as well as "theorize universal concerns more fully" (226). Ultimately, this allows women of different communities and identities to "build coalitions and solidarities across borders" (226), which contributes to my sense of empowerment not as individual but as collective and collaborative, and crucially based in solidarity practices.

The concept of women's empowerment thus crucially involves a reformulation of feminist activism that frames agency and resistance across the borders of nation and culture. As Mohanty similarly notes, it is important that feminist solidarity extends beyond terms of discrete and disconnected cultures and nations, a "divide between false,

overstated images of victimized and empowered womanhood" that negate each other (248). In exploring this notion of women's empowerment, my dissertation situates women's empowerment in transnational context, as involving the fundamentally transnational notion of rethinking established boundaries and hierarchical global relationships. In the context of this dissertation, agency can thus be understood in terms of a transnational mode of feminist solidarity that challenges a precondition of a globally pervasive structural oppression.

Overview of Chapters

The transnational novels I examine in this dissertation demonstrate both the limits and the possibilities of a transnational mode of feminist solidarity against a global rape culture. Although a great number of texts published recently may exemplify this, I have chosen to focus on detailed examinations of the following novels: Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1991), Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2016 [2007]), Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), and Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* (1993). That all these novels have enjoyed relatively wide readerships reinforces the fact that the trends I am delineating appear at the forefront of literary production. Most of these texts are written by diasporic American authors who are descended from underrepresented ethnic groups, including Sidhwa, Castillo, and Díaz; Adichie writes from the specifically African diasporic

context of Afropolitianism; Han's *The Vegetarian* stands out as the only translated text.[11] These novels have in common a focus on national, colonial gendered violence that expose the more subtle workings of rape culture in the contemporary world. Each novel represents national and historical instances of patriarchal violence deflected onto the most vulnerable members of society, particularly women, instances that include India's 1947 Partition, the Trujillo dictatorship of the Dominican Republic, and the history of Japan's comfort women in Korea during World War II, among other national instances of instability, war, and colonialism.

In each of these novels, past and present are intertwined; historical violence continues to subtly affect the daily reality of women's lives and bring forward more varied concepts of subjectivity, agency, and community, including many that challenge a predominantly individualistic, Eurocentric concept. At the same time, each of these novels demonstrate and expose the myth of empowerment that makes women more vulnerable to sexual predation. The women in these novels are far from passive; on the contrary, they actively resist patriarchal oppression, powerfully exert sexual agency. The delicate yet authoritative upper-middle-class women of *Cracking India*, the strong-willed protagonist of *The Vegetarian*, the survivors of unspeakable rape and abuse in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the Nigerian women who exert "bottom power" over important men in *Americanah,* and the dynamic, unconventional women of *So Far*

[11] Originally published in 2007 in Korean, *The Vegetarian* was translated to English by Deborah Smith in 2015.

from God all exert sexual agency to resist their oppressive circumstances. Yet the individual exertion of sexual agency ultimately does not liberate these women from oppression; instead, it generates more harm. Thus in reading these novels alongside each other, my dissertation investigates the limits of individual sexual agency within a structural rape culture in the era of transnationalism.

In Chapter II, I shift my focus on Sidhwa's influential Partition novel from its sensational portrayal of rape and gendered physical violence to the subtle and implicit violence affecting a broader group of women. My application of an interdisciplinary feminist viewpoint encompasses not only the violence openly inflicted on working-class women, but also that which is inflicted on upper-middle-class women behind closed doors. Sidhwa establishes solidarity among women across classes by portraying them as common victims from the perspective of child protagonist Lenny's adolescent development. While Lenny's growth into womanhood is metaphoric of the national trauma of Partition, which has generally been the primary source of the novel's literary resonance, I examine how Lenny's unique sexualized observations of other women contribute to her awareness of her own developing sexuality as well as the illusory power of capturing male attention with which it is accompanied.

Numerous scholars have addressed the concept of the gaze as a mode of control that corresponds to a form of routine violence; Michel Foucault elaborated the term as a way of explaining dynamics of certain power relations in society, while Laura Mulvey has since theorized the concept of the male gaze in feminist film theory. In *Cracking India*, the gaze becomes a mode of revealing violence as well as resisting that violence,

to a possible mode of empowerment. The uniqueness of Lenny's gaze towards the three adult women she is closest to—Ayah, Mother, and Godmother, among which her sexualized observations alternate—lies in its queerness, which often closely resembles a voyeuristic male gaze. This queerness, which derives mostly from Lenny's status as a pre-adolescent and pre-sexual child, allows Lenny's gaze to ultimately diverge from and resist the male gaze, exposing its violence towards women by revealing the gendered violence that underlies the only seemingly empowered femininity of Ayah, Mother, and Godmother.

The quality of gendered violence I spotlight in this chapter is its deceptive routineness. The prominence of this deceptiveness is not merely that it is so deeply ingrained within the everyday and mundane that it becomes invisible, but also that it is often disguised as and confused with romance. This is why, when Ice-Candy-Man rapes, prostitutes, and marries Ayah against her will, his conduct towards her is socially excused as having been motivated by the forgivable fact of his romantic love for her. Ayah, whose image as Ice-Candy-Man's bride is described in the most empowered terms, is actually the most oppressed in this moment, as Lenny recognizes. Ultimately, the dazzling appearance of empowered femininity the novel's women embody obscures the fact that they are utterly subordinate to structural male domination. The sexual agency they exert over men is strictly confined within a patriarchal social structure in which men control and oppress women.

Chapter III explores Han's novel *The Vegetarian*, in which the wartime violence of the comfort woman system is portrayed not as an extraordinary traumatic experience,

but rather as a form of routine and structural violence that transcends history and continues into the present day. I examine rape culture through the specific, historical, and structural violence inflicted on comfort women, or military comfort women: women and girls forced to provide sexual services to Japanese Imperial Army troops before and during World War II.[12] Han's novel offers an exploration of both rape culture and possibilities of empowerment, wherein the protagonist Yeong-hye's rape by her husband is compared to a Japanese soldier's forced advances towards a comfort woman. This reference links the daily domestic violence Yeong-hye obsessively rejects to the history of comfort women and rape culture. Resistance to the ideological structures of gendered violence is projected onto Yeong-hye's simple decision to become a vegetarian, with meat-eating becoming a symbol of a culture of violence against women and animals.

Over the course of the story, Yeong-hye's practice of vegetarianism as a resistance against male-based violence develops into a desire to become a tree, which she attempts literally, leading to her death by starvation. While it is difficult to consider this an empowered portrayal, it is Yeong-hye's only way of resisting the violence that is inextricably interwoven into the fabric of her daily life, and thus offers a challenging concept of empowerment. In an analysis of the sexual intercourse between Yeong-hye and her artist brother-in-law and the dynamics of female sexual empowerment the scene portrays, I explore the ways in which sexual empowerment comes to collude with the

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[12] Comfort women were held captive in brothels called "comfort stations" that were systematically installed and maintained by the Japanese government from 1932 to the end of WWII in 1945 all over Japanese-occupied areas. The women in these stations were even regularly tested for sexually transmitted diseases in the interest of Japanese soldiers' health.

structural gendered violence that pervades the rest of the book. In my analysis of this scene, rape is masked by the illusion of sexual empowerment. I examine the blurring between the lines of art and pornography portrayed in this dynamic as well as the question of sexual consent within a structure of gendered violence.

In Chapter IV, I extend the scope of my research to Latin America and link national, historical, gendered violence to a continuing rape culture as depicted in Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The novel portrays the displaced lives of Dominican-American protagonist Oscar and his immigrant family, driven from the Dominican Republic to escape an intergenerational curse called the *fukú*. *Fukú* is a name for the structural violence generated first by the colonization of the Americas in the post-Columbus era and second by the brutal regime of Dominican dictator Trujillo; both forces traumatize Oscar's family for generations, and follow the family to the U.S. Importantly, the origins of this curse lie in Oscar's grandfather's refusal to allow his daughter to be raped by Trujillo, which is mirrored across borders and generations in Oscar's own refusal to conform to a systemic rape culture in the U.S. Trujillo's regime of violence against women is thus intertwined with a contemporary model of toxic masculinity that renders men into perpetrators of rape. Oscar is violently murdered in punishment for his failure to assimilate into this system. Díaz's depiction of gendered violence as a pervasive, systemic, and intergenerational force links the gendered violence of a national dictatorship to a more contemporary, ongoing rape culture.

An inherent problem with Díaz's political framing of masculine toxicity and hypersexuality as a traumatic response to rape, however, is that this trauma continues to

be deflected onto women. The female characters of the novel are objectified as hypersexual beings whose function remains largely to embody the grounds for the male character's negotiation of trauma and masculine identity. While Díaz has been open about his own use of writing as a mode of political engagement as an activist writer, the deflection of male trauma onto the bodies of vulnerable women mirrors the public allegations of sexual misconduct brought up against him by several female writers, rendering the author complicit in structures of violence against women. Drawing upon the implicit connection between Díaz and his narrator Yunior, I argue that Díaz's connection of the external displacement of migrant diaspora to a much more personal rape trauma inflects the author's critique of the narrator's exploitation of women both physically and narratively.

Chapter V explores rape culture in Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). Adichie's novel connects violence against women and racism in America through the story of protagonists Ifemelu and Obinze, and their love and growth throughout their separate departures to America and Britain. Both Ifemelu and Obinze "become black" when they arrive in these Western countries from Nigeria as they face for the first time, issues that arise from being black; Ifemelu, in particular, documents her grapplings with race in excerpts of the blog posts she writes throughout the story. One of Ifemelu's most traumatic experiences at the beginning of her stay in America, however, is sexual; to pay her bills, she is forced to take on a one-time job that requires her to provide sexual favors to her employer. Though Ifemelu's experience of this sexual trauma here is portrayed as part of her struggling adjustment to America and a newly developing awareness of

racism, the experience of sexual trauma is not wholly new; rather, it is a variation of the rape culture she is already familiar with in Nigeria, in American capitalist form. Ifemelu identifies this rape culture as a pervasive "culture of dependence" among Nigerian women aggressively seeking material compensation from relationships with wealthy men, a system undergirded by wealth and power, to which women are subjected even as they seemingly benefit from romantic relationships.

The disconnect between the model of sexual empowerment Ifemelu promotes and the social circumstances of Nigerian women is situated within critical concerns regarding Afropolitanism. As an "Americanah," whose Afropolitan mobility is linked to an American economic mobility within a global capitalism, Ifemelu is positioned to make choices regarding her sexuality that the underprivileged Nigerian women would find difficult due to structural circumstances. Thus I explore how the model of sexual empowerment Ifemelu embodies can be considered an individual, Westernized model of empowerment that is largely disconnected from and inaccessible to women in the Nigerian context, even as Ifemelu herself initially experiences sexual, racial, and economic vulnerability in the American context. Although Ifemelu advocates for a universal feminist empowerment, she fails to place herself in solidarity with the underprivileged women of Nigeria who use their sexuality for economic gain in a system of inequality between the sexes. Additionally, I question the possibilities of empowerment the novel presents in the notion of an individualistic romantic ending; while the rekindled romance between Ifemelu and Obinze offers a feminist vision of equal, mutual understanding, I examine the ways in which this reunion represents an

individualized sexual empowerment and liberation, the shortcomings of which are demonstrated in the displacement the reunion causes in the lives of less privileged characters.

In Chapter VI, my final chapter, I explore the unique vision of empowerment offered in Castillo's *So Far from God*, which involves the concept of martyrdom as a hybrid, women-centered feminist solidarity that counters violence. Revolving around the lives of protagonists Sofia (Sofi) and her four daughters, Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and La Loca, who suffer intersectional oppression in their community as socially and racially marginalized Chicanas, the novel is presented in the form of a hagiography, a biography of a saint, casting Sofi and her daughters as martyrs sacrificed within a system of gendered violence. Women are particularized as martyrs within a rape culture portrayed as a pervasive, religious system of male violence against diasporic Latinas. Gendered violence in the novel is portrayed as an inescapable, omnipresent force which takes the form of a supernatural evil spirit at times and manifests concretely in male-centered institutions such as the Church, the patriarchal family unit, capitalist industries, and war. While this pervasive force catches up with and consumes the lives of each of the women protagonists, the novel's hagiographic portrayal of their lives as saints and martyrs simultaneously provides a space of hybrid resistance.

My examination of this novel centers not only on its depiction of gendered violence as a supernatural evil force called the "*malogra*," but also on its vision of collective empowerment against individual empowerment. With this chapter, in Castillo's portrayal of the M.O.M.A.S. as a hybrid, activist, women-centered space, I

explore the possibilities of a vision of collective empowerment that can bring about social change. Drawing upon Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, I read the novel in terms of its portrayal of female sainthood as a hybrid, resistant mimicry of Catholic sainthood, reversing the individualistic and exclusive authority of a masculine order into a collective, activist spirituality. *So Far from God* portrays a number of hybrid spaces through which Castillo envisions spaces for women, not outside, but within a masculine order. I examine Castillo's vision of activism as one that does not locate resistance as a space outside of the patriarchy that inevitably results in death; instead, her novel portrays women as survivors of extraordinary harm and envisions a transnational space of solidarity in which they can resist systemic violence from within it.

CHAPTER II

QUEER EYES AND GENDERED VIOLENCE IN BAPSI SIDWHA'S *CRACKING INDIA**

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1988) is a feminist postcolonial border narrative that has acquired canonical status as a Partition narrative. In this chapter, I argue that Sidhwa's portrayal of the subjective violence of Partition highlights a much more mundane rape culture that insinuates the lives of Indian women regardless of class or social status. For a Partition novel, *Cracking India* is extensively concerned with the minutiae of the sexual development of its young protagonist Lenny.[13] The extent to which the novel focuses on Lenny's pre-adolescent experience and emotions, however, allows the more prosaic element of her adolescent trauma to become representative of the national trauma of India's Partition. The gendering of the violence in both processes is crucial; the account of Lenny's coming-of-age foregrounds the sexual violence involved in both her development and that of the nation, and reveals the way that Partition violence was enacted upon the bodies of women. Jill Didur has argued that the novel destabilizes patriarchal nationalist discourse by mapping the ways in which women become the "ground" in struggles for postcolonial self-determination (68).

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[13] The novel in its original version, *Ice Candy Man*, dates back to 1988, and in its *Cracking India* version to 1991.

Partition is just one instance of the way in which sectarian violence between men has been enacted on women's bodies in sexualized or rapacious acts, indicating a pre-existing rape culture that is embedded into women's daily lives in addition to the violence of Partition that magnifies it. Rosemary George points out that despite the "general consensus" that Partition was an "exceptional moment of insanity in which men went mad," the violence women underwent at that time is nevertheless understood to be "similar [to] but of a different magnitude than the usual fare doled out to them in a patriarchal society" (136). Ananya Kabir likewise maintains that the events of Partition were primarily inscribed on the bodies of women because they provided a "space over which the competitive games of men were played out" (179); Kavita Daiya (2008) describes the ways in which Partition affected male and female sexuality differently, representing the "otherness" of women's bodies prior to the violence (70). My goal in this chapter is to shift the spotlight from the novel's treatment of sectarian violence on to its portrayal of sexualized violence as a more long-term phenomenon in the lives of its women. In other words, I want to explore an implicit rape culture that predates and continues beyond Partition.

While Lenny's growth is crucially influenced by the events of Partition that constitute the backdrop to her coming-of-age, it predominantly occurs as a result of the sexual knowledge she develops through her interaction with the women on whom she depends. Her developmental trauma is explicitly gendered through its focus on female sexuality. In particular, Lenny's naïve yet precociously sexual observations of these women both exposes and resists the ever-present possibility of rape that exists in their

lives. Looking, in terms of the raising and lowering of eyes, has political ramifications in the novel; by observing the world around her, Lenny sees truths that a nine-year-old girl is not supposed to see and discerns the invisible power dynamics that drive women's interactions with men and each other. She comes to recognize that her coming-of-age as a woman will initiate her into a realm of institutionalized gendered violence, which I refer to in this dissertation as rape culture.

Lenny Sethi is a young girl from an upper-middle-class, politically neutral Parsee family, coming of age in Lahore during the time of India's Partition and independence.[14] Stricken with polio as an infant, she spends most of her time with Shanta, her ayah (or nanny), and narrates the events of the novel in the first-person as she experiences them in a world "compressed" by her age, gender, and disability (Sidhwa 11). The competing conservative-national imaginaries that arise at the end of British rule in India intersect with the patriarchal power relations that circulate in Lenny's household and community. Lenny's decentered female perspective diverges from the dominant interpretations of history and nationalism at the time, disclosing the patriarchal and majoritarian underpinnings of both. Her status as a child with a disability allows her an unusual intimacy with her caregivers, including her ayah, her mother, and her godmother, and this results in her distinctively detailed observations. While the events of the novel take

[14] The Partition of India was the division, or "cracking", of British India into two independent nations, modern India and Pakistan, in 1947. The northern, predominantly Muslim sections of India became Pakistan, while the southern and majority Hindu section became the Republic of India. The division was accompanied by an unprecedented mass migration of between eight to ten million people across the newly created borders in both directions and coincided with the violent deaths of an estimated 100,000 to 500,000 people as well as the sexual assault of over 75,000 women (Didur 2006, 4).

place when Lenny is nine years old, the narrator is an older version of Lenny who at times contributes a mature perspective and shifts the chronology of events.

At the center of the story is Lenny's intimate relationship with Ayah, whose beauty attracts suitors of diverse backgrounds and religious identities; as a result, Lenny becomes aware of the heterogeneous cultural context of her society at large. Once Ayah, a Hindu, is violently abducted by a mob led by her obsessive former suitor, Ice-candy-man, a Muslim, Lenny's growth into maturity inevitably accelerates. Lenny's mother and godmother attempt to track down the lost Ayah, and Lenny contributes her own efforts. During this process Lenny develops an awareness of the inherent violence that accompanies the new social role she is being thrust into as a woman—one embodied by her mother and godmother—and her search for Ayah is accompanied by an increased political awareness. When Ayah is finally discovered, it is revealed that she has been forced into prostitution by Ice-candy-man before being coerced into marrying him. The novel ends with Ayah escaping from Ice-candy-man's clutches as Lenny and her godmother arrange for her to return to her family in India, across the border.

The national trauma of Partition and Lenny's traumatic adolescent development are gendered within the novel because of the symbolism transferred into them by Ayah's rape. Ayah's abduction and subsequent rape represents the fate of thousands of women during the events of Partition. Much critical work on *Cracking India* has dealt with the gendered violence in the novel, generally focusing on Ayah and the working-class women who were most brutally victimized and exploited during Partition. Different kinds of violence coexisted during Partition, and women's vulnerability differed

according to their religion, class and caste. Sangeeta Ray, in her influential reading, scrutinizes the novel's postcolonial, gendered depiction of India whereby Ayah becomes the symbol of the nation; she maintains that the class differences among the novel's women reveals the elitist and bourgeois underpinnings of an Indian masculinist national discourse (136). In a similar vein, Ambreen Hai focuses on the ways that Partition affected women differently according to class, arguing that the more privileged upper-class women became agents of Partition violence, re-enacting the Partition-related violence they themselves suffered upon less privileged lower-class women such as Ayah.

Class and social privilege are crucial determiners of women's vulnerability to sexual violence, especially within the cultural history of gender formation in the British colonies, which constitutes the specific transnational backdrop of Sidhwa's Partition novel. Lopamudra Basu compares the cult of respectable middle-class womanhood developed in the 19th-century Britain to that in India, argues that sexuality was manifested differently among women according to class; she points out that a mode of delicate and decorous femininity unavailable to lower-class women such as Ayah was embraced by upper-middle-class women such as Mother and Godmother. While Sidhwa pointedly portrays such differences, it is important not to allow the privileges of upper-class women to obscure their own status as victims within a rape culture that does not fundamentally distinguish amongst class or social status. Jacquelynn Kleist views the upper-class women of *Cracking India* as possessing "versions of feminine power" when they "completely step outside their traditional domestic roles" to "proactively exert

influence" through their economic power (70). However, to regard the novel's upper-class women as empowered is to overlook the gendered oppression they suffer; it implies a hierarchical standard of violence that views their traumatic conditions only in relation to those of "more" oppressed, lower-class women. While Sidhwa spotlights the devastating harm enacted upon working-class Ayah, she does not discount the violence suffered by the upper-middle-class Parsee women. My focus here is on the ways in which Sidhwa portrays a version of transnational solidarity among women across classes through Lenny's decentered perspective, which views the women's suffering as interrelated rather than hierarchical.

It may be useful here to return to George's point that the violence against women during Partition needs to be contextualized as a magnification of that which women suffer daily within a patriarchal society, as a systemic rape culture rather than an "exceptional" moment of madness. In Gyanendra Pandey's definition, modern violence consists not only of the most spectacular but also the "much more general and continuous" forms that are systemically routinized into a modern political minority's condition of being (5). Violence, in this sense, is a condition of modern life, a "total social phenomenon" (7) rather than a transitional, occasional, or abnormal one; it is manifested in the "construction and naturalization of particular categories of thought" as well as in the "mundane, banal, everyday exercise of power" (15). For the women of *Cracking India*, violence is both routinized and gendered, and exists prior to the events of Partition. It is thus possible to shift away from the notion of Ayah as the "sole

representative figure of female violation" in *Cracking India*, as Hai puts it, and extend this condition to the lives of the upper-middle-class women (Hai 390).

While others have written on the ways in which Lenny's narrative gaze subversively disrupts a patriarchal nationalist discourse, many also compare her sexualized descriptions of Ayah to the male gaze, casting Lenny's gaze as a form of witness that produces or ratifies male violence.[15] Hai discusses Lenny's "double vision" towards Ayah, in which Ayah becomes the victim of both the male gaze and the gaze of the more privileged women of Lenny's upper-middle-class. Rani Neutill refers to Lenny's sexualized descriptions as "voyeuristic" and suggests that they function as a form of scopophilia (81). For example, citing Lenny's statement at the beginning of the novel that "the covetous glances Ayah draws educate me" (Sidhwa 12), Neutill points out that it is crucially the gaze of the men "whose glances tell [Lenny] where to look" that accomplishes this education (81). The ensuing, openly-sexualized observations, wherein Lenny describes Ayah's "rolling bouncy walk that agitates the globules of her buttocks under her cheap colorful saris and the half spheres beneath her short sari blouses" is thus read as a marker of the scopophilic pleasure Lenny derives from looking at Ayah (Sidhwa 12). Such readings regard the eroticism in Lenny's descriptions of women as an appropriation of the male gaze, one that reproduces its violence.

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[15] Nandi Bhatia argues that Lenny's questions and queries and attempt to search for answers constantly interrupt the narrative in a "fragmentary emplotment" that refuses to impose coherence on the narrative (203).

Lenny's narrative gaze, however, may more accurately be described as queer, curiously and precociously omnisexual rather than heterosexually voyeuristic. Alison Kafer, in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), makes the case for disability as a site of political engagement in its alliance with feminist and queer identity categories; in this regard, Lenny's queerness can be defined in terms of political resistance. My use of the term "queer" is predominantly a way of indicating divergence from heteronormative standards into a fluid sexual awareness;[16] pre-adolescent Lenny is not yet sexually indoctrinated, and her polio adds an additional dimension of non-normativity to her perspective. Although Lenny's sexualized descriptions resemble the male gaze, they are not inherently violent towards women in the way scholars have attributed to the male gaze. I refer to Lenny's narrative gaze throughout the novel in terms of her queer perspective or viewpoint, purposely refraining from the term "gaze." This is a shift intended not only to differentiate Lenny's perspective from what other scholars have termed her male gaze, but also to indicate its political queerness and to define the act of looking in which she engages as agential, perceptive, and resistant, rather than scopophilic. Thus, rather than appropriating the male gaze, Lenny's queer gaze discerns and exposes the hidden rape culture insinuated into the lives of the women around her. This power of discernment eventually allows Lenny to resist the male gaze and the rape culture it upholds.

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[16] See Sara Ahmed's "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology" (2006) for a conceptualization of queerness in terms of spatial orientation defined primarily as a phenomenological rather than an exclusively sexual difference.

The resistant nature of Lenny's perspective is emblematically demonstrated in her encounter with Gandhi, the most powerful male figure in Indian history, who makes an appearance in the novel as a symbol of an invisible rape culture. Lenny lowers her eyes before Gandhi in this scene "in a burst of shyness" -- the first time she has "lowered [her] eyes before man" (Sidwha 96). This is clearly an act of deference to his authority—his "pure shaft of humor, compassion, tolerance and understanding" that "fuses [her] to everything that is feminine, funny, gentle, loving"—which Lenny accepts as a force that embraces women, lame children, and untouchable sweepers (Sidhwa 96). Many years later, however, she comprehends the "concealed nature of the ice lurking deep beneath the hypnotic and dynamic femininity of Gandhi's non-violent exterior" and emblematically raises her head, at which point "the men [lower] their eyes" (96). At this moment, looking becomes political; Lenny's raising her eyes reflects her disillusioned realization of the violence generated by Gandhi's non-violence campaign and becomes an act of defiance that demands accountability.

Looking thus construed as a mode of discernment linked to resistance allows Lenny to detect the gendered power relations normalized in the lives of the women with whom she is allied. Initially, Lenny spends much of her time watching Ayah and her interactions with her male suitors; her sexualized descriptions of Ayah indicate a jealous possessiveness that places her in competition with men for Ayah's attention, situating her in what Basu calls an "erotic triangle" with Ayah and her men (17). However, similar configurations result from Lenny's openly sexualized observations of Mother, towards whom Lenny expresses the same jealousy and possessiveness:

> Her firm strokes, her healing touch. The motherliness of Mother. It reaches from her bending body and cocoons me. My thighs twitch, relaxed. Her motherliness. How can I describe it? While it is there it is all-encompassing, voluptuous […] I swim, rise, tumble, float, and bloat with bliss […] I open my heart to it. I welcome it. Again. And again. I begin to understand its on-off pattern. It is treacherous. (Sidhwa 50-51)

This scene not only reveals the intensity of the desire underlying Lenny's view of Mother, as indicated in the words "voluptuous" and "treacherous", but it is also a moment of learning in which Lenny perceives the "on-off pattern" of Mother's femininity. In identifying the women who surround her as objects of desire in a rape culture that commodifies their femininity, Lenny also perceives that femininity can be manipulated—switched on and off—and begins to understand her own sexuality and identify it with theirs. Moreover, her recognition of the on-off pattern of this power leads to the development of her own power as a maturing woman. In this scene, Lenny's knowledge is obtained as a privilege of her disabled condition, as the leg massages during which she is able to watch Mother in this way are prescribed by the doctor after her cast is removed. To a certain degree, then, Lenny's looking is queer to the extent that it is disabled; as her coming-of-age progresses and her body becomes more "normative," her perspective also gradually loses its queerness, and she comes to operate within the "normality" of rape culture.

Lenny's perception of the power relations that drive the "on-off" of Mother's femininity is revealed in a passage during which Lenny's eyes are distinctly contrasted

with those of her father. Only after Lenny sees how Father looks at Mother does she begin to understand Mother's femininity as something that needs to be policed:

> Mother's motherliness has a universal reach. Like her involuntary female magnetism it cannot be harnessed. She showers material delight on all and sundry. I resent this largesse. As Father does her unconscious and indiscriminate sex appeal. It is a prostitution of my concept of childhood rights and parental loyalties. She is my mother—flesh of my flesh—and Adi's. She must love only us! (Sidhwa 51)

Though it is Ayah's sexuality that Sidhwa portrays most openly in the novel, Lenny's view of Mother makes clear that Mother also possesses an "involuntary female magnetism" similar to Ayah's allure. Her description consists of subtly contradictory terms that indicate the displeasure in Father's gaze and reveal the process of Lenny's appropriation of it. For instance, she first uses the word "involuntary" to describe Mother's "largesse"—a term connoting abundance and generosity, possibly with a strategy—which contrasts with her subsequent use of the word "indiscriminate" to describe how Father perceives her "sex appeal." It is after Lenny has made the connection between her resentment and that of her Father that the negative emotions of jealousy and possessiveness intensify, culminating in her use of the word "prostitution" to refer to Mother's appeal. The implications of this term can hardly be overlooked in a novel that engages so explicitly with commodified sexual violence as its major underlying theme. While Ayah is the one who is literally prostituted, this passage indicates that Mother's "female magnetism"—whether it be her sexuality or her

motherliness—is also routinely exploited by men. This exploitation is not only evident in the customary performances Mother stages in front of Father to extract housekeeping money, which I discuss below; it is also demonstrated in the novel's implication that Mother is physically abused by Father (Sidhwa 224).

Just as the "covetous glances" drawn by Ayah educate Lenny, her understanding of how Father looks at Mother initiates Lenny into the realm of adult sexuality—a realm in which the role she must play as a woman is predictable, and rehearsed, operating within the strictly established power structure of rape culture. Lenny's perspective possesses a privileged liminality—what Victor Turner refers to as "the power of a not-yet-sexual, not-fully-classed being" that allows her access as an observer into realms that would otherwise be denied to an adult of her class or gender (qtd. in Hai 396): as Lenny herself remarks, "having polio in infancy is like being born under a lucky star. It has many advantages—it permits me access to my mother's bed in the middle of the night" (Sidhwa 20). It is during such moments of privileged intimacy that Lenny observes crucial interactions between Mother and Father that reveal Mother's painstaking performance of her gendered role: her "plaintive, grateful, husky" voice and "small burrowing, yearning movements", carefully calculated to evoke Father's response (20). A similar scene later in the novel educates Lenny about the exploitative gender dynamics between Mother and Father; Lenny observes Mother in action "handl[ing]" Father both literally and figuratively to manipulate him into giving her housekeeping money, and recognizes it as a "talented performance" that Father "extract[s]" from her the way he does from "all those who work for him", explicitly invoking the dynamics of prostitution

(76). Here Lenny joins her Mother in this performance, "exaggerating [her] modified limp" to chase after Father, as she is, at this point, well "schooled to read between the lines of [her] father's face" (78).

Lenny's observations of Godmother resemble her perspective on Mother and Ayah. Like Mother, Godmother is an upper-class woman, yet her femininity derives from being past sexuality; she can be seen as a crone figure beyond her reproductive years and the processes of sexual manipulation, but nonetheless distinctly feminine in her power and wisdom. Critics tend to agree that Godmother is the ultimate "empowered woman" (Mitra 38).[17] Lenny describes her relationship with her as being "stronger than the bond of motherhood" and "more satisfying than the ties between men and women" (Sidhwa 13). Again, it is Lenny's disability that strengthens this intense bond, just as it does that with Ayah and Mother; it is the "weakness," "fierce demands," and "loneliness" deriving from Lenny's illness that tie her to Godmother's "strength," "nurturing," and "compassion" (13). Yet Lenny looks at Godmother the way she looks at Mother and Ayah, and perceives the power dynamics within which her femininity operates:

> I kiss her, insatiably, excessively. […] I cannot be in her room long without in some way touching her. Some nights […] I sleep with her. She wears only white khaddar saris and white khaddar blouses beneath which is her

[17] See Gravley-Novello, Rastegar, and Kleist.

> coarse bandage-tight bodice. In all the years I never saw the natural shape of her breasts. (Sidhwa 13)

Here, Lenny's curiosity about Godmother's bodice and her breasts distinguishes Godmother's powerful femininity from that of the sexuality she observes in women like Mother and Ayah. Yet Lenny crucially recognizes this femininity to be complicit with the power structure that polices Mother's feminine largesse; Godmother's "bandage-tight" binding of her own breasts resembles the discipline she extends to the femininity of other female figures with whom she is allied. This is demonstrated most clearly in her cruelty towards Slavesister, who is vulnerable to Godmother's bullying because, unmarried, she does not meet the standards set by the male hierarchical structure that Godmother has internalized. Increasingly, Lenny recognizes that the implicit violence of this structure is normalized into even the most intimate alliances among women as well as men.

The reason Lenny is "unable to bear the thought of an able-bodied future" is, as she declares (in distinctly unchildish diction) that she considers it to be "the certainty of an altered, laborious and loveless life" (Sidhwa 23), a reference grounded in the condition of the lives of the women she observes around her. Lenny's fear of an able-bodied future, then, can be seen as the fear not only of losing her intimate bond with these three maternal figures, but also of having to lead the lives that they lead. This apprehension is expressed in an uncanny nightmare, in which the relationship between disability and able-bodied-ness, coming-of-age, and Lenny's three maternal figures is revealed:

> Children lie in a warehouse. Mother and Ayah move about solicitously. The atmosphere is businesslike and relaxed. Godmother sits by my bed smiling indulgently as men in uniforms quietly slice off a child's arm here, a leg there. She strokes my head as they dismember me. I feel no pain. Only an abysmal sense of loss—and a chilling horror that no one is concerned by what's happening. (Sidhwa 31)

This nightmare is an important marker in the process of Lenny's growth, along with the repeated nightmares she has of a Nazi soldier, which are sparked by the "lesson in gullibility and shock" Lenny receives from her male cousin via an electric current (30). Significantly, Lenny describes this nightmare as one "that connects [her] to the pain of others" (31)—a reference to the pain of mutilation that takes place in the dream. Mutilation of body parts, appearing first in this nightmare and reflecting of Lenny's own disability, is a recurrent theme in the novel; men, women, and children are mutilated in varying degrees during Partition, but the device is especially important in revealing the pervasiveness of gendered violence. A particularly horrifying image in the book consists of a train full of mutilated women whose breasts have been chopped off, and the process of Ayah's abduction and abuse by Ice-candy-man is figuratively narrated in terms of mutilation.

Crucial are the roles Mother, Ayah, and Godmother perform in this nightmare. While the dream dismemberment itself is enacted by "men in uniforms" —symbolic of the instigators of the violence suffered by the women of the book—Mother, Ayah, and Godmother appear disturbingly complicit: "solicitous," "businesslike," and "relaxed" in

their reaction to the mutilations taking place around them. Most unnerving is Godmother's "indulgent" smile and caress as Lenny is dismembered. Lenny explains that she feels no pain during her dismemberment, which implies the nature of the rape culture it represents: so inextricably woven into the condition of women's lives that it is "businesslike," "relaxed," and "quiet." Significantly, the "chilling horror" that Lenny feels in this nightmare is caused not by the uniformed men and the dismembering itself, but rather by the fact that "no one is concerned by what's happening," which shifts the horror onto the three women who appear unconcerned, unaffected, and complicit.

The horror of the dream is realized near the end of the novel in the form of Godmother's complaisance about Ice-candy-man's justification of his violence towards Ayah in the name of romantic love. "What's happened has happened […] But you are married to him now. You must make the best of things. He truly cares for you" is the advice with which Godmother, the most powerful woman in the novel, responds to Ayah's desperate wish to leave Ice-candy-man and return to her family (Sidhwa 27). Increasingly, then, Lenny's dismemberment nightmare becomes a reality. It is hardly accidental that this nightmare is sparked by her interaction with Cousin—a male relative about the same age as Lenny—which, as Kamran Rastegar points out, "align[s] the recognition of gender difference and sexuality with the violence defining these roles" (30). Apart from this instance, in which he convinces Lenny to touch the electric current, he engages Lenny in multiple violent acts: making her hold his genitals, smothering her with a pillow, and showing her his hernia scar. As with Ice-candy-man's violation of Ayah, Cousin justifies his actions toward Lenny in the name of romantic love: "But I

love you," he says, after placing his hands on Lenny's breasts against her will, "as if that condones his lascivious conduct" (Sidhwa 244).

The horror of the nightmare, then, is clearly connected to a rape culture that manifests as a collective female condition of trauma into which Lenny is increasingly interpellated as her sexual development commences. Clare Barker suggests that it is when Lenny "begins to identify herself as a vulnerable citizen on the basis of her gender and disability" that she develops empathy with the suffering of others; she is "sensitized to her disability and gender as mediating factors in her social identity" (124). Yet the connection to the pain of others enabled by this nightmare is clearly gender specific—less an empathetic recognition of shared humanity than a chilling recognition of a shared condition of victimization under a structure about which Mother, Ayah, and even Godmother appear unconcerned. It is through this nightmare that Lenny, perhaps unconsciously, realizes the true nature of the seemingly empowered femininity that Ayah, Mother, and Godmother radiate, as well as the education she receives through her privileged and distinct observation of them. It is merely a delusion of empowerment, through which she will be trained and indoctrinated into a silent rape culture.

This awareness is heightened as Lenny becomes increasingly complicit in Mother's continuous struggle to please Father. In their daily ritual of greeting him when he returns from work, Lenny notes how Mother switches "the bulletin immediately" to elicit positive responses from Father as they chat to him during dinner; she joins Mother "on cue", "ham[ming] up the performance with further innocently insightful observations" (Sidhwa 88). Of the debilitating effect this has on her, Lenny says:

> And as the years advance, my sense of inadequacy and unworth advances. I have to think faster—on my toes as it were…offering lengthier and lengthier chatter to fill up the infernal time of Father's mute meals. Is that when I learn to tell tales? (Sidhwa 88)

Likewise, when Mother shows Lenny a photograph of Jinnah's Parsee wife, Lenny immediately connects her to her other maternal figures: "Giving—like Ayah. Daring—like Mother," as well as "astonishingly beautiful," "confident," and "generous"—the picture of ideal femininity that is increasingly forced upon her (170).[18] While Lenny admires the beauty of this picture, she soon learns that Jinnah's wife—married to one of India's most prominent national leaders and an influential political figure herself—died of, among all things, a "broken heart", and reflects: "her daring to no account. Her defiance humbled. Her energy extinguished. Only her image in the photograph and her innocence—remain intact" (170-171). The implication is that even the most beautiful, powerful women like Jinnah's wife, and the agency they seemingly exert, such as Ayah and her "tyrann[ical]" power over men, are ultimately of "no account" (170; 29). In the end, they are confined to their expected social role as wives and subordinates within a rape culture.

As Lenny undergoes her own sexual development, she refers to the "two little bumps that have erupted beneath my nipples" in the same fiercely possessive terms she

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[18] Rattanbai "Ruttie" Petit (1900–1929), also known by her married name Maryam Jinnah, was the second wife of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founder and first Governor-General. She was affectionately known as "the Flower of Bombay" due to her beauty, and married Jinnah at the age of 18 against the wishes of her Parsee family.

used previously to describe her three maternal figures, calling her new breasts "flesh of my flesh, exclusively mine," and "guard[ing] them with a possessive passion" (Sidhwa 231). She says that "as the mounds beneath my nipples grow, my confidence grows" (231), indicating the certainty of the knowledge she has gleaned from her observations of the adult women around her. Her "burgeoning breasts," along with "the projected girth and wiggle of [her] future bottom," that assure her that she will be "quite attractive when [she's] grown up," are aspects of the female sexuality and power Lenny has heretofore acutely observed in Ayah, Mother, and Godmother (231). Lenny has clearly internalized the heteronormative gender dynamics engaged in by her closest maternal figures. In other words, her coming-of-age has successfully insinuated her into the social structure in which the sexuality and femininity modelled by those three figures are deceptively endorsed as agency and empowerment.

Nonetheless, Lenny acknowledges and exposes the illusory nature of this image of feminine empowerment in her final description of Ayah's body. Here Ayah appears "in the awesome shape of a bride," the most empowered form of femininity, with her sexuality emanating in its fullest force:

> Ayah's face, with its demurely lowered lids and tinsel dust, blooms like a dusky rose in Godmother's hands. The rouge and glitter highlight the sweet contours of her features. She looks achingly lovely: as when she gazed at Masseur and inwardly glowed. (Sidhwa 273)

Though this description does not diverge from the tone of Lenny's previous observations of Ayah, she recognizes in the lines that follow the falsity of this "awesome" female

image: “But the illusion is dispelled the moment she opens her eyes—not timorously like a bride, but frenziedly, starkly” (273). When she speaks, her voice is “harsh, gruff: as if someone has mutilated her vocal cords” (273). This image of mutilation connects back to Lenny’s dismemberment nightmare, in which Godmother sits by and strokes Lenny’s head as her limbs are quietly sliced off. Godmother plays a similar role in this scene with Ayah, touching Ayah’s face and telling her that her figurative mutilation was “fated” and must be forgiven and forgotten in “the business of living” (273). Godmother’s use of the word “business” (31) to refer to the constant state of gendered trauma these women must live through parallels Lenny’s use of the word “businesslike” to describe the atmosphere of her nightmare, which is clearly its most unnerving quality (31). In this sense, “the business of living” on behalf of which Godmother exhorts Ayah to forgive and accept the injustices enacted upon her indicates a gendered violence so pervasive and routine that it is unnoticeable, perpetuated by even the most privileged and powerful women in the novel.

As Lenny’s own physical sexual development commences and her confidence grows along with her breasts and bottom, she acknowledges: “I have a wayward heart. Weak. Susceptible and fickle. But why do I call it my heart? And blame my blameless heart? And not blame instead the incandescence of my womb?” (Sidhwa 232). Here her use of the term “wayward” aligns her with Mother’s “largesse”; having fully recognized the patriarchal disapproval with which women’s overt sexuality is regarded, she identifies her developing femininity as a deficiency that defines her entire sex. The fiery “incandescence” of this femininity, in particular, contrasts starkly with the “ice that lurks

behind the hazel in Ice-candy-man's beguiling eyes" that Lenny sees in Ayah after she is victimized, the "hint of coldness" she notices underneath Mother's overwhelmingly innocent and beautiful features, and, of course, the "concealed nature of the ice lurking deep beneath the hypnotic and dynamic femininity of Gandhi's non-violent exterior" (272; 50; 96). The image of ice and coldness concealed within images of candy, beauty, and peace reveals the violent power dynamics hidden deep beneath the beautiful and magnetic façade of empowered female sexuality as observed by Lenny.

Cracking India is the first Partition novel to offer a gendered perspective on the extent to which Partition violence was enacted upon the bodies of women; Lenny's perspective, however, indicates that there is more to this violence than the sensational rape and physical violation of Ayah. Lenny's eyes crucially reveal the subtleties of an implicit violence and oppression that exist beyond the sensational. In this regard, *Cracking India* portrays a rape culture that encompasses not only the violence openly inflicted on working-class women, but also that which is secretly inflicted on upper-middle-class women behind closed doors. Through Lenny's eyes, the novel calls for political recognition of an insidious, normalized rape culture brought to surface through the abnormal circumstances of Partition.

CHAPTER III

VEGETARIANSIM AS PASSIVE RESISTANCE IN HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN*

Vegetarianism, the practice of abstaining from the consumption of meat or by-products of animal slaughter, is becoming increasingly popular in most modern countries for ethical and health-related reasons. As a practice that resists the prevailing ideology of carnism in most cultures, vegetarianism is often construed as a form of political activism for women, animals, and the environment.[19] In her celebrated book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, for instance, Carol J. Adams identifies meat-eating and meat-advocating cultural discourses as symbolic of a patriarchal discourse that "animalizes women and sexualizes and feminizes animals" (4). Vegetarianism, thus construed as a symbolic rejection of patriarchal attitudes that validate the objectification of other beings, becomes an advocacy of feminism and animal rights. Han Kang's 2007 novel titled *The Vegetarian* is a book that directly embodies this political feminist notion of vegetarianism; in the book, meat-eating is portrayed as a symbolic reinforcement of a normalized patriarchal order, and the protagonist's vegetarianism becomes a radical resistance to a structural gendered violence embedded within daily life. As a form of political resistance, vegetarianism is crucially linked to the protagonist's regaining of

[19] Carnism is a concept used in discussions of humanity's relation to other animals, defined as a prevailing ideology in which people support the use and consumption of animal products, especially meat. The term was coined by social psychologist and vegan activist Melanie Joy in her book *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows* (2009).

agency and control over her body; her refusal of meat symbolizes her political rejection of violence, and involves an assertion of her bodily and sexual agency against the problematic social and cultural norms of rape culture.

As a form of political activism, vegetarianism as resistance is inevitably linked to the concept of empowerment. In the preface of her book, Adams presents her concept of the "sexual politics of meat" as a form of engaged theory, a critical framework that is fundamentally concerned with social change.[20] By exposing social problems such as those fraught within the sexual politics of meat, engaged theory liberates from harmful and limiting beliefs, which then enables social change. Conceptualized as a "theory enacted through the body," ethical vegetarianism becomes a form of empowerment (Adams 193). Yet although it is clear that "the vegetarian" in Han's novel is likewise motivated by a newfound, liberating realization of the symbolic violence of meat-eating, it can hardly be said that her resistance is ultimately empowering; on the contrary, it generates more harm towards herself and others, culminating in total mental and physical breakdown. What remains in *The Vegetarian*'s final portrayal of the protagonist—emaciated, catatonic, and vomiting blood—is an overpowering sense of the inescapable structural violence that consumes the lives of its characters.

In this chapter, I examine *The Vegetarian*'s portrayal of vegetarianism as a form of political resistance against systemic rape culture that fails to lead to empowerment.

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[20] According to Adams, engaged theory is "theory that arises from anger at what is; theory that envisions what is possible. *Engaged theory makes change possible* […] Engaged theory exposes problems, but also offers solutions. Engaged theory makes resistance empowering […] It is about liberation from harmful and limiting beliefs" (2, emphasis original).

My goal is to explore the dilemma of the protagonist's political vegetarianism, the disconnection between resistance and empowerment, in terms of a universal patriarchal structure. The concept of empowerment is situated in a largely Western contemporary discourse on social change and theorized in terms of individual choice and liberation.[21] This is why it may be problematic to assume that the discourse can be neatly applied to a novel written in a non-Western context; *The Vegetarian* was originally written and published in Korean by South Korean author Han Kang before its translation into English and subsequent international acclaim.[22] Through an examination of the novel's dismal portrayal of political resistance, however, I argue that *The Vegetarian* reveals the ways in which individual resistance can collude with a larger structural violence.[23] This collusion is especially prominent in the novel's portrayal of the protagonist's sexual agency and consent, which is depicted as an extension of her political resistance. In this scene, the protagonist willingly engages in an incestuous sexual encounter that appears to be in alignment with her own choice, but paradoxically results in her exploitation. My

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[21] Porochista Khakpour takes this view in her review for *The New York Times* when she comments on Han's "glorious treatments of agency, personal choice, submission and subversion," calling *The Vegetarian* "magnificently death-affirming" (12).

[22] Following the publication of Deborah Smith's English translation in 2015, *The Vegetarian* won the Man Booker International Prize for fiction in 2016 and was included in *Time* magazine's mid-year list of best books of 2016.

[23] Han concedes in an interview with *World Literature Today* that *The Vegetarian* is concerned with violence as a universal human condition rather than a culture-specific one: "Violence is part of being human, and how can I accept that I am one of those human beings?" is the question she explores (64). In this regard, Han's novel, although widely read as a specific critique of patriarchal Korean society, calls for a wider, culture-transcendent application in its questioning of the normal things that constitute everyday life and identity.

analysis unfolds in three parts; first, I explore the ways in which vegetarianism in the novel becomes a symbolic political resistance to a normalized, structural rape culture; second, I examine the ways in which the sexual scene between the protagonist and her brother-in-law is an extension of her political resistance that seemingly leads to empowerment; third, I analyze the larger structural conditions under which the protagonist's sexual agency and desires are fetishized, creating a ruse of sexual empowerment.

To begin with a brief overview of the narrative, *The Vegetarian* revolves around protagonist Yeong-hye, a "typical" Korean housewife living in modern-day Korea, whose sudden decision to stop eating meat disintegrates the entire social fabric of her life and results in her destruction. Contrary to her desire to transcend violence, Yeong-hye's increasingly radical vegetarianism triggers more acts of violence towards both herself and others as she comes to fixate upon the self-destructive fantasy of transforming into a tree. During this process she engages in a complicated sexual intercourse with her brother-in-law, a video artist who develops a sexual fetish towards a birthmark on her body and attempts to create a piece featuring her nude body painted with flowers. The narrative is arranged into three parts that flow in chronological succession with a separation of approximately a year of time in-between; each part is narrated from the perspective of a family member affected by Yeong-hye's vegetarianism. In Part One, "The Vegetarian," Yeong-hye's husband chronicles how Yeong-hye's vegetarianism leads to the disintegration of their marriage as well as her relationship with her family. Part Two, "Mongolian Mark," is narrated by Yeong-hye's

brother-in-law and details his obsession with creating an artistic image using Yeong-hye's body. Part Three, "Flaming Trees," told from the vantage point of Yeong-hye's older sister In-hye, focuses on In-hye's struggles as she deals with Yeong-hye's decline in the aftermath of the family collapse resulting from the events of Part Two.

Analyses of the resistant nature of Yeong-hye's vegetarianism are largely based on Part One, in which Yeong-hye's husband, Mr. Cheong, documents the immediate changes in his and his wife's heretofore unexceptional lives, situating Yeong-hye's vegetarianism as a disruption in the established normality of their marriage.[24] Mr. Cheong is baffled that his wife, whom he regarded "completely unremarkable in every way," has suddenly and inexplicably begun a lifestyle that he views as out of character (Han 11).[25] Having married her mostly because he considered her the counterpart to his own ordinariness, his confusion turns into anger as Yeong-hye's refusal of meat evolves into a refusal of daily activities that comprise her social role and duties as wife—she no longer cooks meat for him, stops caring about how she looks, and starts avoiding sex. Because vegetarianism is generally considered a trendy and harmless lifestyle choice, it may initially be difficult to comprehend the strife it produces in Yeong-hye and Mr.

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[24] Mr. Cheong's actual name is never revealed in the text; he himself never calls Yeong-hye directly by name, instead referring to her as "his wife." As a result, throughout most of Part One the characters are presented as an anonymous husband and wife, strictly defined in terms of their conformity or lack of conformity to those social roles. This partly invokes the uniquely collectivist Korean societal backdrop in which individuals' identities are strongly determined by their social relationships and roles.

[25] Mr. Cheong is portrayed as the epitome of Korean middle-class averageness; he works at a nine-to-five job at a small company and is insecure about the size of his penis. He initially conceptualizes Yeong-hye as the counterpart to his own ordinariness; the fact that Yeong-hye is "completely unremarkable in every way" suits his lifestyle and expectations.

Cheong's marriage.[26] Yet it is clear that Yeong-hye's vegetarian transition is not motivated by commonly socially-accepted reasons such as dietary weight loss; the bizarre circumstances of the sudden decision (she stands staring at the refrigerator in the middle of the night in a trance-like state, claims she "had a dream" as the only response to Mr. Cheong's bewildered inquiries, and subsequently starts emptying out every bit of meat in the refrigerator) causes Mr. Cheong to reason that there is "more going on here than a simple case of vegetarianism" (Han 16, 23).

Yeong-hye's vegetarianism can thus be understood as an ethical will to non-violence. Eating meat is representative of other larger, unspoken, but strictly upheld conventions that create the fabric of a society whose violence is masked in routineness. Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is unsettling because it is a response to the violence inherent in seemingly trivial activities essential to human life that have become so mundane that they are no longer even considered violent; it reveals a reality in which violence has become normalized. Her rejection of meat and refusal to participate in the violence involved in producing meat is complicatedly motivated by a deep resentment against the social norms under which she has been oppressed her entire life, which are symbolically associated with the communal sharing of a hearty meal consisting of meat dishes. While some may dismiss Yeong-hye's ethical will due to her gradual lapse into mental illness, Yeong-hye's decision is never depicted as anything other than conscious and intentional:

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[26] While vegetarianism is becoming increasingly popular in Korea, the country is traditionally a heavily communal society in which eating meat, especially during the sharing of communal meals, is attached to a collective sense of unity.

she is “serene,” “firm,” and “cool[ly] self-possess[ed]” in carrying it out (Han 21).[27] Though the strange circumstances of her decision cause Mr. Cheong to voice his doubts over her sanity more than once, Yeong-hye is decidedly clear-minded about it; she responds to her husband in a “surprisingly clear” voice, speaking in “the same ordinary, calm tone of voice” with a “perfectly composed” expression that contrasts with Mr. Cheong’s confused outbursts and loud accusations (Han 16, 18).

The problematic dream that spurs Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism reveals the uncanniness of meat-eating as an everyday social practice in which violence is concealed. The dream begins in a series of images that invoke horror; Yeong-hye describes herself trying to escape a bloody, meat-filled barn in a dark, frozen woods, her mouth and clothes soaked with blood; when the woods open out, however, she finds herself in a springtime scene with families picnicking, children running about amidst the delicious smell of barbequed meat (Han 20). The bloodiness and violence of meat-eating in the barn contrast sharply with the “*singing and happy laughter*” of social bonding that meat-eating also represents (Han 20).[28] Yeong-hye is unable to reconcile the cheerful, social version of meat-consumption with her own secret meat-consumption in the barn, which she describes largely in terms of terror and guilt:

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[27] Caitlin E. Stobie likewise rejects the position that one cannot objectively classify an individual’s ethics if they are mentally ill; she writes that this view “privileges the very same carnophallogocentric rhetoric that regulates women’s bodies… without considering the complexities and ‘messiness’ of subjective experience” (788).

[28] Yoo Jin Choi conducts a psychoanalytical reading of this dream in her article, arguing that the barn and woods signify oppressive patriarchal social conditions, and that its connotations regarding the “return of the oppressed” tie into the “han” (grudge, resentment, grief) of Korean women (214).

But the fear: My clothes still wet with blood […] My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood. (Han 20)

[*하지만 난 무서웠어. 아직 내 옷에 피가 묻어 있었어. 아무도 날 보지 못한 사이 나무 뒤에 웅크려 숨었어. 내 손에 피가 묻어 있었어. 내 입에 피가 묻어 있었어. 그 헛간에서, 나는 떨어진 고깃덩어리를 주워먹었거든. 내 잇몸과 입천장에 물컹한 날고기를 문질러 붉은 피를 발랐거든.* (Han 19)]

The "*vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling*" Yeong-hye experiences in this dream can be seen as a reference to her lifelong familiarity with meat-eating, which is suddenly rendered strange by the realization of the violence it involves (Han 20). The uncanny realization of the violence in the familiar is a consistent theme throughout Yeong-hye's fragmented dream sensations and interior monologues, through which Yeong-hye increasingly comes to identify herself as a victim in her past and current social relationships. As such, she increasingly comes to align herself with the animals sacrificed and slaughtered for meat.

Yeong-hye's dream is linked to a series of interior monologues scattered throughout Part One in dense, broken fragments that reveal the depth of the trauma Yeong-hye has experienced from the structurally violent conditions of her life since childhood. From a psychological standpoint, Yeong-hye's nightmare can be explained as a traumatic response resulting from the accumulation of such violence. As the youngest of three children, Yeong-hye is revealed to have been the scapegoat child who bore the

brunt of her domineering, military veteran father's violent temper growing up.[29] In Part Three, narrated by Yeong-hye's older sister In-hye, In-hye recalls in the aftermath of Yeong-hye's mental deterioration that Yeong-hye had been "the only victim of their father's beatings," "docile and naïve," "unable to deflect their father's temper or put up any form of resistance," while In-hye herself had adopted the role of "hard-working, self-sacrificing eldest daughter" as a "survival tactic" (Han 162-163). Yeong-hye's vegetarianism and the dreams of inexplicable, repressed violence that initiate it appear to be an expression of the internalized fear and anger accumulated from abuse, which she describes elsewhere in her dream sensations: "*Intolerable loathing, so long suppressed. Loathing I've always tried to mask with affection. But now the mask is coming off*" (Han 36). The increasingly self-destructive behavior Yeong-hye engages in throughout the book can thus be seen as a psychological response to these long-repressed feelings of resentment from her childhood that continue into her adulthood.

Crucial is the way in which this violence is gendered; the politics of Yeong-hye's will to non-violence makes her subject to violating societal norms that are inevitably policed by men representing a patriarchal social order. Critics of *The Vegetarian* have been quick to point out the dynamics of patriarchal male violence and female resistance involved in Yeong-hye's rejection of meat. Yoo Jin Choi writes in a sociocultural

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[29] Narcissist parents often manage their dysregulated self-esteem by isolating family members from one another. Typically, they designate a golden child and one or more scapegoats; golden children are idealized while scapegoats are devalued and targeted with negative projection, criticism, rage, and sometimes physical abuse. Ultimately, both roles are damaging and generate false identities that deny and negate the child's authentic self, causing emotional and psychological trauma that can last a lifetime.

analysis of the novel that meat is symbolic of the historical cultural oppression Korean women have suffered within the male order, noting that Yeong-hye's resistance to meat becomes a resistance to male dominance and gender-based oppression (216). Cornelia Macsiniuc and Caitlin E. Stobie extend this dynamic beyond its sociocultural context when they posit meat-eating as symbolic of a more universal patriarchal order.[30] As a symbolic resistance against a patriarchal society, Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is perceived as an act of inexcusable disobedience by those around her, continuously evoking gendered forms of discipline from the men in her life.

This is demonstrated in Mr. Cheong's reaction to Yeong-hye's decision, as well as that of Yeong-hye's father; both men respond with anger and physical violence in attempts to subdue her "disobedience" and bring her back into compliance. For instance, Mr. Cheong resorts to raping Yeong-hye when she begins avoiding sex, and Yeong-hye's father violently forces a piece of meat into Yeong-hye's mouth during a family gathering. Rape and force-feeding become mirroring metaphors that represent a military patriarchal discipline. In the passage of Mr. Cheong's raping of Yeong-hye, Mr. Cheong explicitly compares Yeong-hye to a comfort woman and himself to a Japanese soldier, aligning this moment of domestic sexual violence with a specific, historic instance of sexual violence against women: "…she lay there in the dark staring up at the ceiling, her face black, as though she were a 'comfort woman' dragged in against her will, and I was

[30] Both Macsiniuc and Stobie present an analysis of vegetarianism in *The Vegetarian* based upon Adams's theory of the "sexual politics of meat" in which meat-eating is symbolic of a patriarchal order and eating habits are carriers of gender status in a way that is inherently sexualized.

the Japanese soldier demanding her services" (Han 38).[31] In a scene that clearly mirrors the domestic rape scene involving Mr. Cheong, Yeong-hye's father becomes angry at Yeong-hye's persistent refusal of meat at the family dinner; he slaps Yeong-hye across the face so violently that it draws blood, thrusts a piece of pork into her mouth, and "mash[es] the pork to a pulp on [Yeong-hye's] lips as she struggle[s] in agony" (Han 47).[32] The scene concludes with Yeong-hye slashing her wrist with a fruit knife, after which she is rushed to the hospital unconscious. Clearly, both Yeong-hye's father and husband view Yeong-hye's acts of refusal as her foregoing of her rightful social role and duties as a woman under a patriarchal society; thus their responses are to discipline and punish her, and force her back into compliance.

The literal and symbolic violation of Yeong-hye's body continues throughout the book as Yeong-hye's fantasy of becoming a tree develops over the course of Parts Two and Three and she is admitted into a psychiatric hospital. The culminating act of discipline in Part One (the father's force-feeding of meat into Yeong-hye's mouth) is mirrored in Part Three as the hospital staff attempt to forcefully inject Yeong-hye's

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[31] Comfort women, or military comfort women, were women and girls forced to provide sexual services to Japanese Imperial Army troops before and during World War II. Comfort women were held captive in brothels called "comfort stations" that were systematically installed and maintained by the Japanese government from 1932 to the end of WWII in 1945 all over Japanese-occupied areas. The original version of the book does not specify the identity of the rape perpetrator as specifically "Japanese," leaving room for a broader interpretation of the perpetrators of comfort women rape.

[32] Yeong-hye's father is a decorated veteran of the Vietnam War who largely defines himself in connection to his military past, and whose abusive patriarchal authority is illustrated in the fact that he used to whip his daughter over the calves up until she was eighteen years old (Han 37). Thus both the force-feeding incident and Mr. Cheong's rape invoke military violence as part of the much more transcendent and prosaic form of gendered violence that manifests within Yeong-hye's life.

emaciated body with gruel to keep her alive. Yeong-hye's violent physical resistance to the injection causes blood to spurt from her body in a scene reminiscent of the "blood ribbon[ing]" from her wrist after her suicide attempt in Part One (Han 48). Yet even in this advanced stage of both mental and physical deterioration, Yeong-hye is remarkably clear-minded about rejecting food in any and all forms; despite being in a near-deathlike comatose state induced by starvation, she demonstrates a sudden, "impossible" strength in resisting the tube being inserted into her nose, and "enunciates clearly" her resistance (Han 179). In both this scene and the scene with her father, Yeong-hye is compared to an animal in distress, rebelling against a system of gendered violence represented by meat-eating. Yeong-hye is thus repeatedly punished for her continued attempts to regain agency and control over her body as part of her political resistance to violence.

The political implications of Yeong-hye's will to transcend violence grow stronger as her mental and physical health deteriorate, which is especially evident in the final stages of her self-destruction in Part Three; yet Yeong-hye's symbolic refusal to participate in all forms of human violence by aspiring to become a non-violent tree ironically generates more acts of violence towards herself. What begins as an intentional political attempt to regain agency and control over her body inevitably results in destruction, placing Yeong-hye in line with a long tradition of literary portrayals of women who escape oppressive conditions through madness and self-annihilation.[33]

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[33] Bertha Mason from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and the unnamed protagonist of Charlotte Perkin Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1982) can be seen as archetypes.

Macsiniuc posits Yeong-hye's resistance within this tradition when she writes that although Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is a "form of dissidence from the patriarchal script," "True freedom would lie in the total exteriority to such a system" (111, 113); thus Yeong-hye's "only way of escaping" the system is not by opposing it, but rather by extracting herself from it (113). Such a view implies that Yeong-hye's foreshadowed death is liberating and empowered.

Despite the subversiveness of Yeong-hye's vegetarian journey, however, Han complicates an optimistic reading of the ending through a deliberate portrayal of the gruesome and bloody harm that Yeong-hye's body undergoes during the process. Aspiring to become a tree does not lead to transcendence, neither for Yeong-hye nor those around her; on the contrary, Yeong-hye's choices have a daunting effect on her sister and caretaker, In-hye, who sinks into a profound depression as she watches Yeong-hye deteriorate. Again, what remains in *The Vegetarian*'s final portrayal of Yeong-hye is an overpowering sense of the inescapable structural violence that consumes the lives of its characters. As demonstrated previously in the military violence invoked by both Yeong-hye's husband and father, violence is a structural and pervasive legacy that continues into Yeong-hye's daily modern life; sexual violence, in particular, is persistent throughout history.

As an extension of her political resistance in Part One, Part Two features Yeong-hye engaging in a subversive, taboo-breaking intercourse with her brother-in-law. The agency Yeong-hye exerts in this intercourse, as well as the sense of liberation she experiences during it, allow for a reading of the scene as empowering for Yeong-hye,

and its private, sexual nature establishes it as a particularly individualist version of empowerment. Yet any discussion of the sexual agency and liberation Yeong-hye experiences in this scene must be situated within a reality in which her body is treated like a piece of meat in a symbolic patriarchal order. The scene is significantly more complicated than Yeong-hye's other encounters with sexual and gendered violence. For example, it is not as straightforward as the scene in which Yeong-hye is raped by her husband or forced to eat meat by her father, as both are instances in which her own will towards resistance is undeniably clear. In Yeong-hye's encounter with the brother-in-law, the status of her desire and consent initially appear coherent with the desires and purposes of the brother-in-law. The brother-in-law transforms Yeong-hye into an extraordinary and subversive work of art, painting her naked body with flowers, by which Yeong-hye is sexually aroused. Engaging in the brother-in-law's project stalls the dreams of violence she continues to have after her divorce, corresponding to her will towards non-violence and leading to a temporary sense of empowerment.

Many of the complications that arise in determining individual sexual empowerment derive from the fact that empowerment is fundamentally seen as a process associated with the regaining of power as a means for the improvement of one's life within structural confines.[34] Feminist scholar Lorraine M. Gutierrez defines empowerment as the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so

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[34] Empowerment scholar Marc A. Zimmerman, in his synthesis of various definitions of the term, establishes that empowerment is a "process in which efforts to exert control are central," and that "participation with others to achieve goals, efforts to gain access to resources, and some critical understanding of the sociopolitical environment" are basic components of the construct (44).

that individuals can "take action to improve their life situations," identifying both micro and macro level applications (149).[35] The different levels of empowerment are generally understood to be inherently connected; individual and community empowerment are mutually interdependent.[36] Similarly, women's empowerment is defined by Andrea Cornwall as a "radical approach concerned with transforming power relations in favour of women's rights and greater equality between women and men," with an emphasis on the "essential sociality" and relationality of the concept (343, 344). In short, the centrality of power and control to the conception of women's empowerment is primarily based on structural gender inequalities rather than individual self-assertion.

The extent to which individual choice is empowering thus crucially depends on the degree to which they are validated within social conditions. Individual resistance or consent can hardly be viewed as empowering in and of themselves, particularly when it does not correspond to some level of change and improvement in social circumstances. This is a dilemma when it comes to the realm of sexuality because of its particularly individualist construction.[37] Catharine MacKinnon asserts that a feminist theory of

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[35] According to Gutierrez's description, on the macro level, empowerment is often defined literally as the process of increasing collective political power, whereas on the micro level, it is often described as the development of a personal feeling of increased power or control without change in structural arrangements (150).

[36] Zimmerman writes: "Individual, organization, and community empowerment are mutually interdependent and are both a cause and a consequence of each other" (46).

[37] This issue defines the debate between liberal and radical feminists. Liberal feminists emphasize women's ability to maintain their equality through their own actions and choices. Radical feminists, on the other hand, believe that the fundamental cause of women's oppression is the unequal gender relations in a patriarchal social order.

sexuality that "seeks to understand women's situation in order to change it" must first "identify and criticize the construct 'sexuality' within its situated social meanings" (317).[38] Accordingly, the sexual nature of the brother-in-law's desire for Yeong-hye and the sexual agency Yeong-hye exerts within the intercourse are embedded within a social reality in which sexuality remains constructed under conditions of male supremacy. The violence Yeong-hye experiences from male figures throughout the first part of the book hardly disguises such conditions; it is clear that gender inequality is normalized into everyday life, thus Yeong-hye's resistance disrupts that normality. To a certain extent, Yeong-hye's sexual liaison in Part Two appears liberating because it is such a radical deviation from normality. Moreover, contrary to the attempts of Yeong-hye's husband, father, and doctor to conform her to a normativity she finds violent, the brother-in-law's exploitation of Yeong-hye seems to be in line with her nonviolent will.

Eventually, however, it is clear that Yeong-hye's sexual uninhibitedness in the intercourse with her brother-in-law fails to be empowering. Although Yeong-hye's desires motivate her consent, when they are acted on they fail to meet her fantasy, and her subsequent withdrawal of consent fails to stop the brother-in-law from continuing on. Isolated from the rest of Part Two, the intercourse itself seems to be initiated by Yeong-hye and motivated by her desire to transcend violence; when the brother-in-law asks Yeong-hye to take part in his video art project, she consents non-verbally by

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[38] In their book *Hard Bargains: The Politics of Sex* (1998), Linda Hirschman and Jane Larson similarly maintain that sex between men and women must be understood as a political relationship despite mostly taking place in the private sphere.

voluntarily showing up to his studio. Throughout the course of multiple filming sessions Yeong-hye expresses her admiration for the flowers the brother-in-law paints on her body; in a session involving the brother-in-law's coworker J as a male counterpart to Yeong-hye, she even concedes to the brother-in-law that she is "wet" with desire for the painted flowers (Han 113). Yeong-hye's focus on the painted flowers clearly represent her aspiration towards a non-human, non-violent form of being which later develops into a full-fledged fantasy of becoming a tree in Part Three. Because Yeong-hye refuses to have sex without the flowers, the brother-in-law arrives at Yeong-hye's house after having his own body painted, and the two engage in multiple acts of sexual intercourse during which the status of Yeong-hye's desire is again revealed by her "soaking wet" vagina (Han 119).

Yet the commencement of the events indicates a change in Yeong-hye's sexual desire, which in turn reveals her lack of power within the actual sexual intercourse. As a mode of empowerment, sexual consent is generally assumed to be active and continuous, yet Yeong-hye demonstrates a consent that is passive and mutable; the concept of sexual empowerment rarely theorizes how consent can be performed under exploitative structural conditions. It is within this vein that feminist sociologist Nicola Gavey contends that "feeling empowered is not necessarily the same as *being* empowered," suggesting that the concept of empowerment may not be the most useful theoretical tool

when it comes to understanding women's sexuality (719).[39] As the brother-in-law films their intercourse, Yeong-hye becomes distressed; bursting into tears and gnashing her teeth, she screams and yells for him to "stop" (Han 121). This is clearly a withdrawal of her initial consent as she apparently realizes that the intercourse does not, after all, correspond to her desires; yet she does not reserve the power to disengage herself from the situation at this stage. Yeong-hye's violent response in this moment contrasts with that of the brother-in-law, whose gratification of desire during the intercourse is unequivocally described as an "unendurable sense of satiation" (Han 120). In the aftermath of this intercourse Yeong-hye wonders to herself out loud, "Will the dreams stop now?", confirming that her involvement was an attempt at transcendence and that her ends are far from having been as utterly gratified as those of the brother-in-law (Han 121). Yet the events that occur subsequently suggest otherwise: later that night In-hye arrives at Yeong-hye's apartment, discovers the video of the two having sex, and calls paramedics on them both. In Part Three, these events have led to In-hye's divorce and Yeong-hye's permanent confinement to the psychiatric hospital.

Taken in context, the entire video art project is a sexualized enactment of the brother-in-law's own attempt to regain control over his life; the sexual intercourse, which is a microcosm of his project, is dominated and controlled by the brother-in-law's desire rather than that of Yeong-hye. Tellingly, the brother-in-law's fixation on Yeong-

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[39] See also Stuart and Donahgue (2011) and Meenagh (2017) for a discussion of the dilemmas in conceiving individual choice as the bottom-line value of empowerment within a neoliberal, postfeminist context that assumes that systematic and structural factors contributing to women's oppression have largely been removed.

hye takes place in the midst of his own profound midlife crisis; dismal reflections regarding his life, his work, and his marriage crucially intersect with his obsession with Yeong-hye, indicating that he perceives Yeong-hye as a way of escape from the oppressive realities of his midlife. The opening scene of Part Two, for instance, portrays his acute sense of disappointment with his current marriage with In-hye. Having viewed a performance with a similar flower body-paint concept, he disqualifies it as being "overtly sexual" (64), "showy" (64), and "promiscuous" (65), claiming that he is in search for something "quieter, deeper, more private" (64); this preference directly mirrors his preference for his sister-in-law over his wife. He is left "vaguely dissatisfied" by In-hye's affability and "pleasant, open features," whereas Yeong-hye's plainness, "blunt[ness]," and "uncouth[ness]" is everything he desires with In-hye (Han 71).

His dissatisfaction with the show's performance in the opening scene overlaps with his dissatisfaction with In-hye, their marriage, and later, his own body, artwork, and identity, reflecting a crisis of masculinity in a society that defines it in narrow terms of physical and economic potency. He reflects on the fact that he has disregarded In-hye's wishes in choosing to view the performance alone that Sunday afternoon rather than spend family time at home. The oppressiveness he feels towards his wife and home, which keeps him from leaving the train when it arrives at his house, is ultimately linked to the oppressive insecurities he feels towards himself; staring at his reflection in the train window he has to "force himself to accept that the middle-aged man, who had a baseball cap concealing his receding hairline and a baggy sweater at least attempting to do the same for his paunch, was himself" (65). He is "revolted" by the past ten or so

years' worth of his work, and reflects that his identity as an artist is "quietly turning its back on him" (Han 76). His vision of Yeong-hye and the vivid, flower-painted images, which mark a significant turn from the monochrome and "ascetic" tone of his previous work, are established in connection to the deep-set insecurities dominating his identity (Han 117). He continues to express such insecurities throughout the book, being self-conscious about his balding crown and paunch and questioning his own morality; his self-disgust fuels such impulses as to "spit at those red, lined eyes" and "pummel his cheeks until the blood showed through beneath his black beard, and smash his ugly lips, swollen with desire, with the sole of his shoe" (70).

As an inferiority complex deriving from an oppressive construction of masculinity, the brother-in-law's insecurities find release in the form of violence towards less powerful members of society, mirroring the actions of Mr. Cheong to the extent that the two become interchangeable perpetrators of male violence. While Mr. Cheong rapes Yeong-hye in an instance compared to a comfort woman being raped by a Japanese soldier, the brother-in-law forces In-hye into intercourse during which he "shut his eyes and tried to block out his wife's face," "push[ing] himself toward the image of [Yeong-hye]" (Han 89). In-hye's perspective on the assault is explained in Part Three, wherein she narrates that she had been vaginally bleeding for close to a month at the time of the event. The middle-aged male doctor's removal of the polyp that caused In-hye's bleeding, described in terms of "cold," "shame," and "sharp pain" (Han 167), is mirrored in the abrupt and one-sided sexual intercourse initiated by her husband soon after; unaware of her surgery, he asks her to "put up with it for a minute" despite her protests

and the "pain" and "shame" she feels afterwards (Han 169). In-hye's vaginal bleeding and domestic rape is linked to Yeong-hye's violation in this scene as In-hye associates her own "blood-soaked pants" with "the way in which the blood from Yeong-hye's wrist had spurted out into the air" (Han 166). In Part Three, In-hye's victimization within this structure increasingly mirrors that of Yeong-hye.

The brother-in-law's fetishization of the thumb-sized Mongolian mark Yeong-hye bears on her upper-left buttock can be seen as a reflection of his need for self-assertion.[40] The knowledge of this mark, gained from a casual comment by In-hye, inspires a vision of a man and woman engaging in sexual intercourse with their bodies covered in flowers. While the brother-in-law himself narrates that the causality between the two images is "inexplicabl[e]" and "beyond comprehension" (Han 67), it becomes clear that his vision centers on the stoic, transcendent, "vegetal" lack of desire in the painted bodies juxtaposed against the carnal nature of the sexual intercourse (Han 90). This lack of desire is a quality that the brother-in-law recognizes as being perfectly embodied by Yeong-hye in her steadfast will towards non-violence. Later, when he actually sees Yeong-hye's Mongolian mark, he is reminded of "something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or else perhaps a mark of photosynthesis," which, to his surprise, is "more vegetal than sexual" (Han 90). The non-sexual quality of the Mongolian mark, associated with infanthood but which Yeong-hye retains in adulthood,

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[40] Mongolian marks or spots are congenital birthmarks that commonly appear on infants of Asian or African ethnic backgrounds. They are flat, grayish-blue or green in color (resembling a bruise), caused by some pigment that did not make it to the top layer during the formation of the baby's skin. Most Mongolian marks fade away within the first year of life, but sometimes persist indefinitely.

is apparently what arouses his desire; its bruise-like appearance seems to signify to the brother-in-law a lack that he feels entitled to fill, both literally and metaphorically, by capturing the image of their unending sexual intercourse on film. His representation of Yeong-hye in his artwork infantilizes her by reducing her into an icon that signifies the qualities he fetishizes in her birthmark. In this regard, the "vegetal" quality Yeong-hye radiates in her will towards non-violence is appropriated by the brother-in-law; it is he who projects his own lust for Yeong-hye into this quality, adding the "sexual" to her vegetal image as part of his artistic vision.[41]

Additionally, that Yeong-hye's fantasy of becoming a tree, which becomes the ultimate manifestation of her non-violent resistance, is initiated by the brother-in-law's desire is a crucial but easily overlooked aspect of the novel. Although Yeong-hye's resistance is initiated by her dreams of violence, her desire to transcend those dreams specifically via taking the form of a plant is actually an idea first presented to her by the brother-in-law's video art concept of flowers painted on her nude body.[42] The impact of the brother-in-law's intervention is especially poignant in consideration of the fact that Yeong-hye is doing much better both mentally and physically after her divorce from Mr. Cheong; she has gained weight after being admitted to the hospital and eaten well while staying with In-hye's family (Han 81); following her doctor's orders to avoid isolation,

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[41] Sneja Gunew writes that the brother-in-law's fixation on these birthmark-inspired images is a "proxy projection of lust" that is actually a materialization of his own uncontrollable lust for Yeong-hye (10).

[42] Ioana Alexandrescu likewise suggests that it is unclear whether Yeong-hye would have ended up needing to become a plant in the absence of her brother-in-law's fantasies of vegetation, arguing that the painted flowers are an active display of the brother-in-law's psyche on Yeong-hye's body (130).

she even interviews for a job at a department store (Han 83). Yeong-hye's capacity for independence is something that strikes the brother-in-law when he first approaches her about his project; he notes with surprise that "she wasn't as far gone as all that" (Han 83). It is after her encounter with the brother-in-law that her irrevocable downfall begins.

The exploitative sexual encounter between Yeong-hye and her brother-in-law is framed within an ideological structure in which Yeong-hye becomes sexually fetishized and idealized in the psyche of the brother-in-law. Once she becomes his muse, she is integrated into an ideological power structure in which she becomes a representation constructed by his artistic gaze. One of the basic assumptions of feminist criticism is that all representation is inherently ideological; structurally, the sexual violence Yeong-hye experiences in her encounter with the brother-in-law is based upon the ideological operations of power within representations of women in art, commonly conceptualized as the male gaze, which construct women as icons and objects of male sexual desire.[43] Again, the brother-in-law's artistic purposes are indistinguishable from his personal sexual obsession, and it is clear throughout Part Two that it is the brother-in-law's desire for Yeong-hye rather than Yeong-hye's desire for non-violence that dominates the sexual intercourse between them. The brother-in-law's video art can be seen as an appropriation of Yeong-hye's desires, integrating her will towards non-violence into a larger narrative that she does not control and that has nothing to do with her desires.

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[43] Jill Dolan maintains that all representation is inherently ideological, and that ideology in performances often assume a "particular way of looking" fraught with gender bias even as they suggest a "pure, universal way of looking" (44).

Thus it is not the status of Yeong-hye's individual desire or consent that determines whether Yeong-hye is exploited in this scene; rather, it is the structural elements through which Yeong-hye is victimized despite her individual agency.

It is important that art is the medium through which the brother-in-law's personal sexual desires for Yeong-hye are framed because the structural framework of art provides a ruse of transcendence. As a video artist, the brother-in-law's artwork is not only a means for him to escape reality, but also to critique it; the images he creates prior to his project involving Yeong-hye are clearly a projection of his own desire for transcendence.[44] His work is politically wrought, consisting of video-taped recordings of images he captures from everyday life with a camcorder he carries around with him, which portray images of subjective violence such as "politicians' faces, ruined bridges and department stores, vagrants, and the tears of children who suffered from incurable diseases" (Han 75). Sometimes they are from advertisements and media clips, "images related to things he loathed and thought of as lies," edited into an "impressionistic montage with music and graphic subtitles" (Han 75). Eventually, it becomes clear that the brother-in-law's art is particularly concerned with images of flight that represent his own desire to escape the violent reality portrayed in his work. During her narration in Part Three, In-hye recalls a moment in which her husband had gotten excited about an

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[44] Video art is a modern art form that emerged during the late 1960s that utilizes the visual elements of cinematic film without relying on many of its conventions. It draws on a diverse range of art movements, theoretical ideas, and technological advances, as well as political and social activism. Emerging from a period of dynamic social, economic and cultural change, video art was formally and politically radical, influenced by movements and ideas from performance art, body art, experimental film, and a diverse range of other cross-disciplinary cultural activities and theoretical discourses (Meigh-Andrews 2).

idea for a video featuring their son, Ji-woo; he conceptualizes a piece with In-hye and Ji-woo dressed in shabby clothes walking across a lawn, animated flowers and butterflies springing from the toddler's footsteps (Han 139). The fantasy sense of hope within this image is in stark contrast to the reality of their family dynamics; the brother-in-law is portrayed as being too preoccupied in his artwork to actually be present in the lives of his wife and son. The futility of his images is implied in In-hye's comment in Part Three: "All those scenes of flight he'd included in his videos; and yet, when he needed it most, such flight had proved beyond him" (Han 165). The temporary and transient nature of the video medium reflects this sense of futility.[45]

While his art is a medium through which the brother-in-law portrays his own tragic struggles with reality, it is important to understand that it simultaneously becomes a medium through which gendered ideology manifests. The brother-in-law's profound struggles, though sympathetically portrayed, are deflected onto Yeong-hye in his desire for transcendence. The structural objectification of women in art has been largely discussed in terms of the male gaze, a concept articulated by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in the mid-1970s.[46] Much of feminist film theory has accepted Mulvey's premise that dominant narrative cinema's visual pleasures are unconsciously structured

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[45] According to Chris Meigh-Andrews, the "impermanent and ephemeral nature" of the video medium appealed to many early practitioners who wished to avoid the influences and commercialism of the art market and considered working "live" as a political and artistic statement in itself (6).

[46] See Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), in which she argues that an asymmetry of power between the sexes is a controlling force in cinema, and that the male gaze is constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer.

upon patriarchal ideas and values, reflecting and satisfying the male unconscious.[47] Feminist theater and film critic Jill Dolan has extended this premise to theater, writing on the ways in which the structural reality of performance is ideologically marked by the male gaze (41). Issues of gender and sexuality surrounding the representation of women, particularly the female nude, have been explored in art and visual culture preceding the coining of the term "male gaze"; art critic John Berger, for example, addresses the subject of female sexual objectification in the arts in his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972), defining the female nude in terms of politics rather than aesthetics.[48] Feminist art historian Linda Nochlin describes the ways in which ideological operations of power regarding the superiority of men manifest in representations of women in art, masked as natural and logical. Problematizing the way in which the sexual positioning of women in art is construed as part of the neutral or aesthetic fabric of the art work, Nochlin states that "any representation of woman as sexual object, far from being natural or simply 'given,' is itself a construction" (28):

> …[I]n a world in which the power structure was such that both men and women equally could be represented clothed or unclothed in a variety of poses and

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[47] Critics such as E. Ann Kaplan and Mary Ann Doane, in addition to Mulvey suggest that film offers visual pleasure by objectifying women in the narrative for the active male protagonist, with whom the male spectator is meant to identify. In addition, Gaylyn Studlar writes that much of the writing on spectatorial pleasure has been linked to the representation of the female as a masochistic object for the male's scopophilia/voyeurism (5).

[48] Berger notes that "according to usage and conventions, which are at last being questioned, but have by no means been overcome—men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (45).

> positions without any implications of domination or submission—in a world of total and, so to speak, unconscious equality, the female nude would not be problematic. (Nochlin 30)

In other words, there is a crucial distinction between the erotic itself and a male-controlled discourse of the erotic, in which male-fetishist images of vulnerable and seductive young women are constituted as universally erotic.

Following the logic of the male-controlled discourse of the erotic, it is clear that Yeong-hye's "vegetal" lack of the erotic is itself eroticized in the brother-in-law's artistic vision. The brother-in-law's fetishization of the vegetal is not transcendent of its embodiment in Yeong-hye's physique; rather, the artistic vision's entrenchment in the male gaze is apparent in its focus on Yeong-hye despite involving both male and female figures. The brother-in-law structures the video in two parts; the first, "Mongolian Mark 1—Flowers of Night and Flowers of Day" consists of footage of Yeong-hye's body being painted by his hand, reflecting the "sacred" eroticism the brother-in-law himself feels in the process (Han 95); the second, "Mongolian Mark 2," filmed at Yeong-hye's apartment, contains footage of their two nude, painted bodies engaging in sexual intercourse. While it is possible to interpret the brother-in-law's inclusion in the second piece as an instance in which he is made vulnerable even as he fetishizes Yeong-hye's form, the scopophilic rendering of the first video, which focuses on Yeong-hye's birthmark and even includes a close-up shot of her face, reduces Yeong-hye's entire

body to the brother-in-law's fetish, framing the entire project under the male gaze.[49] It is clear from the beginning of the brother-in-law's conception of the project that the male counterpart sexually dominates the female; the vision is described in abusive imagery as he sketches "the faceless man with his arms around her neck, looking as if he were attempting to throttle her, who was thrusting himself into her" (Han 68).[50] Moreover, as Dolan points out, a naked female body is "laden with connotation, the most prevalent of which is sex object," while a naked male body does not have the same connotations (52).[51] Yeong-hye is clearly represented in the video as an icon; she and the images produced in the brother-in-law's work are framed as objects of the brother-in-law's own desire.

Accordingly, in a moment that recalls MacKinnon's assertion that pornography is a means through which sexuality is socially constructed, the brother-in-law continuously agonizes over the fact that his visions are pornographic (MacKinnon 319).[52] His artistic vision of Yeong-hye is indistinguishable from his personal sexual obsession with her. At

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[49] Stobie, for example, writes that when the brother-in-law's body is imagined as a plant, the homology between vegetal and human sexual organs renders him defenseless to Yeong-hye's and the reader's gaze (796).

[50] Stobie suggests that the term "denuding," used in Han's novel to describe the brother-in-law's artistic vision of Yeong-hye, implies that "the racialized and sexualized woman is 'a clear object' to be 'conquered'" (795).

[51] According to Dolan: "The male body does not signify the history of commodification that the female body represents, and in a representational exchange set up for male visual pleasure, the nude male is not the object of the exchange" (55).

[52] The gendered power dynamics of pornography have been established by feminist scholars such as Catharine MacKinnon, who maintain that pornography is a means through which the social reality of male dominance and hierarchy are sexualized.

one point he even recognizes that Yeong-hye's desires have nothing to do with his own, reproaching himself "for having used [Yeong-hye] as a kind of mental pornography, when she simply had an innocent wish to be naked" (Han 84). At the same time, he is determined to make his own desires a reality in the form of his video artwork as "the only way out of [his] hell of desire" (Han 85). Yeong-hye's own "innocent wish to be naked," as part of her desire for purity and transcendence, happens to coincide with a situation that has already been constructed by the brother-in-law as an artistic and erotic image with which he becomes obsessed for his own purposes.[53] Ultimately, the individual sexual agency Yeong-hye exerts over her body in her participation in the brother-in-law's video art is not the only factor to be considered; the larger question is whether it is possible for women to subject themselves to the male gaze in some transcendent way despite its entrenchment in male-controlled structures.

In an analogical reference to the social and historical context of power dynamics in sexual relations between men and women, Alexandrescu compares Yeong-hye to the mythological figure Daphne on the basis of their common transformation into plants as a way of "protection from men," writing that Yeong-hye's attempted transformation into a tree, like Daphne's transformation, can be read as a "silent response to what she feels to

[53] Stobie similarly notes in her article "Sibling Species in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*" that Yeong-hye's frustrated attempts to exert control over her body merely confirm the brother-in-law's fetishization of her physique (795).

be the hurtful attitude of a man towards her" (131).[54] Although Daphne is a Western figure, the gendered power dynamics portrayed in the myth are applicable to *The Vegetarian* as a transnational text; Yeong-hye's suffering from the "hurtful attitude of a man" in the book is metaphoric of the structural gendered violence that pervades her life, which both Yeong-hye and In-hye repeatedly experience from the men around them. Yet neither Daphne nor Yeong-hye gain true protection from men in their transformation into trees in the sense that their images as trees are, respectively, appropriated by the men they desire to escape.[55] Like Daphne, Yeong-hye's desire to become a tree is exploited by the brother-in-law under the pretense of his creation of art, which becomes a projection of his own desires. The men in Han's novel are hardly all-powerful gods; rather, Han portrays a reality in which they are clearly victims of oppression themselves. Yet the novel's reality is permeated with structures of violence against women; meat-eating becomes representative of this culture, and once more reflects the ways in which violence is deflected onto the most vulnerable members of a patriarchal social order.

At the beginning of the novel, Yeong-hye has a part-time job filling in speech bubbles for a comics publisher, which resembles the kind of limited agency she has in

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[54] Daphne, the daughter of Earth and the River Ladon in the Arcadian version of the myth, or of the River Peneus in its Thessalian version, awoke Apollo's love but would not let herself be seduced by him, preferring a perpetual maidenhood. When Apollo pursued her in order to impose his love, she asked for help and this resulted in her transformation into a laurel tree, escaping in this way the god's lust. During her transformation into a tree, Daphne's body was covered with bark, her hair turned into leaves, and she got planted in the earth. Apollo made a crown out of her laurel leaves that he would wear from then on, and awarded a laurel wreath to the winner of the Pythian Games, held every four years in honor of Apollo.

[55] The laurel wreath made from Daphne's leaves become a symbol of Apollo, awarded to the winner of the Pythian Games held in the god's honor

her social role as a woman in the outside world; she is not in charge of what she puts into the speech bubbles, but is rather expected to follow a larger social script. Ultimately, this part-time job is not unlike the role she fulfils in the brother-in-law's art project, as the enactment of her desires becomes integrated into the brother-in-law's larger script, which has nothing to do with her desires. Yet what little agency Yeong-hye exerts in her comics job and in her participation in the video art is lost within the closely regulated confines of the psychiatric hospital, where her mental stability collapses for good as she withdraws into total silence. Before her involvement in the brother-in-law's project, Yeong-hye dutifully avoids "any kind of job where [she] would be left alone with [her] own thoughts" (Han 83). Ironically, the events leading up to Part Three leave her more isolated with her own thoughts than she ever was before, which results in the beginning of her self-destructive attempts to become a tree. Convinced that the transformation is working, Yeong-hye triumphantly tells In-hye that she is not an animal anymore and that soon, "words and thoughts will all disappear" (Han 159).

The notion of sexual empowerment can be dangerous because it often screens sexual vulnerability. Unlike the other instances of violence Yeong-hye undergoes throughout the book, most prominently her rape by her husband, which is compared to an explicit instance of horrific sexual violence, Yeong-hye's rape by her brother-in-law appears consensual and liberating. The concept of the project, of course, is transcendence, the idea being that the vegetal lack of desire Yeong-hye radiates renders the image of two flower-painted bodies having sex into a work of art. Yet for the brother-in-law, the project is all about his desires, and the sexual gratification he obtains

from the intercourse remains the important part. The extent to which the sense of empowerment Yeong-hye obtains within a project dominated by the male gaze can be considered valid remains questionable. The issue at heart is the seemingly empowered guise that sexual objectification can take, in which the purported empowerment of women colludes with the male gaze. In the end, resistance does not result in empowerment within structural conditions. Yeong-hye's sexual intercourse with the brother-in-law demonstrates the larger dynamics of her political vegetarianism throughout the book, in which her seemingly empowered desires lead to results contrary to those desires and ultimately coincide with the structures she resists.

CHAPTER IV

MASCULINE FAILURE AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA IN JUNOT DÍAZ'S *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO**

Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is widely studied and celebrated for its portrayal of colonialism, dictatorship, and transnational migration from the Dominican Republic; in particular, it is known for connecting individual trauma with a larger national trauma through its depiction of sexualized colonial violence as an intergenerational curse called the *fukú*. This connection is made through the novel's main narrator, Yunior, who weaves together the stories of the marginalized Dominican subjects traumatized during the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo.[56] Rape is the central thread that ties individual trauma to historic trauma; throughout the novel, Yunior's recounting of Trujillo's regime of sexual violence becomes a way of articulating an unspoken, personal rape trauma. In both cases, trauma is induced by a failed masculinity within a Dominican culture that condones the hypersexualization of both women and men in the name of patriarchal privilege. Thus Díaz establishes

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[56] Rafael Leónidas Trujillo was a Dominican politician, soldier and dictator, who ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1961. His regime is known as "one of the longest, most damaging U.S.-backed dictatorships in the Western Hemisphere" (Díaz 3). Díaz describes Trujillo in length in a footnote in his novel as "one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators," a "portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato" who "came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master" (Díaz 2).

hypersexualization as an indication of trauma, the result and effect of rape culture. In this chapter, however, I argue that Díaz simultaneously critiques and embodies masculine failure through his hypersexualization of the female characters of *Oscar Wao*. Although hypersexualization renders both men and women victims, the hypersexualization of the female characters, specifically, reveals and exposes a rape culture in which violence is structurally and symbolically deflected onto the bodies of women.

In the novel, the legacy of colonialism and dictatorship is personalized and modernized through the younger generation of the Dominican diaspora. National and historical trauma is linked to personal trauma through the stories of Oscar, Lola, and Yunior, whose personal struggles become political as they mirror their forebears' struggles in an era of national and historical violence. The novel's Dominican-American protagonist Oscar is born in New Jersey as a result of his mother's migration, and the events of the novel take place during the characters' movement between New Jersey and the Dominican Republic. Oscar's story is interwoven with those of his sister, Lola, his mother, Belicia (Beli), and his grandfather, Dr. Abelard Louis Cabral. The narrator, Yunior, is Oscar's friend and Lola's on-and-off boyfriend, who meets the siblings during their college years at Rutgers University and ends up documenting Oscar's life and death, a task that involves uncovering the experiences of generations of Oscar's family as well the Dominican Republic's national history of dictatorship and colonialism. Beli and Abelard, as contemporaries of Trujillo, suffer direct and indirect persecution resulting from his regime; Oscar, on the other hand, who is born in New Jersey as the

result of migration, is persecuted his entire life by his failure to fit the standards of a hypersexual Dominican masculinity that affects him across borders. Despite being hopelessly obsessed with beautiful women, he is constantly bullied and overlooked due to his "nerdiness"—his enthusiasm for science-fiction and fantasy genres—and his obesity. While he is characteristically optimistic, the condemnation (both social and self-inflicted) that results from his failure to conform to sociocultural standards of masculinity causes multiple bouts of suicidal depression. Clearly, the curse that manifests as the violence of dictatorship during Trujillo's regime also manifests itself in Oscar's life as a rape culture that promotes hypermasculinity. Both Trujillo's regime and Oscar's contemporary rape culture operate as systems that punish and overpower individuals who defy them.

The national and historical violence of the *Trujillato* thus continues into the modern day through a systematic rape culture. This system victimizes men as well as women by perpetuating a model of toxic masculinity that affects both sexes. The origins of the *fukú*'s hold on Oscar's family, which lie in Abelard's refusal to allow his daughter to be raped by Trujillo, is mirrored across borders and generations in Oscar's defiance of standards of masculinity in the United States. In this regard, Trujillo's regime of violence against women is linked to a contemporary rape culture of toxic masculinity that causes men to perpetrate sexual violence against women. Albeit in opposite ways, Oscar and Yunior are both affected by this culture: Oscar is victimized by his failure to conform, but Yunior's struggles come from having internalized these standards in a way that renders him unable to not conform. Yunior compulsively cheats on Lola and

mistreats Oscar, and Yunior himself suffers from the trauma generated by his own toxic behavior. The novel ends with a picture of a recovering Yunior, who nonetheless continues to pay the price for past toxicity through feelings of hopeless longing and regret towards Lola as well as intermittent guilt about Oscar. This sense of irresolution mirrors Díaz's implication (conveyed through the dialogue of the DC Comics series, *Watchmen*) that the *fukú* legacy continues: "'In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends'" (Díaz 341).[57]

Despite its multiplicity of perspectives and characters, the vast majority of the book is filtered through Yunior's unique narrative voice, a subversive mixture of English and Spanish slang that frequently invokes the genre fiction with which protagonist Oscar is obsessed.[58] Much of the novel's scholarship focuses on the subversiveness of Yunior's narration, which Monica Hanna describes as a "hybrid narrative model," as well as the potential problems of this narration (498); for example, Elena Machado Sáez argues that Yunior's narration embodies a heteronormative rationale that ultimately silences Oscar's "points of queer Otherness" (523). Díaz himself has referred to Yunior's narration as a form of dictatorship, stating in an interview with Katherine Miranda: "What's ironic is

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[57] This irresolution is confirmed in Díaz's most recent work, *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012), in which Yunior reappears as a character mourning the loss of his fiancé, who has ended their relationship after discovering that Yunior has cheated on her over fifty times. Maja Horn links the "negrita from Salcedo" Yunior is married to at the end of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to the "bad-ass salcedeña" that appears in *This Is How You Lose Her* (134).

[58] Oscar is described as a "fat sci-fi reading nerd" (Díaz 19) who frames his experience in terms of genre fiction; Yunior catalogues Oscar's nerdiness in the following often quoted passage: "Could write in Elvish, could speak Cakobsa, could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai, and a Lensman in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee, and was a role-playing game fanatic […] Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens" (Díaz 22).

that Trujillo is this horror in this book, but the readers don't even recognize that the person telling the story is Trujillo with a different mask." Though Yunior focuses on the vast history of the nation as exemplified by the specific experiences of Oscar and his family, his relation to these events is framed by his personal relationship to Oscar and Lola, and the struggles with masculinity Yunior undergoes in both relationships. In this regard, Yunior's narration of national history is much more personal than it initially appears. His documentation of Oscar's life and the generational trauma with which it is associated becomes the ground in which his deep inner grappling with his own masculinity plays out. This personal, private battle is at the core of the novel.

Masculine trauma is a central concern in Díaz's other works, including his first book, *Drown* (1996), which portrays the ways in which masculine identity is crucially shaped by the effects of migration. A young Yunior appears as the main character and prominent narrator in this collection, allowing for an interconnected understanding of *Drown* and *Oscar Wao*. In his study of Latin American masculinity in *Drown*, John Riofrio investigates the effect of the potential trauma which migration has on the male, working class psyche. As a process affected by trauma, immigrant Dominican masculinity can be seen as a reflection of socially oppressive circumstances that cause men to reproduce the violence of those circumstances; for example, Riofrio suggests that the adolescent boys in *Drown* engage in a violent hypersexuality as a means to compensate for the humiliation of poverty and other socially oppressive circumstances, a process by which "oppression over women and girls functions as a direct means towards the assumption of patriarchal privilege" (27). Thus Díaz's conception of masculinity

crucially involves interaction with the feminine, a category that includes those who are feminized in their marginalization or "otherness," as well as women. Riofrio thus establishes that masculine hypersexuality can be conceptualized as a traumatic response that unfolds through the failure of empathetic connection with the feminine. While this interpretation is compelling, it seems, against real world evidence to the contrary, to condemn victims of oppression to themselves become oppressors, excusing perpetrators of aggression because it can be explained away by previous trauma.

In one of his talks at Davidson College, Díaz himself addressed the source of the Caribbean hypersexuality depicted in his stories as the literal and metaphoric rape and subjugation of colonialism, pointing out that hypersexuality, often a coping mechanism developed by traumatized victims of sexual violence, occurred at the level of the social in the Caribbean (qtd. in Gonzalez 282). In *Oscar Wao*, it is clear that the hypersexuality of both male and female characters alike is a response to this trauma. The Yunior that narrates *Oscar Wao*, when seen as a character who continues the legacy of *Drown*, has seemingly come to terms with an empathetic identity that allows him to emotionally connect with the experiences of the novel's women—particularly Lola and Beli, whose stories are presented at length. However, even as Yunior sympathetically describes these women, his perspective contains an empathetic distance towards them that signifies his ongoing struggle with masculinity. This empathetic distance derives simply from the fact that the central female characters, and nearly every female character in the novel, are explicitly hypersexualized by their narrator.

As an activist writer, Díaz has been open about his own use of writing as a mode of political engagement. He is known for his conscious social representation of communities of color, particularly Dominican migrants and black Dominicans, those who are socially and racially othered. In an interview with Olga Segura, Díaz explicitly describes his understanding of his role as writer as an "anti-politician" that is invested in "mak[ing] the country better." As such, Díaz's interviews and speeches about his writing work as paratext that generate meaning that adds to his writings. It is in this context that Yunior, the main narrator of all three of Díaz's published books, is considered a version of Díaz's own political persona. On the one hand, Díaz has been openly critical of Yunior during interviews; in addition to comparing Yunior's narration and by extension his own literary voice to Trujillo's dictatorship, he has acknowledged that Yunior is "sexist," "misogynist," and "racist," while linking this behavior to Yunior's status as a victim of childhood rape:

> Thinking about Yunior as having been raped made (in my mind at least) his fucked-up utterances in the novel have a different resonance. And while he wasn't yet ready to bear witness to his own rape, it gave him a certain point of view around sexual violence […] that helped me produce a novel with a feminist alignment (Díaz, interview with Moya)

On the other hand, Díaz has implicitly identified himself with Yunior's behavior by revealing his status as a victim of childhood rape in a 2018 essay for *The New Yorker*, wherein he vulnerably opens up about the traumatic aftermath of his own rape and the toxic behavior it induced in him. The piece can be understood as an intentional political

gesture on Díaz's part that invites the possibility for understanding his writing in terms of his status as rape survivor, while at the same time recognizing the complex work of its fictive constructions and avoiding an autobiographical conflation of the author and narrator.

An inherent problem with Díaz's political framing of masculine toxicity and hypersexuality as a traumatic response to rape, however, is that this trauma continues to be deflected onto women. This deflection mirrors the public allegations of sexual misconduct brought up against Díaz by several female writers shortly after his *New Yorker* confession, which include accusations of verbal aggression and forceful kissing.[59] In the wake of these revelations, the boundaries between the author and the narrator of *Oscar Wao* are not as clear-cut as previously assumed. As a writer whose status as a victim of sexual trauma and as an inflictor of this trauma have both been politicized, Díaz's implication that Yunior's toxicity and hypersexuality must be understood as a traumatic response to having been feminized, both as a migrant and as a victim of rape, has political ramifications. While Díaz clearly critiques hypersexual masculinity in Yunior, he creates empathy towards Yunior and the male characters by linking their toxicity to trauma. Yet this empathy is not allowed the female characters. While the female characters are also hypersexualized, their behavior is never linked to trauma; as a result, women are detached from empathy. While standards of masculinity

[59] Díaz has since been restored to both his position as chairman of the Pulitzer board and his teaching position at M.I.T.

are profoundly damaging to the male characters, the female characters are not shown to have any problem in conforming to standards of hypersexual Dominican femininity by which they are objectified. Díaz empathizes with rape trauma and hypersexuality, but this empathy is ultimately not extended towards the female characters themselves, who are objectified by the narrative as primarily sexual beings in a way that dehumanizes them. Their function in the novel remains largely to embody the grounds for the male characters' negotiation of trauma.

Female hypersexuality is never questioned or critiqued by the narrator in the way male hypersexuality is, even as it is clear that both the novel's male and female characters disapprove of and look down on female hypersexuality. Oscar himself displays this attitude throughout the story, despite the fact that the love of his life, Ybón, is a sex worker. Oscar's family aggressively protests Oscar's relationship with Ybón on the basis of her profession; this resistance begins prior to their knowledge of her "jealous Third World cop boyfriend," at whose hands Oscar ultimately meets his death (Díaz 302). Oscar's mother, Beli, and abuela, La Inca, are outraged by Oscar's association with Ybón, whom they consistently refer to as a "puta," telling him that "not even God loves a puta" (297). The paradoxical distinction between male and female hypersexuality are revealed in the words of Rudolfo, Oscar's uncle: "Yeah, […] but everybody knows that God *loves* a puto" (Díaz 297). The contrasting attitudes towards male and female hypersexuality is ironically portrayed; the novel is clearly critical of the fact that male hypersexuality is encouraged while female hypersexuality is demeaned. While Oscar and

Yunior suffer from and resist this attitude towards hypersexual masculinity, however, the female characters do not resist this attitude towards hypersexual femininity.

Even as Oscar defends Ybón's profession, and braves death in pursuit of a relationship with her, it is ultimately unclear whether he is attracted by anything other than her overt sexuality. Oscar's pursuit of Ybón is framed as a sexual conquest, which in turn is framed as his last opportunity to "become a man" in terms of Dominican masculine identity:

> He was a not-so-fat fatboy who'd never kissed a girl, never even lain in bed with one, and now the world was waving a beautiful puta under his nose. Ybón, he was sure, was the Higher Power's last-ditch attempt to put him back on the proper path of Dominican male-itude. (Díaz 294)

In this passage, Ybón is clearly distinguished in terms of her profession as a sex worker. It is important that she is a beautiful "puta," not just a beautiful woman, the implication being that her profession increases Oscar's chances of having sex with her. Ybón's potent sexuality is what consistently motivates Oscar's pursuit of her in crucial moments. For example, accidentally glimpsing Ybón's bare breasts one night has the effect of consolidating Oscar's decision to press on in pursuit: "He'd seen her beautiful chest and knew now that it was far too late to pack up and go home like those little voices were telling him, far too late" (Díaz 303). A similar moment occurs when he returns to see Ybón after recovering from a near-fatal beating from her dangerous boyfriend, the capitán: "[…] for a moment he thought about letting the whole thing go, about returning to Bosco and getting on with his miserable life, but then [Ybón] stooped

over, as if the whole world was watching, and that settled it" (Díaz 325). In neither of these instances is Ybón described as conscious of being seen by Oscar or able to reciprocate his feelings; she merely becomes a sexual spectacle. In the comatose dream Oscar has after his near-fatal beating, in which he is at the crossroads of life and death, it is the memory of his family—Lola, his mother, and La Inca—along with childhood memories of his love for nerd genres (his *Planet of the Apes* lunchbox) that prompts him to choose "more" (Díaz 312). Notably, it is not Ybón who occupies his thoughts in this crucial life-and-death moment, suggesting that his love for her does not consist of the true empathetic connections he has with his family and his nerd identity.

Thus even as Oscar is a victim of rape culture, it is clear that he has internalized its basic ideology, namely, that women are primarily sexual beings. As such, the shallowness of Oscar's obsession with women on the basis of their physical sexuality is demonstrated throughout his other (one-sided) romantic encounters. Even as Oscar is attracted to sexual women, he joins his family's pronounced disapproval of female sexuality when his affections are not reciprocated. When he walks in on his college crush Jenni Muñoz (La Jablesse) in bed with another guy, he calls her a whore and vandalizes her dorm room (Díaz 194). His violent reaction is possibly influenced by his traumatic first relationship with his high school crush, Ana Obregón, who is entangled in an abusive relationship with an older man. (When she and Oscar reach the Elizabeth exit on the New Jersey highway she screams, "Elizabeth! […] Close your fucking legs!" [Díaz 40], metaphorically displacing her anguish at her own toxic relationship with her boyfriend, Manny). Additionally, Oscar's brief, childhood "girlfriend" Maritza Chacón

is also characterized as a "cuero" known in the community for her promiscuity in her adolescence and adulthood, who "seemed to delight in getting slapped around by her boyfriends" (Díaz 18, 42). Each of these women is described in extensive physical detail that foregrounds their sexuality. Thus in depicting women as hypersexual, Díaz implies that they are overtly courting violence through their sexuality. Olga Polanco, Oscar's other childhood girlfriend, the only named female character in the novel who is not sexually attractive—growing up to be "huge and scary, a troll gene in her somewhere," and later ending up in jail for robbery, never to be heard of again—is one of the only characters in the book more marginalized than Oscar himself (Díaz 17).

As part of this rape culture, empathetic distance from the female characters is dictated by an unspoken moral standard for women that does not exist for men, which is ostensibly based on their sexuality. Maja Horn identifies this standard in her study of Dominican masculinity in the aftermath of the *Trujillato*, maintaining that *Oscar Wao* remains "caught up in the lasting desirability and lures of hegemonic Dominican masculinity," which includes the "tendency to divide women into 'good' and 'bad'"; according to Horn, this is a division that is partly based on women's willingness to abide in a stable, hegemonic union (129). For example, women like Lola in *Oscar Wao* and Yunior's fiancé in *This Is How You Lose Her,* who are willing to leave unfaithful men for stable relationships, are distinguished from women who engage in casual sexual encounters with Yunior, whom Yunior calls "sluts" (Horn 135). Díaz himself has referred to this division during an interview in terms of his characters' pursuit of what he calls "decolonial love": "the only kind of love that could liberate them from that horrible

legacy of colonial violence" (Moya). In Díaz's words, Yunior fails his "one best chance at decolonial love and, through that love, a decolonial self" because he fails to confess his own sexual abuse to Lola, which would have "tied him in a human way" to her (Moya). This explanation foregrounds the trauma of rape as the basis of empathy; the ability to pursue and obtain a "decolonial" relationship free from the traumatic legacy of rape culture becomes an ethical standard for the characters of *Oscar Wao*. This standard, however, is one that is symbolically obtained through hegemonic male-female relationships that mark a distinction among the novel's women; women either embody this decolonial love, or they embody the opposite. For instance, Lola functions as a symbol of life because, for Yunior, a relationship with Lola represents salvation; by contrast, the "side-sluts" through which Yunior enacts his trauma-induced promiscuity symbolize Yunior's entrapment and represents his inability to obtain a salvaging relationship (Díaz 192). Women are thus implicitly rendered responsible for the decolonization of the minds of men. In addition to reflecting an oddly conventional sense that only normative, hegemonic relations can accomplish such a task, this notion is a retread of the age-old concept that men can be saved by the love of a pure woman, which, again, mandates sexual purity on the part of the woman in order that she be able to carry out her salvific mission.

This is a dynamic that plays out in the characterization of the novel's major female figures in their embodiment of conflicting qualities. The women of the novel function as advocates for life and love, means for the male characters' obtainment of "decolonial selves," but, at the same time, they are thoroughly commodified by their

sexuality. While Ybón is the only woman in the novel who earns money as a sex worker, Lola and Beli, whose stories are fundamental to the narrative, are also associated with prostitution. Lola, in particular, is what Melissa M. Gonzalez calls "the voice of ethical authority" in the novel, the only character granted first-person narration and the only one apart from Yunior whose words offer direct ideological critique about the events of the narrative (282). Yet because Lola is a female character her sexuality is objectified when she has her "big puta moment"; she engages in an affair with the politician father of one of her classmates during her time in Santo Domingo, offering up her body for sex and then demanding two thousand American dollars in return (Díaz 212). Despite showcasing Lola's perspective, the narration nonetheless creates an empathetic distance through Lola's own detached description of this sexual maneuver. While she acknowledges that she is "messed up" at this time because of her frustration at having to leave Santo Domingo against her wishes, her motives are otherwise unclear even as her moral awareness is alert (Díaz 212). She quotes La Inca's words: "Every snake always thinks it's biting into a rat until the day it bites into a mongoose," detachedly referring to herself as the mongoose that tricks the snake (Díaz 212). She is aware of that the man is rich, and manipulates the guilt he feels after their sexual intercourse: "I kissed him when he dropped me off at the house only so that I could feel him shrink from me" (Díaz 213). This description marks a teenaged girl used sexually by an older man of power as herself an intentional predator. The sexual agency Lola seemingly exerts in this scene is thus merely an illusion, yet which Díaz casts as empowered.

In this context, both Lola's and Ybón's positive associations with the force of life have the effect of distancing them as symbols of "decolonial love" rather than humanizing them as characters. Directly after her "big puta moment," Lola's ex-boyfriend, Max, dies in a tragic traffic accident, leaving Lola with remorse for having broken up with him in her fit of rebellious frustration. Max's status as the recipient of the *fukú* contrasts with Lola's role as an advocate for life: "The curse, some of you will say, Life, is what I say. Life," Lola narrates (Díaz 216). She effectively compensates for breaking Max's heart by giving his impoverished family the money she receives from her "puta moment," stating: "My toto good for something after all" (Díaz 216). In this passage, Lola's sexuality becomes a means for the benefit of those in need, and Lola herself is associated with a force of life. This is a dynamic that occurs in Ybón's relationship with Oscar, wherein not only does Ybón's sexuality "save" Oscar from dying a virgin, but is also associated with her celebration of life. In response to Oscar's telling of his traumatic life events, she raises her glass, "To life!" (Díaz 299); later, once they have consummated their relationship and Oscar laments the wait he has endured, she suggests "calling the wait something else": "Maybe, she said, you could call it life" (Díaz 345). In these instances, life is associated with the femininity represented by women, yet these women are simultaneously objectified in their embodiment of a monetized hypersexuality.

One might argue that the sexually commodified portrayal of the women characters testifies to their exploitation rather than endorses it. Jill Toliver Richardson, for example, maintains that the portrayal of the female characters in the novel is

empowering—particularly in her point that Díaz positions Isis, Lola's daughter, to take on the work of excavating her family's lost past; as a daughter she is "more deeply connected to the female family members' legacy of gendered violence and sexual violation" (Richardson 329). However, Isis is more a symbolic embodiment of a "decolonial" future than an empowered female character. Although, as Richardson points out, Isis is named after the powerful Egyptian goddess as well as a DC Comics superhero, her power consists of her symbolic representation of a potential trauma-free future rather than as an actual human being.[60] Describing her as dark and blindingly fast, Yunior attributes to her the power of lightning, by which he expects her to "take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights" and "put an end" to the curse (Díaz 339; 341). Yet even as this important role is imparted to Isis, her name links her to a legacy of sexualized femininity that is invoked through Díaz's reference to the figure in his description of Maritza's sexual development at the beginning of the book: "Well, before you could say *Oh Mighty Isis*, Maritza blew up into the flyest guapa in Paterson, one of the Queens of New Peru. […] body fine enough to make old men forget their infirmities, and from the sixth grade on dating men two, three times her age" (Díaz 18). Even though this passage describes Maritza's abuse in what would legally be categorized as statutory rape, it is framed more as a lauding of Maritza's power—a power that seems to consist of inspiring men to abuse her before she has even completed

[60] *Ancient History Encyclopedia* describes the goddess Isis's powers in hyperfeminized terms: "selfless, giving, mother, wife, and protectress, who places others' interests and well-being ahead of her own" (Mark).

middle school. The reference to the DC Comics superhero inextricably links Isis's femininity to the liberating role Yunior expects her to undertake in the future. Although Isis is not explicitly sexualized, she is clearly expected to grow into a beautiful woman who is "as smart and as brave as [Yunior] expect[s] she'll be" as an embodiment of the "life" that counteracts the *fukú* (Díaz 341). In this regard, Isis is also commodified.

The commodification of these women characters is revealed in the contrast between Beli's and Oscar's respective beatings in the sugarcane fields, which mirror each other intergenerationally but contain crucial differences. The sugarcane fields are a symbolic location that directly references the violent legacy of systematic rape associated with the migration of enslaved Africans to work the colonial sugarcane fields in Hispanola. Scholars such as Anne Garland Mahler, Maria Kaaren Takolander, and Richardson have pointed out that Beli's and Oscar's beatings in the sugarcane fields links them to the colonial violence by which hundreds of sugarcane slaves were raped, beaten, and murdered. In this regard, the sugarcane fields are a site of postmemory, conceptualized by Marianne Hirsch as the transmission of trauma across generations in a "structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience" (Hirsch 6). Beli's and Oscar's personal trauma repeats the collective and cultural trauma of generations before them. In the scene of Beli's beating, Yunior reports on the physical damage inflicted on Beli's body but does not confirm that she was raped, representing this trauma as a "página en blanco" (Díaz 155). Díaz confirms in an interview that rape is the unspeakable trauma Yunior inherits, stating that the three blank lines of silence Yunior cannot convey to Lola, the "words that could have saved" their

relationship (Díaz 337), are "I too have been molested," an admission of his own abuse that "would have tied him in a human way to Lola, that indeed could have saved him" (Moya).

The novel's foregrounding of the women's stories of rape has been noted by Richardson as a political reframing of the historical narrative around the experiences of those who are most marginalized and silenced (28). While the transmission of this feminized sexual trauma constitutes the central foundational arc of the narrative, it is clear that its legacy is inherited by the male characters. Oscar is aligned with the violating experiences of his mother and sister by his inheritance of the *fukú* in his murder in the sugarcane fields; his role as the bearer of this inheritance is demonstrated in his acknowledgement of its existence when Yunior claims, "I don't believe in that shit, Oscar. That's our parents' shit," to which Oscar asserts, "It's ours, too" (Díaz 200). While sexual violation is enacted upon the bodies of the novel's women, the women themselves are aligned with a life that counteracts this trauma in a way that undermines their experience of sexual trauma. Sexual trauma primarily belongs to the men of the novel, and the women are sexualized in a way that casts their experiences as somehow "less" traumatic. Beli, in particular, embodies both harrowing sexual violation and a supernatural transcendence of this trauma in the scene of her beating. In the sugarcane fields, she encounters a magical golden mongoose that encourages her to survive her beating and escape the cane; while this mongoose also appears to Oscar after his beating, Beli is conflated with the mongoose to the point that she almost becomes the mongoose, a conflation that does not happen with Oscar. Richardson makes this connection when

she links the mongoose's "chabine eyes flashing through the stalks" to Beli's "golden eyes of a chabine" (Richardson 32). While the mongoose functions as a magical symbol of life in these instances, it is also ironically the animal Lola aligns herself with when she "tricks" the older man in her "puta moment."

Beli's beating occurs after Trujillo's sister has discovered that Beli has become pregnant by her husband, "the Gangster," and is almost identical to the beating that Oscar receives at the end of the novel when the capitán discovers Oscar's relationship with Ybón. Unlike Oscar's beating, however, Beli's survival is clearly framed in terms of her femininity to the extent that her femininity becomes her source of life:

> […] so did our Beli resolve out of her anger her own survival. In other words, her coraje saved her life.
>
> Like a white light in her. Like a sun.
>
> She came to in the ferocious moonlight. A broken girl, atop broken stalks of cane. Pain everywhere but alive. Alive. (Díaz 155)

The "white light" like a sun links Beli to the power of "lightning" that her granddaughter Isis will come to embody, as well as to the life that is repeatedly embodied by the other female characters. While the description of the medical damage inflicted on Beli's body is much lengthier than that of Oscar's, Oscar is saved from his beating by Clives, the taxi driver, who finds Oscar lying unconscious in the cane field and hauls him out. Beli, on the other hand, survives the beating by finding her own way out of the cane field, weeping for the dead baby in her womb, fueled by her maternal instincts: "Each time she thought she would fall she concentrated on the faces of her promised future—her

promised children—and from that obtained the strength she needed to continue" (Díaz 156).

At the same time, however, Beli is associated with hypersexuality not only through her physicality, but also through her association with the Gangster. The Gangster is a character closely associated with Trujillo's regime, prominently defined by his success in the prostitution business:

> Skilled our Gangster became in many a perfidy, but where our man truly excelled, where he smashed records and grabbed gold, was in the flesh trade […] And there was something about the binding, selling, and degradation of women that brought out the best in the Gangster; he had an instinct for it, a talent—call him the Caracaracol of Culo. (Díaz 126)

Tellingly, it is with a man who makes a living out of the prostitution business that Beli falls in what she perceives to be a "pure uncut unadulterated love, the Holy Grail that would so bedevil her children throughout their lives," even as everyone else in her community views her relationship in terms of prostitution (Díaz 131). Her relationship with the Gangster unfolds mostly in love motels and on his terms; the fact that she "spent more time inside the love motels than she had in school" causes the community to believe that she has "finally found her true station in life, as a cuero" (Díaz 133). Later, as she is being beaten to near-death on the orders of the Gangster's Trujillo wife, Beli herself understands that she has been "tricked" and "*played*" by him (Díaz 154; italics in original). Ironically, however, the Gangster remains the love of Beli's life because he "adored" Beli and awakened her to her sexual agency: "it was he who taught her all

about her body, her orgasms, her rhythms, who said, You have to be bold, and for that he must be honored, no matter what happened in the end" (Díaz 132). Beli's sexual awakening in this moment is allotted so much value as to render her exploitation by the Gangster and its horrific consequences "honorable." In this regard, Beli embodies a contradiction. Her sexuality is depicted as a mode of agency, but it is clear that this sexual agency does not translate into political agency, a fact of which Yunior seems unaware.

Thus, Beli embodies the paradoxical conflation of sexual agency with political agency at the core of Yunior's struggles with masculinity. Mahler writes that the similarities between Beli's and Oscar's beatings convey the intactness of the cycle of tyranny and oppression despite Trujillo's death, the passing of time, and Beli's migration, and that this cycle is crucially linked to the writer's tyrannical control of language (128, 130). Referencing multiple interviews in which Díaz compares his writing to dictatorship, Sáez furthers this focus on the writer's tyranny and argues that Díaz entices the reader into becoming complicit with the heteronormative rationale embodied by Yunior that is used to "police male diasporic identity" (523). The framing of Oscar's death is thus regarded by many as an act of tyranny on the part of the writer and narrator, by which Oscar's life is molded into a representative heroic narrative. For Yunior, the sexual agency Oscar obtains through his sexual conquest at the end of the novel clearly indicates a degree of political power in that Oscar has finally obtained the hypersexual masculinity endorsed by Dominican culture. Ironically, then, empowerment in the novel is portrayed as the ability to successfully comply to the standards of a rape

culture. This logic, however, is undermined by the female characters, each of whom is undeniably sexually empowered, yet in no way politically empowered by their sexuality. Decolonial love, or decolonial self, a condition liberated from the trauma of rape, is ultimately not found in sexual agency within relationships, for neither men nor women.

In a *New York Times Magazine* interview regarding his recent work, *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012), Díaz states: "I wanted to capture this sort of cheater's progress, where this guy eventually discovers for the first time the beginning of an ethical imagination. Which of course involves the ability to imagine women as human" (qtd. in Horn 136). Horn critiques this statement, maintaining that Díaz's problematizing of Dominican masculinity fails to extend into a gender awareness that surpasses Yunior's "own afflicted self" or goes "beyond the male world" (136). This masculine failure is clearly depicted in *Oscar Wao*. Yunior writes in a moment of poignant internal reflection on his relationship with Lola: "I thought about my own fears of actually being good, because Lola wasn't Suriyan; with her I'd have to be someone I'd never tried to be" (Díaz 205). Yunior's failed relationship with Lola, reflecting his failure to "actually be good," is emblematic of his failure to empathize with women as fully human beings throughout the narrative. Rape culture leaves everyone internally and externally displaced; Díaz's novel connects the external displacement of migrant diaspora to the internal displacement of the feminine within the construction of a diasporic masculine identity, as a rape trauma that transcends generations and national borders. In the wake of Díaz's self-admittedly autobiographical depiction of Yunior, this displacement not

only inflects the author's critique of the narrator's exploitation of women both physically and narratively, but also casts the author as complicit.

CHAPTER V

AFROPOLITANISM AND BOTTOM POWER IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*

Choice is not always an indication of agency or power. Women's sexual choices are regarded an indication of agency because they are considered independent from structural factors. In the U.S. and the U.K., the validity of women's sexual choices has been debated in the context of deliberations on pornography with scholars such as Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin arguing that pornography is a systemic violation of women's civil rights that must be combatted through legislation.[61] In Western regions such as the U.S. and Europe that have a history of feminist rights movements, there is a widespread postfeminist assumption that society has reached a point where structurally oppressive conditions against women have largely been removed. Additionally, it is important to note that just as feminism does not work similarly among differing global contexts, individual sexual choice does not indicate empowerment across the globe.[62]

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[61] In 1983 Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin proposed a set of local ordinances in the U.S. called the Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance, also known as the Dworkin-MacKinnon Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance, which allowed women harmed by pornography to seek damages through lawsuits in civil courts. The ordinance defines pornography as form of "sex discrimination" that involves the "graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words" (Appendix D).

[62] See Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality as well as Chandra Mohanty's work on transnational feminism to examine women's experiences across the world.

Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* demonstrates the precariousness of choice, agency, and empowerment, especially when it comes to female sexuality. The title refers to Nigerians who have been changed by having lived in America.[63] The novel tells the story of Nigerian-born protagonist Ifemelu and her lifelong love interest Obinze, who migrate to America and Britain, respectively, and ultimately reunite in Nigeria. Many of the novel's themes unfold via excerpts from Ifemelu's blog, titled "Raceteenth o*r Various Observations* About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black," which is a venue for expressing Ifemelu's experience as an African immigrant as well as her observations of the nuanced workings of racial hierarchy in America. The novel has been lauded for its portrayal of race, racism, and black diasporic identity; in particular, critics have drawn attention to its portrayal of a new Afropolitan identity and subjectivity.[64] Taiye Selasi, in her seminal essay "Bye-Bye Barbar," conceptualizes Afropolitanism as a redefinition of African identity in explicitly continental and multiracial terms: "You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, […] others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos," "not citizens, but African, of the world." Selasi's definition accurately describes the "Americanahs" at the novel's Nigerpolitan Club: "a small cluster of people drinking champagne in paper cups, […] chic people, all dripping with savoir faire, each

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[63] The word is infused with a sense of self-righteousness, superiority, and privilege, as embodied by the members of the novel's Nigerpolitan Club.

[64] Hallemeier, Phiri, Lyle.

nursing a self-styled quirkiness […] Their voices burred with foreign accents" (Adichie 501). Transnationalism is a major focus in the novel as it deals with identity issues foregrounded by migration; as an Afropolitan and a "non-American black" who has "discovered race" and "became black" upon arriving at America, Ifemelu is well positioned to comment on the peculiarities of what it means to be black in America (Adichie 499, 273). Aretha Phiri explores the ways in which the novel expands and extends generalized notions of black authenticity (133). Cristina Cruz-Gutierrez and Dina Yerima each focus on the novel's discussion of hair politics and beauty practices in relation to black identity, which Ifemelu covers in her blog.

Although the novel portrays the transnational migrant experiences of both Ifemelu and her male counterpart, Obinze, it is primarily concerned with Ifemelu's experience as a black woman in America. As such, the novel portrays what Phiri calls a "decidedly female perspective" that resists an "overarching heteronormative, heteropatriarchal narrative of blackness" (12). Caroline Lyle adds that Ifemelu's gendered experiences stand out in contrast to Obinze's, who "does not face the sexual stigmatization and abuse Ifemelu encounters" and "does not have to adjust his Afropolitan identity sexually the way she has to" (110). Ifemelu's experiences as a black immigrant are thus understood to be significantly affected by gender, such that the negotiation of her sexual identity is crucial to her formation of an Afropolitan identity. As a result, Ifemelu's literal and philosophical mobility as an Afropolitan, which she constantly negotiates in her mobile quest for home and belonging, plays out to a

significant degree within the context of her sexual and romantic relationships.[65] Ifemelu's sexual experiences in America, which include sexual abuse from an employer as well as her relationships with two American men, become sites through which Ifemelu negotiates her racial and migrant identity. The novel's love-story ending, in which Ifemelu reunites with her childhood love, Obinze, represents a conclusion to her search for identity, home, and belonging.

In this regard, Ifemelu's journey of self-discovery crucially involves sexual (dis)empowerment. Ifemelu's formation of an Afropolitan identity is symbolically portrayed through a romantic union in which she is able to fully express her sexual agency. It is in this context that Jennifer Leetsch writes that love and sexuality function as a political mode in Adichie's works in a way that "enables encounters between humans and the transgression of borders" (4), thus becoming a "tool to re-appropriate and to rebuild certain power relationships" (9). Leetsch and Lyle both read Ifemelu's reunion with Obinze as representative of a regaining of the sexual agency she has lost at the beginning of her stay in America. Her financial situation at this moment leads her to experience sexual abuse at the hands of an employer and results in her breaking off all communication with Obinze for most of the narrative, until just before her return to Nigeria. According to Lyle, Ifemelu's sexual abuse is one of the most important plot developments in the novel as it causes Ifemelu's self-alienation; this is a multistep

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[65] Mobility, as Selasi conceives in her essay, indicates the ability to move between Africa and the West. Chielozona Eze, in his essay "We, Afropolitans," explains Afropolitan mobility as an openness, both spatially and internally, that expresses the "widening arc of African self-perception" that goes beyond conventional postcolonial notions (115).

process in which Ifemelu is robbed of her voice, ownership of her body, and her sense of self (107). It is only after she reunites with Obinze in Nigeria that she is able to articulate her experience of sexual violence to him for the first time, in what becomes "the final, and crucial, step of reversing her self-alienation and coming to voice" (Lyle 115).

The significance of sexual empowerment in the formation of a transnational black identity is one that Adichie promotes in her other works, including her essay, *We Should All Be Feminists*.[66] Speaking out against the notion that feminism is "un-African" (9), Adichie advocates a universal feminism that is sexually liberating. "Gender matters everywhere in the world" (25), she writes, describing a "fairer world" (25) in which girls are not shamed for their sexuality nor raised to be "women who cannot say they have desire. Who silence themselves. Who cannot say what they truly think. Who have turned pretence into an art form" (33). At the same time, Adichie speaks out against "bottom power," which she describes as a Nigerian expression for a woman who "uses her sexuality to get things from men": "bottom power is not power at all, because the woman with bottom power is actually not powerful; she just has a good route to tap another person's power" (44). Thus, using sexuality to obtain material gain from men is critically portrayed as being the norm among young Nigerian women in *Americanah*, and referred to by protagonist Ifemelu as a "culture of dependence" by which women are "crippled" (Adichie 521).

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[66] *We Should All Be Feminists* is an essay-length book published as a modified version of Adichie's 2012 TedTalk of the same title.

Ifemelu is a sexually liberated character who embodies the empowerment Adichie conceptualizes in her essay. She passionately disapproves of young Nigerian women's sexual self-commodification to manipulate men for economic gain. It is important, however, that Ifemelu occupies a privileged social position in comparison to those Nigerian women she criticizes, in what Katherine Hallemeier refers to as the "remarkable economic security" she enjoys in a global capitalist society (Hallemeier 237). As an "Americanah," whose Afropolitan mobility is linked to an American economic mobility within a global capitalism, Ifemelu is positioned to make choices regarding her sexuality that the underprivileged Nigerian women perhaps find difficult due to structural circumstances. As a financially secure intellectual who is "Americanized," the sexual agency Ifemelu exerts can be seen as an individual, Westernized model of empowerment that is largely disconnected from and inaccessible to women in the Nigerian context, even as Ifemelu herself initially experiences sexual, racial, and economic vulnerability in the American context.

The disconnect between the model of sexual empowerment Ifemelu embodies and the social circumstances of Nigerian women's "bottom power" reflects critical concerns regarding Afropolitanism. Critics of the novel have noted that *Americanah* is a conscious subversion of the expectation that Afropolitan novels necessarily project a political dimension, functioning, in the words of Fredric Jameson, as a "national

allegory" for an "embattled" third-world society (Jameson 69).[67] In an interview with *The Guardian*, Adichie herself has described her novel as "an unapologetically old-fashioned love story" that goes against the kind of politically-oriented novel that would have been expected of her as an African writer. Ifemelu's prosperity subjects the novel to the claims of critics who maintain that Afropolitan novels such as Adichie's address an exclusive realm of privilege that fails to account for broader political and economic realities.[68] More generally, critics of Afropolitan novels have maintained that Afropolitan writers' portrayal of privileged upper-middle-class protagonists, who reflect a small portion of the African diaspora, risks becoming a "dominant narrative" of "African success," eliding the experiences of non-affluent members of African diaspora (Hallemeier 233). Serena Guarracino references Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina's concerns around Afropolitanism as "yet another cultural commodification of African culture" (qtd. in Guarracino 10). Although Adichie has never explicitly identified herself as Afropolitan, preferring to identify herself as "happily" African instead (interview with John Barber), the wide appropriation of her work and persona by the Afropolitan community exposes her novel to concerns regarding the perpetuation of a commodified

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[67] Jameson, in his controversial yet influential essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986), proposes that "third-world texts," even those invested in the "private" and "libidinal," project "a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (69).

[68] Ruth Franklin claims in her review that Adichie's novel foregrounds her own potential to be "a privileged white woman who does not notice another's agony," even as it subverts white privilege through its Nigerian protagonists (42).

Afropolitanism that paradoxically asserts African agency via interpolation within a global consumerist culture.

Despite the fact that Ifemelu's and Obinze's love story unfolds on a private, individual level that sets the characters apart from and against the larger culture and society of Nigeria, their story is nonetheless offset by the broader political and economic realities of Nigeria in a way that renders it political. Ifemelu's own experience with sexual abuse at the hand of an employer, a situation into which she is forced by dire economic need, aligns her with the Nigerian women in the novel who, pressed by structural circumstances, commodify their sexuality. Hallemeier situates Ifemelu's struggles within a "distinctly patriarchal" global capitalist society in which "economic advancement depends upon one's connections with relatively wealthy and documented men," whether in the U.S., Nigeria, or the U.K. (Hallemeier 238). For example, Ifemelu's relationship with the wealthy white American Curt becomes a turning-point that initiates her prosperity in substantial ways.[69] Adichie indicates a connection between Ifemelu's economic gain through this relationship and Nigerian women's actions, in the accusations of Ifemelu's friend Ranyinudo: "'And who are you to pass judgment? How is it different from you and the rich white guy in America? Would you have your U.S. citizenship today if not for him? How did you get your job in America? […] Stop feeling so superior!'" (Adichie 521). Thus even as Ifemelu distinguishes herself, perhaps

[69] Curt knows "some people my dad did business with," whom he is able to connect Ifemelu with to find a job in public relations with a company that sponsors her for a green card (Adichie 249). This, in turn, gives Ifemelu the time and leisure to launch her blog.

condescendingly, from Nigerian women who exert "bottom power," Adichie's portrayal of that distinction in the novel is not as clear-cut as she describes in her essay. In the novel, both women such as Ifemelu and the Nigerian women Ifemelu disapproves of are commodified within a global patriarchal capitalist rape culture.

In a rape culture that is insinuated into the economy, Ifemelu cannot survive without commodifying her sexuality. Ifemelu's first sexual encounter in the U.S. occurs on purely commercial terms and demonstrates the interconnected structural manifestations of capitalism and gendered violence.[70] Unable to find a job, even illegally, and pressed by economic need, Ifemelu responds to an advertisement in the newspaper for a "female personal assistant," which leads to her being sexually exploited by an unnamed tennis coach who wants "help to relax" (Adichie 177). Initially, Ifemelu imagines that she will retain her sexual agency within the situation; she makes plans to approach it "looking her best" and "mak[ing] it clear to him that there were boundaries she would not cross" (Adichie 188). Yet it becomes clear that the economic power imbalance between Ifemelu and the tennis coach manifests sexually in their encounter, which is why the exchange can be described as abusive rather than reciprocal.[71] Ifemelu realizes too late that the "power balance" is inextricably "tilted" in the man's favor from the moment she has entered his house, and that not only is she unable to negotiate the

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[70] Racism also manifests in this interconnected structure.

[71] Lyle maintains that the encounter is better labelled abuse rather than self-prostitution (as Phiri terms it), because of the tennis coach's privileged position within "a systematic chain of disadvantages that specifically targets Ifemelu as a black immigrant woman in an equally racist and sexist society" (108).

boundaries of the encounter, she is also unable to control the reactions of her body during it (Adichie 189). She describes what appears to be an orgasmic experience during the encounter as she feels "her body rousing to a sickening wetness" despite the revulsion she feels in her mind (Adichie 189). This traumatic split between bodily pleasure and mental, emotional investments results in a profound sense of alienation. Ifemelu feels afterwards that her body is "tainted" (Adichie 188) and as though it "no longer belonged to her" (Adichie 189), which in turn causes a "self-loathing" and inability to communicate her experience to anyone that spirals into depression (Adichie 195).

Although this is Ifemelu's only experience with sexual abuse, the power imbalance she experiences during the encounter is part of a larger, ubiquitous structure of gendered inequality, that, in Nigeria, has become normalized to the degree that it manifests as a "culture." The lives of both Ifemelu and the women who use their sexuality for economic gain are affected by a rape culture that functions across borders and normalizes the commodification of female sexuality. Intersectionality factors crucially in understanding the formation of Ifemelu's sexual identity as an Afropolitan living in America; as Lyle suggests, Ifemelu's sexuality during her life in the U.S. is racialized in a way that it is not for women living in Nigeria (103).[72] Significantly, the racialization of Ifemelu's sexual identity affects not only her sexual exploitation by the

[72] My use of the term "sexual identity" aligns with Lyle's use of the term in her essay, not as a synonym for "sexual orientation," as is commonly done, but instead as an umbrella term to refer to one's identity as a sexual being: "one's sexual desire, needs, and wants; and one's intersection of sexuality with other facets of one's identity" (Lyle 105).

tennis coach, but also her consensual sexual encounters with the American men with whom she enters into relationship. The encounter with the tennis coach, which Phiri terms "a symbolic instance of self-prostitution," is the only instance in which Ifemelu receives monetary compensation in exchange for sexual favors, yet it is clear that the gendered and racial power dynamics that work against Ifemelu in this instance of abuse are still intact within her consecutive, consensual relationships (Phiri 134). In particular, Ifemelu obtains economic and social gain as the girlfriend of the white, affluent, well-connected Curt, which she describes as "a role she slipped into as into a favorite, flattering dress," but which she increasingly realizes to be imbued with racialized power dynamics (Adichie 241-2).

Throughout the novel, sexual intimacy in unequal power relations are permeated with a sense of inauthenticity in a commodified culture that is linked to a deeper sense of inner displacement. The displacement Ifemelu feels in her relationships often manifests in a fear of being unmasked as "play-acting" her identity (Adichie 376). She comes to feel this apprehension towards her blog even as she finds a sense of belonging in the interactive space it creates, because she is aware that "the people who read her blog were not the same people who attended her diversity workshops" (Adichie 378), which, in

turn, causes her to doubt the efficacy and authenticity of the work from which she derives her identity:[73]

> The point of diversity workshops, or multicultural talks, was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves. They did not want the content of her ideas; they merely wanted the gesture of her presence […] she began to say what they wanted to hear, none of which she would ever write on her blog, because she knew that the people who read her blog were not the same people who attended her diversity workshops. (Adichie 377-78)

The sense of displacement Ifemelu feels within a culture that is only interested in "the gesture of her presence" indicates a paradox in blogging, in which intimacy and authenticity are commodified. Guarracino writes of the connection between affective flows and money flows in blogging: "heartfelt expression" of a blogger's feelings become dependent on the revenue that can be earned by those they reach and touch, a dynamic whereby "feelings can be profitable" (16). Similar to her encounter with the tennis coach, Ifemelu experiences a feeling of physical and emotional dispossession over the identity she expresses via her writing, as her blog becomes a commodified space over which she has diminishing agency.

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[73] Sara Ahmed interrogates the institutional nature of diversity work in her book, *On Being Included*, exploring diversity as "a set of practices" that "can participate in the creation of an idea of the institution that allows racism and inequalities to be overlooked" (14). Chandra Mohanty, in *Feminism Without Borders*, has also critiqued diversity within educational institutions as a discourse of "benign variation," which "bypasses power as well as history to suggest a harmonious empty pluralism" (193).

The displacement Ifemelu feels with her job mirrors the sense of dissatisfaction she comes to feel in her romantic relationships in the U.S., which she expresses in terms of a "hunger" and "restlessness" caused by an "incomplete knowledge of herself" (Adichie 358). Even as Ifemelu declares in her blog that "real deep romantic love" between interracial couples, "the kind that twists you and wrings you out and makes you breathe through the nostrils of your beloved," is the "simplest solution to the problem of race in America," her own relationship with Curt falls short of this merging and fails to dissolve the racial issues that arise between them (Adichie 367). It is romantic love's potential for an interracial intimacy that reaches beyond the safe and comfortable pretenses of a shallow friendship that Leetsch describes as having the ability to "re-appropriate and rebuild" power relationships (9). Yet it is clear that the romantic love between Ifemelu and Curt has not succeeded in equalizing the racial power hierarchies within their relationship. Ifemelu comes to an awareness that Curt will "never be fully knowable to her" due to their insurmountable social discrepancies (Adichie 256). For instance, Curt demonstrates throughout their relationship an egoistic desire to be "the fucking love of [Ifemelu's] life," a desire that indicates a need to assert his dominance over Ifemelu within the relationship (Adichie 278). This deep-seated need is demonstrated during their sexual encounters, and linked to his perception of Ifemelu as a racialized and sexualized Other:

> In bed, he was anxious. 'Do you like that? Do you enjoy me?' he asked often. And she said yes, which was true, but she sensed that he did not always believe her, or that his belief lasted only so long before he would need to hear her

> affirmation again. There was something in him, lighter than ego but darker than insecurity, that needed constant buffing, polishing, waxing. (Adichie 257)

The potentially racial inflections of the metaphor, "lighter than ego but darker than insecurity," are an indication of Curt's need for dominance in his relationship with Ifemelu, which leads to his commodification of Ifemelu's black body. Lyle links this need for dominance to a "voyeuristic fantasy of a confrontation with an imagined Other that validates the self" (Lyle 113). Curt places a commodified value on Ifemelu's racial otherness: "Curt had never been with a black woman; he told her this after their first time […] with a self-mocking toss of his head, as if this were something he should have done long ago but had somehow neglected" (Adichie 240).[74] The internal sense of displacement Ifemelu feels in her unequal relationship with Curt leads her to displace her sexual desires onto a stranger; she cheats on Curt with her neighbor, Rob, to whom she is attracted because of his "superficial" grunge attire, and with whom she feels "faintly and glamorously theatrical" engaging in a sexual liaison (Adichie 356). The theatrical sense of inauthenticity Ifemelu feels in this moment is linked to a profound displacement, as she is presently "overcome with the frightening sense that she was looking for something solid, flailing, and all she touched dissolved into nothingness" (Adichie 356).

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[74] Lyle points out that for Curt, "a consummation of Ifemelu's body can be understood quite literally" (Lyle 113), as demonstrated in his desire to "suck her finger, to lick honey from her nipple, to smear ice cream on her belly as though it was not enough simply to lie bare skin to bare skin" (Adichie 241).

While racial hierarchy in America is a prominent part of the displacement Ifemelu experiences in her relationship with Curt, it is simultaneously clear that racial equality only partially resolves it. Ifemelu's next relationship is with Blaine, with whom she shares the bond of being black; yet it is the failure of her relationship with Blaine that creates in Ifemelu a sense of displacement so profound that it prompts her to leave America for good. The distinction between "American Blacks" and "Non-American Blacks" is at the core of the alienation Ifemelu feels in her relationship with the African-American Blaine, which Shan, Blaine's sister, gives voice to when she attacks Ifemelu's position as non-American black:

> You know why Ifemelu can write that blog, by the way? Because she's African. She's writing from the outside. She doesn't really feel all the stuff she's writing about. It's all quaint and curious to her. So she can write it and get all these accolades and get invited to give talks. If she were African American, she'd just be labeled angry and shunned. (Adichie 418)

This criticism is a blow to Ifemelu, though in the moment she simply replies, "I think that's fair enough" (Adichie 418). The accusation that she cannot fully identify with African American struggles because of her outsider status, however, lingers prominently over Ifemelu's relationship with Blaine and becomes the seed that grows into their

falling-out.[75] Eventually, Ifemelu and Blaine reach a point where their relationship is predominantly sustained by their shared passion for Barack Obama: "Their union was leached of passion, but there was a new passion, outside of themselves, that united them in an intimacy they had never had before, an unfixed, unspoken, intuitive intimacy: Barack Obama" (Adichie 437); "On the day Barack Obama became the nominee of the Democratic Party, Ifemelu and Blaine made love, for the first time in weeks, and Obama was there with them, like an unspoken prayer, a third emotional presence" (Adichie 442). In the lack of a sustained emotional intimacy, Barack Obama becomes an idealistic symbol of the racial bond they share without the divide of African and African-American, yet this bond also turns out to be a façade that ultimately fails to hold their relationship together. The lack of intimacy that Barack Obama symbolically indicates is linked to the moral dogmatism Blaine exerts over Ifemelu, influencing her to adapt a more "responsible" voice over her blog posts that she comes to "resent" as sounding "too academic" and unlike her own (Adichie 386). Ifemelu experiences Blaine's influence on her blog as an imposing of power over her identity, such that she sometimes "felt like his apprentice" (Adichie 387). Hallemeier comments that Blaine's impeccable morality is symptomatic of "the singular experience of being black in the United States,"

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[75] Saidiya Harman writes of her experience of the fractured relationship between African American returnees and Ghanaians in her book *Lose Your Mother* as a commentary on the disconnection diasporic Africans feel with their African kinship and identity as a result of the slave trade. This disconnection is voiced elsewhere in the novel through the words of an African-American girl in Ifemelu's honors history seminar: "Well, if you all hadn't sold us, we wouldn't be talking about any of this," she accuses the African students following a heated debate on the political correctness of using the word "nigger" (Adichie 170).

an experience that has left Blaine "unprepared to function in a relationship in which his goodness, which is to say his advocacy for racial justice, does not result in the absolute solidarity he desires and expects" (Hallemeier 240).

The failure of intimacy in Ifemelu's relationships is thus directly related to power imbalance within relationships that are marked by a sense of commodification that indicates internal displacement.[76] This displacement is mirrored in the lives of the Nigerian women who perform intimacy in relationships with men to obtain social and economic gain. Ifemelu's close friend and relative Obianuju, referred to as Aunty Uju throughout the novel, demonstrates the precarity of women's position in these performative roles. Uju becomes the mistress of a powerful, wealthy man called "The General," through whom she obtains a new job and a house: "The hospital has no doctor vacancy but The General made them create one for me" (Adichie 55). It is clear that Uju has entered the relationship by choice; she admits that she slept with the General the first night she met him not because she "wanted something," but because she "was attracted to him even with his teeth like Dracula" because of his "power" (Adichie 93). Uju's attraction to The General here is clearly interpellated by a culture that places value in men's power, such that the feeling of empowerment that accompanies Uju's expression of her sexuality with The General becomes questionable as a mirage-like effect of the very patriarchal structure that disempowers her. Despite her self-professed sense of

[76] Internal displacement is also mirrored in Obinze's portion of the narrative, during which he lives through a precarious existence as an illegal immigrant in the U.K. before being deported back to Nigeria.

sexual choice and control, Uju's patronage by The General is considered a "miracle" by those such as Ifemelu's mother because of the turbulent political and social circumstances of Nigeria that would have made it impossible for Uju to find a job otherwise (Adichie 55). As a new medical school graduate, her only options are to take medical exams abroad in America or Britain, or "tumble into a parched wasteland of joblessness" with the country "starved of hope" and on strike (Adichie 55).

The illusoriness of the sexual power Uju exerts in her decision to become The General's mistress is underscored by the illusoriness of her financial security. Despite The General's patronage and protection, Uju remains entirely financially dependent upon him. The hospital job that The General has conjured up for her fails to pay her even though she works every day, a common, though troubling, condition of work in Nigeria's broken economy. She has no money in her bank account because The General prefers that she request money from him directly. Uju's complete economic dependence eventually causes her to develop an anxiety disorder attached to The General's welfare. When The General's whereabouts are uncertain for a day because of a coup, Uju is struck by a panic attack that becomes an asthma attack: "She was gasping, shaking, piercing her arm with a needle, trying to inject herself with medicine, drops of blood staining the bedcovers […] Finally, The General called to say that he was fine […]; Aunty Uju's trembling stopped" (Adichie 97). Her entire world comes to revolve around the General's visits, which makes her increasingly emotionally unstable. Both she and Ifemelu identify this change as a detachment from her normally "clear-eyed self" (Adichie 100). When The General dies in an abrupt and unexpected military plane crash,

she becomes penniless overnight and defenseless against The Generals' vengeful relatives, who threaten her life. Thus, she is forced to flee to America where she struggles to pass the U.S. medical licensing exam while working multiple menial jobs to support herself and her son, Dike, fathered by The General. Uju's story demonstrates the precarity even of the most highly educated, professional women of Nigeria within an economic system that compels their sexualization.

Although it is clear that Uju's choice to commodify herself as the mistress of a powerful government official is one that is largely motivated by the political and social instability in Nigeria, Ifemelu perceives the situation as one in which the blame is Uju's for her choice. Ifemelu ignores the structural corruption that The General represents and embodies. Despite her own experiences with structurally-induced self-commodification in America, Ifemelu remains critical towards the women of Nigeria upon her return. Guarracino writes that the "insidious presence" of men like the General represent a "cosmopolitan Africanness deeply embedded in the criminality and corruption that Afropolitanism means to reverse," but that is conspicuously absent in Ifemelu's blogs as part of a "bottom ground of Nigerian culture" that Afropolitanism cannot elaborate (18). Ifemelu clearly recognizes that Uju's relationship with the General is one in which Uju is abused and victimized, commenting: "That relationship destroyed her. She became a different person because of The General and she couldn't do anything for herself, and when he died, she lost herself" (Adichie 521). While in her blog she criticizes the "beautiful, brilliant women" who "define their lives by men they can never truly have, crippled by their culture of dependence, with desperation in their eyes and designer

handbags on their wrists," her blog never references the men behind this culture (Adichie 521). It is clear that Nigerian men control a corrupted economy that renders precarious the lives of even professional women such as Uju. Yet Ifemelu's belief that women are empowered and capable of individual choice causes her to blame women who are victims in a system within which their choices are actually very limited and confined to trivialities.

Contrastingly, Ifemelu's counterpart Obinze is aligned with the men who perpetuate women's commodification in Nigeria's culture of dependence by his association with the Chief, a rich, shady businessman of power not unlike Uju's General. Obinze obtains socioeconomic power by commodifying himself as a "hungry and honest" intellectual migrant amidst the "trail of prostrating visitors to Chief's house, […] their pockets full of requests and appeals" (Adichie 31, 33-34). Gaining Chief's favor turns out to be the equivalent of winning a lottery that opens up for Obinze the opportunity to front a series of corrupt business deals, by which he rapidly gains wealth, social status, and a beautiful wife named Kosi, with whom he has a daughter, Buchi. He is left "dazed" by the "ease" with which his social rise happens under Chief's patronage (Adichie 33). It appears that Obinze, in what Uju refers to elsewhere as Nigeria's "ass-licking economy," has found the right ass to lick (Adichie 93). It is ironic that while Obinze's metaphoric ass-licking results in actual prosperity, Uju's actual ass-licking results only in metaphorical prosperity. Uju herself calls herself "lucky to be licking the right ass" when she is with The General, even as the security of her position crashes down soon after; Obinze's position, despite being similar to Uju's, is never shown to be

as precarious (Adichie 93). Rather than being dependent upon the Chief, it is implied that Obinze is set up to one day become a Chief within a male system of corruption.

By the end of the novel, it is clear that Obinze does assume the position of men such as Chief and The General, despite his pronounced revulsion at the system that has made him rich and powerful. Ironically, it is his reluctance to conform to this system that causes him to replicate the displacement that Uju and Dike undergo at the beginning of the novel onto his own wife and daughter. For example, he is initially repulsed by the fact that Kosi sees him merely as a wealthy young man susceptible to the Lagos women who are in the habit of throwing themselves at him: "Kosi expected him to cheat, and her concern was to minimize the possibilities he might have" (Adichie 42); in what is "both a reassurance and a rebuke," he tells her that "nothing can happen unless I want it to. I will never want it to" (Adichie 42-43). This rebuke is rendered ironic by the ease with which he cheats on Kosi soon after Ifemelu's return to Nigeria. As mentioned above, scholars of the novel have read the ending as a resolution for both Obinze and Ifemelu; Caroline Levine calls their union at the end of the novel the "joining of two characters who have cultivated an ongoing distance from the comforts of convention" (603). The reunion is a narrative closure to the displacement Ifemelu and Obinze feel throughout the novel, as they finally obtain an internal sense of belonging in each other's company.

Yet this idyllic closure is fractured by Kosi and Buchi, whose lives undergo a sudden displacement upon Obinze's decision to pursue Ifemelu.[77] The precarity of their position is not unlike that of Uju's and Dike's at the beginning of the novel, who are left vulnerable by The General's abrupt death. For instance, although Kosi is legally connected to Obinze rather than being his mistress, her economic position is entirely dependent on Obinze's wealth and prestige. The precariousness of Kosi's position is demonstrated in the ease with which Obinze is able to divorce her against her wishes, or rather, how little he takes her into account as he makes his decision to leave her. To Obinze, Kosi is just a woman who married him for his money, their marriage the result of a moment of bad judgment on his part, which is how he justifies his decision: "Kosi is a good woman and my marriage was a kind of floating-along contentment, but I should never have married her. I always knew that something was missing […] But I've been pretending all these months and one day [Buchi will] be old enough to know I'm pretending" (Adichie 588). However, Obinze's decision to leave Kosi, and thus reunite with the true love of his life, Ifemelu, ironically reproduces the social displacement with which the novel begins, onto the vulnerably positioned Kosi and Buchi. Obinze, however unwittingly, thus comes to embody the Nigeria of Chiefs and Generals, which, as Guarracino points out, "appear at the beginning and at the end of the novel as framing references for the Afropolitan dream that cannot really be" (Guarracino 19). This

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[77] Buchi's name is possibly a reference to the author Buchi Emecheta, a Nigerian writer of the previous generation that Adichie is paying respect to with this allusion. Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) is a semi-autobiographical narrative about Nigerian emigration to the U.K. in search of economic prosperity, and the racial prejudice and gendered limitations experienced thereby.

narrative closure additionally places blame on women for commodifying their sexuality within a prevalent culture of dependence upon men for socioeconomic gain, while deflecting it away from the men who uphold and benefit from this system.

Although Ifemelu's refusal to become Obinze's mistress indicates a feminist rejection of the Nigerian culture of dependence, the empowerment Ifemelu obtains in her union with Obinze at the novel's end fails to translate into a larger, social empowerment for other women of Lagos. Thus the agency, power balance, and sense of belonging that Ifemelu and Obinze share in their union become more an indication of an exclusive and privileged form of Afropolitanism that is largely detached from the rest of Nigerian society. This detachment is demonstrated in the words of Okwudiba, Obinze's friend and confidante, who advises Obinze that his decision to leave Kosi for Ifemelu goes against the grain of Nigerian social propriety:

> Look, The Zed, many of us didn't marry the woman we truly loved […] but no need for this kind of white-people behavior […] But to get up and say you have no problem with your wife but you are leaving for another woman? *Haba*. We don't behave like that, please. (Adichie 582)

Okwudiba's advice becomes a counterpoint to the universal feminism Adichie promotes in *We Should All Be Feminists*, in which Adichie speaks out against the notion that feminism is a "white-people behavior" that defies African values. While Okwudiba's statement is presented ironically in the novel, it reveals the extent to which the liberation that Ifemelu and Obinze's union represents is considered alien and unassimilable to the rest of the community. Thus the private romantic love of two wealthy professionals fails

to become a resolution to the politically pervasive displacement portrayed in the novel; on the contrary, it perpetuates displacement in the lives of the novel's underprivileged characters.

While Adichie portrays a universal rape culture that links gender inequality in America to that in Nigeria, Ifemelu, even as she has been victimized by this culture in America, ultimately does not fully sympathize with the victimization of women in Nigeria. When we first meet Ifemelu, resident thirteen years in America and ensconced in her privileged life in Princeton, she is on her way outside Princeton to get her hair braided as one final act before moving back to Lagos. Despite the fact that the black hair salon is often a place of shared Africanness that functions as a "safe space" for empowerment and uninhibited communication, Cruz-Gutierrez points out that the social class differences between Ifemelu and the Afro-Caribbean hairdressers cause Ifemelu to feel neither comfortable nor empowered there (Cruz-Gutierrez 76). The hairdressers gossip about and compare African and American femininity and sexuality, expecting Ifemelu's agreement in "this shared space of their Africanness," which Ifemelu rejects by refusing to respond (Adichie 126). Aisha, Ifemelu's Senegalese hairdresser, voices certain topics that make Ifemelu uneasy as they are at odds with her beliefs. As such, the hair salon in *Americanah* falls short of being a safe space, and rather leaves Ifemelu uncomfortable; she feels faint in a space that is sweltering due to a perpetually broken air conditioner, and also "rank with oiliness" due to the strong smell of Chinese take-out (Adichie 126).

Yet the salon is hardly a safe space for the women who work there. Aisha's wages as a hairdresser are exploited by Mariama, the salon's owner, as Ifemelu is aware when she hands her the tip (Adichie 452). As an undocumented worker, Aisha struggles to thrive in America; unable to travel home when her father dies, she is set on marrying her boyfriend, who has obtained a green card via lottery, so that she will be able to visit her ill mother before she dies (Adichie 451). This possibility, however, is portrayed as futile, because Chijioke will not marry her, which is why Aisha "hop[es] but not really believ[es] that she would ever see her mother again" (Adichie 452). She asks Ifemelu to talk to Chijioke on the basis that he may listen to a woman from his Igbo tribe; Ifemelu promises to do so, but never does, as she is interrupted by the news of Dike's depression-induced suicide attempt; depression is an illness that Ifemelu associates with Americanization, metaphorically indicating the social barrier between Ifemelu and Aisha in this instance.[78]

Adichie satirizes Ifemelu's privileged position with the titular term "Americanah," used for Nigerians who have been changed by having lived in America. Like those in the novel's Nigerpolitan Club, these Nigerians have developed a sense of superiority that makes them critical of their native land and culture: "They were sanctified, the returnees, back home with an extra gleaming layer" (Adichie 502). In the end, it is not clear whether Ifemelu stops feeling superior. Ifemelu is not exempt from

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[78] "Depression was what happened to Americans, with their self-absolving need to turn everything into an illness," Ifemelu reflects, initially rejecting the possibility that she is depressed after her abusive encounter with the tennis coach (Adichie 194). She later writes a blog post titled "On the Subject of Non-American Blacks Suffering from Illnesses Whose Names They Refuse to Know" (Adichie 194).

experiencing the pervasive sense of displacement that characters across national borders and cultures feel throughout the novel, particularly the physical and psychological displacement that comes from being commodified within a universal rape culture. Yet even as Ifemelu advocates for a universal feminism, she fails to place herself in solidarity with the underprivileged women of Nigeria who use their sexuality for economic gain in a system of inequality between the sexes. Thus her reunion with Obinze at the novel's end represents an individual sexual empowerment and liberation, which fails to translate into the context of Nigerian society, and the shortcomings of which are demonstrated in the displacement the reunion causes in the lives of less privileged characters.

CHAPTER VI

HYBRIDITY, HAGIOGRAPHY, AND EMPOWERMENT IN ANA CASTILLO'S *SO FAR FROM GOD*

In Ana Castillo's third novel, *So Far from God* (1993), women are represented as martyrs within a rape culture portrayed as a pervasive, religious system of male violence against Latinas. Revolving around the lives of protagonists Sofia (Sofi) and her four daughters, Esperanza, Caridad, Fe, and La Loca, who suffer oppression in their community as socially and racially marginalized Chicanas, the novel is presented in the form of a hagiography, a biography of a saint, casting Sofi and her daughters as martyrs sacrificed through a system of gendered violence. In the novel, rape culture takes the form of an inescapable, omnipresent force that takes the form of a supernatural evil spirit at times and manifests concretely in male-centered institutions such as the Church, the patriarchal family unit, capitalist industries, and war. While this pervasive force catches up with and consumes the lives of each of the women protagonists, the novel's hagiographic portrayal of their lives as saints and martyrs simultaneously provides a space of hybrid resistance, indicating the possibility of transnational spaces of women's solidarity. This final chapter concludes my dissertation with an examination of the possibilities of a vision of collective empowerment that has the potential to accomplish social change within a systemic rape culture, which I argue may be found in Castillo's portrayal of hybrid, activist, women-oriented spaces.

In what follows I draw upon Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity in an analysis of the novel's representation of female sainthood as a form of resistance grounded in collective, social change. Bhabha's theory describes the "strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal" that takes place in the colonized subject's repetition of colonial discourse and power (Bhabha 154). The English book, in his primary example the Bible translated from an English version into Hindi, is an emblem of colonial rule, desire, and discipline; as Bhabha conceptualizes it in his essay, the English book functions as a "sign taken for wonders," an indication of the fixity of colonial power that paradoxically also becomes an emblem of colonial ambivalence. As an emblem of colonial discourse and power, the English book simultaneously undermines colonial discourse by indicating its susceptibility to "mimetic" subversion:

> The discovery of the English book establishes both a measure of mimesis and a mode of civil authority and order […] For it is in between the edict of Englishness and the assault of the dark unruly spaces of the earth, through an act of repetition, that the colonial text emerges uncertainly. (Bhabha 149)

Adopting colonial discourse ironically with "the dark unruly spaces of the earth," Bhabha performs the uncertainty produced by reiteration. The mimetic repetition of colonial discourse creates a place of difference and otherness that is "agonistic, shifting, splitting […] lying on the borderline between outside and inside, a surface of protection, reception, and projection" (Bhabha 152). Drawing on Bhabha's theory, I demonstrate in this chapter the ways in which the female martyrs in *So Far from God* enact a hybrid mimicry of both the colonial and the patriarchal discourses of male violence as

represented by the Roman Catholic Church. The female saint, an emblem of the Church's power that is embodied in the hybridized context of Castillo's novel, undermines the Church's authority from within. Rather than reinforcing the archetypes of the traditional religious femininity promoted by the patriarchal authority of the Church, Castillo's women saints resist and transgress those archetypes as they are particularized as martyrs persecuted by precisely that same authority.

In Bhabha's widely-cited essay, the English book's "paradigmatic presence as the Word of God is assiduously preserved" in the colonized natives' unquestioning approval of direct quotations of the Bible, while they simultaneously reject the "codes, connotations, and cultural associations" that "make its presence culturally and politically authoritative" (161). This dynamic is evident also in *So Far from God,* whose women characters draw on the direct authority of God to enact their own versions of spiritual faith, while rejecting the oppressive regulations of the Church. The protagonists of Castillo's novel do not overthrow the male authority of the Church by defying spirituality. In contrast, the novel is filled with faith-based miracles understood as being the work of God, which the protagonists use to resist the Church's authority, demonstrating a display of hybridity that "terrorizes authority with the *ruse* of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery" (Bhabha 157, emphasis original). Castillo portrays a specifically Chicana spirituality that "mimics" the spirituality of the patriarchal Church, yet in doing so, resists it. The novel opens not only with an introduction to the protagonists, but with a miracle, as three-year-old La Loca, Sofi's youngest daughter, is resurrected at her own funeral, subsequently declaring that she has

been sent by God to pray for the community after a brief trip to otherworldly realms. La Loca's resurrection is set up as a physical subversion of the authority of the Church, which she asserts by rebuking the local priest verbally: "No, Padre… Remember, it is *I* who am here to pray for *you*" (Castillo 24, emphasis original). Additionally, a resistant female spirituality is embodied by mystical female figures such as the local *curandera* (spiritual healer) Doña Felicia, described initially as a "non-believer," "suspicious of the religion that did not help the destitute all around her despite their devotion," who later develops a faith "based not on an institution but on the bits and pieces of the souls and knowledge of the wise teachers that she met along the way" as a powerful and authoritative alternative (Castillo 60). As the story progresses, all four of Sofi's daughters experience supernatural resurrections and healing, which are understood to have come directly from God and allow the women to engage in their own versions of spirituality. La Loca, once resurrected, is endowed with spiritual powers; her sister Caridad is miraculously restored to perfect health after a near-fatal mauling in which her body is brutally mutilated, afterwards becoming a spiritual healer and channeler; Fe screams herself perpetually hoarse in a supernaturally prolonged mourning after she is jilted by her fiancé; Esperanza, the oldest, lingers as a ghost after she is murdered while covering the Persian Gulf War as a journalist. The protagonists' association with such miracles distinguish them as martyrs during their lives and render them saints after their deaths.

It is important to note that *So Far from God* engages with a specifically Latin American form of hybridity known as *mestizaje*, which precedes Bhabha's colonialist

distinction and begins at the moment of the Spanish conquest in the year 1521. Rather than a particular enactment of resistance, *mestizaje* refers to an established condition of being that has long dominated Mexican cultural production. Gloria Anzaldúa articulates this hybrid condition in her concept of *mestiza* consciousness, which refers to a "pluralistic mode" of being developed in the physical and metaphoric Borderlands of Mexico:

> The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode […] (Anzaldúa 101)

The hybrid spirituality portrayed in *So Far from God* is widely understood in terms of its representation of the *mestiza* plurality and interstitiality defined by Anzaldúa, and thus as both a feminist and anticolonial resistance. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano notes that Castillo's characters perform *mestiza* consciousness as they "speak from a multiplicity of positions" (66); Theresa Delgadillo writes that Castillo's novel links itself to Anzaldúa's notion of spiritual *mestizaje* in its portrayal of alternative spiritualities that enact what Anzaldúa calls the "Indian woman's history of resistance" (qtd. in Delgadillo 890); Kelli Lyon Johnson argues that the protagonists of *So Far from God* enact a hybrid, resistant identity by occupying "in-between spaces" that reject the violent patriarchal imposition of borders, which becomes a mode of physical and cultural border-crossing called "la travesía" (39). Concurrently, much of the novel's emphasis on female martyrdom is accomplished through Castillo's feminist rewriting of the iconic Mexican/Mexican-

American legend of La Llorona, emphasizing, among other things, La Llorona's capacity for crossing borders as a marker feminist hybridity.[79] Critics such as Domino Perez and Danizete Martinez read the lives of Sofi and her four daughters specifically as revisions of La Llorona's tragedy in their transgressions of culturally established boundaries of women's place within the borderlands.[80] As a persisting image of a woman who fails to comply with male imperatives for women and perpetually regrets her transgression, La Llorona's story functions as what Bhabha would call a "normalizing myth" that sustains the tradition of colonial authority (Bhabha 147). Castillo's rejection of La Llorona as a largely passive, cautionary female figure, and subsequent reclaiming of her role as a "Chicana international astral-traveler" (Castillo 162), can be understood, in Bhabha's terms, as a fundamental "displacement, distortion, dislocation, repetition" of the "sign of appropriate representation" (Bhabha 147).

While the hybridity in Castillo's novel is mostly discussed in Anzaldúa's terms of *mestizaje*, my purpose in invoking Bhabha's theory is to bring out the particular resistance embedded in the third space of hybridity as a more ambivalent portrayal of empowerment. In reading Castillo's characters as powerful *mestizas* who actively engage in various modes of border-crossing, many critics are optimistic about the

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[79] The traditional Mexican legends describes a woman who drowns her own children in a moment of insanity or jealous rage, after which she commits suicide; her guilt and grief are such that her spirit haunts the river at night, searching and calling for her children.

[80] Perez writes that the four daughters in the novel revise La Llorona's tragedy by "overcom[ing] and liv[ing] beyond the myth" (49); Martinez writes that La Llorona "functions as an agent of change" in the lives of the protagonists and is reclaimed as a "feminist force" (220, 221).

empowerment of women on an individual basis. Delgadillo, for instance, reads the novel as "a story about the recovery of Chicana power and voice" (895), with the protagonists' enactment of spirituality allowing them to become political "agents of social change" (889). As a novel widely established as being politically concerned, there is no question that its protagonists actively resist their oppressive circumstances, experiencing moments of dynamic individual empowerment. Nonetheless, Castillo's portrayal of the protagonists' lives is ultimately not triumphant, nor does the individual empowerment of the protagonists result in lasting social change. Castillo does not overlook or undermine the very real, harrowing violence her protagonists undergo, and it is in this vein that Laura Halperin similarly emphasizes the extraordinary material harm enacted upon the bodies of the novel's women, arguing that it must be examined as "more than just individual and more than fantastical or outrageous" (92). Bhabha's notion of hybridity describes a condition of existing "against a mottled background, of being mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare," a third space that is vexed and multifaceted rather than simply optimistically empowered (162). I argue that Castillo portrays this "mottled" space as an ongoing condition of resistance that exists within the backdrop of a patriarchal settler colonialism rather than replacing it, "a continued agony" rather than "a total disappearance of the pre-existing culture" (Bhabha 156). In doing so, Castillo portrays a vision of empowerment that is crucially achieved through resistance within community and in collective modes of expression, rather than in individual modes.

In her essay collection, *Massacre of the Dreamers* (1995), Castillo identifies the Latin American hybridity as a central component of Chicana identity, emphasizing minority cultures' need to gain knowledge of their indigenous heritage to "educate the world, including our own communities, about ourselves" (6). While the novel is widely studied for its use of "magical realist" elements to forward its political message, Castillo herself has denied any connections with the genre of magical realism: "Someone always asks me about 'magic realism.' But people who know see the sources for my 'magic.' Like in *So Far from God*—the women are literally saints […] 'Magic realism' is just another name for the imagination of Latino Catholics" (qtd. in Calvin 24).[81] Mike Lemon thus makes the case for a shift in terminology from "magical realism" to "spiritual imagery" as a more nuanced distinction encapsulating the novel's Catholicism, indigenous beliefs, and "syncretic spiritual movements," which combine Catholicism with traditional rituals (Lemon 126). Specifically, the novel's supernatural events are an expression of Castillo's concept of "Xicanisma," a combination of feminist consciousness with aspects of traditional Mexican/Latin American femininity.[82] Castillo describes the Chicana identity as one that is "defined by society in a very religious way":

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[81] Marta Caminero-Santangelo establishes that the conversation around *So Far from God* tends to assume an intimate link between the novel's politics and its magical realism such that the instances in which the protagonists' hybrid spirituality manifests in miracles are considered a mode of political empowerment (81). Caminero-Santangelo is herself critical of the romanticism ascribed to magical realism, which, in her view, contradicts the novel's political call for action (84).

[82] Castillo is one of the leading voices in Chicana feminism. In her essay collection, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (1995), she coins the term "Xicanisma" to refer to a new, aggressive brand of feminism that centers the unique, intersectional experiences of Chicana women. The essay collection is Castillo's attempt to establish a historical, philosophical, and religious/spiritual foundation for her feminist practice.

"I can't separate the identity of the Mexican woman, the Chicana woman, from some sort of religiosity. Women, I feel, carry on the traditions of religions, even though they may not be the ones who formulate the ideology" (Interview with Milligan 20). Castillo's portrayal of this specifically woman-based Chicana spirituality invokes Catholic saints alongside Mexican-American folkloric icons and Native American goddesses, including, in addition to the iconic La Llorona, the Lady in Blue, Matlaciuatl, Ciuapipiltin, Cihuacoatl, and more.[83] As such, the Catholic faith that has developed in the novel's community of Tome, New Mexico is a hybrid one that intermixes indigenous Mexican-American traditions with its Catholic traditions.

As an expression of Castillo's concept of "Xicanisma," the miracles in the novel set up a fusion of the religious and supernatural worlds in a way that emphasizes the tensions between the established structure of the local church and the marginalized members of the community, particularly Sofi and her family. This juxtaposition establishes the Church in *So Far from God* as a male-centered institution that polices women and their bodies. When La Loca secretly performs abortions for her sister Caridad's two unwanted pregnancies, for instance, the narrator draws attention to the fact that public knowledge of this transgression would have been "a cause for excommunication for both" (Castillo 27); Sofi's divorce from her husband Domingo is out of the question for similar religious reasons despite Domingo's gambling away of

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[83] Theresa Delgadillo discusses the novel's references to various Native American myths and symbols, which include the shrine at Chimayo, the Laguna creation story, and the Seneca story of The Woman Who Fell from the Sky, by which Castillo construct a "feminist indigenist cultural identity" (904).

most of Sofi's property. As such, Sauer interprets the novel's title as emphasizing the oppression Castillo's Chicanx characters experience within the Church and its restrictiveness (79).

As a remark attributed to Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz in the novel's prologue, "So far from God—So near the United States" is a rueful reflection on proximity to a powerful, expansionist neighbor.[84] Accordingly, the phrase appears within the novel in a description of Francisco el Penitente, a religious character whom most critics associate with harmful, male, institutionalized religion due to his practice of abnegation, which includes mixing ashes with his food, as well as the violent obsession he later develops for Caridad.[85] Francisco's vocation as a *santero*, which involves carving wooden sculptures of saints called *bultos* for a living, is described as an isolating vocation handed down in his family generationally: "[…] they labored with the natural elements, sun, air, and earth and prayed all the while as they worked together in silence—like their Spanish ancestors had done for nearly three hundred years on that strange land they felt was so far from God" (Castillo 102). Both references to the title, that of Díaz's quotation and Francisco's vocation, are associated with colonial violence, in which Castillo implicates the institution of Christianity.

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[84] The whole remark from Porfirio Díaz goes: "Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States." The epigraph in *So Far from God* adapts this remark: "So far from God—So near the United States."

[85] Halperin reads Francisco as a personification of "patriarchal power and institutionalized religion" (96), while Alcalá writes that Francisco "embodies the worst of the male-constructed theologies" Castillo alludes to in *Massacre of the Dreamers*, personifying "an extreme, patriarchal faction of the Catholic Church" (6).

Castillo's hybridization of the Church's authority and discipline involves a "mimicry" that transforms the Church's male-based, individualized forms into woman-based, communal forms of authority that challenge the Church's power. These woman-based, communal forms of repetition take place on multiple levels in Castillo's novel. Castillo adapts the outdated, if not extinct, medieval genre of hagiography with hybridized elements, including the use of humor and irony, through which she reformulates it into what Rita Cano Alcalá calls a "Chicana hagiography for the twenty-first century." Castillo also reinvents traditionally male-controlled spaces and rituals such as the patriarchal family unit, heteronormative relationships, and the Holy Friday enactment of Jesus's Way to the Cross into woman-based rituals and communities, including Sofi's all-female household, Caridad's non-sexual lesbianism, a woman-based local sheep-grazing coalition, an activist Holy Friday demonstration, and the M.O.M.A.S., or Mothers of Martyrs and Saints, a global organization based on motherhood and a shared condition of loss that becomes a vision of transnational solidarity. In both the form and content of her novel, Castillo creates ambivalent, agonistic spaces that are "produced within the rules of recognition" of traditionally authoritative male spaces (Bhabha 153), yet which undermine the authority of those spaces through a democratic decentralization and circulation of power to the community.

To write this hybridized hagiography, Castillo borrows elements from the telenovela format and inflects her narrative voice with humor to counterbalance the doctrinal tone of her political message. The first-person narrator of *So Far from God* is clearly invested in the novel's events in a highly opinionated manner; she assumes the

point-of-view of a gossipy *comadre* whose language is inflected with Spanish *dichos* (popular sayings), black humor, and irony.[86] According to Magali Cornier Michael, the narrator's voice is "recognizably that of a politically savvy Chicana" who is engaged in the lives of the Mexican American women characters she depicts (122). Combined with gossip and humor, however, the seriousness of what Alcalá calls a hagiographical "moral lesson or point of Catholic doctrine" are lightened and rendered subversive (4). The narrator's ironic humor can be read alongside Castillo's widely-commented-upon use of the telenovela format, wherein the sixteen chapters of her novel are assigned lengthy descriptive titles reminiscent of sensationalistic telenovela episodes.[87] Michael points out, however, that Castillo subverts the telenovela's traditional emphasis on heteronormative romances with happy endings, as all the heterosexual relationships in *So Far from God* are decidedly problematic in Castillo's portrayal of a deeply male-centered American and Mexican-American cultural backdrop that silences and disempowers women (121).

Castillo's use of the telenovela format is important in its indication of her commitment to its "communal and populist democratic values," as Michael also points

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[86] The back cover of the 1994 Plume edition of *So Far from God* includes a brief review by renowned Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros that describes the book as "a novel roaring down Interstate 25 at one hundred and fifteen miles an hour with an almanac of Chicanoismo—saints, martyrs, T.V. mystics, home remedies, little miracles, *dichos*, myths, gossip, recipes—fluttering from the fender like a flag. Wacky, wild, *y bien* funny."

[87] Often described as Mexican soap operas, telenovelas are an extremely popular form of "Latin American television serial," generally broadcast in prime time for a period of six to seven months, which gives them closure but nevertheless time to build a community of viewers (Vink 11).

out (119). In the medieval era, the hagiographies of women were a constant verbal reinforcement of holy women's lives, which, as Thomas Hefferman explains, acquired their authority through repetition in a predominantly illiterate society; these hagiographies were often told as entertainment, occasionally taking the place of the homily in a mass (298). Thus the hagiography served a didactic and even propagandistic function, and it is these elements that Alcalá suggests Castillo subverts, turning these "spiritually didactic and materially propagandistic" messages on their heads (4): "Castillo's narrative embraces this female-identified, politicized spirituality in order to criticize the male-dominated Eurocentric Catholic Church and to question the values it endorses through its myths and icons" (3). Michelle Sauer argues that each of the protagonists invoke the lives of an actual female saint, through which Castillo captures for her Chicana characters the relative authority enjoyed by these powerful women (75). Yet the combination of the hagiography with the communal format of the telenovela functions to further popularize Castillo's hagiography.

Accordingly, the novel's female protagonists are increasingly aligned with woman-based, communal spaces that "mimic" more traditional male-based spaces, while contrastingly, the male characters' occupation of such traditional spaces isolate and exclude them from community. The religious system of the Church is portrayed not in alignment with community, but rather as a pervasive, supernatural "evil spirit" called the *malogra*, which attacks women and isolates men. The *malogra* is specifically gendered as a male force that enacts sexualized harm upon women, as depicted in its attack on Caridad. The brutal, near-fatal mauling leaves sexualized marks of violence on Caridad's

body; she is stabbed in the throat, her nipples bitten off, her body scourged and branded (Castillo 33). That the police are negligent in their search for her attacker, due to the blame they place on the victim as a young woman who has "enjoyed life," further reinforces the violence Caridad endures (Castillo 33). Yet the spiritual women of the novel, including La Loca, Doña Felicia, and Caridad herself discern that the attack has been perpetrated by a force greater than any individual man: "And they three knew that it wasn't a man with a face and a name who had attacked and left Caridad mangled like a run-down rabbit. Nor two or three men" (Castillo 77):

> It was not a stray and desperate coyote either, but a thing, both tangible and amorphous. A thing that might be described as made of sharp metal and splintered wood, of limestone, gold, and brittle parchment. It held the weight of a continent and was indelible as ink, centuries old and yet as strong as a young wolf. It had no shape and was darker than the dark night, and mostly, as Caridad would never ever forget, it was pure force. (Castillo 77)

Delgadillo interprets this description of the *malogra* as an allusion to institutionalized patriarchy that "foster[s] disregard for women at every level of society" (907); Lemon notes that its weight and intangibility call for a colonial reading, whereby Caridad's encounter represents "a particularly violent confrontation with one's environment and its heritage" (131). Alma Rosa Alvarez reads the *malogra* as an explicit representation of the Church, and Caridad's near-fatal encounter with it as a retelling of narratives about

mystic Spanish nuns (88).[88] Due to its amorphous form, the *malogra* is manifested in institutionalized forces such as religion, war, and industrial exploitation, as well as through individual men, inducing the martyrdom of each of the protagonists. Like that of Caridad, the deaths of each of Sofi's daughters are brought about by different manifestations of the *malogra*.

Concurrently, the novel's male characters are associated with the *malogra* to varying degrees, as instigators of the systemic rape culture that perpetrates the women's martyrdom. The *malogra*'s attack on Caridad is mirrored in the second sexualized assault enacted upon her by the religious Francisco, whose twisted veneration of her as the Virgin Mary leads him to abduct and rape Esmeralda, the woman Caridad loves, and to chase them both off a cliff to their deaths.[89] In addition to Francisco, whose stalking repeats and completes her first *malogra* attack, Sofi, Esperanza, and Fe suffer in relationships with emotionally and physically abusive men who seem to embody a violence that is bigger than themselves. Castillo parallels Domingo's reckless gambling of Sofi's land and house, owned by Sofi's family for generations, to the appropriation of Tome's farmland by Anglo-American outsiders, which Michael further links to the

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[88] According to Alvarez, the physical attack on Caridad's nipples and the scourging of her body "recalls the fate of Saint Agatha [who] attempted to preserve control of her mind through control of her virginity (body). The consequences of this control were mutilation and death" (88).

[89] While the novel does not explicitly confirm that Francisco rapes Esmeralda, critics such as Magali Cornier Michael interpret his abduction of her in front of the rape crisis center, as well as Caridad's response to Esmeralda's assault, as evidence of the crime, an act that functions simultaneously as a punishment of Esmeralda's lesbianism and an "assertion of male-patriarchal power" over Francisco's failure to "colonize" Caridad (Michael 140-141).

"imperialism that resulted in the imposition of U.S. citizenship on Mexicans who resided in lands that presently make up the southwestern Unites States" (126). Esperanza is outrageously exploited by her college boyfriend Rubén for money and sex, before she escapes the relationship through a thriving career as a news reporter only to be murdered after being shipped off to Saudi Arabia to cover the 1992 Gulf War. Fe, who earns the title La Gritona (The Crying Woman) by screaming herself perpetually hoarse after being jilted by her first fiancé, Tom, dies from chemical exposure from her job at Acme International, a global weapons company, shortly after marrying her second fiancé, Casimiro. Even La Loca, who avoids all human contact outside of her family after her resurrection and who is never involved in a relationship with a man, inexplicably contracts and dies from AIDS, a disease that Kelli Johnson reads as a "violation" of the safe space of the home by a pervasive male control (52).

Thus the novel problematizes heteronormative relationships within the context of a male-centered culture, which is, as mentioned above, a subversion of the telenovela's classic emphasis on heterosexual romances and happy-ending marriages. In this regard, heteronormative relationships between men and women function in the novel as a colonial signifier that "turns delirium into the discourse of civil address," indicating the violence inherent within the normative representation of these relationships (Bhabha 148). The spirit of gendered violence not only debilitates the novel's women through men as instigators, but also debilitates the novel's men, whom Castillo portrays as lacking responsibility and a sense of community, though, to be sure, she is not wholly unsympathetic towards them. Domingo is depicted as a well-meaning man who cares for

Sofi and their daughters, and his plight during his absence from Sofi's household is referred to enigmatically in terms of his experience of hell, which La Loca asserts to Sofi: "Mom, hell is where you go to see yourself. This dad, out there, sitting watching T. V., he was in hell a long time. He's like an onion, we will never know all of him—but he ain't afraid no more" (Castillo 42). The fact that Domingo exploits his daughters' spiritual powers, including one instance in which he wins the lottery by entering the plate number of the police car that symbolically kills Caridad's beloved horse Corazón (heart), which indicates his inability to stop being a compulsive gambler, is rendered all the more tragic by his own implied past sufferings. Likewise, Fe's first fiancé, Tom, suffers from a severe case of *susto*, a type of spiritual fright, that is portrayed as a much deeper and more complex "inability to open his heart," a condition that is extended to a wider demographic of men: "like so many hispanos, nuevo mexicanos, whatever he wanted to call himself, something about giving himself over to a woman was worse than having lunch with the devil" (Castillo 32).

While the violence the protagonists suffer from male partners is thus linked to a larger, institutionalized male violence, including colonialism, industrialism, and war, it is eventually clear that the male characters suffer because of their isolation, suggesting that men are, in part, victims of the very patriarchy they both embody and inflict. Unlike the female characters, whose ability to survive pain and hardships is anchored in their belief in community as well as their spiritual faith, the male characters are portrayed in terms of their inheritance of debilitating legacies of isolation. Fe's second fiancé Casimiro is an accountant whose descent from a three-hundred-year-old sheepherding family has

somehow left him with the "odd affliction of bleating," which Castillo links to a long familial history of isolation tending herds in the cold (Castillo 175). Sheepherding becomes an unsettling link to the *malogra*, whose other name is "wicked wool spirit," while Casimiro's current job as an accountant is reminiscent of the "indelible ink" and "brittle parchment" associated with the *malogra*'s description (Castillo 78).[90] Casimiro's family lineage can be compared to that of Francisco, as both men are born into a long line of isolating patriarchal vocations. Yet even Francisco, despite being the novel's most explicit embodiment of religious male violence, is somewhat sympathetically portrayed; Delgadillo, for example, points out that Francisco's family history, economic opportunities, education, war experience, and social status all contribute to shaping a religious practice that is primarily concerned with abnegation rather than community, and argues that Castillo "veers away from stereotyping Francisco as simply a fanatic Penitente" by bringing these other elements into the picture (Delgadillo 902).[91]

While the novel's men are thus associated with the spirit of gendered violence by which they are isolated and turned inward, the women counteract isolation by engaging in a spirituality that is communal and turned outward. Community, particularly amongst

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[90] This connection is all the more unsettling because, although Casimiro is completely devoted to Fe, their plans for a blissful future compels Fe to leave her safe position at the bank for a higher paying job at a weapons manufacturing company, where she is exposed to hazardous chemicals that cause her brutal death from cancer.

[91] According to Delgadillo, Francisco's troubled state is "attributable to his service in the Vietnam War, a life- and therefore also faith-altering experience"; he "also seems to have been the unwitting exotic foil for a privileged young white woman's sexual experimentation," which "serves to remind us of the numerous, perhaps even seemingly trivial, manifestations of his marginalization in Anglo society that affect his individual psyche" (902).

women, is portrayed as a potentially empowering alternative to hierarchical male-female relationships, producing a "range of differential knowledges and positionalities that […] produce new forms of knowledge, new modes of differentiation, new sites of power" (Bhabha 161). Sofi's family represents a matriarchal unit that is expanded into a woman-based "sheep-grazing wool-weaving enterprise" called the "Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative" that eventually comes to sustain two dozen women and their families, which Sofi starts after becoming the self-proclaimed mayor of Tome (Castillo 146).[92] Empowered by her vocation as unofficial mayor, Sofi refuses to be subjugated, upon his return, by Domingo's heavy gambling, despite finding Domingo "as enrapturing as […] when she was fourteen years old" (Castillo 113). Their rekindled romance does not result in a reconciled marriage, but rather in divorce as Sofi kicks Domingo out of the house in a symbolic usurping of his traditional patriarchal power as head of the family. The family is thus redefined as a feminine space, a woman-centered, non-hierarchical household in which the members willingly care for each other in a giving, reciprocal manner. Sauer writes that the woman-based community modeled in the novel echoes a subversive sect of the religious medieval tradition called "beguines," a "specifically female community that would aid and protect its members from the harshness of a male-dominated society" (78-79). La Loca prefers the company of animals as she confines herself to the safe space of the home while remaining physically and spiritually

[92] The Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative is modeled after the real-world Ganados del Valle cooperative community that exists in northern New Mexico.

connected with her sisters. The three older daughters, Esperanza, Caridad, and Fe, eventually reject debilitating relationships with emotionally and physically abusive men before returning to the organic, woman-based space of their home. Esperanza, albeit posthumously, reconnects with her family after her brutal death abroad; even Fe, who aspires uncritically to a romantic vision of marriage and pursues heteronormative relationships to escape her home and heritage, finds "Sofi's chaotic home" to be "a sanctuary from the even more incomprehensible world" of violence that she encounters at the time of her death (Castillo 171-172). As Michael puts it, Sofi's woman-centered and non-hierarchical household "remains the only sane place in a world in which [the novel's women] are marginalized on multiple fronts," becoming for them a "caring, communal social model that exists in contradistinction to the hierarchical, competitive, violent world that assails them from the outside" (125).

Caridad demonstrates most drastically the novel's shift away from traditional heteronormative relationships in favor of a female community, not only in her transformation from compulsively engaging in relationships with toxic men to becoming a spiritual healer and channeler, but also in her love for Esmeralda. In contrast to Francisco's obsessive love for Caridad, Caridad's love for Esmeralda is what Michael terms "multidimensional" in its joining of spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions (139). Within this dynamic, the nonviolent relationship between two women becomes a clear "mimetic" subversion of the traditional heteronormative relationship. Caridad in no way attempts to impose her love on Esmeralda, who is already in a relationship with another woman named Maria. As in the style of the telenovela, the novel sets up an

almost comical love triangle in which Francisco stalks Caridad as she pursues Esmeralda: "but nobody was talking to nobody about nothing and everybody meanwhile was in a constant state of the willies, feeling like they were being followed all the time, because of course, they all were" (Castillo 206). While the situation ultimately results in the deaths of all three involved in the triangle, demonstrating the destructive consequences of Francisco's violent, masculine assertion of power, Michael points out that the novel distinguishes the women's deaths from Francisco's death as "a means of supporting its call for more communal and giving forms of power and agency" (141). Caridad and Esmeralda's deaths, as they jump off a cliff hand-in-hand to escape Francisco, are presented as a joining with Tsichtinako, the mythological goddess from the origin story of the Acoma Pueblo Indians of Esmeralda's ancestry. This scene is widely interpreted through indigenist, romantic, and feminist lenses, as representing a powerful defiance of patriarchal violence and a safe, eternal rebirth into a spiritual dimension.[93] Sauer writes that the two women's return to Tsichtinako demonstrates the sanctity of Caridad's love for Esmeralda, and politically implies that "the exclusion of the male is not dangerous—it can be both healing and spiritual" (84). Norma Alarcón similarly contends that when women look away from men, their identities as people alter, and "there is no need to submit to or placate the patriarchal structure" (14).

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[93] Delgadillo focuses on the indigenous images of birth and rebirth within the scene that suggest that the deaths need not be viewed as an "end" as in Western constructions. Rodriguez similarly reads the scene in terms of its "romantic connection to the earth and a rebirth," maintaining that a "deep feeling of spirituality fills the termination of Caridad's and Esmeralda's lives, as they forsake them for a nobler spiritual union" (77).

Contrastingly, Francisco hangs himself in a field alone in remorse in a death that lacks any such communal or utopic implications, resembling the individualistic nature of his controlling spirituality during his life.

According to Rich Calvin, the relationship between Caridad and Esmeralda allows Castillo to explore "a long-standing theme for women writers: What space can women occupy outside of the patriarchal order?" (40). In Kate Chopin's 1899 novel, *The Awakening*, there is no space for protagonist Edna Pontillier once she rejects the patriarchal order, other than the sea where she chooses to drown herself. Similarly, the titular protagonists of the 1991 feminist cult classic *Thelma and Louise* choose to drive off a cliff at the Grand Canyon to their joint deaths rather than return to a masculine order, a scene that Caridad's and Esmeralda's plunge off the mesa is widely compared to. Through the portrayal of the two women's deaths, Castillo likewise implies that there is no clear way out of patriarchal or colonial control. Grounded in communal activism, however, Castillo's novel portrays the creation of spaces outside of the patriarchal order that are within this world, spaces that are communal, nonhierarchical, and woman-based, which the protagonists of *So Far from God* increasingly come to occupy. As Irene Visser similarly argues, the deaths of her daughters function as an "opening" for Sofi, allowing her to "integrate the violence of death with a new commitment to life" via her commitment to the villagers of Tome (295). The M.O.M.A.S. at the novel's end embodies such a space.

The political implications of the protagonists' occupation of subversive female spaces are clear in the Holy Friday procession depicted near the end of the novel, which

can be seen as a precursor to Sofi's foundation of the M.O.M.A.S. (Mothers of Martyrs and Saints) at the novel's conclusion, and which expands the protagonists' martyrdom to a broader, communal call for activist social justice. Foregoing the traditional Catholic emphasis on penance through self-mortification, as is enacted in earlier scenes of the ceremony, this Holy Friday procession reorients the traditional ritual towards contemporary social issues in a mimicry of the traditional form that demonstrates Bhabha's notion of resistance as "the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition" (Bhabha 153). Sofi carries a picture of Fe as a bride, sacrificed through chemical poisoning, and La Loca (who is close to death herself) carries a piece of clothing from Caridad and Esperanza; the people likewise carry photographs and remnants of their loved ones who have died from industrial exploitation. The procession thus becomes, as Delgadillo notes, a protest against violence rather than an acceptance of "suffering as the route to salvation" (911). As Alcalá similarly asserts, the novel thus "calls attention to martyrdoms that must be eliminated" rather than representing "the lives of martyred saints as role models to emulate" (3).

In the description of "the Later-to-Become World-Renowned Organization M.O.M.A.S.," which Sofi founds after the deaths of all four of her daughters in the last chapter of the novel, Castillo emphasizes martyrdom as a specifically female condition associated with motherhood. While the narrator humorously disclaims against the "bad talk regarding M.O.M.A.S.'s discrimination against men," with there being "an equal portion of male and female santos and martires represented" by the organization, motherhood and a shared condition of loss are the requirements for acceptance (Castillo

247). As Michael notes, the organization thus "moves motherhood out of the private/public binary" (147), in what Nancy Naples refers to as "activist mothering," wherein "women draw on traditional female identities to justify taking revolutionary actions to improve their communities and the lives of their families" (qtd. in Michael 142). Always commencing with a Mass, which is eventually "held by women clergy, not just men, including some who were married," the convention validates all that the novel has forwarded as means toward an alternative model of female agency and activism, including hybrid forms of spirituality, women's connections to each other, and the power of communities and coalitions (Castillo 250-51). Markus Heide writes that the M.O.M.A.S. "appears as the narrator's vision of the empowerment of a community that stays traditional and spiritual, but at the same time is globally connected" (176); Ellen McCracken reads the organization as a "feminist utopian gesture" that "positively attempts to reverse the patriarchal power of the Catholic church" (38). Castillo thus emphasizes the explicitly female martyrdom associated with the sacrifice of women as a condition that extends beyond the lives of Sofi and her daughters into a broader, international group of women.

Yet the M.O.M.A.S. is also ambivalently portrayed, as noted by several commentators who interpret the exaggerated language and tongue-in-cheek tone of its description as ambivalent about its activism. Castillo's description of the conventions includes a description of its "share of charlatans" that increasingly produce "more useless products and souvenirs than what a tourist could find on a given day at Disney World," which include the "all-time favorite," artisan-drawn "La Loca Santa and her

Sisters Tarot Deck" (Castillo 249). This representation of Sofi and her four daughters as images in a deck of tarot cards sold as popular souvenirs potentially commodifies the protagonists' martyrdom and social activism. As Caminero-Santangelo argues, Castillo distinguishes between meaningless worship and collective activism, and in her farcical portrayal of the M.O.M.A.S. positions the group as a less-than-exemplary coalition to be emulated (95); the souvenirs, in particular, indicate a degradation into "useless consumerism" that offers the "illusion of choice" to disguise the absence of real agency, which reviewer Tanya Hellein has referred to as "the 'Disneyfication' of the Society of Martyrs and Saints" (qtd. in Caminero-Santangelo 94). Halperin likewise observes that Castillo highlights in this last chapter the "absurd elements that can come with coalition building" (120), while maintaining, however, that this humor functions in the Brechtian manner of elucidating critical social awareness, advancing Castillo's "highly politicized purpose" (121). As such, Halperin argues that the humorous tone deployed in the description of M.O.M.A.S. does not take away from the political urgency invoked in the previous Holy Friday procession. Nevertheless, it is clear that Castillo's irony highlights the coexistence of conflicting elements in collective coalition-building.

In her portrayal of hybrid spaces such as Sofi's family unit, the Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative, the Holy Friday procession, and the M.O.M.A.S., Castillo creates a space for women, not outside, but within the masculine order of the Church. As mentioned above, Bhabha emphasizes that hybridity is "a space of separation" that is "denied by both colonialists and nationalists," thus offering an ambivalent third choice other than that which Frantz Fanon offers, to either "turn white or disappear" (162). The

third option, the effect of hybridity, is "camouflage, mimicry, black skins/white masks," which Bhabha describes not as a question of harmonizing with the background, but rather "against a mottled background, of being mottled" (162). Thus, it is important to note that Castillo's vision of women-based community exists as a state of "being mottled" against a hybridized colonial backdrop; Castillo does not portray this space as utopian, existing outside this backdrop or overthrowing it completely. While Caridad's and Esmeralda's joint disappearance into the indigenous earth suggests that there is no space on this world for women who defy the masculine order, Castillo's portrayal of the M.O.M.A.S. provides a more hopeful vision of a space that exists for women within this world, which marks a continual state of resistance. As Bhabha concludes, "When the words of the master become the site of hybridity […] then we may not only read between the lines but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain" (162). The transnational woman-based community envisioned in the M.O.M.A.S. portrays with humor the debilitating influence of consumerism against which it must inevitably exist within this world, while indicating its potential to change that world.

The consumerism depicted in the M.O.M.A.S. can be read in league with Castillo's subversive humor in the adaption of populist democratic genres such as the telenovela, as a hybridized, communal distribution of the discourse of power. Castillo's hagiography is distributed as a telenovela, just as the images of the four daughters are distributed as popular souvenirs and membership in the M.O.M.A.S. is granted freely enough to attract "charlatans." The novel begins with a portrayal of an exclusive

spirituality as embodied by Francisco, whose *bultos* are handed down through generations as an exclusive vocation, and through which Francisco practices an individualistic spirituality demonstrated in his perverse exaltation of Caridad as the Virgin Mary. Francisco's wooden sculptures of saints, which function as a sign of a masculine religious authority, are contrasted with the image of La Loca's statues in the last chapter, which become a popular household staple, distributed as "a good luck gift to new brides and progressive grooms" (Castillo 248). *So Far from God* thus ends with a vision of God close within reach.

In a hybrid mimicry of Catholic sainthood, female sainthood in *So Far from God* becomes a reversal of the individualistic and exclusive authority of a masculine order into a collective, woman-based spirituality. In doing so, the female saints in the novel turn the authority of the Church against itself. Castillo's hagiography testifies to the condition of rape culture women, particularly Mexican-American women, suffer collectively. Martyrdom is a double-edged sword in the novel, both a result of structural rape culture and a mode through which it is resisted. The protagonists undergo tremendous, often inexplicable harm, paying for their deviance in martyred deaths. As Halperin similarly argues, Castillo emphasizes the "devastating harm exacted on the Tome community" through the protagonists' sacrifice, yet crucially "as part of her call for social change" (122). Castillo does not locate resistance as a space outside of the masculine order that inevitably results in death; instead, she portrays women as survivors of extraordinary harm and envisions a space based on transnational solidarity in which they can resist systemic violence from within it. The novel's combination of

hagiography and telenovela, humor and tragedy, and subsequent alignment with democratic forms advance Castillo's vision of an empowerment grounded in collective social activism.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I return to the empowerment-themed *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue, "In Her Own Words." In a black-and-white picture of herself posing for this shoot that model Robyn Lawley posted to her Instagram account, she has the word "mother" printed across her collarbone, "lover" down her chest, "nurturer" on an arm, and "human" just above her pubis. Each of these positive words are of Lawley's own choosing. She looks confident and flawlessly beautiful in her sexiness. Yet the bold, black letters inscribed across her bare flesh give an impression of vulnerability rather than power. The words that Lawley has chosen for herself are predictable and inoffensive descriptors of the image of femininity upheld by the social construction of gender roles. In particular, the fact that Lawley feels the need to assert that she is "human" indicates the overall absurdity of the idea that she is meant to appear empowered in this shoot. The myth of empowerment demonstrated in this shoot, and the ways in which women are coopted into doing the work of patriarchy, is at the heart of this dissertation.

In the commodified feminism of today's culture, consumer choice is masked as empowerment. What we might see as liberatory is liberatory only within the already circumscribed goals of capitalist consumerism. More ways to consume fashion and beauty products that are "empowering" does not change the fact that these industries are harmful to women at multiple levels of production. Yet one may ask, is there not some

power that women gain through their consumer choices? Luce Irigaray argued in the 70s that although women exist as commodities and currency within a patriarchal system of trade, they can nevertheless gain power by refusing male surveillance and instead maintaining among themselves another kind of trade in an alternative female homosexuality.[94] This alternative trade is doubtless what M. J. Day, the female editor of the 2018 Swimsuit Issue, aimed for, with her all-female crew and a message targeting a female audience as well as a male audience.[95] The fact that Day marks the first woman to be in charge of a shoot in the history of the Swimsuit Issue certainly demonstrates the power of women as consumers in bringing about this change.

I believe there is power to be gained by consumption when the consumption is directed towards solidarity-building rather than towards products or goods on a superficial level. In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian,* Yeong-hye's older sister and caretaker In-hye runs a cosmetics store, which represents both literally and symbolically the consumerist empire she has created for herself. This empire is founded on the ideology that women are both consumers and consumed goods, whose consumption adheres to patriarchal standards of beauty. While In-hye strictly maintains these standards in both her private and public life, she comes to question these standards when her sister transforms herself into a consumer product by allowing her nude body to be painted with

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[94] See "Commodities among Themselves" from Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One* (1981).

[95] The audience are addressed as mostly women in model Lawley's February 7, 2018 Instagram post of the shoot where she invites a female audience to think of their own positive words: "When you have to think of what words would you put on your body the only condition is they have to be positive what would you chose?"

flowers in her husband's art project. For Yeong-hye, this is a political transformation of her objectified body into a resistant body, via the medium of video art, a transformation not unlike that which In-hye's customers desire as they consume products to paint onto their bodies and faces in the belief that their power is increased by this transformation. As In-hye eventually comes to realize, but not in time to save her sister, painted flowers and beauty merely reinforce the patriarchal structure that objectifies women as it does animals, consuming both as meat.

In this structure, women do not escape the consequences of inhabiting an objectified body in consumerist acts of resistance. In-hye is unable to establish a solidarity relationship with Yeong-hye because her care of Yeong-hye is based on this consumerist notion of transforming Yeong-hye's body into one that adheres to patriarchal norms, a policing that is enacted by both herself and her artist husband on different levels. Perhaps the only moment of solidarity between the sisters is achieved at the very end of the novel, when In-hye, finally understanding the violence involved in the efforts to "normalize" Yeong-hye's body by violating it, rushes into the surgery room to tear away the needles injecting fuel into her sister's body against her will. Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* features a similar dynamic, wherein Ifemelu rejects the opportunity for solidarity offered in the beauty parlor of the African hair salon. This is another instance in which women's consumption is based on transforming themselves into consumable goods within patriarchal norms, with the Nigerian women exerting "bottom power" being the epitome of such consumability. The salon is a space that is, on the one hand, sustained by product consumption, yet on the other hand, differs from the

space of In-hye's cosmetics store in that it is also a protective space sustained by solidarity among the African women who inhabit it. As the creator of her blog *Raceteenth*, which becomes an empire for female solidarity work among African and African-American women that operates not through product consumption but through language, Ifemelu conducts such solidarity work in the virtual realm but fails to see the salon as a space in which the same kind of solidarity work can take place. Thus there is power to be gained in consumption in spaces where women consumers come together in exchanges that surpass the superficial level of product exchange.

Nevertheless, does this return to second wave feminism indicate that we are stuck, theoretically, in the 70s? The texts I explore in this dissertation, in critiquing postfeminist theory, may additionally appear to indicate that we have simply made no progress since second wave feminism. Adichie's 2017 TedTalk titled "We Should All Be Feminists," which draws mainly on her personal experiences growing up in Nigeria, advocates for concepts that were discussed in feminist debates of the 70s in the U.S., including basic social equality issues between men and women. The talk, as a representation of Adichie's perspective as a prominent representative for African and global women's rights, certainly seems to indicate that the issues in second wave feminism continue to persist across different parts of the world. I believe that it is important to return to second wave feminist values emphasizing the structural prevalence of rape culture and a concept of empowerment based on collective, rather than individual, action. Yet I also believe that we are not theoretically stuck, but have made progress in conceptualizing feminist solidarity that extends beyond a primarily Western,

Eurocentric context. Sara Ahmed, in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), articulates this progress in her description of an intersectional version of solidarity:

> Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground. (189)

While Irigaray's model of a homosexual female consumerism remains valid today, it does not explicitly address solidarity outside a predominantly European frame. The writers I explore in my dissertation question the postfeminist ideal of choice and empowerment in regard to underrepresented parts of the world, marking the development of an intersectional solidarity that takes place across differences among women.

Each text I have examined in this project features powerful, resistant women who are disempowered within rape culture regardless of their agency. To what extent, then, can agency be seen as commensurate with actual power? In addition to Yeong-hye from *The Vegetarian*, women like Ayah from *Cracking India*, Beli from *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Ifemelu from *Americanah*, and Caridad from *So Far from God*, are women who actively consent to sexual encounters and exert an alluring power over men. Each of these women are punished for their sexuality through brutal instances of rape or sexual assault. Any agency they exert is predicated on their being conventionally sexually attractive first. As in the 2018 *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue,

these texts demonstrate the limits of fighting a culture of rape by sexualizing one's body. My dissertation has aimed to demonstrate that the agency women exert in acting out dominant patriarchal ideology cannot be considered as actual power.

Yet this issue brings us back to the question of whether there can be a space outside of patriarchal ideology within the world of literature. Specifically, to what degree are the texts explored in this dissertation interpolated within this ideology? To what degree do these writers maintain a critical distance outside the world of their texts? To what degree is their portrayal of gendered violence ironic? These are questions that cannot be easily determined. The degree to which the narrator Yunior's misogyny is actually ironic in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, for instance, is rendered complicated in the wake of the author's accusations of sexual misconduct and verbal abuse towards women. In Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*, written in the genre of hagiography, it is not always clear whether the narrator is being ironic or sincere in her descriptions of supernatural miracles as spiritual truth. In Han's *The Vegetarian*, determining the narrator's level of irony is complicated by the controversy surrounding the book's translation from Korean to English, which primarily has to do with translator Deborah Smith's stylistic alterations of Han's narrative voice.[96] While there is no stable point of narration, I believe that these authors write from a hybrid literary space that

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[96] An *LA Times* article written by Charse Yun in September 2017 reported claims of mistranslation of the book by Deborah Smith, including allegations of numerous errors, omissions, and embellishments. Yun focuses on Smith's stylistic alteration of the text into a more "poeticized" tone and voice, with adverbs, superlatives, and other emphatic word choices nowhere in the original. Smith has defended her translation, stating that one cannot translate text literally from one language to another, and Han herself has stood by Smith's translation.

exists both within the circumstances they depict in their novels and outside of them. In this regard, the concept of literary irony is similar to hybridity as a social concept. It is this hybrid space of resistance from within the system that I locate the possibility of subversion, both literarily and socially.

Resistance that escapes the system of interpolation oftentimes results in death, as in Caridad's and Esmeralda's swallowing up by the indigenous earth and in Yeong-hye's transformation into a tree by starvation. When empowerment through sexuality fails, the only solution presented is for women to escape through death a system in which they cannot otherwise keep their bodies from being objectified. While such instances can be regarded as liberatory and even triumphant breakings from the system, it was important for me in this dissertation to locate a subversion of the system that did not result in death. Therefore, I close with the hybrid space of mothers in *So Far from God*, which envisions the possibility of resistance from within, instead of outside, the system. Sofi and the mothers in *So Far from God* do not escape the system through death in response to harrowing gendered violence. Rather, they inhabit a hybrid space from which they resist violence, alive, through community and solidarity. This space is optimistic without being wholly unrealistic. It is a space sustained not in individualized modes, but rather on a structural level.

Frantz Fanon famously claimed that national culture emerges from the "zone of occult instability where the people dwell," a zone that belongs to the community in colonized nations that is under magical jurisdiction. In the texts I have explored in this dissertation, occult instability emerges in the status quo of rape culture rather than

colonialism. The rape culture women experience in the domestic personal is amplified in moments of the national historical, in which sense colonialism becomes an amplification of systemic gendered violence. While personal and domestic violence often stands as an allegory for national and historic violence, such as in the allegorical portrayal of Ayah's rape in *Cracking India* representing the metaphorical rape of the nation, violence is not always allegorically readable when it bleeds outwards in occult fashion, as in the image of the train full of Muslim women's mutilated breasts. In the texts I explore, violence is often literally of the occult, manifesting in supernatural forms such as in the *fukú* in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and the *malogra* in *So Far from God*. The relationship between national historic violence and the personal experience of violence in the domestic sphere is thus vexed, multifaceted, and not always easily determined.

On this note, we may return to the question of consumerism, and whether the consumption of these works of literature can result in actual social change. As in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's critique of popular culture consumption as a means by which people are brainwashed into passivity, it is possible to consume these literary texts and be pacified rather than politicized. With the increasingly blurred distinctions between what Horkheimer and Adorno refer to then as "high culture" and "mass culture," it is not easy to determine the status of the literary works I have examined in this dissertation. The question of whether these texts function to train our brains and wake us from ideological interpolation, or simply quell our desire for real life change, is one on which more research needs to be done.

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