PRESENCE, PROCESS, PRODUCT:
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WOMB IN WRITING WOMAN

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PRESENCE, PROCESS, PRODUCT:
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In this paper, I propose a way to interpret Trinh T. Minh-ha’s theory of writing woman. Minh-ha claims that writing woman must come through the body; therefore, I argue that this movement is situated within the womb. To navigate my argument, I investigate three texts as they represent the womb in different stages. First, I use two short stories from Chinelo Okparanta’s collection _Happiness, Like Water_ to articulate the presence of the womb. Then, I explore the television miniseries _Top of the Lake_ to demonstrate the process of the womb. Finally, I employ Karen Russell’s short story “Reeling for the Empire” to evince the product of the womb. These texts present the womb in atypical ways, which allows me to conclude that writing woman is a comprehensive endeavor that works to recognize the embodied experiences of women.
Dedicated to writing women
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INTRODUCTION

*It wrote itself through me. “Women must write through their bodies.”*  
Trinh T. Minh-ha

I have long been interested in feminist theory and its intersections with literary theory. I believe that the bodily representation of women in texts is problematic as it can inform and extend misogyny. Therefore, when I write, I choose to analyze embodiment and the portrayal of female forms (whether explicit or obscured) to reclaim women from destructive literary structures which deny and trivialize the experiences of women by exaggerating the body, sensationalizing emotion, and ignoring intellect. However, in my research to break down these structures, I have found work that exemplifies the body, emotional range, and intellect of women. I first explored one such work while enrolled in a literary theory course and by the end of the semester, my investigation manifested into a final paper — my professor's parting response to this paper was 'What now?' What now, indeed.

While I have been informed by all the feminist theory I have read, in shaping this thesis I have immersed myself in one particular focus — the approach to women's writing. How does it look? What does it feel like? What makes it distinct? These are all questions that molded my understanding as well
as direction. I found that one of the most influential texts in answering these questions is Trinh T. Minh-ha's book, *Woman, Native, Other*. For me, this work captures what it means to adequately represent women in text (through body, emotion, and intellect), to ‘write woman.’ Like écriture féminine, Minh-ha’s ‘writing woman’ stresses a female language but encourages this language be used to document the experiences of women. While much of feminist theory has called for and explored the notion of what a female body of text might look like, how it might stand next to, but separate from, a patriarchal canon, Minh-ha offers indicators to how women might write themselves and guideposts to chart women’s exploratory creation, thereby constructing an embodied writing. Therefore, when I use the term ‘writing woman’ or ‘write woman’ I will be referring to the on-going process, as elucidated by Minh-ha, that women employ to embody themselves through writing. Using Minh-ha's work as a launch, I have engaged four texts by three authors to examine their ability to write woman. Across genres, I have observed over-arching themes that are present in writing woman texts, themes that both substantiate Minh-ha's assertions and broaden her scope.

In her discussion of ‘Writing Woman’ within the chapter “Commitment from the Mirror Writing Box,” Minh-ha identifies four tensions present in this process of writing the body. Minh-ha uses these tensions to offer perspectives on writing the body under the influence of patriarchy. Through this passage, Minh-ha explores the simultaneous emergence of woman writer’s identity and woman writer’s body as women refuse to comply with patriarchal structures and embrace their bodies as producers embodied texts. In finding fluidity between writing
identity and writing body amidst the tensions presented by patriarchy, writing woman emerges to establish a consciousness that is grounded in ability to produce texts.

The process of reconstructing a consciousness through writing woman is the focus of this thesis. I will be examining the validity and extension of Minh-ha’s process as it applies to three contemporary texts written by women, about women. While the crux of my argument centers around one subsection of ‘Writing Woman’ (Write your body), I will use the other three themes (The Priest-God scheme, And I grow younger as I leave my me behind, The body in theory) to exaggerate the tensions each section presents as showcased by a creative text. Developing my argument this way serves a twofold purpose. First, it will allow me to clarify the complexities to writing woman. Second, I will have the opportunity to epitomize writing woman as an evolution.

By following Minh-ha’s logic, I am able to argue writing woman develops in three parts: presence, process, and product of the womb. This development in writing woman mirrors design of the womb as it exists, menstruates and gestates, and births. In choosing three different, contemporary texts of writing woman, I will establish these themes of development as necessary to and prevailing in the narrative structures of writing woman. Even though all of my primary texts fulfills each of the themes to writing woman that I prescribed above, I will dedicate one text per condition in order to more completely examine the expectation, tendency, and fulfillment of writing woman as it pertains to that particular state of the womb.
‘The Priest-God scheme’

In this passage, Minh-ha examines the egoism present in (men’s) writing that assumes a stance of knowledge that is pure and omniscient. The effect of this writing harms women because it prioritizes rationale and intellect. Since women have often been separated from these qualities through exacerbation of their bodies and emotion, women cannot enter this realm of writing by writing themselves. Instead, they must mimic the writing that men produce, writing that diminishes their experiences. Within this scheme, a division emerges between ‘write yourself’ and ‘write about yourself’ and Minh-ha acknowledges that a limited perspective in writing occurs throughout the latter: “narrow representation starts with the necessity of “I am God” or “I am goddess” to create” (29). This God-writer remains lofty and detached, emotionally distant from and existing outside of the text produced. Enter the Priest-writer — the critic, the mouthpiece of God and authority; “The closer to this voice s/he claims to stand, the more weight her/his vision or opinion is likely to carry” (29). In adopting this stance, the Priest-writer denies personal feeling to perpetuate a perspective that is not necessarily her/his own in order to gain notoriety and value.

Writing about the self is writing egotism. In adopting the Priest-God scheme, women writers enter the arena of men, where women are not God but pale reflections, and they imitate egotism and remoteness to gain acceptance into the space of the canon. Women who write the self continues to be denied entry into conversation and actively silenced for the feeling, emotion, and selfness it creates. But in shedding egoist writing and choosing instead to write through
their bodies, women usurp their perceived lack. To claim fullness of self, however, women mark themselves as separate, as no longer willing to entertain the Priest-God scheme. This movement away from imitation writing gives women the opportunity to write about their experiences. Writing woman seeks to overturn the practice of regurgitating patriarchal narratives because they inadequately represent the experiences of women; writing woman produces a text that is a sincere reflection of women.

‘And I grow younger as I leave my me behind’

In this theme, Minh-ha unravels the multiplicity of writing woman. Rather than fall into the habit of writing as a mirror, a mimicry of the Priest-God scheme, Minh-ha seeks an alternative plurality believing that meaning is not dependent on the truth of the single message. Reality, rather, is found in denying self-likeness to a single message, in denying ego: writing “is an ongoing practice that may be said to be concerned, not with inserting a “me” into language, but with creating an opening where the “me” disappears while “I” endlessly come and go” (35). As the ‘me’ in writing falls away, so does the ego, so does the single message. ‘I’ becomes plural, meaningful, and perpetual because it relies on the text, not the writer. In writing woman, women can find herself reflected in the text, whereas, in egoist writing, the representations of women are stagnant and stilted. In the absence of the writer’s ego, the writer exists in the text and in the act of writing — her existence is plural: “Writing is born when the writer is no longer” (35). Removing the ego inaugurates a new writing that holds the reality of the text above the identity of the writer; plural texts supersede egoist writing
because the single message of the Priest-God scheme is “never original” and “grows indefinitely on ready-mades” (36). Multiplicity in writing woman works to diversify and transform, it “is ceaselessly re-breaking and re-weaving patterns of ready-mades. The written bears the written to infinity” (36). In purposeful repetition and reclamation of patterns, writing woman is simultaneously ‘I,’ plural, and timeless.

The plural writing Minh-ha calls for is recognition of the self in flux. Plural writing disabuses the notion of binaries, which are products of the single message, and reinstates the variety of experience as reality. The body is not static and therefore cannot produce or exist in a rigor that insists on dualisms. Rather, the body is in unceasing change because of sequenced experiences. Writing woman works to portray experience as a process through the body. Before, in the Priest-God scheme, women were left to procure language outside of themselves to produce a text to match egoist writing. Now, in embracing plurality, language moves through the body because plurality is formed in (bodily) experience. Writing process writes through and with the body.

‘Write your body’

Minh-ha’s insistence that women must write the process and experiences of their bodies comes from her belief that “We write — think and feel — (with) our entire bodies rather than only (with) our minds and our hearts” (36). Thinking and feeling this way necessitates a bodily writing, but notably a writing that generates in the body and likewise moves through the body. Movement such as this is organic, all-encompassing, and engendered in one site: the womb:
No man claims to speak from the womb, women do. Their site of fertilization, they often insist, is the womb, not the mind. Their inner gestation is in the womb, not in the mind. The mind is therefore no longer opposed by the heart; it is, rather, perceived as part of the womb, being “englobed by it.” (37)

Writing woman is dependent on the womb because the womb is a place of process both physically (through menstruation and gestation) and linguistically (by hosting the unification of the mind and the heart). Women’s articulation of the womb signifies the ability to create plurality.

In claiming this womb, Minh-ha critiques the way patriarchal systems have separated womb from women’s bodies. Separating the woman from the womb eliminates her agency — creation is not of the woman (her heart, mind, and body), but rather a by-product of an organ. Women must reclaim their bodies as synonymous with their womb and woman’s body is fulfilled. Minh-ha explains, “Women use “womb” to re-appropriate it and re-unite (or re-differ) themselves, their bodies, their places of production (38). Minh-ha fights to establish writing woman as womb, mind, heart to reclaim the woman’s body, the whole body, as a site of creation so she can now create in fulfillment of her body, through her body. Ultimately fulfilled as a body, woman can now (and must) write her abundance through her body, engaging a process that matches her body.

Ultimately, the womb exists as a site of process and production: "a body capable of receiving as well as giving: nurturing and procreating" (37). A body capable of this is centers plurality in the womb. It follows, then, that the desire to delineate the womb is an extension of the process and does not originate outside
of the womb. Because the desire to write woman prevails in a site of unity, the woman’s body cannot be fragmented into a mind, a heart, and a body; when unified, the woman’s body is, the woman’s body writes.

‘The body in theory’

Minh-ha explains the final theme as the ability to find harmony in writing the womb. She cites chakras and concentrates on the kath, “below the navel...[as it] radiates life... [and] brings a new awareness of life into previously forgotten, silenced, or deadened areas of the body” (40). Below the navel, within the womb, this new consciousness is “an ongoing unsettling process” that subverts power and knowledge into a cyclical chase which culminates in “rewrit[ing] women’s relation to theory” (40-1). Expounding upon the difficulty of necessitating the fundamentality of writing the body to the uninterested theory of the Priest-God scheme participants, Minh-ha notes that “Theory oppresses, when it wills or perpetuates existing power relations, when it presents itself as means to exert authority” (42). In response to oppressive theory, Minh-ha contends writing woman “cannot be fully explained by any analysis” (44). Although bound to the constraints of the language of men, writing woman is an exploration, summation, and declaration of paradoxes made whole in the body, as the body.

Because writing woman is a text of process and multiplicity, language is used as it is experienced at a moment in time, as it moves through the body. The relationship with language and words is always changing because experience is fluid, thus writing woman is ongoing work. The ability to sustain this amorphous language distinguishes the work of writing woman. Therefore, theory that
attempts to capture writing woman without acknowledging process and flux is tyrannical. Theory of writing woman must recognize the ability to host a boundless relationship to language that evolves to match both body and experience.

**Moving Forward**

A clear understanding of Minh-ha’s guideposts to writing woman allows me to parse through and showcase what I consider original presentations of writing woman by three female writers. In navigating these works, I have found that Minh-ha’s themes are easily translated into narrative structures because of the nature of process. These female authors (Chinelo Okparanta, Jane Campion, and Karen Russell), present forms in their writing and their subject matter that challenge the Priest-God scheme, typify plural writing, and culminate in a creative consciousness. As previously mentioned, each text writes woman fully, but I will align one author with one of Minh-ha’s sections to highlight the complexity each text presents.

To epitomize the Priest-God scheme associated with Writing Woman, I will examine two works in Chinelo Okparanta’s collection *Happiness, Like Water*. This series of vignettes offers overlapping themes of mother/daughter relations, childbearing, and marriage. The exploitation of the female characters that occurs because of patriarchal structures presents women as wounded individuals. In writing these wounds, Okparanta defies the Priest-God scheme and writes a womb centered experience that works against the single message. In writing the experience of the womb, Okparanta displays the wounds inflicted upon women
for existing in confrontation the Priest-God scheme.

To complement Minh-ha’s Priest-God scheme and illuminate Okparanta’s short stories, I will be using the work of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie’s engagement of feminism from two perspectives (as Nigerian and an inhabitant of the United States) offers a viewpoint that carefully defines feminism in such a way that applies to women cross-globally. Her stance is encompassing and points to directly to patriarchal structures, customs, and cultures as the locus of harm to women. Therefore, should another writing woman text aside from *Happiness*, *Like Water* be used to examine “Body as Wound” it would still function because of the demarcations specified by Adichie.

The plurality of writing woman highlights the nature of continuous process, of making space, of menstruating, of nurturing, of gestation. To demonstrate this concept in text, I analyze a particular story arc within the mini-series *Top of the Lake*, written by Jane Campion and Gerard Lee. Narrowing my focus to a particular set of characters (a commune of women, a pregnant adolescent, and her father), I will examine the corporeal nature of repetitive process as it is presented through women’s bodies. The women live as one; their identities are enmeshed into a plural ‘I’ because they share the experience of process, a process which is physically embodied by the gestation of a child.

To extend Minh-ha’s notion of plurality and negotiate the commune of women with their natural surroundings, I also draw upon eco-feminism and the work of Françoise D’Eaubonne and Val Plumwood to set up the process of healing. Utilizing the parallels between women and nature that D’Eaubonne and Plumwood contend, I am able to hone the plurality of women as a reflection of
their nature (menstruation and gestation) which is fundamentally a process. To establish this process as of women allows me to signal the healing process as of women as well.

Minh-ha's apex, the mastery of consciousness, is manifested in this portion. The space to create, the ability to create, the will to create through the womb all culminate in an awakening of self. To demonstrate this manifestation, I explore Karen Russell’s short story “Reeling for the Empire” in which young women are enslaved to produce silk for their kingdom, but seek freedom by creating their own space, a cocoon. This short story navigates the production of manipulated bodies and brings to light the reciprocal relationship of womb and consciousness as highlighted by ability.

To epitomize the space to create, I will couple Minh-ha's commentary with Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One’s Own* and Wendy Gan’s response "Solitude And Community: Virginia Woolf, Spatial Privacy And A Room Of One's Own." These essays validate the necessity of a space for women to write and create. Therefore, my use of this essay and critique allows me to name any space in which a woman creates *her* creating space. Whether it be a room or a cocoon, if the space is particular to creation it mirrors the womb and is accordingly of woman.

My three-pronged argument of presence, process, and product of the womb is an attempt to capture Minh-ha’s assertion, “It wrote itself through me. ‘Women must write through their bodies’” (36). Minh-ha places writing woman as movement through the body as a way to avoid the Priest-God scheme, write plurality, and establish consciousness. Therefore, if I locate movement in the womb (presence) and initiate it through the womb (process), then I am able to
situate the consciousness of creative ability (product) as the consequence of the womb, as the realization of writing woman.
CHAPTER 1

PRESENCE

Body as Wound

*Charged with intentionality, writing is therefore disclosing (a secret), and reading is believing.*

Trinh T. Minh-ha

Naming the body as wound indicates a perpetration of violence — the body, once whole, is now injured. Therefore, the body as wound exists in juxtaposition: the fullness of the past body and the damage to the current body. This positioning points to an act of violence as the defining gesture that changed the body. Through trauma, the experience of injury marks the body as wound. Because wounds are open and exist in the present, they are prone to infection or further injury, an exacerbation of the trauma. For this section, I am naming woman’s body as wound because I want to draw attention to the acts that harm women and discuss how the injuries sustained become septic. Harm such as this can incapacitate woman’s body as permanent disfigurement unless writing woman emerges — writing the injury works as a tool for healing because it acknowledges the experiences of women. In paralleling my examination of Trinh T. Minh-ha and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s critical work (*We Should All Be Feminists*)
with Chinelo Okparanta’s creative work (*Happiness, Like Water*), I have developed a criterion for how wounds particular to the womb are represented and extended.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s essay *We Should All Be Feminists* is an extension to her celebrated TEDxEuston Talk by the same title. A native to Nigeria, Adichie now splits her time between Nigeria and the United States giving her a distinct perspective on the workings of gender across cultures and continents. This position informs her observations and cements her definition of feminism. As such, Adichie’s claims work universally so that when she says, “Gender as it functions today is a grave injustice,” it is relevant to audiences throughout the globe (21). This theme of gender as a genesis of injustice is paramount in her essay and she distills this reality into the contention that “For centuries, the world divided human beings into two groups and then proceeded to exclude and oppress one group” (41). Adichie’s conclusion that women are the group excluded and oppressed by men lends itself to wounding imagery because exclusion and oppression are injurious. And to be subjugated in this way because of biological differences, that difference in women—the womb—I situate as a marker of injury.

Adichie spends time addressing the tensions in difference, which further presents the womb as wound. She acknowledges that “Men and women are different. We have different hormones and different sexual organs and different biological abilities—women can have babies, men cannot. Men have more testosterone and are, in general, physically stronger than women” (16-17). This quote establishes differences and thereby sets up the reasoning which allows
Adichie to conclude women have been excluded and oppressed. Citing the lack of testosterone, abundance in estrogen, and ability to have a child locates the womb as the wound because it exaggerates the difference and places it in the site of reproduction.

While, Minh-ha is not as explicit as Adichie in her construction of the female body as wound, her main claim of “The Priest-God Scheme” is that for women to join the literary canon they must imitate writing men. This is harmful in two ways: it denies women the space to write their selves, their bodies, and it situates them in the shadows of men. The wound Minh-ha writes appears because of the injury women sustain by writing a language that does not reflect their bodies but their oppressors. She explains, “we have all let ourselves be infected with the leprosy of egotism, which remains the most difficult disease to cure, for what egoists, like lepers, inevitably undergo is a loss of feeling and are consequently apt to injure themselves without realizing it” (28). In this context, Minh-ha is using ‘egoists’ to represent author’s who engage narrative structures that assume a God-like or omniscient perspective and propound it as the sole format of composition. She assigns male writers to this category as well as female writers who mimic this framework. Furthering her point, Minh-ha calls attention to the injury that ensues when egoist writing is employed, more particularly for the female writer. In this sense, women are wounding themselves when they chose not to write woman, thus adding to the wounds perpetuated by the egoist (male) writing structure itself.

In reuniting language with women’s bodies, a wound is written. It is written around the harm, around the injury, around the body that signifies the physical
difference that men have cited to keep language from women: the womb. Through exclusion and oppression, the wound is situated in the womb. Writing the body as wound makes obvious the chronic injury of women for being women, for being marked by a womb. But this writing process is twofold: not only does it make explicit the inflicted harm but it also calls attention to the structures that inflict the harm. Slowly, in acknowledging their bodies, writing women display their wound by writing their wound, by writing their bodies, by writing the experience that transitions the body between wellness and harm.

Chinelo Okparanta writes woman in her collection *Happiness, Like Water*. Two stories in particular press intimately on the notion of woman’s body as wound. “Wahala!” and “Runs Girl” both present womb as wound because the bodily experiences of women in a patriarchal structure are themselves wounding. The harm that is inflicted on the women in these stories occurs because they are women. Constructing the wound consists of three overlapping facets: pain, subjugation, and awareness. In each story, pain is visible and palpable — it weighs on the characters in physical and mental ways. Often following the presentation of pain comes a point where the woman character is subjugated at the hands of her fellows, either because of her position or because of her willingness to sacrifice herself. As both the pain and subjugation develop, the women come to a silent awareness of her situation, accompanied by bouts of shame. Okparanta’s presentation of writing woman as seen in these stories is a faithful and nuanced reflection of the contentions of Minh-ha and Adichie.
Pain

Just as suffering exists in many forms, the pain that signals the wound can be physical, mental, or emotional. Adichie speaks of a harmful experience in which waiters ignored her while her male associate was addressed directly:

The waiters are products of a society that has taught them that men are more important than women, and I know that they don’t intend harm, but it is one thing to know something intellectually and quite another to feel it emotionally. Each time they ignore me, I feel invisible. I feel upset. I want to tell them that I am just as human as the man, just as worthy of acknowledgement. (20)

Adichie’s attention to this situation proves that it is not rude staff ignoring all patrons, or even intentional rudeness at all, but rather a deeply entrenched belief that women are not worthy to be greeted, and that men are. This pain contributes to womb as wound because it is Adichie’s womanhood that renders her invisible to the waiters and initiates her feelings of harm (‘I feel invisible’). In this passage, the presence of pain (‘I feel upset’) signals the wound.

The story “Wahala!” showcases physical and mental pain as interdependent. Beginning from the perspective of Chibuzo, a patriarch, the narrative unfolds as he wishes to seek the help of a healer (a dibia) so that his wife, Ezinne, might soon conceive his child. When the point of view shifts to his wife, however, readers become aware that Ezinne wants the healer to rid her of pain during intercourse:

Ezinne told the dibia of the pain. She said that it came in her lower belly each time Chibuzo inserted himself into her. It hadn’t always been there,
she explained. It had come on suddenly, one of the nights that she lay with Chibuzo, some months after they were wed. Perhaps it was a thing that happened because she had by then already begun to grow afraid of not being able to bear Chibuzo a child. In any case, each time afterwards that he made to enter her, she stiffened, and there was the pain. Or rather, she said, it was hard to tell which one came first — the stiffening or the pain.

(Okparanta 25)

In this passage, pain is both indisputable and dependent on Ezinne’s biology, her womanhood. Okparanta strikes this theme when she places Chibuzo’s thoughts next to Ezinne’s; had Ezinne been a man, her pain would be nonexistent because the site of her discomfort would be absent. Additionally, if she were a man, Ezinne’s mindset would be focusing on the inability of her partner rather than the impotency of herself (just as her husband does). Okparanta moves beyond the literal representation of womanhood and into the figurative depiction when she indicates Ezinne’s fear of sterility. The proximity of these signals (pain during intercourse and fear of sterility) showcases the interweaving of physical pain and mental anguish. Nearly inseparable, the physical and mental suffering Ezinne endures in attempts to conceive presents a wounding experience because of her sex.

In “Runs Girl,” readers are likewise presented with explicit pain experienced by a woman. The story revolves around a daughter and her ailing mother: “It began with pain on the shoulder... But the next day she could barely move her left arm” (68). While this pain is experienced by a woman character, it is not exclusive to her — had she been a man she could have easily experienced the
same malady. In this narrative, the mother’s illness weighs solely on the mother and daughter; this pain is the women’s burden and the daughter acknowledges this difficulty when she surmises, “Papa had gone and left us to fend for ourselves in a world where it was hard for a woman to do so honestly” (70). Using the mother’s pain as well as the daughter’s understanding, Okparanta deftly negotiates body as wound. The daughter’s inability to help her mother causes as much mental anguish as the mother’s physical affliction. By shifting focuses between the pain itself and the circumstance surrounding it, Okparanta is able to highlight the all-encompassing nature of bodily experiences and in doing so, demonstrates that the woman’s body is a wound because the characters’ experiences are wounding as are their bodies.

**Subjugation**

Subjugation of women works to extend the wound, it grows within the pain of the wound because it exists as the womb exists. Calling attention to her whole body and the perpetuation of her injured body, Adichie neatly sums, “Of course I am a human being, but there are particular things that happen to me in the world because I am a woman” (44). Here, Adichie differentiates between human experience and female subjugation. While there are occurrences experienced by both men and women (what we can call human experiences) there are also situations experienced by women that are not experienced by men, simply because of the difference Adichie highlights, the womb. Because these experiences are exclusive and oppressive, they subjugate women. Subjugation, then, is born out of pain and manifests in experience.
Ezinne's pain (physical and mental) becomes a source of her subjugation. After seeking a cleansing from the dibia, Ezinne's husband, Chibuzo, believes Ezinne to be cured. In his eagerness to conceive a child, he insists upon intercourse that evening. But Ezinne has not been healed: “She tenses up... There are tears in her eyes by now but she blinks them away... as he enters her, there is the pain, sharp and as willful as ever before. She moans but he enters anyways (32-33). Both the metal anguish, as signaled by her tears, and the physical discomfort, as gestured by the pain Ezinne feels when Chibuzo enters her, are present in this moment. Notably, Ezinne moans, which should indicate to Chibuzo that her body, that she herself, is in distress. Instead of listening to this cue, however, Chibuzo “thrusts himself into and out of her, and she continues to moan, louder and louder. ‘Please,’ she finally screams, but he doesn’t seem to hear. She tries again. ‘Chibuzo, please stop!’ ... He takes in all the pleading but what he hears are gentle sounds of pleasure not at all sounds of pain” (33). Not only does Chibuzo ignore Ezinne’s moaning, but he also disregards her speech and he sees her as only a womb, a vessel for producing a child. Chibuzo morphs Ezinne’s pleads and moans into what he expects to hear, what he wants to hear: cries of pleasure. Ezinne is subjugated because Chibuzo is unwilling to recognize her suffering that is manifested in both her body language and speech. His desire for a child overpowers Ezinne’s desire for wellness and by raping her, Chibuzo exploits her personhood. Ezinne’s pain is not valid in the face of Chibuzo’s willfulness and consequently, Chibuzo deepens and aggravates Ezinne’s wound.

Ada, the narrator of “Runs Girl,” is subjugated via her willingness to sacrifice her scruples for the sake of her mother. When disclosing her mother’s
illness to Njideka, a friend and prostitute, Njideka suggests Ada earn money as a ‘runs girl’ to take her mother to a specialist: “Your mama is sick, and there’s a good chance you won’t even have to sleep with the man” (77). Njideka knows Ada’s reluctance but by pitting Ada’s mother’s illness as her responsibility against the likelihood of what Ada will be asked to do, Njideka convinces Ada it is her only option since, as Ada understands, it is difficult for women to support themselves honorably (70). Therefore Ada decides, “I would do it just that one night. To get the money so that I could take her to a specialist, one that Njideka would recommend” (79). Even though Ada believes “It’s sinful,” her conscience is split between duty to her mother and observing virginal decorum (77). Hence, Ada’s decision acts as sacrifice — she chooses to behave as a runs girl for one evening with a twofold hope that she will not have to ‘sleep with the man’ and that she will earn enough money to buy her mother treatment. Although Ada makes this decision for herself, she is subjugated by circumstance. Sacrifice acts as its own subjugator because in this instance she feels she has no free choice, only obligation under the guise will. Because Ada’s situation parades as choice, she succumbs to a decision that would hurt her less but in doing so, Ada as wound is still hurting.

**Awareness**

The capacity for self-awareness as it stems from pain and subjugation is often accompanied by feelings of shame. Belief that the womb itself, and not the patriarchal structures around the womb, as the cause of women’s suffering and injustice triggers a sense of disgrace. Indeed, Adichie explains, “[They] have been
raised to think of women as inherently guilty... We teach girls shame. Close your legs. Cover yourself. We make them feel as though by being born female, they are already guilty of something” (33). Simply being born with a womb is to experience shame. A woman’s awareness of this shame shades future choices as desperate: as a wound, as a subjugated being, there is fear that any decision which attempts to eliminate shame will exacerbate the pain of the wound.

Ezinne’s pain and experience direct her introspection. Watching the backlash from Chibuzo and her mother because she had not yet conceived, “...[Ezinne’s] mind had been heavy with the knowledge... that some imperfection in her was the reason for all that wahala, all that trouble (23). Aware of the tension in her environment, Ezinne cites herself as the cause. By the nature of their existence, wounds are open and are therefore susceptible to infection, which causes further affliction. As the fulcrum of her husband and mother’s trouble, Ezinne is the wound. This realization allows Ezinne’s thoughts to circle to other, less self-contained possibilities: “And what if the imperfection was not really even in her? What if it was in him? It was a thought that she could not dare voice. It was generally understood that such things were the fault of the woman” (23).

This passage presents a disconnect. Ezinne has both acknowledged herself as the problem and wondered if she, in fact, is not, that perhaps her husband bears fault. But Ezinne remains wounded because she is unable to speak her idea; she imbibes the notion that this could not be Chibuzo’s defect, and therefore it must be hers because the problem still exists — her problem exists because she exists. A certain shame is entangled with this kind of understanding. To be the source of trouble, the reason for familial anxiety, is magnified by the recognition that
Ezinne may not be at fault but will always be blamed. A disgrace to her family and to herself, Ezinne is inescapably stigmatized by others’ suppositions about her body.

Similarly, Ada is plagued with shame. Before her decision to earn money as a runs girl, Ada confesses, “Mama was falling apart and there was almost nothing I could do” (67). Her mother’s illness contrasts with Ada’s ability; although Ada is not infirm, she is still unable to help her mother. Ada’s heightened awareness initiates her spiral into shame. The use of ‘almost nothing’ signals that Ada knows there is at least choice she could make. As undesirable as this choice may be, Ada is paralyzed by and ashamed of her helplessness. Therefore, in seeking to suspend her shame and find means to help her mother, Ada decides to spend one evening as a runs girl. But when this evening ends in Ada’s rape (and payment), her shame is magnified: “I decided I could not bear to see [Njideka]. It would be like staring my sin in the face. It would have been too difficult a thing to do” (81). Ada’s awareness is manifested as she describes her choice as ‘my sin.’ She knows she made a choice, she claims that choice as her own, and then she labels that choice a sin. By recognizing sin, Ada displays both a conscience and a wrongdoing, which solidifies her self-prescribed disgrace. Ada leaves her encounter with her rapist one thousand dollars richer and tormented by shame. Even though she has secured means to aid her mother, Ada is overwhelmed with ignominy at her decision; the payment offers little consolation since her mother refuses the money when she learns how it was obtained. Ada is a victim and her decision was an act of sacrifice — the shame she internalizes is baseless but instead, Ada believes the shame is of her because of her decision and awareness.
Conclusion

The presentation of body as wound demonstrates the harmed bodies of women. Instead of leaving discourse to the ownership of men, or rather than writing an imitation of men (as acknowledged by Minh-ha in the Priest-God scheme), writing wound involves writing the harmful experiences of exclusion and oppression as perpetrated by a patriarchal structure. And within it, pain, subjugation, and awareness are states of being that exist together in flux — each informs the womb as wound. By writing exclusion and oppression, by writing this wound as experience, women are writing themselves.

In developing the Priest-God scheme, Minh-ha states, “Charged with intentionality, writing is therefore disclosing (a secret), and reading is believing” (30). Here, the ‘secret’ is the wound. Writing woman is steeped in intention because of its desire to shed the guise of imitation writing or the pain of not writing. This intention is initiated when women claim (write) their womb. Carving out the space to expose harm mirrors the space of the womb; without it, the secret cannot be disclosed because the secret would not exist.

The texts I chose by Okparanta magnify the pain, subjugation, and awareness I see existing in all writing woman texts as a signal for injury. To claim the woman’s body as wound, the presence of these features detail a progression and determine the existence of a harmed woman. Because women have been harmed for no other reason that they are not men, their difference, the womb, acts as wound. In writing this reality, writing women acknowledge and claim their difference, their marker. The presence of a womb signals the existence of a woman; choosing to write that womb inaugurates writing woman.
CHAPTER 2

PROCESS

Body as Plural

*Writing is born when the writer is no longer.*

Trinh T. Minh-ha

My examination of wound in the previous chapter brought attention to the presence of pain, subjugation, and awareness experienced by a wounding of a woman’s body. Because wounds exist in the present and signal a move from a whole body to an injured one, the injuring experience necessitates a healing process to restore the body to its original wholeness. Through my analysis, I noted that writing the wound can initiate healing and bring the body to wholeness. While healing can be sought through writing, both are processes. The process by which women come to terms with and attempt to heal their wounds (writing) mirrors specific bodily processes (menstruation and gestation). Both writing and reproduction are processes wholly of women and therefore have the capability to heal their wound. Like writing woman, menstruation and gestation exist because the womb exists; the process of healing, then, takes form through the womb. Accordingly, the body is a manifestation of healing, but as more than an emblematic site. Rather, the process of healing seeks the development of a
resolution much in the way menstruation is preparation for gestation — both are processes experienced by and of the body.

In this chapter, I examine the processes of writing woman and the woman’s body as they exist in simultaneity. For each process, the womb is central; therefore the processes are unified in location, which highlights the plurality of the womb. The theory of plurality Minh-ha adopts in her section “And I grow younger as I leave my me behind” seeks to confirm the bodies of women as a site for interdependent processes. Therefore, the woman’s body is always plural: “I am so much that nothing can enter me or pass through me. I struggle, I resist, and I am filled with my own self” (Minh-Ha 35). Minh-ha’s emphasis on dynamic experience furthers her notion of plurality. Because ‘struggle’ and ‘resist’ suggest an action of prevention against a foreseen harm, Minh-ha signals both the existence of the wound (the harm) and the experience (the actions of prevention) as concurrent. Notably, Minh-ha begins and concludes this quotation with a demonstration of fullness. In being plural, in acknowledging her body’s reality, Minh-ha is ‘filled with her own self.’ A confession such as this unites the self (as experienced by wound and healing) and the body (as experienced by the womb and menstruation/gestation) in a reciprocal relationship. In uniting her self and her body as interdependent, Minh-ha unites with other women who experience a similar sense of being self-informed by their bodies.

Ecofeminism is a useful theoretical frame by which I can parallel with Minh-ha’s plurality because it maps out and mimics the healing process of women as dynamic and all encompassing. Françoise D’Eaubonne and Val Plumwood endorse the liberation of women’s bodies as women conquer their selves through
their surroundings. As I observed in their work, the obstacles to this freedom can be condensed into three structures: egoism, dualism, and instrumentalism (Plumwood). Egoism divorces women from their surroundings; dualism pushes polarizing categorization and negates the value of variation; instrumentalism reduces individuals to tools that serve a particular end. In the “Priest-God scheme,” Minh-ha’s discussion of egoism overlaps with ecofeminism because both notions of egoism impact the woman’s body as wound — the separation from surroundings or texts removes woman from her experiences. This use of egoism supports dualism because the denial of experiences supports a system that divides based upon perceptions. Consequently, woman’s body as an instrument develops as a placeholder to sustain dualistic systems. Egoism, dualism, and instrumentalism are impediments to recovery. In breaking this destructive narrative, the process of healing begins by recognizing and chronicling experience.

Top of the Lake, created and written by Jane Campion and Gerard Lee, is a television miniseries that takes place in New Zealand and captures the plurality of women as they heal. I will follow the storyline of a cohort of women living simply on a plot of land named Paradise. Although the women own the land, a man who desires the land and therefore stakes a (wrongful) claim to it challenges the women. This man, Matt, represents egoism, dualism, and instrumentalism as obstructive realities the women experience and work through. Likewise, Matt’s attitude poses theses conflicts against his daughter, Tui, a pregnant twelve year old. The contrast between the women, Tui, and Matt is heightened by the presentation of process as it stems from the womb — while Matt relies on
structures that harm women, the women resist through their bodies, which is a process mirrored by Tui’s pregnancy. This juxtaposition between Tui’s pregnancy and the women’s resistance to harmful structures furthers Minh-ha’s claim of plurality because it represents more than one process dependent on woman’s body. Whether menstruation, gestation, or healing, the possibility for process is made tangible by the woman’s womb; the dynamic reality in the presentation of woman’s body is palpable.

**Egoism**

In her article "Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism,” Val Plumwood identifies egoism as a singular mindset absorbed in the self and distant from the natural environment: “The view of humans as outside of and alien to nature seems to be especially strongly a Western one, although not confined to the West” (10). Her specification of this type of egoism as a Western ideal situates *Top of the Lake* as a dichotomy between the wilderness experiences of the inhabitants of New Zealand and their Western mindset. This polarity is depicted by the differences between a male character, Matt, and female characters, the women of Paradise: the female characters (many from Europe, supposedly entrenched in Western thought) are harmonious with their natural surroundings whereas the male character (a Kiwi with less Western awareness) constantly opposes natural processes. Although from the West, the women do not embody the mindset that separates their bodies from nature. Matt, however, is a native to New Zealand and does not honor the relationship between humans and nature. This entangled
representation validates Plumwood’s claim that mindsets are not necessarily confined to certain groups.

Matt’s disgust at the contact between humans and nature is epitomized in a scene where he screams, “Where do you put your piss and your shit? You put it in my fucking land! That’s where you fucking put it…. Your fucking menstrual waste... Your fucking... Your scum is going right in there” (“Episode 4”). Here, Matt calls attention to the women’s bodies, their by-products of organic processes, and likens menstruation to excrement calling both ‘waste’ and ‘scum.’ Not only does this comparison diminish the valuable process of menstruation (more than a by-product, it creates a space), it pushes the perception of Matt as foreign to nature because natural processes of female bodies repulse him. Likewise, in using ‘my,’ he claims the land for himself, furthering the mindset that he is separate from nature because it is something to be owned and not something that is a part of himself (like it is with the women). Although Western backgrounds influence the characters opposite to tradition — usually Eastern and Native traditions have more harmonious relationships to the earth than Western customs — their alignment posits women as natural and men as foreign.

Plumwood further defines the relationship between earth and humans when she surmises, “The features that are taken as characteristic of humankind and as where its special virtues lie, are those such as rationality, freedom and transcendence of nature (all traditionally viewed as masculine), which are viewed as not shared with nature. Humanity is defined oppositionally to both nature and the feminine” (11). Matt is both masculine and, although a native to New Zealand, representative of Western ideals (he believes in ownership of land and scorns
closeness to nature). Despite the fact that the women are transplanted from the Western mindset of Europe to New Zealand, the women are nevertheless the source of Matt’s scorn because of their proximity to nature (the focus on their bodies’ processes Matt chooses positions their physical disposition at the forefront). Because the women do not possess the features characteristic to humankind and because a Western figurehead has located the women as close to nature, they exist in opposition. This existence is another representation of women’s womb as wound and characterizes the process for healing as adverse to Western thought.

_Dualism_

Dualism further extends the adversity presented by egoism. When women are defined as dual and not plural, their experiences and distinctions are ignored. The harm prevails because, “As ecofeminism points out, Western thought has given us a strong human/nature dualism that is part of the set of interrelated dualisms of mind/body, reason/nature, reason/emotion, masculine/feminine, and has important interconnected features with these other dualisms” (Plumwood 10). If women are pushed into this duality, they exist in constant opposition and secondarily, an afterthought to precedence. This binary denies the influence of surroundings and obscures a plural existence. The women of Paradise are further defined by their surroundings — their environment is not the only source of definition because it is only one aspect of their existence. Matt adopts a similarly binary view when he asks about the purpose of Paradise:

Matt: “So this is some kind of... halfway to recovery camp? Am I right?”
Grishna: “Well, yeah. It’s nothing official. But there are a lot of women here in a lot of pain. They come from abused marriages, broken hearts, sex addicts. Most of them have come here hoping that GJ can, um, can help them get well.” (“Episode 1”).

Where Matt believes Paradise only serves one purpose, Grishna explains that the experiences of the women are varied and therefore Paradise, under the guidance of the obstinate visionary GJ, must serve multiple purposes. Grishna’s list captures the diverse backgrounds of the women and pinpoints a reason for their commune: the hope to get well. The women of Paradise are united in their search for healing.

Minh-ha, too, points to the tendency to lean away from plurality and establish dualisms. She gives a common example: “We create a dualism, not realized that death, like life, is a process. The moment I am born, I enter the realm of death. Life and death are together one process, and we are dying every moment” (35). Instead of observing life and death as inherently opposed, Minh-ha infers that each is dependent on the other thus eliminating the dualism of either/or. Continuing this notion, it must be noted that life and death do not exist in a vacuum; a variety of experiences characterize this dependency. Existence is plural even when the proposition of death supersedes the experience of life. The poignancy of this realization is captured when a woman not part of the commune seeks advice from Paradise:

GJ: “Are you dying?”

Jude: “Yes yeah. Mmm.”

Just go with the body.” (“Episode 5”)

This brief exchange captures the importance of the body in negating dualisms; because the body is plural by living experiences, the body has knowledge, the body can be entrusted with death. A vehicle for life, the body’s assistance in death showcases the fallacy of dualism. Life and death are not opposed because both exist in the body and the body cannot be opposed to itself. Jude realizes this when later she tells her daughter about her experience at Paradise: “GJ and the women were really helpful. Well I think... I can’t say what happened, but I’m lighter. I’m feeling relieved” (“Episode 5”). Jude’s sense of relief signals the removal of dualistic thinking. Feeling ‘lighter’ and ‘relieved’ show an awareness of unity. Although death is very near for Jude, it occurs simultaneously with her life. GJ’s advice to ‘go with the body’ helps Jude realize this interconnection and therefore her acceptance of death is part of her life. Dualism has no room in this way of thinking and consequently is unfit for the healing process.

**Instrumentalism**

Similar to dualism is instrumentalism. Where dualism reduces the experience of women to a binary, instrumentalism facilitates the construction of a binary. Again, instrumentalism emphasizes a single perspective — a utensil with a sole purpose. Plumwood explains: “instrumentalism — the view that the excluded sphere is appropriately treated as means to the ends of the higher sphere or group, that its value lies in its usefulness to the privileged group” (19). In *Top of the Lake*, the women of Paradise are encompassed in the ‘excluded sphere.’ This point is emphasized when John, the ex-husband of the benefactor of
Paradise, Bunny, brings their daughter to the compound and inquires into the cohort’s aims:

John: “Now, what sort of program do you run here?”

GJ: “No program.” Anita echoes: “No program.”

John: “You must have some... kind of timetable or structure?”

GJ: “No structure.” Anita echoes: “No structure.”

John: “So what happens here?”

GJ: “Nothing. We stop. We... We don’t think. We don’t do.” (“Episode 2”).

In this exchange, John is perplexed when GJ does not present him with her purpose, or even the purpose of Paradise; the concept of doing ‘nothing’ is inexplicable to him. As a man, John is a member of the privileged group and therefore he anticipates service. His desire for GJ to present him with a calculable objective points to his belief that GJ exists to fulfill his needs and her value to him is entirely dependent on her response. GJ recognizes this and responds, “Big. Mr. Jock. Can’t look after your own daughter so you expect me to. No. Don’t accept” (“Episode 2”). By refusing to be John’s instrument, GJ resurrects the significance of the women of Paradise. Significance, instead, lies in the ability to dismiss a limited existence as either dual or instrument.

To embrace a plural existence is to deny a finite one. Because instrumentalism impoverishes and distorts, much like dualism, its opposite reacts in abundance (Plumwood 21). GJ’s dissent stems from her unwillingness to cooperate as an instrument and her insistence on boundlessness. In replying ‘nothing’ when asked what happens at Paradise, she embodies a straightforward existence, living and breathing. Although ‘nothing’ implies absence, GJ reclaims
‘nothing’ as verifiable bounty: a refusal for instrumentalism and a reversal to an unquestioned existence. To do ‘nothing,’ in the very least, is to refuse to be an instrument. And in not being an instrument, the women of Paradise become everything else — they become plural.

**Experience**

In her article “Feminism—Ecology: Revolution or Mutation?” Françoise D’Eaubonne points out “The struggle of women for conquest of their bodies extends over that control over the impregnation” (176). Centering the genesis of strife in the womb emphasizes its representation as a wound and locates the fulcrum of resurrection. In Top of the Lake, twelve-year-old Tui is pregnant; when asked who impregnated her, Tui writes ‘NO ONE’ (“Episode 1”). Later she admits to her friend, “I don’t even know how it got in there” (“Episode 6”). Tui’s uncertainty and her vulnerability signal her lack of control. Without control, Tui lacks authority herself and is easily pinned into an instrumental position (fetus carrier). However, to regain authority and agency, Tui must find certainty and claim ability through experience, through process. For Tui, this process begins when she decides to run away from home and experience her pregnancy in nature. As Tui physically separates herself from the exercise of control over her body, she begins the conquest of her self.

The physicality of Tui’s gestation launches a bodily process, which parallels the mental processes upon which Tui and the women of Paradise embark. The experiences that characterize their healing are determined by the increase of self-worth. When D’Eaubonne notes, “[Women] are struggling for their dignity as
human beings” she gestures to the strife of women as paramount because their dignity has been compromised (177). The wound fosters an inadequate sense of self-worth. For Tui, her rape and subsequent pregnancy is traumatic; for the women, their histories of abuse and pain are harmful. In both situations, moving past the injury and searching for dignity is a healing process.

In a separate article entitled "What Could an Ecofeminist Society Be?” D’Eaubonne continues her discussion and proposes, “as procreators, women are all the more concerned with the outcome of future generations” (181). Notably, D’Eaubonne ties process to women in her use of ‘procreators.’ The concern she considers arises as a product of the creation process. This movement is captured in *Top of the Lake* when Tui seeks refuge in Paradise:

Bunny: “GJ this is Tui. She’s run away.”

GJ: [immediately, before Bunny gets finishes her sentence] “You want to sit down? Are you hungry? Get her some soup.”

For the period Tui is at Paradise, the women take care of her. Unaware of her pregnancy, the women take care of Tui as a fellow. The women’s care-work for Tui is part of their own healing process: expressing concern displays the empathy associated with dignity.

Tui is latently aware of this process, at least enough so to acknowledge the wounds the women exhibit:

Tui: “What happened to you?”

GJ: “A calamity. It’s as if I was hit by lightening. Every cell in my body changed. What happened to you?”

[Tui pulls out folded sonogram picture, hands it to GJ.]
GJ: “You got a time bomb in there. BOOM. It’s going to go off. Are you ready kid?” (“Episode 1”)

GJ speaks of two separate, but equally catastrophic events: lightening and a time bomb. Her emphasis on these events capture the polarity in existence of the before and after— an experience remedied by process. Without process, the wound caused by trauma cannot heal, which is why GJ asks, ‘Are you ready kid?’ Because readiness evokes the action of preparation, readiness implies process. But Tui is not ready; she is fearful of the process because she is uncomfortable with her body. After leaving Paradise to hide in the wilderness for the remainder of her pregnancy, Tui returns to seek GJ’s counsel during her final month of gestation:

GJ: “The body has tremendous intelligence. Follow the body. It will know what to do.

Tui: “I don’t want to be naked.”

Tui’s fear of being naked is a fear of her body. Although late into her pregnancy, Tui cannot acknowledge the process of her body thus far because she is focused on the culminating event of childbirth. This indicates that she has not fully recognized or embraced the current process of her body as preparation. But with GJ’s advice to ‘follow the body,’ Tui is comfortable enough to retreat back into the wilderness to give birth; Tui trusts the process of her body.

**Conclusion**

My emphasis on mirroring woman’s experience with the processes of her body works to center healing as of the body. To write woman is to work against
the injuries of egoism, dualism, and instrumentalism by capturing the experiences of woman; writing these experiences (wounding and otherwise) initiates a healing process. The variety of experience and the ability for multiple processes (writing, menstruation, gestation) signals women as plural. In writing this plurality, women remedy themselves from injury. Writing woman acknowledges the whole of women, experiences and body alike.

Because writing woman exemplifies the experiences of women, Minh-ha states, “Writing is born when the writer is no longer” (35). Although this claim appears to further separate women from their work, it instead works to eliminate egoism in writing. Obscuring the writer from the text allows for the written experience to reflect the experiences of all women, not just the writer. Reflection such as this emphasizes plurality because the writing works to encompass a variety of experiences.

*Top of the Lake* is an apt representation of woman’s body as illustrative of woman’s experience via process. Through focusing on Tui’s pregnancy, the process of woman’s body is centralized. This centralization allows me to draw attention to the physical processes of woman’s body — menstruation and gestation — that are dependent on the womb. Therefore, my claim that writing woman is of the womb stems from observing menstruation and gestation as comparable processes in the womb through the attention to woman’s body and her experience. While menstruation creates space and gestation develops a child, writing woman seeks healing; the processes of the womb are plural, experienced, and embodied.
CHAPTER 3

PRODUCT

Body as Consciousness

“Certain woman’s womb writing, which neither separates the body from the mind nor sets the latter against the heart... allows each part of the body to become infused with consciousness”

Trinh T. Minh-ha

In chapter two, I elaborated the processes of woman’s body as plural. By establishing processes that exist in simultaneity, I investigated the effect of mirroring woman’s body with woman’s experience. Now that I have analyzed this relationship, I want to examine the product that comes from writing woman. As a process for healing, writing woman culminates in reinstating the whole body. Much like menstruation and gestation are processes engaged for childbirth, writing woman facilitates healing by developing a consciousness of creative ability. In these acutely real processes, the woman’s body culminates in creation; in these experiences, women host their own ability to create. The outcome of such a reality epitomizes the woman’s body as the quintessential site of creation — her biology reflects and informs her experience. Significantly, writing woman as process evolves into a consciousness that is realized in ability.

To establish the consciousness of ability as the product of writing woman, I
will highlight the agency and autonomy that grow through the process of writing woman. Minh-ha’s section, ‘The body in theory,’ provides a way to unite this agency with the body: “thought is as much a product of the eye, the finger, or the foot as it is of the brain” (39). This concept emphasizes the necessity of the whole body in shaping comprehension; ‘thought’ cannot be informed without the sensations felt by the body. It follows that agency, too, cannot develop separated from the body. With agency, the body is the means to autonomy. The cyclical nature of process/product lends itself to a pattern: a plural body finds agency through fabrication, fabrication begets an awareness of instinct, instinct makes way for consciousness, and consciousness sparks assertion. A consciousness of the ability of the body is a creative force.

In her short story “Reeling for the Empire,” Karen Russell creates a space of isolation by writing a shared experience of twenty-one women whose bodies have been altered. In penning characters imprisoned both by the walls of a factory and by the torment of their bodies, Russell articulates a weighted solitude felt by the entire community. Here, isolation operates like Minh-ha’s process — a means of production, culminating in freedom — much like in Virginia Woolf’s composition, A Room of One’s Own. Both Minh-ha and Woolf advocate for a process; when looking at “Reeling for the Empire,” this process is tagged as solitude. Pairing Minh-ha and Woolf’s claims with Wendy Gan’s article, “Solitude and Community: Virginia Woolf, Spatial Privacy, and A Room of One’s Own,” the platform of a woman’s space (mental and physical) as necessary to writing woman emerges into a product. The ability to create a space is the process of solitude as well as the effect of the process itself.
What makes “Reeling for the Empire” particularly effective in examining ability as process and product is the embodiment of the characters: as self prescribed kaiko-joko — silkworm-workers — they are half woman, half silkworm, producing thread in their wombs and spinning silk out of their palms and fingertips. The site of the woman’s communally cloistered body is a site of production and creation. Though these bodies have been manipulated by outside force, the women find agency through the manipulation. The opportunity for freedom lies in a particular kind of creation (a cocoon), a theme that exemplifies the theses of Woolf and Minh-ha’s texts. By establishing the locus of creation within the body of the kaiko-joko, I can explore the nuances of the created cocoon as a space and process. Built upon the plurality of the women, the cocoon is both a reflection of its process and the consequence of process.

**Plurality**

As a woman-silkworm hybrid, the women embody a physically plural existence. In fusing two bodies of production together, Russell creates a hybrid body to come together for one process — whether woman or silkworm, a stirring in the womb is unified in creation. Likewise, the women exist simultaneously as their past and present selves: “the more our kaiko-bodies begin to resemble one another, the more frantically each factory girl works to reinvent her past” (Russell 23). In attempts to deny their self-likeness, the kaiko-joko fabricate histories of glamour, adventure, and honor as a means to preserve self-identity, to exist singularly. However, efforts to deny the shared anonymity are fruitless because they cannot deny their physically plural, nor bygone plural existence. For even
before the change, they were “sisters already, spinning identical dreams in beds thousands of miles apart” (25).

Part of this plurality exists in a realm of homogeneity— a similar history of poverty and hopes of independence. Readers see the thread of congruity arise in *A Room of One’s Own* as Woolf discusses the lack of funding for women’s education:

> What had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us?... Now if she had gone into business; had become a manufacturer of artificial silk or a magnate on the Stock Exchange... we could have been sitting at our ease tonight and the subject of our talk might have been archaeology, botany, anthropology, physics, the nature of the atom, mathematics, astronomy, relativity, geography. (Woolf Ch. 2)

Woolf establishes the mothers as homogenous and therefore unable to extend themselves beyond the constraints placed upon them. The daughters, however, willing and waiting to adopt a plural identity find themselves prevented because of the inability of their mothers to provide a legacy. The impoverished families of the kaiko-joko are likewise unable to provide means for their daughter’s plurality. Although forced into a hybridity they did not anticipate, the kaiko-joko are now plural and their survival hinges on their plurality. When Kitsune, the narrator of the story, recognizes this, she chooses to locate agency in her pluralism, embracing the benefits of her hybrid existence.

Much of Kitsune’s agency stems from bitterness and regret. While the other kaiko-joko were forced into hybridity by the Recruiting Agent (“It took his hands around their throats” [36]), Kitsune voluntarily accepted his offer, forging her
father’s signature and willingly consuming “The Agent’s drink [to remake her] insides. [Her] intestines and secret organs” (29). Although Kitsune did not know the effects the tea would have, she harbors obsessive regret over having no one to blame for her current circumstance but herself. Honing this bitterness (and act of free will), Kitsune learns she can control the production of her silk — the density, the color, and eventually the mucus. Kitsune’s agency is a consequence of her plurality. As a hybrid, she has the ability to engage with two separate sensitivities: production of silk and entertaining emotion. No longer just feeding the Machine silk to spool, Kitsune recognizes, “So I’m no mere carrier, no diseased kaiko” (46). It is this recognition that allows Kitsune to produce a cocoon where “once inside... [she] can grow wings and teeth” (46). This new agency, developed in a cocoon, allows Kitsune hope.

Kitsune’s cocoon operates just as Woolf’s room — a space necessary for creation and as such, freedom. The construction of a cocoon is a literal space that allows Kitsune (and the other kaiko-joko) to physically transform their bodies. Notably, the cocoon is a manifestation of the kaiko-joko’s plurality: spun of silk and devised in human intentionality. Although homogeneity persists in the presence of multiple cocoons, it must be recognized that the cocoons differ in the content of color. Because each kaiko-joko produces a unique color silk (an extension of her character), her cocoon is exclusive to her person. The image of twenty-one colorful cocoons, “hang[ing] from the far wall, coral and emerald and blue, ordered by hue, like a rainbow” reinstates the plurality of the once uniform and anonymous kaiko-joko (51).
Fabrication

Before the kaiko-joko learn agency in their silk production, they rely on equipment to extract the silk: “It takes thirteen to fourteen hours for the Machine to empty a kaiko-joko of her thread” (29). As the Machine reels each kaiko-joko’s silk around dowels, she looses her product, her creation, for the profit of the empire. Taken for sale by a blind intermediary, the created is no longer part of the creator — the ability to produce in this space is for the benefit of a public, not the kaiko-joko. Woolf speaks of a similar experience and sensation when she describes the odd jobs she carried in order to support herself. Using her talent for writing and reading towards an end that did not directly benefit herself left Woolf feeling “like a slave, flattering and fawning, not always necessarily perhaps, but it seemed necessary and the stakes were too great to run risks; and then the thought of that one gift which it was death to hide — a small one but dear to the possessor — perishing and with it my self, my soul” (Ch. 2). Entirely reliant upon her talent to maintain a living, Woolf cannot keep the production of her ability to herself. And like Woolf, the kaiko-joko survive on their talent: "We pass [the blind intermediary] that day’s skeins of reeled silk, and she pushes two sacks of mulberry leaves through the panel with a long stick... She simply waits, patiently for our skeins, and so long as they are acceptable in quality and weight, she slides in our leaves” (28). For Woolf and the kaiko-joko alike, their talents do not fulfill the intended purpose — composing to create a text, or spinning silk to create a cocoon. Instead, talent has become pirated, an unwilling fabrication for a physically sustainable existence.

Since the nature of the jeopardy is of confined production, it lends itself to
existing within a domestic space. That is to say what is produced (items or affects) occurs in an immediate space — one that stifles growth and incubates talent for the sake of living, not for creation. For the kaiko-joko, “Every aspect of our new lives, from working to sleeping, eating and shitting, bathing when we can get wastewater from the Machine, is conducted in one brick room” (26). A one-room existence does not have the capacity necessary for transformation; instead, it absorbs and accumulates the ability of the kaiko-joko, reflecting their talent back as a chore. Woolf notes that the talent will eventually rebound: “for women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force... it must harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics” (Ch. 5). The kaiko-joko, however, have not been in existence for millions of years, and they cannot yet embrace their talent as anything other than a bodily function, one that sustains a cursed existence.

Because the effects of the kaiko-joko’s talent are used for primary sustenance, the work enters a form of servitude. The talent of the women is exploited, which turns the talent into a task. For the kaiko-joko, a significant part of the relationship between her and this task is expelling the thread; Kitsune notes, “The relief of being rid of it is indescribable” (29). But at the same time, the kaiko-joko’s relief fuels their exploitation. In realization and resistance, a kaiko-joko named Dai announces that she’s on strike — “No more reeling,” (43). For five days, she refuses the necessity of food and the relief of reeling until it is made apparent that reeling is, too, a necessity: Dai perishes with “her excess thread... packed in knots” (44). Prodding Dai’s body, the Recruitment Agent proclaims “this girl died a thief” (45) further establishing that the kaiko-joko’s creative
power belongs to the empire, the Recruitment Agent, and the Machine ("the kaiko-joko “can never be away from the Machine for more than five days... the silk will build and build and kill [them] in the end” [45]).

However, Dai recognizes in herself the ability to produce thread and the ability to choose; electing to choose rather than produce, Dai’s resistance to the empire shows ownership, both of body and ability. The other kaiko-joko experience a similar recognition, but unlike Dai, they opt for production and choice by creating silk for themselves to fabricate a cocoon, the product that their ability intends. Through the cocoon, the kaiko-joko can have the time and space necessary to transform, to grow teeth and wings. To support the transformation of women writers, Woolf “offers a materialist solution — sufficient income to pay for a room of one’s own and ... control” (Gan 70-1). The material and control Woolf identifies are imperative; without the space and the authority of that space, metamorphosis cannot occur. And for the kaiko-joko, to metamorphose is to find freedom: “First, the silkworms stop eating. Then they spin their cocoons. Once inside, they molt several times. They grow wings and teeth. If the caterpillars are allowed to evolve, they change into moths. Then these moths bite through the silk and fly off” (46). In this way, production is instinctual, willing, and processual.

**Instinct**

To acknowledge the instinct of the kaiko-joko is to acknowledge the relationship of instinct to their bodies. Without the ability of their body, instinct would have no hold and all that would be left is desire — a desire to escape, and a desire to produce the means necessary to transform. If their bodies were not
plural, instinct and ability would take on entirely different forms, forms unavailable to a kaiko-joko. More than just being a kaiko-joko who once occupied a woman’s body and now inhabits a hybrid body, the kaiko-joko is her body: she is a woman, she is a silkworm, she is a silkworm-worker. With this body, the kaiko-joko finds herself enslaved to an empire and a Machine, but she is herself in this world because she is doing the work of her body — a work that she learns to reclaim for herself.

Reclamation, then, takes the form of instinct and desire and is manifested in the fabrication of a cocoon and the stimulation of self-pride, a rapture in ability. Amidst the fear and uncertainty that occupies the thoughts of the kaiko-joko, Kitsune is awestruck in her ability and acknowledges that “I am so happy to discover that I can do all this myself: the silk-generation, the separation, the dyeing, the reeling. Out of the same intuition, I discover that I know how to alter the Machine. “Help me, Tsuki,” I say... “I know, Kitsune,” she says, “I see what you have in mind” (47). Kitsune’s surrender to her instinct for creation has an impact beyond herself. In taking pride in her body and ability, she is able to ascertain a way to manipulate the Machine so it will work for her, to aid her production of thread necessary to facilitate her instinct. Through inspiring instinct in the other kaiko-joko, together they are able to “adjust the feeder gears, so that the black thread travels in a loop; after getting wrung out and doubled on the Machine’s great wheel, to shuttles back to [their] hands” (48). Only after Kitsune can take pride in her body and ability, is she able to defeat her enslavers.

Much like the process of menstruation and gestation move through the body, so, too, must the kaiko-joko create through their bodies. The production of
silk is stirred in the womb and expelled out of the hand — a literal depiction of creation through the kaiko-joko body. The kaiko-joko’s thread, “The writer’s ink, the mother’s milk, the woman’s blood and menstruation,” are all instinctual acts of creation through the female body (Minh-ha 38). From the site of inception (blood, menstruation, womb) to the site of production (milk, ink, thread), an ability for creation through the body exists. The site of writing, the physicality of a hand moving across a page, is where the silk of the kaiko-joko is released. Creation follows an instinct: in the womb, out the hand.

Instinct, however, is not enough to create. Desire, rather, must dictate the direction of instinct and, as expressed by Woolf and Minh-ha, desire operates in a field closed off from oppressive forces. Minh-ha cites this space as the body, Woolf cites a room, but they amount to the same purpose. Gan summarizes, “The sitting room was meant to be a private study and yet it was also a kind of study where company could be allowed in if desired. The owner/occupier of the room was free to discern how her room was to function” (76). Choice and desire — the two actions that articulate creation — exist in a singular space. Whether a body or a room, the effects of this space are unified and epitomized in the kaiko-joko. The cocoons of the kaiko-joko are part of their bodies, a space, a womb they create to incubate themselves, thus proving Minh-ha’s claim that “Certain woman’s womb writing, which neither separates the body from the mind nor sets the latter against the heart... allows each part of the body to become infused with consciousness” (40). An instinctive process, the creation of a cocoon collaborates ability, choice, and desire into a product of consciousness.
Consciousness

The consciousness of the kaiko-joko is recognition of their bodies and ability outside of the context of the empire; rather than continuing to mourn the loss of an entirely human female body, the kaiko-joko find agency in their hybridity. For a moment, Kitsune chooses to re-contextualize herself as she would appear to the Recruitment Agent: “it’s only now, watching the Agent’s reaction, that I realize what we’ve become in his absence. I see us as he must: white faces, with sunken noses that look partially erased. Eyes insect-huge. Spines and elbows incubating lace for wings” (51). However, it is clear to Kitsune that her consciousness has evolved to something that exists within her current body for she notes, “His eyes are huge and black and void of any recognition. I whisper my name to him, to see if I can jostle my old self loose from his memory: Kitsune Tajima, of Gifu Prefecture. / Nothing” (52). Kitsune’s former self is gone. In preparing a cocoon for herself, her consciousness evolved into that of a creator, a kaiko-joko.

The consciousnesses of the kaiko-joko could have been easily fragmented, torn between their past and present selves. Instead, however, they find energy in a chakra Minh-ha identifies as the kath: “This center, located below the navel... radiates life. It directs vital movement and allows one to relate to the world with instinctual immediacy... allows each part of the body to become infused with consciousness” (40). For the kaiko-joko, the kath is the conception of silk, the possibility for life when harnessed in a way that welcomes the cocoon-building instinct. A unification of life, movement, and instinct, the consciousness of the kaiko-joko cannot be splintered because the kath is the site of their production, gestation, and transformation, which culminates in a creative ability. Gan
believes that “A Room of One’s Own is a text interested in process, not product” and “Reeling for the Empire” operates in a similar way (77). Readers do not gain a product; readers do not learn what happens to the kaiko-joko after they enter their cocoons. What readers are left with are women entering into a space of their own creation for a period that will allow them the opportunity (time and arena) to transform — indeed, this is the portrayal of process and one that highlights the importance of a creative consciousness in order to generate opportunity.

Part of realizing this consciousness necessitates the kaiko-joko being able to support herself. While Woolf calls for 500 pounds a year for women to support themselves, the kaiko-joko need hope and confidence to support themselves. In recognition of her ability, Kitsune climbs the wall of the factory and notes, “For the first time, I can see outside: from this angle, nothing but clouds and sky, a blue eternity. We will have wings soon, I think... soon, I am floating in circles over the Machine, suspended by my own line” (48). Kitsune’s witness of the sky through a window instills a hope facilitated through her ability. Likewise, she can physically support herself ‘by her own line,’ a move she would not have made if she were not confident in her ability. In addition to hope and confidence, the kaiko-joko need the support of each other. If Kitsune alone were to make a cocoon and stopped spinning silk for the Masters, the others would have been punished (“Don’t forget the trade, it’s silk for leaves” [49]). But because all of the kaiko-joko join Kitsune in cocoon weaving, their consciousness and process become united — “instinct obviates the need for a lesson” and together they “agree to work night and day to reel the ordinary silk, doubling production, stockpiling the surplus skeins. Then [to] seize control of the machinery in
Nowhere Mill” (49). Although the kaiko-joko are working to produce a solitary space, their process necessitates community thereby establishing a hybrid arena that “allow[s] both opportunities for exclusion and inclusion, solitude and community” (Gan 69). Together, the kaiko-joko participate in a communal solitude by seeking a space that responds to the logic of their bodies, the process of their consciousness.

Woolf, too, cites a developing consciousness when she admits, “I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in” (Ch. 1). When coming to this conclusion, Woolf is thinking of those who chase her off the lawns, stipulate her time, and structure her education; these are the people that hold the key to the locks. But when Woolf calls for her own space, the key becomes a measure of security: “a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself” (Woolf Ch. 6). It is necessary for Woolf to take the key, to discover for herself the power of a lock, the ‘power to think’ (consciousness), which will give her the ability to transform. In spinning silk for themselves, in weaving a cocoon, the kaiko-joko take a figurative key out of the Recruitment Agent’s hand; they make a deliberate choice to lock themselves in their cocoons, to be “Paralyzed inside... silk, but spinning faster and faster. Passing into [the] next phase” (51). And in a mixture of instinct and consciousness, the kaiko-joko will transform and escape.

**Conclusion**

Using consciousness as the product of writing woman synthesizes my claim
that creation should come through the body. Just as the transformation that occurs through the healing process originates in the womb, so should the recognition of the ability to create. Honoring ability as it exists in the body is a natural product of the healing process. “Reeling for the Empire” allowed me to tease out this use ability because the result, cocoon as symbolic womb, neatly represents the process of the body. Likening the healing process of the wound to kaiko-joko’s search for autonomy showcases that regression is not the means to restoration or self-determination; instead, a transformation is necessary. In discovering their plurality, ability, instinct and free will, the kaiko-joko are able to create a space through the ability of their body for their individual transformations.

More than this collective space, however, is the process by which it is created. Minh-ha posits the process necessary for creation must come from the body; Wolf proposes the space of creation must exist singularly. Because gestation encompasses the dictates of both Minh-ha and Woolf, their theories prescribe a process that mimics gestation as needed for the creating woman and the creating kaiko-joko. As the womb exists in the body, so too does creative consciousness; as the womb is a space specific to woman, it is singular. This process is integral to both writing woman and the kaiko-joko and the development of their creative consciousness. Let her, the creating woman, the writing woman, transform herself in the same way that she creates, from her womb.
CONCLUSION

In “Commitment from the Mirror Writing Box,” Trinh T. Minh-ha carefully explicates what writing woman might look like. Although she is reluctant to draw any conclusions, I believe her argument that “Women must write through their bodies” is a call to action (36). When I first read this section, I deliberated how women might write through their bodies. Then, while reading countless creative works, I began to notice snippets of how women do write through their bodies. From my reading, I was able to distill three texts that best represented what I considered writing woman. However, in my consideration, I was careful to set a criterion that did not oversimplify Minh-ha’s thesis but still honored her flexible application. As such, the benchmarks I proposed focused on experience and the womb.

What became immediately apparent to me in writing woman texts was a presentation of violence. Whether physical or mental, the presence of pain in these texts is palpable. Looking to the body as a wound allowed me to capture this injury. Then, coupling this pain with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s feminist theory helped me negotiate how the womb might be construed as a wound. In pointing to pain, subjugation, and awareness as the markers of injury, I was able to call attention to why writing woman exists, as a space to heal the wound.

To heal the wound, I looked to the plurality of processes hosted in the
womb. Establishing plurality helped me to argue that healing, like menstruation and gestation, is a process and can likewise stem from the womb. The multiple purposes of this distinct site allows for a narrative that mirrors an assortment of experiences. My engagement with ecofeminists Françoise D’Eaubonne and Val Plumwood helped me to better articulate this argument. I paid particular attention to harmful structures they listed (egoism, dualism, instrumentalism) in order to push the opposite, plurality, as an avenue for healing.

While the process for healing is important, I feel it endeavors towards an eventual end. Therefore, I concluded that the process is realized in a new consciousness, one that highlights creative ability. A creative consciousness features the capability of the body and mind when unified. The transformation of creation, implied by attaining this new consciousness, suggests that autonomy can be secured through the body. Pairing Virginia Woolf and Wendy Gan’s critique of Woolf to represent the mental space and Minh-ha’s presentation of physical space allowed me to centralize two aspects of woman’s body into a singular space of creation.

Ultimately, I use this thesis as a way to examine writing woman in line with Minh-ha’s reasoning. My focus on the womb makes the woman’s body paramount and suggests my criterion as widely applicable. Additionally, I chose disparate texts to analyze because I wanted to showcase the variety that writing woman encompasses as well as establish a progression that is not limited to one genre or style. Having now examined body as wound, body as plural, and body as consciousness, I identified a movement that establishes woman’s body as a space, which both captures and honors writing woman.
WORKS CITED


