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Fluid bodies: Narrative disruption and layering in the novels of Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood

Epstein, Grace Ann, Ph.D.
The Ohio State University, 1990

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FLUID BODIES: NARRATIVE DISRUPTION AND LAYERING
IN THE NOVELS OF DORIS LESSING, TONI MORRISON
AND MARGARET ATWOOD

DISSERATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of the Ohio State University

By
Grace Ann Epstein, B.A., M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1990

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1990
To Claire, Toby, Steve, Mom and Dad,
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION: NARRATIVE, DESIRE, AND THE FEMALE WRITER

Feminist psychoanalytic theory in recent years, particularly in France, has focused much of its attention on the relationship of language to the constructions of femininity. At the forefront of the discussion for many of these theorists has been the way in which patriarchal discourse has shaped, confined, and, at times, obliterated the notion of female desire from the spectrum of language. Luce Irigaray in her book This Sex Which Is Not One illustrates how male discourse has relegated female desire to a position of lack, of nonexistence, or to the mirror representation of the desire of the male subject. According to Josette Feral, the idea of the female "exists only in so far as she endlessly reflects back to [the male] the image of his manly reality. . . . Woman has thus been transformed into the other side of a mirror present and absent, nowhere to be found but still here, skirting the grasp of the other as well as her own." (89). This emphasis on male desire and the male sex organ, the phallus--"the ultimate meaning of all discourse" (Irigaray, 67)--to the exclusion of female desire--has come about through a system of discourse which automatically privileges sight over other senses summarily dismissing the female organ, "the organ which has nothing to show for itself [and] lacks a form of its own," as inadequate or more often, nonexistent (Irigaray, This Sex 26).
Men have been the owners of philosophical discourse in western culture since the time of Plato, a discourse from which women have been systematically excluded. Women have found themselves in the unsatisfactory position of feeling alienated from their bodies and from their own desire, which cannot be realized through the relegation of their sexuality to a mirror (mere) reflection of the masculine, or their assignment to a position of lack (without a penis). In the absence of a discourse which articulates their desire in any other way, women, and women writers specifically, remain unable to construct any comprehensible notion of their desire beyond that to which it is relegated by traditional male discourse. Furthermore, Helene Cixous explains that "it is precisely because there is so little room for her desire in society that... [the woman] ends up not knowing where to put [her desire] or if she even has it" (1987, 82). Caught in a condition of alienation from discourse, as well as from desire, the female lives out a broken subjectivity bathed in contradiction, and, as traditional male narratives propose, signified by mystification. Woman is an abstraction, at times, even to herself.

Certainly, a pivotal assumption which these theorists employ here is that discourse is significant to any cultural understanding of desire. Without language, any construction of desire for women is stymied. On a similar track, Peter Brooks examines the close connection of narrative to desire calling desire "the motor of narration," not only the theme of literature but "the very intention of narrative language and the act of telling" (RFP, 53-54). For Brooks, narrative is the most significant way experience is structured. In
narrative terms, human beings attempt to assign meaning and formulate actions. While a profusion of narratives may exist in any culture, the basic function of assigning meaning to experience is the purpose of all narrative. That purpose is fueled by human desire, the desire to make connections, to make meaning and to attach to others. In this way, narrative becomes a kind of living body itself. Not surprisingly then is the fact that Brooks calls the story of Oedipus the "masterplot" for all narrative, and in so doing, acknowledges the privileged position of this narrative within culture (90-112).

Both Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in Anti Oedipus: Schizophrenia and Capitalism argue that the oedipus story is a narrative around which all other capitalistic narratives are arranged, one which founds the culture upon the singularity of sexual experience, designating all other narratives which digress from it as constituting madness and deviance. Deleuze and Guattari point to the prominence of the Oedipus narrative in psychoanalysis and literature with its emphasis on castration and lack. Tracing the history of psychoanalysis and its short circuiting of desire by insisting all desire be coded and prescribed within the Oedipal complex and its mythical plane of familial relations, Deleuze and Guattari also concur that the female has been deprived from ever acknowledging her sexuality since "there is finally only one sex, the masculine, in relation to which the woman, the feminine, is defined as a lack, an absence... The idea of a single sex necessarily leads to the erection of a phallus as an object on high, which distributes lack as two nonsuperimposable sides and makes the two sexes communicate in a common absence—castration" (294-
It is this very Oedipal narrative which they believe structures and orders the experience of desire under capitalism. Similarly, Cixous also asserts that the primary couple throughout the history of western culture has not been the man and the woman but the father and the son (1987, 65), and Jessica Benjamin, in her study of sadomasochism in literature, similarly proposes that women serve as a prize in a competitive enterprise between men, a struggle for recognition between fathers and sons (289). These observations not only suggest the prevalence of Oedipal inscriptions within a patriarchal culture but indicate the nature of the marginalized position assigned to woman and the inconsequential stake her desire plays within the discourse of men. Oedipus as the model for narrative is at once a restrictive and unsatisfactory representation of female desire, prompting Laura Mulvey and Teresa de Lauretis to maintain that the nature of narrative is, for the female, essentially masochistic (1984, 103).

To go a bit further, Ross Chambers emphasizes the relationship of desire to narrative as a type of seduction of the reader by the writer. The result of the work of both Chambers and Brooks, then, suggests that both in the inception and reception of the narrative, desire is the primary feature characterizing its success or failure. If narrative is a way of structuring experience, for which the oedipal narrative is the cultural model, then such an association of desire to narrative emphasizes the highly political and social power inherent in even the smallest act of storytelling.
What erupts then from the association of narrative and desire—both serving to create and actualize the other—when discussed in terms of the absence of language for female desire, is that the female writer's act of authorship, of narrating, as a movement toward assembling a prohibitive experience of desire, becomes subversive because it resists the oedipus structure; dangerous, because it is associated with madness and deviance; and uncharted, because its very assertion is of a desire for which there is no story. A woman's ability then to attempt to articulate her pleasure, even to herself, because it has no name or frame of reference, both challenges and breaks open the founding narrative of western culture. Not only is her marginalized position within her culture subverted, but the very culture is shaken from its foundation in oedipus. In this way, it is indicative that the female writer experiments with language, exploding linguistic structures and assumptions, creating disruptions in plot, incongruities, and empty spaces from which new constructions and perhaps multiple constructions of desire can be constituted. Her narratives, far from meeting the oedipal model, will not conform, will not surrender to the closure, but rather celebrate the breaks within their own continuity.

Both Irigaray and Helene Cixous have presented strategies by which new constructions of desire can be approached. One model for moving beyond cultural assignments for the woman's desire explored by these theorists is that of the hysteric. Typically a female subject, the hysteric destroys sexualized territories by slipping in and out of male and female categories. Cixous explains that "hysteria is necessarily
an element that disturbs arrangements; whatever it is, it shakes up all those who want to install themselves. . . . It is difficult to block out this type of person who doesn't leave you in peace, who wages permanent war against you" (1986, 156). For Irigaray, "hysteria is a privileged place for preserving . . . that which does not speak. . . . Hysteria is silent and at the same time it mimes . . . reproducing a language that is not its own, masculine language, [which] it caricatures and deforms" (This Sex, 137). The hysteric's mimicry disrupts psychoanalytic notions of her desire, allowing her to detach her desire from patriarchal assumptions. In this way, she becomes for feminists a model for female resistance.

Deleuze and Guattari also propose ways in which the schizophrenic—the one whose desire cannot be confined within the Oedipus—disrupts discourse, and, retreating from standard inscriptions, recodes desire by creating new combinations of language fragments. In effect, what schizophrenics do is to form new understandings of desire from the wreckage of language fragments. Describing the schizophrenic's provocative use of language, Deleuze and Guattari explain that "the schizophrenic passes from one code to the other, that he deliberately scrambles all codes, by quickly shifting from one to another" or by "stuffing [the Oedipal code] full of the disjunctions that this code was designed to eliminate" (Anti-Oedipus, 15). In fact the schizophrenic's "overstuffing," like the hysteric's parody of masculine language, exposes and undercuts the structures which harness desire.
The descriptions of the language disruptions of schizophrenics echo strategies which both Irigaray and Cixous enlist in connection with female resistance, the place of hysteria in female writing. It is only in this disruption of language that desire, which is always conceptualized in and through discourse, can be decoded and recoded to be constructed in new and formerly unimaginable realms. Then, the paths toward constructions of desire can be examined and a flow of desire within their language scramble and flight can be indicated.

Also illuminated in the *Anti-Oedipus* is the description of desire as a flux or flow. Through a metaphor of fluidity Deleuze and Guattari attempt to demonstrate the movement of desire.

Desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks flows. . . . Amniotic fluid spilling out of the sac and kidney stones; flowing hair; a flow of spittle, a flow of sperm, shit or urine that are produced by partial objects and constantly cut off by other partial objects, which in turn produce other flows, interrupted by other partial objects (*Anti-Oedipus*, 5-6).

In *Dialogues*, Deleuze goes on to explain more fully that in *Anti-Oedipus* he and Guattari had conceived of desire as a process and that it unrolled a plane of consistence, a field of imminence, 'a body without organs', as Artaud put it, criss-crossed by particles and fluxes which break free from objects and subjects. . . . it is immanent to a plane which it does not pre-exist, to a plane which must be constructed, where particles are emitted and fluxes combine (*Dialogues*, 89).

Resisting the notion of lack designated by the psychoanalytic understanding of desire, Deleuze and Guattari identify desire as a flow through and around objects (*Anti-Oedipus*, 6). Here, too, desire is not identified in terms of subject-object relations and in respect to egos
and libidos but as a force always in flux, unable to be tacked down or
designated to a single region or arena, ever shifting, reconnecting and
breaking with other objects and flows of desire. Fluid and liquid-like,
desire is dynamic. This metaphor of fluidity presents an
alternate understanding of desire that both challenges existing notions
of desire as oedipalized and remains accessible to new presentations.

One of the problems with alternate models within discourse for any
culturally established idea such as that reflected in the Oedipal
understanding of desire is the very transparency of dominant
discourse. The Oedipal complex within psychoanalysis has been more or
less a foregone conclusion. It remains unthinkable that persons,
particularly female persons, might not be satisfactorily characterized
within that narrative. Anything that attempts to question or overturn
the reigning structure is identified as paltry or mad. This has, of
course, been the traditional reception of much female writing.

Richard Terdiman in Discourse/Counter-Discourse notes that "all
ideological discourse strives to approach the transparency of such
totalization of the real" so as to control and overtake any discourse
around it (201). The move to absorb all desire into the Oedipal code
so there will be no desire left uncoded rests on the ability of the
culture to perceive all male and female understandings of desire as a
foregone conclusion with the structures of control, or restraint, non-
evident (Deleuze & Guattari, 79). For Cixous, "ideology is a kind of
vast membrane enveloping everything" and the task for any creator of
resistance discourse is to remain cognizant of that pervasiveness even
though it encloses everyone as well as everything (1987, 145). Because
of this fact, any resistance discourse must make those invisible controls, those foregone conclusions, visible. The resistance writer, usually in bits and pieces, attempts to illuminate or to perform a surgical detachment of discourse from its cultural field. In counter-discourse, "not the figure but the ground is altered," (Terdiman, 203). The discourse thus lifted from its transparent background creates a spacial dimension between the figure and the ground making the ground visible for the first time and giving the discourse a new perspective in relationship to that ground.

A second problem remaining for resistance discourse is the way it is easily appropriated by dominant discourse. According to Terdiman, "from within dominant discourse, difference nearly eludes us" (14) because it is so easily swallowed up by the discourse itself. Feminists have been aware for some time now of the paradox in which "deconstruction of the ideological blindness at the heart of patriarchal practice and theory ... inevitably locates itself within the margins of the dominant [discourse]" (Terdiman, 73). This capacity of dominant discourse to dominate, to co-opt resistance, to capture it, short-circuits possibilities for any long term fundamental restructuring to take place. A dynamic and ever-changing discourse then is necessary to continue resistance.

Just such a dynamic understanding of literature is presented by Deleuze who conceptualizes writing as a specific flow of desire, a kind of "minority becoming" by the writer, while reading is a process by which the reader "extracts from the text its revolutionary force" (Deleuze & Guattari, 106). Meaning, rather than stable and stagnate,
is fluid, a movement of desire; rather than contained by the language, it is continuously breaking free of its codes and attaching itself to new flows which then break from one another.

Similarly, Irigaray focuses away from the rational constructs of solids, of subject-object relations, toward what she calls a theory of fluids. She emphasizes the similar properties of fluids, like its resistance to symbolization, with the female body's flow of milk and menses, suggesting that a closer examination and appreciation of fluidity can provide a more appropriate metaphor within language for the exploration of female desire. So close then is the relationship of desire and language, where each gives force to the other.

In examining narrative strategies in terms of the desire which fuels and assembles them, Brooks points out that frequently a text presents an "operating" metaphor that functions structurally as well as thematically for the text. This metaphor, like the motors in Balzac and the engines in Zola, reflects the overall character of the work providing the dramatic movement of the story. Chambers links the practical and pedantic function of storytelling to the modern context by proposing that the simple and practical knowledge which storytelling once provided the listener has now been supplanted by a complex understanding of human behaviour and life which can no longer utilize simplistic stories. Rather, Chambers feels that storytelling in literature becomes more sophisticated structurally in order to accommodate a wider range of variations to situational problems arising in a complex heterogeneous society. Chambers sees the proliferation of embedded stories in modern literature as presenting models or anti-
models for the reading of the text. Through embedded stories readers witness the act of interpretation within the subtext and evaluate its relationship to the frame. The validity of the narrative's practical "point" as it applies to the outer text is scrutinized and, thus actively suggests the interpretation of that outer frame to the life of the reader. In this way, the story in the complex modern world retains its authority to make a point to the reader by demonstrating the possibilities for its interpretation from within itself. Thus the story is made vulnerable to the acknowledgement of its limitations to the interpretations of the reader. What finally validates the story's point for the reader, in Chambers view then, is this very feature of the self-consciousness of the story.

Finally, Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response demonstrates how the modern narrative text becomes a map for readers as they actually engage in the very construction of the narrative for themselves through the many signals and gaps posed by the author. Iser attempts to identify not simply the authorial strategies, but the textual gaps which present a kind of gestalt where the structure as well as the content of the work permits an arena of possible responses from readers instead of specifying a selected response. In both Chambers and Iser's work, the stress on the reader's desire for the story creates a tension in the act of reading which underlines reader participation in the construction of modern texts.

These understandings of the interrelationship of narrative to desire and Deleuze and Guattari's demonstration of the operations of desire can be significant in comprehending the use and abuse of
narrative language that takes place in the feminist text, a text which will out of necessity be charged by and sensitive to female desire. By tracking the movement and conjunctions of desire within the texts, these works indicate not singularity of desire but the extreme virtuosity of the women authors in tracing multiple flows of desire out of the wreckage of old structures. Like Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into The Wreck," the feminist writer seeks

- the wreck and not the story of the wreck
- the thing itself and not the myth
- the drowned face always staring toward the sun
- the evidence of damage

Their disruptions of those myths in which "their names do not appear" are not mad or deviant or paltry, but severed, repressed, tentative. Their narratives frame their experience as women, just as the masterplot once framed that of their fathers.

The realization of the role of language in constricting any understanding of desire, and of dominant discourse to effortlessly appropriate and neutralize any new constructions of desire, has forced many feminist writers to enlist radical narrative digressions, often creating important departures in form as well as content. In these texts, the shape and structure of the narratives become crucial to the subject matter. Form and content are inseparable. Such texts scramble narrative conventions and problematize the language that circulates around constructions of the female and of her sexual desire. Often the very constructions of the narratives are fluid, slippery and discontinuous. As flows of desire they detach patriarchal discourse from its transparent background to move away from any fixed
presentation of its narrative so that the text parallels and mirrors itself and constitutes a dynamic of language parts.

Foremost among feminist texts has been Doris Lessing's novel The Golden Notebook. In a multilayered discussion of sexuality, of female/male and female/female relations, The Golden Notebook has served as a generative feminist text with respect to the way the protagonist Anna Wulf assails and excavates language and narrative. Lessing has stated that she means to "shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped" (The Golden Notebook, xiv). Here the "form and content are such apt reflections of each other in this novel that they tend to fuse" (Lightfoot, 182-83) Clearly the work is anything but wordless; rather it is hundreds of pages of words, and countless sentences through which a reader must move before the shape of sentences and stories assembled beyond the words--its fused form and content--can be apprehended.

Anna's narrative scramble among the four notebooks and the "Free Women" sections is indicative of the insufficiency of narrative to fully represent her life. Anna's descent into the notebooks is a decent into the mad use of language, her flight from the constructions of culture which no longer make sense or which appear to Anna to otherwise legitimize the repression and oppression all around her. However, Anna Wulf's flight from language and cultural confines is also a flight to her exploration of desire. Unlike the character, Susan Rawlings, in "To Room Nineteen" who sees the figure of desire before her in her garden and then retreats from it (Lessing, 1978, 411), Anna Wulf only temporarily skirts her desire by rationally
compartmentalizing her life. Her sexuality, while problematic in her relationship with Michael, lingers behind the curtains, in the darkness where she pursues it within the discontinuous layers of her narratives.

In an interview in 1986, Toni Morrison stated that she had always been interested in the way the dream world "spills into the real world" (Epstein, 5). In each of her five novels, she investigates this interlock of reality and dream that infuses the lives of her characters, creating harmony as well as dissonance. Such dissonance, far from being the focus of the problem, as in the case of the realistic novel tradition, is embraced and celebrated in Morrison's work. In fact, these dream-flights become the character's map of his or her reality in ways similar to what Cixous identifies as "stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers" (1976, 887). This added dimension of reality which Morrison's characters engage, their narrative weavings and blendings of story with story--dream, myth, legend, ballad--also act upon the reader as well, to evade realistic constructions and categories that fix story-meaning. Instead, stories take flight beyond themselves where, as Deleuze describes, they join with "the transmutation of fluxes through which life escapes from the resentment of persons, societies and reigns" (Dialogues, 50).

Even in Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye, she uses a distinctive and yet familiar narrative voice to report the action of her narratives. In The Bluest Eye, the narration moves from character to character depicting the social and personal mythologies which inform
those characters and ultimately contribute to the emotional demise of Pecola Breedlove. This flight from perspective to perspective unravels the textual expectation for a hero or protagonist. Violation by the father of the female child in *The Bluest Eye* both problematizes and challenges Oedipal mythology. The retreat from desire by Pecola and her subsequent disintegration create a disturbing novel in which Morrison defies privileged prescriptive plots to indicate the bizarre and often inadequate constructions of reality which fail to feed and nurture young women and can ultimately destroy them. It is American culture which seems to be the focus of this novel.

Similarly, in *Sula*, the various character perspectives initiate a sort of archaeology in terms of structure, a structure which is reflected in the metaphors of sexual desire revealed in first person narrative "moments" by the two principles of the novel, Nel and Sula. In *Sula*, the untamed desire of the female protagonist is the crux of the novel's plot. That Sula's desires are always being assembled almost in spite of her community's disapproval creates the tension and her flight from confinement within their idea of her is both tragedy and triumph.

In *Beloved*, the ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter haunts the whole community where her ghostliness is observed and narrativized. The "unnaturalness" of Sethe's maternal crime is bounded by the supernaturality of the dream world in which both she and Beloved and, to some extent, the entire community reside. Crucial to the novel's drama are the fragmented narratives from the three women of 124 as they spill into and entangle with the collective memory narratives which
deliver, in fragmented and disjunctive ways, the history of slavery, "the story that should not be passed on." These choral voiced narrative threads assemble the movement of the novel along disconnected and disrupted lines where Sethe's unconscious desire to relieve her guilt as well as to legitimize her actions constitutes a radical departure from constructions of female desire assigned and imprisoned by cultural understandings of maternal love. Here Sethe reconstructs her own and her community's history to assemble the group dream or nightmare which underscores the flow of her desire to live again in the presence of her daughter's ghost.

Canadian writer Margaret Atwood has also explored the terrain of female desire in many of her novels. Equally evident in novels like The Handmaid's Tale and Bodily Harm are the narrative structures which enfold and eclipse these novels. The direct relationship of patriarchal discourse's inscription of female desire is excavated both at the narrative and word level. In both texts, the female body is examined as a text upon which is written the ideology of patriarchal domination. Offred's greatest occupation in The Handmaid's Tale is resisting the state narrative which isolates women, commodifies them, and imprisons them in kennels for use in designated state services. A woman has no other value than the one relegated to her. Her sexuality as well as her very survival in her culture is reserved exclusively for her contribution to the procreative function of her disintegrating and repressive culture. Atwood explores female sexuality and resistance to patriarchal assignments of desire in their most austere terms. The novel provides her with a format for stripping away language at the
same time narrative is proliferated. In resisting the state narrative, Offred imagines and casts her own narratives, some of which compete with or challenge one another. However, the handmaid insists she believes all these versions simultaneously so that once again the narratives of the feminist writer concerned with female desire slip and slide like multiple currents that continue to resist as well as flow into one another.

Atwood's protagonists engage in a kind of textual hysteria in which they alternately pull away from their inscribed bodies or stand back emotionally from a distance in order to "read" the markings there. In Bodily Harm, Rennie's breast cancer and subsequent mastectomy signify a retreat from desire as well as from her own body to a position where she scrutinizes and disrupts inscriptions. Elizabeth in Life Before Man also surveys her body from a position away and above her. The heroine of CE manages to save herself from death in the icy river water by being lifted up by the figure of a madonna. These detachments from self or dissociations, far from being mad, signal a retreat to regions which are protective, designating flight and movement away from crippling isolation and violation. The field of these novels is infused with multiple visual signs and surgical detachments of discourse, which likewise make assigning meaning slippery. They force the writer and reader into multiple positions inside and outside of the texts, compounding and duplicating signification.

In each of these novels patriarchal discourse's exclusive claim on female desire (female sexuality reflects male sexuality) is illuminated while female sexuality is again and again assembled and disassembled,
resisting a definitive symbolization. It is no surprise then that the narrative structures of these novels are discordant, discontinuous and fluid, flowing in multiple directions with language parts and story lines slipping and sliding in order to evade capture and appropriation by dominant discourse. Despite the focus on the limitations of language to ever perfectly represent events or to render exact meaning, these texts do not abandon language or narrative. If anything they affirm their own contradictions, their own inadequacies, even seem to celebrate them. They push away from patriarchal discourse by validating all objects and yet they acknowledge the validity too of their own selectivity by remaining self conscious about the principles of that selection. In this way, these feminist texts dynamically excavate the hidden regions of female desire. It is exclusive rights which these novelists challenge, not any particular set of conjunctions. De Lauretis, citing Levi-Strauss, points out that the ultimate purpose of myth is "to resolve that glaring contradiction [that all men are born of women] and affirm by the agency of narrative the autochthonous origin of man," but then she continues with "or perhaps they will have to accept it as a contradiction, by which in any case they will continue to be born" (Alice, 156). Feminist writers, rather than denying contradiction, embrace it in an effort to explore the vast depths of desire for themselves and that of their characters. As Atwood's handmaid puts it, "It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way" (THT, 45). There is no question but that all objects, all desires are valid
for the feminist text and that multiplicity structures experience along a fluid ever-shifting ground.

When, in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, the post office issues a directive insisting that Mains Street no longer be known as "Doctor Street," the black community resists the patriarchal move by disrupting and undercutting this assignment, thereby reclaiming the act of naming by forever referring to this avenue upon which the first black doctor lived, not as "Mains Street" as the ruling demands, but as "Not Doctor Street." By inverting their desire and embracing its new dimension of power, the community resists. This is the strength of the work of Lessing, Atwood, and Morrison to disrupt former assignments of women and sexuality, producing and reproducing new lines of escape where new flows and connections of female desire can be constituted.
Coding is an activity of any social body to "reflect collective agreement as to what is of social value," however decoding represents a particularly characteristic activity within capitalism whereby what is valuable is continuously altered and re-invested "for the sake of immanent, self-renewing production." Under capitalism, what is valuable within the culture is constantly in flux and thus makes conditions favorable for schizophrenia (Holland, 1988, 65-67).

My favorite example of how resistance is appropriated within culture is exemplified by the war protesters of the 60's in the United States whose disenfranchised garb and symbols were widely appropriated by the Madison Avenue with the effect that peace insignias actually stopped meaning "Stop the War" and became fashionable with all young people despite their political leanings. The revolutionary impact of donning army green, bell bottom pants, and long hair soon became the signs of materialism, of conformity, and of support for the status quo. It was impossible to identify the movement any longer when, as the Ohio National Guard at Kent State discovered, the "enemies" of the country's military policies were indistinguishable from its supporters. Protesting had become a leisure activity in which all college kids wanted to participate.
A style is managing to stammer in one's own language. . . . Not being a stammerer in one's speech, but being a stammerer of language itself. Being like a foreigner in one's own language (Deleuze & Parnet, 4).

In her 1971 Introduction to The Golden Notebook, Doris Lessing discusses her novel in light of the nine years following its first publication. What Lessing underscores in this introduction is not only her purpose for the novel but the intellectual backdrop from which it arose. She stipulates first and foremost her understanding of language as a means of shaping perception and of controlling ideas. From the beginning of life, she explains, a child "is a prisoner of the assumptions and dogmas of his time, which he does not question because he has never been told they exist" (Lessing, xvi). Lessing concludes with how important she thinks it is that the novel, if it is to be truly viable, somehow must reach beyond its readers so that its meaning never becomes fully comprehensible. This posture toward language and particularly narrative typifies Lessing's conscious move to break free of the transparency of discourse by illuminating the assumptions and dogmas in order to create what she calls a "wordless statement." She also stresses the importance of structure to the overall purpose and meaning of the work in which the book might "talk through the way it was shaped" (Lessing, xiv).
In order to break loose from the words and structure which fail to "confine meaning," The Golden Notebook's protagonist, Anna Wulf, explores and unleashes a panoply of forms, structures, and writing strategies which, over the course of the novel, are disrupted, and recast in other forms. Calling it a "heterogeneous web of fictions, haunted by allusions to absent fictions, traversed by one fiction presented as 'reality' and another explicitly presented as fiction," Elizabeth Abel indicates that the novel subverts "the notion of narrative authority" (Abel, 105). DuPlessis suggests that "narratives based on nostalgia, or manipulative transformation, on small minded, riskless reaches into the expressive are obsessively set forth and rejected. Thus [The Golden Notebook] is an encyclopedia of the critique of narrative and hegemonic orders" (102). The reliability of all narrative is questioned in a move which exposes the ideology upon which each is based.

Anna Wulf is definitely at a crisis point concerning her own narrative authority. In the opening pages of "Free Women" she is struggling with whether she will ever write another novel because she believes that the success of her first novel Frontiers of War has served to reinforce the oppression she meant for it to refute. The Golden Notebook is then, according to Ellen Cronan Rose, "a metafiction, a novel about writing novels" (66). Betsy Draine in her book Substance under Pressure sees the work as reflecting Lessing's disposition toward her own first novel The Grass Is Singing, a realistic novel about white racism in southern Africa. Draine describes Lessing's feelings that the book had "succumbed to the lure
of tragic emotion" (3-6). Likewise in The Golden Notebook, Anna Wulf identifies Frontiers of War's "lying nostalgia" as a critical problem. This nostalgia is responsible for expiating white guilt over the continued oppression of blacks via the novel's tragic catharsis.

Anna's authorial crisis then is at the center of Free Women's action.

Lessing begins with her excavation of the transparent discourse in and around constructions of female desire then with the traditional narrative structure of "Free Women" which ultimately disassembles the notions of plot and characterization in the modern novel. "Free Women" is the starting point of the novel. As well as providing a frame of reference against which Anna will explore her own desire, this traditional form inverts and disturbs the conventional arrangements of plot and is problematized by Anna's over-awareness of language as well as the embedded narratives of The Notebooks sections which break up the five sections of "Free Women."

"Free Women" is the outer frame of The Golden Notebook. For various reasons this section is more frame-like than a seemingly contending story among other contending stories. For one thing, it begins and ends the work and takes place later in relation to time than do the notebooks. The action of "Free Women" is contiguous with the disintegration of the notebooks and their complete abandonment, suggesting that "Free Women" must have been written a considerable time following the termination of the inner golden notebook. The notebooks are repeatedly alluded to by Tommy and Anna in "Free Women": several times in the course of "Free Women," Anna looks through or reads the notebooks; Tommy who has secretly read the notebooks challenges Anna
about them on two separate occasions. What is most important about this time arrangement is that Lessing permits "Free Women" to incorporate the notebooks, to allude to the notebooks and to pivot action around them. This kind of incorporation of one section by another gives the framing narrative precedence over its embedded narratives despite the fact that the embedded stories disturb and problematize the frame. The embedded stories will nevertheless be judged primarily in terms of the relationship to that frame.

According to Draine and Du Plessis, "Free Women" is intended to be seen as Anna Wulf's novel. It is, in fact, "novelesque" in-having a single protagonist and a single dramatic action. Anna Wulf attempts to cope with her own mental breakdown as she helps her friend Molly contend with Tommy's crisis of meaning. Peter Brooks discusses the primacy of plot in relationship to narrative when he calls it "the armature of the story, that which supports and organizes the rest." According to Brooks, it is the movement toward the end which plotting satisfies and which generates a privileged position of plot with respect to other critical elements of narrative (11). A well-plotted narrative, by the same token, is likely to gain ascendancy over other aborted or incompletely plotted narratives--such as those of The Notebooks--that may surround or permeate it. It is one of Anna's disturbing insights when she realizes that in her story of Ella and Paul's affair (i.e., her affair as well) the events of the story are derived from the ending, from the plot that reveals itself once the final note of the story has been played out (Rose, 69); she concludes that "literature is analysis after the event" (Lessing, 28). For the
very reason that "Free Women" appears to satisfy reader expectations of a realistic novel then, it is the main current around which the other streams of the novel will flow. Each time the narrative returns to "Free Women," there is a feeling of returning to a the more conventional movement of plot. Anna's writing stalemate, Tommy's identity crisis, and Molly and Anna's conflicts are all familiar elements to realistic fiction and therefore easily accommodated and comfortably followed by readers.

Nonetheless, "Free Women" has a subverted plot—that of "the portrait of a woman over forty with writer's block" (Sprague, 196)—which resists the traditional novel plot by calling attention to both the tradition and its deviation. By virtue of its subject matter, "Free Women" is placed in a kind of ironic dialogue with the long line of novel writing which privileges the position of the artist and locates the novel's catharsis with the writer's decision to take up or refuse to take up the pen. The deviation or "correction" to a narrative tradition, according to Wolfgang Iser, is set up so that a "special experience of the new perception may be captured and conveyed" as well as a "reference which is then transcended by the correction" (91). In this way, the tradition can be challenged by emerging as a subject of the novel itself. As "Free Women" opens, Anna has been initiated into the limitations and the problematic of plot construction. She has become stymied and immobilized by her knowledge. The initiation plot has been used, according to Terdiman, to make construction of discourse visible, so that the language is denaturalized and forced to reveal itself (103). In such a plot
Stephen Dedalus must realize that he cannot write the "uncreated conscience" of his race from within his own culture but must leave and move to Europe if he is to be relieved of the intellectual and emotional constraints which prevent him from writing and from gaining the needed perspective on his culture, in order to complete his project. Anna too, at the opening of the novel, feels so immersed in narrative constructions that she is barren and crippled by her disillusionment with language. For Lessing to have stopped at this point, simply with the initiation plot however, would have placed Anna Wulf in a tradition that demanded her total resignation to the impossibility of creating a moral and intelligible statement within narrative. Negation of both the tradition and the ability of narrative to be viable would have been inevitable. This is precisely then the point at which "Free Women" begins, where Anna reveals to Molly her startling perceptions about how narrative limits vision. The novel goes on to explore whether the rejection of narrative is its foregone conclusion.

Anna designates *Finnegan's Wake* as representative of the thinning of language and the abandonment of narrative meaning. Even if this appears to be the conclusion of "Free Women" where Anna gives up writing to do social work, it is not the actual conclusion of *The Golden Notebook*. However, the elements of traditional plot and characterization in "Free Women" provide *The Golden Notebook* with a framework around which to problematize traditional narrative structure while never completely eradicating the notion of plot, characterization, and more significantly, narrative meaning. Fuoroli
points out in "Doris Lessing's 'Game': Referential Language and Fictional Form" that "Free Women" is "an ironic comment on the inadequacies of traditional fiction. Yet it also provides both Lessing and Anna with a stable social reality around which the notebooks cluster and this ordering function affirms the value and potential of referential language, personally for the character and structurally for the author" (156). Despite the fact that Anna Wulf acknowledges the limits of language to harness perception and strangle meaning, she is unable to abandon language or to challenge its confinements outside of narrative. Because of this resistance to traditional formulas along with the acceptance of the value of language, The Golden Notebook never abandons narrative even while problematizing it.

Another way in which "Free Women" is problematized is through the narrator's self-reflexivity. At the beginning of her breakdown in the fifth section of "Free Women" Anna attempts to move beyond words by ritualistically tacking up clipped bits of newspaper upon the walls of her apartment. At one point she sits staring at two clippings until the words themselves seemed to detach themselves from the page and slide away, as if they had detached themselves from their own meaning. Yet the meaning remained, unconfirmed by the words, and probably more terrible (though she did not know why) because the words had failed to confine it (Lessing, 50).

All too aware of the slippery nature of language, of the transparency of discourse, Anna understands that words are all the more fearful when meaning cannot be nailed down or perfectly transferable from sender to receiver. Although she realizes that her efforts are futile, Anna continues to pull off shreds of discourse and to fasten them with pins as if to stabilize the force and meaning of those sets of words by
virtue of their physical pinning down. Anna contests the authority of narrative throughout "Free Women" by rigorously scrutinizing the written and verbal texts all around her. At one point she describes to Molly how she took three letters from her communist comrades and compared them with one another noticing that "in phraseology, style, tone, they were identical" (Lessing, 49); or later in the novel, she listens to Marion and begins to locate Marion's discourse within the various print medias from which she senses Marion has retrieved her phrases:

"I mean," said Marion happily, "it's a continent in chains, well isn't it?" (Tribune, thought Anna; or possibly the Daily Worker.) "And measures ought to be taken immediately to restore the African's faith in justice if it is not already too late." (the New Statesman, thought Anna.) "Well at least the situation ought to be thoroughly gone into in the interests of everybody." (The Manchester Guardian, at a time of crisis.) "But, Anna, I don't understand your attitude. Surely you'll admit there's evidence that something's gone wrong?" (The Times, editorializing a week after the news that the white administration has shot twenty Africans and imprisoned fifty more without trial) (401).

In this way discourse is examined by locating it within an ideological background and then detaching it from that ground to illuminate the political motivation that generates it. With such a conscious examination of the language within its text then, "Free Women" draws attention to its own ideological frame, the modern novel and its investment in modern capitalism.

However, despite its self-conscious use of language, "Free Women" is more disturbed by Anna's notebooks, which break up its action with corresponding or completely different action of their own. The Notebooks sections which follow each of the first four "Free Women"
sections function on several structural levels. The notebooks seem to
charge the "Free Women" section in the traditional way that framed
narratives are charged and complicated by their mise-en-abymes. Mieke
Bal discusses the embedded narrative's relationship to its frame as
serving to disrupt the chronology, "but also, the limits between the
whole and part, between the text and metatext, become problematic. For
the figure imposes its unique version of the fabula and this disrupts
the version we are reading at the moment it intervened. The status of
the detail is thus called into question" (88). The embedded stories
disturb the reading of the frame repeatedly. Frequently the action of
the notebooks is totally unrelated to that of "Free Women." When
actions are relatable to "Free Women" in the notebooks, there are other
correspondences which break down. For instance, the Tommy of the
notebooks seems older, and though still bothersome, is somewhat better
adjusted than the Tommy of "Free Women". There are name changes
between the characters who appear to parallel one another in the frame
and the embedded stories. Most significant is that the version
presented in "Free Women" ends differently from that presented in the
notebooks, suggesting that the Anna of one is not exactly the Anna of
another. While the notebooks suggest that Anna Wulf is the author of
"Free Women" the fifth and final section of "Free Women"--which also
ends The Golden Notebook--reveals that Anna will not go on to write
again.

Another aspect of the notebooks is the way in which they give
dimension to the characterization of Anna in "Free Women." The
motivation of Anna is built and fueled through the notebooks. For one
thing, reader appreciation of Anna's breakdown is enhanced. Her conflict with language is illustrated throughout the notebooks as strands of narrative bleed into other strands and Anna appears caught in an endless cycle of writing and analyzing what she has written.

Ross Chambers indicates that the embedded text has the function of providing the larger text with a suggestive reading or anti-readings because to designate specifically another text or work of art within a text is to invite the reader to correlate that text with the work mentioned . . . and hence to situate the text in terms of a literary or discursive context that serves as the interpretant, or criterion of relevance, and determines the selective process of reading (31).

The relevance of notebooks to "Free Women" is then a sort of invitation to the reader to "read into" the frame those elements of the embedded texts which seem to correspond or to accommodate those elements which fail to correspond. This seems to be exactly what happens as the reader attempts to situate the Anna of "Free Women" with the Anna of the notebooks.

In the beginning of The Golden Notebook, the notebooks appear to have a certain method of organization, that, though somewhat arbitrary, is nevertheless tangible. This idea of organization is never really made explicit until the very end of the novel, but we are immediately aware of a kind of subject arrangement between the first presentation of the notebooks. Simultaneously we are aware of the presence of an author, Anna Wulf, who is the protagonist and subject of the "Free Women" sections.
Briefly, the black notebook begins as a chronicle of Anna's experience as a writer, expenses, reviews of her book generally her moral conflicts vis a vis *Frontiers of War*’s incorporation into the market place. It is here that Anna discusses her meetings with various television and movie people who want to buy the rights to her book. The black notebook recounts Anna's autobiographical story of the group of communist youth during World War II who regularly meet at the Mashopi hotel to exchange party narratives just as they change partners. As Anna’s attempt in the notebook to retell the story of what has become the basis of *Frontiers of War*—the naivete of the group and the problematic of the colonization of Africans—stands in contrast to the alluded to fiction of *Frontiers of War*. Anna describes the novel as a lie and the notebook chronicle as an attempt at truth. However, only a short time later in another entry, Anna writes that the notebook account is equally reductive, "full of nostalgia, every word loaded with it, although at the time I wrote it I thought I was being 'objective'" (153).

The red notebook’s subject matter generally delineates Anna's political activities with the communist party, and the role of the party in her life during the late 40's and the early 50's, the period of Soviet expansion. Besty Draine maintains, the red notebook charts the "loss of faith in communism" (142) for Anna and her associates. For Anna, the communist narrative of utopian possibility is the most formidable one in her experience. She has never been comfortable with the colonial view of human history because it assumes a subject and an object. For her communism is an ideal of a better, fairer and freer
existence. She explains to Tommy that she thinks the communist revolution of 1917 represented this century's only "lurch forward" (275). Yet as a party member, Anna remains critical of and disconcerted by the prescribed rhetoric of the party. She continually contrasts the words and language she uses with other members against the discourse she employs when acting as a representative among those who are not members. As with the black notebook before it, the red notebook is an excavation of the rhetoric of narrative, this time the communist one.

The yellow notebook is reserved for her fiction writing activities. She creates the story of Ella and Paul, as well as proposing various plot summaries for future stories (even here it seems that Anna is not prepared to relinquish her desire to narrate). In this notebook, Anna attempts to discover the very way in which narrative construction occurs. This notebook, also, is a mirror of Anna's relationship with Michael. Anna writes,

I used the name of my real lover for Ella's fictitious son with the small over-eager smile with which a patient offers an analyst evidence he has been waiting for but which the patient is convinced is irrelevant, I see above all my naivety. Any intelligent person could have foreseen the end of this affair from its beginning. And yet I, Anna, like Ella with Paul refused to see it" (211).

Here in the fictional accounts of Ella, in the plot summaries of Ella and herself on other fictional works, we come to see an Anna who is clearly disintegrating. Far from being a remote author, Anna seems very real as her character, Ella. Green notes that toward the end of this notebook, "the names of Ella and Anna begin to be used
interchangeably. It is not clear whether the short story sketches are Anna's or Ella's, or whether they are fictional sketches for the 'real' version or a more fully developed fictional version that is however recorded inappropriately in the blue notebook" (305). Because of the tight association between Anna and her character this notebook becomes something of an amplification of the blue notebook which is Anna's diary of events.

The blue notebook is intended to be the notebook of "what happens," a diary or place for the merest listing of events, devoid of what she thinks is commentary. Here Anna attempts an analogue in which she can record the facts, the uneditorialized truth. She discusses her visits to Mother Sugar and her five year relationship with Michael around whom, we are told in "Free Women," she has continued to structure her life long after he abandons her. In this notebook she also delineates her social work activities which she dispenses at the communist party office along with the intrigues of her day to day dilemma over being or not being a communist.

The notebooks also represent Anna's desire to compartmentalize and keep her life rational and tidy. She strips away one subject from another, one theme from another, just to keep track of them. When Tommy questions her about keeping four notebooks instead of one, Anna tells him that she must have four otherwise her writing would be "such a scramble" (266) or "chaos" (274). Irigaray explains that "the rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts a woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily" (Irigaray, *This Sex*, 30). In an attempt to ward off the chaos then, Anna
constructs four separate notebooks. Frightened of a complete fall into madness (when Tommy speaks the word, she winces) she proceeds, hoping she can hold onto her sanity by dividing her life into the notebooks, by providing a scaffold of support for her collapsing version of meaningfulness. She continually reiterates that it is the rational Anna who is the only barrier between her and insanity.

In fact, Anna's exploration takes her to a series of almost hysterical narratives where she appears to be many people all at once. With Saul in the blue notebook she claims to play all the roles she never permitted herself to play before (Lessing, 603-04). In a discontinuous flow of words, character, theme, and narrative, all resisting and contradicting one another, there remains throughout this particular story a degree of consistence and correspondence as though it were told from the viewpoint of several people and yet from the viewpoint only of Anna Wulf.

While the notebooks may originally be Anna's strategy for staving off madness as she pursues desire, her compartmentalizing gradually gives way bit by bit, notebook by notebook, foregoing any possible attempt to keep the categories separate much less the narratives. Rather, there is so much overlap as well as contradictory material that almost immediately the notebooks begin to slide into one another. Even though both "Free Women" and The Notebooks assume a certain distinct and definable reality within the novel as a whole, the plots are rarely, if ever, fully distinct from one another. Most significant is the way in which "Free Women"'s motif of fluidity begins to be mirrored in the structure of the novel itself. Rather than definite
lines of plot running parallel with one another, those lines begin to
intersect and to intertwine so that before the end of the novel,
discrete flows of narrative will be nearly impossible to detect. Not
only are the flows of narrative fragmented and often abandoned, but
sometimes they are picked up and followed in other ways by other
narratives.

This motif of fluidity is established in "Free Women" with Anna's
need to get back from the dry and scorching place to a well or stream.
This idea becomes the operating metaphor which links Anna's journey
into and away from language with her search for her own desire. Peter
Brooks explains in Reading for the Plot that texts often have a
founding metaphor which acts as a sort of subtext, and may "represent
the dynamics of the narrative," acting as "a mise-en-abyme for the
novel's narrative motor, an explicit statement of the inclusion with
the novel of the principle of its movement" (45). Fluidity of movement
is precisely the metaphor at work here in the structure as well as in
the content.

In "Free Women," Anna is continually aware of a dryness within her,
a depletion which brings on her dream of water, of getting "back to the
spring" which Anna desperately envisions in what she names her moment
of "drought" (Lessing, 407-08) and which Grant calls Anna's "journey
into the unconscious" (33). This same image is held throughout "Free
Women" and extended to all the significant moments of insight for
Anna. For instance, in "Free Women" Anna watches the demonstration
against the government's African policy, as a fluid movement,
unhampered by organization or direction:

it was fluid, experimental—people were doing things without knowing why. The stream of young people had flowed down the street to the headquarters like water . . . Anna standing to one side had watched: under the restless, fluid movement of people and police was an inner pattern or motif" (512).

This insight is crucial for Anna who realizes that only in fluidity can resistance, or real forward movement take place. The significance of fluidity is a capacity "that continues to resist adequate symbolization and/or that signifies the powerlessness of logic to incorporate in its writing all the characteristic features of nature" (Irigaray, This Sex, 106-07). It is no coincidence that shortly following this insight, Anna Wulf begins her emotional breakdown, allowing herself to sleep

as if lying just under water, with real sleep in bottomless layers beneath me . . . As I lay on the surface of the dream-water, and began very slowly to submerge, this person said: "Anna, you are betraying everything you believe in; you are sunk in subjectivity, yourself, your own needs." But the Anna who wanted to slip under the dark water would not answer . . .I knew the depths of the water under me had become dangerous, full of monsters and crocodiles and things I could scarcely imagine, they were so old and so tyrannous. Yet their danger was what pulled me down, I wanted the danger. (614-15).

Just as the water acts as a medium in which Anna can explore her subjectivity, the scramble of the four notebooks acts as lines of escape that permit Anna to push aside some cultural frameworks and move on to assembling other personally valid ones. The dream of fluids and the liquid movement of her narrative then could signify the same sort of move from logical powerlessness and inadequate symbolization described by Irigaray as associated with fluidity, a tactile movement
in the dark toward the construction of her own desire (Irigaray, *This Sex*, 106-07).

Currents move against and through one another and yet nothing is ever fully lost, no molecules have been obliterated though they may have been separated or fused. This method of organization for *The Golden Notebook* provides a proliferation of narrative currents which are questioned, examined, and sometimes set aside but never completely lost. Schweickart suggests that with *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing employs the Derridian strategy of writing under erasure (274). In fact, several of the notebook entries are reported to be exed out or bracketed by Anna when she finds them in her subsequent readings to be inadequate reflections of her feelings. This method of writing under erasure allows the word or words to be identified in their representative function while still allowing them to register meaning in a "referential way" (Fuoroli, 149). This strategy as well allows for flow and movement beyond words and behind language while never fully abandoning meaning.

The motif of fluidity is reinforced with the childhood game Anna remembers in which she moves systematically from the smallness of her room and home to the vastness of the universe, trying as she does so to keep in mind the smallness of her room and home against that vastness. Her childhood perspective then acquaints Anna with the idea of multiplicity. The game is reflective of the novel's overall perspective of holding each narrative strand in mind, while taking in the vastness of the whole novel. With the game, Anna becomes conscious that life in itself must accommodate many perspectives at once and
likewise many stories. Only then can Anna really integrate her personality for, as Hite maintains, "to be whole by societal standards is not to have resisted fragmentation but to have been reduced to a single fragment" (485). To accept such multiplicity is not to abandon narrative or discourse, but to embrace it in its manifoldness, the way fluids accommodate various flows. Betsy Draine claims that "through the paratactic structure of the plots, through the constant presence of correspondences among elements of these plots, and through the deaccentuation of character development" Lessing signals an intention to endorse multiplicity (Draine, 106) since she has already "accepted the assumption that all perceptions are relative and [come to] the conclusion that it is futile to try to find the 'right' view of reality or to record it" (Draine, 77). According to Sprague, the doubling of characters--Anna/Ella, Michael/Paul, Saul/Anna, Molly/Anna--"forces us to question any single view of personality or reality" as does the multiple narrative forms--"diary, letter, book review, parody, short story, film script, headline, news clipping synopsis"--acting as mirrors for Anna and her world (55), at the same time such doubling acts to suggest the myriad similarities and interchangeability of individuals and situations.

The notebook scramble too reflects the operation of flows or currents for the novel's structure as a whole. For example, the blue notebook which is reserved for objective detail, full of newspaper clippings and non-narrative fragments, culminates in the deepest and most subjective narrative concerning Anna, her relationship with Saul Green and her rambling in the midst of her clinical depression. This
occurs just as the black notebook begins to be an assemblage of newsclips and abandons its former organization. No longer only concerned with *Frontiers of War*, the black notebook encloses itself with the newspaper footage of the political and in particularly the African world. Boundaries crumble. The blue notebook narrative is taken up by the new inner golden notebook, which in turn spills into "Free Women"5 mirroring the Anna/Saul story of the blue notebook, but registering persistent name and situational differences.

The red notebook is where Anna has her most exhilarating dream of colored tapestry where "red areas are being invaded by the bright different colours of the other parts of the world . . . melting and flowing into each other, indescribably beautiful so that the world becomes whole. . . .[becomes] a colour I've never seen in life." Upon waking, she has a feeling of joy and elation as she finds Michael snuggled beside her and she thinks, "the truth is I don't care a damn about politics or philosophy or anything else, all I care about is that Michael should turn in the dark and put his face against my breasts" (Lessing, 299). While the dream's theme and the denunciation of the political may be appropriate to the red notebook's subject matter, this endorsement of the personal and the intimacy with Michael are materials consciously left out of this notebook and reserved for the blue notebook.

Similarly, the dream of complicity between the executioner and the executed marks a motif throughout the whole of *The Golden Notebook*. Originally it is recorded in the blue notebook and immediately related to the interaction within the communist party office in which she
works. It is her dealings with Jack and John Butte in that notebook that underscores Anna's insight concerning the failure of the communist party to pose any viable resistance to the capitalistic system. Describing the condition of their complicity with maintaining the status quo, Anna observes,

there's a group of hardened fossilised men opposed by fresh young revolutionaries as John Butte once was, forming between them a whole, a balance. And then a group of fossilised, hardened men like John Butte, opposed by a group of fresh and lively minded and critical people. But the core of deadness, of dry thought, could not exist without lively shoots of fresh life, to be turned so fast, in their turn, into dead sapless wood. In other words, I, "Comrade Anna" . . . keep Comrade Butte in existence, feed him, and in due course will become him (344).

Such a powerful political insight is certainly misplaced in the blue notebook and far more fitting in the red notebook where it so succinctly deconstructs the communist narrative.

Thematically the dream of complicity is played out in a number of ways throughout the novel in conjunction with the various interpersonal relationships of the characters. For instance, in "Free Women" Molly complies with Tommy's demand for control when he returns from the hospital following his suicide attempt and blinding. Anna mentions how Ella willingly consents to relinquish her intelligence with Paul and similarly we see Anna do the same with Michael. It is an undercurrent of the novel itself that women willingly comply to deny their desire in order to "keep" their men.

Certainly an even more significant example of the movement between the notebooks of narrative and thematic material occurs within the yellow and blue notebooks. The material reserved for the blue notebook's diary-like recording is mirrored in the most intimate and
personal way in the yellow notebook's novel, *The Shadow of the Third.* The novel about Ella and Paul so closely reflects the affair of Anna and Michael that even Anna on occasion gets confused. Speaking of the fictional situation between Ella, Bob and Julia, Anna writes "Julia, myself, and Bob sitting in her kitchen" [emphasis mine] (214). Lessing demonstrates the close connection we are intended to make between Anna and Ella. Anna not only acknowledges her connection with the naive Ella whose complicity with Paul abdicates her own intelligence, Anna also implicates herself openly in her own parallel with "I, Anna, like Ella with Paul refused to see" the inevitable end of the affair with Michael.

Other parallels persist. Both Anna and Ella are novelists; Ella writes advice for a doctor's column while Anna gives advice to the sick of heart who write to the communist party office. Both have trouble asserting their own desire with their respective lovers. Both Michael and Paul insist upon stripping their mistresses of the power to claim their desire. Joseph Hynes considers the construction of *The Golden Notebook* as a series of mirror narratives with the story of Ella as a reflection of the Anna/Michael affair (108-09). Just as Paul structures Ella's life and projects his own insecurities on her by insisting that she is unfaithful to him, Michael in the blue notebook projects his inadequacies onto Anna. Anna describes how he likes to suggest that it is she who wishes to end their relationship when he is the one pulling away. Similarly, the position of sexual dominance shows Paul bullying Ella over whether there is any such thing as a vaginal orgasm, and Michael making "impersonal" love when Anna is
the blue notebook echoes with the Ella/Paul story in its account of Anna and Michael, specifically because it follows the yellow notebook's fictional depiction. So that when Ella is bullied over sex shortly before the blue notebook depicts Michael criticizing Anna about waking him and teasing her sexually the first scene in the yellow notebook spills into the second scene so that Michael appears to be every bit as domineering as Paul and Anna equally complicit in her silence as Ella is in hers. Likewise, when Ella discloses to Paul that she would love to bear his child and later on in the blue notebook Anna reveals the same wish to Saul, the boundaries between Anna's fiction and her life become fuzzy and one association after another becomes potentially applicable to Anna's circumstances. According to Ross Chambers, the specular text as a model or anti-model intercepts the larger text in which "reading such texts is based essentially on a process of comparison" (28-29) of one text to the other. In this way, the similarity of the substance of the two notebooks invites readers to "read into" Anna's story the pain and abandonment which Ella's story depicts. In addition the process of blurring the "line between fact and fiction reveals the reality in our fiction and fiction in our reality, and implies that we can create what we can imagine, for good or for evil" (Lightfoot, 182). Here Anna does create what she imagines just as she is created by what others, such as her lover, imagine of her.
Surprisingly, it is the blue notebook that is more detached and removed from Anna than the yellow notebook. In this notebook, Anna seems more like an author paring her fingernails, while as the author of the yellow notebook, she is raw, exposed and more emotionally involved. Not until the breakdown of all notebook divisions, raising "questions as to what 'actually' happens and what is imagined" (Greene, 295) culminating in the final section of the blue notebook, does Anna become more emotionally available within the blue notebook, mirroring Anna's emotional breakdown in "Free Women."

Finally, the golden notebook materializes once the other notebooks have disintegrated and ended. It begins where the blue notebook leaves off but it goes on to incorporate the first sentences of both Saul's and Anna's novels which they exchange as they begin to surface from their madness. The beginning of the golden notebook intersects in time with the action of "Free Women" and the material of Anna and Saul's affair is alluded to, though not identical with, that affair. However, Schweikart says that the inner golden notebook "prevents an unequivocal ironic reading of Lessing's novel" since it is in this last notebook that Anna assumes the position of the fictive author of "Free Women," if not The Golden Notebook as a whole. In this way, the novel folds in on itself to undercut the ending of "Free Women" and to indicate that the third person narration of "Free Women" (and the bridge sections of the notebooks, as well) are written by the same character, Anna, who also writes the first person narration of the notebooks.
While *The Golden Notebook* is a collection of narrative threads which overlap and disconnect, it is likewise a collection of narrative interpretations which, as Chambers suggests, are presented as models or antimodels so that the novel's overarching narrative, "Free Women," is simultaneously "overstuffed" with possible and completely valid versions of itself.

The fluidity of language fragments moving into other fragments with narrative flows meeting and breaking is a reflection of Anna's journey away from the unsatisfying structures of discourse which dry and deplete her as a woman, as a writer, as a political subject, or as a sexual being. However nowhere is the fluidity of structure more evident than around the subject of female desire.

The notebooks themselves act as a kind of excavation of the theme of female desire that overlaps and intersects all the notebooks from the onset of the black notebook where Anna begins her journey into the dark recesses of her consciousness until she surfaces again in the internal golden notebook. Nonetheless, it is in darkness that Anna begins to examine the notebooks. Pulling the curtains, she shuts out the light and only then takes up reading the notebooks. When she begins the black notebook, she expresses fear over the seeming abandonment of rational props which she only reluctantly relinquishes during the course of the entire novel, clinging as she does here for some time to that idea of scorching hot light (55). Such a beginning is appropriate to the exploration of female desire since it is the "dark continent" of language. The course is uncharted, hidden from discourse and, given the stake any woman has in daring to begin such a
journey, it is entirely comprehensible that Anna would have so much distress. That she reads and writes her notebooks in the dark, away from the access of others, that she feels exposed and violated when Tommy admits to reading the notebooks—the log of her course of exploration—is an indication of how threatening this journey is for her. What prompts Anna to begin her journey is the same thing that brings about her initiation into the inadequacies of narrative: the loss of her lover, Michael—"And when had this new frightened vulnerable Anna been born? She knew: it was when Michael had abandoned her" (407).

Irigaray discusses the difficult position a woman finds herself in when she begins to explore her own desire for "what is most strictly forbidden of women today is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure" (This Sex, 77) and that "only in secret, in hiding, with anxiety and guilt" can it be recovered from its assignment to "masculine specula(riza)tion (30). By opening her mouth to speak, a woman must transgress a discourse which fixes her in silence (Cixous & Clement, 1987, 92). Anna seems to experience her need for the notebooks as a kind of transgression. Her distress over Tommy's questions about them shatter her composure and she can barely restrain herself from stopping him as he flips through them. By pulling away at the layers of discourse which surround notions of female sexuality, political as well as personal ones, she discards what has inadequately "named" her in the past and imprisoned her desire, but she believes the cost for this daring will be great, will at least risk her sanity and
perhaps her life as well. As Feral maintains

to put discourse into question is to reject the existing order. It
is to renounce, in effect, the identity principle, the principles
of unity and resemblance which allows for the constitution of
phallocentric society. It means choosing marginality (with the
emphasis on the margins) in order to designate one's difference, a
difference no longer conceived of as an inverted image or as a
double, but as alterity, multiplicity, heterogeneity" (91).

Under patriarchal inscription for a woman to be brazen enough to speak
or to write is to risk not only the label of madness, but the
possibility of a total break with cultural realities.

The black notebook's story of the Mashopi group of young leftists,
made up ostensibly of British fighter pilots and some local colonials,
revolves around the coupling of Willi and Anna, a sexual and generative
center serving to provide continuity and glue for the interrelations of
sex and politics among the young people. Anna explains:

If there is a couple in the center of the group with a real full
sexual relationship it acts like a catalyst for the others, and
often, indeed, destroys the group altogether. I've seen many such
groups since, political and nonpolitical, and one can always judge
the relationship of the central couple (because there is always a
central couple) by the relationships of the couples around them" 
(140).

The sexual dimension of Anna and Willi's relationship, because it is
unsatisfying to both—a fact neither of them acknowledges to one
another—is reflected among all the other couples of the group. They
serve as the father and mother to the group's interpersonal relations
and since it is an unsatisfying relationship, it begets other
frustrated and stymied offshoots. Yet the myth of Anna and Willi's
intimate satisfaction is maintained by several of the members in order
to continue the group's obsessive coupling.
Several times during the course of the black notebook's rendering of the story of the Mashopi group, issues of desire are explored, particularly female desire. One instance involves June Boothby, the daughter of the hotel proprietors. June's momentary obsession with sexuality strikes both Anna and Maryrose who immediately recognize her condition as typical for a teenage girl. However both are careful about keeping their knowledge hidden from the men of the group because they recognize June's vulnerability to the ridicule and self-serving behavior of the men should they discover this secret. What Maryrose and Anna know is that female desire is a secret women must keep from men to protect themselves.

While Maryrose and Anna are drawn to the unbridled sexuality of George, both spurn it as something dangerous. Similarly, for much of the period, Anna resists the love of Paul whom she knows really desires her because she is unable to respond to any man who truly wants her, as Maryrose turns away every man, remaining, instead, fixed upon the former intimacy with her now-deceased brother, retreating from her desire, permitting no one access who is capable of arousing her. To acknowledge desire, not to keep it secret or hidden is dangerous for women. While Anna is angered by Willi's prudish assignment of her as a "fallen" woman based upon her intimacy with him—"it would be different if we were married" (118)—she is unable to repel his attack or to articulate why she does not accept it. Caught in the bind of her assignment under patriarchy, Anna is "guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being 'too hot'; for not being both at once; for being too motherly
and not enough; for having children and for not having any" (Cixous, 1976, 880). Later in the yellow notebook, Anna records a proposed plot line spelling out a similar dynamic between the male and female characters where "at the moment when she emotionally gives herself to him, his emotions cut off, he loses desire for her. She, hurt and miserable. Turns to another man. But at this point, the first man finds her desirable again" (539). What excites the first man, Anna goes on, is that the female character has been with another man. In this way, Lessing reveals the trap for a woman, particularly the thinking woman under a system that seeks to repress everything she chooses for herself.

In one of the final sections of the black notebook, the group, gone pigeon hunting, runs across thousands of grasshoppers mating. Paul and Jimmy attempt a scientific deployment of matching the insects up in what they believe is a more compatible arrangement of size. Ultimately the maneuver is only a partial success in the face of so many insects coupling with no such intelligent interference. The flood of nonrational desire, of insect linking with insect, is an excellent image upon which Anna draws toward the end of that section where Jimmy remarks that Maryrose and Paul are "a perfectly matched couple" who will never have a chance to mate because of Maryrose's disapproval of Paul (433). Finally upon their return to the hotel, aching with heat and scorching sun, the group separates.

Much of what occurs in the Mashopi incident of the black notebook is picked up in the red notebook, at least thematically. Here an older Anna is thinking of joining the communist party and is still surrounded
by a makeshift group of intellectuals. The absent narrative of communist myth hangs over this section, just as the absent fiction of *Frontiers of War* hovers over the black notebook. Canvassing for the communist party in the elections of 1950, Anna is disturbed by the number of housewives she meets who seem to be "going mad alone" (167). She speculates that these women feel guilty for not being happy, a condition which Anna also, in "Free Women" and in other sections of the novel, identifies with herself. With all the vestiges of female success these women are unable to articulate what is wrong. They are anxious for an outlet, a mode of expression for their misery, and several of them use the opportunity to converse with Anna in order to vent this incredible loneliness. A wife of one of the party officers is bothered by the incongruity of her feelings and their resistance to the proper attitude of the party. She becomes a kind of clown or caricature of herself. Like the hysteric who parodies language this woman is unable to live according to the master narrative set out by the party; she fumbles and giggles through her conversations with others. Unable to name a desire within language women flee to the margins (Feral, 91) where they try to retrieve what is missing, or at times obliterated. These women, like Anna and Maryrose, are repelled and attracted, caught in a trap of what has become an inadequate representation of female desire.

At just this juncture in Anna's realization of the condition of women and their desire, the yellow notebook's novel, *The Shadow of the Third*, picks up the current to reveal yet another movement within female desire. Fiction making is Anna's greatest preoccupation. She
berates herself for creating stories just as she starts the blue notebook, yet it is her way of setting down a structure around which she can understand her life. In just this connection, the story of Ella functions as a way of understanding her affair with Michael. However, this story flows right off the red notebook's perspectives about the awareness of women's suffering in loneliness and madness. At one point in the yellow notebook, Anna considers the difficulty she has in writing about sex because, for women, "sex is best when not thought about, not analyzed," and she uses as her example the exchange between Bob and Julia over the break-up of their mutual friends' marriage which Bob insists ended as a result of a the man's inadequate organ:

Julia: "I always thought she didn't love him." Bob, thinking she hadn't heard: "No, it's always worried him stiff, he's just got a small one." Julia: "But she never did love him, anyone could see that just by looking at them together." Bob, a bit impatient now: "It's not their fault, poor idiots, nature was against the whole thing from the start." Julia: "Of course it's her fault. She should never have married him if she didn't love him." Bob, irritated because of her stupidity, begins a long technical explanation (215).

This is not unlike the episode with the grasshoppers where aspects of anatomy are isolated and designated problematic despite the fact that for Julia and for the grasshoppers, desire exists beyond scientific scrutiny. To Julia, any linkage between couples is futile without love, an inexplicable commodity which, when absent, can not be manufactured by any correct set of anatomical elements. However, this is totally missing from Bob's phallocentric awareness, thus any articulation of Julia's understanding of desire is an expression in a vacuum, from out of a black hole where men like Bob experience irritation over the woman's seeming lack of logic and biology. In this
representation, female desire is to be understood exclusively in terms of a man's physical equipment; Bob's irritation reflects his intellectual deafness inherent in his understanding of his own sexuality.²

Here in the yellow notebook's discussion of sex between Ella and Paul, Anna begins to explore her own desire since "it is a remarkable fact that until I sat down to write about [sex], I had never analyzed how sex was between myself and Michael. Yet there was a perfectly clear development during the five years which shows in my memory like a curving line of a graph" (215). It is the activity of writing a story, then, that gives Anna the means for understanding her relationship with Michael. For until she is able somehow to "name" her feelings, she is completely unaware of their existence. It also represents her only refutation of the phallocentric narratives within which she feels caught.

Also at this point Anna, as Ella, begins to discuss the idea of vaginal orgasm and to validate its relevance to the understanding of female desire. Feminist critics such as Jean McCrindle indicate that Lessing's conservative view of the superiority of vaginal orgasm over clitoral orgasm is indicative of her sexual conservatism in 1962, which is further supported by her seeming denunciation of homosexuality as represented by the story of Ivor and Ronnie in "Free Women" (51). While this reading of the work may be valid, it stops short of realizing that vaginal orgasm serves as a signifier for female desire in general within the novel. The privileging of vaginal orgasm provides an excellent symbol for designating the arena of female
sexuality because, as Irigaray discusses, the region of the female organ that is hidden, out of sight, dark and multiplicit, rather than singular (Irigaray, *This Sex*, 26), is the perfect signifier for challenging notions of patriarchal assignment of female desire. Enfolded within the female body, the vagina is never recognized by men nor is its pleasure.

This is, in fact, what Ella finds out with her lover, Paul. He prefers that she have clitoral orgasms (particularly once she has admitted to having the greatest pleasure in vaginal orgasm). Because the clitoris is assumed to be the anatomical parallel to the penis—the undeveloped penis—it is the more valorized region of pleasure in a system of phallomorphism (Irigaray, *This Sex*, 26). Like the phallus, it is visible and therefore controllable by the male in a way that vaginal orgasm is not. All the patriarchal discourse around the subject of female pleasure in *The Golden Notebook* attempts to discount or eradicate the feminine claim to vaginal pleasure. Dr. Bloodrot, whose lecture Paul goes to hear—a male doctor of course—revels in his research with female swans, correlating his results to female human beings, by way of establishing that there is no anatomical basis for vaginal orgasm. Clearly, this is a patriarchal move that seeks to deny the woman a voice for acknowledging the arena of her own pleasure. Thus, Lessing's selection of the vaginal orgasm for discussion about the "real" pleasure of a woman not only functions at the content level where it is being denounced by male discourse, but at the formal level as it mirrors the buried and unacknowledged condition of female desire in general. In describing it, Anna says "a vaginal orgasm is emotion
and nothing else, felt as emotion and expressed in sensations that are indistinguishable from emotion . . . dissolving in a vague, dark generalized sensation like being swirled in a warm whirlpool" (215). Even its description here is linked with fluidity and the nonrational nature of the female organ; it is emotion, not reason which rules in this realm.

Female desire, rather than existing in a vacuum, has a location, a location which can be identified by the woman. While it may be hidden from view, while it may be absent from a discourse which ties it up, it exists, has impact, creates spaces in discourse and in the lives of women in a way that The Golden Notebook's proliferation of missing narratives creates space and has impact on the novel and the other present narratives of the book. Elizabeth Abel notes that the novel is "haunted by allusions to absent fiction" (105), such as Frontiers of War, which generate other narratives in the form of reviews, parodies and screenplays. The communist narrative, though never fully articulated in the novel, produces other shorter versions of itself, other myths and heroes for its restructured stories. The strategy of missing fictions presents possibilities beyond the page for creating space and a sense of wordlessness. We are unable to identify the form and shape of these fictions, because they only exist in the loose construction of each reader's imagination, yet they are present in that they produce a dimension of existence that is unformed by language. This illusion of space, like the many hidden and elusive aspects of desire, is only tangentially structured. It is not nailed down and so it continues to escape depiction, fleeing in each moment of its
construction to other unmentioned possibilities. This seems exactly the quality which Lessing proposes in making no structural claims on female desire. It is not to exclude claims of pleasure in other physical regions for women, nor to harness desire to any particular structure, but to endorse claims which are voiced by women over the scientific and patriarchal objections or assignments of men that would obliterate what cannot be scrutinized, analyzed or gazed upon. Hidden from view, the vaginal orgasm, like these invisible fictions of the novel, constitute an imagined space in which each woman can construct an understanding of her pleasure as well as reconstitute it as she experiences it.

In a similar way, the discussion of homosexuality that occurs around Anna in "Free Women" and to some degree the youths of the Mashopi, relates in a similar way to the valorization of the feminine, the emotional, the nonrational. Anna is most upset with Ivor because he ridicules the female both in language and in his relationship with Ronnie. What disturbs Anna about Ivor's influence on Janet is not that he is gay but that he, too, like the patriarchal society in general, shares a contempt for all that is female, a contempt that more clearly reveals itself in the presence of his male lover. Anna prefers to shield Janet from Ronnie's contempt and that is the reason she establishes for ousting him. In this way, Anna's quest for a retrieval of desire and for validating nonpatriarchal constructions of the feminine is continued with what in some ways appears to be a rather traditional view of sexuality.
Anna, at times, feels repulsed and disgusted by her own body and she identifies this disgust with the homosexual literature of disgust which she feels it represents. Here, obviously is a more conservative view suggesting that homosexuality is prompted by self-disgust. However what continues to be essential is that Anna wishes to acknowledge her self-loathing—rather than dismissing it—and to embrace it as another part of herself about which she has previously been unacquainted. It is in her hysterical reaches beginning in the blue notebook and ending in the golden notebook in which the novel's proliferation of stories, characters, and selves is made absolutely irreducible to one, to unification and where multiplicity both in sexuality and personality is acknowledged and endorsed. The disintegration of the notebook organization and their complete abandonment as distinct and separate unities are swept up in the final sections of the notebooks.

Interestingly, the final blue notebook begins over the issue of whether Anna wants to rent out her vacant room or not. She considers the possibility of not renting when she receives an offer from an American, whose communist leanings in the time of the McCarthy hearings have brought him to England. The mixture of fantasy and reality in this notebook and within this narrative of Saul Green living in Anna Wulf's flat, at just the time when her daughter Janet has left for boarding school, explodes the narrative by creating a flooding of words and episodes. Here with almost total abandon, Anna pursues her sexual desire floating "darkly on her love" where "she embraces the fullness of her experiences including, at last, all the roles she has denied
herself, venting passions that she has consistently denied herself in the past" (Draine, 84). Saul rescues her from her dryness (Ezergailis, 42). She allows herself jealous rages against Saul, as well as allowing Saul to taunt and tease her emotionally. Time restraints are abandoned. The reader is unaware of how long Saul stays, but more importantly when he disappears and reappears claiming to have worked for hours while Anna claims he has only been gone minutes, it is not clear who it is, Anna or Saul, who has an actual hold on reality. Just as Saul is portrayed by Anna as a multiple personality, evidence indicates that Anna, as well, slides from one personality to another. Anna and Saul act out repeatedly the dream of complicity's exchange of executioner and executed. As Anna gives Saul the golden notebook, it is not clear if he is simply her alter ego or another person entirely. When they exchange sentences it is not clear if Saul is anything more than the male part of Anna and that ultimately, Anna has allowed herself even that role. Such a reading of this notebook then spills over into the rest of the novel where its many doubles could be possible sides of Anna.

Certainly the narrative sweeps into what Draine calls a state of "saving schizophrenia" for readers as well as Anna. Deleuze & Guattari describe the schizophrenic as transexual. . . . He does not reduce two contraries to an identity of the same; he affirms their distance as that which relates the two as different. He does not confine himself within contradictions; on the contrary, he opens out and like a spore case inflated with spores, releases them as so many singularities (77).
There seems to be a diffusion of personalities, of sexual categories traversed here to the point at which Anna is unable to keep the conscious and unconscious material separated any longer. Jean Pickering points out that for Lessing madness is "an answer to the problems brought upon us by the patriarchal culture" (99). And in this way, as with the schizophrenic and the hysteric whose patterns Anna reflects in this final section, madness represents a strategy and a means of escape from damaging narratives. By the end of the novel there are at least two Annas, the one of "Free Women" and the one of the notebooks (Schweickart, 274), and yet the fragmenting structures of so many aborted fictions and absent narratives suggest that there are surely more than two. In a "desire to fracture confining structures," (Abel, 104) the work disrupts. Yet the many Annas of the notebooks, must exist along side one another with the Anna of "Free Women."

The oedipal structure of "Free Women" where Tommy actually blinds himself, enforcing a state of looking permanently "inwards on himself" (34), where Molly marries out of convenience rather than love, and where Anna Wulf turns from writing to do social work is posited and yet resisted with the notebook's Tommy who marries a young activist and the Anna who comes to write The Golden Notebook. So familiar are readers with the modern novel that casts ironic judgements on its characters and society and that presents its readers with either/or possibilities such as that which leads Tommy to feel caught between meaninglessness and suicide, the ending of "Free Women" fits almost too neatly here. In that tradition Tommy, Molly and Anna attempt to understand "the exact dimensions of the bed" they are fitting themselves into (666).
However, this ending in light of the enfolded ending which names Anna of the golden notebook as its author demands not only that its characters and its protagonists accommodate chaos as well as order, but that its readers likewise contend with several stories simultaneously. Drawing readers as it does back to the middle, the narrative movement is away from Brooks' understanding of reading for the end, away from the oedipus masterplot toward a discontinuous almost circular order.

The discussion in *Anti-Oedipus* concerning the schizophrenic movement of desire away from the binary system that represents life in a dualistic fashion centers around the rejection of those either/or positions so familiar to western culture and to oedipalization. Instead, the schizophrenic adopts an understanding of life that Deleuze and Guattari describe as the "schizophrenic 'either . . . or . . . or" [which] refers to the system of possible permutations between differences that amount to the same as they shift and slide about" (12). Here schizophrenics attempt to slip away from oppositional structures which control and drive desire underground and create positions between differences, in the middle of those oppositional positions, producing for themselves a broader range of positions, more commensurate with their experience. These movements too, like Lessing's novel, are away from the orgasmic ending, the explosion of pleasure and toward the continuation of desire.

Fishburn suggests that the multiple structure in Lessing's work represents a move to "restructure thinking itself" (9) down lines not previously explored and away from dualisms. Far from wanting to abandon narrative Anna recognizes the power of narrative to provide
shape and meaning. She understands from Mother Sugar that she can "rescue" order out of the chaos. With Janet, Anna creates the shape of her child's experiences by telling Janet the events of her day, with Janet making only occasional amendments to the story. When Janet challenges her mother with "Do I have to clean my teeth?" Anna responds with "of course, it's in the story" (Lessing, 363). As with the childhood game, Anna intends to keep all possible elements in mind as she moves from one to another. Or like Chinese boxes which envelope one another, no theory, no ideology, no story and no desire is not capable of being incorporated or subsumed by another even though all may at times be equally valid. According to DuPlessis, "the physical end of The Golden Notebook stands only to be eroded by the tidal rip of notebooks swelling around it, each of whose acts of containment are criticized by the presence of the others, for each constructs a reality that tries to exclude the others" (101). Speaking to Tommy at one point Anna explains how it is that women see people, especially their own children:

When a woman looks at a child she sees all the things he's been at the same time. When I look at Janet sometimes I see her as a small baby and I feel her inside my belly and I see her as various sizes of small girl, all at the same time. . . . That's how women see things. Everything in a sort of continuous stream—well isn't it natural we should? (269).

Similarly The Golden Notebook's quest for female desire must, like the structure in which such a quest enfolds itself, endorse no exclusive claims but produce and reproduce multiple ones. Desire, far from being singular or fixed as claimed under patriarchy, is fluid and ever moving here. The oedipal inscription of desire has, in fact, sent female
desire underground. Repeatedly Anna attempts to challenge the exclusivity of that confinement until she finally abandons it, abandons her fear of madness and claims for herself all those passions that have been denied or withheld from her. She can become then, an "endless body, without 'end,' without principal 'parts'; if she is a whole, it is a whole made up of parts that are wholes, not simple partial objects but varied entirety, moving and boundless change, a cosmos where eros never stops traveling, vast astral space" (Cixous & Clement, 87). In multiplicity, both Anna Wulf and the readers of The Golden Notebook, are swept along amidst various flows of desire, not toward endings, but toward new beginnings, new patterns and connections.
NOTES

1 The term refers to the schizophrenic technique articulated by Delueze and Guattari which attempts to pack the signifier, or the word with multiple connections.

2 Cixous and Clement suggest that a woman exists in a double bind of language, where any time she speaks at all she disrupts the social order. Her place is prescribed, like that of a child, to a marginal position where she is seen and not heard, however, should she attempt to speak for herself and out of the language of her own desire, here too, "she transgresses, her word almost always falls on the deaf, masculine ear, which can only hear language that speaks in the masculine" (92)
CHAPTER II
MORRISON AND NARRATIVE ARCHAEOLOGY

These rivers flow into no single, definitive sea. These streams are without fixed banks, this body without fixed boundaries. . . . All this remains very strange to anyone claiming to stand on solid ground (Irigaray, This Sex, 215).

While much of the literary criticism on Toni Morrison addresses her relationship to black identity, she is nonetheless a writer who speaks very startlingly to the issue of female desire. According to Elliot Butler-Evans however, the play of feminine desire in Morrison's fiction disrupts her "novel's focus on the struggle between authoritative and internally persuasive discourses" (70), creating ruptures within the textual structure, that though "subsumed by the larger mythology and the emphasis on form . . . are discordant chords that usually remain on the periphery of the text" (76). Yet these "ruptures," which Butler-Evans identifies, like those of any female writer, are generally created by problematizing and foregrounding transparent ideological assumptions. For Morrison, exposing ideology with respect to race and gender represents the exploration of conflicting minority discourses against which she backdrops that of the dominant white culture. Butler-Evans' assessment overlooks the fact that whenever a woman articulates her desire or whenever she attempts to narrate at all, her voice disrupts, that in speaking her own desire she cannot help but undercut existent discourses (Cixous, 1976, 888) since what is always forbidden her is to speak of her own pleasure (Irigaray, This Sex, 77).
Morrison's novels suggest female desire through their structural disruptions where they assume critical importance, rather than the peripheral place suggested by Butler-Evans. The entangled narrative threads circulate around issues of racial identity and female resistance, to construct a fabric of narrative desire which is fluid, multi-layered, saturated with contradiction, and reflected by the rich exposition of female desire within the works.

Speaking almost opposite to Butler-Evans, Cynthia Davis claims Morrison centers so much upon the African American experience that she fails, at least in her first four novels, to bring to life any full-fledged female hero ("Self, Society and Myth," 341-42). Indeed, Morrison's narratives do evade categories for her female characters including the heroic ones, not because she constitutes heroism exclusively in male terms, as Davis suggests, but because Morrison fails to incorporate terms like "hero" and "quest" which, imbued as these terms are in a context and a narrative understanding that is essentially white and male, are largely unsuitable to the female experience.

Elizabeth Ordenez has articulated three characteristics of the writing of ethnic women: their disruption of genre expectations; the displacement of "the central patriarchal text (that is, the Bible and other commonly accepted mythical constructs exerting power over women)," and their rewriting of a matrilineal tradition which involves "inversion or compensation" of the narratives of women (19). In this way female "heroism" is subverted or overdrawn in an enterprise meant to disrupt or displace traditional stories and story forms that
dominate women. While Pilate in *Song of Solomon* fails to articulate a matrilineal heritage as Davis points out, her function as part of a powerful female triumvirate is central to Milkman's story, where Milkman comes to embrace her feminine values over his father's patriarchal and capitalistic ones. However, Pilate's death is only a catalyst for Milkman because she is not a conventional hero. For of all Morrison's novels, *Song Of Solomon* is the most traditional in novelistic terms. However, as Davis further reveals, the constitution of heroism is generally lost amidst the profusion of characters, among whom Morrison develops multiple perspectives to show "the limitation of the individual view . . . [so that] the attempt to make one view into the myth, one person into the hero, is seen for the reductive act that it is. . . . [allowing] her to show a number of subjects as comments and variations on the central character" (336-337).

Further, Wolfgang Iser explains that "a novel without a hero . . . eliminates [the] hierarchical structure of perspectives. The main and minor characters all serve the same purpose, which is to evoke a multiplicity of referential systems in order to bring out the problematic nature of the norms selected . . . We have an echelon of references and perspectives none of which is predominant" (102). Thus, displacing or at least diffusing the notion of heroism allows the writer to dispense with a hierarchical structure, a structure that is more suitable to advancing the grip of patriarchy than serving the purposes of alternative discourses. Unlike Milkman who is a hero in the Dostoevskian sense, where, as a largely unlikeable character, he gains heroic stature through his coming to a greater understanding of
self and world. Despite the isolation and pain she endures in *Beloved*, Sethe maintains the same outlook on her act of murder throughout the novel where her response to Paul D.'s claim that she is her "own best thing" is the query, "Me?" (273). Nor is her pain entirely redemptive either in her eyes or in the eyes of readers. Rather, readers come to understand Sethe's act of murder as embedded in the history of slavery, an action induced from the limited options and ideology available to slaves. Because her behavior is riddled with duplicity and haunted by the past, Sethe's stature is marked, but not determined, by her ability to survive. Here heroism is constructed around the tentative and questionable response, "Me?" Like the last chapter of the novel which flushes across the story of the couple's reunion with the story that should not be passed on, any assertion of heroism is as ephemeral as the ghost's footsteps along the creek bank.

Disruptions of novelistic form are in fact further demonstrated by other narrative strategies which place the notion of unified thematics in dispute. Terdiman's discussion suggests that, in the nineteenth century, counter-discursive strategies set about to overtake or subsume dominant discourse (57), basically the replacement of one discourse with another. Such a project is not indicative of female resistance discourse; rather, a myriad of alternative discourses disrupt and contend with one another, all seeming to provide equal force and seductiveness. Similarly, Morrison infuses her narratives with so many disjunctures that, rather than producing a singular counter-discourse or point of view, or unified theme, she illuminates the presumptuousness of the insistence upon exclusive claims, a strategy
which sufficiently weakens domination and exclusivity, but does not entirely eliminate the validity of any perspective. The discordant chords of female desire are a metaphor for discourse which accommodates contradiction and celebrates an ensemble of narrative voices, viewpoints, and visions across the entire text, often producing disharmonious effects. "You only escape dualisms effectively by shifting them like a load, . . . [finding] between the terms, whether they are two or more, a narrow gorge like a border or a frontier which will turn the set into a multiplicity" (Deleuze & Parnet, 132).

Morrison disrupts through her creation of gaps in which she reconceptualizes difference not "as an inverted image or double, but as alterity, multiplicity, heterogeneity" (Feral, 91). Here discourse is broken apart to expose the forbidden, the unspoken, the unnamed, breaking "the back of words" (Beloved, 261).

One method Morrison employs for delivering a multiple understanding that displaces the exclusive claims made by discourse is through presenting a traditionally authoritative narrative voice and then disrupting it. As early as The Bluest Eye, a classical narrative voice—narrated in first person and identified as one of the characters of the novel, Claudia MacTeer—mimes a storytelling situation in which the omniscient narrator flits from perspective to perspective delineating the dispositions and thoughts of each of the principle characters who ultimately, willingly or unwillingly, partake in the demise of Pecola Breedlove, the girl for whom the marigolds are planted. While Claudia is the matured adult looking back on the circumstances of her childhood, her access to information is far more extensive than the
limiting first person point of view usually allows. The older Claudia knows the details of Soaphead Church's letter to God, as well as the intimate play of rage and cowardice between Cholly and Pauline Breedlove. She searingly portrays Pecola's illusory retreat into invisibility as she watches her parents battle one another. The narrator even knows the ways that whole groups of people behave and to what extent they interact with and fail to interact with the hosts of other groups in the community.

Far from being a third person-limited narrator, who is ultimately confined by the realistic perceptions of individual motivation, Claudia's narration is most familiarly an omniscient one, seen from the perspective of each principle player designated by each section. As Claudia searches around the multiple characters and events which converge to create Pecola's desire, she is propelled by an inextinguishable thirst to tell the circumstances that led to the demise of that desire to have blue eyes—the denial of Pecola's blackness in exchange for the acceptability she imagines will replace it. In the section that fills in Pauline's past, there are not only many things about Pauline that the narrator knows, but things about the entire environment that the narrator is able to explain. To begin with, the narrator's proverbial voice relates, "to find out the truth about how dreams die one should never take the word of the dreamer" (86). Following the depiction of Pauline's early marriage, and the loss of her first tooth, the same narrator surmises that in that young and growing Ohio town whose side streets, even, were paved with concrete, which sat on the edge of a calm blue lake, which boasted an affinity with Oberlin, the underground railroad
station, just thirteen miles away, this melting pot on the lip of America facing the cold but receptive Canada—What could go wrong?" (90).

Later, in another section, the narrator characterizes the disposition of an entire group of women populating any black community anywhere who sing second soprano in the choir, and although their voices are clear and steady, they are never picked to solo. They are in the second row, white blouses starched, blue skirts almost purple from ironing. They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding hearts: how to behave (64).

In this passage, Morrison appears to be evoking an authoritative narration similar to that of oral narrative where the narrator is "gifted . . . with the ability to observe an action from every side and to tell the secrets of men's hearts" (Scholes, 51). Clearly, Morrison's narrator functions to recreate what most critics identify as contemporary myth. By assuming an authoritative stance vis a vis her material, Morrison's narrator is the community historian, the voice of the whole community.

Revealing the buried layers of community construction, the storyteller projects rather than declares a set of motives and opinions which appear probable with respect to the people living there. The storyteller conjures up the motivation and ruminations of the characters, characters who are not characters in the novelistic sense, not individuals, but almost stock characters whose appearance in the narrative drives the action toward the illumination of the story's point, rather than the depiction of any individual's illumination or
lack thereof. Morrison's dramatic stylizing works to create
generalizations about particular groups and to relate history in a more
communal, if perhaps, historicist fashion: "There was once a
neighborhood" (Sula, 3); or "124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom"
(Beloved, 3); or finally

The soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it
will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land
kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no
right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter.
It's too late (The Bluest Eye, 164).

These formulaic patterns frame the story, placing individuals within a
larger context that is redundant and representative. Such a form lends
itself more explicitly to the exploration of values because it encloses
the individual's story within the story of the teller's audience making
the individual story inform that first level narration.

Walter Benjamin describes the function and persona of the classic
storyteller,—a secularized chronicler—as one whose voice extends back
"prior to all literature." His or her story is drawn from the
storyteller's own experience or "that reported by others" and thus
carries the weight of an authority deeper and more immediate than that
of the writer. Here, "the most extraordinary things, marvelous things
are related with the greatest accuracy . . . [and] it is left up to
[the listener] to interpret things the way he understands them, and
thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks" (83-
109). This amplitude, in terms of theme and plot, distinguishes
Morrison's work (Otten, 9) and to a large degree earmarks her
narratives as myth-making. However, it also permits the second level
narrative to permeate the surface of the frame itself thus spilling
into the story of the constructed storyteller and that constructed storytelling audience. Thus readers, simulating the storytelling audience, are implicated in the task of incorporating the stories within their own lives.

What informs her technique is a sincere respect for the function of the storytelling and a deep appreciation for the power of narrative to order, shape and motivate the actions of whole groups of individuals, "a debt that any black writer has to oral tradition" (Fabre, 108). As with the epic narrator, whose tradition, like that of the African American community is largely oral, the field of individual exploration extends across the entire culture of the first level narrative. What is at stake is that culture's survival and belief system. Indeed Sula is the story of an entire community and, as such, represents epic rather than novelistic tradition. Morrison's ability to relate an appropriate narrative or myth under which a community constitutes itself (such as the scapegoat myth in Sula), or proceeds with a certain kind of action (such as the isolating of Baby Suggs and Sethe after the celebration-of-freedom feast in Beloved), is established by this narrating voice, thus allowing for a greater latitude and authority from which to create an analogous relationship between one level and another that measures societal currents, validating any and all claims, but avoiding for her novel any final resolution since the story of the frame remains untold. Readers never observe the direct relationship of the inner story to that frame, but because of the tradition under which it constructs itself, readers must imply the connection for themselves. In this way, the narrator's chronicle is not interested in
"an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with the ways these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world" with gradations of color and shading (W. Benjamin, 95-96) which touch and reflect the storytelling audience's story.

Both Davis and Butler-Evans believe Morrison is attempting to create more viable mythologies for African-Americans and women. While her project simulates the mythic teller-audience relationship, it is not an attempt to construct a new myth. The rhetoric, global and stylized, imitates oral narrative, but it is not oral. Here, rather the "written narrative consists rhetorically of the imitation or representation, of a teller, his story, and an implied audience... [permitting the] narrative artist to add an important level of complexity and of potential irony to his story" (Scholes, 53). There is no real storyteller except the one constructed by Morrison. Certainly, the development of this oral storyteller drives the narrative forward, yet this constructed voice is only part of a larger, more diverse whole. In the larger narrative the potential for irony is exploited so that the narrator's vision is simultaneously authorized and questioned, positing a self-conscious narrator and a profusion of stories, rather than a singularly reified one.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the narrator is displaced in two ways: first by the suggestion of myths at the margins of the novel. The American myth of family, represented by the dick-and-jane narrative infiltrating each section of the novel, and the Hollywood myth of love alluded to throughout, spill over and around those personal myths assembled by the narrator. They converge upon and inform Pecola's ideal of Shirley
Temple and Maryjane. Pauline's seduction by the Hollywood movies underscores her emotional abandonment of her children. The power of these formative narratives can not be underrated in terms of the culture which produced them, nor the novel that reproduces them. Their fragmented insertion into each section of the novel forms an infrastructure from which the narrator's story clings as it "deconstructs" its desire (Butler-Evans, 68). The reified narratives of the American family--permanently the object of the Look ("See Jane. . . See Mother. . . See Father. . . Look, look") (Davis, 328)--underpins all relations within the novel. Morrison demonstrates that human beings are "a product of the symbolic order as much as the symbolic order is a product of the human" (Campbell, 21). The running together of words and sentences embodies the indiscriminate quality of this narrative's incorporation into the fabric of the lives of the members of American culture. This valorization creates disjunctures for those members of society whose reality in no way resembles this narrative, thus producing confusion and shame in Pecola; resentment and indifferent anger in Claudia; and self-deception and coldness in Geraldine. The inclusion of multiple viewpoints, shifts in character perspectives (from Pauline's to Cholly's to Claudia's, etc.), the splitting of the fictitious reader's perspective (from that of simulated storyteller audience to receiver of American myth or Pauline's story), and that of the narrator's (life as a child to philosophical teller) "enables certain given and expected evaluations to be transformed into a background against which the reader is made to produce new criteria for judging the events and their significance"
(Iser, 204-25). The novel then presupposes a very active audience in which readers are continuously modifying and questioning the norms and the reception of those norms by themselves as well as by the characters. In the novels following this one, Morrison will only allude to the reified narratives which a larger, dominant white culture holds over its black population suggesting by omission and absence their sustaining power as well as the potential for resistance to them. In this way, cultural myths, private myths, whether stated or not, are foregrounded along with the narrator's stories.

This is not so much the ringing endorsement of myth Davis claims for Morrison or the quest for a myth broad enough to incorporate African-American reality (Davis, 323), but a presentation of the shifting, baroque variations that dance around any single mythic narrative. By mimicking—through the jumble of words and punctuation—the standard structures by which dominant culture's white middle class understands reality, the oedipal theme is reconstructed by various voices exploring and reconstituting the melody; these narrative variations successively challenge and illuminate one another in a dialogue which "creates as it questions the narrative and designates the field of force" (Brooks, 284) around which the stories collect.

More precisely, Morrison uses myth to challenge the dichotomized understanding of it. In myth, good and evil are oppositional. In Sula, good and evil exist simultaneously fused. Sula's intention to make Chicken Little happy costs his life. Living is a risky business in Morrison's fiction where there are no stable formulas that insure characters against catastrophe. Watching Chicken Little fly to his
death, Nel discovers her own secret delight in his drowning, even though she had never before wished him any harm. As Sula points out at the end of the novel, no one can be sure about who is good and who is evil. By diffusing the boundaries of good and evil, loss and gain, Morrison breaks open the diametric opposition inherent in the terms and in the mythologies that exalt those terms. For in traditional myth, evil is as clear as are the characters' choices. While god-inflicted agonies occur, and the hero is consigned to do what it is he does not wish to do, there are rewards for upright behavior. The moral fabric is clear and sharp, even when the gods are vengeful. Sacrifices of one's children are not lightly made and only in exchange for a larger purpose, with the resulting consequences mitigated by that specified moral framework. If Agamemnon slays his daughter, the furies are not satisfied until restitution is made. Morrison's moral framework is much more tenacious and peculiar to a full range of character and situational possibilities. For instance, characters like Soaphead Church or Geraldine in The Bluest Eye garner little sympathy from the constructed narrator who portrays their adoption of whiteness and white oppression as clearly flawed, yet their actions fall within the framework of their sense of reality. Characters are not diabolical--even Soaphead's molestation of little girls is comprehended through his own self-indulgent blindness. Clearly, too, their personal myths are viewed within a context of physical and social oppression so that the moral framework registers the scrutiny of those valorized structures under which characters and communities operate. Unlike Oedipus who does the unforgivable, unwittingly, these characters do it knowingly
but under faulty assumptions, paying tribute to false gods, and, in the case of Soaphead and Cholly, for well-intentioned reasons.

The very positing of more than one version of a story is "to question [its] origin and indeed to displace the whole question of origins, to suggest a kind of referentiality, in that all tales may lead back not so much to events as to other tales, to man as a structure of the fictions he tells himself" (Brooks, 277). This enfolding of story into story collapses the dichotomized notion of good and evil, and foregrounds the problematic nature of societal and personal mythologies.

The narration, because it is occurring on at least two levels with a constructed tale and constructed storytelling situation, evolves as duplicitous and self-referential, making readers aware of the process of assembling meaning through the continual shifting, selecting and discarding of norms. The internal narrative becomes a kind of gestalt, with shifting foreground and background images with the result that readers are conscious about how characters, and by extension, readers, assemble meaning, creating a level of receptiveness to the textual situations not formerly available to them (Iser, 134).

Ordonez explains that ethnic women writers "have overlapped and mixed up their discourse in order to make history more real and fiction more desirable from their point of view" ("Narrative texts," 20). For, to remix conventional myth creating dialogue within the novel itself, where myth, disassembled andreassembled, may constitute a recreation of itself, is necessarily to create a more provisional text, one that
then spills into the storyteller's construction process, to disrupt as well as validate that construction.

The second way the "constructed" nature of the storyteller is revealed and disrupted is through Morrison's digression into first person narrative at crucial places, abandoning the authoritative narrative voice. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline is the only other character besides the narrator who addresses the audience with her own story. Pauline's first person narrative chronicles the movement from girlhood into womanhood, a mirror narrative of the second level text concerned with Pauline's daughter, Pecola, whose onset of menses sends Claudia and Frieda into frantic and comic action and ultimately concludes the novel with the loss of Pecola's baby and her selfhood. In Pauline's section, beginning with "SEEMOTHERMOTHERISVERYNICEMOTHERWILLPLAYWITHJANE- MOTHERLAUGHS. . ." (*The Bluest Eye*, 86), she testifies to her deepest fantasies, her initial enchantment with Cholly, social isolation, dissolution of her marriage, and finally, the recollection of sexual desire as a flow of color and fluidity before its ultimate loss:

I begin to feel those little bits of color floating up into me--deep in me. That streak of green from in the june-bug light, the purple from the berries trickling along my thighs, Mama's lemonade yellow runs sweet in me. Then I feel like I'm laughing between my legs, and the language gets all mixed up with the colors, and I'm afraid I'll come, and afraid I won't. But I know I will. And I do. And it be rainbow all inside. And it lasts and lasts and lasts. And I want to thank him, but I don't know how . . . But it ain't like that anymore. Most times he's thrashing away inside before I'm woke, and through when I am (01-02).
Just as the point of view shifts here to permit Pauline to articulate her own story and desire, so Sula moves from its external focalized point of view momentarily, as Nel Greene speaks following the discovery of her husband's infidelity with Sula: "What am I supposed to do with these old thighs now . . . . They will never give me the peace I need to get from sunup to sundown . . . . with never nobody settling down between my legs" (111). Later in the novel, Sula's desire is marked by another first person narrative juxtaposed with the description of Sula and Ajax's lovemaking:

If I take a chamois and rub real hard on the bone, right on the ledge of your cheek bone, some of the black will disappear. It will flake away into the chamois and underneath there will be gold leaf, . . . . and scrape away at the gold, it will fall away and there will be alabaster . . . . I can take a chisel and small tap hammer and tap away at the alabaster. It will crack then like ice under the pick, and through the breaks I will see the loam, fertile, free of pebbles and twigs . . . . I will put my hand deep into your soil . . . . I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist (130).

The positioning of the shifting point of view between Sula and the narrator's depiction of the lovemaking simulates the rhythmic flow of the couple's sexual intercourse. Here again, sexual desire is associated with color, precious metal, and represented by a layered and ever deepening movement under Ajax's skin. As Butler-Evans maintains, it represents a rupture of textual momentum; however, it also advances the deepening awareness of female desire flowing simultaneously with the excess of narrative being formed and counterpointed throughout. This representation of desire as mining for the rich and fertile soul of the lover mirrors the novel's construction of layer upon layer of precious narrative experience. As in The Bluest Eye where the
narrator's narrative desire to tell Pecola's story is reflected in Pauline's sexual awakening with Cholly, *Sula*'s textual desire is represented through *Sula*'s multilayered experience of sexual desire reflecting the "piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitute the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings" (W. Benjamin, 93). In a sense the construction of *Sula* in chronicle style allows for the systematic layering of events one on top of another, an archeology of stories. The past unfolds as a contiguous set of stories, which touch one another, occasionally overlapping, but remaining separate. The steady accumulation of losses propel the novel: Shadrack's loss of self; Plum's, Hannah's, Chicken Little's deaths; the disappearance of Jude Greene and then Ajax; each has meaning in and of itself but when layered among the others creates breadth and density across the larger landscape, giving the novel that same sense of bottomlessness and toplessness which underscores Nel's circles of grief at the end of the novel.

There are particles of narrative that give body and resonance to the tale, which appear as "relics" (W. Benjamin, 108) of another time or another teller, simulated by Morrison to allow the story to reverberate with various historical contexts and embeddings. Likewise Fabre suggest that the novel's archaeology represents "a repository of secrets, . . . the epitome of all narrative" (113). One such narrative relic is represented in the story of the three young boys taken in by Eva, each of whom she names "Dewey." This fragment has a tangled symbolic purpose: three black males, collectively known as the deweys,
all of whom come to resemble one another, all of whom are small, ageless, never really men. No one, not even Eva, can tell them apart and no one really ever needs to since, lingering as they do in their story's incompletion, their presence provides only a smattering of potential meaning that may or may not be assembled by the reader. If nothing else, the reference calls up a larger purpose, one of mystery, half-truths, half-understandings, half-significance. The story of the deweys might refer to an idea of trinity, or mirror the female triumvirate of the Peace household, or represent the truncated potential of the African-American community, or perhaps it simply underscores the importance and responsibility of naming. It is just the sort of element that lingers on in traditional tales, and it calls up its larger context and relevance. Like female desire, these stories defy convention, puzzling readers with the suggestion of absence and the intrusion of excess. In this way, Morrison's narrative is rich and fecund, spawning other narratives from itself, reproductive, rather than productive.

In *Beloved*, Morrison further spotlights the potentials of female desire with the movement into first person point of view at the literal center of the novel among the three major female characters: Sethe, Beloved, and Denver. In each instance the narratives overlap and echo the others. The middle section of the novel begins with "124 was loud" (*Beloved*, 169) as Stamp goes to make amends to Sethe for revealing her secret to Paul D. Stamp is struck by the flood of voices coming from 124, so that "although he couldn't cipher but one word, he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked
blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons. What a roaring" (181). Even without the dedication which reads, "Sixty million and more," the reference is clearly to the victims of the institution of slavery or those sixty million and more who died before ever reaching the new world as slaves (Clemons, 75). In this way, Stamp "reads" the voices, identifying them not solely with Sethe's past acts, but with the entire history of American slavery which reverberates in the lives of all those who lived or inherited its terrible reality. At this point, the novel increases its amplitude and the narration itself attains a choral quality in its textual constitution. It is significant too that while Stamp hears the voices, he is unable to distinguish the words, all voices interrupting and contending as they are with one another.

What ensues following this introduction to the voices, then, are richly repetitive and fragmented narratives representing the desire for diffusion and symbiosis of the three women of 124. This overlap of desire, of the fusing of mother, daughters, and sisters, calls into question not only the notion of identity but all oedipalized perceptions concerning women's relations with the mother and with other women, that which "has been singularly neglected, barely touched on, in the theory of the unconscious" (Irigaray, This Sex, 124). More than simply left out of discourse, relations among women reflect that "woman is disgusted by woman and fears her" (Cixous & Clement, 68).

Four sections, in first person narrative, reveal a radical exposition of women-love. The fourth section is reminiscent of the dissociated dialogue in The Bluest Eye where Pecola's split self is
dramatized, but also reflects merging and dialogue of all three female voices, so that, like Stamp, the reader is unable to distinguish completely which of the three women is speaking at any one time. The exposition of details is fluid, effused, and chant-like. Not surprisingly, these sections revolve around images of milk, blood, water, colors, and memory. They are chants specifically addressing and dialoguing with one another. As stated earlier, the novel that sets up an internal dialogue with itself puts into question all discourse, not only that of itself, but that of all the institutions it mimics. In this way, the dialogism as "an exploration of the body, dreams, and language . . . exteriorizes political and ideological conflicts of the moment" (Kristeva, 83). This particular series of chapters breaches the narrative continuity of the novel, by exposing the deep psychic desire that drives the novel. These sections dialogue with the rest of the novel, alluding to earlier narratives, reconstructing other narratives throughout the novel--the story of Beloved's death and Denver's birth--reflecting the desire for symbiosis like that of the mother and child, and for the connection to the fractured and truncated narrative, like that of the lost slaves. Beloved's close association with the lost slaves makes the personal arena the site of political struggle. Here political action is always personal.

These sections punctuate the swift flow of desire from mother and daughters, constructing with fragments of narrative the impressionistic relics of lost stories about "men without skin," about dying and vacant
faces. Beloved narrates a litany of pain and endurance where

I cannot find my man the one whose teeth I have loved a hot thing the hill of dead people a hot thing the men without skin push them through with poles the woman is there with the face I want the face that is mine they fall into the sea which is the color of the bread she has nothing in her ears if I had the teeth of the man who died on my face I would bite the circle around her neck bite it away I know she does not like it now there is room to crouch and to watch the crouching others it is the crouching that is now always now inside the woman with my face is in the sea a hot thing (211).

Here are fragments of narrative picked up and at least hinted at in other sections—the father with sharp white teeth, the mother with the ring around her throat from the metal collar, the crowded slave ship where there was not even enough room to fall to one's death. Characterizing the dialogism of Menippean discourse, Kristeva calls it "a festival of cruelty, but also a political act . . . [constructing] itself as a hierglyph, all the while remaining a spectacle . . . a plurality of linguistic elements in dialogical relationships" (Kristeva, 84-85). With the first person narrative, Morrison calls up a spectacle of death and broken bodies, lavish settings of sea and field, colors and faces which break in on and explode the narration from the other parts of the novel. This narrative violence, in bits of speech and broken images, reflects a fabric of severed narrative threads which dramatize and foreground the cruelty experienced by all those who, like Beloved, have been cut off from their desire to connect with their pasts. All the narrative fragments flow and bleed into one another. For instance Sethe links her mother's death with the suffering women of her present community who are forced to smile as
they work in the pig yard after the men get off:

She had the bit so many times she smiled. When she wasn't smiling
she smiled, and I never saw her own smile...They said it was
the bit that made her smile when she didn't want to. Like the
Saturday girls working in the slaughterhouse yard. When I came out
of jail I saw them plain. They came when the shift changed on
Saturday when the men got paid and worked behind the fences, back
of the outhouse. Some worked standing up, leaning on the toolhouse
door. They gave some of their nickels and dimes to the foreman as
they left but by then their smiles was over. (203)

A paragraph later, she connects them to herself with "I got close. I
got close. To being a Saturday girl" (204).

With these monologues, and even in their choral arrangement in the
fourth section, voices always join together, even repeat and duplicate
one another. The narratives of the living and the dead, broken and
fragmented, interact with one another.

Sethe's narrative begins with the recollection of her lost mother,
then relates the details surrounding the murder of Beloved. Sethe
equates the loss of color (and perhaps the loss of desire as well) with
the death of Baby Suggs--"her pinkish headstone was the last color I
recall"(201), sometime following the murder. Beloved's return
instigates Sethe's "lookout" for color again. Earlier maternal-infant
separation is reflected when Sethe explains to Paul D. that because she
never had a mother and, lacking any women companions at Sweet Home, she
was unable to know exactly what it was that she needed to do (160) for
her children.

Similarly this same refrain of separation is picked up again in the
Beloved's highly fragmented and dissociated section. Here, punctuation
is abandoned, sentences rarely capitalized and without periods. "I am
Beloved and she is mine" begins the third section of first person
narrative. Beloved continues with "I am not separate from her there
is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in
the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing"
(210) and later "I cannot lose her again" (212) and finally, "I come
out of blue water after the bottoms of my feet swim away from me I
come up I need to find a place to be . . . she is my face smiling at
me doing it at last a hot thing now we can join a hot thing"
(213). The repetition of "a hot thing" and the imagery of birth, which
similarly calls up the narrative of Denver's birth, saturate this
section with the force of desire for joining the mother. The fragments
and particles of speech along with the breaks of spaces between
fragments is highly impressionistic and characteristic of both
Morrison's use of absence and layering seemingly to provide, between
the words, a space for what is not said, narratives never articulated,
like those of the slaves.

These passages reverberate with the entire history of slavery and
the inscription of slaves--slave bodies and stories--within the
discourse and narratives of white men. This master/slave economy is
contained by the discourse of the slave master who, not coincidentally,
is represented as a schoolteacher. Schoolteacher takes a careful
measuring of his slaves' "human" and "animal" characteristics. It is
this inscription which most bothers Sethe and motivates her act of
destroying her children before they can be reappropriated by
schoolteacher. Outwitted in a verbal exchange with Sixo, schoolteacher,
beats him to show that "definitions belong to the definers--not the
defined" (190). The master/slave economy is always oppressive as Baby
Suggs points out that even Mr. Garner's bargain with Halle to free her netted Garner a second generation of slaves and was far from the magnanimous act others perceived it to be. Here both the male and the female are inscribed into a system of oppression in which their sole measure is procreative and designated by the master.

In light of such oedipalization, Sethe's act to destroy her children is the underside of an economy in which the child functions to validate the existence of the mother. It is in this act of taking her children away from schoolteacher that Sethe attempts to become an inscriber of her own children by setting her mark upon them. The female abundance that characterizes the time before the murder, the time in the clearing with Baby Suggs, the food, the women friends, enough milk for two babies, the twenty-eight days before the flow of blood, has been eliminated in the household and replaced by deprivation. Jessica Benjamin notes that in the master/slave economy "male rationality and individuality are culturally hegemonic while the traditionally female unboundedness and submission are denied and repressed" (63). The arena of struggle charted out in this novel, and punctuated by the first person narratives, is one of mother and daughters, all deprived of their mothers through some act of violence, prevented from the free flow of desire to unite. Sethe becomes further inscribed in that economy and circumscribed by death and deprivation which are its inevitable end (J. Benjamin, 292) despite her attempt to escape it.
In this way, the appropriation of women as breeders and the repudiation of the fluid female economy underscores all the violence of the novel. Sethe, like Beloved, has been denied the nursing of her mother: "There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left" (200). The most troubling part of the beating she receives at the hands of schoolteacher's nephews is that they take the milk meant for Beloved from her breasts, an indication of the way male economy appropriates women to their own use and prevents the relationship of women to one another. Women are motherless daughters whose desire to blend with the other is thwarted by their masters.

Not insignificantly placed, the first person narrative of Denver intervenes between this first and third section. Denver's narrative begins with "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk" (205). Similar to her mother's and sister's testimonials, Denver represents her desire as mixing with that of another's. Denver shares the milk of her mother with her sister and as with Beloved, Denver feels her mother is essentially lost to her, because "there sure is something in her that makes it all right to kill her own. All the time, I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again" (205).

By taking in her sister's blood right along with her mother's milk, Denver and Beloved share a blood-deep connection which is enhanced when the ghost-baby first comes to 124 to play with Denver. Beloved's birth imagery in the third section calls to mind, not Beloved's birth, but
that of Denver. In the end of Denver's narrative she too pronounces "She's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (209). However, it is Denver in the course of the novel, who comes to separate both from Beloved and her mother, to become part of the community of women. It is Denver who initiates the actions which will eventually wrest her mother from the past that diminishes and threatens to destroy her.

The mitigating factor for Denver in leaving 124 is her memory of Baby Suggs. Clearly, Baby Suggs is the major figure of female economy and desire. The environment created by Baby Suggs within the community stands in marked contrast to that of the outside world. The master/slave economy, like western culture in general, emphasizes "difference over sameness, boundaries over continuity, polarity and opposition over mutuality and interdependence" (J. Benjamin, 295). However, Baby Suggs represents the intuitive and nurturing values that create, not difference, but community, even though her nurturing abundance—a miraculous multiplication-of-loaves-and-fishes experience—leaves her family vulnerable to schoolteacher's attack. Baby is the figure around whom the community of women is formed, a person who "makes things [food, forgiveness, love] circulate without inscribing them" (Cixous & Clement, 37).

In this second section, Denver remembers Baby Suggs' words and stories. As a child born on the waterway to freedom, she has no first hand experience of the slave world. Nonetheless, Denver attempts to place her own story along side that history through the mediation of her grandmother. Speaking of Baby Suggs who had seven children, all by
different fathers, Denver relates

Colored people and white people both look down on her for that. Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. Still, they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down. She said for me not to listen to all that. That I should always listen to my body and love it (Beloved, 209).

Here, Denver draws for herself the connection between what she has learned of her family history in order to order her own experience. Recalling Baby Suggs' interdiction not to forget her own body, Denver goes to Lady Jones for help in preventing the starvation of herself, Sethe and Beloved. Bearing the lessons and words of Baby Suggs, Denver enters the community of women whose trail of "paper scraps" is emblematic of the fragments of food and care contributed to the women of 124. In the early part of the novel, readers learn the story of Sethe's escape from Sweet Home and Denver's birth along the river bank, with the assistance of another female traveller, Amy Denver, the white girl for whom Denver is named. Although Denver is impatient with stories that do not include herself, she is nonetheless the character around whom the synthesis of past, present, and future, dream and reality, take place. Denver, unlike Beloved and her two brothers, is not physically marked by her mother's violent act, and as a free person and survivor she is the rightful inheritor of slavery, the one who must interpret its relationship to herself. Her perspective is the one that finally retrieves Sethe and herself from the vengeful past of Beloved and brings her mother once more into the presence of women friends. "It was the word 'baby,' said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman" (248). Joining Lady
Jones and the community of women is precipitated here both literally and figuratively through the connection with Baby Suggs. In this way, Denver enters womanhood, able to nurture and rescue her mother.

A fourth section, a revolving dialogue of all three women's voices, begins from Beloved's perspective repeating the opening of section three with "I am Beloved and she is mine" (214). The birth imagery is particularly pronounced as this voice reveals that "Sethe went into the sea... I wanted to join. I tried to join, but she went up into pieces of light at the top of the water... I will not lose her again. She is mine" (214). Since no narrative exists in the novel about Beloved's birth, the crouching, the place by the bridge are all associated with Denver's birth and, more abstractly, with the journey into slavery of the sixty million and more. The section goes on to further blend the three women's stories with one another into a multivocal dialogue: "Beloved/ You are my sister/ You are my daughter/ You are my face; you are me/ I have found you again; you have come back to me/ You are my Beloved/ You are mine/ You are mine/ You are mine" (216). Because Beloved is the representative of all those lost to slavery, just as her mother and Denver represent its survivors, the dramatic dialogue blends voices, repeating and vitalizing one another to become discontinuous, fluid and diffused, a chorus propelled by the desire to blend, to spill into the same current, similar to Sula's image of two throats (perhaps three, here) and one eye. The celebration then of the fused desire of the women stands in marked contrast to the desire of oedipalization which characterizes the slave world.
Together the four sections of first person point of view narration, appearing as they do in the middle section of the novel, are the literal core of the novel. Not only is female desire represented as fluid and effusive here, but the narrative itself rushes over the multiple flows so that stories intertwine with that of African-American history, and that of female desire, since "not to need permission for desire--well now, that was freedom" (Beloved, 162). The images of fluidity are appropriate here as the narrations swell, ebb and flow, "a turbulent compound of flying colors, leafy spaces, and rivers flowing to the sea we feed" characteristic of the female text (Cixous & Clement, 88-89). The diffusion of selves signifies the blending and mixing of the stories of many other characters throughout the novel like Stamp, Baby Suggs, Eva, the Bodwins, and the victims of slavery whose voices are only articulated in the stream of indecipherable noise behind the walls of 124.

Following these sections, the novel returns to the third person narration and not coincidentally to Paul D.'s story. Paul D., who finally comes to terms with Sethe's act of murder, reveals that "he wants to put his story next to [Sethe's]" (273). Once again narrative is expressed as layering, where one story is tangent and co-ordinate to another. In this next to final section of the book, Paul D. remembers Sixo's words about the Thirty-Mile Woman that "She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order" and it is then that Paul D. tells Sethe "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (273). It is a proposal to lay their stories and their abused, inscribed bodies along
side one another to build a future from the streams of their intersecting pasts. Like the multiplots and voices of the novel, overlapping and intersecting, the future of the characters of Beloved will be constructed from the piecing together of stories, laying them beside one another.

"Finding those provisional, tenuous plots that appear to capture the force of desire that cannot speak its name but compels us in a movement—recursive, complex, unclosed—toward meaning" (Brooks, Reading, 285) makes life narratable. The narratives that take up the narratability of female desire may in fact demand a less direct line of plot and compel the disruption of former narratives in order to assemble a plot at all. Like Sixo's Thirty-Mile woman, Morrison's novel gathers up and orders what appears to be the bits and pieces of character and story. For a female, "to write is always to make allowances for superabundance and usefulness while slashing the exchange value that keeps the spoken word on its track" (Cixous & Clement, 93). As a strategy for disrupting and displacing language through the excess of narrative, the shift of point of view in these instances gives the narration over to the female character to tell her own story, to underscore her desire, a desire that has been given no name in language and no place in dominant discourse. In this way, Morrison not only infuses the field with a plethora of replacement narratives that threaten to be similarly reified if not for the counterpoint of other narratives, but she provides a singular voice to be raised, to be articulated, and validated against the narrator's collective one.
In these final sections, Morrison captures a stream of passion from the viewpoint of the female characters which has remained repressed in western discourse against the valorization of individuation and individualism. However, this multivocal flow of desire cracks open the power of love to rob and destroy the other just as it revels in the exuberance of such love. In The Bluest Eye, Morrison states that love is only as good as the lover and that "there is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye" (163). Since it is the idea of love that has been the locus of struggle by women for their desire, it is not surprising to see it problematized here in feminist fiction. It is in love that women's bodies have been most "colonized" by men, (Cixous & Clement, 66-67). Further, with maternity, women double their exchange value in society, where their bodies are again appropriated when they reproduce children in the name of the father (Irigaray, This Sex, 174-176), or as in this novel, under the names of their masters.3

As with Latin American writers, fantastic elements appear in Morrison's first novel in the dream imagery of Pecola and her ultimate dissociation from reality. While Morrison will later go on to utilize fantastic events and myths in ways more integral to the plot, in this novel Pauline and Pecola's dreamlife is implemented not only to present motivation and the theme of desire but also as a means for jarring the allusion of realism which realistic texts aspire to. Because desire for African-Americans and women has been neutralized by patriarchy, any challenge to the act of reality construction can be accomplished
through the infusion of elements which are also marginalized within fiction. The insinuation of the realistic frame with dreams and fantasies sweeping over and around the major narrative line wash it clean of the pretensions to fact. Reality, like fiction, is literally a construction, but a construction of great density in which the empirical world is only a small part of what humans experience. What Morrison creates and what the fantastic somehow infuses into "realistic" texts is a quality that defies gravity, flies in the face of empirical beliefs, the "border or frontier phenomena ready to crossover to one side or the other" (Deleuze & Guattari, 126), defying boundaries and rules, insisting upon magic and wonder despite their exclusion from conventional constructs of reality. "To fly/steal is woman's gesture, to steal into language and to make it fly...[taking] pleasure in scrambling spacial order, disorienting it, moving furniture, things, and values around, breaking in, emptying structures, turning the selfsame, the proper upside down" (Cixous & Clement, 96).

The fantastic as a strategy plays at "the systematic illustration of something that runs opposite to the Real. An Imaginary calculated according to the orderly displacements of proportions of the real world" (Clement, 23). 4 Morrison's brand of magic realism is realism with the imagination present, and not simply the psychoanalytic imagination, but the unpredictable, semiotic imagination which, like Sula's, can render a child mesmerized by curiosity at the sight of her own mother burning to death. It is the exclusion of these aspects of human personality, the disinterested stare, the flood of irresponsible human emotions spilling from experience that is on some level beyond
explanations; behavior, such as killing your child in order to save her, which, in psychoanalytic terms is explainable, remains relatively incomprehensible unless one just understands such things, as Sethe thinks when Paul D. confronts her:

Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off--she could never explain. Because the truth was simple, not a long drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells. Simple (Beloved, 163).

Like Sethe's story, readers must come to understand the simplicity of her action despite the reprehensible nature of that violation. Beloved's universe is extraordinary and readers come to accept it only after the slow and deliberate unfolding of its narrative.

These unmentionable aspects of life, that are given free reign in myth and fable, are often excluded from the novel tradition as so many bastard children. The incorporation of the fantastic then is part of a larger strategy wherein the layering of stories, reified, traditional and fantastic ones, permits the novel to push against the boundaries of cultural constructions of reality by embedding within the narrative elements what has been excluded or dismissed, particularly that of female desire. The novels affirm the marginalized or buried within discourse.
Similarly the marginalization of female desire is demonstrated in the description of Cholly's rape of his daughter. While the narrative, seen from Cholly's perspective, is sympathetic to the shattered state of his life and ego, the rape itself, even from the male perspective, reverberates with the residue of its violation of the female child's misrepresented desire, which it is.

He wanted to fuck her—tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her, and the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made—a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon (128).

Pecola's rigid reception of her father and the deflated balloon metaphor function to indicate the child's hopeless resistance to what has been a father's violent attempt to love. It is testimony to the violent infliction oedipalization imposes on the female child. This version of the oedipal narrative powerfully defies its own valorization in which the female child longs to seduce her father and to produce his offspring. This inscription of Pecola's body into this founding narrative literally explodes against Cholly's misconception of his daughter's (and perhaps his own) desire. Certainly in a novel already focused on the adoption of withering myths, this moment in the text provides a haunting echo. Morrison's secondary layer of awareness amplifies the problematic of the selective perspective and shatters its singular claim to validity.

Morrison also exposes marginalized desire within her text by demonstrating the perplexing dynamics of black and white women. When Pauline Breedlove is challenged by her white employer to leave Cholly
because he beats and cannot support her, Pauline reacts with surprise and indignation. Pauline knows the white woman cannot understand that a black woman would not leave a black man just because he doesn't measure up to some arbitrary white standard of manhood. Pauline is not "saved" in the same way a white woman might be saved if only because African-Americans negotiate an entirely different set of options, where rage and fear are played out on a very different plane than for the white woman whose husband is far more in control of his options. This construction of the narrative, however, portrays the misguided advice and the demand for its adherence as a fundamental blindness in whites based on their homogenous understanding of the African-American community. In addition, by focusing on the white woman's withholding of Pauline's money, Morrison permits Pauline's vision to clarify the moral tone so that her refusal to buckle under, even though she needs the money, signals a triumph in terms of resistance to the domination of white narrative constructions. However, this is also a triumph of the author's resistance as well. Morrison posits a rereading of white feminist rhetoric through a psychologically limited character like Pauline Breedlove, who, though flawed and constrained by her own faulty understanding of her life, asserts herself. Pauline may be harnessed by her own personal mythology, but this passage lights up a trail of ineffective narrative options which have been dealt black women by whites—women as well as men—and indicates the vacuity of their message and the strength of black women to name and declare the construction of their own desire against those forced upon them by any discourse.
Another important way in which Morrison explores the uncoded and marginalized desire is in her construction of narrative absence. In "Absence into Presence," Robert Grant discusses the significance of the chronological and character absences in *Sula* as "gaps that dance with and within the narrative's manifest content . . . [to] become the sources of figurative fulfillment" (96). *Sula* is particularly attentive to gaps. In fact, missing pieces of the narrative—Eva's eighteen month absence and Sula's ten year pilgrimage away from Bottom (reflective of a ten year lapse in the chronological exposition of the novel)—create gaps which the narrator of the novel, acting as a community chronicler, is uninformed of. This empty space, however, becomes a locus of narrative desire for the community which assembles a story to "fill in" the vacancy. Eva's story will center around the loss of her leg while Sula's, since she returns to Bottom in the midst of a plague of robins and bird shit, comes to represent the basest of human motives and evil. It is clear though that despite the community's selective narrating of events from the past of these women's lives, the speculative fictions constitute an historical reality for the community. The novel itself reveals a canvas of filled and unfilled space creating a gestalt which allows readers to engage in a casual speculation of their own, one that incorporates, but is not confined to, the speculations of the community as the community attempts to read its own gestalt. This further establishes the continued self-reflexivity of the text wherein the readers are aware both of the community's desire to order its reality, as well as the readers' desire to fill in the missing portions. Imaging or ideation,
unlike perception, "depends upon [the object's] absence or non-existence" in order to take shape in the readers' minds (Iser, 137). What Morrison manages here is to suggest images that hover over and around the text, in the way that the "soft ball of fur" hangs about Nel's vision. These suggestive images become another part of the novel's construction and, like a gestalt where both the negative and the positive spaces alternate to reveal the shape of two or more pictures, they are integral to the whole of the novel. What is absent is as important as what is present because it defines or creates the shape of what is present. "The empty space at the literal center of the novel [the missing ten years when Sula is away] thus may be seen as an emblem of the work's missing subject(s)" (Grant, "Absence," 95).

Grant proposes that Sula characterizes absence and loss as presence. Since the whole novel is a kind of chronicle of losses in the community of the Bottom the absences also have metaphorical significance. Leavetakings—death and abandonment—are marked with meaning. It is Chicken Little's death which becomes Sula's first indication of the unpredictability of life, of the fact that she can not even depend on herself. Jude's leaving is marked for Nel by his tie and her empty thighs. For Shadrack, Sula's lost belt indicates her solidarity with him in understanding fear. Even the very subject of the novel's narrative itself is the history of a place which no longer exists at the time of the telling: "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood" (Sula, 4).
This idea of the subject's absence introduces absence as a subject itself and is reinforced through various ways. Nel's soft fur ball clouding her vision has a physical presence in the novel in the way that other fantastic elements take up space. In another way, Eva's missing leg and Chicken Little's death serve to underscore the ways loss is not synonymous with lack. With the loss of her leg, Eva attains a power and, if the narrative of the community is correct, an income for her family. It hardly seems surprising that Eva Peace, in order to provide for her family must amputate herself. Even if she hasn't amputated herself for the money, as the community assumes, one reason this explanation becomes so acceptable for the community is that it is symbolic of what women, particularly ethnic women, have been forced to do in order to provide for their children and themselves. Amputation, then, is fruitful, life-producing, and though unusual, not unthinkable. That Eva is amputated and that, inevitably, she gains even greater strength as a result, is indicative of what Morrison believes about losses, that they provide something in the way of knowledge of limits and an affirmation of power. Eva's absent leg, is seemingly "filled" in by the community's narrating of it. Facing the limitations of life and taking up one's burdens, while implying, actually demanding, losses, registers gains and implies a content. Many of Morrison's female characters are marked by losses, or some sort of limitation upon their bodies. Pilate has no naval because she is born after her mother's death; Pauline and Baby Suggs are crippled by natural mistakes; Sula bears a birthmark that is continually read and reread by people in the community; and Sethe carries a chokecherry tree
on her back as a memento of her beating at the hands of schoolteacher's nephews. Far from being stymied by these marks upon their bodies, the female characters are empowered by them just as Hester Prynne is empowered by her Scarlet A.

Here the suggestion of absence and the connection with lack is reflective of the lack associated with female sexuality and with difference itself. Like the members of the community who are disregarded, invisible, and absent from white reality, Morrison depicts open space as part of the existence of the novel and of the existence of the community as suggesting a shape and a content with respect to the entire picture of reality. In her role as scapegoat of the community, Sula's presence is asserted. Though she is ostracized, it is her existence in the Bottom that ultimately holds the community together, a place to put disappointment and resentment, and when she dies, they are filled by those resentments once again which gush from them in a tidal wave of anger that leads to their mass suicide. Like the tunnel that finally engulfs them and destroys them, the empty space is filled in with something: desire, broken promises. Even Nel's loss at the end of the novel "pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat" (Sula, 174). Earlier as she leaves Eva in the hospital Nel discovers that "a bright space opened in her head and memory seeped into it" (169), and in the cemetery she examines the gravestones of the Peace family, thinking, "They were not dead people. They were words. Not even words. Wishes, longings" (171). Similarly, in Beloved, the ghost of the dead child--"everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name"--becomes a loneliness "that can be
rocked . . . a dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one's own feet going seem to come from a far-off place" (274). What lingers of her is "down by the stream in back of 124 [where] her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit." The last sentence is notably "Beloved" and this section's repeated refrain, "It is not a story to pass on" (275) causes the novel to fold back onto itself as a negative reflection of itself.

Both Nel and Sula experience loss of sexual desire in a way that acknowledges the reality of absence. Nel is puzzled by the existence of Jude's tie when he is no longer there. When Ajax leaves her Sula reflects that he had left nothing but his stunning absence. An absence so decorative, so ornate, it was difficult for her to understand how she had ever endured without falling dead or being consumed, his magnificent presence. . . . His absence was everywhere, stinging everything, giving the furnishings primary colors, sharp outlines to the corners of rooms and gold light to the dust collecting on tabletops. . . . Now that he had gone, these things, so long subdued by his presence were glamorized in his wake (Sula, 134-35).

The wake after the leaving signifies Morrison's use of absence. Through the interplay of absence and presence of her novels, Morrison is able to further diffuse moral boundaries. Evil is, then, not the absence of good, but exists simultaneously with it. Unlike myth, where characters are constantly scrambling to avoid the nasty consequences of things that they cannot control, here, repressed desire is multilayered, a deus ex machina to the novel's problematic which, like the chorus of women in Beloved assembles to rescue Sethe from Beloved's relentless passion, or to sweep the marchers across the
landscape of the Bottom on into the tunnel of society's vacant promises. That world, where good and evil exist together, breaks forth in unpredictable and irrevocable ways from some stream of isolated logic. Morrison points out in Sula that the black community accepts evil as something to be endured. That it is endurable gives it a place in their lives. Perhaps that is why Pauline is so puzzled by the white woman's insistence that she leave Cholly because he has been bad. Pauline would not entertain such a notion, as though evil, as though being bad, were something that could be isolated and then extracted like a bad tooth. Such things do not happen. Evil must have a place, must be acknowledged and cannot be eliminated anymore than desire or dependence or fate can be. Evil exists, not as the absence of good, any more than a woman is the absence of a penis, or black is the absence of white, loss, the absence of content. Rather, there is no polarity but a physical and emotional continuum. This too is the intention of Shadrack's National Suicide Day: to create a space for fear that will take care of it for the rest of the year. That emotions or persons exist whether they are acknowledged or not is indicative of the entire novel's narrative mechanism and theme.

*Beloved* is haunted by the absence of characters, history, and narratives. Halle never arrives at the meeting place and the conjecture that Paul D. offers about what happened to Halle is never verified. Nevertheless, Halle's absence hangs over the lives of his wife, mother and living daughter. The absent years of Paul D.'s roaming exist only in litany style, discontinuous and fragmented, yet informing every concern and commitment he makes about 124. Both Baby
Suggs and Beloved are present in the household despite their deaths. In Beloved's first person narrative at the center of the novel, the empty spaces separate fragments and sentences thus: "the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I can not see the dead man on my face" (210) in a narrative richly evocative of the slave ship experience where "men without skin" refer to the white men who master the ship's "cargo" of those being pressed into slavery, an experience for which there are only missing narratives. The narrative itself is broken by empty spaces. Kristeva, in discussing Celine's use of ellipses explains that the breaks cause "connotation to rush through" (141). Similarly, these breaks represent gaps through which connotations flow: gaps in understanding, in experience so that the story of the ghost-child resonates with the blanks of history where slave stories are never assembled, or where the desire of the daughter and mother is missing. Beloved, who, with Denver, is there and not there in the wood shed, and the space created by Beloved's footsteps at the end of the novel which can be filled by adult or child, make empty space a significant feature of the novel itself, where an ever-alternating narrative gestalt forces readers to tentatively accommodate the gaps. It is the female, seen as the negative to the male positive, who is often disregarded and marginalized. Instead of being recognized as a part of a gestalt formation, where the borders of one gives visibility to the other, she is simply not seen, simply absent, as is her desire. It is not surprising then that Morrison's novel Beloved attempts to articulate female desire in those gaps, through a semiotic production.
In one of the first published discussions of Morrison's fifth book, *Beloved*, Bayles criticizes Morrison's use of fantastic elements in the texts, and generally in all the novels since *The Bluest Eye*, as sentimental and inauthentic, a theft of Latin American literature. Bayles goes on to suggest that the way Sethe finally exorcises the dead child's influence on her life is in her attempt to kill the white man. Through this plot device, Morrison suggests that catharsis is reached in the novel when Sethe attempts to kill Bodwin at the end of the novel. Certainly this interpretation follows a conventional understanding of the novel's tradition of climax and resolution. The action to stop the white man actually appears to be the event that exorcises the ghost from 124. However, this interpretation does not take into account the highly semiotic nature of the novel itself. It is first and foremost a novel about the reading and using of signs, highly subjective though those readings might be. Kristeva defines the semiotic as "heterogeneous to meaning but always in sight of it or in either a negative or surplus relationship to it" (*Desire in Language*, 133). The semiotic is that aspect of language, which is repressed, the depository of multiplicity which "introduces wandering and fuzziness into language" (136). The semiotic admits to the "uncertain and indeterminate articulation" and its repressed and nonsymbolic nature is linked to the female, particularly the maternal, "a reinstatement of maternal territory into the very economy of language," but a reinstatement that does not seek to repudiate or eliminate the symbolic function of language, rather it amplifies and signifies that which the symbolic excludes (136-38).
Beloved, a novel caught up in the exploration of maternal territory and female desire thematically and structurally, is virtually permeated with wondrous and unusual signs just as its characters are preoccupied with reading those signs in nature, inscribed bodies that are beyond the words which inscribe them symbolically as white property. Beloved is essentially a ghost story where one thing is frequently a sign of something else. On the way to the carnival Sethe sees the shadow of three figures linked at the hands. She thinks then that it indicates the linking of the lives of herself, Denver and Paul D. Later in the novel, she rereads it as the sign of the blending of herself, Denver and Beloved. Denver and Paul D. are also readers of such signs. There is the figure in the elegant dress bending over Sethe as she prays causing Denver to speculate that the baby ghost has made a decision. Paul D.'s interpretation of what happened to Halle is based on the sign of the smeared butter on his face. The advance of the community women is characterized by their voices searching "for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words . . . [which] broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (261).

While Morrison does not verify that all these signs are read correctly--"often showing even the best-intentioned attempts at meaning going astray" (Davis, 336-37)--she validates the act of reading reality through signs by virtue of the proliferation of those readings across the novel. In the same way, Campbell indicates that embedded stories or mirror texts serve as models for reading the larger text, so, too, do these multiple semiotic readings provide samples for the reading of the novel as an intricate complex of signs. On one level, the African-
American community of the novel is constituted by its use of signs since that community is functionally deprived of language and narrative by whites. When Ella comes to attend to Sethe at the place up river after Stamp Paid rescues her, she reveals to Sethe the means of knowing that constitutes this community:

"Saw the sign a while ago," she said. "But I couldn't get here no quicker."
"What sign?" asked Sethe.
"Stamp leaves the old sty open when there's a crossing. Knots a white rag on the post if it's a child, too" (Beloved, 91).

Here, the figure of the open sty is appropriated to a subversive signification. It's usual meaning for the farmer is appropriated to the purposes of the Underground Railroad. More importantly, however, is that this appropriation, the sign of subversive union between Stamp and Ella, signifies Sethe's survival, and her chance for freedom. The deferral of symbolic meaning to the layers of appropriated and semiotic meaning--subversion, defiance for the law, collusion--forms the community as the scapegoat myth did in Sula. Here, the sty signifies the release, not of animals, but of slaves; it implies the end of the corraling of human bodies; it represents the united efforts of those caged beings to free themselves. The semiotic dimension is revolutionary, charged by it's subversion of the literal meaning. The gate has been opened to the animals, to the fugitive, to a new life. This attention to signification in all its levels adds texture and comprehension to the many veiled and obsoured dangers that bring together this community. Characters judge things not so much by what they see, as by the residue of what they see or sense. They judge things by the indications that are beyond words because words are not
innocent, words are, in fact, enslaving as the story of Sixo's beating indicates.

Similarly, Baby Suggs in her last days takes comfort from concentrating on color. Colors, readers are told, are innocent. Sethe's act of murder is precipitated by seeing the sign of schoolteacher: his hat, a warning not merely of his presence but his intention, his ownership, his claim upon her and her children. In fact, her reaction to destroy herself and her children represents a desire to claim her own body and that of her children for herself. Paul D. appreciates the impact of this action when Stamp shows him the newspaper clipping about Sethe. For Paul D. who does not read words, comprehends the significance of Sethe's picture in a newspaper, where words are spent on her, as a terrible and fearful reality. In this universe of the novel, literal meaning is reduced by the semiotic. Sethe's reading then, of Bodkin coming into her yard and her need to protect her children and herself is exactly the same as the scene with schoolteacher. He is another white man, but a white man all the same, once again coming into her yard. For it is whites, she learns from Baby Suggs, that are the only bad luck in the world. This time however Sethe's attempt to kill him rather than herself and her children represents a movement away from inscription to protection.

As Bayles states, Sethe has identified the correct enemy or, at least, the sign of the correct enemy even though the reading is imbued with a particularity which the weakened Sethe is unable to comprehend. Though driven by the need to protect her children, Sethe does not really see Bodkin, himself. It is significant that this particular
white man, while he signifies an inhuman and racist white world to Sethe who has been physically isolated from her community, is innocent of those crimes and is no more deserving of death than Beloved. Her repetition of the murder this time is interrupted by the community of women, who once turned their back on her and Baby Suggs, is now there to protect her. The scene exacts the revenge of Beloved by demonstrating Sethe's willingness to die for her ghostly child as the community of women exorcises her control over Sethe by providing Sethe with support and camaraderie again. With the certainty that she has acted on the behalf of her children, Sethe's guilt recedes and she moves into a community of women where a different economy reigns. Though she is more convinced than ever about the justification of her actions to save her children from being returned into slavery, finally she grieves over that loss.

Here too, readers are forced to make readings of the events. Both Paul D., Denver and Stamp propose meaningful understandings of the action, but Morrison leaves the final reading to the readers of the novel. Turning away from the community and returning once again, Morrison leaves the footsteps on the bank, the vacated space along the bank where others might walk in those steps. The final word of the novel, then, "Beloved" manages to affirm once again the ghostly, the loss, the blanks of the story and most importantly of the text.

Irigaray describes a syntax alien to that of patriarchy, where "'oneness' would no longer be privileged, . . . [and] would involve nearness, proximity, but in such an extreme form that it would preclude any distinction of identities [sic], any establishment of ownership,
thus any form of appropriation" (This Sex, 134). The syntax of Morrison's novels pushes to extreme a number of strategies which debunk the valorization of individuality, foreground the repression of spiritual and emotional elements of reality, and break open the symbolic function of language to reveal its multiple semiotic streams of meaning. Through the use of a storytelling narration, Morrison authorizes the field of vision in her novels to accommodate a number of character perspectives, where an ensemble of voices is proliferated with variations of stories and fragments creating a multi-layered body around which those characters project their own desire for meaning. These multiple narratives overlap and resist one another so that no single viewpoint or order can make a claim over any other. Also, through absence, the use of fantastic elements and the semiotic focus on language, Morrison establishes a gestalt-forming text which forces readers to reflect upon their own as well as the characters' process of reading. This excavation of character perspectives, narratives, and meanings, turn up the rich fertile soil from which the novel's multiple desire springs.
Notes

1 In many ways, in fact, the entire novel is a catalogue of lost mothers: Sethe's, Amy's, Halle's, Beloved's. The resolution of the oedipus complex, according to Lacan, represents separation from the mother as the basis for entering the Symbolic order, the law of the father. J. Benjamin also claims that the ultimate repudiation of the mother represents a denial of social interdependence and this dynamic sets the stage for the initiation of rational violence and the master/slave economy.

2 Here the name of the father signifies for Irigaray as well as Lacan the movement into the symbolic order.

3 What motivates schoolteacher most in his trip to reclaim his runaway is not so much her body as the potential of that body to reproduce his property.

4 In French feminist terms, the Imaginary, reflecting the Lacanian designation as a stage in the infant's development which is both preverbal and pre-Oedipal, is seen more positively and persistantly. Marked by "the illusion of the possibility of oneness" with the mother, this stage provides a model for those unspoken and repressed desires that continue to exist even after the child's emergence into the Symbolic order (Cixous & Clement, 165).
CHAPTER III
ATWOOD'S BODY/TEXT AND TEXTUAL BODIES

Through the same opening that is her danger, she comes out of herself to go to the other, a traveler in unexplored places; she does not refuse, she approaches, not to do away with the space between, but to see it, to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can be" (Cixous & Clement, 86).

More ostensively than either Doris Lessing or Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood links the notion of female sexual desire with narrative desire. By focusing on the appropriation of the female body by patriarchal discourse, Atwood's female protagonists are forced to struggle to recover and inscribe not only their own stories, but their bodies. Their narratives represent a reconstitution of desire and ultimately the reappropriation of their bodies for themselves. In Bodily Harm, Rennie's sexual subordination to the will of her three lovers, Jake, Daniel, and Paul, parallels her professional subordination to the will of the market place, where she views her interviews and life style pieces as fluff in the journalism game. Her success as a writer is contingent upon never scratching the surfaces of things or by refusing to do stories whose subject matter might explode the nicely drawn boundaries she maintains. Her capitulation to the market place increasingly alienates her from her writing material
just as the relinquishment of her desire to Jake's games of bondage and physical subjugation alienate her from her body.

Also in The Handmaid's Tale, the female body and sexual desire are inextricably bound to the patriarchal narratives which imprison Offred within her society and, more specifically, within her own body. The handmaid's desire to free herself from that imprisonment parallels her need to extricate her appropriated and sexualized body from the political as well as social function of childbearing. She explains that "I avoid looking at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely" (82). Her disruption of the discourse of the Gileadian government amounts to a repudiation of that government's claim upon her body, so that in reinventing her own narrative against that of the government she comes to reclaim her body for her own desire rather than for that of the state. Atwood examines the woman's body as a text, which is inscribed and territorialized by society in both these novels (Irvine, 98). The female body as a text then becomes an operating metaphor in both novels upon which Atwood attempts to reassemble female desire, both sexual and narrative, in multiple and disjunctive ways.

Margaret Atwood has always made the female body the site of exploration in her novels. In The Edible Woman, the protagonist comes to understand her body as a product for her boyfriend's consumption; the consumption of the cake-woman at the end of the novel is both humorous and liberating. In Lady Oracle, also a novel about women and consumption, "the fat lady as Joan conceives her is the embodiment--
literally—of the female potential for excess, of the threat that unmutilated, uncheeked femininity will overflow boundaries, obliterating distinctions and violating proprieties" (Hite, 1989, 139). The excess depicted here "becomes symbolic of female resistance to a society that wishes to constrict women to dimensions it deems appropriate, using devices that range from exemplars to definitions to diets" (132).

With *Bodily Harm*, Atwood goes even further to examine the consequences inherent in the assignment of woman to those appropriate dimensions and society's inscription upon her body (Irvine, 96). The dynamics of oppression are made painfully clear from the title as well as the epigraph that opens the book. Quoting from John Berger's work, *Ways of Seeing*, Atwood focuses the novel's attention upon the spectatorship of a woman's body. Women are, as Berger persuasively argues, seen differently from men, representing the site for inscription, reflecting "what can or cannot be done to her" (46). Indeed, sight is integral to this novel where the tourist, whose aesthetic distance "treats another culture as a consumable product" (Brydon, 183), and the telescope, which Rennie recognizes "confers furtive power, the power to watch without being watched" (218), signify the illusion of detachment present in the act of looking. In Griswold, Rennie grows up learning "how to look at things without touching them" (55). That voyeurism and inability to engage, she assumes, insulates her from the danger present on the island and from social responsibility.
Throughout the novel what is being watched varies, however, the female body and specifically Rennie's is the primary focus of the novel's voyeurism. The doctor who has performed the surgery that is supposed to have saved her life is first to explicitly see the body as a text. After the operation he tells Rennie to "think of your life as a clean page. You can write whatever you like on it" (84); however, Rennie, who is out of touch with what she desires for her life, because she is used to deferring to her lover the power of "making" her—at least in private—is ill-prepared to inscribe herself, especially after the doctor's surgical inscription. Of Jake's efforts to "package" her, she says that "sometimes I feel like a blank sheet of paper. . . . For you to doodle on" (105). Her consignment to this condition is at least in part self-imposed. She tells herself and Jake that her public image "aims for neutrality; she needs it for her work . . . . Invisibility" (15). On the island, however she is bothered that the men see her "only from the corners of their eyes" (224) and where Rennie admits that she has always seen herself, not out in front, but "off to the side" (26), literally in the margins. To Rennie, her subsequent cancer and partial mastectomy thoroughly mark her as damaged goods and as someone no longer invisible, triggering a steady mental retreat from her body and, as the novel progresses, simultaneously from her writing: "People are beginning to think she won't finish assignments. There's some truth to this: increasingly there are things she can't seem to do. Maybe it isn't can't, maybe it's won't" (65). The novel reveals this duplicitous state in which Rennie, no longer able to present
either her self or her work as assigned, is still unable to assert what it is she most desires.

According to Irvine, the novel is "concerned with harm, the symbol of which on the body, is the mark of castration. Can we therefore discover on a woman's body, the marks that will allow us to read her story? For much of the novel, Rennie reveals herself to be a thoroughly manipulated writer, and repeatedly emphasizes that she is not writing. Nonetheless, that her body is to be imagined as potential material for inscription is abundantly clear" (95). Irvine's point is an important one, because Rennie, like all the women in the novel, finds that constituting her sexual desire, like that of her narrative, is fettered with complications and hampered by the markings which, like the rigid standards of her home town, Griswold, become something she is forced to define her self against. Increasingly, Rennie begins to view her body as a collection of various inscribed parts, rather than as a whole. While Jake jokes, "what is a woman, a cunt with a head attached or a head with a cunt attached?" (235), Rennie recognizes that women are cheerfully parcelled up--head, cunt, legs, hair, etc. Her subsequent retreat into passivity represents what Davey calls a response to a life she believes "to be determined by narratives entirely outside of [her] control" (Davey, 1986, 64). As "a failed artist deliberately renouncing her responsibility . . . to confront reality" (Rigney, 1987, 105) her history of writing chronicles her abasement to the matters which she assumes are silly or trivial. Her acquiescence is symtomatic of her lack of imagination and physical stamina.
This is also the situation which presents itself to Offred in The Handmaid's Tale. Circumscribed within the state narrative, Offred's body as well as her life is controlled and colonized by the repressive and patriarchal government that assigns her the task of bearing its children. From a biblical narrative presented in the epigraph of the novel, and referred to throughout the work, depicting the use of a handmaid to procreate comes the justification for the absolute and total subservience of a woman's life and body to the act of procreation: "Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb. And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her" (iii). What organizes and fuels the state repression is contained in yet another narrative about the dependency of the culture's survival upon that repression. According to the novel's state spokesman, Aunt Lydia, they "were a society dying ... of too much choice" (34) where women smeared their bodies with oil and lay half naked on beaches; where sexual desire was given free reign; where promiscuity brought on an epidemic of AIDS, and a toxic environment that disabled and sterilized many men and women so that the birth rate dipped drastically low and women's exchange value as childbearers was magnified. According to Aunt Lydia, they now have "freedom from" rather than "freedom to" (33).

Such founding narratives are supported by a raft of proverbs and cliches appropriated from a variety of sources, which structurally and politically hold together the faltering regime. Here too, as in Bodily
Harm, biology is destiny and women's bodies are bound and gagged so as to facilitate their use. The state has been careful to designate the handmaids, so that "everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us . . . . The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (11). The handmaids' imposed isolation from other women and from one another is essential to carrying out their function for the state. The other women of the novel are also tightly defined by costume and by their domestic functions. The Wives oversee the household organization and care, the Marthas, the domestic tasks and cooking, the Econowives, the support of their working class husbands. Defined by their functions and service to men, their subjectivity is obliterated insuring their continued oppression.

Recognizing the tremendous connection of language to her imprisonment, Offred variously acknowledges "Pen is Envy" (241) and that the Commander "has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once" (114) and "the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us" (33). The connection to narrative is also largely explored as Offred realizes that "I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (86). Like her sexual desire, narrative desire is the prerogative of the state. For the handmaid, it can only be constituted subversively. The movement to construct her tale proceeds simultaneously with her movement to recover her sexual desire.
Perhaps the most obvious connection between sexual desire and language is embodied in the interactions of the Commander and the handmaid. While the word games which the Commander plays with Offred in some ways assuages her resentment and hatred for him—he is only trying, she thinks, to make the situation between them slightly more personal--these games, to a large degree, only foster his convenient perception that women are basically unable to add, to use words, to understand the workings of the real world, and need to be appropriately assigned and resigned to the margins of that world. He permits her the luxury of word games as a means of seduction. He literally seduces her with words. It is not for sexual intercourse that he draws her into his little office, but for verbal intercourse.

Offred, as well as the other women in the novel, whose exchange value is dependent upon hers, recognize themselves only within their assignments. Like Rennie, Offred sees herself as "a blank, here between parenthesis" (295). At various points she prays for emptiness, emptied of thoughts, opinions, to be filled by sperm or fertilization. At other times she thinks of her hands (also empty), her face, voice, the parts of her body from which she feels alienated. Her narrative is an internal exploration of the dimensions to which she finds herself consigned:

I sink down into my body as into a swamp ... .I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. ... Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping (95).
Here she even sees the very arrangement of her flesh as somehow altered from how it once was. The very organization of that body now that it has been appropriated no longer resembles what it was. Like the shops whose signs have been written over after their appropriation by the state (Lacombe, 6), Offred's body has been written over to form an assemblage that radiates only a uterus within the "translucent wrapping" of her flesh. The flesh itself disappears. Now, she thinks of herself as "a refugee from the past, and like other refugees I go over the customs and habits of being I've left or been forced to leave behind me . . . . marooned in the twentieth century, I wander back, try to regain those distant pathways" (295), as a means of holding onto that body, that life which has been rewritten and reinscribed. Memory however, like her flesh, is in danger of evaporating.

Offred's body is inscribed and marked by her costume, by her function, and finally by a tattoo which signifies her permanent incarceration within Gilead. She too is a text for her society whose markings are far more blatantly accepted. The condition of her subjugation is the framework which holds the entire society together so that her narrative becomes for herself and for her unidentified audience "a means of converting (historical) weakness into (discursive) strength" and as such is "a major weapon against alienation, an instrument of self assertion, and an 'oppositional practice' of considerable significance" (Chambers, 212) In The Handmaid's Tale, then, uniting ideas of the female body as a text constructed linguistically, Atwood sets out a novel which explores the precise way in which a woman does more than merely resist that composed text; she
follows the force of her physical desire by constructing over and around that text, like a palimpsest, to reconstruct herself for herself.

In these novels, the protagonists must attempt to balance their physical and emotional survival against their need for self discovery. Rennie's emotional and physical retreat from desire is represented by her preoccupation with surfaces prior to her operation. However, after the operation she is obsessed with the awareness that something always lurks beneath surfaces: stories, disease, cellars, the little underground insects which crawl out of the drain and the earth, perhaps even conscience. Though she is frightened by the danger beneath these surfaces what fixes her attachment to Daniel is the idea that he has seen what she is like inside, under her skin--territory completely unexplored by Rennie. She comes to understand that "the tidy boundaries between fact and fiction, doctor and patient, male and female, inside and outside, life and death" are ineffective and invalid (Hansen, 17). What Rennie loses with her "tidy boundaries" is the middle, the process, where living is also dying, where inside and outside merge, and where her neutralized body and story continue to be written and re-written with or without her full participation.

Offred's story also is one in which she attempts to explore her emotions and to break down some of the boundaries which confine her. While she never takes advantage of the underground network, and even the final section of her story betrays the inability to act in her own behalf, her narrative establishes that her private assertion of desire represents the force of political change. Dr. Minnow's comment, in
Bodily Harm, that life styles are precisely what is important and politically essential creates a humorous disjuncture for Rennie. Here, as well as in The Handmaid's Tale, Atwood produces circumstances which challenge the patriarchal assumption that what people wear or eat or do with their spare time is not important, and thus not political. While Atwood scrutinizes the capitulation of her protagonists to those neutralized and transparent marketplace demands, she asserts the significance of private choice as political action.

Any woman's struggle to mark her own body, to do with it what she wants is not only private and personal, but her most crucial political priority. "To tell, to report, to bear witness, then, is Rennie's moral obligation . . . . [since] for A, writing itself becomes a political act" (Rigney, 1987, 110-11). Because "cruelty is the movement of culture that is realized in bodies and inscribed on them. . . . a cruel system of inscribed signs that renders man capable of language, and gives him a memory of the spoken word" (Deleuze & Guattari, 145), the inscription of bodies, then, is bound to discourse and ideology. In a culture founded upon sexual difference, women serve as the tablet upon which language assumes meaning as her entire body becomes an ideological text. Since "the power to determine meaning and to order the exchange of signs" is what "sustains the modern form of domination" (Terdiman, 113), Rennie's, or any woman's, failure to inscribe her own body underwrites her capacity to conspire with her own domination. This passive complicity with the colonization of her body by men which Rennie comes to recognize,-- and to which Offred is painfully reconciled--triggers her emergent sense of
subversiveness. Though Offred actively resists the narratives of the state, her lack of political action is often disturbing to her. Yet her act of telling, which the taped artifact represents, once more underscores the significance for Atwood of personal action as a means of challenging political regimes.

Nonetheless, the close association of domination with narrative is further demonstrated throughout Bodily Harm by Atwood's mimicry of the traditional romance plot. In fact, the romance plot of this novel, exposes romance as the ideological infrastructure which controls and castrates women by making their bodies a symbolic manifestation of male narcissistic desire. In a serious reading of the dynamics of mythical narrative by Propp and Lotman (of which Oedipus is the masterplot), Teresa de Lauretis establishes that "the hero, the mythical subject, is constructed as human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of difference" (1984, 119). Rennie's island lover, Paul, typifies the mythical hero. He is a Hemingwayesque ideal whose love of danger propels him on the course of running drugs and weapons for the revolutionary factions of the island. His professed cynicism is a veil for his incontestable narcissism and idealism where he is constantly in search of new boundaries to cross and new worlds to conquer. "I used to believe in issues" (240), he tells Rennie. However, now the only thing that appeals to him is the power game, and it is to that game that he is addicted. Engrossed in his own image of courage and prowess, neither of which is lost on Rennie, he brags about his ability to replace his lost cargo and captain in a drug heist while Rennie "tries very hard
not to find any of this romantic. Boys playing with guns, that's all it is. Even telling her about this is showing off; isn't it? But she can't help wondering whether Paul has any bullet holes in him. If he has, she'd like to see" (244). Rennie too, like Paul, is seduced by this plot, seduced by the markings on his body inscribing him into the romance plot. However, he is the author of his own body/test unlike Rennie. His mastery, like that of Daniel and Jake, is seductive to Rennie. She has learned very early in life that "men were doctors [inscribers?], women were nurses; men were heroes, and what were women?" (56).

Paul admits he left his wife and children because he was unable to "settle down" after his army stint in Vietnam. He explains that "when you've been living . . . never knowing when someone's going to blow you into little pieces, that other kind of life seems fake, you can't believe in it . . . you don't have time for a lot of healthy women sitting around arguing whether or not they should shave their legs" (239-40). However what is really missing in that settled down environment is that there are no more forbidden lines to cross such as war, revolution, drugs, and money provide. Women and their concerns are fake and petty. That women shaving their legs is precisely about their experience of being blown "into little pieces"--heads, cunts, legs--has no meaning for Paul. It is beyond his experience and awareness even if it is not beyond Rennie's, though her feeling of being "outflanked" by the language he uses to dispose of those female concerns is significant here. He must denounce the women's right to a voice because he is the hero. In the narrative "female is what is not
susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot space, a topos, a resistance matrix and matter" (de Lauretis, 1984, 119). Literally maneuvered from place to place like a pawn in Paul's chess game, and before his supposed "rescue" is revealed as only another chess move, Rennie recognizes the control he is exerting over her and her personal invisibility to him and his adversary within the romance plot:

Rennie can see what she is now: she's an object of negotiation. The truth about knights come suddenly clear: the maidens were only an excuse. The dragon was the real business. So much for vacation romances, she thinks. A kiss is just a kiss, Jocasta would say, and you're lucky if you don't get trenchmouth... She feels like a hostage, and, like a hostage, strangely uninvolved in her own fate. Other people are deciding that for her (258).

In the romance plot, a woman is the excuse for the game in so far as she represents the stakes, the ideology, the abstractions of the contest between men, where she has no separate reality and, like the Medusa or Sphinx, she comes to represent the "enigma of femininity" (de Lauretis, 1984, 110). In fact, "the relation of domination is built upon the fantasy of omnipotence and denial of the other's separate reality" and tied once again to the Oedipal desire for differentiation (J. Benjamin, 292). In this plot, the woman is indispensable as the idealized mother over whom the game is played. But as an actual woman, she is invisible, denied representation. Not only symbolic of these stakes, woman is also the field of conquest "marking out the place (to) which the hero will cross... woman functions as both a sign (representation) and a value (object) of exchange" (de Lauretis, 1984, 140). If she is the blank text, then the hero, needs to inscribe her, claim her by conquering her every territory as his own, which is
exactly what Paul does; he stakes his claim so Rennie comes to represent his ideals, his laws and ultimately himself, before she can be exchanged as the prize in the competition between men.

Certainly Atwood represents the seductiveness of this plot for Rennie and for women in general. At this moment when she exposes her mangled flesh to Paul, she is swept up in the rapture of reentering her body and abandonment to her sexual desire.

Rennie can't remember ever having been touched before. Nobody lives forever, who said you could? This much will have to do, this much is enough. She's open now, she's been opened, she being drawn back down, she enters her body again and there's a moment of pain, incarnation, this may be only the body's desperation, a flare up, a last clutch at the world before the long slide into final illness, and death; but meanwhile she's solid after all, she's here on earth, she's grateful, he's touching her, she can still be touched (204).

That Rennie reenters her body/text at that moment underscores the force of her sexual desire, but also the strength of the romance narrative's seduction for women as well as men. She has abandoned herself to desire, thinking as she stands before Paul that "she doesn't care what he thinks of her, she never has to see this man again if she doesn't want to. . . . There's nothing to worry about, nothing can touch her" (203). What it defines for her in that moment, more significantly however, is the tentativeness of the orgasm, the connections of this romance with mortality, as a rally prior to the finale of death. She feels solid, not liquid and effusive as she and the novel's narrative have been to that point. Yet, the solidity, and the unity it implies, does not remain; it is a traditional climax followed, not by a quick denoument, but rather by the second half of the novel where, as in her earlier novel Lady Oracle, "the 'rising action' of the classical plot
has been betrayed by the lack of climax" (Hite, 165). Conventionally, such a climax would be the end of the plot, closure, consummation, death itself, the event which gives shape to the beginning and middle. However, Atwood's novel "subverts the illusion that orgasm is the climax, the happy ending to Rennie's problem, . . . . denies the heterosexual orgasm its conventional importance and reopens the question of what sexuality means in women's lives and in novels" (Hansen, 12).

Essential to the plot of the romance and to the role of a women in that plot is that she resist the hero so that she can be won over, replicating the game between men. In this plot, the good woman, therefore, is the one who "resists" long enough for him to feel both his power over her and his desire (I mean one who "exists"), and not too much, to give the pleasure of enjoying, without too many obstacles, the return to himself which he, grown greater--reassured in his own eyes, is making (Cixous & Clement, 70-80).

Certainly this recalls Jake's lovemaking demand of Rennie that she, with pinned hands, "fight me for it" (201). Waging war and making love are the same. The good woman is, as Jessica Benjamin's study of erotic domination confirms, the objectified other whose "resistance must be found, so that she can be vanquished anew . . . [until] he has exhausted the possibilities of violating her boundaries" (289).

Yet as Atwood casts the narrative, Rennie does not play her role well with Paul and he complains that "You were too obvious . . . . You were doing everything right out in the open. You were too nice. You were too naive. You were too easy. Anyway, you wanted it too much. I can tell when a woman's faking it" (245). Rennie is just "too"
everything to complete her function in the plot. Failing to incorporate the idealized picture where something can be done to her, where she can be inscribed as his, she betrays a desire of her own, thus he is compelled to abandon her. Her desire is leaking through the seams. Jocasta's narrative of her night out with one attractive man with whom she wishes to have sex recalls this dynamic. At first he indicates he wants to have intercourse with her until she reveals her own desire. Because her desire for him is unseviceable to the plot which permits him to "take" her or "fight" her for it, he ultimately becomes disinterested. When men can no longer "score" their conquests because women are not unwilling victims, but desiring subjects who disrupt the game, Jocasta explains, a new kind of scoring occurs where

the new scoring is not scoring. Just so long as you keep control. They don't want love and understanding and meaningful relationships, they still want sex, but only if they can take it. Only if you've got something to lose, only if you struggle a little. It helps if you're eight years old, one way or another" (167).

Like Jake and Paul of Bodily Harm, the Commander of The Handmaid's Tale wants to win Offred over before he has sex with her. His verbal seductions are the foreplay for his eventual sexual conquest of her. However, the Commander is not a formidable hero because The Handmaid's Tale is not in any way a romance plot. When Offred reveals to Moira that she has been brought to Jezebel's by her commander, Moira remarks "Some of them do that, they get a kick out of it. It's like screwing on the altar or something . . . . Just another crummy power trip." However, Offred thinks that such a scenario "seems too simple for him, too crude. Surely his motivations are more delicate" (316). In fact,
the Commander's behavior does appear more complex than the romance scenario of transgressing sacred boundaries. Certainly the element of danger is present as it is for Paul. With the Eyes of the state on him, as well as his wife's mediated power, his activities skirt the boundaries of danger. However, the risk he takes seems far too little given his position as a state patriarch. His physical peril is not commensurate with that of the handmaid or perhaps anyone else in the story. Unlike Paul, the Commander's game is minimized because there are so many other players like himself as Moira's analysis reveals. Here he seems more like a little boy who wants to be "bad" rather than a convincing hero. Of course this is largely due to Offred's perspective. She sees him as essentially pathetic, an oppressor disturbed that he can only be desirable because of the power he wields, and for no other reason, but completely unwilling to relinquish or risk any of that power. The office play implies a moment of escape from his indisputable position as oppressor where he pretends that he is kind, that he is secure enough not to be threatened by a woman dabbling in words, and that her desire is actually for him. Such is not the case, of course. Readers see Offred cautiously playing so as not to seem too bright, and reluctantly responding to his personal inquiries. Her desire for him apart from his power will never be anything more than a pretense, right down to the act of consummation where she forces herself to act like she is enjoying it. What is exposed here is that male domination is predicated here upon the fantasy of its relinquishment and this passage further illustrates the stake a woman's
silence—lest she betray her lack of interest in him, or her ability to
out fox-him—plays in its perpetuation.

The power dynamic of the romance plot, for the female character, is
always both "entangling and entrapping" (Hite, 154). In Bodily Harm,
Atwood imitates this plot, however by casting Rennie as not only the
field of conquest, but as the "hero" vying for control of the text,
Atwood exposes a struggle which is both external and internal, both
inside and outside the text, simultaneously. Similarly in a move of
textual hysteria, Atwood's novel as well, is both internal to Rennie's
story and external to it. In Technologies of Gender, Teresa de
Lauretis defines "the feminist subject as one that . . . is at once
inside and outside of the ideology of gender. . . . That is the
contradiction" (114). The unconscious "effects a splitting of the
female subject's identification into the two mythical positions of hero
(mythical subject) and boundary (spatially fixed object, personified
obstacle)" (de Lauretis, 1984, 123). The novel's textual alternation
of first and third person point of view, its "linguistic guerilla
tactics" (Lacombe, 12), the seemingly endless accumulation of narrative
fragments. Mirroring Rennies's experience of hysteria in which she
remains within her body/text, readers experience the novel, which they--
authors/heros--are actively forced to construct from the fragmented
narrative which Atwood provides--spatially fixed object--both from
within and without the text: a seemingly textual hysteria.

Thematically, Rennie's hysteria appears and reappears throughout
the novel, in both dream and waking sequences. Duplicating
psychologically the representation of the woman with the small
retreating head in Jake's poster, Rennie senses as he makes love to her, that she is "watching him from her head which was up there on the pillow at the other end of her body" (199). Following the sex, "she stroked the back of his neck and thought of the soul leaving the body in the form of words, on little scrolls like the ones in medieval paintings" (201) making an even more obvious connection of bodies and texts—as though words give bodies, as they do texts, their substance and life. After the intruder's visit, she discloses that "she began to see herself from the outside, as if she was a moving target in someone else's binoculars. She could even hear the commentary: Now she's opening the bean sprouts, now she's cooking an omelette, now she's eating it . . . . She began to have nightmares, she woke up sweating. Once she thought there was someone in the bed with her, she could feel an arm, a leg" (40).

With Paul, she dreams that "there was another man in bed with them; something white, a stocking or a gauze bandage, wrapped around his head" (217) and then even later she observes that Paul, too, is missing from his body and she searches for "the other body beneath the tangible one, but she can't reach him, right now he's not there" (222). In one frightening hallucination that suggests her operation and the mutilation of her body, Rennie hovers near the ceiling, in the corner of a white room, beside the air conditioning unit, which is giving out a steady hum. She can see everything, clear and sharp, under glass, her body is down there on the table, covered in green cloth, there are figures around her, in masks, they're in the middle of a performance, a procedure, an incision, but its not skin-deep, its the heart they're after, in there somewhere, squeezing away, a fist opening and closing around a ball of blood. Possibly her life is being saved, but who can tell what they're doing, she doesn't trust them, she wants to rejoin her body but she can't get down" (173).
Certainly, Rennie has been and continues to be both physically and emotionally traumatized and Atwood depicts this separation and exteriority of self as a response to the trauma as well as a strategy for making sense of her physical colonization. From above she is able to observe the markings they are making on her and to understand that "she doesn't trust them." Throughout the novel, Rennie is both inside and outside of her body/text. Only from outside of her body can she read her body/text in order understand what must be rewritten.

Textually, Atwood structures her novel in both first and third person points of view. The novel opens with the sentence "This is how I got here, says Rennie" (11). The lack of quotation marks and the proceeding delineation of events through first person point of view alongside the "says Rennie" tag suggests that something more complicated than either a simple first person or third person perspective is in operation. Following this particular narrative sequence the novel switches over to a conventional third person narrative, however, it is one that is closely aligned to Rennie's limited viewpoint, one which, the novel hints, is Rennie's hysterical voice. In fact the internal focalization of both this first level text and the embedded text suggests a split perspective. The detached voice which Atwood frequently manifests is a speaker who is

a spectator of her own life, standing outside both this life and its temporal context [where] the principle of cause and effect tends to disappear . . . It is more the language of someone in but not of the male formal garden, of someone physically within the arena of "power politics" but refusing to seriously participate, . . . . an implication that language itself may be male . . . [that] the woman must use a man's own language to have any hope of being
understood . . . because he is uncomprehending of the underground or liquid" (Davey, 1984, 41-43).

As Hansen's article suggests, the first person narratives may form segments of an overarching narrative enclosed in the "this is how I got here" and the "this is what will happen," suggesting the imprisoned Rennie and Lora who tell stories to one another in order to keep from panicking about their situation, are actually enclosed by that overarching narrative. If so, then the overarching narrative may be a construction of that disembodied Rennie who encloses both her own and Lora's stories within the structure of this disrupted romance. Regardless of whether it is or is not Rennie's narration, the juxtaposition with Rennie's disclosure of separating from her self, constitutes a reflection at the novel's textual level of Rennie's psychological experience. Through the alternation of narratives, readers can be both inside and outside of Rennie's story at various points throughout the novel.

The second section of the novel duplicates the first section's presentation of a first person embedded narrative--past tense suggesting a past recollection, i.e. "this is how I got here"--then followed-up by the first level narrative presented in the third person, present tense. However, the third section complicates the pattern by adding another first person narrative from Lora ("When I was growing up") to follow up Rennie's first person childhood narrative before returning again to the first level narration. By the fourth section, this pattern is abandoned when, framed by a third person point of view where Rennie and Jocasta have lunch shortly after the operation,
Jocasta relates a story in the first person pattern. This third/first person alternation whether at the first level or the embedded level—each an internal focalization—has the effect of establishing "between narrator and character(s) a variable or floating relationship, a pronominal vertigo in tune with a free logic of a more complex conception of 'personality'" (Genette, 246) and I would also include, a more complex conception of female experience within language because, as de Lauretis maintains, female identification is necessarily split.

While Rennie's first person narrative "presents a less mediated version of the character point of view" (Hansen, 8) and yet remains perceptively close to that of the overarching narrative, Lora's and Jocasta's first person narratives also share much with Rennie's. Certainly the overlap of personal testimony by Rennie, Lora and Jocasta, is meant to suggest the parallelism of their situations. In each they are all denied desire, all struggling to articulate what is unspeakable about their relations with men, and all in some way marked women. "Another woman's experience is apparently meant to be taken into account in understanding Rennie, and/or to be interesting in its own right" providing the scaffolding of support (Hansen, 9) for each woman's effort to reconstruct a new understanding of her reality in response to the inflicted fragmentation by men that divides her "in their own best interests, so either I don't have any "self" or else I have a multitude of "selves" appropriated by them for them, according to their needs or desire" (Irigaray, This Sex, 17). Each woman's perception testifies to the cultural content of female violation by men.
At her hysterical distance from her body/text, Rennie is caught up with wondering about the physical fragmentation of her grandmother who, though always seen as one solid piece (53) by Rennie—repeatedly betrays a sense of having been severed at the hands. Rennie wonders what happens to the body parts that have been surgically removed and much of her consciousness is given over to observing the parts of bodies, particularly hands, like Lora's ravaged fingernails and Daniel's clean ones, Elva's hands on the German woman's foot, Jake's teeth and white knuckles, the deaf-and-dumb man's handshake to give her luck. These multiple mental amputations, particles really, which she isolates are further exaggerated with the female body. Jake's pornographic posters depicting a tiny head receding from her body, and a bound woman with exposed breasts and buttocks, the black female torso with the emerging rat in the vagina emphasize the process of amputating women. Even loss is somehow associated with femaleness. Her mother's acknowledged loss of her husband is only articulated to Rennie after the onset of menses (110) and Lora's loss of her mother comes following her stepfather's attempt to rape her (172). Similarly Bodily Harm consists of a series of linguistic amputations. In both this novel and The Handmaid's Tale, Atwood's "linguistic guerilla tactics" (Lacombe, 12) are profuse.

Discussing her ensuing awareness of the function her body represents for men and by extension for the culture, Rennie tells Jake that she feels she's being used as "raw material" (212). To Paul's glib comment about the attitudes of the island men that "'if you get angry and chop up your woman, that's understandable; a crime of
passion, you might say . . . mostly they beat or slice rather than chop.' Rennie thinks of cookbooks" (225-26). In a similar connection she thinks "doctored, they say of drinks that have been tampered with, of cats that have been castrated" (101) and, to the nurse's comment that some cancer patients "are full of [cancer], they cut it out and it just pops up somewhere else, Rennie thought of toasters" (34). These verbal disjunctures punctuate and caricature meaning and language by overexposing and forcing the words to reveal their multiple connotations and connectedness. Speaking of the notion of caricaturing, Terdiman states that "the excess it loads upon its object in order to bring it down, comprises an essential counter-discursive move. It signifies an assertion of difference in the strongest sense" (153). By exaggerating the limits of any particular word or figure of speech, in effect by creating a textual stammer that is "bilingual even in a single language" (Deleuze & Parnet, 5), Atwood surgically detaches the original denotation or connotation from the verbal signifier exposing a gap and calling into question the relationship of those alternate meanings. To speak of a woman as being "sliced" or "chopped" or as "raw material," or even as a "clean page" or a fatal disease "popping" up like bread does from a toaster is to reveal the underlying violence implicit in the use of language, rendering subjects to so much "meat" or consumable goods. Language in this connection is a weapon transparently castrating and imprisoning unsuspecting victims, especially women. And yet, Rennie's disposition toward language in the novel, while critical and detached, never seeks to abandon it, nor to abandon the meaning which it represents. In fact, while watching the
beating of the deaf-and-dumb man from her prison cell, she acknowledges the "oh please" of his wordless look (290), also caricaturing her own "oh please" evoked earlier whenever she was bored or impatient. At the hotel Rennie sums up the look of the English woman with the word, "malignant" (262) associating it with the pervasive and uncontrollable cancer which she most fears and which threatens to destroy her.

By extension, Atwood too "creates works that are gardens of textual delights. Almost all of her work has subtexts either implied or embedded within it . . . . which discounts declared meaning, which looks instead for sublanguage: of syntax, vocabulary, literary structure, imagery and symbol" (Davey, 1984, 162). If anything Atwood portrays Rennie as hungry for words and narrative, pulling them together in unimaginable combinations. Not surprisingly in retreat from her violated body, Rennie has a great deal of difficulty eating: she forgets entirely about the food in the refrigerator at home before she leaves for her excursion. Her first evening at the hotel, she is late for dinner. The following day she is caught up in reviewing the food, rather than eating it. When food does actually appear, it arrives damaged: uncooked, burnt, discolored or dirty. Rennie's eating finally culminates in a bout of dysentery. Defining anorexia as a "feminine protest, from a woman who wants to have a functioning of the body and not simply organic and social functions which make her dependent" Deleuze and Parnet reveal an important tactic which "turns consumption against itself." By betraying the social and biological forces that constrict her, the anorexic "multiplies the absorption of little things, of little substances. . . . Her goal is to wrest
particles from food, minute particles with which she gives them out or receives them" (Deleuze & Parnet, 110). A similar process appears to be going on with respect to the novel where the protagonist gathers and picks the particles that make up the various narratives, the fuel for the life of the narrative. Her voice disrupts and abandons them, writes over and around them with her observations and interpretations. The words like the food are damaged, overcooked or disconnected.

Similarly "the dismembered bodies referred to [and in particular Rennie's] in the text itself seems repeatedly destructured" (Irvine, 90). Most of the stories assembled fail to construct any stable chronology. They are memories and as such float to the surface for a moment and then are once again swept away by the current. Here, "time is like the time of dreams" which "disintegrates completely" (Irvine, 90). These dreams like the one of the man with the rope or those of her grandmother, spill in and out of the "realistic" narrative. At one point, Rennie feels she has awakened from a dream only to find herself embedded in another one. This scene opens with "Rennie's dreaming, she knows it, she wants to wake up" (115). What follows is a vision of her grandmother in the garden where everything is "bright, so full of juice," flowers, birds, bees despite the fact it is winter and snowing. Her grandmother is an apparition which Rennie is unable to touch. Her hands go right through the image as her grandmother says "Life everlasting." However, Rennie "struggles to wake up" and then goes to the bureau to find her hands which she believes she has folded neatly like a pair of gloves. This however is only a dream also, one that makes a significant comment on her own connection with the
grandmother who experienced herself as maimed, whom Rennie experiences here as vaporous and intangible, like herself. Finally, though, "Rennie opens her eyes; this time she's really awake" or is she? Oddly her own comment is that "she's stranded somewhere in the future. She doesn't know how to get back" (the very condition projected in The Handmaid's Tale).

This dream section, is followed by another narrative starting with "What do you dream about? Rennie asked Jake" (115-116) and then repeated—at the end of the sequence in which Rennie remembers asking Daniel the same question. This sequence makes a comment on the situation of time and, of course, on dream and reality. Both Jake and Daniel are unable to say anything about their dreams. Daniel is unable to remember his and, of course, Jake is so threatened by the intimacy such a answer might expose that he accuses Rennie of being like his mother, an accusation informing the novel's interest in the relationship of mothers and power. Dream reality also merges and informs the various levels of narrative throughout the novel. Rennie's recurring dream of the man with the rope conjures up the haunting danger of men in the novel. However the dream spills into her reality at the prison where she imagines him as "only a shadow, anonymous, familiar, with silver eyes that twin and reflect her own" (287) and when, after the watching the courtyard beatings, she realizes that "she's afraid of men and its simple, its rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening. She's seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like" (290). Both her dream of her grandmother and the dream of the man with the rope disrupt the order and time of the
narrative taking detours into territory without boundaries and limits where nothing much can be measured but which nonetheless circle back to affect Rennie's awareness and behavior.

Indeed the combinations of first person testimony by Rennie, Lora, and Jocasta relating their past experience make comments and infuse one another. For instance, Jocasta's narrative complements Lora's story about her stepfather's attempted rape and her first love affair with Gary who "liked me to stop him, he said he respected me for it" (169) just as Lora's narratives of Paul, of men, and of the island that "runs on grandmothers" (231) illuminates the book's overall perspective.

Fragments of memory are discharged randomly throughout the novel making unconventional comments on the narratives around them. After relating the scene of Rennie's physical intimacy with Paul, the next section begins with "Jake liked to pin her hands down, he liked to hold her so she couldn't move" (207), undercutting the climatic appreciation of the previous story.

The final sections of the novel alternate in and out of reality and in and out of memory in such a way as to obscure a realistic ending. Rennie's imagination flushes the desperate and disturbing sense of harm with a sense of transcendent hope. However the strongest bit of fragmentary juxtapositioning occurs in the novel's ending pages. Here Rennie, virtually starving and suffering from Montezuma's Revenge, shifts from listening to Lora's stories, dreaming, and idle conversation.
Her memory of being trapped in a bus station with a woman delineating the troublesome "True Confessions" of her family is interrupted by Lora's comment that "You aren't listening" and then, "Maybe I should shut up for a while" only to trigger another memory of missing hands and walking with her mother and grandmother (273-74). Later, as a metaphor for this section of the novel, she thinks of "a jigsaw puzzle, in her head, the top border, the ones with the flat edges, it's always the sky, one piece fits into another, fits into another, interlocking, pure blue" (280). Here "the present is both unpleasant and unreal; thinking about the future only makes her impatient, as if she's in a plane circling and circling an airport, circling and not landing" (282).

Finally though, at the moment when Lora is being beaten by the guards, the narrative leaps to "This is what will happen" in which a provisional escape is fabricated between the brackets of this brutal attack on Lora. In it Rennie, who is alone, imagines the way she will get out, the appearance of the Canadian attache, the return of her passport, her supposed compliance with the request not to write about the affair. Returning to Lora, she watches the guards throw her back into the cell, only to conjure from the past the memory of her grandmother desperately searching again for her hands. Rennie, who is unable to help her grandmother watches as her mother demonstrates "Here they are. Right where you put them. She takes hold of the grandmother's dangling hands, clasping them in her own" (298).
In a sense, Rennie's reaching out to Lora in the next section--

She moves the sticky hair away from the face, which isn't a face anymore, it's bruise, blood is still oozing from the cuts. . . . the mouth looks like a piece of fruit that's been run over by a car, pulp, Rennie wants to throw up, its no one she recognizes, she has no connection with this, there's nothing she can do, it's the face of a stranger, someone without a name, the word Lora has come unhooked and is hovering in the air, apart from this ruin, mess . . . she knows she is pulling on the hand, as hard as she can, there's an invisible hole in the air, Lora is on the other side of it and she has to pull her through, she's gritting her teeth with the effort, she can hear herself, a moaning, it must be her own voice, this is a gift, this is the hardest thing she's ever done . . . 'Oh, God,' says Lora. Or was that real?

--is a reach to that ravaged and colonized body whose every organ barely represents human characteristics. Like her mother's gesture of touching her grandmother's hands in an act of giving back to the older woman the hands which she feels she has lost, Rennie's reach to Lora into the invisible hole is an attempt to reappropriate that body for this other woman with the name and the word, Lora from which it has become unhooked. It is also, in a way a reach beyond the present, informed by the dream of escape which interlocks with that past and present. Perhaps it is a reach toward all women, including herself, all of whom have had their bodies ravaged by inscription and rendered unrecognizable as female, as, not ironically, even human. This action of reaching out to bring back the word to the ravaged body ultimately makes R an inscriber and the hero of her own text, she exceeds the boundaries of life and death. In order to reenter these bodies, women must reunite with language, through a gesture of one to another. In the prison, after all, Rennie realizes that the only way to keep from panicking is by sharing stories with this other woman. The entire novel seeks to reinforce the exchange of stories, of consciousness
among women, as a means to surviving, to enduring (Hansen, 11). It is a gesture that is enormously difficult, one that requires someone willing to touch the ravaged fragments as she reaches beyond formerly understood constructs of reality, to give language back to the unrecognizable assemblage of flesh even when the outcome of the effort is always provisional ("Or was that real?").

In a similar gesture, in the joining of this assemblage with Rennie's provisional escape—"Then the plane will take off"—Atwood formulates the novel's ending as provisional, thereby reformulating the entire narrative:

What she sees has not altered; only the way she sees it. It's all exactly the same. Nothing is the same. She feels as if she's returning after a space trip into the future... She will never be rescued. She has already been rescued. She is not exempt. Instead she is lucky, suddenly, finally she's overflowing with luck, it's this luck holding her up (300-301).

It is this provisional digression at the end of the novel which really holds up the novel as well. "It is never beginnings or endings which are interesting," but middles (Deleuze & Parnet, 39). This moment in the novel radicalizes the text by undercutting itself as an ending and forcing readers to re-read the "This is how I got here" of the first sentence which propels the reader into a middle devoid of a beginning. The middle which is, in fact, the beginning and, as we see by the provisional ending, becomes the realistic ending as well. Paradoxically, ending and not ending.

Like Rennie's model, Dr. Minnow, Atwood's job is to imagine. Escape, a provisional notion in itself in the world of the novel— the paradoxical "never be rescued" and "already rescued"—can only be
constructed by the imagination. Whether Rennie pulls Lora's fragmented self back to life or whether she herself ever leaves her prison is not really the point. Endings are never really known. Endings are only a choice about where to stop the telling. The point is the gesture of the middle. It is the act of faith of those who seek to leave the terminal for an elsewhere: "all plane crashes can be explained by a loss of faith" (22). The flight is what has meaning, not the departures and arrivals. Flight, especially from our phallocentric colonizing world demands an act of imagination and faith. "Bodily Harm involves not only its central character, but also its readers in a journey of the imagination" (D. Jones, 99) where an ending will be is anyone's guess, any writer's choice, where writers and readers can formulate new ways of seeing, new ways of using language, ways that heal and embrace rather than appropriate and inscribe, where language, as desire, takes flight. Peter Brooks claims that "the performance of the narrative act is in itself transformatory . . . . The narrative act discovers and makes use of the intersubjective nature of language itself, medium for the exchange of narrative understandings" (Brooks, 60). Certainly for women, where their bodies have become a text representing the very constitution of male desire, the mere act of reinscribing is an ongoing story, one without an ending where they are reading "in a spirit of confidence, and also a state of dependence, that what remains to be read will restructure the provisional meanings already read" (Brooks, 23). Women remain in the middle, in the air. "If there is a self proper to woman, paradoxically, it is her capacity to depropriate herself" so that "if she is a whole, it is a whole made
up of parts that are wholes, not simple partial objects but varied
totality, moving and boundless change, a cosmos where eros never stops
traveling, vast astral space (Cixous & Clement, 87). Women must
rewrite, reconstruct their bodies with lost or shattered language
assemblages. They must, like Rennie who acknowledges at the end that
she is "subversive," be in two places at once, perhaps in and out of
their bodies, in and out of this world, in flight, in between, and that
is precisely where Atwood places her reader and text. In transit, the
reader and the text have no endings, only middles.

The textual hysteria of The Handmaid's Tale is accomplished in a
slightly different way than in Bodily Harm since its entire story
develops as provisionally as the ending of Bodily Harm. For one thing,
Offred is not a traditional hero, even though she ultimately is the
inscriber of a her own text because her society obviously no longer
believes in its own capacity to win at the romance narrative, clearly
what remains in Gilead, as noted with the Commander, are only the
vestiges of that lost narrative. Likewise, her capacity to resist
domination is never acknowledged either by the patriarchal adversary
nor by herself; in fact the state precludes any semblance of
resistance, instead what is mandated is pure, unadulterated
compliance. In addition, The Handmaid's Tale is related from the
perspective of a woman who knows the truth of that narrative and
alludes inscription simply by recognizing her own ability to be seduced
by it.
Rather than a narrative concerned with the forging of new boundaries, The Handmaid's Tale is written in a dystopian tradition, where the "metaphorical and ideological thrust" of the novel depicts a crumbling society which subordinates individual needs to those of a state fearful of the future and enveloped in internal as well as external conflict. Like all dystopian fiction, it is intended as a forewarning about the social practices of the present (Malak, 10-11). The Handmaid's Tale, like Orwell's 1984, is a novel whose dystopian force comes from its emphasis on language. As in Bodily Harm, there are feats of linguistic calisthenics where Offred, the speaker confined to silence, divested of language, mentally resists the dogma directed at confining her. Such linguistic digressions as "fraternize means to behave like a brother. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister. Sororize, it would have to be" (15) or "something smells fishy, they used to say; or I smell a rat. Misfit as odor" (24), allow Offred to pull at the transparent film of language, forcing to the surface the process by which language consigns and restricts its subjects. "Such Orwellian manipulation of language occurs when the narrator Offred speaks of the imperfect babies as 'unbabies' who end up as a 'shredder'" (Kaler, 45) or repeats the term "unwomen" to designate those women who either refused to cooperate with the state dictates, or who were physically unable to. Acknowledgment of "Misfit as odor" or the absence of "sororize" as well as the blatant depersonalization charted in the use of "unbabies" and "unwomen" exteriorizes the methods by which
experience comes to be shaped and named and implicates not merely the
originators of the words, but the users of it as well.

Another aspect of The Handmaid's Tale which makes its detachment
from the narrative possible for the reader is that of the protagonist's
voice. While Offred is representative of Atwood protagonists who "live
psychologically in the hidden story while functioning physically in the
official story . . . . forever witnesses to events rather than
participants in them (Davey, "Alternate Stories," 12-13), her voice is
even more remote than in Atwood's other works. Within the dystopian
format of the novel is "a story of non/signification, of the breakdown
of normal relations between signifier and signified" (Lacombe, 9),
where the book unfolds in a dark, often austere, confessional mode
reminiscent of the spiritual journal (Kaler, "Sister Dipped," 59).
Because the purpose of her story (later re-read in light of its
unorthodox ending where she is literally presented only as a voice) is
obscured through the greater part of the novel, Offred appears to be a
teller whose audience and purpose is not directly formulated. Like the
James story "Figure in the Carpet," "the tale is addressed to a
readership whose existence is virtually unacknowledged in the tale"
(Chambers, 152). Several times through the narrative she addresses the
issue of that absent audience with

If it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone.
You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone
else. Even when there's no one . . . . Just you, without a name.
Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is
riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there,
of survival, yours? I will say you, you, like an old song. You
can mean more than one. You can mean thousands . . . . I'll pretend
you can hear me. But it's no good because I know you can't (52-
53).
That she has no idea to whom she speaks, presents a seeming lack of utility for her story about which she admits, "I don't have to tell anything, to myself or to anyone else. I could just sit here, peacefully. I could withdraw. It's possible to go so far in, so far down and back, they could never get you out. . . . Why fight?" (291). The experience of telling then is highly existential, ungrounded by a purpose or audience, to a large degree fluid even to the teller. In addition, telling is envisioned as one option among many. There is always the possibility of not telling. The desire to order her experience propels her into the telling. Offred's story evolves as a movement to reclaim from her appropriated body the force of desire for herself. Used to living in the "blank white space at the edges of print . . . . in the gaps between the stories" where it is safe (74) Offred now desires, as Rennie did at the end of Bodily Harm, to center experience, to give shape, at least provisionally, and to reappropriate her body and text.

The metanarrative quality of the protagonist's awareness allows her, as it does any author, the ability to tell and to simultaneously comment upon the act of telling. Offred has a psychological competence which, unlike the narrator of Bodily Harm, allows her to accept the emotional, mental, and physical limitations of her body as well as her story. In this way her detachment from self and story appears more strategically useful than Rennie's, providing her with a unique position from which to construct the obligatory vision of herself as absolute, fecund femininity for the state, without being lost in the narrative of the state, to the Commander's seductions, to a
predetermined plot. By questioning the motivation for her story constructions—as she does when she constructs the various versions of Luke's capture—and by acknowledging the limits of any of those constructions—"this is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. . . . It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact" (173)—her narrative becomes empowered and authoritative, despite its dislocatedness from audience and purpose, because as a self-reflexive text its narrative authority derives from "the power to undo itself" (Chambers, 221). In this way, she too is a character both in and out of her own story, in and out of her culture. Though she is separated from her desire by the threat of violence and harm, she gives voice to that desire by telling her story and in so doing, reclaims for herself the sexual desire neutralized and driven underground by the state.

Like Rennie, Offred also uses words to pull her away from her body and text, in order to survive the state of alienation imposed upon her. During intercourse with the Commander, she reveals that "one detaches oneself. One describes" (123). And following her sexual liaison with Nick which plagues her with the guilt for her infidelity to Luke, as well as the societal guilt implied in her abandonment of Ofglen and the resistance movement, she implicates her desire for an easy romance narrative to justify what happens with Nick. Through narrative, she pulls away—"I made that up. It didn't happen that way" (338)—as well as engages her absorption into the force of desire for Nick, admitting that "I tell him things I shouldn't. . . . I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known" (346-47). At the end
of her narrative, it is Nick's use of her real name in fact—a name readers never officially know—that gives her the strength to trust his advice to her.

Michelle Lacombe suggests that the metaphor of the palimpsest used on the first page of the novel—"a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style"(3)—is a fitting one for the whole novel where the narrative is a "writing over" or rewriting of multiple narratives, including itself (4). As stated earlier, Offred's body as a text has been rewritten as translucent flesh enclosing the pear-shaped womb. Her official name, Offred, is a rewriting, Lacombe points out, because she is of Fred (presumably the name of her Commander) but also "she is 'Offered'" and "'Off-red' as a secret rebel" And in connection to the narrative, "She is also 'Off read' or misread" (Lacombe, 8). The palimpsest is further developed with respect to Offred's story where she continually engages in an alternate reading of all the stories around her. To Janine's story of rape solicited from Aunt Lydia for the purpose of instruction, Offred reminds herself and the reader that "it may not even be true. At Testifying, it's safer to make things up than to say you have nothing to reveal" (92). When she listens to the anchorman relating the news on t.v., she rereads him in an effort to resist his persuasiveness "I struggle against him. He's like an old movie star, I tell myself, with false teeth and a face job" (106-07). In a similar way, she retells the proverbial instructions of Aunt Lydia with "All flesh is weak. All flesh is grass, I corrected her in my head" or while watching Aunt Lydia's mouth trembles before her "long and yellowish teeth," Offred thinks "about the dead mice we
would find on the doorstep" (73). In these instances Offred narrates over the stories with the inscription of desire—incorporating what she believes are the narrators' desires, Janine's for survival; the newsman's for authority; or her own for resistance.

Certainly the state itself promotes a panoply of rewritten narratives whether a biblical one championing the use of handmaids to procreate the earth with the chosen people or a late twentieth century one valorizing the "return to natural order." Each of these stories is reread, sometimes verbally altered—"From each according to her abilities to each according to his needs"—in order to suit the agenda of the state. Like the shop signs that are painted over with picture words, Lacombe points out that the former lingerie store converted to Soul Scrolls provides the two handmaids, Offred and Ofglen, the opportunity to see one another's faces, where instead of "directing her gaze to the travesty of a Tibetan prayer wheel meant to mesmerize the observer, the window reflects the new image of self and world" (6).

The most radical moment Atwood provides for readers themselves to experience textual hysteria comes when the novel abandons the handmaid's tale in midair—like the ending of Bodily Harm—with the handmaid literally stepping "up into the darkness within; or else the light" (378) to break into the final section of the novel headed "Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale." (The heading itself suggests the idea of palimpsest, here a palimpsest to itself, really). This last section catapults to yet another fictive future time beyond the future constructed by the novel's past 378 pages.
With this disjuncture of time and story, readers are compelled to make a move literally away from Offred's story into a framing narrative that places them outside and beyond where they have been comfortably situated. As with all framing narratives this one creates a distance with its embedded text by allowing "for a relatively intense interpretive involvement on the part of the reader" producing "a degree of textual polysemy" where the embedded text is engaged as a narrative function to the other story (Chambers, 32-35). While injecting duplicity and polysemy, the embedding also limits the reading and creates for that inner narrative, boundaries—an inside and outside—which can be clearly designated. As Offred herself explains, a frame creates "the illusion of depth. . . . Perspective is necessary. Otherwise there are only two dimensions" (185).

Because the framing of the internal handmaid's tale comes at the end of the novel rather than at the beginning, this framing is jarring, unexpected, as well as disruptive. The novel's reader, now resituated in the time of the scholars, must attempt to place the significance of Offred's tale into the world of the scholars. This particular move not only exteriorizes the discourse, but the act of interpretation. By creating this disjuncture, Atwood links the purposes of the reader with that of the scholars.

In this epilogue, Prof. Pieixoto asks of the text only the questions which Offred has not chosen to relate. Pieixoto wants to know her name (and are readers of the novel any different in this?); the Commander's name; the exact location; and, like the readers of the novel, what happened to Offred—did she escape, or get captured?
However these are not the questions which the text answers, nor are they, ironically, the questions which the text raises. What is singularly missing from this cautious and seemingly meticulous exegesis is a sincere attempt to engage the tale that Offred did relate. When, earlier in the novel, Offred finds the austerely coded message inside her cabinet left for her by someone whom she assumes is the previous handmaid, she too is not aware of its meaning. Even linguistically the message, Nolite te bastardes carborundorum, is a puzzle. Latin, bastard latin, overwritten latin, is not comprehensible. However, Offred senses that it is a message meant for her and she guards it, projecting it as prayer, plea, even curse. Eventually her careful research pays off when she realizes that the message is a fragment meant to relate both its translated wish of, "don't let the bastards get you down," but also the warning that the Commander is not to be trusted.

It's all before me now. I can see why she wrote that, on the wall of the cupboard, but I also see that she must have learned it here, in this room. Where else? . . . I have not been the first then. To enter his silence, play children's word games with him (242).

Unlike her scholarly successors, Offred regards the message, not as a failure because it leaves no name, no more than its amputated words, but as a triumph, a shower of information that helps her navigate the mine field in which she has been thrust where "it is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind" (45).
Like Offred, the scholars must decode the fragmented message; they must make distinctions. Left on old twentieth century tapes—overwritten as recorded music—they must reconstruct the story (in fact, Pieixoto remarks that the exact sequence is not certain) on outmoded equipment in order to reveal the content. They also must reconstruct the context in which they believe the tapes were recorded. While they recognize that context is important, as Davidson suggests, they have "little awareness that context itself is a construct" (118). Their chauvinism not only for women (represented by their pithy jokes), but for the past (revealed by Pieixoto's condescending "our job is not to censure but to understand" (383)), seriously undercuts the warning which Offred's narrative belies. They cannot, as Offred can, literally read the writing on the wall not so much because they are caught up with what they wish to know about its transmission and authenticity as a historical artifact that they overlook the content of its warning about language, fear, and oppression, but because they are so unaware of their own stake in what they wish to see. Perhaps that is the most significantly patriarchal position of all, one, like the Commander's, which assumes objectivity and denies its own vested interest.

However, it is the delay in presentation of this frame which accomplishes, in two ways, the novel's ironic reading, and thus the textual separation from the epilogue as well as the handmaid's story. First of all, readers are allowed to read the internal handmaid's tale in a spirit of unmediated interruption. Though it is a self-conscious narrative in which Offred intermittently examines from several projected perspectives the dynamics of narrative and her narrative in
particular, readers authorize her as a dependable narrator. In fact, it is her self-reflexivity that empowers the narrative. With the imposition of the narrative frame, readers are forced to stand back from the authenticated tale and reread it in light of the future that brings an end to the republic of Gilead, and comments on the buried existence of the tale itself. Now represented as an artifact to an even more distant future, rather than merely as a text for the reader's present, the exposition of the internal narrative takes on a purpose that would never be foreseen either by the narrator or by the novel's readers prior to that point. The tale becomes a comment, not upon the conditions of its inception, but upon the conditions of its reception. Here, as with *Bodily Harm*, readers are forced to be both inside at the inception of the present tense narrative, and outside at the reception of it. Readers see the story, as they do the woman's body, as a text and as an artifact (Lacombe, 4).

Secondly though, the delayed construction of the frame drives a wedge between the readers and the scholars of the framing narrative by virtue of the independent reception experience posited by readers prior to their incorporation into the frame narrative. Malik maintains that what distinguishes Atwood's novel from that of other dystopian fiction is its feminism and its ironic presentation of this framing narrative (15). Irony is injected by creating a scene that resembles the present far more closely than Offred's. In this way, the "epilogue loops back through the text that precedes it to suggest that the ways in which scholars (present as well as future) assemble the text of the past confirms . . . . [that] how we chose to construct history partly
determines the history we are likely to get" (Davidson, 115). Readers are allowed to look both forward and backward at once. Forward to Gilead and the world of the scholars and backward to the past which the present rhetoric, methodology, and textual distance have inscribed.

The reading of Pieixoto's reading is not simply ironic with respect to his failure to achieve the insight which readers have since certain of his questions, such as what happened to her or what her real name might have been, actually implicate readers as much as they do him with the limitations of their own reading. The different readings do provide readers with both an inside and outside perspective on the scholar's level of narrative; "of how patriarchal imperatives are encoded within various intellectual methods" (Davidson, 120). More significantly, the late insertion of this narrative imposes an ironic reading upon the reader's own level of reception or interpretation. In other words, readers are asked to reread their own reception of the narrative over and against that of the scholars. Readers are once again in mid-air, between time, between the beginning and the ending, for if the story at the outside level is about reading, then it is again a process, an incomplete story where the last sentence "Are there any questions?" presupposes a permanent state of dialogue and undercuts any ending at all for the handmaid, for the scholars, for the readers. In this novel, the undercover heroine who "denies nothing and affirms all" (Rosenberg, 60) is a model for readers as well as for the scholars.
De Lauretis suggests that in an ideology where women find themselves hopelessly confined by oedipal narrative—literary as well as mythical—feminist strategy need no longer advocate the destruction of narrative (1986, 108). By embracing the female experiences of split consciousness, of being inscribed and parcelled up, Atwood constructs texts that narrate "with a vengeance" (1986, 108). Her texts force readers both inside and outside the narrative where she amasses language particles to form wild currents of narrative desire, where "language is criss crossed by lines of flight that carry off its vocabulary and syntax" (Deleuze & Parnet, 116); where words are drenched with multiple conjunctions and breaking up singular notions of meaning or plot. Like Rennie of Bodily Harm, Atwood betrays a hunger for narrative knowledge and authority which acknowledges that "language is always a tool, a medium, and something that limits." For Atwood, truth is never "absolute, whole, objective, total" but "composite" (Castro, 231-32). In her novels, she resists narrative unity which valorizes one position over another. Rather her structures reveal complexity, a maze of valid objects and stories; her characters are flawed and measured by their contradictory acceptance of language and by their willingness to tell their stories in the face of fluid and swiftly moving realities. From within these narrative structures, readers are compelled to venture into the "vast astral space" that encloses them in their act of reading just as it pushes them outside of the narratives, a place from which they can discover what they are as well as what they can be.
1. Irvine identifies as one of the movements defining the female text: the "illustration of the use the male pen has made of the female body" (Irvine, 98)

2. Proverbs have been defined by W. Benjamin as the "ruins" of a narrative, and this seems to be true. Proverbs frequently call up a story rather than an image alone. They are a lesson, providing a three dimensional sense of what the words represent.

3. Irigary explains the Oedipus complex resolving "itself into the individual's ability to make capital out of ideals and (thereby also) out of mothers, wives-mothers . . . . [Oedipus'] 'superego' teeming with ideals and moral rules and self-reflective and self representative gazes, will have taken woman away from him in exchange for an idea of woman, 'femininity.' The metaphorical veil of the eternal female covers up the sex-organ seen as castrated" (Speculum 82).

4. Lacombe recognizes that the scholars treat the story as an artifact, one which they name (as the state does the handmaid) and which they essentially reconstruct (again, as the state reconstructs the handmaid's body). She persuasively demonstrates that the dynamics of this act of writing over by the scholars as a palimpsest to that narrative, is a model for the rereading which readers of the novel must do in respect to the frame narrative of the scholars: a palimpsest, then of the frame by the novel's readers. I want to go a step further to suggest that the organization of the entire novel, with one level of narrative informing the other, also disposes readers to make an ironic reading or a rereading of their own reading at yet another level of narration.
CHAPTER V

NARRATIVE DESIRE IN THE FEMALE TEXT

It is possible to read otherwise, in ways that acknowledge female-created violations of convention or tradition as deliberate experiments rather than inadvertent shortcomings . . . that stories both obscure and encode other stories has been axiomatic to our understanding of narrative since at least the eighteenth century; then construed as repressed or suppressed, stories of the Other, these other stories become the enabling conditions for the writing and reading of feminist narrative. (Hite, 1989, 3-4)

In a dialogue with Susan S. Lanser, Nilli Diengott explains "that narratology's apparent disregard" for notions of gender, far from being accidental is actually fundamental to its aims (42). Certainly this agenda has seemed to be all too frequently the case for some feminists in the past. Narrative theory directed much of its inquiry toward male texts and hardly bothered to consider that those texts might have a specifically patriarchal disposition that was specific to history and painfully inappropriate to female texts. Many of the categories which Genette attempted to articulate, while specific to Proust, had little to offer feminists because either these categories failed to appear in female texts or they were, in some way inadequate. (I think here specifically of ideas of focalization which distinguish between internal and external focalization, but do not accommodate a possibility for a simultaneously internal and external viewpoint). Lanser goes on to suggest that this virtual
masculine agenda of narratology, however, has occurred rather unintentionally by way of those critics who see Genette's work as an imperative paradigm rather than an artistic method also informed by and embedded in a western historical context (53). However, with the advent of the narrative work of Brooks and Chambers, wherein the intentionality of writing and reading is made specific to history and shown to be rooted in the unconscious desire for making meaning and seducing readers, feminists, already well-versed in the significance of culture to the appreciation of texts, have an opportunity to invoke as well as recast old paradigms that illuminate the understanding of narrative and its reproduction in female texts.

These preceding chapters have been intended as a process of "reading otherwise." Here I have attempted to use the paradigms of narratology through the lens of feminism, particularly French feminism which has been so effective at employing unusual and useful metaphors in discussing the idea of female desire. The close textual connections between desire and narrative demonstrated by Brooks, Deleuze, and Guattari as grounded in oedipus, and the implications of those connections as explored by Cixous, Irigaray and Benjamin, demonstrate that female writers shape and manipulate their narratives to break open what, within standard narratives, continues to confine and separate them from their own desires. I wanted to suggest here also that the domination of the oedipal narrative has similarly affected narrative analysis in general so that what has always been identified and privileged as "narrative technique" is also drawn from the Oedipus model. As it has dictated the understanding of the
unconscious, so too, has this narrative subsumed the study of literature. As Deleuze and Guattari point out, "literature is like schizophrenia: a process and not a goal, a production and not an expression, ... oedipalization is one of the most important factors in the reduction of literature to an object of consumption" (133). In fact women, I think, also share this particular element in common with literature since they, like the narratives studied and examined in literary criticism, are reduced almost unequivocably to objects of consumption, as though they, like a text, have no voice of their own. Their desire too, has always been appropriated to male desire; their meaning, like these texts, have been evaluated by their servicability to male design. In light of such connections, I have attempted to explore the stakes which female authors have, however buried, in determining their own structures, in articulating their own concerns against those that have been articulated for them by men.

Because of this connection between women and narrative, female texts are perhaps even more at risk of being neutralized, of being divested of all revolutionary force, than a typical masculine resistance narrative. For "to speak as a 'woman' in this culture--is to utter truths by convention so unimaginable that they are likely to be dismissed as gibberish, mere symptoms of hysteria" (Hite, 29). What has been privileged, even in terms of resistance texts, has continued to be those factors and those authors who most succinctly speak to or around the privileged competition of fathers and sons where women signify a plot function, a reward for faithful execution, or orgasmic completion. The end, the closure, the "meaning of all
discourse" in such an enterprise must inevitably be blindness, or if we are women, death. If such a narrative has been seductive to women in the past, if in fact it continues to be so, I think it is still possible to say that it may not necessarily be sufficient for women in general, and probably not even for any single woman.

Confined to the margins of discourse, women have been silenced in a variety of ways, even, as The Golden Notebook has indicated, from being the legitimate spokesperson for their own pleasure—as though Dr. Bloodrot's experiments and conclusions on the orgasm of female swans were more authoritative than a woman's own statement about her pleasure. As Susan Glaspell's murder story, "A Jury of Her Peers," suggests, perhaps women are the best readers of the female texts because they are not as apt to overlook the clues, or the significantly female functions which all women have used to veil or conceal their desire or to dismiss the personal arena of the household as a site of political and ideological action. Certainly, Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale reveals the great risk which Offred courts when she attempts to speak even to herself, even to an unidentified audience. Moreover, the work reveals how men seduce women with words and language and with playful disavowels of their abject subordination to male order and design. Morrison's Beloved underscores the subjectivity denied women when they, as mothers, would attempt to hold their children for themselves rather than permit those children to be inscribed into a master/slave economy that subjugates and castrates everyone including those masters. When women are inscribers, there is chaos, there is isolation, there is guilt even though we have come to
realize in recent history that when violence is orchestrated by masters there is never any "Choice" controversy about it. Again, though, the punctuation of resistance and revolution in these texts continues to bubble below the surface. Like swift moving currents, the narratives shift in a variety of ways to allude capture within any ideological paradigm that might neutralize the import of those constantly changing flows of desire. Rather the texts demand participation from readers in order to assemble the revolutionary force of the narratives.

However the bottom line for female writers need not be that their texts can be or ought to be read only by women, anymore than the bottom line for male texts is that they cannot be read by women. Rather, as women have been instructed in the reading of male texts, and, as they have come to respond to these texts on their own, so too men can read female and feminist texts. Certainly, in terms of its own disclosure of impotence, of castration, and of silence, the Oedipal narrative has had its drawbacks for men as well as women. The mere fact that writers such as Lessing, Morrison, and Atwood are read and reread by male writers perhaps underscores the rather austere fulfillment which Oedipus currently delivers to most westerners, where it is regarded as "something of a relic" read more for its illumination of Freud than vice versa (Holland, 1989, 2). This is the significance of the work of Deleuze and Guattari who have proposed understanding language in terms of its relation to desire, and to understand the oedipal narrative in terms of the restrictions it places upon desire for all those who fall under its rigid code.
However, the female and the female writer falls into a much
different morass under Oedipus than does her male counterpart. For,
if she reveals a desire at all, she will inevitably be subversive,
mad, hysterical, deviant, not because of the content of that desire
like the male, but because of the fact that under Oedipus, she is not
permitted any desire of her own, not even one which has the sanction
of men. She remains totally neutralized, passive, the shadow only of
male content; rather her desire is like the faded line drawings of a
coloring book, intended to be "outlined" and "filled in" by husbands,
fathers, or sons. If she explores her desire, such an exploration is
silly, unwarranted, or clearly insane. Such a journey is of necessity
constituted along tentative and provisional lines against her assigned
neutralization. Here even the very act of taking up the pen, of
muttering a syllable, constitutes an aberration, an act of subversion
which needs to be contained by the patriarchal system for which she
serves as value and representation of male desire. If men, too, are
hampered by oedipus, it is not as a woman, as a nonsubject, or as a
surface reflection of a subject. As de Lauretis explains, women are a
contradiction in language where "we attempt to speak as subjects of
discourses which negate or objectify us through their representation"

As a gendered other, a woman is assigned a place with the standard
line of narrative as an object of inscription. Since she is not
allowed subjectivity, her desire is forced underground, into the
buried recesses of the narrative. It is not surprising then that
writers like Lessing, Morrison, and Atwood have delivered highly
layered and deliberately dense narrative structures from which they assemble their narrative desire. These narratives, too, are fueled by desire, that same unconscious "revolutionary force" which D&G poetically discuss. However, that desire takes shape out of absolute prohibition. Her language as well as her narrative then is bound to be dynamic, discontinuous, fluid. Rather than abandoning narrative altogether as some male writers advocate, the female writer navigates a course around and through narrative. Born in contradiction, she is at home with contradiction. She understands that the rejection of narrative underwrites the dualism which has forced her desire into exile, into a reflection of the male: her irrationality to his rationality; her unintelligibility to his intelligibility; her wrong to his right (Hite, 29). It is from this perspective of contradiction that women live and choose to speak. If they are to create a subjectivity for their female characters it is necessarily a complex one where various desires, and thus stories, are not only possible but imperative.

While the protagonists of these texts acknowledge the seductiveness of standard narrative lines—the initiation plot in Lessing, the realistic plot in Morrison, and the romance plot in Atwood—they also resist these plots through taking flight from the conventions. Rather women writers employ narrative "with a vengeance" (de Lauretis, 1984, 157). Speaking of the The Golden Notebook, Hite points out that "'the truth' is not a fixed reality that lurks behind the distortions of narrative form but a product of tellings and retellings. Or rather, that there is no truth apart from the telling,
no real story, no authorized version, no vantage point that allows experience to be viewed as a whole" (90). These writers put many stories in the air at once in order to approach that which has even for them been off limits because their texts, like their desire, is constantly being newly formed and revised. This is the challenge for the female writer: to give voice to her desire, to shape a reality that has no language, that destroys itself even as it is created. It may be, too, that this process is more acceptable to western culture now than it has been in previous centuries. In fact, its appropriation by dominant discourse is yet another reason for such fluidly constructed works. Women, like many minorities, enjoy a long history of having their ideas, their energies, even their bodies, lifted and put to use in the service of their own oppression. What, I feel, distinguishes these three particular writers, is that they are as conscious of the act of appropriation within their text as they are of the subversive nature of their exploration of desire. It is not only that, like Shelley's Frankenstein, they wish to portray the faithless irresponsibility of mastery in western culture, or the categorical objectification of difference, but that the monster himself has been absorbed and reissued to the various merchandising altars of men like Victor for service to the master's greed and agrandisment. The monster has learned to kill so that he can, at the will of the master, come to adorn a Christmas stocking where his rebellion delivers amusement and, frightenly, absolution to the master and the adoring guests.
Rather, in addition to their dense narrative structures, these narratives by Lessing, Morrison, and Atwood are self-conscious, undoing at every new juncture what the work attempted to assemble at the previous juncture. In this way, the works slip and slide from appropriation. Though Beloved and The Handmaid's Tale may have adorned the best-seller lists, their effusive stories continue to baffle and slide away from their interpreters, including this one.

Lastly, I want to suggest that narrative study might be an interesting and enlightening method by which female texts can be examined, not because it purports to scientific validity or because its paradigms are better than those of other critical methods. Rather, I think it is useful for the exploration of female texts largely because narrative theory acknowledges a relationship between structure and meaning which many theories do not. It also acknowledges a relationship between narrative structure and the unconscious and the historical context. Because feminists, writers and critics, are so often bound by such structures, it seems to me a particularly fruitful avenue of exploration. Also, narrative theory continues to be an important juncture from which to understand how women and their bodies are used within mass culture and therefore, I think, how their texts are read by those cultures. While narratology as it currently stands often proves inaccessible to female texts, its dialogue with feminism can provide a vitalizing method for engaging these works and allowing them to reveal their deepest and most obscured desires. Far from being the only method for interpretation, it is a good beginning. What I have attempted with this dissertation,
is a first step in a journey of a thousand miles, where female authors can be read not for what they support in the male logic of our world, not solely for what they dispute in that logic, but for what they add, "otherwise." Susan Lanser concludes her discussion in favor of a joining of feminism and narrative theory calling upon "feminists, narratologists, and feminist narratologists to turn our swords [and here I read over—our phallocentric dichotomizing weapons] into ploughshares and to cultivate some common ground" (59). And as we do so, perhaps we can eventually reap a less violent and ravaged future for our literary concerns as well as for our culture.
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PRIMARY SOURCES


BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SECONDARY SOURCES


