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Imaging the body in contemporary women's poetry: Helga Novak, Ursula Krechel, Carolyn Forché, Nikki Giovanni

Kepple, Amy Jo, Ph.D.

The Ohio State University, 1991
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IMAGING THE BODY IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETRY:
HELGA NOVAK, URSULA KRECHEL, CAROLYN FORCHÉ, NIKKI GIOVANNI

DISSERTATION

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

By

Amy Jo Kepple, B.A., M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1991

Dissertation Committee: Approved by
Helen Fehervary
Dagmar Lorenz
Leslie Adelson

Adviser
Department of German
In memory of Helgard Genschel
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VITA

April 19, 1957 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Born--Springfield, Ohio

1979 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . BA, Capital University, Columbus, Ohio

1982 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . MA, Department of German, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1982-1983 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Teaching Assistant, Hardtberg Gymnasium, Bonn, West Germany

1986-1987 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Instructor, Department of Foreign Languages, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama

1988-1990 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Academic Adviser, University College, Ohio State University

1990-1991 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Lecturer, Ohio State University-Newark Campus, Newark, Ohio

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INTRODUCTION

Overview and Description of Research

The present study focuses on poetry from the last 25 years by four women writers, whose work is presently scarcely acknowledged by, or reflected in, the canons and literary criticism of German and American literature. The poets Helga M. Novak, Ursula Krechel, Carolyn Forché, and Nikki Giovanni have continued consistently throughout the 1970s and 1980s or longer. These writers, born between 1935 (Novak) and 1950 (Forché), with Giovanni and Krechel in 1943 and 1947, respectively, entered the world in a period from four years prior to the Second World War to five years thereafter. They belong to what can thus be referred to as the second postwar wave of twentieth-century women poets.¹ None is or has been directly aligned or identified with a particular school of poets or poetic movement, which has yielded a singular poetic voice and vision for each.² All

¹ For a definition of the first wave, see page 16 below.

² Sigrid Weigel includes Novak and Krechel among other contemporary German women poets "who have developed individual and very divergent styles" ("Overcoming Absence" 20).
have written a significant body of what may best be termed narrative poetry, by which I mean that the poem plays a crucial role in storytelling, that is, in relating real or invented episodes in the poetic text. All four can be described as writers of engaged poetry, in that they frequently address critical social and political issues directly in their writing. Lastly, their respective contributions to women's poetry today is not reflected in the existing research on their work, which is scant.

Poetry that describes experience from a woman's perspective is by standard definition marginal and oversteps the bounds of normative poetic discourse. It has been said of women's language that

The transgression of literary boundaries--moments when structures are shaken, when language refuses to lie down meekly, or the marginal is brought into sudden focus, or intelligibility itself refused--reveal not only the conditions of possibility within which women's writing exists, but what it would be like to revolutionise them. In the same way, the moment of desire (the moment when the writer most clearly installs herself in her writing) becomes a refusal of mastery, an opting for openness and possibility, which can in itself make women's writing a challenge to the literary structures it must necessarily inhabit. (Mary Jacobus, qtd. in Meese 120)

To varying degrees and in different ways, the poetry of Novak, Krechel, Forché, and Giovanni is transgressive.

---

3 As distinguished from lyric, dramatic, and linguistically or formally experimental poetry.
according to the above description. These poets have expanded and altered traditional literary forms, such as the ballad (Novak), the elegy (Krechel, Forché), the tall tale (Giovanni), the long poem, and the narrative poem (all four), to suit their aesthetic needs, and to meet the demands of their respective, and very different, poetic projects.

I will discuss the poetry of Novak, Krechel, Forché, and Giovanni in the context of their literary, historical, social, and political backgrounds. My analyses examine the diverse ways in which the imagery of the body confronts and reflects the experience of life in West German and American societies from the late 1960s to the present. I focus on the implications of gender--and, where appropriate, race and class--difference for women's everyday lives, including acts of violence, discrimination, and oppression; sexuality, pregnancy, and childbirth; aging, disease, and death, all as they appear in the body imagery of the poems. I have chosen between eight to twelve poems from each writer to discuss in this context. The poems were selected on the basis of their imaging of the human body in general, and the female body in particular. The majority of the selected texts contain imagery descriptive of the body from a third-person perspective, while a smaller portion directly presents
portrayals of bodily experience from the perspective of the first-person (female) poetic persona.

The poems under discussion are dated from 1965 to 1985, while the majority were written during the 1970s. In terms of historical background, this twenty year period saw the beginning and development of the civil rights and black liberation movements in the United States, as well as the emergence of the student movement, protesting American military involvement in Vietnam, and the women's movement in the U.S. and West Germany, in which Giovanni, Novak, and Krechel were active participants. Forché's work as a human rights activist began somewhat later, in the mid to late 1970s, yet the effects of the Vietnam War on her friends and family had had a profound impact on her life earlier in that decade.

The poetry of these four writers has grown out of these different social and political movements of the late sixties and early seventies. Throughout her career, Helga Novak, an expatriate of the German Democratic Republic since 1966 who lived in Frankfurt am Main until the late 1970s, has written many poems that confront social injustice and human rights abuses. In particular, two of the later volumes of her poetry, *Balladen vom kurzen Prozess* (1975) and *Margarete mit dem Schrank* (1978), take issue with the oppressive measures
undertaken by institutions of the West German government, which not only violate the civil rights of marginalized citizens such as minority women, but also destroy their lives in the process ("Ballade von der Türkin Nigar," "Ballade von der Zigeunerin und Kronzeugin Carla"). The latter book also responds to the offensive in the Federal Republic of Germany against persons suspected of linkage to the terrorist activities of the Red Army and the Baader-Meinhof group during the late 1970s, which included the invasion of privacy and intrusive federal investigations ("Datenbank des BKA"). Other poems from this volume deal with violence against and the ostracization of women, both from cultures beyond the FRG ("Strafe ins Bild gesetzt," "eine alte Geschichte"), and as paradigmatic of that nation ("Margarete mit dem Schrank").

Throughout her oeuvre, Novak has consistently portrayed poetic personae as outsiders alienated from their community as a result of their differing positions in the respective socio-historical context. These figures act as anti-heroes and are the victims of corruption in government ("Ballade von der verbannten Glocke"), poverty, colonialism, and the military-industrial complex ("Ballade vom Legionär"), and the impact of everyday fascism, the legacy of the National Socialist past, and a divided Germany ("untauglich,"
"Margarete mit dem Schrank," "Ballade von der kastrierten Füppe"). Novak's frequent employment of the ballad as a narrative device to relate these stories of injustice, as well as her use of simple, colloquial language suggestive of the literary traditions of the German working class, place her firmly in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht. Yet by keeping the violations of the body directly before the eyes of her readers, Novak manages to materialize the consequences of isolation, mutilation, and fragmentation through grotesque, graphic imagery--and often absurd humor--not manifested in Brecht's poetry.

The development of Ursula Krechel's poetry is not as readily definable as Novak's. Although critics have somewhat misguidedly placed her in connection with the nebulous grouping of New Subjectivity in the poetry of the 1970s--among such poets as Jürgen Theobaldy, Nicolas Born, Karin Kiwus, and Renate Rasp--the major influence on her writing has been literary and cultural aspects of the West German public sphere since 1968, in the context of the student and women's movements. As in her first creative work (the play "Erika," 1974) and her first book (Selbsterfahrung und Fremdbestimmung: Bericht aus der Neuen Frauenbewegung, 1975), Krechel centers her vision on women figures and women's issues throughout each volume of poetry.
In the poems "Meine Mutter" and "Todestag," for example, she introduces a reappropriation of the traditional elegy in German poetry by rewriting the standard father-son bond into a mother-daughter relationship severed through death. Krechel weaves motifs of pregnancy, childbirth, childcare, and matrilineal heritage into her poems in order to salvage such aspects of women's experience from the margins or blind spots of poetic representation ("Nach Mainz!," "Schon ihre Mutter war Mutter," "Mnemosyne"). Several poems that deal with the oppression of women under the patriarchy of present-day Germany portray women transformed into wild prey and hunted by men ("Nachts verwandeln sie sich in reisende Wölfinnen," "Die Würde der Frau ist tastbar"). Still others confront the estrangement in human relationships that emanates from the depersonalization of today's scientific, technological, and intellectual inventions ("Entwurf zu einer Anthologie der Körper," "Stammen wir nicht von Menschen ab," "Örthopädie des aufrechten Ganges").

Krechel's poetry at times ironizes the struggles of the West German women's movement and its departure from the male-dominated political left of the 70s in the Federal Republic ("Nach Mainz!," "Die Würde der Frau"). Such poems expose the often unacknowledged sexism that existed among the ranks of the political radicals at that time and assert
the need for West German women to organize separately from their male counterparts. In her long poem *Rohschnitt* (1983), which is divided into sixty sections, Krechel experiments with formal aspects of film technique and theory, and creates a women-centered sphere through an innovative poetic persona: in addition to a first-person speaker throughout the book, the main character is a three-part figure who encompasses major aspects of a female identity (*die Kluge, die Schöne, die Mutter*). This work and her next volume of poems, *Vom Feuer lernen* (1985), both of which list annotations citing allusions to or quotations from sources as diverse as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Brecht, and Bachmann, suggest that the direction of her work is increasingly entering into an interrogation of the inheritance of the modernist avant-garde in feminist poetic discourse. Krechel's poetry delineates the female body in transition from birthgiver to genealogist, charting the course of women's history and consciousness.

Much of Carolyn Forché's poetry also exhibits an engagement with the modernist avant-garde. Forché's poetic language, which often contains neologisms and innovations in syntax, is consistently elevated and literary. Her early poetry introduces imagery of sexual intimacy from a woman's perspective, through realistic depictions of an oppressive
power imbalance between the sexes that serves to deromanticize male-female eroticism ("Year at Mudstraw," "Taking Off My Clothes"). She further subverts myths and elisions of women's sexuality through sensual portrayals of pregnancy and childbirth ("Ha Chi Je Na I Am Coming," "White Wings They Never Grow Weary") and lovemaking between two female figures ("Kalaloch"). Forché's *Gathering the Tribes* (1976) presents the embodied sensuality of a white, middle-class, North American woman engaging with the culture of Native American peoples in the western U.S.

Although still highly stylized, the poetry in *The Country Between Us* (1981) speaks with more awareness of and insight into her privileged position as a white North American against the backdrop of the impending civil war in El Salvador. Contrary to her first volume, Forché's second book shifts its focus from the body of the female persona to the bodies of Salvadorans and other Latin Americans who are the victims of violence. In poems that witness political turmoil in that Central American country, Forché writes about disconnection from the body due to torture, imprisonment, and dismemberment ("The Memory of Elena," "The Visitor," "The Colonel," "Because One Is Always Forgotten"). In several long poems, the body serves as the emblem of its own perpetual violation from World War II to the atrocities
of the recent past ("Return," "Ourselves or Nothing"). Forché's poetry exposes the grand scale of human rights abuses of the present day and attempts to inscribe the memory of the lost lives in our consciousness by incorporating their stories into the poetic text.

Whereas death and mutilation abound in Forché's imagery of the body, a celebration and affirmation of embodied life flourish in Nikki Giovanni's poetry, who relates her experiences as a woman from an Afro-American perspective. Initially active in the black liberation movement of the late 1960s, Giovanni has written poems which accent her connection to the black community ("For Two Jameses") and to other black women, both younger and older ("Poem for Flora," "Poem (for Nina)," "Hands: For Mother's Day"). Elsewhere in her poetry, she emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance and appreciation through a sustained reflection on her identity as a contemporary African-American woman ("Ego Tripping," "The Life I Led," "Seduction").

As is often pointed out in the criticism on her work, Giovanni's earlier poems exhibit a militant edge in theme, language, and tone, while her later poetry reveals a greater subtlety in style with themes of subjective interests such as family and introspection. Though she has never claimed to speak for the black community, her early work often
voices her anger and desires about living as a woman of
color in the United States. These texts, frequently written
in the African-American vernacular, show the influence of
the rhythms and styles of black popular music. Giovanni's
more recent collections speak about the experience of
growing older, an appreciation of simple pleasures, and
reflection on ways in which everyday life has enabled women
to fight the harmful effects of violence and disadvantage.

In feminist literary criticism, numerous books and
articles have appeared within the past fifteen years which
address a wide variety of issues in recent women's poetry in
an English-language context. For a number of reasons, the
work of women poets is generally more readily accessible to
the reading public in the U.S. than in Germany. The
existence of Women's Studies both as a discipline and as an
academic unit on university campuses throughout the United

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See, for example, Jan Clausen, A Movement of Poets:
Thoughts on Poetry and Feminism (1982); Mary K. DeShazer,
Inspiring Women: Reimagining the Muse (1986); Suzanne
Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by
Women, A New Tradition (1976); and Jan Montefiore, Feminism
and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's
Writing (1987). In addition, on poetry by women of color,
see Mari Evans, ed., Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A
Critical Evaluation (1984); Lynda Koolish, "The Bones of
This Body Say, Dance: Self-Empowerment in Contemporary
Poetry by Women of Color"; and John F. Crawford, "Notes
toward a New Multicultural Criticism: Three Works by Women
of Color," both in A Gift of Tongues: Critical Challenges in
Contemporary American Poetry (1987), Marie Harris and
Kathleen Aguero, eds.
States has enabled a large number of students to be exposed to literature by women. In addition, there are more women faculty at the college level in the U.S. than at German universities. Many of these professors—in Women’s Studies, English and creative writing, foreign language, and other humanities departments—are thus able to teach courses and to organize conferences that deal with women’s writing; they also often invite writers as guest speakers, visiting instructors, or leaders of writing workshops within the university. In turn, many American women poets go "on the circuit" of college campuses frequently and with regularity, so that a wide audience can become familiar with their work at poetry readings, if not through the books they write. Taking the Americans in this study as examples, Nikki Giovanni has established and maintained her reputation as a representative African-American poet as much on the basis of her public speaking and poetry readings as her publications. Carolyn Forché’s recognition as an Euro-American poet has largely been founded on the immense success of her second book, The Country Between Us (which became a best seller), both among the general populace and in academic circles. Still, the currently available literature about Giovanni and Forché’s poetry is limited to a small number of articles in academic journals or critical anthologies.
Neglect of the topic of poetry by women is indeed far more drastic in the existing scholarship about contemporary German literature than in American literary criticism. Germanists both in the United States and Europe, including those who employ feminist approaches, consistently choose to discuss women's prose writing at the expense of poetry. I attribute this trend in part to a current preference for, and a greater degree of familiarity and higher level of comfort with, reading and writing about fiction, a practice which tends to contribute to a ghettoization of the poetic genre by women Germanists, both generally and more particularly in terms of women's poetry. The few publications that deal with German women's poetry explicitly are anthologies of the primary literature and not critical studies or essays, which are fairly common on poetry by American women; while these collections represent necessary, restorative, historical research, they nonetheless provide no further exploration of the subject.\(^5\)

Several essays from the mid 1980s survey contemporary German literature by women and provide overall thorough and

thoughtful analyses. Still, Sigrid Weigel's two-part article on "Contemporary German Women's Literature" and Renate Wiggershaus's "Neue Tendenzen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, in Österreich und in der Schweiz" devote their attention almost exclusively to prose fiction and make only a passing reference to poetry. In a one-paragraph summary Weigel acknowledges the need to devote more attention to the genre, yet believes that "prose represents the forum in which the development of theory, topoi, themes and perspectives of female culture expresses itself most significantly" ("Overcoming Absence" 20). Wiggershaus, who devotes several paragraphs to the poetry of Rose Ausländer and Friederike Mayröcker, refers to the work of both Novak and Krechel, though she discusses only the autobiographical novels of the former (421) and briefly describes a single volume of poetry (Rohschnitt) by the latter (424). No in-depth study of contemporary poetry by German-speaking women yet exists to address the writing of these and other female poets of recent years.

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While this may be true of German women's literature, in the U.S. poetry has remained in the forefront in the development of feminist literature.
Modernist poetry has traditionally inscribed the female body as the aesthetic landscape of desire. Beginning with the French symbolist poets in the nineteenth century, continuing into the twentieth century with the surrealist and expressionist movements in Europe and the United States, and encompassing the trend toward hermeticism that signalled a profound crisis in modern poetry after the Second World War, women, and their bodies, have been the objectified other upon which the male poet—and poetic persona—has projected his voice and his vision. From Charles Baudelaire's prostitutes to Bertolt Brecht's faceless Marie A., from the nameless women in T. S. Eliot's "Prufrock" to the medicalized anatomies of Gottfried Benn, the female gender has primarily been utilized as the passive, inspiring muse by writing men in their depictions of the female body.

In the early twentieth century, however, a number of early women modernists began making their voices heard in Germany and the United States, albeit in league with the major male poets in those two countries. Elsa Lasker-Schüler became a leading representative of expressionism and belonged to the inner circle of the movement together with Georg Trakl, Georg Heym, and Franz Werfel. During the first half of the century, she wrote poetry prolifically about
themes of love, death, and biblical mysticism through vivid archetypal imagery and symbolism. At the same time that expressionist poetry was flourishing in Germany, imagism arose as the dominant school of poetry in America. In connection with founder Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, three women writers gained recognition through their poetry of the imagistic style. Amy Lowell took over as the prominent figure among the imagists after Pound left both the country and the movement. While the poetry of Hilde Doolittle (H.D.) is associated with imagism as well, the work of Marianne Moore represents the poetry of the objectivist school, an outgrowth of imagism.

An important generation of women poets, born between 1915 and 1935 and starting to publish for the most part in the 1950s or early 1960s, constitute the first postwar wave of German and American poetry by women. The early work of this generation, which predated the women's movement and still largely upheld various strands of modernist poetry, helped pave the way for younger women poets. In terms of Euro-American poetry, these writers include Carolyn Kizer, Maxine Kumin, Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Sexton (Heilbrun 61, 63); and in African-American poetry, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, Sonia Sanchez, and Margaret Walker have each made significant contributions.
In the German-speaking world, Ilse Aichinger, Ingeborg Bachmann, Sarah Kirsch, Friederike Mayröcker, and Christa Reinig are representative of this generation. A modicum of critical attention has been granted the work of most writers from this generation; however, as often happens in the formation of the canon in most historical periods, critical studies overwhelmingly predominate on the work of only a few writing women, such as Plath, Rich, and Sexton in Euro-American, Brooks and Lorde in Afro-American, and Bachmann in German literary criticism.

The immense social, political, and psychological consequences of the Second World War naturally had a more profound impact on literature in Europe than in the United States. Due to the complexities of German history, modernism came to be increasingly diversified after the war. Two modernist poets from the postwar period have made a significant and lasting impression on the genre in the German language. During the 1960s, the poetry of Paul Celan became progressively more abstruse and less accessible, while that of Ingeborg Bachmann became more and more concerned with themes of silence and speechlessness. Their

7 For example, in terms of German women poets: Catharina Regina von Greiffenber (1633-1694), Karoline von Günderode (1780-1806), Annette von Droste-Hülshoff (1797-1848), and Elsa Lasker-Schüler (1869-1945).
mutual reliance on the cryptic use of metaphor and symbol
signalled a movement toward a more hermetic lyric form,
which stemmed from a crisis of language and a questioning of
its limits for poetic expression experienced by both poets.
The struggle to maintain a poetic voice and vision, and the
ultimate realization of the inadequacy of both language and
the lyric form to accomplish that end, were problems that
Bachmann and Celan shared. Their late poetry forebodes
their immanent exhaustion of the genre, as it represents the
culmination and subsequent decline of modernism in German
poetry. Bachmann's production of poems gradually diminished
in the early sixties and virtually ceased after 1964; she
wrote fiction—short stories, a novel (*Malina*), and two
novel fragments—until her death in 1973. Celan, on the
other hand, continued to write poetry until he died in 1970;
however, the language and structure of his final poems
became more and more compressed, as the lens of his poetic
vision contracted to a point that defies comprehension.⁸

The dilemma of attempting to sustain the lyric form,
which Bachmann and Celan experienced in the decades
following World War II, has become emblematic of Theodor
Adorno's now timeworn dictum from the essay "Kulturkritik

⁸ Katharine Washburn characterizes Celan's late work as
poetic "decomposition" and "stylistic devolution" (xxiii).
und Gesellschaft" (1951) that writing poetry after Auschwitz is not possible (30). Nonetheless, many writers continued to employ the verse form for the very reason of confronting the Holocaust and the National Socialist past in the years after the war. For the many postwar writers, different implications of modernism were reflected in various poetic traditions. Imagery and themes of the Holocaust characterize the poetry of the German Jewish writers Nelly Sachs and Erich Fried. While the work of Sachs resembles the elevated poetic stylizations of Bachmann, Fried's political critique, in poems about Vietnam and the Arab-Israeli conflict, for example, reflects the use of satire in the poetic traditions of Heinrich Heine and Bertolt Brecht.

In varying degrees and by combining social criticism with formal and stylistic innovations, postwar German poetry demonstrates the continuation of modernist traditions in the lyric genre. The work of Günter Eich and Hans Magnus Enzensberger carries on the tradition of socially critical poetry. The poetic texts of Eugen Gomringer, Helmut Heissenbüttel, Ernst Jandl, Friederike Mayröcker, and Franz Mon, as well as members of the Wiener Gruppe such Hans Carl Artmann and Konrad Bayer, are experimental in language and form. Their poetry suggests an outgrowth of the formalistically radical movements of dada and surrealism in
modernism of the early twentieth century, as exemplified in the verse of Hans Arp and August Stramm, as well as the austere symbolism and visual formalism of Stefan George. The poetry of such East German writers as Johannes Bobrowski, Peter Huchel, and Sarah Kirsch in its nature imagery is indebted to Klopstock and Hölderlin, yet in language, form, and style is also reminiscent of expressionist verse. To advance a comparison of modernist poets one step further, the poetry of both Bachmann and Celan is indebted to the weighty heritage of the early modernists Hugo von Hofmannsthal (who, as they did, experienced a Sprachkrise) and Rainer Maria Rilke.⁹

The cultural impact of the social movements of the sixties and seventies signalled the beginnings of a crucial shift in literature. The political environment of these two key decades, with the rise of the new left in the Federal Republic, formed the major historical impetus in the development of the second generation of postwar writers. Thus the move away from modernism in German poetry arose not so much in response to the legacy of the Second World War—as it had for most of the poets of the older generation mentioned above—as in accordance with the formative social

⁹ None of these poets—Bachmann, Celan, Hofmannsthal, or Rilke—was born in Germany or lived there for an extended period.
and cultural trends of the latter postwar decades. For the German women poets of this generation, then, who began publishing in the 1960s and 1970s and of whom Novak and Krechel are representative, I will argue that the writing of poetry was not only possible but necessary in finding creative, literary means for overcoming absence\(^{10}\) in, and gaining access to, poetic discourse.

In both the Federal Republic and the United States, the publishers, critics, and theorists of mainstream West German and American literature have helped perpetuate the elision and marginalization of much of the writing by persons of the female gender. In general terms, women in western patriarchal societies have been excluded as subjects and omnipresent as objects in the literary, philosophical, and historical texts of male writers. As Teresa de Lauretis makes clear, this conundrum for women (writers) exists both literally—concretely in the world—and figuratively—abstractly in discourse:

\[\ldots\] the paradox of woman, a being that is at once captive and absent in discourse, constantly spoken of but of itself inaudible or inexpressible, displayed as spectacle and yet unreprented; a being whose existence and specificity are simultaneously asserted and denied, negated and controlled. \ldots\] one should be mindful that this paradox is not solely

\(^{10}\) I borrow this phrase from the title of an essay by Weigel.
discursive, but is grounded in a real contradiction for women in the world designed and governed by men, a conceptual and experiential contradiction in which women are necessarily caught as social beings, and which no other political or social thought but feminism has seen fit to consider. (26)

These words are echoed in an essay by Weigel, who formulates this paradox in reference to the female body:

Er, das männliche Subjekt, repräsentiert die männliche Ordnung; der einzelne Mann steht für sie, auch dann, wenn er als einzelner, als Aussenseiter, vom Bild der Männlichkeit abweicht. Männlichkeit meint beides, das herrschende Prinzip und die Existenzweise eines Subjekts. Die Frau dagegen verkörpert Weiblichkeit, d.h. ihr Körper ist als Ort der Weiblichkeit in der männlichen Ordnung definiert und fixiert. Dieser Unterschied beinhaltet eine grundsätzlich verschiedene Perspektive der Erfahrung und Wahrnehmung und lässt alle Androgynitätsphantasien als naive Wunschutopien erscheinen. ("Frau und 'Weiblichkeit'," 109)

The article containing this passage, written in 1983, continues the groundwork in West German feminist theory and criticism begun several years earlier by Silvia Bovenschen. Her essay "Über die Frage: Gibt es eine weibliche Ästhetik?" (1976) and book Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit (1979) helped launch a discussion of the portrayals of women, the female body, and the feminine in art and literature by men, and questioned the possibility and potential value of a feminist aesthetic as separate from, but presumably on equal footing with, the male tradition.
In tandem with the rise of feminist criticism, a new and different kind of poetry by female authors emerged in the 1970s on the heels of the women's movement in the United States. Alongside the early feminist practice that encouraged non-professional women writers to use poetry as a means to express the self and to explore repressed feelings (Weigel, "Absence" 20; Krechel 61-62), American women poets such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, most of whom had published previously, began to write freely about the female body through the lens of lesbian desire and experience. This writing often characterizes the female body, its sexuality and biology, as the focal point in the empowerment of women and the common bond in the development of women's communities. With regard to poetry, the impact of this writing, however, lies in its reformulation of erotic and love poems. Unlike the expression of heterosexual desire between the sexes in traditional verse, lesbian poetry makes possible the presence of woman both as the writing, desiring

11 Although the poetry of West German women writers such as Christa Reinig and Verena Stefan have had a similar influence in the FRG, because of the stronger development of lesbian writing and theory and its greater impact in the U.S. women's movement, I will focus on this as principally an American phenomenon.

12 Female homosexuality has been a topic largely forbidden in poetry since the seventh century B.C., when the writings of Sappho were almost completely destroyed for violating the taboo of love between women.
subject of the poem, and as the love "object," or receiver of affection. For the lesbian poet thus incorporates the female body into the poem in the form of the other-who-is-the-same, as a dialogue with another not based on a gendered physical difference. This reappropriation of the female body by a woman transforms the standard objectification of the female lover into a reflexivity/reflectivity between self and other not possible for the heterosexual male poet, which preserves and uplifts a primary relation of the lesbian poet both to herself, to other women, and to the female body.

In her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), Hélène Cixous writes:

I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies--for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text--as into the world and into history--by her own movement. (245)

The focus on the body remains a controversial topic in feminist criticism and beyond. In the past few years, the controversy over the body in literary and critical theory has asserted itself most prominently in the form of the

13 The primacy of that bond originates in and is based on the connection of a woman to her mother's body and its physical sameness.
hotly contested question of essentialism. Since a detailed account of this debate is beyond the scope of this study, I would like to summarize its significance for the following project: Although the current concern with the body in literary criticism borders on essentialism, it likewise engenders a reciprocal desire to place the body in context and to de-essentialize it. For "the body"--or any configuration of "bodies"--stripped bare of its theoretical underpinnings, is at the very least a term for a concrete biological entity, and at best a figure of discourse that signifies an abstraction of the gendered physical embodiment of human beings. An effort to contextualize the female body stems from the acute need in feminism to historicize and politicize essences, so as not to neglect the differing and significant specificities of women's location as historical subjects, including such definitive factors as age, race, class, nationality, and religion. Images of the body in literature, and the reception and interpretation of them, are always mediated by the critic's own particular linguistic, cultural, and historical circumstances.

See "The Essential Difference: Another Look at Essentialism," differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 1.2 (1989). The dialectic suggested in the issue's title, by juxtaposing the implication that gender, feminism, and/or "woman" is an or the "essential difference," against its counterpoint, the essentialism debate, informs the underlying argument of de Lauretis's article.
et al. 4; Suleiman 2). Thus, as a feminist critic, I will analyze poetic imagery of the body in relation to each poet's own particular set of historical conditions, and to the poetic personae and settings of the poems, as well as in the context of other poetry by the same and different writers, in an attempt to circumvent a reliance on essences.

Contemporary poetry by women can make possible a literary reclaiming of the female body in order to actively engage in dialogue with women's history of objectified otherness in male discourse, while it can also make manifest a plurality of female subjectivities that reveal the specificity of each poet's location in the socio-cultural matrix. In her book *Literature and the Body*, Elaine Scarry aptly characterizes the connection between the body and its place in literature and demonstrates how the current interest in the body in literary criticism and theory has arisen out of the theoretical discourses and critical practices of poststructuralism and deconstruction:

\[... the human body is at the present moment a special site of attention and concern. As a historical phenomenon, there is nothing surprising about this: the very extremity of the scepticism\]

\[15\] I believe Virginia Woolf was well able to express the importance of the inclusion of women as both the subject and object of literary discourse when she wrote about the potential for empowering women inherent in the seemingly innocuous, but actually very profound, statement: "Chloe liked Olivia" (86-88).
about the referential capacities of language in the past decade made it almost inevitable that at the moment when language was finally reconnected to the world, the primary site of reconnection would be not just this or that piece of material ground but the most extreme locus of materialization, the live body. . . . attention to the body constitutes a narrow band within the much wider spectrum of recent attention to history and naturalism, subjects that have themselves arisen as avenues of reclaiming the material world for literature. (Scarry xx-xxi, emphasis added)

In this study, I will examine the ways in which contemporary poetry by two West German and two North American women images the body and disrupts both conventional assumptions about the female gender and traditional poetic narrative. In addition, I will assess the extent to which the portrayal of women's bodies in these poems transforms gender, racial, and class stereotypes and demonstrate how these poets ground their writing in the material conditions of postmodernity.


CHAPTER 1
DISPOSSESSION, VIOLATION, AND MUTILATION:
THE FRAGMENTED BODY IN THE POETRY OF HELGA M. NOVAK

Introduction

In the poetry of Helga M. Novak, the body imagery revolves around recurrent themes of violence against oppressed persons in a variety of settings and historical locations. Novak frequently makes use of the ballad form to tell these stories of injury and abuse, which often graphically depict the effects of bodily harm. I will examine Novak's imaging of the body on three central topics. First, the poetic persona sometimes functions as an outsider who experiences alienation as a result of both verbal or physical abuse and isolation from the community, leading to internal withdrawal and conflict. Second, the sexual and otherwise physical violation of women from different social classes and cultures underlines oppressive social and political conditions affecting their gender. Third, the body (often male) in varying contexts suffers mutilation and dismemberment which underscores the psychological, military-political, and technological mechanisms that enable and perpetuate such violence.
The Dispossessed Body

Three poems spanning Novak's writing career, beginning with "untauglich" from *Colloquium mit vier Häuten* (1967), followed by "Margarete mit dem Schrank" from the collection of the same name (1978), and "meine doppelte Zunge" from her most recent volume of poetry, *Legende Transsib* (1985), center on the problematic interaction of an individual with his or her environment, manifested through a distinguishing physical feature of the head or face. These personae encounter difficulty in self-expression or verbal communication with people in the surrounding community.

The poem "untauglich" (1965) points out the personal characteristics of someone of great sensitivity and gentleness, who nevertheless displays a coarseness in verbal expression: "der . . . mit dünem Fell / . . . der mit den weichen Augen / der mit dem derben Maul."¹ This portion of the poem is revised using the feminine definite article in the title of the foreword to Novak's collected poems (the entire poem appears later in that introduction, 10):

Die mit dem dünnen Fell
Die mit den weichen Augen
Die mit dem derben Maul

Helga M. Novaks Gedichte 1955-1980 (5)

¹ Novak, *Grünheide Grünheide* 41-2. All of Novak's poems with the exception of those from *Legende Transsib* are cited from this volume; all citations appear parenthetically in the text.
Although the poem ostensibly presents a male persona as evidenced by the use of the masculine *der*, the poetic persona may refer to the poet. Whether Novak intended to describe another person or to present a veiled self-portrait, the poem depicts a human being suffering from the legacy of National Socialism: it is written in a language that recalls the *lagerdeutsch* of the concentration camps.

The second stanza reads: "der kann den Backenstreich / seines Ernährers nicht ertragen / weil seine Haut schneller als anderen platzt." This victim of abuse is apt to be treated worse precisely because of his sensitivity; those who inflict the violence react all the more fiercely when they perceive his vulnerability. The poem voices their attitude toward and response to this person: "haut ihn / er weiss alles besser / er sieht durch alle durch." The persona must endure the suggestion of types of torture and other trials concocted by those—who resemble members of the SS or *KZ*-guards—with the will and the power to inflict pain on him, for example: pricking his finger on the spinning wheel (as in "Sleeping Beauty"), or anticipating the onset of various natural catastrophes. Thus "untauglich" operates

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on two levels: it speaks from the metaphoric realm of fairy tales and as an historical indictment of Nazi sadism.

In the final stanza, the persona is executed as a scapegoat, although his only crime was the possession of those physical traits which endangered him in the first place—soft eyes, thin skin, a vulgar mouth. The poem ultimately evinces a portrait of a martyr figure whose suffering is emblematic of the genocide of Jews, communists, homosexuals, and other persons persecuted during the Holocaust; he is submitted to unspeakable atrocities and has little hope of survival. Through the distance of irony, Novak conveys a portrait of a person whose physical and emotional sensitivity allegedly makes him unfit for work or even useless to society: *untauglich*. This word was used during the Third Reich to refer to mentally, physically, or emotionally disabled or ill persons who were deemed unworthy of existence and who were thus perfunctorily exterminated. In Hitler's fascism and in "untauglich," the body functions as the determinant of an individual's fate: if it deviates from the norms of health, fitness, and an Aryan background, it then becomes the object of torture, maiming, and murder.

This poem is relevant in light of the author's personal background. Novak's autobiographical novel *Die Eisheiligen* (1979) describes her childhood and the emotional trauma of
her early years caused by the abuse of her adoptive mother.\(^3\)
The child was routinely beaten, humiliated, and ridiculed by this woman, whose actions reflect everyday fascism: an internalization and enactment in the private sphere of the cruelty and brutality carried out en masse in the concentration camps. Novak, born in 1935, spent the first ten years of her life during the reign of Nazism and the Second World War.

"Margarete mit dem Schrank" (101), one of Novak's most intriguing poems, lends its title to her fourth volume of poetry. Margarete is a woman who wanders around with a cabinet on her head while also knitting vests and scarves for her beloved—a absurd yet herculean combination of activities. Nevertheless, she humbly claims that it is not difficult and requires no special talent or skill:

\[
es\text{ ist auch gar keine Kunst}\\
einen\text{ Schrank auf dem Kopf zu balancieren}\\\nwenn\text{ man dabei für seinen Geliebten}\\\nWesten\text{ strickt und Schals gegen die Kälte}
\]

The villagers she encounters on her travels respond to her in two ways: in the second stanza, she reports that they are becoming friendlier and offer her food and drink without hesitation since they know her and thus expect her visits;

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\(^3\) For a detailed characterization of their relationship, see Renate Wiggershaus (421).
in the third stanza, however, they ridicule her without compassion. The persona closes the poem with the self-referential question which the townspeople have not bothered to pose: "Margarete / was ist eigentlich in dem Schrank."

This query, though unanswered, brings the focal point back to the incongruous element of the poem and lets the reader consider unravelling the puzzle of Margarete's peculiar millstone. The Schrank has been referred to as "die Last ihrer Liebe" (Krechel 388); this interpretation might at first seem plausible, since the lover's absence is conspicuous, and since the knitting--specifically for the lover--is mentioned twice (in both the first and second stanzas), as often as is the act of carrying the cabinet on her head. Yet to interpret the Schrank as simply the burden of her lost love is not satisfactory in understanding why she is doing these things and explaining any further significance of the cabinet.

The final three lines of the first stanza provide insight into the enigma of Margarete's fate: "welche Ruhe ist über mir es fallen / überhaupt keine abgenützten Wörter mehr / ich gehe nur immer weiter und weiter." First, the calm which has befallen her indicates the cessation of worry, turmoil, or doubt that may have plagued her before. Second, there is no longer a need for banal verbiage, the
lack of which signals additional freedom from distraction. Finally, the action of perpetual wandering which she unquestioningly performs suggests the obsessive-compulsive nature of her behavior. These three factors--absolute stillness, freedom from the constraints of language, and incessant, repetitive motion--point toward the possibility that she has found serenity in madness.

Still, what is in the cabinet, and why exactly is she balancing it on her head? The position of the Schrank denotes a psychic or mental burden which she thus necessarily takes with her wherever she goes, yet which may not be readily or visibly apparent to others. Indeed, as a type of furniture that stores and encloses objects in an unseen, confined space, it might even be a projected image of her profound sense of alienation and suffering, emotions that are locked away and sealed off from the outside world. Margarete is a homeless outsider in her environment, roaming aimlessly from town to town, while engaged in the equally futile activity of creating garments for a loved one who is not present. She must beg for food because her preoccupation with her own plight makes her unable to provide even the most basic necessities for her survival.

To make sense of the poem, an examination of the name of this figure affords two significant literary allusions.
Margarete is the full first name of the character Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust*, the young woman who falls prey to the title figure's attentions and later to his abandonment. In the play and for its title character, Gretchen, in her initial innocence, and later because of her infanticide, represents an imperfect embodiment of Goethe's notion of the eternal feminine. The name Margarete also appears four times throughout Paul Celan's acclaimed poem "Todesfuge" (1952) in conjunction with the physical attribute "dein goldenes Haar"; here Margarete symbolizes the prototypical German woman, placed in juxtaposition to the other female mentioned in the poem, the Jewish woman Sulamith, with her metaphorically significant ashen hair, alluding to the crematoria of the Holocaust (37-39).

By taking the allusions to both of these female figures in German literature into account, we gain a new perspective on Novak's poem: the *Schrank*, as psychic burden, is a metaphor for the legacy of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Margarete represents the contemporary embodiment of *Germania*: a symbol for the postwar state of disjuncture in a divided country. The cabinet functions as a Germanic version of Pandora's box, locked up tightly but still

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4 The still on-going process of coming to terms with the historical era of Nazism and the Holocaust.
containing many unmentionable horrors too frightening to recognize or acknowledge consciously. Or, in other words, in Margarete's case, there are indeed skeletons in the closet to conceal and protect.

That this poem lends its title to the collection Margarete mit dem Schrank indicates its importance alongside the other poems in the volume, which has been called "Novaks persönlichster Gedichtband" (Bessen 4). The straightforward introduction of its opening line ("ich bin Margarete mit dem Schrank"), as well as the adoption of a persona through first-person address, are features generally atypical of Novak's poetry, which frequently provides a third-person narrative for its characterizations. This varying approach allows an association between Margarete's plight and the biographical circumstances of the author's own life. Novak was born in Berlin-Köpenick, was schooled and studied in the GDR, then married and moved to Iceland for several years. In the mid 1960s, she returned briefly to East Germany to continue her studies, but her citizenship was revoked in 1966 after she attended a meeting of the West German postwar literary circle Gruppe 47 in the United States. She resettled in Frankfurt am Main until the late 1970s, when she returned to West Berlin. Accordingly, Novak may have considered herself homeless in the necessity to live as
though without a native land, and thus experienced the resulting estrangement of residing in West Germany as an outsider. In the introduction to Grünheide Grünheide, Jürgen Fuchs writes: "Und sie [Novak] ist 'Margarete mit dem Schrank', die von Dorf zu Dorf zieht und Westen strickt für ihren Geliebten" (13; emphasis added). Knitting then acts as a metaphor for the seemingly hopeless anticipation of, and pointless preparation for, the return of the beloved, that is, the restoration of a unified homeland.

The poems in the volume Margarete mit dem Schrank are grouped under headings that reflect four different geographical locations in Germany: 1) the border area between the GDR and the FRG in "eine Landschaft selbst von den Römern gemieden" (9-26); 2) East German landscapes in "kann nicht steigen nicht fallen" (29-44); 3) the West German metropolis in "... dass ich aus Frankfurt muss" (47-61); and 4) the region surrounding Berlin at the time of the poet's childhood in "Grünheide Grünheide" (65-77).^5 "Margarete mit dem Schrank" is the last poem in the second grouping, "kann nicht steigen nicht fallen," which depicts GDR scenes. As an expatriate from the East, Novak has personified the dilemma she experienced during her exile:

5 For support of this classification, see Ursula Bessen (4).
she embodies the dislocation and dispossession of the German nation and its landscape through her forced resettlement in the West, and the subsequent desire to end her nomadic wanderings in the unfamiliar territory of the Federal Republic, which her exile precipitated.

The poem "meine doppelte Zunge" from *Legende Transsib* (56) describes the paradoxical situation confronting the persona, which consists of, on the one hand, engaging in a dialogue in the language of Marxist philosophy (in which Novak is well schooled), juxtaposed with a recognition and an appreciation of the physical labor and down-to-earth materiality of the working class. The first and second stanzas present a repeated dialectical structure; the beginning two lines introduce the subject under discussion (thesis), while the third through fifth lines of each proceed to counteract the topic of conversation by the contradictory reaction of the speaker's "double tongue" to working men (antithesis), presumably sighted outside the train which carries the persona and company.

meine doppelte Zunge redet vom Kopfstand eines Hegelianers der die Welt veränderte

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6 The autobiographical character in *Die Eiskeiligen* joins the FDJ and then enters a state-run boarding school in the GDR at the end of the novel. The sequel to that book, *Vogel federlos* (1982), continues the story of her life there during adolescence and young adulthood.
und fängt gleichzeitig an zu schnalzen
angesichts der patschnassen Gleisbauarbeiter
die den Hülsenpuffer so lebhaft nachahmen

meine doppelte Zunge redet vom angeblichen
Naturgesetz nach dem die Systemhierarchien
praktiziert werden und bohrt sich in die Wange
wegen eines Kerls der Leitungen schultert
und zwinkert als sei ich extra für ihn gemacht

The persona at first talks about the importance of the
Hegelian "who changed the world with a headstand"--Karl
Marx--yet her real interest lies in watching and fantasizing
about the railway workers. Similarly, in stanza two, the
persona's "double tongue" engages further in ideological
rhetoric, but soon retreats from that subject, due to her
flirtation with and physical attraction to another working
man. The persona is trying to reconcile her knowledge and
understanding of Marxist theory with her sexuality, as
expressed in relationships with men of the working class.

The third stanza attempts to arrive at a resolution of
the preceding conflict by the introduction of a third party:
the colleagues with whom the persona is in dialogue. Since
the setting of the book containing this poem is a journey on
the Trans-Siberian Railroad, these colleagues are most
likely communist party functionaries, and quite possibly
representatives of the Stalinistic old guard. Again, friction arises, this time between their strict principles and her creative imagination, which causes her tongue to shrink back almost to the point of choking her.

The persona struggles against her subjective wishes and fantasies, which are in conflict with her political and philosophical idealism. The last line sums up the situation succinctly: when her tongue gives voice to and espouses ideological beliefs, it is simultaneously constrained to negate or deny the body's sexual and other desires. Yet the tongue is also an organ of sensuality. By shrinking back and nearly choking her, the persona's tongue becomes a metaphor for the physical and emotional longings she feels obliged to repress in the presence of the intelligentsia.

The primary image of the poem—that of the "double tongue"—ought not be mistaken for that in the familiar

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1 *Legende Transsib* appeared in 1985, at the time when the terms *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) first began to enter common usage in the USSR under Gorbachev. Historically, however, these words have also been used by previous Soviet leaders (e.g., Stalin and Khrushchev) in party addresses to signal a shift in policy. I am grateful to Angela Perez for insight into this matter.
phrase "to speak with forked tongue," or its German equivalent, "mit gespaltener Zunge reden." The colloquial meaning suggests deceitful or malicious intent by the speaker, whereas Novak's "double tongue" instead emphasizes an inherent split or dual quality. Indeed, "meine doppelte Zunge" illustrates the poet's conscious struggle and effort to overcome the dilemma of whether to pay heed to the demands of her intellect or to her body and its passions.

The Violated Body

While depictions of violent acts abound in Novak's oeuvre, a number of her poems present graphic portrayals of direct assaults to the female body. In the following analyses, the imagery depicts violations of women and their bodies that reveal crimes of rape, child abuse, wife beating, police brutality, and murder.

die Torfstecherinnen

kommen aus den moorigen Wiesen
ihre kahlgeschornen Köpfe
schwanken in der Dämmerung
wie die Perlenkette einer Riesin

nacktfüssig pressen die Weiber
Spuren in die geteerte Strasse
die Soldaten vor den Palisaden
warten auf die Leiber
der Torfstecherinnen
"Verschleppte" (26-27), from Novak's first book of verse, *Ballade von der reisenden Anna* (1965), serves as an appropriate starting point for a discussion of the theme of physical violation of women by men, not uncommon in her poetry. The poem is an early example of how Novak's oeuvre is marked by the lingering repercussions of the ravage of World War II. The first image shows the female peat-cutters emerging from the marshland. Our attention is drawn to their shaved heads, which are described by their unsteady motion and compared to an object of monstrous beauty ("die Perlenkette einer Riesin"). Deprived of their hair, these women have been physically violated, yet still retain an allure like that of a gigantic strand of pearls. With bare feet, they tread along en masse, leaving their imprint on the newly tarred pavement and a lasting impression in the images of the poem.

But they are *Weiber*, not *Frauen*, a word choice that underscores their subjugation. After a day's labor, they can look forward to only further degradation, literally at the hands of soldiers whose sole interest lies in using the bodies of these female laborers for sexual gratification. Rhymed with *weiber*, the plural form of the word *Leib* (which translates as body, belly, or womb) in the penultimate line strengthens the objectification of the women as pure flesh.
or matter by the military men who violate their bodies. The title "Verschleppte" also places them on a par with movable goods or baggage. The word *Torfstecherinnen*, a term denoting their physical labor and productivity as workers, neatly frames this short piece and allows the women to occupy the prominent positions of the poem, in order to underscore their oppression as working class women.

Two other poems from *Ballade von der reisenden Anna* make brief mention of women in demeaning postures due to maltreatment by men. In "die alte Kosakin (Stricklied)" (28-29), the title persona speaks of the physical abuse she suffered from her father's beatings: "auf meinem schunden Rücken / tanzten lange / des Vaters Birkenprügel." The action of the preceding stanza may have been the impetus for the paternal violence:

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ob der dünne Rinderhirt
der mich mit Gier
auf den Schober zog
erblindet ist ob er
mich liebte oder log
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Whether the father beat his daughter as a direct consequence of her seduction by the cowherd is not clear. Yet the fact that she wonders whether the young man loved her indicates that the *Rinderhirt* at least injured her emotionally, if he did not abuse her physically.
In contrast to the fate of the old cossack woman, a group of women are sexually violated by an unspecified band of men (referred to only as *sie*) in "einem Funktionär ins Poesiealbum" (34-35):

> die nächtlichen Tänze der Zimmerleute hast du nicht gesehn die Schreie der Weiber nicht gehört denen sie die Röcke übern Köpfen zusammenbanden

Novak has again chosen the colloquial *Weiber* instead of *Frauen*, which adds emphasis to the degradation of rape. Made anonymous or faceless with their skirts tied above their heads, these women become mere receptacles for their attackers, devoid of any free will or autonomy. The women in this poem cry out against such humiliation and subjection despite the clothing meant to cover their faces and muffle their screams.

A later poem by Novak centers on an even more drastic violation of a group of women. "Strafe ins Bild gesetzt" (97-98) from *Margarete mit dem Schrank* describes the practice of wearing large numbers of copper rings to elongate the necks of women who live in a place identified only as the "Land der sehr Ruhmreichen" and its valleys of Kayah. Here the head becomes distended from the body, hence the designation *Giraffenfrauen*. As the poem begins, the poet's own "sinking head" is heavy when considering the plight of these women, and thus provides an initial
opportunity for comparison with them. But no further self-referential intrusion follows; the poem proceeds to give a detailed account of the particular circumstances surrounding the "giraffe women."

In the second stanza, the poet has chosen the same verb that appears in the poem "Verschleppte" to depict the peat-cutting women; here schwanken describes the motion of the women's giraffe-like necks ("ihre überlangen Häule"), which shine like "altes öl." To undercut any potentially aesthetic quality of the metal bands, however, this simile is immediately followed by a stark metaphor: "doch das Wogen ihrer stolzen Schädel / ist fauler Roggen im Wind." By equating their movement with decaying seeds cast to the winds, Novak evokes a juxtaposition between the "giraffe women" and their apparently fecund land ("grasige Täler"), and thus demonstrates the hopelessness of their wasted existence. The poet's use of the expression "Kopf hoch" acquires an ironic twist here, since its intended encouragement is bound to fail in both a literal and a figurative sense for these women.

In the next stanza, the poet points out that the only possible escape from the bondage of the copper rings comes as punishment for marital infidelity:

denn allein die Untreue befreit
die Giraffenfrau von den Fesseln
Ironically, gaining freedom from the neck shackles results in complete physical incapacitation above the shoulders, and thus ultimately, in death:

ein Hals ohne Muskeln und Sehnen--
unmöglich jemals den Kopf zu heben
unmöglich zu schreien
unmöglich zu essen

Between these lines, the poet interjects a strong critique of this group of people, which picks up the seed/plant motif again: "wahrlich das Geschlecht / hat satanische Blüten getrieben." The word satanisch underscores the inherently destructive nature of such human cruelty, inflicted by the men of this unnamed culture on their wives.

The final stanza begins with a woman who is abandoned and left to starve for being unfaithful. Her death will be prolonged and full of agony; if her neck had broken as the chains were smashed, she could have died instantly and thus been spared the suffering of slow starvation. The only real hope for escape from the Kayah valleys lies therefore in the physical end to existence for the "giraffe women."

The poem's title is puzzling. "Strafe ins Bild gesetzt" translates as "punishment well instructed" or "informed"; the idiom jemanden ins Bild setzen usually takes a person as its grammatical object rather than a thing, as
here the abstract noun *Strafe*. Beyond the figurative meaning of the phrase, the title also conveys the idea of fixing the penalty in the images of the poem, whereby the product of the creative act both presents the picture and simultaneously distances itself from this custom of a foreign culture. That these women must conform to the male-imposed dictates of fashion or die reveals that the ideals of feminine beauty often encode prescriptive measures which actually physically injure or maim women and their bodies, such as foot binding in China, and the current practice of myriad kinds of cosmetic surgery in the United States, such as nose jobs, face lifts, and liposuction.  

The setting of "Strafe ins Bild gesetzt" is in nature, away from the technology of civilization, presumably in an African country. Similar physical deformations of the face, skin and body are commonplace among native peoples in Africa and elsewhere around the world. The female figures here are characterized by the likeness of their outward appearance to the giraffe, a member of the animal kingdom indigenous to that continent; however, the women must live by the terms of the social mores established by their patriarchal, and thus...

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8 On the subject of women and beauty, Silvia Bovenschen remarks: "Die kulturell varierten Schönheitsnormen haben den Objektstatus des weiblichen Körpers quer durch die Jahrhunderte immer neu festgelegt" (99).
very human, community. Proud of the "jewelry" they wear around their necks and its desired effects on their bodily appearance, they bow to the judgment of their husbands and accept their violent punishment, unwilling or unable to utter a sound in protest. Novak shows in this poem an extreme example of the physical abuse of women: a deformation of their bodies that ultimately kills them. She indicts the power structures of male domination and the accompanying subordination of women that enables such a practice to continue. Novak's account of such blatant misogyny and violence against women in a Third World microcosm reflects the concurrent and rampant occurrence of wife-beating, rape, and murder of women in Western society.

Yet another example of the violation of women by men, "eine alte Geschichte" (100), also from Margarete mit dem Schrank, tells the story of a rote Seehündin in the manner of a fairy tale or legend from a Norse saga, as the title indicates. In fact, the described custom of the unhappy young women who, after transforming themselves into seals, return to dry land once a year to "play human," echoes the plot of "The Little Mermaid" by Hans Christian Andersen. The main anatomical motif of "eine alte Geschichte" is the red coat or skin of the female seal, whose Fell is stolen by a farmer who then forces her into domesticity as an enslaved
human wife. It represents individual freedom as well as an autonomous identity, as it is locked away in a chest to which he wears the only key around his neck. After three years of captivity, she manages to kill the man with an ax in order to regain what she was robbed of, and in the process his blood stains ihr haariges Kleid permanently red. Thus her crimson fur, akin to Hester Prynne's scarlet letter, is worn as a constant reminder of the crime she committed in retaliation for the violation of her autonomy through the theft of her coat.

The poem, which might be called a feminist narrative in verse form, at first glance also could have been rendered in prose without any less accessibility. Yet the narration itself comes forth in the three middle stanzas, while the first and last, nearly identical, serve as a lyric frame:

zwischen Grönland und Spitzbergen
zieht eine rote Seehündin ihren Kreis
und noch keinem Robbenfänger ist es gelungen
ihr das Fell über die Ohren zu ziehn

... ... ... ... ... ... ...

seitdem taucht die rote Seehündin allein
zwischen Grönland und Spitzbergen unter
und noch keinem Robbenfänger ist es gelungen
ihr das Fell über die Ohren zu ziehn

The idiom jemandem das Fell über die Ohren ziehen, found in the last line of each framing stanza, functions on both a literal and a figurative level here, and thus takes on
doubled significance. The Bauer actually fleeced or flayed her by taking the skin and, in so doing, also stripped her of all personal rights through the swindle. "Once bitten, twice shy," the red seal bitch relies now only on herself; wisdom gained through experience will not let her be tricked again by man's connivance to gain possession of woman, while masquerading as an act of love.⁹

Novak uses the ballad form to relate the fatal outcome of violent crimes against two minority women in the Federal Republic. In "Ballade von der Türkin Nigar" (73-76), from Balladen vom kurzen Prozess, the primary anatomical motifs are the feet and legs; through damage to these parts of her body, the title character is kept immobile and subordinate to the men who abuse her. Injuries sustained by the lower extremities impede her mobility and the performance of simple, everyday tasks. The image of walking away as a metaphor for freedom or independence is introduced in the first stanza: "da ist kein Davonlaufen," in reference to a generalized subservience of Turkish women to their fathers, husbands, and male bosses, in that chronological order.

⁹ The text reads, "es ist aber ein Bauer vor lauter Liebe hingegangen und hat ein Fell gestohlen" (emphasis added).
In stanza two, we learn that Nigar grew up without wearing shoes because they were too expensive. Being chased barefoot by her father in all kinds of weather, during every season, undoubtedly took its toll on her physically, not to mention emotionally or psychologically. After she is sold into marriage at the age of fourteen, Nigar's husband retaliates with a violent blow directly to her left shinbone, timed conveniently between harvests, when he discovers that she has secretly been learning to read from their son (stanza three). Yet she struggles through and survives these hardships, more determined than ever to assert herself. Nigar and her seemingly indomitable spirit are ultimately broken, however, by a final brutal attack to her lower limbs, perpetrated by prison guards:

dir werden wir die Hammelbeine
schon noch langziehn!
an die Pritsche gefesselt
hat sie wieder Blut gespien
hat geschluckt und gewürgt
und ist gegen Morgen abgekratzt

This maltreatment of being chained to the iron bed resembles the use of a medieval torture instrument known as the rack, in which the victim's extremities were bound and slowly pulled apart, resulting in excruciating pain and an agonizing death. Nigar's punishment by such brutal, primitive means takes place not in her native Turkey, however, but in the modern-day Federal Republic of Germany.
"Ballade von der Türkin Nigar" paints a graphically explicit portrait of the succession of abusive acts which eventually cause this woman's death. Novak prefaces the narration of these events with an aside in parentheses, toward the end of the poem's first stanza:

(was ich hier von ihrem sehr kurzen Leben berichte ist wirklich passiert und keine Fantasie-Geschichte)

The ballad acts then as the poetic documentation—or secondhand testimonial—of a female foreign worker's victimization. In jail for participating in the occupation of a deserted house, Nigar dies by violence at the hands of West German law enforcement officials.

A similarly violent end befalls the title figure in another poem from Balladen vom kurzen Prozess. "Ballad von der Zigeunerin und Kronzeugin Carla" (71-72), written in stanzas of rhyming couplets, presents the story of an economically disadvantaged illiterate woman. Unable to adequately express and defend herself due to poverty and lack of education, Carla is subjected to police harassment and forced to comply with the unethical practices of a prosecutor to bring her into court:

mit Sicherheit geht sie auf die Fünfzig zu
die Polizei lässt ihr Tag und Nacht keine Ruh

na bevor ihr Kopf rollte
sagte sie lieber was die Anklage von ihr wollte
seit einem halben Jahrhundert geht es ihr schlecht
und die haben das Recht

will der Staatsanwalt eine wie Carla vor Gericht
hetzen
ist wichtig sie vorher unter Druck und in Angst zu
versetzen

She is coerced by the (white, male, financially advantaged)
prosecuting attorney to implicate another gypsy woman in a
crime she did not commit. Thus Carla, herself a victim of
discrimination and oppression as an uneducated minority
woman of the lower class, betrays a person suffering under
similar unfavorable circumstances: "trotzdem hat Carla eine
andre Zigeunerin des Mordes bezichtigt / und wird von der
Angeklagten sachgemäss berichtet." The poem tells of the
continued persecution of this ethnic minority in Germany:
approximately half a million gypsies perished in
concentration camps during the Holocaust.

After delivering perjured testimony, she succumbs to an
unknown assailant outside the courtroom; her fate is
revealed in the closing lines of the poem:

vorf ihrem falschen Zeugnis streng bewacht
hat sie die andre dennoch in den Knast gebracht

kann sein Carla hat den Braten gerochen
jedenfalls wurde sie am Mainufer gefunden:
alle Rippen gebrochen

Having fulfilled her necessary function, Carla is disposed
of by a fatally damaging attack to her upper torso, followed
by the dumping of her corpse into the river. Her death is
caused by severe blows to the core of her physical being, by crushing the ribs which protect the vital internal organs such as the heart, kidneys and liver. The kicks to her gut also signify the unjust compensation for complying with corrupt judicial officials, who paradoxically forced her to further perpetuate the abuses of the court system on someone like herself. She is destroyed as perfunctorily as any other piece of physical evidence that is potentially incriminating to the wrongdoers.

Earlier in the poem, Carla's outward appearance is described as follows: "halbgeschlossene Augen ein Lächeln ein Pferdeschwanz." The first two attributes suggest that this fifty-year-old woman is mentally retarded and reinforce the image of vulnerability that she projects and that is used to advantage by the lawyers. Her victimization recalls the medical experiments on developmentally disabled persons and minorities such as gypsies by the Nazis: "bloss, dass man sie als Mädchen sterilisiert hat." While the poem records the crimes against this woman, it objectifies the villain(s) through vague references--"die Polizei," "die Anklage," "der Staatsanwalt"--and props up the institutions of law enforcement and the courts in a would-be scathing, in essence unsatisfying, critique. Here Novak's intention of divulging a case of blatant injustice and abuse of the
judicial system falls short of its desired effect by projecting the wrongdoing onto an abstraction: the patriarchy as the bureaucratized, depersonalized enemy.

The Mutilated Body

Several ballads by Novak depict acts of mutilation, two of which are carried out on the male body. The following poem presents a rare example in Novak's poetry of a person of the female gender committing violence against another human being. Originally printed as a separate publication (1975), "Ballade von der kastrierten Puppe" (65-70) also appeared in Balladen vom kurzen Prozess (1975) and still earlier as one of Novak's many unpublished radio plays. Before turning to an analysis of the poem's story, a description of a few of its formal aspects will aid an understanding of the discrepancy between the playful, innocuous quality of the rhymed stanzas and the gruesome tale they relate.

It is a long poem, with ten numbered stanzas, each sixteen lines in length and consisting of two octets, followed by a five-line refrain. The rhyme scheme of the stanzas is consistent throughout, with repetitions of the pattern ABCB; that of the refrain contrasts as follows: ABACA. Nearly every line contains three stressed syllables, but
with considerably free variance in meter, though iambic predominates. Novak adapts the three-stress line of the traditional German Volkslied to the ballad, to relate a story not of the common folk but of spiessige Kleinbürger.

Stanza one sets the stage for the ballad:

in Bayern wo die Dörfer
altd und finster sind
lebt ein Dorfschullehrer
mit Frau und Kind

The scene of the action, a Bavarian village, is marked by the conservative, outmoded values of its inhabitants. Novak also sets the mood with the adjectives "alt and finster" by conjuring up an atmosphere reminiscent of foreboding evil familiar in fairy tales, while she works to debunk the stereotype of an idyllic southern Germany. As the title indicates, the ballad tells the story of a castrated doll and centers on the corresponding body part: an infantile penis.

doch eines Tages schickte
Tante Lucie aus Paris
der Bettina eine Puppe
der Hildebrand hiess
der Hildebrand konnte
lachen und weinen
und hatte ein Schwänzchen
zwischen den Beinen

The first verse ends with the refrain which bodes the onset of violent deeds:

was habe ich denn gemacht
meine liebe Mutter?
ich träume jede Nacht:  
du kämst mit einem Messer  
und hättest mich umgebracht!

This chorus gives voice to deep-seated anxieties in the form of a child's recurrent nightmare of infanticide.

However, it is the father, not the mother, who causes direct emotional harm to the child by his extreme reaction to the Jungenpuppe, the presence of whose Schwänzchen he cannot tolerate because he finds it indecent and not in line with the propriety of petit-bourgeois values. He does not want his daughter to be exposed to the doll, as it reveals male sexual anatomy, and in essence he is thus denying both his own and his daughter's sexuality by negating her fondness for the toy. At first he takes the doll from her and hides it in the closet (stanzas two and three), an unsuccessful attempt to cover up its sex organs and to deny its existence. After Bettina finds it again, the meddling doctor's wife next door discovers the child playing and scolds her soundly:

"Betti pfui schäm dich  
mit deiner Zunge  
zu küssen zu schlecken  
den Puppenjunge [sic]!"10 (stanza four)

Frau Doktor also goes so far as to call the girl entartet, in this context a much-overstated reprimand and reminiscent

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10 The -n is presumably omitted from the accusative of Puppenjunge for the sake of rhyme with Zunge.
of the label used to describe "deviant" behavior or persons during the Third Reich. Bettina's father immediately takes the drastic action he deems necessary to remedy the situation in an appropriate manner: he grabs his daughter and seeks the doctor's help.

"Herr Doktor dieser Rüpel
der bringt mich noch ins Grab
schneiden Sie ihm doch bitte
sofort dieses Ding ab!"
und zu Betti: "was heulst du
wie eine kleine Wilde?
aus deinem Hildebrand
wird eben eine Hilde!" (stanza five)

Although he tries to assure her that it is only a harmless change of gender, his pat solution of the castrated doll causes the child tremendous trauma, both during the operation and thereafter. Yet neither parent can deal with her troubled feelings; the pregnant mother, beating her head against the wall, thinks Bettina is possessed by the devil, while the father reveals his gross insensitivity and complete inadequacy in handling children's problems, both at home and as a schoolteacher:

der Vater kann Kinder-
schmerz nicht ermessen
er selber hatte Hilde-
brand längst vergessen
"warum lachst du nicht
und singst keine Lieder
für deine Mutter?
sie kommt bald nieder!" (stanza six)
The hyphenation of the doll's name between lines underscores this man's indifference to, and lack of comprehension about, the entire castration incident and its effect on his child.

The following two stanzas relate how Bettina sneaks into the doctor's Puppenpraxis at night and takes several instruments for her own use: "Bettina . . . / . . . sucht sich eine Zange / und zwei Messerchen heraus" (stanza eight). We also learn here that the girl now has a baby brother, so that her clandestine acquisition of the small tools infers ominous consequences, in particular when she, though quite oblivious, receives a warning from the moon—a metaphor for her own conscience—to leave well enough alone.

In the next stanza, her mother attempts to instill her with traditional bourgeois values toward maternity by serving as a proper role model:

die Mutter sagt "Bettina
uns leuchtet neues Licht
jeder von uns beiden
hat nun seine Pflicht
du trägst deine Hilde
stolz und sicher im Arm
und ich halte den Christian
in seinem Bette satt und warm" (stanza nine)

The line "uns leuchtet neues Licht" implies renewed hope for the family unit through the birth of a son. Bettina is acutely aware of the difference in gender between herself and the new arrival, and pledges him her aid after she has
confirmed the presence of male genitalia beneath the blanket.

The ballad culminates, perhaps by now not unexpectedly, in Bettina's re-enactment of her doll's fate upon her little brother:

Bettina tanzt und jubelt  
ist lustig wie eine Biene  
"Mutter ich habs geschafft  
aus Christian ward Christine!"  
die Mutter eilt ans Bettchen  
das Blut tropft ihr in den Schuh  
der Christian ist gestorben  
seine liebe Seele hat Ruh (stanza ten)

From Bettina's perspective, the castration and resultant death of the infant serve not only as an unconscious act of revenge for the mutilation of the doll by the patriarchal authority figures of the doctor and father; they also exemplify the child's appropriation and imitation of repressive and dangerous attitudes toward sexuality. Novak shows the damage perpetrated by such attitudes and behavior, and their resemblance to the mutilations and operations performed for the sake of eugenics by the Nazis. "Ballade von der kastrierten Puppe" is also an indictment of the propagandization and idealization of the German family and motherhood propagated under Hitler.

Another piece from Balladen vom kurzen Prozess involves the mutilation of a son, this time, however, in military combat. Unlike the baby in "Ballade von der kastrierten
Puppe," the title figure of "Ballade vom Legionär" (61),
though never mortally wounded, endures a more extensive loss
of body parts. The poem relates an ongoing series of battle
injuries in nine rhymed couplets, framed by an introductory
and a closing tercet. The opening three-line stanza sets up
the rationale for the young man to join the French Foreign
Legion, namely, due to poverty: "ich hab nichts zu essen für
dich mein Sohn / sagte die Mutter ich gehe ja schon / sagte
der Junge und ging zur Legion." Although we are not told
how old the boy is until the closing lines (when he returns
home presumably years later at the age of 28), he is in all
likelihood still a minor at the poem's outset, for he is
referred to as a Junge who still lives at home with his
mother. So much time has passed, and the youth has
undergone so much physical defacement throughout the course
of the ballad's narrative, that his mother does not
recognize him--or chooses not to--at the end of the piece:
"mit achtundzwanzig kam er wieder nach Haus / die Mutter
sagte wie sehen Sie denn aus / undwarf ihn zur Tür hinaus."
Not only does she address him with the formal second-person
pronoun, which stresses the estrangement and completely
severed parent-child bond the two have suffered; the mother
also adds injury to insult by physically removing him from
her house.
The ballad reads steadily and easily throughout, due to its lilting meter and rhyme pairs, features which on the surface significantly undercut the gravity of the subject matter. As in "Ballade von der kastrierten Puppe," here too we are dealing with a domestic tragedy because it concerns the rupture of a family unit of a lower class single mother and her son. Yet with the exception of the first and last stanzas, the action of "Ballade vom Legionär" takes place not in the home, but at many points around the globe. Although the nationality of the legionnaire is not explicitly stated, he is a Western mercenary. The "adventures" with the Foreign Legion, on the other hand, lead the young man to remote areas of the earth, i.e., to geographic regions commonly referred to as the Third World: various spots in Africa and East Asia, and an island in the South Pacific. He is slowly dismembered, body part by body part, with each successive assignment. Novak's enumeration of damaged body parts portrays the injuries of the soldier in explicit detail, as though he were dangling like a limp and helpless marionette before our eyes.

Novak's poem recalls Brecht's "Legende vom toten Soldaten" (136-40), which critiques and ironizes the mercenary's lot as both hired killer and celebrated war victim. In that poem, Brecht parades the soldier's corpse--
also like a limp doll--throughout the entire piece, yet the actual descriptions of the body are few, imprecise, and not descriptive of his battle wounds: the "verwesten Leib," for example, in stanza seven (137). The dead body is neither as visually distinctive nor as physically present as the mangled anatomy of Novak's soldier. The ballad carefully outlines how the mercenary repeatedly risks and suffers injury in battle. In Algeria, he loses his ears and part of his jaw; in Chad, an eye; in Madagascar and the Congo, his left and right hands, respectively; a foot in Vietnam; and finally, his genitals (Männlichkeit) in the jungles of Tahiti. He then suffers from the collective absence of these lost limbs and organs by experiencing phantom pain: "in Djibouti plagten ihn seine fehlenden Glieder / in Wirklichkeit hatte er bloss Fieber." Additionally, early in this damaging tour of duty, his hair turns prematurely grey during his yearlong stint in Korea. In sum, the legionnaire pays dearly for this field of work with vital physical attributes; his body undergoes extreme and thorough injury sufficient to maim him critically for life.

The legionnaire's body graphically represents the effects of violence from armed combat and the consequent injuries sustained. The step-by-step destruction of his physical form reflects the gradual breakdown of this
individual’s integrity through participation in military interventionism. The legionnaire bears the scars of active engagement on the world’s battlefields, and his missing body parts signify the extreme results of his participation.\footnote{Alicia Ostriker, in her article "Body Language: Imagery of the Body in Women’s Poetry," points out that "The damaged bodies of war victims . . . are important images" in the work of American women poets such as Adrienne Rich and Denise Levertov. Unlike the damaged body of the legionnaire in Novak’s ballad, however, which is more a metonym for war than a metaphor, she finds that often women poets "seem drawn to describe psychic hurt in somatic terms" (249).}

From a historical perspective, the described locations, from Algeria to Dien Bien Phu, were all sites of actual armed conflict during the 1950s in which France fought against the various native peoples in their separate struggles for independence from imperialistic rule. In this respect, "Ballade vom Legionär" singles out a particular European power in a strong critique of the repercussions of nineteenth-century colonialism experienced during the decade immediately following the end of World War II, indeed perhaps precisely because the French presence created so much dissent and unrest in many such places throughout the world.\footnote{France’s imperialism is emblematic of how most western European nations scrambled to gain world power by staking out colonies after the defeat of Germany in 1945 and the subsequent annexation of eastern Europe by the Soviet Union.} Yet the use of the human body and its component
parts to display the ravage of foreign militarism and imperialism conversely symbolizes the debilitating effects of colonialism on the nations and peoples who are its pawns.

The sole ballad in Novak's latest volume of poetry presents yet another tale of human mutilation, though the crux of the narrative is actually fratricide within the Russian royal family of the late sixteenth century. "Ballade von der verbannten Glocke" (Legende Transsib 26-29) relates the murder of the favorite son and heir apparent of Ivan the Terrible (Ivan IV):

der Zarewitsch ist tot der kleine Dmitri auf den sein Vater Iwan Grozny am meisten gebaut und die Bojaren unter Eid genommen hat minderjährig noch und jetzt ist er tot erstochen und liegt in der Stadt Uglitsch mitten auf der Strasse verblutet erstochen ermordet

The next line of the opening stanza points a finger at the murderer, caught red-handed next to the body by the local citizenry. Quite naturally and instinctively, the townspeople of Uglitsch sound the alarm by continuously ringing the town bell: "seht Leute da steht doch der Mörder / neben dem toten Zarewitsch zieht den Glockenstrang / läutet läutet Sturm läutet." The chorus following the first and subsequent three verses, however, anticipates a turnabout in terms of action with the bell:

holt die Glocke vom Turm
die läutet nicht länger Sturm
The ballad then relates further details of the effect of the murder on the Uglitschers.

In Moscow, Dmitri's brother, Feodor, dismisses the death as an accident and refuses to hear evidence to the contrary:

doeh Fjodor der Zar schuettelt den Kopf--alles Luge von Mord kann gar keine Rede sein Luge Verleumdung mein Bruder ist leider blos ein Epileptiker gewesen und sein Tod die Folge eines Anfalls ein Unglueck--also kein Mord sondern Epilepsie hat den echten Thronfolger getoetet der ist ins eigene Messer gefallen

From this point on, it is clear that the czarevitch was killed in order that he be removed from the throne. The historical accounts of the incident lay possible blame for the ordering of the murder on Feodor's chief advisor and the true but unofficial ruler during his reign, the infamous Boris Godunov, whose name, however, does not appear in Novak's ballad. Nonetheless, despite the fact that eyewitnesses captured the killer in this portrayal, the citizens of Uglitsch will have to pay the price for speaking the truth about this particular episode of political intrigue which set off the notorious Time of Troubles in Russian history (1591-1613). By highlighting this historical period, Novak offers a point of departure for
considering the more recent legacy of Stalinist purges in
the Soviet Union.

Beyond the murder itself, the initial act of mutilation
in the ballad is the removal of the bell's clapper or tongue
in order to halt its call of alarm:\(^\text{13}\)

\[
\begin{align*}
der \text{ [Glocke]} & \text{ machen wir den Garaus} \\
die Richter beraten eine Stund \\
dann greifen sie ihr in den Mund \\
und reissen ihr die Zunge raus
\end{align*}
\]

This gesture bodes ill for the honest city folk who have
become inextricably though unavoidably involved in corrupt
civic affairs. Just as the bell is forcibly silenced by
excision of the tongue for purposes of censorship, they too
will suffer a similar fate, if they are exiled and are not
among those executed: "... zweihundert erstmal
hingerichtet / der Rest von dreissigtausend wird nach
Sibirien geschickt / aber vorher wird vielen die Zunge
abgeschnitten." Not only the tongue, but other facial
features are cut off as well, as punishment for merely being

\(^{13}\) This act is symbolic of female genital mutilation,
known in its various forms of excision, clitoridectomy, or
infibulation, still prevalent today in the Mideast and
Northcentral Africa (Hosken 42-45). Since the bell and its
shape suggest female anatomy, it is possible that Novak
wanted to make such an allusion. Also, the removal of the
bell's tongue or clapper alludes to the misogynist dream of
the silent woman.
at the scene of the crime and truthfully relating what happened there:

... der zweiten Gruppe schlagen
sie die Ohren ab dass sie nicht etwas läuten hören
und wieder andern wird die Nase abgehauen
dass sie nicht etwas riechen was gar nicht ruchbar
ist

den Vierten schlitzen sie die Wangen auf
dass sie sich nicht aufplustern mit Berichten
die jeder Grundlage entbehren...

In such a system of justice, the penalty indeed fits the crime, though of course these are only trumped up charges against the peons of society, in an elaborate cover-up of blatant abuse of power by members of the ruling class.14

The fourth stanza continues with a repetition of the bell's "corporal punishment":

... schliesslich wird die Glocke
heruntergeholt und bestraft dass sie nicht länger
Sturm läutet bei Windstille
somit ist die Nachrichtensperre perfekt

And the townspeople--mute bell in tow--set off for Siberia as penance for their unwitting complicity in attempting to expose the murder. In the following refrain, a variation on the previous personification of the bell spells out two further physical attributes inflicted with violent abuse on this token of stifled truth and miscarried justice: "die

14 We are reminded of the figurine depicting a row of three monkeys, each one concealing a different sensory organ, along with the motto, "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil (tell no lies)."
Richter sprechen schnell / der [Glocke] brennen wir noch
eins übers Fell / und zertrümmern ihr die Wangen." No
differentiation is evident here between the "physiognomy"
and materiality of this inanimate object, and those of the
persecuted townspeople. In fact, the ballad closes by
telling of the eventual return and rehabilitation of the
banished bell to Uglitsch 300 years later, using the word
*geheilt*, which normally refers to living creatures. Novak's
rewriting of this historical moment reconstructs the symbol
of the bell, though it of course cannot undo the human
suffering that occurred.

A present-day version of human mutilation takes place
in "Datenbank des BKA" (103-104) from *Margarete mit dem
Schrank*. By means of the database at the *Bundeskriminalamt*,
this poem describes a systematic breakdown of the bodies,
psyches, and emotions of those persons representing members
of the radical and intellectual left who were targeted for
suspicion of terrorism in connection with the Baader-Meinhof
group during the 1970s in the FRG. Novak, herself a likely
suspect due to her background in the GDR and her ties with
the leftist community in both Germanies, demonstrates the
real abuses suffered by people such as Ulrike Meinhof, among
others. Meinhof experienced extreme maltreatment during her
imprisonments from 1972 to 1976 in both Cologne-Ossendorf
and Stuttgart-Stammheim prisons; the cause of her death in Stammheim in 1976, which the West German authorities alleged to be suicide, has remained highly questionable (Meinhof 190).¹⁵

The poem, written between 1976 and 1978 (thus soon after Meinhof's death), speaks in the first-person plural (wir, uns, unser) throughout, predominantly in the passive voice, so that its structure displays an opposing dualism of "us" vs. "them," or rather, "it," the database, which is Novak's version of Big Brother: "es wird unser Fleisch / der Datenbank überliefert." The computer--the mechanized embodiment of the BKA's investigative operations--is personified as a powerful, active agent:

\begin{quote}
die Datenbank führt Buch
über unsere abgetriebenen Kinder
sie frisst und frisst
ihr ist kein Laken zu grau
keine Freundschaft zu staubig keine Liebe zu süß
ihr dauert keine Ehe zu lange
sie frisst und frisst
\end{quote}

The poem then proceeds to enumerate the specific methods used to analyze and categorize different parts of the human body. This process of classification by empirical

¹⁵ Novak, together with Erich Fried and others, published the volume *Am Beispiel Peter-Paul Zahl: Eine Dokumentation* (1976), about a West German author of poetry, short stories, and dramas who in the 70s was also incarcerated and incriminated for participation in crimes of violence, but whose innocence has long been maintained.
techniques underlines the victimization of the collective "we" that is being acted upon and objectified by the database as a depersonalized entity representing the institutions of the BKA and the West German government.

The expression Buch führen emphasizes the clerical or bureaucratic nature of the database as well as its careful observation of minute detail. The inference that the computer keeps tabs on such intimate matters as abortions indicates the extreme degree of its intrusion into the privacy of the female individuals, based on a functional rationality (not to mention the volatility of the issue of abortion's legality and the implication that it is a criminal offense). Also, the repetition of the line "sie frisst und frisst" reinforces the notion of the network's insatiable gluttony in not only acquiring, but consuming and digesting its data, so that its appropriation of the personal information becomes a very threatening violation of these persons' civil rights and distinct identity. In short, this electronic monstrosity will stop at nothing and devours anything that stands in its path of perpetual motion and destruction.

The details of the data collection process are found in six three-line stanzas of similar structure: the first line of each begins with "da werden. . ." and describes how the
various anatomical features are subjected to the quantifying procedures of a criminological laboratory; the second provides further details on the corresponding procedure; while the third line translates the hard data into the appropriate quantified properties: "da werden unsere Hände angeschwärt / und unser Fingerspitzengefühl / übersetzt in Muster und Rillen." Here the hands and fingers, the physical attributes to be analyzed, are darkened in order to set down fingerprints for the purpose of identification. By use of the word Fingerspitzengefühl, however, the poet manages to introduce a subjective element while contrasting it with the objectifying record of the fingertips in their unique physical patterns. Thus the elusive nature of the human intuitive faculty is juxtaposed with the attempt to capture it through positivistic methods. Novak shows that this sort of categorizing and classifying of the separate body parts of these individuals is an example of the rationalistic destruction of human subjectivity and personal history in the Federal Republic.

"da werden uns die Haare vom Kopf gerissen / und unter ihren Mikroskopen / übersetzt in Stärke und Schattierung." The first line of this stanza depicts the harsh means by which samples of hair are removed for examination. The second line indicates the measuring instrument employed for
the laboratory analysis, to determine the degree of thickness and color of each specimen (third line). The following stanza also targets the anatomy above the shoulders, in this case, the facial features: "da wird unser Antlitz abkonterfeit / und Lachfalte Narbe Tränenspur / übersetzt in Striche und Profile." The choice of the poetic Antlitz (countenance) instead of Gesicht (face) creates an elevation of style which assigns a certain dignity or nobility to the examined parties. Yet the very next word, the verb abkonterfeien, immediately brings the stylistic level back down to everyday speech. The second line resembles that of the first tercet in its inclusion of characteristics which show the lingering effect of emotion or life experience, here on the face: laugh lines, scars, traces of tears. Once again, the subjective element is transformed into quantifiable properties devoid of human qualities, mere lines on a page.

The next step in the process moves up to the forehead: "da werden unsere Stirnen aufgemeisselt / und was sie entblättern / übersetzt in Ziffern und Signale." This verse conjures the image of making a plaster cast of the brow in order to decipher its furrows and ridges. The forehead serves as the physiognomical locus for the expression of not only worry and concern, but also of thinking or intellectual
activity. As before, these external signs of introspection become significant for the database only in their contribution to the quantification of human consciousness. What now follows is probing the recesses of the throat for data on the vocal organs and their functioning: "da werden unsere Stimmen entrollt / und die Anatomie unserer Kehlen / übersetzt in Wellen und Klangfiguren." The individual nature of a voice is destroyed by the rigid efficacy of the scientific method. A communicative feature unique to humankind, spoken language, is valuable only in its measurable properties of sound waves and tonal patterns.

The final part of the investigative procedures entails drawing blood for the purpose of distillation. The residual pigmentation of each hemic sample enables further classification for the computer. It is again the outer appearance, rather than the inner essence, that matters: "da werden wir zur Ader gelassen / und was sie destillieren / übersetzt in Henna Purpur oder Lachs." Blood, the flowing life force within human physiology, functions here solely as yet another commensurable anatomical element.

After the proceeding verse, a seven-line stanza, mirroring the first, serves to recapitulate the raison d'être of the database.

die Datenbank führt Buch
über unsere verschütteten Träume
The compilation of data and maintenance of surveillance remains the overriding concern of the computer; the process alone is primary. Here the verschüttete Träume take the place of abgetriebene Kinder, suggesting a sense of lost ideals and unfulfilled hope. The line "sie nimmt die heile Haut genauso wie die kaputte" indicates that no one is exempt from the Computer-Wahn of the BKA; in other words, no one can mit heiler Haut davonkommen.

The poem's final two lines echo the beginning couplet, only in closing they more strongly show the commodity value placed on human beings: "ja es wird unser Fleisch / auf der Datenbank feilgeboten." Novak's critique of the technocratic approach of the federal investigative agency carries with it an attack on the reactionary measures imposed by the Federal Republic to curtail terrorist activity in the mid to late 1970s. The dehumanization of those suspected of criminal activities took the form of illegal search and seizure, arrest and detention without (or on a trumped up) charge, and exceptionally brutal interrogations and treatment during imprisonment, such as solitary confinement and psychological, if not physical, torture.
Thus not only the pervasive presence of technocratic domination in criminal investigations, but also numerous reports of torture by West German police and prison officials during interrogations of persons accused of terrorism during the seventies, led Novak to paint such an exceedingly bleak portrait of the imposition of the drastic means taken in reaction to the threat of terrorist activity by the radical left at that time. The poet has positioned this important piece, "Datenbank des BKA," directly in the center of the section "... dass ich aus Frankfurt muss" in Margarete mit dem Schrank. The poem, at the core of a sequence of lamentations on life in Frankfurt am Main, attests to the poet's own stake in and struggle against the abuse of human and civil rights of persons unjustly accused of criminal activity, and her aversion to residing in that city, the center of the backlash against the left in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Conclusion

In Novak's poetry, the body is repeatedly fragmented to the point of an almost complete deterioration of the individual and his or her rights, as the last poem well confirms. Her critiques of the exploitation of human beings as evidenced in the physical abuse of the body range from
indictments of the fascism during Nazism and its lasting effects, to the dissociation of Germany in the postwar decades, to the conservatism and reaction of the government in the Federal Republic during the 1970s and into the 1980s. Novak depicts the practices and results of oppression on women, minorities, the lower class, and also leftist men, and to a lesser extent, middle-class families. The violent imagery in these poems shows the experience of dispossession of many contemporary Germans from their country, alongside the mutilation and violation of the body both as metaphor and reality in the present day.


CHAPTER II
MATERNITY, METAMORPHOSIS, AND EVOLUTION:
THE BODY IN TRANSITION IN THE POETRY OF URSULA KRECHEL

Introduction

The poetry of Ursula Krechel shows the body in flux, as it continually changes, mutates, or evolves. The female anatomy, due to its monthly cycles and lifelong stages of development, can best represent the body in transition, as many of the poems under discussion will show. Most notably, Krechel experiments with a number of different aspects of maternal imagery to underline the transitional nature of the body. In addition, several poems present forays into the imagery of corporeal metamorphosis, by blurring the boundaries between the female body and animal, and of physical evolution, to chart the origins and future progression of humankind.

The Maternal Body

Unlike Helga Novak, in whose lyric oeuvre the mother is absent beyond the peripheral maternal figures we encountered in the ballads of the legionnaire and the castrated doll, Ursula Krechel uses a variety of mother figures throughout her poetry. Entitled "Meine Mutter" (5-6), the first piece
in Krechel's premier volume of poetry, *Nach Mainz*! (1977), confronts the death of the persona's mother through a two-part structure: stanza one depicts the mother during her lifetime performing her parental and marital duties; stanza two presents a dream construct in which, shortly after her death, she returns to visit her daughter. Both stanzas begin with a definitive placement in time: "Als meine Mutter ein Vierteljahrhundert lang / Mutter gewesen war und Frau," and "Zehn Tage nach ihrem Tod war sie im Traum plötzlich / wieder da," respectively. While the opening statement grounds this woman in the realistic milieu of the bourgeois home evoked through the persona's memories, the second provides a complementary foil in the narration of the dream sequence, which, although concrete in image and vivid in detail, shows the mother in a heretofore unprecedented setting: as a peer among the erstwhile friends and acquaintances of her daughter.

A shift in focus occurs between stanzas with regard to the physical descriptions of this woman. Krechel draws attention to the cause of her mother's death by leading up to it slowly and purposefully throughout the first stanza,
and then describing the uterine cancer as the active, destructive agent of death in the closing lines.¹

. . . als sie schon manchmal wagte, die Beine am frühen Nachmittag übereinanderzuschlagen, frass sich ein Krebs in ihre Gebärmutter, wuchs und wucherte und drängte meine Mutter langsam aus dem Leben.

As wife and mother, she is depicted by her body below the waist. These lines, which close the first stanza, point out parts of female anatomy associated with both feminine beauty and (in this context, relief from) housework—the legs—and with childbearing—the uterus.² Earlier in this stanza, another allusion furthers and supports the focus on the lower abdomen; although used figuratively in an idiomatic expression here, the word Schoss can also translate

¹ Krechel's use of uterine cancer to depict a woman's death has an interesting precedent in German literature. Maria Kublitz discusses how this disease in the last short story written by Thoman Mann ("Die Betrogene") has been met with both disgust and resistance by several critics in the 1970s: "Auch P.L. Sauer will sich nicht lange beim Gebärmutterkrebs und seiner mehr oder weniger 'grausamen Geschmacklosigkeit' aufhalten, dafür verweilt er um so ausgiebiger beim harmonisierenden Schluss der Erzählung" (161). Perhaps the transformation of the female reproductive organ that has brought forth life into the harbinger of death is what so distresses these male readers.

² The word Gebärmutter is itself morphologically revealing, from the verb gebären, to bear (a child), plus Mutter, mother. See Ursula Geitner (133) for an elaboration of the important role this female reproductive organ played in the diagnosis of hysteria, and Christine Brooke-Rose (308) for an explanation of the misogyny in the etymology of the word hysteria, which stems from the Greek word for womb.
literally as womb: "sparsamer in der Küche und in der Liebe als eine / der das Glück in den Schoss gefallen war." An ironic turnabout results if we compare the idiom das Glück jemandem in den Schoss fallen, which means "to have happiness fall right into one's lap," with the fatal disease which ravaged that very part of her body.³

In contrast, we gain a view of her, from the waist up only, in the dream, as she sits in the back seat of a car:


The poetic camera lens, through the eyes of the persona, zooms in on the mother's wrist and arm in this passage from the second stanza. The third sentence here functions like an aside, adverting us back to the domestic frame of reference in stanza one. Later in this stanza, towards the

³ A reference to the faces of her daughters as well as to her own deviates from the emphasis on the lower body elsewhere in this stanza; however, it actually describes an absence or lack in terms of the mother's face: "als sie anfing, den Töchtern ins Gesicht zu sehen / auf der Suche nach Spuren, die sie im eigenen Gesicht / nicht fand."
end of the poem, the persona's gaze again comes to rest on her mother's upper body, specifically on her breasts, which in their youthful-looking sensuality arouse uncomfortable feelings in the persona:

> Willst du nicht mitfahren? fragt sie. Aber im Auto ist doch kein Platz, sage ich und blicke verlegen durch ihre seidige Bluse so eine trug sie zu Lebzeiten nie auf ihre junge, noch ganz spitze Mädchenbrust

Thus not only is the mother playing the role of revenant in the dream; her reappearance in the daughter's consciousness seems also to have engendered a rejuvenation of her physical form. The recognition of the mother's alluring sexuality leads the persona to a response seeking paternal aid or guidance. In the transition from the last quoted passage to the remaining lines of the poem, as Elisabeth Hoffmann has pointed out (408), the thought "ich muss den Vater rufen" acts as a catalyst in bringing about an abrupt end to the mother's return visit and also to the poem:


Hoffmann, who refers to the final couplet as a laconic self-critical remark (408), concludes that, "Der Schluss des Traumes verweist also wieder auf die Realitätsebene, indem der Gedanke an die Endgültigkeit des Todes realisiert wird"
(408). On the contrary, the persona's disappointment and frustration in not noticing the car's license number act as a continuation of the dream, in which she realizes she may have missed a rare opportunity to reconnect with the deceased parent. In the dream state, however, she does not comprehend the irony, from the point of view of waking consciousness, of regretting this lost chance.

Turning to the persona's own physicality in the poem, beyond the self-deprecating gesture in the final lines, we find only a brief mention of her body: "Ich die gebohnerten Treppen hinab. / An der Haustür höre ich schon ein Kichern: Mama! / rufe ich, der Nachsatz will mir nicht über die Lippen." At this moment of reckoning, the persona moves towards her mother by descending the stairs and greets her with an exclamation in the child's form of address for the maternal parent: Mama instead of Mutter. Beyond that intimate greeting, her lips will not cooperate in finishing the rest of the sentence as if out of temporary paralysis. Yet she is able to respond firmly and forthrightly in the

Other than this single instance of direct, familiar address, the possessive pronoun mein is always used in connection with the word Mutter to refer to the mother, in the title as well as four times in the poem. While the repetition of the phrase "meine Mutter" reinforces the mother-child connection, it also suggests a formality and distance between them which the term of endearment Mama overcomes.
negative moments later, when her mother asks if she would like to accompany them: "Aber im Auto / ist doch kein Platz." The speaker of the poem relates the sequence of events in the dream quite clearly in retrospect, but when confronted face to face with her mother and amidst her own peers, she cannot express herself verbally and becomes momentarily speechless.

The contrast in body imagery in "Meine Mutter" reveals the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship. The mother is described in stanza one in terms of the uterine cancer that brought about her death, and in stanza two by a vibrant sensuality that eclipses her anatomy below the waist. The combined result evinces the persona's remembered reality of bourgeois domesticity set off by a visionary rendering (or rewriting) of her mother's life, released from the bonds of marriage and motherhood after death. Those parts of the mother which were repressed or constricted during her lifetime—her sexuality, autonomy, and personal freedom—resurface and find expression during the persona's period of mourning, to help her through the process of

5 Susan Sontag takes issue with such a perception of the disease, although she acknowledges that "today many people believe that cancer is a disease of insufficient passion, afflicting those who are sexually repressed, inhibited, unpontaneous, incapable of expressing anger" (21).
grieving and in coming to terms with her mother as an individual.⁶

This poem also appears in Krechel's radio play "Zwei Tode," originally aired in 1977, the same year that Nach Mainz! was published, and later collected in Was geschah, nachdem Nora ihren Mann verlassen hatte? Acht Hörspiele von Elfriede Jelinek, Ursula Krechel, Friederike Mayröcker, Inge Müller, Erica Pedretti, Ruth Rehmann und Gabriele Wohmann (85-101). In "Zwei Tode," the poem is set in the larger context of the surrounding family relationships; thus by reading the Hörspiel, our understanding of the piece is expanded. "Meine Mutter" is inserted toward the end, each stanza separately, with the second, the dream sequence, closing the play. The first-person narrator of both the poem and the play, who provides commentary throughout "Zwei Tode," assumes in the second section of the Hörspiel the

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⁶ In Maternal Thinking (38-39), Sara Ruddick discusses how feminist writers often depict realistic maternal figures: "For many . . . women, becoming feminist is inseparable from breaking with a tradition of oppressive maternal self-sacrifice. . . . Fortunately, in the feminist tradition numerous writers neither fear nor romanticize mothers and their work. These feminist writers distinguish the experience of mothering from the oppressive, confining, isolating institutions of motherhood that spoil that experience for so many women. They insist that grown-up children--that is, all of us--acknowledge a mother's separate, subjective self." Krechel's poem, through its dream construct of the second stanza, attempts to do that.
role of the grown-up kleines Mädchen, or younger daughter in the family, from the play's first part.

In the radio play, the action opens with Onkel Ernst's visit to the mother and her two daughters with news of the grandfather's death. The mother leaves immediately to go home to the village to comfort the grandmother and to take care of the funeral arrangements and accompanying duties. Exhausted, she collapses at the funeral, is hospitalized and then sent away for a number of weeks, thus separated from her small children. Approximately ten years later, the setting is a family Christmas: at the parents' home, the older daughter is there with husband and children, while the younger one is unmarried. The latter does not feel part of the festivities; her heart is simply not in it. Her mother questions her aloofness and estrangement, but the daughter cannot verbalize the problem. Shortly thereafter, the mother becomes ill again; as the narrator/younger daughter says, the illness, uterine cancer, affords her the opportunity finally to become the center of attention. With this accomplished, her condition begins to decline rapidly.

Alle, die die Geschichte der Krankheiten meiner Mutter jahrelang nicht mehr hören mochten, wollten jetzt meine Mutter sehen. Jetzt glückte ihr, was sie sich ein Leben lang vergeblich gewünscht hatte: einmal im Mittelpunkt zu sein, als Person wahrgenommen zu werden. Sie, die immer auf die Familie gewartet hat, lässt jetzt die Familie auf ihren Tod warten. Sie empfängt Gäste und
This speech elaborates on the mother's self-sacrificing role in the family, which is put forth more subtly in the poem. She dies from a disease of the female organ of reproduction which dictated her function in life, i.e., wife and mother, yet she can gain recognition as an individual only through sickness and death.

Krechel employs the theme of the lifestyle of the middle-class housewife and turns it into a satiric critique in another poem from Nach Mainz! "Hymne auf die Frauen der bürgerlichen Klasse" (62-63) speaks in broad generalities about this particular demographic group: married, mothering, median-income, non-professional, white women, not employed outside the home. The underlying emotional restraint which characterized the personalized portrayal of the mother figure in "Meine Mutter" gives way to an uninhibited lambasting of these women's sheltered, privileged lives. This piece evokes an overwhelming impression of the predominant superficiality of their existence, accompanied by their all-encompassing repression. Each stanza features a different facet of bourgeois women; whether a description of their posture, coiffures, or painted nails, the message is clear throughout: they have compromised themselves and their desires for a secure slice of feigned domestic bliss.
The critique borders on caricature and operates with often grotesque stereotypes of women, such as the proclivity to gossip—"die sanft gebogene Nase immer in die richtige Sache zu stecken, die feinen Taschentücher / die Düfte, sorgsam ausgewählt"—sexual subordination, and marital dishonesty:

Oh, und ihre verschwiegene Lust zwischen den Beinen
ihr schönes Keuchen, Hecheln, Schwitzen, die ganze
sorgfältig gepflegte Hingabe und alle Versuche
sich noch einmal vorteilhaft zu verändern beim Friseur.

The enumeration of carefully groomed body parts, alongside a recitation of the mundane objects of their households—expensive items for their table service, wardrobe, and pet menagerie—demonstrates the commodified value of these women. In this context, the body signifies women as chattel; they not only "keep house" (i.e., manage the household objects), but also are human embodiments of an aestheticized objectification, productive solely in the private sphere of family and home life.

The last verse of the "hymn," which conforms to that genre in structure and title only, summarizes the lot of middle-class women. Hardly a song of praise or joy, the poem ends with a depiction of the grim "grin-and-bear-it" mentality or "keep-a-stiff-upper-lip" attitude that helps
them on a day-to-day basis to maintain their lives of missed opportunities, martyred acquiescence, and polite pretense:

Oh, und immer wieder die Selbstverständlichkeit mit der sie noch einmal aufstehen, zwischen allen Stühlen sitzen, die Zähne zusammenbeißen, Hände schütteln als sei alles wie immer früher und jetzt.

The compromised existence described in "Hymne auf die Frauen der bürgerlichen Klasse" echoes and elaborates on that of the woman in "Meine Mutter," whose life ended so abruptly, after having just reached the point of finding some relief from, and satisfaction beyond, her role as housewife (read: domestic servant), only at the point "als sie nicht mehr vor Angst aufwachte / weil sie vom Bügeleisen geträumt hatte / das nicht ausgeschaltet war." Ursula Krechel is attempting to come to terms with her own bourgeois background and family history in these poems, yet at the same time has managed to reveal her non-conformity to that lifestyle; her dreams involve not anxieties about whether household appliances have been left on, but matters such as her relationship with her mother and reconciling herself with the loss of her.

Krechel takes up the issue of grieving her mother's death again in a poem from her fourth volume of poetry, Vom Feuer lernen (1985). "Todestag" (65) is set thirteen years after the death occurred, in remembrance of her maternal
parent. The poem creates a desolate atmosphere and correspondingly gloomy mood in the first stanza:

Was bleibt von einer sehr gestorbenen Frau (sie starb kurz nach dem Muttertag und wäre auch auf Bitten nicht geblieben) zu was im Mai die Winde wehen, die Luft ist rauh

The phrase "sehr gestorben" emphasizes the tremendous loss that the mother's dying has meant to the persona, and implies that the death created a vacuum in her life which has been impossible to fill. The reader cannot help but be reminded of the mother figure in "Meine Mutter" and "Zwei Tode"; the cause and circumstances of her death are unmistakably similar:

vor dreizehn Jahren lebte sie ihr Sterben Monat um Monat, Tag um Tag geballter Leib und eines Morgens dann nicht mehr zu was Maiglöckchenstrauss, ein Mann, zwei Kinder, Erben

The attention is centered here too on her abdomen: geballter Leib could be translated as "clenched belly"\(^7\) and thus suggests pain, tension, and ill health in that area of the body. The adjective geballt summons up violent images due to its use in the phrases geballte Faust (clenched fist) and geballte Ladung, meaning a concentrated or demolition charge of an explosive. The volatility of her disease, presumably

\(^7\) The word Leib, though often a synonym for Körper (body), can also mean Bauch (belly), Magen (stomach), or Unterleib (abdomen).
uterine cancer, controls the daughter's memory of her life and perception of her death.

"Todestag" also serves to juxtapose the mother's childbearing and mothering with the author's writing by comparing their respective ages when performing these two very different acts:

zu war, die Frau, die hier jetzt schreibt, gleich alt wie jene sehr gestorbene Frau, als jene diese Frau gebar, seufzend, rauh röchelnd dann und schweigend über Töpfen, die andere schreibt

The mother bore the poet when she was the age that the poet is while writing these lines; or, in other words, the author "gives birth" to this poem in memory of her mother on the anniversary of her death, at the time in her life that coincides with her mother's age when she was born. As in "Meine Mutter," this text becomes an elegy to the deceased.

In both poems, Krechel demonstrates what has been referred to as an elegiac tradition in contemporary women's poetry, which differs from the traditional male form in that it "celebrate[s] continuity rather than separation" through "a resurrection of the dead" that "depends on unsentimental

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Ruddick discusses how not only men but also "Some feminists have promulgated their own version of the distinction between merely physical procreativity and the worthier creations of artists and intellectuals" (193). Although this idea is only implicit in Krechel's poem, it is worth noting the possible distinction she is making.
remembering.^^ Like other recent women poets, Krechel recalls her mother's life and death and in so doing "undertakes a . . . reverse elegiac journey back to the maternal point of origin . . . which amounts to a retracing of umbilical indebtedness" (Schenck 17).^10

The penultimate stanza of "Todestag" reiterates some of the same mothering activities described in "Meine Mutter" and re-emphasizes the fact that the author was delivered of a woman no longer living: "geboren von der sehr gestorbenen Frau / die dieses sagt (Kind) und jenes tat / (Löcher stopfen, Nägel schneiden, in die Augen sehen)." Krechel reconstructs the maternal bond now lost by recollecting everyday acts between mother and child and invoking a memory of the dead woman which is neither overly praising nor seeking to transcend her earthly existence, qualities typical of the traditional male elegy (Schenck 17).

In conclusion, Krechel struggles with the grief process in these elegies to the deceased, while she simultaneously attempts to reconcile her career as a woman writer with her mother's very different life experiences as wife and parent. In her appropriation of the elegiac form, the poet's

^^ Ideas are from Celeste Schenck, discussed in Ruddick 215.

^10 In reference to the poet Amy Clampitt.
accomplishments are twofold; she laments her mother's passing by invoking concrete memories of her actual existence and their intimate associations, and at the same time distances herself from the ruptured mother-child bond by making the pain of that loss manifest through her poetic voice. The final lines of "Todestag" well sum up Krechel's situation, which is not one of blame or self-pity but rather the ambiguity of survival and mourning:

verlassen ist ein grosses Wort, wer blieb, wer ging
Besteckschubladen, Kreuzstichkissen, Vasen, Leinen
wer klagt, wer fragt, es bleiben sterbliche Fragen
bis sie an keinem Faden, nichts mehr hing.

The household objects left behind act as reminders of the mother as keeper of the household, and close the poem in the intimate, enclosed realm of the home, much in contrast to the natural elements of the cold winds and raw air from the poem's outset.

Although not explicitly identified as such (as was the second stanza of "Meine Mutter"), the title poem from Nach Mainz! relates a dream sequence and handles the theme of

\[\text{11 The poet comments on this aspect of the poem "Nach Mainz!" as follows: "Natürlich beruht das Gedicht auf einem realen Traum. . . . Nur: die Parenthese 'ich träumte' in einem poetischen Text hat eine gewisse Beliebigkeit: ein Einfall wird nicht besser oder schlechter dadurch, dass man ihn quasi mit der Fussnote beschwert, dass er ein Traumeinfall ist. Und da das zweite Zentralgedicht des ersten Bandes den Traum vom anderen Leben der Mutter so dringend brauchte als Hypostasierung der Wirklichkeit, war} \]
childbearing, but with a radical transformation of that role. Just as in the major portion of the dream passage from "Meine Mutter," "Nach Mainz!" (29-30) is narrated in the present tense rather than the narrative past, giving the action directness and immediacy. When read as another example of a dream construct from this collection, the piece affords a fantastic yet fresh vision, as a springboard for further thought, of empowered and empowering women.

"Nach Mainz!" has hardly attracted critical acclaim; in fact, quite the contrary. However, the poem deserves more credit than to be taken literally, as several critics have done. Peter M. Stephan, using it as an example of the faulty or failed attempts at Kulturkritik by the poets of the New Subjectivity from the late 1970s, reduces the text to "liebenswert versponnener Utopismus, der besser nicht auf seinen ernsthaften politischen Gehalt abgeklopft werden sollte" (494). His remarks about Krechel's poem are cited and echoed by Elisabeth Hoffmann, who refers to it and most others in the volume as "oft allzu plakativ" (411), and further states that, "Vor allem in dem Titelgedicht preist die Autorin 'in hymnischer Naivität' (Stephan, S. 494) eine Form der Befreiung, die zur Pseudoemanzipation gerät" (411).

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ich bestrebt, im Gedicht 'Nach Mainz!' den Traumeinfall nüchterner zu machen, ihm die 'Vergoldung' zu nehmen."
From a feminist perspective, "Nach Mainz!" need not be considered naive or placative on account of its innovative, dynamic narrative, and can be appreciated for its ironization of the West German feminist and socialist movements roughly ten years into their development (1977).

The poem opens in a hospital maternity ward, with three women figures--Angela Davis, the Virgin Mary, and the persona--recuperating after childbirth. The lines describing the delivery of the babies do not refer directly to the women's reproductive organs, but instead use passive constructions which relate the birth experience in an intellectualized, detached manner:12 "Im Nebenraum / plärren die Säuglinge, die man uns abgepresst hat. / Jede von uns ist an einem Wochentag / von einem gewöhnlichen Kind entbunden worden" (emphasis added). The underlined verb structures denote an impersonal stance toward the event through an unemotional, rational description of the birthing process13 and in turn imply the societal oppression of the

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12 See Emily Martin for an insightful analysis of the language used by women of different social classes to describe their experiences of giving birth, menstruation, and menopause; for example, scientific terminology is typical of middle-class women's descriptions.

13 For a critique of "Nach Mainz!" as an expression of the poet's disregard for the responsibilities of motherhood, characteristic of a supposed lack of commitment to relationships in her poetry, see Ursula Unruh 91-92. This
birth-giving body. The following lines detail their convalescing occupations:

Wir reden nicht viel. . . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Maria liegt sehr blond in ihren Kissen.
Angela schläft viel. Ich lese in Freuds Traumdeutung und frage mich, warum ich trotzdem von pelzigen Säuge- und Nagetieren träume.

The persona and her two companions share the common bond of being marginalized from society's mainstream; due to their status as unwed mothers, their economic disadvantage, and their assumed socialist political views (see below), they are all social outcasts. The persona's dreams about "furry mammals and rodents" call up an association of breast-feeding newborns with animals classified by their suckling or gnawing behavior, which further undercuts the mother-child bond. The women's impassivity and confinement define them in the first part of the poem as emotionally subdued, sensorily dulled, physically immobilized. Their bodies are characterized by their maternal functions and the results of their motherhood.

review typifies the glorification of maternity that characterized the West German women's movement in the 70s.

14 These three women may be allegorical figures representing the realms of politics (Angela Davis), religion (Mary), and literature (persona).
What happens next acts as a catalyst for a dramatic turn of events; the persona is brought a newspaper with the headline that all socialists are banned to southern Germany, in a second division of the nation. Once this information has been received, the three female characters unite in engaged solidarity through concrete action: "Wir springen aus den Betten. Nichts wie nach Mainz / den Rhein hinauf. Wir umarmen uns, lachen / rennen barfuss durch die Altstadt zum Rhein." Hence they liberate themselves from the oppressive atmosphere of presumed maternal responsibility and inactivity in the hospital setting and become self-empowered through their shared choice of departure, as demonstrated in their expression of joyous emotion. The only momentary hesitation guided by maternal "instinct," expressed in the next line by Mary, the prototype of the good mother ("Die Kinder, ruft Maria an einer roten Ampel"), is soon overturned by their continued advancement toward their goal ("Wir kehren nicht um. Die Nachkommen gehen eigene Wege").

Unruh criticizes this "abandonment" of the babies as the ignoring of their "Gebundenheit als Mutter" and as proof of their lack of feeling and compassion, despite the fact that she does recognize the poem as a dream description (91).
Once the women reach the Rhine river to begin their upstream trek, the focus is on their now active and dynamic bodies, for the first time in the poem:

Schon stehen wir bis zu den Knien in der grauen Brühe
bespritzen Brust und Arme und kraulen los.
Obwohl wir gegen den Strom schwimmen, kommen wir gut voran. Was für ein Glück, die Arme auszustrecken
zu prusten, gurgeln, spritzen, um sich zu schlagen.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Während wir uns auf den Rücken werfen, reden wir darüber, was uns erwartet. Ich kneife Angela in den Arm.
Wir träumen nicht. . .

The above passage demonstrates the freeing up of these figures' feelings and desires through swift movement and from having taken the initiative to act. Now they are fearless in their joint adventure, though, as shown in the last two lines in this quote, also incredulous that it is happening. In a very different style from that of the poem's first part, here the physical features of the women are clearly stated and portrayed. The words Arm and Arme appear most often, so that the poem singles out the human limb most essential for mobility in swimming and thus concentrates the reader's attention on the vibrancy and vitality of the trio's action.

An interlude with a fisherman follows, in which he talks with them and rows them part of the way in his boat.
This segment of the poem plays on the well known myth of the Lorelei and so alludes to the Brentano and Heine poems which immortalize it. In addition, allusions to traditional Christian legend are evoked here, in relation to Jesus being a "fisher of men" and because in the poem it states that "Besonders Maria weckt sein Interesse. / Sie gleiche einer bestimmten Person aufs Haar. / Manchmal schaut er ihr ins Gesicht." The earlier line, "Maria liegt sehr blond in ihren Kissen," when considered with those just quoted, reinforces the madonna figure as a beautiful, blond, white woman who fulfills a Germanic ideal of femininity. The fisherman's interest in her—as opposed to Angela Davis, a black woman—suggests that he projects onto her images of racial and sexual purity, as emblazoned in the imagery of the cult of the holy virgin in the Roman Catholicism.

Upon arrival at their destination in Mainz, they are greeted by "die Rote Hilfe" (which may allude to the Rote Armee, not the Red Cross), reminding us that their mission was to reach the demarcation line dividing Germany into north and south in order to join the socialists. The last line of the poem, "Wie mir die Knie zittern," offers a final

16 "Lore Lay" and "Ich weiss nicht, was soll es bedeuten," respectively. The Fischer motif is also present in Brentano's "Auf dem Rhein."
reference to the persona's body and indicates either fear, elation, or excited anticipation for the future. At this point she is portrayed alone, separate from her companions, attending to her own concerns and her own body's needs. It is possible that the fisherman functions as the mythological figure of Charon by ferrying the women downriver into the underworld; thus the persona's reaction must surely be fear of the future and apprehension about whether she is living or already dead.\(^\text{17}\)

In relation to this ultimate isolation of the persona, a central question in dealing with "Nach Mainz!" lies in the newspaper headline banning socialists rather than feminists ("Zweite deutsche Teilung. / Alle Sozialisten nach Süddeutschland verbannt"). Krechel has chosen not to further concretize the solidarity among the three diverse, yet kindred, female figures in the poem by making their cause socialism instead of feminism. The choice of Mainz as the point of demarcation is significant, for it was the site

\(^\text{17}\) Judith Ryan comments on the dream sequence as "an essential element of the poem's self-irony. The final line, 'Wie mir die Knie zittern,' implies a fear of something more than merely a long swim in cold river water" (304).
of the first German Republic during the French Revolution. Thus Krechel indicates that, ironically, women have been as oppressed by the idealization of femininity and motherhood under socialism as they have been in capitalism. She implies that women have never experienced liberation in any revolution throughout history, even socialist. While "Nach Mainz!" may seem dated or simply humorous in a contemporary context, the poem can best be appreciated as a fantasy from that recent historical era of political activism during the rise of the new left and the women's movement.

Two poems from Krechel's later volumes of poetry further address women's role in pregnancy and childbearing. The seventeenth sequence of *Rohschnitt* (1983), which begins "Schon ihre Mutter war Mutter," presents a matrilineal view of women's history, whereas "Mnemosyne" from *Vom Feuer*

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18 "In Mainz errichten 1793 im Schutze der französischen Militärherrschaft deutsche 'Jakobiner' für kurze Zeit die erste Republik auf deutschem Boden. Die Sympathien für die Revolution schwinden aber bald wegen ihrer Radikalisierung und der drückenden Besatzungskosten der französischen Armee" (Fragen an die deutsche Geschichte 60).

19 The poet comments on this work as follows: "Jetzt bitten mich manchmal bei Lesungen die Leute, es ["Nach Mainz!"] wieder zu lesen, und ich muss manchmal beim Lesen lachen, und die Leute lachen auch. Wie schön, als ich so schrieb, die Welt geordnet war, ich glaube jetzt, das Gedicht ist ein Märchen, mit der entsprechend entlastenden Funktion." Krechel, letter, 19 Sept. 1989.
lernen uses the maternal as a metaphor in describing Germany's past. In these texts, the poet no longer deals with maternity as a personal issue in relation to her own mother or herself; rather, she uses a broader perspective to illuminate the generic female origins of humankind, and she employs a mythological figure to grapple with the problematic legacy of her nation, respectively.

"Schon ihre Mutter war Mutter"\(^{20}\) (35-37) initially brings to mind the well known quote by Virginia Woolf that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (79). Thinking back through our mothers has become a familiar concept in the contemporary women's movement, and Krechel's poem serves to identify some of the difficulties inherent in the task. The poet has previously recognized the frequent and consistent erasure of women's contributions in literary histories over the centuries in an essay about Irmgard Keun, subtitled "Auch ein Versuch über das Vergessen weiblicher Kulturleistungen" (104-06). In Sequenz 17 from Rohschnitt, the topic is introduced by the figure of the mother, in an

\(^{20}\) Although Rohschnitt is subtitled Gedicht in sechzig Sequenzen and thus should be considered as an extended poem in its entirety, I have, for the sake of convenience and clarity, chosen to discuss this "episode" (and later, several others) from the volume separately, as a poem unto itself.
effort to come to terms with being identified with that role: "So, sagte die Mutter, sei sie Mutter geworden."

The primary motif here is that of the birthing process, beginning in the first line with a rewriting of an idiomatic expression that refers to sons who follow in their fathers' footsteps in their choice of career:21

Schon ihre Mutter war Mutter
die wiederum war einer Mutter vom Schoss gesprungen
die Mutter wurde aus einer Mutter
stumme Mütter, die aufschrien zwischen den Geburten
und wieder still waren jahrelang.

Krechel shows that a main source of women's labor and production throughout history has been in bearing and raising children. In a revision also of the patrilineal chronology presented in the Old Testament books of Genesis and 1 Chronicles, the poem begins by stressing the cyclical nature of the generations and that every mother herself is of woman born. The second line hints that women's role in the birth act is quite natural, spontaneous, and seemingly effortless with the expression "war einer Mutter vom Schoss gesprungen" (which is repeated in the fourth stanza). This phrase both alludes to and rewrites the mythological origin of the goddess Athena, who had no mother but sprang fully

21 "Schon sein Vater war Schuster," for example, about a man who has also chosen to become a cobbler.
grown from the head of Zeus. The fourth line contradicts the implication of ease in giving birth by stating that mothers cry out "zwischen den Geburten" during the pains of labor and delivery but are otherwise _stumm_ and _still_ for long periods of time, which signifies their subordination and oppression both in society and in the home.\(^2\)

The first stanza continues with an indication of the lack of continuity or common history between women and their maternal ancestors, since genealogical lineage is based on, and traced through, the father's family name:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{eine gebar die andere, die von der einen nichts wusste} \\
\text{eine väterlicherseits zusammengevögelte Gesellschaft} \\
\text{eine auf die andere gesetzt, ein Geschlecht von Riesinnen, auf deren Schultern wir ritten auf deren Nerven wir trampelten.}
\end{align*}
\]

The second line of this passage indicates the trafficking in women that attends patriarchy; persons of the female gender have long served as the objects of barter and trade to establish, strengthen, and further tribal, friendship, and

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\(^2\) Ruddick comments on the elision of cultural discourse on birth as follows: "When reason sets itself against a body that is epitomized by birthing labor, the relationship of birth stands _outside speech_. Bodily beginnings, and some women's participation in them, stand for all that reason is not. When birth figures in reason's story only as an absence, the birthing woman is _silent_" (196).
kinship ties among men. The phrase "eine väterlicherseits zusammengevögelte Gesellschaft"--with the slang word *vögeln*--reveals the dominating principles of male power and pleasure inherent in heterosexual intercourse, and the accompanying recognition granted by the patronymic tradition. The latter portion of this excerpt makes several points about female parents and their daughters' relationship to them. First, they are called *Riesinnen*, a term denoting greatness in stature and status, at least in the eyes of diminutive, youthful offspring. Further, that they afford their young years of support and mobility is suggested in "auf deren Schultern wir ritten." Lastly, "auf deren Nerven wir trampelten" counteracts the affirmative value of the previous statement to demonstrate the depreciatory component of the primal love-hate relationship ascribed to mothers by their children, according to the object relations theory of psychoanalysis: their care and nurturance is repaid with ingratitude, if not abuse (Gardiner 126).

Repugnance at the biological role of woman as childbearer as well as her social role as childrearer is expressed in the fifth stanza:

23 See Gayle Rubin for a comprehensive account of this phenomenon from an anthropological perspective.
Ich spreche ins Unreine, sagte sie, will nicht verantwortlich sein für Sätze, Bilder eine Rolle spielen, die Mutter heisst ich bin verantwortlich für das Kind: ein unreiner Zustand, aus der Mutter gekrochen unrein und körperlich, eine zerstückelte Zeit wächst zusammen, Knochenfugen schliessen sich geschleppt und auf den Arm gehoben, unreine Wärme unreine Vernunft, in der hohlen Hand gekrault zwischen den Fingern zerronnen, eine milchige Zeit.

Here, instead of the phrase "einer Mutter vom Schoss gesprungen" used in the first and fourth stanzas, the expression is "aus der Mutter gekrochen" to analogize the birth process from the child's perspective. We know that the woman speaking is the original birthing parent of the child from the first line of the previous stanza: "Dann trug ich das Kind, und das Kind trug mich / in eine andere Welt." This fact makes it surprising, then, that she refers to herself in the third person in the aforementioned phrase, rather than by simply saying, "aus mir gekrochen." The words unrein and körperlich denote the commonly accepted devaluation of childbirth and childcare in our society; Krechel has thus typified the traditional association of women's reproductive bodies with the supposed untidiness and uncleanness of giving birth and the female gender's derogation due to intimate contact with the incontinence of
human bodies. The final three lines of the above passage create an unpleasant sensory experience characterizing the care of small children. Again, the expressions used here summon up an image of bodily fluids and products (breast milk, urine, fecal matter, and so forth) to suggest, ultimately, the little or lack of control mothering women have over their own lives in connection with the bodies of their children. Also, this passage alludes to the problems of finding adequate and affordable childcare and the poverty of many working mothers and their children.

In the final stanza, the three other female figures of Rohschnitt—"die Schöne, die Kluge, ich [poetic persona]"—attempt to amend this portrayal of maternity by reaffirming the individual identity and integrity of this prototypical mother figure: "du warst doch du, eine von uns und nicht verändert," an assertion displaying feminist solidarity that comes somewhat late in the narrative to have much conviction. More like a desperate but failed resolution,

24 See Ruddick for an in-depth discussion of patriarchal society's generally accepted aversion to birth and other traditional female roles; see Donna Wilshire for a delineation of the fundamental misogynist dualisms of our culture which link women with nature, inferiority, and bodiliness, and men correspondingly with culture, superiority, and intellect; see also Klaus Theweleit on the association of women's bodies with the properties of water, blood, and filth.
this statement is largely overshadowed by the suggestion of biological determinism indicated in the lines which follow it to close the sequence: "gekreuzt, fortgepflanzt und mehr (feige, aber wahr) / wenn das eine Genugtuung ist. / Da war die Rolle zuende." On the contrary, to refer to the mother's role with terms from the field of zoology and botany (kreuzen, fortpflanzen, and earlier in the stanza, brüten) offers little in the way of restoration of the mother's loss of self-determination. Women's childbearing bodies are categorized and manipulated as scientific objects for the furthering of the human species, without regard for their subjectivity.

"Schon ihre Mutter war Mutter" provides a satire on the preoccupation with and valorization of matriarchal utopias and the cult of motherhood in the West German women's movement in the late 1970s. In an essay from 1978, Krechel speaks of her disillusionment with the appearance of signs of biological essentialism in feminist theory and ideology, and skepticism about the effort to reclaim the female body:

Hat denn die "Totenwache am mumifizierten weiblichen Körper" (Hélène Cixous) nie ein Ende? Schon sehe ich die Wächterinnen, die darüber wachen, dass der Stein, unter dem der Körper liegt, alle die Leiden der Frauen, die Krebsgeschwüre, der Pesthauch der Entfremdung, nicht weggerollt wird. So geschieht zweierlei, und es ist nicht auszudenken, was schlimmer ist: Wir, die Frauen, die Lust an der Sprache, Lust an der Sprachgebärde im Gedicht haben, sind vom
weiblichen Körper getrennt. Ihn uns anzueignen, käme einer gesalzenen Leichenschändung gleich. Und das zweite: der mumifizierte weibliche Körper modert. Die Lust, die ihm ausgegangen ist, wird nun, da es zu spät ist, sorgfältigst vom ihm ferngehalten. Der Status, den die geschicktesten Balsamierungskünste aufrechterhalten kann, ist der vergangene: wie zu Lebzeiten, aber nicht lebendig. Vielmehr ist der Tod, die eingetretene Starre, die Bedingung, um die Totenwache am mumifizierten weiblichen Körper wahrzunehmen. ("Freie Formen" 68)

This passage outlines Krechel's argument against the preoccupation with the female body in much of contemporary feminist theory. She sees this overriding concern with women's anatomy as essentially unnecessary, and seeks to redeem a new vision for the project of women's writing:

Haben die Frauen die schreibenden Frauen, die aus ihnen heraus schreiben, erkannt? Erkennen die Toten die Lebendigen? Vor lauter Suche nach Traditionen, nach den Anfängen unserer selbst in den dunkelsten Ecken der patriarchalischen Finsternis vergessen wir wieder einmal uns (nein, so einfach mache ich es euch nicht), vergessen wir wieder einmal, uns ganz preiszugeben an unser Begehren, auch an Widersprüchlichkeiten unseres Begehrens: eine Literatur, die mehr wagt, als das, was wir schon kennen. ("Freie Formen" 68)

Krechel is emphasizing the importance of the work of contemporary women authors and is encouraging feminist critics and theorists to help writing women envision other alternatives in form and content, as opposed to simply indicting the patriarchal structures of our literary heritage. In a book such as *Rohschnitt*, the poet accomplishes what she has prescribed. She experiments
formally with the long poem, integrates the language and
technique of cinematic production into the sequences, and
introduces an innovative structuring of poetic character
development in the triadic partnership of the archetypal
female figures with the feminine first-person narrator.

As in the final stanza of "Schon ihre Mutter war
Mutter," the poem "Mnemosyne" (Vom Feuer lernen, 83-84) also
makes reference to the animal and plant kingdoms, but with a
less scientific tone; the words Laich and Schwimmhäute from
the first stanza, and Blütenstaub from the second, suggest a
connection between the natural world and the title figure.
Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess who bore the nine muses
fathered by Zeus, is the personification of memory. Thus
this piece functions on both a mythological and a
metaphorical level: as the embodiment of memory and as the
expectant bearer of history:

Längst geh ich schwanger
mit dem Laich der Geschichte
dem kein Gott Schwimmhäute wachsen lässt
in einer zukünftigen Zeit.

The second two lines indicate that the spawn will never be
fully developed, despite an overlong gestation period, and
therefore will never be fit for survival.

This inadequacy for life is confirmed in the beginning
of the second stanza:
Und wer mich begehren wollte
im Blütenstaub Deutschlands
Geschichte einer zukünftigen Totgeburt
den verlach ich.

Krechel's use of pregnancy and still-birth as a metaphor for contemporary German history is not unique. However, "Mnemosyne" reads as an enigmatic monologue by the mother of the muses whose supposed "unbefleckte Empfängnis" is the focal point of the text. If German history cannot endure, it is because the memory of it will be lost:

Nein, ich werde nicht vermisst
die gestorbenen Dinge
Stuhl, Kamm, Ohrring, Fahrschein
leihern den Singsang des Verlusts.

The first line of this passage, which closes stanza one, indicates that memories of the past need not be preserved because no one has cause, the will, or the desire to remember them. The following lines present a juxtaposition to the nature imagery cited above with the delineation of various everyday products of civilization, all of which have ceased to be useful and bode the transitoriness of such tokens of remembrance.

The state of amnesia that pervades the poem, as inferred from the above quoted passages, stems from:

25 A stark example from contemporary German literature is Wolf Biermann's "Kinderlied," which portrays Mutter Erde as heavy with the gigantic fetus of the ultimately still-born Kommunismus. See Biermann 163-64.
Die fischblütigen Herren, an Telefone gekettet kopfüber besorgt, doch unerschüttert ein Jahrhundert zu spät verfroren in blauglänzenden Kuben.

These cold-blooded bureaucrats, slaves to a deadening lifestyle, are frozen in time and space. The "Zahnlose Münnder, möbliert / mit porzellanweissen Gebissen" portend artifice and sinister acts; their "schön erfundene Lügen, seifenglatt / gepolstert mit echten Zitaten" characterize the inability to face the facts of their own history. Mnemosyne's foreboding presence can be denied or fended off by a simple defensive gesture: "eine schützende Hand auf dem verlogenen Leib," as in the warding off of evil spirits.

Although those whom she addresses as ihr toward the end of the poem are not clearly specified, the referents could be "die Träumenden" of the final stanza. The last two lines of the text, however, point to present-day residents of Germany: "Das Wintergewitter über der Autobahn: / dass ihr es lebend überlebt und lacht." The abstruseness of "Mnemosyne" leaves the reader in a dilemma: is the subject here the crisis of contemporary German society as a result of the fascism, concentration camps, and genocide of World War II? Or does a more subtle meaning elude us in an interpretation of the cryptic symbolism found in the poem?

The motif of the pregnant body of Mnemosyne filled with unlivable history is evocative of an apocalyptic vision and,
as anatomical imagery, works to disturb a complacent forgetfulness of the legacies of Germany's forebears. Nonetheless, the poem is also disturbing due to its appropriation of the female body as the mythological and metaphorical locus for yet another exploitation of maternal imagery. It provokes controversy by anthropomorphizing history and memory as childbearing. Because this female figure is not active, but acted upon; desired, not desiring ("Und wer mich begehren wollte"); and fertile, not innately potent, the text ultimately fails to affirm women's creative powers and talents and instead upholds counterproductive, oppressive stereotypes.

When read in the context of the quotation on the preceding page of the volume, however, the context of the poem may be better understood and appreciated. Krechel cites Antonin Artaud, from *Die Nervenwaage*:

> Endlich einer, in dessen Geist keine Stelle hart wird, und der nicht plötzlich seine Seele links spürt, auf der Seite des Herzens. Endlich einer, für den das Leben ein Punkt ist und für den weder die Seele Einschnitte noch der Geist Anfänge hat. (81)

This statement by the founder of the theater of cruelty from the 1930s and 1940s elucidates an attitude that recognizes the advantages of a steel will and harshness as opposed to compassion and sentiment. In this light, "Mnemosyne" identifies the unresolved and problematic legacy of the
Holocaust and Third Reich for the history of the German nation. Though the symbolism of the poem diffuses the critique of the country's National Socialist past and the inauspicious prognostication for its future, Krechel has expanded upon the mythological figure of Mnemosyne to present a scathing appraisal of the state of Germany in the mid 1980s, under the specter of the neo-conservatism of the ruling Christian Democrats in the Federal Republic. For this poem, she requires not a traditional muse for inspiration, but the mother of the muses, or memory itself, to indict the morally languishing inheritance of twentieth-century history passed on to her and her contemporaries.26

The Metamorphosed Body

As Krechel notes in the Anmerkungen section following the text (100), sequence 31 from Rohschnitt, which begins "Nachts verwandeln sie sich in reisende Wölfinnen" (56-58), is based on a legend from the Auvergne region of France, as reported by Jules Michelet in his nineteenth-century work Satanism and Witchcraft: A Study in Medieval Superstition. Krechel's rendition of the tale adheres closely to

26 For a study of the muse as a re-envisioned, powerful female figure in contemporary American women's poetry, see Mary K. DeShazer, especially the chapter "'Unlearning to Not Speak': New Sources of Women's Inspiration" (196-215).
Michelet's version—which he in turn borrowed from Boguet's *Discours des Sorciers* (1605)—with one notable exception: the body part in question here is a woman's leg, rather than the human hand of the original story (Michelet, footnote 124-25). This adaptation focuses the attention on a part of female anatomy that is highly sexualized, and its dismemberment implies greater injury and risk to survival than does the loss of a hand. 27 In *Rohschnitt*, the recurring threesome of female figures that appears throughout the work ("die Kluge die Schöne die Mutter") undergoes a transformation in physical form: they become prowling she-wolves at night.

Krechel's appropriation of the information provided by Michelet varies from most literary accounts of lycanthropy in that traditionally the humans who turn themselves into (or who are turned into) wolves are male. Of course, under the aspect of witchcraft, the figure of woman as a metamorphosed being seems entirely plausible, since historically the feminine gender has been the gender persecuted more frequently and consistently for suspected devilry, including changing into other life forms and having

27 Compare the repeated injuries to the legs of the title character in Novak's "Ballade von der Türk in Nigar" intended to squelch her independence and impede her mobility. See Chapter 1, pages 53-55 above.
the power over life and death. Still, the common cultural myth of the werewolf remains in most minds a predominantly masculine construction so that "Nachts verwandeln sie sich in reisende Wölfinnen" undercuts the popular conception of a hirsute, bestial, and very male creature that lurks ominously under the full moon.

In contrast, the male figures in Krechel's poem are simple humans and represent various prominent positions in their community: *der Wirt*, *der Metzger*, *der Tankwart*, *der Amtsarzt*, and later, *der Landrat*. These men set out to protect their village due to sightings of the roving she-wolves reported on the radio and in the local newspaper. They are portrayed as ordinary citizens and are characterized by feigned bravery (frequently drinking "Mut aus vollen Flaschen"), genuine fear and superstitions ("Nackenhaare sträuben sich," "Nachts heulen die Wölfinnen / in einem fremden, langgezogenen Ton den Männern / in die Ohren," "Knoblauchzehen unter den Rockaufschlägen"), and cold-bloodedness ("Sein Herz ist kalt"). The line "Die wilde Jagd beginnt in ihren Köpfen" indicates the significant role their petit bourgeois imagination and psychological make-up play in their pursuit of animals which apparently threaten not only their community but also their manly pride and an internalized need to assert it.
The female wolves are as determined as their hunters, intrepid in the face of attack and undaunted even after the onslaught:

The injured creature does not recoil or howl in pain, but unflinchingly seeks to preserve her life by making a quick escape, despite the loss of her leg. The hunters have only approximated their goal of slaying the game, although they feel triumphant by gaining the leg as proof of the success of their adventure, and appease themselves that the animal will not be able to sustain such a maiming wound.

From this point in the narrative, the formerly menacing she-wolves are dismissed ("Genug der streunenden Wölfinnen"), upon the arrival of the men at the home of the Landrat, who praises them for their valiant efforts and calls for further celebration: "Prost. Sie trinken. Mut fällt ab und wohlige Wärme kommt. / Der Landrat lobt die
Bürgerwehr. Die Helden leben hoch. / Dass wieder Ordnung herrscht." The mores of their village have been defended and upheld, so that law and order may reign again. The crux of the narrative follows shortly thereafter, when the self-satisfied vigilantes display their prize for the district magistrate:

Zum Abschied schwankend
holt der Wirt den Lauf der Wölfin aus dem Sack.
Blut
tropft und keiner ekelt sich. Der Arzt wird bleich
der Metzger stumm: in der Hand des Wirts ein Frauenbein
ein Schuh mit Riemchen, Schnallen, die kennt der Landrat
ganz genau am Bein der ungetreuen Landratsfrau.

It is here that the poem departs from Michelet's account; the severed extremity is a woman's leg, changed back to human form from the she-wolf's Lauf, whereas the legend has the animal's appendage transformed into the hand of the nobleman's wife. Krechel's choice of a hind leg turned into a human leg as opposed to a foreleg into a human hand creates a stronger impact; not only the size of the former body part, but also its necessity for mobility is greater than that of the latter. The poem differs further from the legend in that here the Landratsfrau is entirely absent.

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28 As soon as the huntsmen arrive at the Landrat's house, they ask, "Wo / ist die Frau des Landrats?" Heute
whereas there the wife is at home and confronted by her husband who discovers a hand missing and subsequently has her burned at the stake (Michelet 125). Sequence 31 ends instead with the central figures of Rohschnitt (indicated by the first-person plural pronoun) together in safety, again in human form; the Landratsfrau is not among them:

Am Morgen frühstücken wir so spät wie immer betrachten beiläufig unsere schlammigen Schuhe.
Die Beleuchtung stimmt Bild für Bild.
Kein Tagblatt kommt. Dorfhunde spielen Doubles.

Although the victim's whereabouts are unknown, as is the question of her survival, everything here seems to be back to normal. Yet the newspaper does not arrive, which suggests the possibility of either a disruption in the routine daily life of the community due to the past night's events, or the suspicion, fear, and thus avoidance of these women for being involved in the turmoil. The important message of the poem, however, is that a woman has been punished—physically mutilated—for marital infidelity. Her body bears the mark of the brutal maiming she suffered at the hands of the hunters, who resorted to violence for the sake of fraternity.

The issues addressed in "Nachts verwandeln sie sich in reisende Wölfinnen" recall those of a poem from Nach Mainz! beim Heimatabend / Bridge, Spanischkurs?" He offers no response or explanation.
entitled "Die Würde der Frau ist tastbar" (71-73). Beyond a similar depiction of the metamorphosed female body and the violence imposed on it, this earlier piece treats relationships from a personal perspective as well as from a political vantage point and confronts the question of solidarity among women. "Die Würde der Frau ist tastbar" functions both as a diatribe against male domination and as a lament on the still prevalent subordination of women. The title is a variation on that of an essay by the radical political activist Ulrike Meinhof, "Die Würde des Menschen," from 1962, which is collected in Die Würde des Menschen ist antastbar (27-30). Krechel makes Meinhof's claim more specific by explicitly singling out and focusing on women's rights and issues, rather than the more general topic of human dignity. In turn, Meinhof's title reformulates the opening statement of the Grundgesetz of the Federal Republic: "Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar, sie zu achten und zu schützen ist Verpflichtung aller staatlichen Gewalt."

A conversation between the first-person narrator and her companion at the dinner table opens the poem in the first two stanzas and centers on her foregoing of a feminist demonstration in order to devote time and attention to the lover. In stanza three, the persona enters into a
reflective discourse, comparing—with irony—traumatic events particular to women on an individual level, with larger, more public concerns affecting a number of people:

"Was bedeutet eine Abtreibung gegen einen Betriebsunfall / eine Vergewaltigung gegen die Stillegung eines Werkes."

Here the concerns of feminists in the women's movement are juxtaposed with those of the neo-marxists in the new left. The persona then undermines the appropriateness of her feelings and the dissatisfaction with her life in contrast to the suffering and deaths of women whose choices were more limited and whose situations more dire than hers:

Was bedeutet mein Überdruss am Küchentisch gegen die Leiden der vielen Frauen die auf dem Küchentisch verblutet sind29 (oder sich nicht einmal dahin trauten)?

Related questions ensue, until the stanza ends with the poem's title and a slight variation of it:


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29 A reference to the practice of illegal abortions and their high mortality rate, still common at that time in the Federal Republic due to the longstanding existence of the anti-abortion law, Article 218. See Edith Altbach et al. 102-4.
The first and second lines of the above passage reveal a woman-to-woman eroticism informed by an empowering sisterhood ("die wachsende Kraft der Frauen" of the previous line) and the dynamic experience of crossover between the political and sexual arenas: from movement on the public streets in demonstrations to tossing and turning in the privacy of the bedroom. The line "Haut und Gedanken berühren sich" evidences the intermingling of the physical/sexual with the intellectual/cognitive realms.

The similarities with the Wölfinnen sequence from Rohschnitt begin in stanza four, where the motif of male hunters pursuing women as animals appears:

Wir rennen vor den Schlägen, den knüppeldicken
sie haben die Jagd auf uns eröffnet, wir sind das wilde Wild
haben schon immer Schläge ausgehalten
uns geduckt und sind aufgestanden danach zum Überleben.
Geht in die Häuser, das ist die letzte Warnung.
Strasse frei. Jetzt wird scharf geschossen.

There follows here a reference to the gratuitous violence in film and television, whose victims are usually either people of color (in TV newsclips) or film extras (in motion pictures):

Ihr kennt die Filme ja (hab ich geträumt, was weiss ich?)
seht immer wieder, wie einer einfach wegknickt
aber meistens sind es Farbige im Fernsehen
und sie sind massstabgerecht klein. Oder es sind Statisten.
The persona then describes the scene of a massacre, where the bodies of women lie contorted and disfigured:

Hier (träum nicht!) liegen wir auf der Strasse
lauter weibliche Leichen, verdrehte Gelenke
mit samtiger Haut . . .
Blut sickert, verkrustet, süßlich.
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Schuhe ohne Füße, Füße abgeknickt.

This enumeration of lifeless body parts elicits a grotesque inversion of the aesthetization of fragmented female bodies frequently found in popular advertising, or, from the perspective of art history, in the painting of the surrealists, for example; it incorporates the violence dealt the feminine gender throughout history in a critical overview of the ravaged flesh of this scene. Here Krechel takes to the extreme the listing of parts of female anatomy discussed above in the earlier poems "Meine Mutter" and "Hymne an die Frauen der bürgerlichen Klasse."

The stanza also juxtaposes the dead women with the male lovers and relatives who survive the carnage:

Männer aus unserem früheren Leben
identifizieren uns . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
So kommen die Brüder und Väter
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . um uns nicht wiederzuerkennen.

The former lovers identify their slaughtered girlfriends by traces of their physical form ("Das ist unzweifelhaft / die Hand meiner Freundin. Über dieses buschige Haar / strich

Das ist unzweifelhaft / die Hand meiner Freundin. Über dieses buschige Haar / strich
ich") or scraps of clothing ("Stoffetzen kommen ihnen bekannt vor / helle Blusen, aus denen sie uns gepellt haben"). The fathers and brothers, however, are unable to acknowledge the bodily remains of their daughters or sisters first of all because the corpses are beyond recognition, but also because these male relatives can only afford the deceased a hasty interruption of their busy schedules.

Thus the intimacy between the women and their previous male companions is slightly greater than with members of the opposite sex from their own family. Yet the men who were sexually close to these women are renounced for their inability to present a family relation and reproved for their failure to establish any other official (standesamtlich) connection to them:

Vielleicht dürft ihr uns überhaupt nicht sehen seid nicht verwandt, verschwägert steht in keiner abgestempelten Beziehung zu uns. Seid ihr im Kopf verwitwet? Einbeinig, einäugig ohne uns, was weiss ich?

This passage undercuts the value of these past relationships and expresses the uneasiness of the murdered women with allowing men from their past to come into proximity with their bodies. The question "Seid ihr im Kopf verwitwet?" speculates whether their deaths will affect the men more psychologically than in practical terms, but it may also be asking whether the women will be mourned as spouses, despite
the absence of the marital bond. The use of einbeinig and eineigig concretizes the potential crippling effect that the loss of these women might have upon their former lovers. Both words ironize the lack of female presence through the connotation of what would be the antithesis of penis envy: they suggest the inferiority of the singular male genitalia (the penis as the one-eyed or one-legged organ embodying a less than adequate anatomy) and the preferability of the plurality of female sexuality--twin labia and breasts, for example.  

The fifth and final stanza eventually brings the persona back from the horrific fantasy sequence into the domestic frame of reference which opened the poem--the kitchen as the setting for everyday life--but not before a complete dismemberment of the corpses has occurred:

Wir werden in Särge geladen von amtlichen Händen zwischen den Schienen der Tram, an roten Ampeln (sind wir das wirklich?) in Stücke gerissen am Bahndamm der führt heraus aus der Stadt in unsere Küche wo du jetzt fragst: . . . .

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30 Luce Irigaray writes of woman's autoeroticism that "her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually. Thus, within herself she is already two--but not divisible into ones--who stimulate each other" (100). For an elaboration of the radical difference in sexuality and desire with regard to male and female bodies, see Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One."
The remainder of the poem juxtaposes the grapes they will eat for dessert to celebrate the narrator's birthday with the tragic events in the evening news report; the former are suggestive of the dionysian domain (fruit of the vine, wine, the pleasures of taste and eating), whereas the latter refer to the shooting deaths of real young men elsewhere in the world (as opposed to the slaughter of young women in the nightmarish vision):

ausgezogen, gefesselt, frühmorgens
ihre Köpfe von Schüssen durchsiebt
dieses Mal acht junge Männer, Streikposten
auf einem Parkplatz in Argentinien gefunden.

These lines revise the previously mentioned connection between women based upon their common oppression and persecution, and therefore expand the poem's critique to include male victims of violence. The last lines show the persona's shift in perspective by the conferring of her "tastbare Würde" beyond the bounds of her gender, and her cautious movement out of the confines of the familiar kitchen to face the violence of the outside world:

. . . da teil ich meine Würde
(noch einmal) feierlich wie beim Brotbrechen, tast
mich vor
tast mich aus der Küche, in die Welt, vorsichtig
vom Küchendunst ins Blutbad, verwisch die Spuren
hör noch den kalten Fisch im Radio: Wir schalten
um.

The verb sich tasten here plays on the title of the poem, "Die Würde der Frau ist tastbar," and stresses the tactile
dimension of the senses as well as the need to "feel one's way" through the transition between the private and the public realms.

The adjectives tastbar and antastbar, from the verbs (sich) tasten and antasten, suggest the violability and vulnerability of the dignity of women as human beings, whereas unantastbar as used in the rhetoric of the Grundgesetz refers to the universalized unassailable rights of man. In fact, the question of whether those of the female sex even belong to the species Homo sapiens opens the poem:

Gern wäre ich dieses Mai weit weg gefahren
mit vielen Frauen: Die Würde des Menschen ist nicht
die Würde der Frau des Menschen, weil eigentlich Frauen keine Menschen sind: Doch, sagst du

This concern relates to Krechel's portrayal of women as wild animals or wolves, in this poem and in the previously discussed sequence, and leads to a provocative questioning of the fundamental categories of classification used in anthropology, which is male-oriented and male-dominated just as are all fields of science and all aspects of culture and civilization. The persona's assertion is shrugged off by her companion, at once attempting to silence such a claim and then diverting the conversation to the level of everyday life and the domain of the private:
es gibt so viele Frauen. Auf dich 
können sie heute mal verzichten, sagst du. 
Du hast auch ein Privatleben, sagst du 
nämlich mich, sagst du, ein Privatleben und ein 
Recht darauf.

The companion's retort continues in this self-serving vein for several more lines; based on this dialogue in the early part of the poem, the du addressed here appears to be a representative of the patriarchy, though the person's gender seems intentionally left ambiguous by the poet.

In summary, the Wölfinnen sequence and "Die Würde der Frau ist tastbar" present critiques of the long history of brutality against women by showing the degradation of the female gender in the form of a metamorphosis of the female into an animal body. The hunting motif becomes a metaphor for domestic violence and abuse, where the pursued beast denotes the persecuted woman. Krechel has attempted to demonstrate how deeply misogyny is entrenched in the violent images and practices of our society that equate women with animalistic or nonhuman nature. She takes up the feminist struggle for liberation in a more comprehensive way by elucidating the dynamics and pitfalls of the human quest for progress throughout the centuries in several texts that will be discussed in the following section.
The Evolving Body

Three of Krechel's poems, each from a different volume of her poetry, speak about the evolution of the human race and its concomitant struggles in the late twentieth century. In the latter two texts, the poet shifts from her frequent concern with women-centered relationships and issues to a more comprehensive survey of humanity. The earliest of these pieces, however, "Entwurf zu einer Anthologie der Körper" from *Verwundbar wie in den besten Zeiten*, still focuses on the female body in an exploration of sexual intimacy and an attempt at subjective connection between two women figures, who struggle against the effects of domestic violence. Sequence 13 from *Rohschnitt*, entitled "Stammen wir nicht von Menschen ab," deals with the evolution of technology and how its employment affects the growth and the quality of life for humanity. "Orthopädie des aufrechten Ganges" from *Vom Feuer lernen* details the progression through various stages of human development alongside the consequences of scientific intervention in reproduction and genetics. Each of these texts, extended in length and discursive in style, addresses topics germane to an analysis of the transitional female body in Krechel's poetry, although here the specificity of women's bodies and experience is overturned to encompass a feminist reception
of the legacy of patriarchy, which interacts more directly with the terms of the masculine tradition.

Krechel's second volume of poetry, *Verwundbar wie in den besten Zeiten* (1979), has been characterized by its recurrent motif of coldness, which is said to typify the strained relations and lack of human contact found in the poems (Mielke 7-8). "Entwurf zu einer Anthologie der Körper" (36-39) upholds this assessment in two exemplary lines that depict the frigidity of bodies in relation to themselves and each other and represent the separation between individuals: "In diesem Winter stockt die Kälte in den Leibern" and "die plötzlichen Kälteeinbrüche in der Nacktheit." Despite the poet's claim that this text presents an anthology of broadly based research on physical attributes, and despite its impersonal title and beginning lines—"Die Körper haben sich voneinander entfernt / Gefangene der herrschenden Gefühle / sind sie ihrer selbst überdrüssig geworden"—"Entwurf zu

31 While she admits that this poem is "wirklich ein Körpergedicht," Krechel qualifies that statement as follows: "aber ich wollte es nicht schreiben als ein Ausdruck der Trauer, dass zwei spezifische Körper keine Lust mehr miteinander empfinden, sondern als eine auf eine breitere Basis gestellte Forschung: eine Anthologie. Das Private 'einmal in deinem blauen Bett': ein Ort der Forschung, ungeeignet für Metaphorisierungen." Krechel, letter, 19 Sept. 1989. Yet a poem remains a poem, not an anthology, and also not a space reserved for empirical research; the subjective and metaphoric elements cannot be denied.
einer Anthologie der Körper" nonetheless treats the problematic issue of intimacy between the narrator and another person, addressed as du in the fourth and sixth stanzas, implied in the use of wir in the fifth stanza, and, in the last stanza, ultimately referred to in the third person (as sie), which poetically concretizes and finalizes the distance between them. Until the closing passage, however, the gender of this individual is not divulged and its disclosure seems purposefully to have been evaded (as was that of the persona's partner in "Die Würde der Frau ist tastbar"). But based on the use of the pronoun sie in the final stanza, we can surmise that the text describes the waning of sexual and emotional intimacy between two persons of the feminine gender while, as we will see, it also engages the issue of their mutual oppression as women.

After two brief initial stanzas, the third relates the background details of the original motivation for writing this piece:

Jahrelang wollte ich eine Geschichte der Körper schreiben, einen Zyklus der Bewegungen eine Formation aus unserem nicht getanzten Ballett in dem eines das andere einholt, flieht, umkreist.

Jahrelang suchte ich nach Bildern für die Poren der Haut, die ruhlosen Muskeln ich wollte ein Verzeichnis der Runzlen anlegen ein Gedicht mit Sprüngen das alle Bewegungen nachvollzieht und neu erfindet einmal an einem langen Band
This stanza justifies the poet's intent to create an anthology, or selective collection, of the body in lyric form. The desire to put together such a poem, however, existed long before the wish could be realized:

Ein Entwurf zu einer Anthologie der Körper
spukte mir körperlos im Kopf.
Ich ging gebückt unter der Last des eigenen Anspruchs
temte Musterkoffer mit anatomischen Gliederpuppen.

The idea was present, yet without form (körperlos), in the poet's mind. Still, the claim to such a project, even in the early stages of development, had already become an obligation which brought itself to bear heavily on her, as if weighing down her shoulders and back.

The following stanza begins with an indication of the foundation upon which the anthology was to be built:

Einige Zeilen standen immer fest
in meiner Anthologie: einmal
am Nachmittag in deinem blauen Bett, einmal
mehrmals
sprachen wir über Unterdrückung.
Nicht die schnell auszusprechende jenseits
in Schulen, Büros und Fabriken
wo sich die Fäuste leichter ballen
in der Tasche als unter der Decke

A distinction is made between oppression in the public and private domains, and clearly here it is a question of the latter. The physical intimacy between the two is described:
"wir hatten die Zehen ineinander verzahnt" and "So lagen wir Haut an Haut, Hüfte an Hüfte." But in the next stanza, the
persona points out the estrangement experienced by both upon
the exploration of each other's bodies:

> Immer haben wir unser wild wachsendes Schamhaar
mit Scham betrachtet, immer war etwas zwischen uns
die Fremdheit unserer Körper, ihre fremde Größe
und Form
sie wollten nicht ineinander passen
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
immer verstanden wir zu spät die andere Lust
die plötzlichen Kälteeinbrüche in der Nacktheit.

These lines could be speaking of two persons of opposite
gender. Still, the short sixth stanza sharpens the focus on
their common consideration of the effects of Unterdrückung:

> Wer hat dir die blauen Flecken gemacht?
Wessen Zähne haben sich in deinen Arm geschlagen?
Wer besetzt deine Träume mit unablössigen Appellen
an die Klugheit des Schwächeren, der nachgibt?

This stanza reinforces a mutual concern between the two
persons—not typical of most heterosexual liaisons—about
the experience of female subordination. Again, Krechel
posits instances of the abuse of women, physical and
emotional, as a basis for a woman-centered intimacy.

The turning point comes in the penultimate stanza,
which begins:

> So ging es weiter bergab mit den Körpern
die ihre Tode schon ahnten
mitten im wildesten Fleisch. Vieles blieb dunkel
unbeantwortet in diesem Gedicht
wie im Schweigen der Körper . . .

The intimate exchange—sexual and verbal—described in the
previous stanzas apparently precipitates a withdrawal of
contact, perhaps due to a recognition of the severity of shared pain, or the acknowledgement of a common destiny too overwhelming to bear. The closing stanza disrupts the lyric structure of the poem up to this point, by the introduction of the other in the form of the third person, reported through indirect speech: "Da schrie sie schon auf: sie wolle keine Vorwände liefern." The remainder of the text relates what transpires when this woman experiences an emotional upheaval and is attended to by the poem’s first person narrator. The crisis seems at least in part to have stemmed from her knowledge of the inception of this poem, and her role in its creation.

In the final section, the other woman speaks in a way that anticipates Krechel’s personification of history in "Mnemosyne":

- Die Geschichte sei eine Frau
- jeder wolle sich in ihr verewigen
- seinen Samen hineinspritzen
- wolle Bäume pflanzen, fallen, Impfstempel aufdrücken
- . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
- jeder wolle sich über sie wälzen, aber sie, aufgerichtet
- entkomme. . . .

In an indirect allusion to the Goethian notion of the eternal feminine, the imagery in the above passage depicts history as the supine female recipient of the semen of every man who would wish immortality for himself; in the spreading
of his seed, he thus makes a lasting mark in the world. The speaking subject is aware of how the persona may respond to her outburst; she responds defensively that she will be perceived as hysterical or paranoid: "Sprich nur von meiner Phobie / dann spreche ich, sagte sie, von deiner Naivität." The woman's self-consciousness mirrors the reflectivity of the poem. Just as she fears, this episode will be frozen in time by the persona in the text:

*auch du, schrie sie, ihre Stimme überschlug sich
ich hielt ihr den Kopf wie einer Erbrechenden
denn jeder Satz, den sie unbedacht
zögernd, erbittert, ausstosse, jetzt rannen
auch die Tränen über ihren Nasenrücken
tropfen, tropften, jeder Satz
könne sich losreissen von ihr
ein Beispielsatz werden, auch in meiner Anthologie*

She is protesting both her personal circumstances and those of her gender, and she is rebelling against the violation of intimacy she suspects of her companion.

This unnamed woman acts out her distress in an attempt to break free of the bonds of self-reflectiveness, or the reflection of herself in the other person:

*da wälzte sie sich auf dem Teppich
in den Lehrbüchern einer geschichtslosen Geschichte
sie wolle nicht mehr
in Spiegel fallen, glitzernd, gesplittert
die eigenen Splitter gespiegelt sehen.*

The recognition of the self in the other, particularly crucial when the other person shares the same gender and
historical legacy, here has overwhelming effects. As the poem states earlier, "die gereizte Haut entzündet Gespräche, Verlegenheiten / noch einmal ich zu sagen in einer anderen Person." This is a coming to terms with one's sexuality and the essence of one's own gender. The final couplet records the dawn of a new day, which could signify that the worst of the storm has passed; but has it? The last word reads like an emphatic, unanswered question, which may indicate only further suffering and struggle: "Es tagte schon, wolkgig, heller das Licht. / Die Vögel, die Vögel, aber wir."

The birds referred to in the last line harken back to those mentioned in the first line of the poem's second stanza: "Ach, die gefangenen Finken!" This phrase is also the title of the volume's third section, which lends it greater significance. The following line, also an exclamation, "Die von der Schlange besessenen Menschen!," sets up a parallelism between the finches and human beings, in reference to their shared state of captivity, whether literal, as for caged birds, or figurative, as in a psychic obsession. 

This lament recalls the title of the renowned autobiographical novel of the African-American writer Maya

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32 The Schlange may function here as a phallic symbol, although in pagan mythology, the snake is usually a symbol for the female.
Angelou, which likens her situation as a poor Southern black woman and incest survivor with a winged creature in captivity in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1970). The female figure in "Entwurf zu einer Anthologie der Körper," in her rage at the injust oppression of herself as a woman, has at least momentarily relinquished rational control of her physical, psychological, and emotional self. She rebels against the splintering of her image in the mirror, a reflection of her shattered body and mind, which in turn reflects the insoluble paradox of living as a woman under patriarchy. Her outrage takes material form in her outpouring of words and in her desperate flailing about on the floor, as in a temper tantrum. These actions, and the poem's express theme of cataloguing the body, suggest a revision of the male-authored theory of hysteria as an organic affliction of the female body, into an understandable response of historically located, otherwise sane women, to the consequences of physical and verbal abuse by men, as demonstrated in the pivotal four-line stanza:

Wer hat dir die blauen Flecken gemacht?  
Wessen Zähne haben sich in deinen Arm geschlagen?  
Wer besetzt deine Träume mit unendlichen Appellen an die Klugheit des Schwächeren, der nachgibt?

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33 See de Lauretis 26.
In sequence 13 of *Rohschnitt* (27-31), the figure of *die Kluge* gives voice to a lengthy pondering about the descent of the human race, in relation to herself and her female associates through the collective pronoun *wir*:

> Stammen wir nicht von Menschen ab
die Affen züchteten, die ihnen ähnelten?
Züchteten dieselben Menschen nicht
Dampfmaschinen und Spaltpilzkulturen
und immer winzigere elektronische Gehirne
mit der Lupe gesucht, in der Ummantelung gefunden
in die Tasche gesteckt von jedermann
den sie in die Tasche stecken?

Variations of the opening question, "Stammen wir nicht von Menschen ab?", appear in eight of the remaining 17 (eight-line) stanzas and thus provide a leitmotif that runs through this extended narrative. Here a discussion of human biological lineage conjoins an enumeration of the scientific investigations and discoveries generated by these genealogical predecessors. Sequence 13 focuses not on a matrilineal heritage as in sequence 17 ("Schon ihre Mutter war Mutter"), but on a group of generalized *Menschen* as ancestors, while at the same time reminds us of the point raised in "Die Würde der Frau ist tastbar" about whether women are indeed considered to be human beings ("weil eigentlich / Frauen keine Menschen sind"). The use of the pronoun *jedermann* in the first stanza suggests the masculinity of the researching forefathers; in conjunction with its technical terminology, the poem affords a critique
of the patriarchal institutions of modern science and industry.

The conflation of human genetics and the technology of nonhuman nature engineered by human means demonstrates a confusion in distinguishing the ancestry of *Homo sapiens* from the origins of manmade science. By playing on the motif of breeding, *die Kluge* entangles the species of apes, from which the human race evolved, with that of humankind, while later in the poem she employs the verb *züchten* again to relate the possible origin of humanity to the Stone Age and to the geological products of that time:

> wäre ich sicher, was ich nicht sein will
> ich stammte von Menschen ab, die Steine waren
> in steingrauer Zeit, Steine, die Menschen
> gezüchtet haben
> recht und schlecht mahrend, schleifend, sich
> reibend
> mit Macht und der Geduld von Jahrtausenden
> ich wäre zufrieden, zähneknirschend über die
> kalten Herzen

Another example of the crossover between the organic and the inorganic realms in the poem likens the brain, the organ developed most fully in humans, with technological constructions such as computers ("immer winzigere elektronische Gehirne") and photographic devices ("kleine Gehirne des Sehens").

Sequence 13 also presents commentary on the prevalent contemporary addiction to the visual images provided by the
film industry; for example, the Kino episode which begins, "Da plötzlich . . . wollte ich ins Kino / weg . . . angesteckt von der Bildersucht." In the third stanza, the Kluge interrogates the first-person narrator about the aesthetic structure of this lyric work/filmic sequence, since the entire project is structured according to the format of a cinematic production, hence the title Rohschnitt and the use of Sequenzen as text divisions in place of poems:

Was willst du, uns durch Bilder ersetzen?
Und was ersetzen die Bilder (Angst vor Bilderlosigkeit)
gefiltert, geschnitten, gemischt, grossmannssüchtig vergrößert
und wo sind wir, wenn wir die Kinos verlassen in denen wir uns gebildet bebildert gesehen haben?
Einmal sass ich im Kino, nein, das erzähle ich später--
sag, wo bin ich am Ende des Films, wo ist meine Wirklichkeit, und wo ist ich in den Bildern?

Krechel is indicting not only her own poetic method but also the bankruptcy of the human imagination, precipitated by the advent of motion pictures. As Walter Benjamin noted in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the cinematic image represents a loss of human aura through the absence of the physical body in that likeness (Benjamin 223).

"Stammen wir nicht von Menschen ab" ends with the story told by the Kluge of her male companion's ravings in the
movie theatre, brought on by the dehumanization he experienced in film-viewing:

Ich bin eine Bildermaschine, Bilderbuchmaschine, glotzt nur
ja, ich bin eine Maschine, und ich produziere Glück
täglicher Ausstoss im Akkord, Glück in Verpackung klick, klick macht die Maschine, und das heisst Glück.

And as he leaves the auditorium, he repeats: "Ich bin eine Maschine, eine Menschenmaschine." The body has often been likened to a machine in philosophical texts and in modernist art and literature, such as in Fritz Lang's classic expressionistic film *Metropolis* (1926). In this segment, Sequence 13 of *Rohschnitt* draws the reader's attention out of the intoxication of film images back to the most basic resource available to us: other human beings.

In "Orthopädie des aufrechten Ganges" (*Vom Feuer lernen* 59-61), the spotlight is again on anthropology, a science Krechel regards much like a curiosity. The title recalls the first lines of the poem "Pfadfinder" from *Nach Mainz*:

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34 See Wilshire 94 for a discussion of Descartes' ushering in of the modern era by dissociating the body from God by calling it a machine, and Ruddick 188 for the analogy in frequent cultural accounts of the body as "an erratic computer."

35 After which Unruh titles her review of the volume: "'Die Vortäuschung des aufrechten Ganges ist eine brotlose Kunst': Zu dem Gedichtband 'Nach Mainz' von Ursula Krechel."
The emphasis on the upright gait of humankind reinforces the major distinction of *Homo sapiens* from the rest of the animal kingdom, while simultaneously setting up the human race as an endangered species:

Später besuchen Kinder eine Wanderausstellung:
Der Mensch.
Wegen mutwilliger Zerstörung
bleibt die Abteilung Fortpflanzung geschlossen.

Reproduction is problematic due to a history of self-extinction, which bodes ill for future generations. Here again Krechel addresses the evolutionary process by pointing out how modern man is a mutation of prehistoric beasts:

Auf den Stelzen der Kindheit
das monstrose Leben abgebrochener Riesen
die Menschen werden wollten
aber nicht wussten wie.

These ancestral giants are set off against the dwarflike creatures who are described in the poem's final stanza and with whom the first-person narrator takes up company:

schmiege ich mich schon ins Zwergengelichter
in dem ich übersehen werden musste . . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
sah ich in Gesichter so klein, dass ich so klein
sie auf der Stelle vergass?

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See Theweleit for a discussion of Ernst Bloch's work on this topic.
The poem depicts an odyssey through a surreal landscape of signs with cryptic slogans ("Schon über der Wiege ein Schild: / Eintritt verboten" and "Später ein anderes Schild / . . . : / Du musst dein Leben ändern"³⁷) and bizarre creatures ("die übergewichtigen Embryonen / übertragen übertragen wie nichts / eine augenlose Rasse mit verklebtem Hirn"). The twin maxims quoted on the placards, and the phrase "Dass man leben muss," suggest the central paradox of feminism: the necessity of living in pre-existing conditions, along with the concurrent moral imperative to change that existence. Yet the deformed, crippled beings exist with no intrinsic value save to ascertain the already confirmed capriciousness of die wahre Menschenliebe: "Lebewesen lagern in der Asservatenkammer / bis man sie braucht zum längst abgeschlossenen Beweis." These are examples of lives wasted and polluted by manmade debris:

Die auf den Wartebänken sitzen
mit Gesichtern, seehundartig geschnauzt
die verkohlten ausgebrannten Geister
auch die in Körben geborgenen Vögel
mit ölverschmierten Flügeln
angeschwemmt von der Flut

³⁷ "Du musst dein Leben ändern" is the last line of Rilke's "Archaïscher Torso Apollos"; although Krechel includes Anmerkungen at the end of Vom Feuer lernen that contain other literary allusions or references, this one is omitted.
The desolation is omnipresent in the poem; the only hope of survival lies in the acquisition of a few invaluable tools: "Zur Aussteuer gehörten ein Paar Krücken / viel Nachsicht, ein Fernrohr, ein Gewehr." The hunting motif recurs also at this point in the narrative: "Eine Saison der höfischen Wilderer / die standesgemäss ihre Scheitel ziehen / an denen entlang sie jagen."

Devolution rather than evolution, retrogression rather than the progression of humanity characterize "Orthopädie des aufrechten Ganges." The poem is a stringent critique of the failure of our species to produce constructive alternatives to misery and despair on the planet. In this portrayal, the body is in pain in an uncompromisingly harsh world.\(^{38}\)

Conclusions

The poetry of Ursula Krechel depicts the female body in major transitions in a continuous grappling with the development of feminist theory and thought. The changes in these poems range from the experience of motherhood to that of illness and death, from giving birth and raising children

\(^{38}\) See Elaine Scarry for a study of pain and torture and their profound political, societal, and psychic implications.
to reconstructing matrilineal histories in the writing of poetry, and from recording the suffering of abused women to formulating strategies for survival and new imperatives for living. Her reappropriation of the elegy to re-member her mother participates in the effort to record women's lives and history on a subjective level. Her poetic fairy tale relating the exploits of the multi-dimensional trio of women in "Nach Mainz!" offers an ironic feminist countertext to the utopian visions of leftist ideology by male writers and thinkers in West Germany of the 1960s and 70s. The recurrence and metaphorization of the motif of women as birthgivers and childrearers emphasize a validation of these historically essential, and essentially female, roles, while calling into question a glorification of them as fixed biological and sociological determinants in women's lives. In the poems that present the metamorphosis of women into wild animals, Krechel outlines the long history of female victimization while also envisioning the possibility of autonomy and self-affirmation among women in friendship and in community. Lastly, Krechel's interest in questioning the legacy of modern "progress" and the development of the fields of anthropology, technology, and science reflects an engagement with the increasingly critical ecological and demographic problems facing the world in the last decades of
the twentieth century. Krechel does not accept the debatable notions unexamined, but rather weaves into her poetry polemical concepts about change and evolution that stretch not only the shape of the lyric form in contemporary German poetry, but also the parameters of our imaginations.
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CHAPTER III
CARNALITY, MEMORY, AND MOURNING:
THE BODY IN CONNECTION IN THE POETRY OF CAROLYN FORCHÉ

Introduction

Carolyn Forché, born in 1950, is the youngest of the poets under discussion here. Experiencing its high school years during the height of the Vietnam war, her generation felt the repercussions of that conflict on classmates and relatives who were among the casualties and participants.¹

Known primarily for her second volume of poetry, The Country Between Us (1981), and mostly fêted for that collection’s El Salvador poems,² Forché had actually emerged on the North American literary scene five years earlier with the publication of Gathering the Tribes (1976). The book, winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition, caused few ripples in the critical world; reviews of it are scarce. Unlike its successor, Tribes provoked little or no

¹ The poet’s former husband is a Vietnam veteran who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (Doubiago 38).

² For insight into the response to Forché’s second book and a debate about political poetry that it helped fuel, see "The Red Pen: Poetry, Politics and Publishing, A Literary Magazine Roundtable” (47-74). Michael Greer (160) gives this reference in an introductory footnote to his article.
controversy, and stirred little interest among the literati as a fledgling effort.

*Gathering the Tribes* does not deal with the central event that overshadowed Forché's late adolescence and early adulthood, the war in Vietnam, but treats instead two other areas of concern to the young poet: the Eastern European heritage of her ancestors, and the Indian communities of the southwestern United States (Lerman 396-97). Both influences characterize the poems in *Tribes*, yet they need to be differentiated. The inclusion of her Slovak grandmother, Anna, as a major figure can be read as an attempt to confront part of her family background; however, the Native American aspect is not an ethnic heritage for Forché, who spent her entire childhood and youth in rural Michigan as the eldest of seven children to white, Catholic, middle-class parents. Her travels to the American Southwest after college acquainted her with the culture of the Tewa population there (Cott 85); the focus on that region of the U.S. brings elements of Native American culture to the volume, lending significance to the tribal theme of the title. However, the settings of the poems also include the coastal regions of the Pacific Northwest of the United States and of Canadian British Columbia (Kunitz xiii).
Forché continually reinscribes the human body as a primary force and basic element in her poetry, thus stressing the sacredness of the body and human life. With her earlier poems, Forché depicts the physical embodiment of herself and others as whole, intact, sensual. The later poems, in contrast, focus on dismembered bodies and the concomitant shock of disembodiment that war and the memory of it effect. As will be shown, the poet allows different body parts to represent the entire body.³

The Carnal Body

In "Plain Song" (38) from Gathering the Tribes, the persona delineates what should be done with her body when she dies. The depiction of her corpse is intertwined with austere southwestern American Indian customs for burial, which make use of both items from nature and simple handmade objects. Her projected death entails the summoning of winged creatures to participate in the funeral rites:

When it happens, let the birds come.  
Let my hands fall without being folded.  
And naked in hair that grows on the dead,  
tie feathers from the young female.

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³ The source of these ideas was a conversation with Forché, Women Writers Conference, University of Kentucky, April 8, 1989.
With this elegy or epitaph, the poet enacts a self-styled initiation of her corporeal self into the tribe, so to speak, by associating her body with objects from that culture: "Close my eyes with coins, cover / my head with agave baskets / that have carried water." In death she will be laid to rest among these Native American artifacts, and in effect thus attempts to appropriate that lifestyle.  

The poem ends with further instructions for the survivors; they are not to mourn her passing silently, but to celebrate her at a wake with music and dancing. Only her bones, the framework of human anatomy, will remain, and she asks that they be saved as reminders of her passing by her loved ones left behind:

Bring the tub drums and dance.  
Bring me to burn with a mesquite branch  
and wear the bones that I leave  
around your necks.

Forché would probably not agree that in this poem she appears to be appropriating Native American culture, because she maintains that "In Gathering the Tribes in the poems having to do with native Americans there's always a little white girl in the poem because I did not want to pretend to be native American and write poetry as if I understood them. So my philosophy about that is that when I am in another culture or living in another world, I maintain the truth of my identity, my real identity [as a white North American]" (Rea 160).
This "plain song,"\(^5\) whose title is both an allusion to a kind of medieval liturgical music and a descriptive designation of the poem's text, spins a clear request by this woman of how to handle her remains, as a last will and testament of the poetic persona to the tribal family she has embraced.

The laying out of a dead woman in this piece recalls the stark imagery of Sylvia Plath's "Edge" (1962).

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odours bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

\(^5\) Celeste Schenck (16) refers to plainsong as a choral and collective round song.
She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag. (84)

Forché has written of herself in the first person in a Native American context, whereas her literary predecessor uses the detachment of a third-person portrayal from a pseudo-classical perspective. The stony coldness of "Edge" differs from the warmth of Forché's funeral fire. A comparison of these two poems reveals a fundamental difference between presenting a female corpse--associated in both cases with the projected or imagined death of the woman poet--as an objectified, carefully sculpted statue on the one hand and as the physical remains of a departed companion, to be treated with respect and care, on the other. The deceased in Plath's poem is unattended in death, while Forché's poem centers on the role the survivors will play. The only attendant to the corpse in the former is the archetypal moon, which lends only greater distance from the human world. The ending lines of "Edge," the penultimate poem in Ariel, exemplify the esoteric symbolism of Plath's poetry and typify her contribution to the closing of the era of modernist poetry in the early 1960s. As also happened with Ingeborg Bachmann in German letters, Sylvia Plath's crisis as a woman poet coincided with the decline of modernism. She silenced her poetic voice by suicide one year after this poem was written.
The woman in "Edge" is accompanied in death by her offspring, leaving no one behind. Thus the children are also victims and represent the poet's own son and daughter. They lie "at each little / Pitcher of milk, now empty"—metaphors for breasts, long dried-up after having nursed the infants—and yet they have receded back into their mother's body in a morbid inversion of the birth process. The alienation of the poetic persona from her female body is striking here and by way of contrast underscores the affinity with the body demonstrated in "Plain Song" through that persona's intimacy with, and acceptance of, her physicality, even projected into death. Plath's imagery—dark, surreal, enigmatic, full of hopelessness and despair—symbolizes the death of the psyche, whereas Forché stresses the materiality of death. In Tribes, images of death and birth are natural processes that bespeak a revered connection with both the body and other human beings.

Gathering the Tribes includes two poems that depict birth as a normal yet remarkable act and event. Forché's imagery neither idealizes nor debases women's role in childbearing, nor does it bring out the incontinence often associated with birth and mothering (Ruddick 190, 206), which we saw in Krechel's "Schon ihre Mutter war Mutter." In "Ha Chi Je Na I Am Coming" (23–24), the labor and
delivery of an unnamed woman are recounted through the physical manifestations of childbirth: "his wife's breath chanted," "her water broke," and "She bit a strap." The line "The first milk flowed" closes the poem and emphasizes the mother's breast-feeding of the newborn. Immediately preceding this line we read, "We roasted the birth sac / on coals and each ate some," another custom that accentuates the closeness of human beings and their bodily functions to elemental nature. Here there is no fear of or repulsion at the placenta, as produced by the woman's birthing body; in most hospital births in Western society, medical personnel carefully cover up and perfunctorily dispose of this and other such human by-products. There is a lyricism in these lines that aestheticizes the experience of birth without neutralizing the birthing woman's pain (we are told that "she cried" and bore down with clenched teeth on a leather strap).

The last poem in the collection, "White Wings They Never Grow Weary" (58), illustrates several bodily changes that women undergo during pregnancy and childbirth signifying female strength and autonomy:

I want to tie off the time like a birth cord chewed broken in a proud woman's teeth. My navel is gone, the moon up, in a month or two my breasts will be in pain. Out here a woman wonders.
And if she has no man her arms get strong.
When seasons change she can't believe
there will ever be milk in her body.

Forché's rendering of these exclusively female experiences affirms women's bodies and celebrates the rounded belly and swollen breasts of the mother-to-be. Here too her imagery differs markedly from the portrayal of maternal alterity found in several of Krechel's poems, including those about her mother's death, the generic mother figure in Rohschnitt, and the metaphorization of childbirth of "Mnemosyne."

There is an erotic sensuality in Forché's poetry that is not found in either Novak's or Krechel's work, which is perhaps a manifestation of Walt Whitman's continuing, profound influence on American poetry. In his *Leaves of Grass* (1855), with its themes of fertility, bisexual eroticism, and love of self, Whitman demonstrated the close connection between sexuality and spirituality largely nonexistent in German poetry. The impact of Whitman's erotic liberation is evident in the poems about birth and several others from *Tribes* that treat sexuality explicitly, if not graphically, with refreshing candor, unfamiliar in American women's poetry until the 1970s. Forché expands and builds upon the foundations laid earlier by such poets as Erica Jong and Adrienne Rich.⁶ Although quite different in

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⁶ Jong's poetry is written from a heterosexual, Rich's from a lesbian perspective. Books of poems by the former
style and intent, the work of these two women has become representative of a greater openness in women's writing. This poetry speaks frankly about female bodily experiences and sexual feelings by using language in a way previously unexplored by authors of their gender. For women in patriarchal society, an implicit connection has often been drawn between a text's language and its author's personal moral standards.\footnote{Nancy Mairs discusses this idea, which she borrows from Jones, who places it in a historical context: "Anne Rosalind Jones notes of women writing in the Renaissance, 'the link between loose language and loose living arises from a basic association of women's bodies with their speech: a woman's accessibility to the social world beyond the household through speech was seen as intimately connected to the scandalous openness of her body'--and that connection continues today" (7).}

The opening up of language by poets such as Forché, Jong, and Rich can be summed up in a statement by Tillie Olsen, who is referring to a passage in "Professions for Women" by Virginia Woolf: "Telling the truth about one's body: a necessary, freeing subject for the woman writer" (225). Greater openness about the female body in American women's poetry, which arose in large part out of the feminist movement, was already apparent in the work of poets include *Fruits and Vegetables* (1971), *Loveroot* (1975), and *At the Edge of the Body* (1979); *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972* (1973), *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (1978), and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981* (1981) by the latter.
like Plath and Anne Sexton (Heilbrun 64). This trend in women's poetry of the 1970s was no doubt also influenced by the colloquial, often sexually and scatologically graphic style typical of the writings of the beat poets during the 1950s and 1960s, such as Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956).

In "Year at Mudstraw," "Taking Off My Clothes," and "Kalaloch," Forché writes of her body, its functions, desires, and responses, in sexually explicit language. In these poems, which I will discuss below, and another piece from *Tribes*, a prose poem entitled, "This Is Their Fault" (48-50), the poet uses colloquial expressions for female genitalia as well as more standard anatomical terminology for other parts of her body. Sexual encounters are related in detail in each poem mentioned, with varying effects.

In "Year at Mudstraw" (51-52), the setting is a rustic cabin, and the gender roles are traditional: the first-person speaker of the poem is a woman whose main activities include cooking, nursing her child, and waiting for the return of her man.

A breeze on the wall
from boiling tomatoes.
A baby snorts air
while it sucks me.
I hum Cold Blew The Bliss
to the child, touch fattened dough.
I wait for the sound of his truck
thoeing a splutter of thawed ditch.
Forché's introduction of breast-feeding—as an experience uniquely female—from the point of view of the nursing mother is a poetic innovation. The woman in the poem performs domestic chores typically associated with femininity. The male figure, in turn, appears correspondingly manly in his stance and actions: "And when he comes he points his rifle / at the floor, lets the dog / smell his pants." The remainder of the poem describes the initiation of a sexual interlude between them. The last four lines depict a commonplace posturing in traditional representations of heterosexual contact and relations; the woman expresses the desire to perform oral sex, while the man is portrayed as unable to experience emotion:

My nipples stiffen, his touch.
I want to swallow down his come,
something in his heart
freezes in a dead run.

8 Forché, who, as the eldest of seven children, likely watched her mother nurse her younger siblings, has spoken of the crucial role other women have played in her development as a poet: "The strongest influences in my life have been women--my grandmother, my mother, many older women . . . . I feel most compelled by women; I'm more deeply affected by them. Maybe because I was raised by my mother and grandmother, and then educated by nuns--I suppose it couldn't help but happen. And I think that oppression has in many women fostered a kind of strength that is incomparable" (Cott 84-85).
The woman's subordinate position is emphasized, while her wish to satisfy the man sexually may be quelled by his icy response.

Forché's chosen theme of female masochism criticizes such traditional gender roles shown in the sexually subservient posturing of this woman. Forché has discussed the psychological development of masochistic fantasies in women as linked to the oppression of their gender, which she clearly differentiates from the actual enactment of sadistic practices for purposes of political repression:

I think that many women in this culture--and I think that it's pretty well documented--imaginatively translate their experiences of childhood and develop masochism. I think most women confront that, and they are repelled by it or do battle with it. But many women whom I've spoken with do have this problem of eroticizing their oppression. Occasionally, however, there's a replay of this kind of fantasy when discussing human-rights abuses, and it has nothing to do with the reality of torture, imprisonment and assassination. It's what an inexperienced mind does with an abstraction that it has eroticized on another level in the light of its own culture. (Cott 111)

The poet points out the vast difference between an internalization of sexual oppression by women such as herself and the occurrence of incidents of political violence against women and other socially oppressed persons in the Third World. "Year at Mudstraw" depicts the
stereotypic female duties and roles of mother, cook, housekeeper, and sexual servant.

Less traditional in its characterization of male-female relationships is "Taking Off My Clothes" (53), which opens with a self-description of the persona's face and body in the first three stanzas. She is in focus physically and poetically, with metaphors for her hair, eyes, and skin:

My hair is the color of chopped maples.
My eyes dark as beans cooked in the south.

Skin polished as a Ming bowl
showing its blood cracks, its age . . .

These images do not show the woman as a male author might, by using standard tropes to depict feminine beauty, such as comparing a woman's lips to a red rose, for example. Instead, these things--firewood, black beans, an ancient Chinese bowl--undercut typical aesthetic ideals for a woman's appearance. The first two are ordinary objects from everyday life, and the priceless antique has flaws and is thus imperfectly beautiful, like human beings.

The male figure, however, is again cold and detached:

"In the night I come to you and it seems a shame / to waste my deepest shudders on a wall of a man." The persona gives insight into his lack of engagement in their relationship and demonstrates her knowledge that his participation in their lovemaking only feigns genuine interest:
You recognize strangers, 
think you lived through destruction. 
You can't explain this night, my face, your memory.

You want to know what I know? 
Your own hands are lying.

His hands betray his mental and emotional absence during sex because the past will not release him to be fully present to enjoy sexual pleasure.

Forché breaks new ground by exploring the frontier of same-sex initiation in a third erotic poem from *Tribes*. "Kalaloch" (54-57), a long poem and the penultimate piece in the collection, has been described as having the potential to become "the outstanding Sapphic poem of an era" (Kunitz xiv). In an interview from 1983, Forché explains that she meant the women in the poem to be archetypal, as though the earth mother and her sister, the sea, are embracing. At the shoreline on the Olympic peninsula, there is a beach, she explains,

where the land comes up into the water in these rock stacks and piles and formations. There's a lot of fog, and the ocean comes over the land; it's completely glazed and the land stretches out. (Cott 111)

"Kalaloch" records the intimacy shared by two female figures on a coastline together.

In the opening stanza, the repetition of the word *tighter* signals a distance between them and a constriction
in their physical movement, in these lines from the first section:

Each noon the milk fog sank
from cloud cover, came in
our clothes and held them
tighter on us... .

We sat with arms tight
watching flames spit, snap.

The following excerpts, from the poem's second section, describe the bodies of the persona and her companion and their surroundings through imagery alluding to female sexual anatomy:

I stripped and spread
on the sea lip, stretched
to the slap of the foam
and the vast red dulce.
Jacynthe gripped the earth
in her fists, opened--
the boil of the tide
shuffled into her.

Rocks drowsed, holes
filled with suds from a distance.
A deep laugh bounced in my flesh
and sprayed her.

The lines cited above suggest the openness and concavity of the female sex organs, in direct contact with the fluidity and oscillation of the tide.

While male authors have often associated the female body with water and other liquids, on the basis of the physical properties and cyclical nature of the biological processes of menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation (see
Theeweleit 235-455), Forchée introduces a poetic subjectivity from the perspective of the female persona, and depicts the intimate bond of the two women with elemental nature, in relation to the ocean and shoreline, and with each other:

With her palm she spread my calves, she moved my heels from each other. A woman's mouth is not different, sand moved wild beneath me, her long hair wiped my legs, with women there is sucking, the water slops our bodies. We come clean, our clits beat like twins to the loons rising up.

There is a mutual sensuality in these passages which was absent in the previous erotic poems; the physical exchange that occurs between these two women as equal partners does not convey the estrangement experienced between the persona and her male lover(s). In "Kalaloch," the images and language present an alternative aesthetics that decenters the male viewpoint by introducing a second female figure as the non-objectified other. Forchée attempts to address her readers as female in an approach that adapts a film concept developed by Teresa de Lauretis:

that a film may address the spectator as female [regardless of the gender of the viewers], rather than portray women positively or negatively, seems very important to me in the critical endeavor to characterize women's cinema as a cinema for, not only by, women. (135)
I would amend it to include women's poetry as a poetry for, not only by, women. In this poem, Forché reclaims woman-to-woman eroticism in a celebratory, non-exploitative way. She reappropriates and rewrites the standard of pornographic films and books: the ritual inclusion of at least one gratuitous "lesbian" scene, to satisfy male voyeuristic, prurient interest.

A misgiving for this proposition arises, however, when one reads the poem's closing stanza; these lines, spoken by either the persona or Jacynthe (it is unclear whose words are given), betray a belief in the intrinsic need for the (sexual) presence of men, and a learned reliance on male approval:

\[ \text{If we had men I would make milk in me simply. She is quiet. I like that you cover your teeth.} \]

"Kalaloch" has indeed gained the attention and approval of male critics (Kunitz xiv; Cott 111). In this final passage comes the recognition that the male role in procreation, insemination, is necessary in order to produce breast milk.

\[ ^9 \text{However, the celebration of female anatomy and sexuality in "Kalaloch" is markedly different from poetry of the pre-feminist era such as the poem "Hypocrite Women" by Denise Levertov: "a white sweating bull of a poet told us / our cunts are ugly--why didn't we / admit we have thought so too? (And / what shame? They are not for the eye!) / No, they are dark and wrinkled and hairy, / caves of the Moon" (305-06).} \]
However, it is significant that not this poem but another has the final word in *Gathering the Tribes*. "White Wings They Never Grow Weary" (58) shows a pregnant woman alone and affirms the value of her independent existence: "And if she has no man her arms get strong. / When seasons change she can't believe / there will ever be milk in her body."

Still, the final couplet speaks to the inevitability that, as a woman, her life revolves around relationship to others: "Ever believe there will be someone / asking something from her." These lines remind us of how women writers must kill "the angel in the house" in order to tell the truth about their bodies, a process that Virginia Woolf articulated in her essay "Professions for Women" (285-88). In *Silences*, Tillie Olsen carries this notion further and elaborates on the social, familial, and sexual demands on women as wives, mothers, and housekeepers that have constantly and consistently distracted them from writing (16-46). In the last words of *Gathering the Tribes*, Forché reiterates the force of the contradictory claims on women's time and the paradox of their dual identity: the necessity for personal autonomy and the concrete reality of their social history as caregivers.
Mourning the Remembered Body

In an interview from 1988, Forché discusses the isolation of the privileged white world of western industrial societies from the omnipresence of death:

If someone wants to understand what a human being is, they should spend time with a corpse—the corpse of someone they knew—it is then less possible to make a mistake about what a human being is. This culture does not value the human body. (Montenegro 37-38)

In her second volume of poetry, *The Country Between Us* (1981), Forché repeatedly infuses her texts with images of the body in a manner quite different from the focus on the carnal aspects of human physicality in *Tribes*. The poet herself makes a distinction between her voice in *Gathering the Tribes* and that of *The Country Between Us*:

The voice in my first book doesn't know what it thinks, it doesn't make any judgments. All it can do is perceive and describe and use language to make some sort of re-creation of moments in time. But I noticed that the person in the second book makes an utterance. (Cott 84)

In effect, her poetry has made a change from aestheticism to engagement. The difference between the portrayal of the body in the two volumes can be characterized as a shift from the sensual body to the violated body, whether alive or dead. Rather than a celebration of the body, the poems in *Country* work toward a remembering and mourning of human beings who have suffered physical injury through violence
and deprivation, and the accompanying psychic anguish. This poetry makes a statement about the fragmentation of the human subject through images of incomplete, dismembered bodies.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, many of Forché's later poems show the body more as the sum of its parts than as an embodied whole. Her more recent poetry recalls the "ritual recitation of body parts" (Scarry 103) in current descriptions of fatal diseases such as cancer and AIDS which often spread throughout the entire body. Such enumerations of the components of human anatomy conflict with the generally held belief "that the body should be thought of 'as a whole' rather than as 'parts,' since the latter seems to imply an aggressive, if only mentally executed, dismemberment" (Scarry 102). While the body in Gathering the Tribes is apparently understood as a whole entity of the embodied self, the frequent imagery of dismemberment in The Country Between Us suggests that "A deep taboo having to do with the integrity of the flesh has been violated" (Gleason 14).

Forché wrote the poems in the section "In Salvador, 1978-80" to report the human rights violations she witnessed in her travels there during those years (Mann 58).

Dedicated to the memory of Monsignor Oscar Romero.
Several of these texts from the book's first part serve to record the killings, maimings, and acts of torture in the period leading up to the still-ongoing civil war in that Central American nation. I will discuss four of the eight poems in the sequence, in the order in which they appear: "The Memory of Elena," "The Visitor," "The Colonel," and "Because One Is Always Forgotten." Each of these poems "involves dismemberment, spiritual or physical" (Mann 55), with the first three "forming the sequence's literal and metaphorical center" (Greer 164). The Salvador poems have been much discussed in the ample secondary literature on The Country Between Us. Forché has also published several journalistic articles (in Ms., The Nation, and The Progressive) about women's lives and the political situation in El Salvador (Mann 58), in addition to a number of interviews and exposés in academic journals. These nonfiction texts relate the background details of what precipitated her journeys to that country— that is, her work with Amnesty International and her subsequent contact with

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11 See the articles on Country by Sharon Doubiago, Bernard Engel, Judith Gleason, Michael Greer, Larry Levis, and John Mann.

12 By Constance Coiner, Jonathan Cott, David Montenegro, and Paul Rea.

13 "A Lesson in Commitment"; "El Salvador: An Aide Memoire."
the family of exiled Salvadoran poet Claribel Alegría, whose work she has translated—and serve to document the people, places, and events she encountered there. Forché has said that initially she had not intended to make poetry out her Salvadoran experience, yet upon her return to the U.S., she claims "The poems were written out of desperation" ("Lesson" 36). Forché's decision to make the trips to El Salvador, and the ensuing communication of her experience there, were an attempt to take responsibility for the U.S. financial and military backing of the Salvadoran government and the notorious paramilitary death squads that have slaughtered thousands of citizens. She explains: "My reasons for going there were personal, having to do indirectly with my decade-long interest in the Vietnam War" ("Lesson" 36). In Country, Forché attempts to confront the legacy of Vietnam not dealt with in Tribes as an integral part of her personal development as a politically and socially conscious poet. Viewing U.S. military support and aid in El Salvador as a present-day corollary for American involvement and presence in Indochina during the 1960s and

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14 See the bilingual volume Flowers in the Volcano (1982), and Forché's preface, titled "With Tears, with Fingernails and Coal" (xi-xiv).

15 See Doubiago 36 on Forché's original intention not to mix poetry and politics.
1970s, the poet takes an active and critical part in addressing the effects of the violence and oppression that such intervention by the United States has fostered.

As a point of reference for the Salvador poems under discussion, let us begin by looking at another piece from the same sequence, "Return" (17-20), which enumerates crimes of torture throughout its four extended stanzas. Perhaps the most graphic and least stylized of the entire section in terms of detailing violent acts, this poem has a devastating impact; for example: "Tell them about the razor, the live wire, / dry ice and concrete, grey rats and above all / who fucked her, how many times and when"; and, "reports / of mice introduced into women, of men / whose testicles are crushed like eggs." "Return," a long dialogue between the poetic persona and Josephine Crum, to whom it is dedicated, also relates the dismemberment of two men:

Tell them about retaliation: José lying on the flat bed truck, waving his stumps in your face, his hands cut off by his captors and thrown to the many acres of cotton, lost, still, and holding the last few lumps of leached earth. Tell them of José in his last hours and later how, many months later, a labor leader was cut to pieces and buried. Tell them how his friends found the soldiers and made them dig him up and ask forgiveness of the corpse, once it was assembled again on the ground like a man. . . .
This passage, as well as the listings of the incidents of torture, are both spoken by the other woman, who is exhorting the poet to reveal all the abuses she has seen, rather than to communicate what she knows from a rational, intellectual perspective, because the American public thrives on tales of brutality and murder: "Go try on / Americans your long, dull story / of corruption, but better to give them what they want." The sensationalism of foreign peoples' pain and suffering has always been standard fare for the U.S. news media, but often works to make such disturbing tragedies ultimately innocuous as a result of their effect as unreal, otherworldly hyperbole. By placing these words in Josephine's mouth, Forché distances her persona, and thus her poetic voice, from the unspeakable horror of the events she witnessed. In contrast to the other poems in the sequence, "Return" is the most stringently self-critical and unapologetic in its candid relating of such grim realities. These lines, chilling to read, are neither aestheticized nor anesthetized.

16 I agree with Greer when he notes that "Where media discourse represents Salvador, 'pictures' it in a way that liquidates any historical traces and relegated present images to a securely bounded, formalized, and easily forgotten past, Forché's poetry makes a historical past once again available in the present" (176).
Forché has commented on her attempt to render the brutal images in these poems sparingly and realistically:

In every case in the El Salvador poems where there is dismemberment . . . all of those are actually based on things that actually occurred. . . . I did not try to embellish them. What I wanted to do was to pare them down so that, to make them as simple, simply stated as possible. . . . (Rea 159)

So it is that "'The Visitor,' 'The Colonel,' and 'Because One Is Always Forgotten' provide a distillation, pared down with powerful discipline, of what Forché saw" (Mann 55).

Yet one of the strongest and most discussed poems from this sequence, "The Memory of Elena" (13-14), differs from the others because, first of all, the murder of the woman's husband occurred in Argentina rather than in El Salvador, and secondly, the images of mutilated body parts appear out of context, in the food the persona and Elena are eating:

The paella comes, a bed of rice and camarones, fingers and shells, the lips of those whose lips have been removed, mussels the soft blue of a leg socket. This is not paella, this is what has become of those who remained in Buenos Aires.

The dismembered body parts in the meal conjure up the Roman Catholic belief in transubstantiation, that is, in the actual presence of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Although the dismemberment here is metaphoric, the poem is nonetheless inscribing the
violations of the bodies of real people, as told by one woman to the other in conversation. Besides the machine-gunning of Elena's husband, Forché has disclosed that Elena also related that she had witnessed the mutilation death of a teen-age boy she knew; she comments:

These things are not in the poem because they could not have, there was no way for them to enter the poem for me and maintain the reverence and silence in the face of that horror. So I think I leapt to the image of the meal becoming gruesome to indicate that what was being said was about that. (Rea 159)

In the previous stanza, tactile imagery describes the final moments that Elena and her husband spend together:

In Buenos Aires only three years ago, it was the last time his hand slipped into her dress, with pearls cooling her throat and bells like these, chipping at the night--

The motif of bells, which ultimately lose their tongues, is repeated in two other passages: once in the opening lines, and again at the poem's close:

We spend our morning in the flower stalls counting the dark tongues of bells that hang from ropes waiting for the silence of an hour.

...These are the flowers we bought this morning, the dahlias tossed on his grave and bells waiting with their tongues cut out for this particular silence.
The imposition of silence on these bells and flowers signifies the speechlessness, and consequent helplessness, of the survivors who bear witness and pay respect to this man's death. That the bells cannot toll his passing to provide him proper mourning implies an inherent futility in the attempt to express the sorrow of Elena's loss in poetry. The symbolic meaning of bells whose clappers have been removed here resembles Novak's similar use of that motif in response to acts of political corruption in "Ballade von der verbannten Glocke."

The silence invoked in the lines above is set off against two aural sensations. First, the sound of horse hooves creates a mood of emptiness and foreboding: "As she talks, the hoilow / clopping of a horse, the sound / of bones touched together." In the next stanza, the muteness of the present, inscribed in the lines of the poem, collides with Elena's memory of the deafening blast which killed her husband: "This is the ring / of a rifle report on the stones, / her hand over her mouth, / her husband falling against her." This moment from the past becomes frozen in the image of their bodies coming together for the last time: the woman aghast in silent horror as the body of the man she loves collapses, a lifeless mass, on top of her. Through an imagined rendering of this event, "Forché does not allow the
images of Elena's memory to disappear; she reinscribes them in our own present" (Greer 178). Such a poetic technique does not diminish, but rather solemnizes, this tragedy.

"The Memory of Elena," written in 1977, is one of the earliest poems from the first section of The Country Between Us. It predates Forché's journeys to Central America and so serves to historically situate her future experiences in El Salvador in the context of Latin America as a whole. By its recording of an incident in Argentina, a country of South America, the poem indicates that similar problems and human rights abuses affect the entire Western Hemisphere, including North America. In addition, the murder of Elena's husband shows that the economic and political unrest exacerbated by the interests of corporations in the United States leads to the killing of not only peasants and other working-class people, but also infringes on the lives of the middle class.

The combination of visual and auditory perceptions shape a lyric portrayal which seeks to give voice to the inexpressible, to depict in poetic imagery that which defies eyesight. This poem anticipates those that follow, for it exemplifies a few basic characteristics of the volume as a whole. Country is

a book of voices speaking, or silenced, or attempting to speak, and many of them are not the
poet's own. Listening to others, one concludes, is a preliminary obligation of the poet who would survive by being witness. Then must come seeing. (Mann 53)

In "The Memory of Elena," Forché suggests that in making contact with this woman, and in hearing and relating the stories she has to tell, it may be possible to transform Elena's personal suffering into an opportunity for growth, healing, and action. The poet records with acumen this particular meeting, as a chronicler who not only distills moments into language, but also makes a statement of her own. Here we see that
talking is remembering . . . Forché crafts her imagery of mouth, teeth, tongue, throat, and bells into memory's dialogue between voice and silence, and these will be compelling obsessions in the remainder of The Country Between Us. (Mann 55)

Yet in the Salvador poems, the focus shifts to parts of the body other than those in "Elena." Forché expands the poetic imagery to emphasize the symbolic as well as the material significance of human hands, ears, faces, and hearts.

The motif of hands appears several times in the poem "Return": the severed hands of José, clasping dirt;¹⁷ "the hands of those who erase / what they touch," that is, those who torture and kill; and the idle hands of the North American poet who feels overwhelmingly helpless to take any action:

¹⁷ See page 179 above.
Your problem is not your life as it is in America, not that your hands, as you tell me, are tied to do something....

It is not your right to feel powerless....

These examples of hand imagery illustrate the function of, and the important difference between, the people who represent the three major factions involved in the conflict in El Salvador. They run the gamut from the peasant who is dismembered and murdered, to the henchmen who commit atrocities for the oppressive regime, to the Anglo outsider and visitor whose government supports the oppressors. Thus in several of Forchê's Salvador poems, the hands are indicative of not only social class but also one's standing in the existent power relations and the actions one undertakes, either to further the status quo or to question and disrupt it. The motif of the hands also points out the varying forms of ethical culpability for each party and, for the white American poet, the accompanying moral imperative to act in the face of her own personal despair.

The hands of an imprisoned Salvadoran, Francisco, form the central image in "The Visitor" (15), a brief but powerful poem from 1979. From the first line, "In Spanish he whispers there is no time left," the desperation of this captive man is clear, which is tempered somewhat by the imagined presence of his spouse.
The wind along the prison, cautious as Francisco's hands on the inside, touching the walls as he walks, it is his wife's breath slipping into his cell each night while he imagines his hand to be hers. It is a small country.

His only solace derives from the awareness that she is there with him, a belief that enables him to transcend—at least momentarily—his isolation and the near certainty that he will not survive. The closing line, echoing his lack of hope of ever leaving the prison alive, refers to the unspeakable atrocities committed there: "There is nothing one man will not do to another."

Documentation of the unbearable, inhumane conditions of El Salvador's Ahuachapan prison has been provided by Forché, who visited it only briefly but found the experience to be perhaps the most revealing during her entire time in the country, due to the absolute repugnance and brutality of what she saw there. The title of the poem indicates that "The Visitor"—presumably the poet herself—was written about someone she actually saw or met during her short visit, or about a man who represents the many who have languished amid the squalor there. However, while the poem well expresses Francisco's pain, it does not accomplish this through an objective description of the physical conditions.

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18 "Salvador" 4; "Roundtable" 285-88.
surroundings. Rather, Forché transmutes his distress through metaphor: his whisper is "the sound of scythes arcing in wheat, / the ache of some field song in Salvador"; the wind is his wife's breath; his hand, hers. By refining the plight of the prisoner through the language of a stylized poetics, she attempts a salvation of the doomed man through the lyricism of poetry. This piece is disturbing precisely because of its haunting and tragic beauty.

In comparison with the poem's main body of text, the final line, which is set apart from the first stanza, seems imprecise, general, abstract. Here, as in the next poem, Forché's poetic voice fails to give concrete expression to such utter despair and suffering. "There is nothing one man will not do to another" is echoed in a line from "The Colonel" (16): "There is no other way to say this." These lines indicate the inadequacy of language to communicate such horrors. Nevertheless, Forché has dared to describe the atrocities rather than to succumb to the temptation of speechlessness. For, just as the poet incorporates a relevant quote concerning the ability of poetry to speak about suffering in "Ourselves or Nothing" later in the volume ("Anna Akhmatova's 'Requiem' / and its final I can when the faceless woman / before her asked can you describe this?," 56), Forché has risen to the challenge of voicing
the brutalities she witnessed. Even when the descriptive powers of poetic imagery are inadequate, she finds expression in the abstracted negations of the above two lines.

A dense prose poem, and the only text without the standard line breaks of free verse in the volume, "The Colonel" also includes a date more specific than the others in the section; it stems from May 1978. This piece is no doubt the most quoted and discussed—and the most likely to be anthologized—poem of Country, due to its forceful statement of an actual, yet unheard of, experience by the poet. "The Colonel" astounds the reader with its crystalline insight and flawless narrative of an evening in the home of a ruthless Salvadoran military officer.

The driving image of the poem derives from the lines immediately preceding the one quoted above, which, although seemingly bland out of context, acts as an effective poetic apologia for what has just been described:

The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this.

Until this point in the poem, a number of straightforward descriptive sentences relate the details of the colonel's home, family, and the conversation between him, the persona, and her companion over dinner. Apart from the opening statements—"What you have heard is true. I was in his
house"--in their reportage-like bluntness, and a metaphoric description in another sentence--"The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house"--the text limits itself to fairly objective declarations about the visit. The impartiality of the narrative continues in the lines which depict what the colonel then does with the severed ears:

He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said.

His actions and gestures here alternate between the truly menacing and the ironically melodramatic. This scenario shows his attempt to threaten the North American poet into compliance through the shock of his collection of salvaged body parts. The sackful of ears makes grotesquely real the many tales of mutilation and murder Forché had heard of.

The last two sentences of "The Colonel" then shift to the metaphoric level: "Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground." The repetition of the beginning of these lines lends emphasis both to the degradation of these remnants of human beings, and to their perceived ability to evince some trace of the living persons from whom they were removed. Engel calls the final statement a "proud warning"
that "the men and women that the ears belonged to may be dead, but the people's collective hearing records the brutality and bides its time" (21). Mann speaks of how these "dismembered body parts of the tortured victims become witnesses" (55) and refers to the survivor's role in relating the atrocities experienced by the victims. Further, he adds: "These ears are dead; they do not talk; yet they seem to come alive to listen with the poet" (55).

In "The Colonel," the ears represent a tangible point of reference for the witness of this event: they contrast well with the imagery of the vocal organs in "The Memory of Elena," and recall Mann's insight about the vital role that careful listening and the reporting of what is heard play in Country. In order to transmit the knowledge she has gained by her presence in El Salvador, the poet must of necessity survive to tell these people's stories. To the colonel, the ears are human trophies which represent his power and cruelty; to the poet, they are macabre tokens of people whose lives have been unjustly taken.

The last poem in the sequence, "Because One Is Always Forgotten" (23), is dedicated to the memory of José Rudolf Forché.

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19 Hannah Arendt, qtd. in Mann 55.

20 Forché acknowledges that she had at least one very close call and brush with death shortly before she departed the country for the last time. See Cott 111.
Viera, and is undated except for the year of his death (1981), which is given in the inscription. Forché returns to a focus on the hands in the final line, in counterpoint to imagery of the heart and face in the preceding lines.

When Viera was buried we knew it had come to an end, his coffin rocking into the ground like a boat or a cradle.

I could take my heart, he said, and give it to a campesino and he would cut it up and give it back:

you can't eat heart in those four dark chambers where a man can be kept years.

A boy soldier in the bone-hot sun works his knife to peel the face from a dead man and hang it from the branch of a tree flowering with such faces.

The heart is the toughest part of the body. Tenderness is in the hands.

Here we see that when one is hardened by suffering and adversity, the archetypal anatomical site of human emotion—the heart—can no longer provide hope, comfort, or compassion. In the poem, Viera figuratively extracts his heart and gives it up to a campesino, who rejects it because this offering cannot save him, and thus is meaningless to him. Then, the young soldier shows that, by removing the

21 See Mann 56 for details on the assassination of this Salvadoran and two U.S. affiliates who were involved in the land reform movement.
skin from a corpse's face, in death all are equal. Hanging from a tree branch adorned with other such fleshless masks, the disembodied visage bespeaks the victim's anonymity and his place among countless dead. Forché indicates in these lines that to endure in conditions such as those in El Salvador, one's heart is sometimes unfeeling, and that that part of the body really has little to do with human good will toward others. It is rather through simple acts and gestures of the hands that people can most basically make contact with each other and express concern.

The actions of the boy in the poem have been described as "the robbing of the dead of even their last poor mark of identity" (56) by Mann, who continues:

In a world where mutilation has become a daily occurrence, one can no longer afford to sentimentalize: Caring comes not from the heart or its pretty sentiments (in this poem the heart is a dark chamber imprisoning every bestial impulse). Caring shows itself only in hands attached to unmutilated bodies--not "tied together"... not grown incapable of merest acts of kindness. (56)

I would add that here Forché no longer allows herself to attempt to lessen the pain of loss through metaphor. The only one she employs is in the lines "and hang it from the branch of a tree / flowering with such faces." The title of the poem, "Because One Is Always Forgotten," reinforces the notion of the erasure of self and person that occurs when these corpses are literally defaced, so as to render them
indistinguishable from one another and to friends and family, who will be unable to provide their dead with a proper burial.

It is fitting that Forché concludes the section "In Salvador, 1978-80" with two lines stripped to the bare essentials in terms of their body imagery: "The heart is the toughest part of the body. / Tenderness is in the hands." These simple, direct statements link two parts of the body, the heart and the hands, with their emotional attributes, toughness and tenderness. Here she inverts the standard abstraction and metaphorization of the heart. By demystifying that internal organ, the poet instills power into the concrete activities of the hands, which caress, hold, touch, and do whatever is necessary to provide comfort and ensure survival.

Conclusion

The Country Between Us deals not only with the particular present-day situation of a Central American nation where the poet learned things firsthand. The closing piece of the volume, "Ourselves or Nothing" (55-59), dedicated to Terrence Des Pres, summons the memory of many more tragedies of this century, where human life has been lost at great expense and in great numbers at the hands of
fellow human beings. The first three lines of the following passage well sum up what has been called Forché's "redemptive project," which "juxtaposes a very particular historical materialism with a larger, more general, apocalyptic apprehension" (Greer 179):

Go after that which is lost and all the mass graves of the century's dead will open in your early waking hours: Belsen, Dachau, Saigon, Phnom Penh and the one meaning Bridge of Ravens, Sao Paulo, Armagh, Calcutta, Salvador, although these are not the same.

Toward the end of this long poem, Forché invokes imagery to represent these different holocausts, to elaborate on the solemn litany of places she recites above:

In the mass graves, a woman's hand caged in the ribs of her child, a single stone in Spain beneath olives, in Germany the silent windy fields, in the Soviet Union where the snow is scarred with wire, in Salvador where the blood will never soak into the ground, everywhere and always go after that which is lost.

Only the first in this string of images directly depicts the bodies of the human victims; it represents the bond between mother and child, unbreakable even in death in a mass grave. By drawing parallels between these sites of genocide, the poet does not lessen the gravity of each in its own separate horror. Rather, she highlights the prevalence of crimes
against humanity in the past hundred years, while she underscores the need to remember the uniqueness of each.\textsuperscript{22}

"Ourselves or Nothing" closes with a powerful vision of the current state of the world, and our position in it:

There is a cyclone fence between ourselves and the slaughter and behind it we hover in a calm protected world like netted fish, exactly like netted fish. It is either the beginning or the end of the world, and the choice is ourselves or nothing.

The images in this passage recall the prophetic revelation described by Walter Benjamin in his interpretation of the painting "Angelus Novus" by Paul Klee.\textsuperscript{23} Forché's "slaughter" corresponds to Benjamin's "catastrophe of

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\textsuperscript{22} "Ourselves or Nothing," with its enumeration of each distinct massacre, makes specific the sites and victims of genocide, whereas the poem "Chor der Geretteten" by the German Jewish author Nelly Sachs (1891-1970) focuses on the role and common cause of the survivors in witnessing the slaughter: "Wir Geretteten, / Aus deren hohlem Gebein der Tod schon seine Flöten schnitt, / An deren Sehnen der Tod schon seinen Bogen strich-- / Unsere Leiber klagen noch nach / Mit ihrer verstümmelten Musik . . ." (50).

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\textsuperscript{23} Indeed, Forché has discussed how her current poetic project directly interrogates Benjamin's ninth thesis from his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and its profound implications for the past fifty years of world history, the present nuclear age, and the outlook for the future. She has recently given readings from her work-in-progress, tentatively titled \textit{The Angel of History} (Montenegro 35), a long dialogic poem which deals with the repercussions of the Second World War (Women Writers Conference, University of Kentucky, April 6, 1989). See \textit{Graham House Review} 11 (1988): 23-30, for an excerpt of this piece, and also Jane Miller's essay "Suspension Bridge," which cites and discusses it.
history"; her "cyclone fence" with his "storm . . . blowing from Paradise"; and the wide-eyed, gape-mouthed fish with the angel of history: "His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread . . . His face is turned toward the past" (257). Like Benjamin, Forché depicts humanity poised on the brink of ultimate disaster, seeking redemption without guarantee that it will come or is even possible. Forché's indictment of the brutality of our times makes clear the irrevocable events of this century, while it places the outcome and fate of the world squarely on the shoulders of those living today: "the choice is ourselves or nothing." That is the crux of her message.

Carolyn Forché's poetry celebrates, mourns, and remembers the bodies of those who have not survived. The exuberance and eroticism of embodiment in Gathering the Tribes gives way to reverence and lamentation in the face of mutilated and murdered bodies in The Country Between Us. These later poems communicate the pain of the victims and transmit a strong reminder of the incessant violations of the human body. Writing as an American, Forché demonstrates a commitment to expose human rights abuses on a global scale and to take responsibility for the injustices U.S. policy has wrought at home and abroad. She seeks to restore the sacredness of the body in her poetry by witnessing to and
for others, thus fostering both a reconnection to the rest of humanity as well as "the relationship of human beings to the life of the planet" (Mann 69).

As Americans, we cling, however precariously, to the myth of our staunch individualism. We are inclined to view ourselves as apart from others. Perhaps we do this because we are haunted by the past, by the occulted memory of the founding genocide. If it were true that we imagined ourselves as connected to others, as part of a larger human body, it would no longer be true that we would suffer the lack of feeling in ourselves which we now describe as the condition of being inured to images of violence. (Montenegro 38)

Carolyn Forché attempts to overcome the pervasiveness of this material and psychic disconnection, by persistently imbuing her poetic imagery and language with a vision of the transformative capacity of human relations grounded in the body.
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CHAPTER IV
CELEBRATION, REJUVENATION, AND NURTURANCE:
THE LIFE-AFFIRMING BODY IN THE POETRY OF NIKKI GIOVANNI

Introduction

In her poetry, Nikki Giovanni has consistently articulated an approach to embodiment that celebrates and seeks to rejuvenate and nurture the human body. Manifestations of the body in Giovanni's poems range from sexuality and touching to the connection between race and love of self for the African-American to the crucial caretaking role that women play for the human species. We can trace a development in this Afro-American poet's oeuvre that begins early with images of self-acceptance and validation, continues in mid-career with poems expressing a commitment to affirm the lives and experiences of her friends and family, and leads to a more encompassing appraisal of the human condition in her later poetry, which, in addition to considerations of race and class, emphasizes the significance of gender difference. The poetry of Nikki Giovanni is strongly informed by the lives of black women and by a valued relation to the body that stresses the importance of human intimacy.
The Celebratory Body

An early poem entitled "Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)" (1970), from Re:Creation (37-38), "derives from folk origins--the tall tale, the amusing boaster whose exaggeration increases throughout the story or song and has no bounds as explicit details accumulate into a semblance of invulnerable realism" (McDowell 148). The obvious but crucial difference between Giovanni's rendition of this popular form of folklore and traditional adaptations of it is that here the speaking subject is an African-American woman instead of the white man. Giovanni has broken relatively unexplored ground in contemporary American poetry by extolling a heroine of African heritage. Giovanni's poem takes the reader on a whirlwind journey through time and space that enables the first-person speaker of the poem, a black female, to move out of the periphery and into the center of poetic discourse with humor and grace. To lend emphasis to the "ego tripping" of the persona, Giovanni capitalizes the first word of every non-indented line, each of which begins with the words "I" or "My," whereas the names of other people and places are all written in lower case. Such an orthography stresses the self-affirmation by this figure. In so doing, the black woman is placed first and foremost in the spaces of the poem, in the context of
white American society that generally puts her last and lowest; similarly, she is symbolically empowered through the graphic enlargement of the capital letters in words that denote the self or ego.

William J. Harris grounds "Ego Tripping" in an African-American literary tradition similar to the tall tale:

The poem is a toast, a Black form where the hero establishes his virtues by boasting about them. . . . "Ego Tripping" is an updating of Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" from a woman's perspective. Hughes' poem is a celebration of the collective Black experience from the primordial time to the present. Giovanni's poem creates a giant mythic Black woman who embodies and celebrates the race across time. . . . Since it is not Giovanni speaking personally but collectively, it is not a personal boast but a racial jubilee. (227-28)

The first two stanzas of Giovanni's poem rework two key lines from the poetic center of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1920) by Langston Hughes.¹ This revision of Hughes' poem not only alters the hero's gender, but also includes expressions from the black vernacular ("I designed a pyramid so tough," "I am bad," "I am so hip even my errors are correct"), a practice perfected by Hughes in his later poetry.² The poems in Hughes' Montage of a Dream Deferred

¹ These lines read: "I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. / I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it" (Hughes, qtd. in Rampersad 363).

² See Montage of a Dream Deferred from 1951 (Hughes 221-68).
(1951), with their short lines and stanzas, reflect the cadences of Afro-American popular music. In her early poetry, Giovanni makes use of similar phrasing and rhythms that show the influence of *Montage*. Besides Hughes, the other leading poets of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s--Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer--were men, while the central female author of the movement, Zora Neale Hurston, was a prose writer. The major literary foremothers in African-American poetry for Giovanni, then, begin in the eighteenth century with the first published black American woman writer, the former slave Phillis Wheatley, and resume in the mid twentieth century with poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker, who began to publish in the 1940s after the Renaissance and the Great Depression.

Giovanni’s "Ego Tripping" reveals the importance of being female to the poetic persona:

I sat on the throne
drinking nectar with allah
I got hot and sent an ice age to europe
to cool my thirst
My oldest daughter is nefertiti
the tears of my birth pains
created the nile
I am a beautiful woman

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3 See Giovanni’s "Linkage: for Phillis Wheatley" in *Those Who Hide the Night Winds* 25-27.

These lines, with references to Allah, Nefertiti, and the Nile, reiterate the significance of her African heritage, which begins in the first stanza: "I was born in the congo / I walked to the fertile crescent and built / the sphinx / I designed a pyramid . . .." Giovanni invokes several vivid images here that connect Africa to womanhood. First, the longest river of the continent, the Nile, was formed by tears of pain and joy wept during the delivery of Nefertiti, the revered queen of Egypt and mother of Tutankhamen, who ruled in the early 14th century B.C. when Egyptian culture reached its zenith. In addition, the poetic persona claims responsibility for the creation of two renowned symbols of Egyptian civilization, the sphinx and the pyramid, which thus link female strength and nobility with the ancient and sublime. As Linda Koolish writes in reference to poetry by other African-American women who also invoke these figures:

Such poems are bridges between contemporary black women and their powerful foremothers like the Queen of Sheba' and Nefertiti. This heritage is particularly meaningful for black women poets because it confers the sense of individual power and tribal authority which women held in ancient Africa. (41)

While the following three stanzas continue with further claims of grandeur such as the formation of the Sahara

5 See the discussion of "Poem for Flora" below, pages 222-26.
Desert (stanza 3), an invocation of the persona's two sons Hannibal and Noah (stanzas 4 and 5), and the persona's equation of herself with Jesus (stanza 5), the sixth and penultimate stanza returns to imagery of the body that likens her materiality to the earth's treasures:

I sowed diamonds in my back yard
My bowels deliver uranium
   the filings from my fingernails are
   semi-precious jewels
On a trip north
I caught a cold and blew
My nose giving oil to the arab world
I am so hip even my errors are correct
I sailed west to reach east and had to round off
   the earth as I went
   The hair from my head thinned and gold was
   laid
   across three continents

This stanza invests the by-products of the persona's bodily functions with the capacity to create the natural resources of the planet, the effect of which is neither scatological nor grotesque, but rather tender and affirming. Giovanni uses irony to demythologize any idealism about the human body, and the chosen images lend humor to its daily routines. The acceptance of the entire human body in all its manifestations reflects the construction of the world as

\[6\] With the lines "I turned myself into myself and was jesus / men intone my loving name / All praises All praises / I am the one who would save," Giovanni envisions Christ as a black female figure; she may also be hinting at the late twentieth-century African-American Christian "savior" who, like Jesus, was martyred though he advocated love, peace, and nonviolent resistance: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
a global village in the poem: the persona leaps from the Congo to Rome and the United States ("New/Ark") in an instant, thus connecting "three continents," Africa, Europe, and North America. The unity of self in the poetic persona relates to a holistic view of nonhuman nature in this depiction of earth.

In "Ego Tripping," then, Giovanni touched on the topics of ecofeminism, which views humanity as intrinsically linked to all human life and the life of the planet, and the self-empowerment of women of color. The poem is Giovanni's appropriation and transformation of the self-celebration found in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," that standard of nineteenth-century American poetry, which first introduced the liberation and acceptance of sexuality and the body into the early literature of the United States. Giovanni's revision of history from her perspective as a Afro-American woman results in this fantastic recovery of the myth of the powerful black female, who was worshipped as the embodiment of the divine in ancient goddess religions. "Ego Tripping"

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Discussing her travels to Africa in an interview, Giovanni says that that continent has not affected her poetry any "more than Mexico or Europe, or, probably, the moon," then later explains that "What I'm trying to say is that you have to recognize, first of all, in 1982, Earth is a very small planet, and what we do is involve ourselves so that we are properly educated. . . . We have to move around and utilize the best of all cultures" (Elder 62).
demonstrates through metaphor a theme that another contemporary African-American woman writer, Alice Walker, expounds on in her most recent novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989). Walker's character Nzingha, an African woman, uncovers the details on the deformation of the African mother-goddess into the hideous, man-destroying figure of the Medusa:

". . . if you are from Africa you recognize Medusa's wings as the wings of Egypt, and you recognize the head of Medusa as the head of Africa; and what you realize you are seeing is the Western world's memorialization of that period in prehistory when the white male world of Greece decapitated and destroyed the black female Goddess/Mother tradition and culture of Africa."

Giovanni's resuscitation of the black woman as powerful creator of the world already in 1970 helped to lay the foundations for the restorative work in African-American women's history in the writings of Walker and other authors during the past two decades.

"Seduction" (38), from another early volume, *Black Feeling, Black Talk/Black Judgement* (1970), places an African-American woman into another context entirely; the setting is against the backdrop of the revolutionary .

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8 Such as Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde, among many others.
politics of the black liberation movement from the late 1960s and early 1970s.

one day
you gonna walk in this house
and i'm gonna have on a long African gown
you'll sit down and say "The Black . . . "
and i'm gonna take one arm out
then you--not noticing me at all--will say "What about this brother . . . "
and i'm going to be slipping it over my head
and you'll rapp on about "The revolution . . . "
while i rest your hand on my stomach
you'll go on--as you always do--saying "I just can't dig . . . "
while i'm moving your hand up and down
and i'll be taking your dashiki off
then you'll say "What we really need . . . "
and i'll be licking your arm
and "The way I see it we ought to . . . "
and unbuckling your pants
"And what about the situation . . . "
and taking your shorts off
then you'll notice your state of undress
and knowing you you'll just say "Nikki,
 isn't this counterrevolutionary. . . ?"

"Seduction" is perhaps one of the best examples of Giovanni's self-described style of writing poetry: "A poem's got to be a single stroke" (Tate 73). Using the conjunctions and, while, and then, the poem relates the action in one extended sentence that unfolds down the page. Giovanni employs various forms of colloquial language in "Seduction": the contraction gonna for going to and expressions from the black idiom in the phrases "What about
this brother," "you'll rapp on," and "I just can't dig." At
the poem's outset, the persona and her partner are wearing
"a long African gown" and a dashiki, respectively, clothes
which indicate pride in their ethnic heritage. Unlike the
capitalization of _L_ in "Ego Tripping," here the first-person
pronoun refers to the persona in lower,\(^9\) to the man in upper
case. This contrast between her "i" and his "I" underscores
their difference in behavior: she takes quiet but insistent
action, while he asserts his authority verbally but is
physically passive.

In this poem, the eroticism of the female persona is
shown in relation to the radical politics of her male
partner. The unabashed expression of her sexuality
contrasts markedly with the disembodied rhetoric of his
ideology. If we compare "Seduction" with Forché's "Year at
Mudstraw" and "Taking Off My Clothes," poems which also deal
explicitly with heterosexual relations, we find that in the
treatment of estrangement between the sexes, Giovanni's poem
delivers its point--the irony of juxtaposing political
activism with erotic pleasure--through playful wit and self-
satire, in contrast to Forché's somber portrayals of gender
alienation during sexual contact.

\(^9\) The poet refers to the first-person speaker of her
poems as "i" in every volume of poetry except her latest,
The persona's sexual advances are juxtaposed with the man's statements, all of which are cut short by ellipses to indicate the woman's concerted effort to distract him from the seriousness and consuming nature of his work. This "Seduction" puts sexuality into a dialectical relationship with politics. Although it upholds traditional male/female stereotypes--the man is dominated by the head while the woman represents the body--the poem nonetheless demonstrates the persona's desire for attention and self-validation through the expression of her sexuality, and her fondness for physical intimacy. The persona's assertive act of disrobing her male partner demonstrates an "affirming sexuality and the physical apprehension of a beloved as crucial to the deepest levels of emotional understanding" as Koolish (32) writes about a poem by the Native American poet Linda Hogan. The persona celebrates her body in connection with that of her lover by satirizing both his exclusive focus on revolutionary politics, which serves to neglect her bodily needs, and her own lustful intentions. "Seduction" portrays a fundamental dualism involving both partners: the demands of ideology on the one hand, and those of everyday life on the other. The question that closes the poem ironizes their diverging stances on revolutionary politics. The persona will not suppress or forego sexual desire and
contact for the sake of any cause, while her male companion places the movement foremost in his priorities.10

Giovanni depicts the black female figures in "Ego Tripping" and "Seduction" firmly grounded in their bodies. However, such a linkage of the black woman with physicality has often been used to the detriment of female African-Americans. Valerie Smith explicates the difficulty in this connection, based on the appropriation of black women writers' texts by white female and Afro-American male literary critics for regrounding themselves in the material realm:

This association of black women with reembodiment resembles rather closely the association, in classic Western philosophy and in nineteenth-century cultural constructions of womanhood, of women of color with the body and therefore with animal passions and slave labor. . . . the link between black women's experiences with "the material" seems conceptually problematic. (45)

Because the close association of the woman with her body in these two poems, Giovanni's celebration of herself as a black female takes on new meaning in light of the historical and political repercussions that the misuse of biological essences has had on the lives and experiences of Afro-American women. Giovanni attempts to reformulate the

10 See Harris 221 for a summary of the poet's conflicts with the male leaders of black cultural activism in the 1960s, who "stressed collective over individual values."
generic equation of black women with physical embodiment through these subjective interpretations based on her own experiences and life as an African-American woman poet.

The Rejuvenated Body

Several of Giovanni's poems from the early 1970s, a few of which are addressed to specific persons, focus on the development of greater consciousness of self, history, and community for African-Americans. Two poems from the volume Re:Creation, "For Two Jameses (Ballantine and Snow): In iron cells" (1969) and "Poem for Flora" (1970), express this transformation in attitude most explicitly. The former presents an analogy between the act of procreation and the formation of a human zygote with the imprisonment of two Afro-American men, while the latter relates the story of a little girl who learns to validate herself despite distortions in her self-concept and body image.

"For Two Jameses (Ballantine and Snow): In iron cells" (11) begins with a description of human conception and the growth of an embryo:

we all start
as a speck
nobody notices us
but some may hope
we're there
some count days and wait
Here Giovanni underlines the common beginning of all human beings. She also suggests that, while some pregnancies are desired, others are not.

we grow
in a cell that spreads
like a summer cold
to other people
they notice and laugh
some are happy
some wish to stop
our movement

The word *cell*, used here in its biological meaning, echoes the "iron cells" of the poem's subtitle. The imagery of procreation in which human life begins as a "speck" or a single cell contrasts sharply with the imagined presence of these men behind bars.

The poem's second half further delineates the comparison between incarceration and the growth of a fetus:

we kick and move
are stubborn and demanding
completely inside
the system

they put us in a cell
to make us behave
never realizing it's from cells
we have escaped
and we will be born
from their iron cells
new people with a new cry

The lines "completely inside / the system" indicate the total enclosure both of the growing human being inside its mother's body, and of these men who are captive within the
walls of the penitentiary, a metaphor for the political apparatus of the state. The analogy between both types of cells draws further parallels between human infants and imprisonment with words such as cry, born, and escaped, with the latter two reciprocally denoting the birth act and release from prison. Idealistic and religious in tone, the poem invokes biblical allusions at the close: "and we will be born / from their iron cells / new people with a new cry." These last lines reverberate with the resonance of the words of a charismatic black preacher. The final stanza clearly sets up an opposition between "us" and "them" that juxtaposes those struggling to gain their civil liberties and the individuals who represent the legal establishment: law enforcement officers, prison officials, and the judges and attorneys of the judicial system, who help perpetuate the criminalization of the black male.

The abstract imagery of biology in this poem differs from the concrete images in the portrayal of an Afro-American child in "Poem for Flora" (42):

when she was little
and colored and ugly with short straightened hair
and a very pretty smile
she went to sunday school to hear 'bout nebuchadnezzar the king of the jews

and she would listen
shadrach, meshach and abednego in the fire
and she would learn
how god was neither north
nor south east or west
with no color but all
she remembered was that
Sheba was Black and comely
and she would think
i want to be
like that

Giovanni sets up an opposition between an assessment of the
girl's appearance by white American guidelines for
attractiveness in the first stanza, and the yet-to-be-
realized blossoming of her own beauty in the closing two
lines, which are set apart for emphasis. The child is
initially portrayed as homely and insignificant through the
description of her as "little / and colored and ugly with
short / straightened hair." Yet the following line, "and a
very pretty smile," counteracts the disparaging physical
coloration of the adjective ugly and the outdated and
condescending designation of African-Americans as colored.
Her "short / straightened hair" betrays the child's attempt
to approximate the demands that white beauty standards place
on women, regardless of race: the possession of long,
straight (and preferably blond) hair. Sheba, however, is
"Black and comely," attributes which overturn the
presumption that the combination of dark skin and beauty is
not possible, a belief which Flora has apparently absorbed from the prevalent norms of the dominant culture.

Most of the Sunday school lessons mentioned—about kings and other masculine biblical heroes—do not speak to the child because they offer no connection to her life as an African-American girl. Yet the historical figure of the Queen of Sheba, whom she can admire and emulate, provides a role model of a black woman both beautiful and powerful. The child identifies with Sheba, which both enhances and helps her to further develop an affirmative sense of herself. Although the description of Sheba is limited to her physical attributes and thus reduces her to a beauty symbol, the development of pride and dignity in children often begins in the care of their personal appearance. In the following passage, Koolish discusses a poem by another woman of color that demonstrates how Giovanni's "Poem for Flora" accomplishes a similar goal:

> Other recent poems speak more directly to black women's changing consciousness about skin color. In "I Used to Think," Chirlane McCray first describes herself through the distorted lens of an internalized racist self-image: "A nappy-headed, no-haired / fat-lipped, / big-bottomed Black girl," wanting to be pecan-colored instead of black. By the end of the poem she is transformed, able to recognize her own ebony beauty, "the woman in darkness / who flowers with loving." (26)

Using orthography similar to that of "Ego Tripping," Giovanni capitalizes only the name of the Arabian queen and
the word Black, to emphasize the significance of both that person and that personal characteristic: the validation and strength of women of color. And again as in "Ego Tripping," the poet reclames from marginality a central position for the black women and girls in "Poem for Flora." By isolating several lines parallel in structure as separate stanzas ("and she would listen . . . and she would learn . . . and she would think"), Giovanni centers our attention on the child and her subjective, cognitive, and perceptive capacities. The little girl is transformed because she learns to use this story in order to visualize alternatives and possibilities for changing her life and self-concept.

This poem demonstrates how the abstraction of the Christian deity as a masculine, anthropomorphic entity can hinder the spiritual development and alienate the self-concept of people who do not belong to the majority group such as this child. The God of both Protestantism and Catholicism is normally taught as a being who inhabits no identifiable location in physical space—"neither north / nor south east or west" (here Giovanni paraphrases the hymn "In Christ There Is No East or West")—but is omnipresent, and as a disembodied spirit, which, despite the assumption of his maleness, has no body and is thus beyond the contingency of race—"with no color." That he is without
color also suggests a lack of interest in and curiosity about him, unlike the girl's vivid and lasting memory of the "Black and comely" queen. Giovanni here deconstructs the traditional Judeo-Christian belief in a supreme being as an omniscient, omnipotent father figure that transcends our understanding and the limitations of space and time. Her poetic imagery brings the focus back to the physical world and its inhabitants, to afford the reader a recognizable, realistic context for the situation of a young Afro-American person. Flora has gained something tangible and valuable for which she can strive: a vision of beauty and respect in a person like herself.

In another piece dedicated to a girl or young woman, Giovanni constructs a protective fortress out of race and gender difference. In "Poem (For Nina)" (46) from My House (1972), the poet deals explicitly with the issue of skin color. The opening line, "we are all imprisoned in the castle of our skins," suggests limitation and restriction, but the following lines soon qualify that demarcation by demonstrating that everyone has a choice in the creation of her or his world:

and some of us have said so be it
if i am in jail my castle shall become
my rendezvous
my courtyard will bloom . . .
my moat will not restrict me but will be filled
with dolphins . . . and sea horses . . .
Giovanni critiques the notion of being imprisoned inside one's skin or body and undermines the assumption of the mind-body split that it upholds. The romantic imagery of the poem's mid-section presents a childlike world of the imagination where harmony and playfulness abound. The images of this world affirm both unequivocal conceptions of blackness and racial integration—"goldfish will make love / to Black mollies and color my world Black Gold"—and the loving, gentle, and peace-making qualities often associated with femininity:

the dwarfs imprisoned will not become my clowns for me to scorn but my dolls for me to praise and fuss with and give tea parties to my gnomes will spin cloth of spider web silkiness my wounded chocolate soldiers will sit in evening coolness or stand gloriously at attention during that midnight sun for i would have no need of day patrol

These activities resemble stereotypical pastimes of young girls. The persona creates in the poem an imaginative haven of safety and wonder to which to retreat temporarily from

11 "Poem (For Nina)" focuses on the relationship of an aspect of the body, skin color, to identity and creativity, while a poem by an Anglo-American male poet on the captivity of the individual within the confines of his or her person emphasizes the body/mind split by centering on the head as the encasement of consciousness. The closing stanza reads: "We'd free the incarcerate race of man / That such a doom endures / Could only you unlock my skull, / Or I creep into yours." See "Listen . . . " (1945) by Ogden Nash (745).
the world. In the final section, the poem speaks of the role that skin color plays in determining one's identity and sense of self:

if i am imprisoned in my skin let it be a dark world
with a deep bass walking a witch doctor to me for spiritual consultation
let my world be defined by my skin and the skin of my people
for we spirit to spirit will embrace this world

Giovanni is reconstructing and reappropriating images of blackness into constructive symbols from their prominent cultural classification as evil and dangerous.¹²

In "Poem (For Nina)," the short lines characteristic of earlier poems such as "For Two Jameses" and "Poem for Flora" have been expanded considerably. Giovanni consistently--here as well as in nearly all her poetry--eliminates punctuation completely and relies solely on line breaks to denote a pause, as a substitute for commas or periods (with the exception of occasional ellipses or double spaces between words). With the shorter-lined poems the lack of

¹² Feminist scholars Naomi Goldenberg and Donna Wilshire describe in detail how myth, philosophy, psychology, and religion traditionally subsume all that is female, earthly, dark, and bodily under--and literally spatially and qualitatively beneath--the so-called worthier categories of male, mind, light, and spirit in a rigid hierarchy. See Goldenberg's Returning Words to Flesh: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Resurrection of the Body (1990) and Wilshire's "The Uses of Myth, Image, and the Female Body in Re-visioning Knowledge."
punctuation is less noticeable, but the longer lines of this poem and another from *My House*, "When I Die," sometimes appear to be run-on sentences and are thus difficult to read.

Also on the topic of aging and death, "When I Die" (36-37) differs markedly from the treatment of the persona's projected death in Forché's "Plain Song." From its title, this poem is clearly setting the instructions, as well as the hopes and fears, of the poet for those who survive her passing. The references to the human body, few in number but strong in impact, serve to frame this living will by their inclusion in the first and last stanzas. It opens:

> when i die i hope no one who ever hurt me cries and if they cry i hope their eyes fall out and a million maggots that had made up their brains crawl from the empty holes and devour the flesh that covered the evil that passed itself off as a person that i probably tried to love

The persona rebels against the pain of rejection she has experienced in relationships with persons who either did not reciprocate her affection or were unable to express theirs for her. She fantasizes that the people who have hurt her lose their eyes and that their bodies and minds become infested with vermin, whose destructive subsistence reflects the hatred these people have sown. The persona juxtaposes
her caring for others against their lack of love. The poem does not specify the persons by name, but in a later stanza the focus narrows to people from the African-American cultural sphere.

The graphic intensity of image and feeling of stanza one is tempered by several others. The bravado of that posthumously-intended curse gives way to an ironic jab at authority figures (stanza two) and a message to her son to honor older people and to appreciate the simple things in life such as the sunrise and acts of kindness (stanza five). Yet in stanza three, the persona articulates a desire to avenge those Afro-Americans critical of her poetry by bidding them to act out destructive fantasies on her books as a symbolic re-enactment of their mistreatment of her:

please don't let them read "nikki-roasa"¹³ [sic]
maybe just let
some black woman who called herself my friend go around and collect

¹³ "Nikki-Rosa," from Black Feeling, Black Talk/ Black Judgement (58-59), challenges the stereotypes that Afro-Americans are poor and unhappy and that their families are in crisis. It begins, "childhood remembrances are always a drag / if you're Black," and ends: "and I really hope no white person ever has cause / to write about me / because they never understand / Black love is Black wealth and they'll / probably talk about my hard childhood / and never understand that / all the while I was quite happy." For insight into the debate about what Cheryl A. Wall refers to as "the desire for the recuperation of the family" (13-14), see the essays by Deborah E. McDowell and Claudia Tate in Wall's collection.
each and every book and let some black man who
said it was
negative of me to want him to be a man collect
every picture
and poster and let them burn--throw acid on them--
shit on them as
they did me while i tried
to live

The violent actions invoked in the third to last line--
burning, throwing acid, defecating--are metaphors for the
emotional torment the persona has experienced by some
unnamed black persons and suggest her humiliation,
degradation, betrayal, and despair. These negative wishes
represent inversions of the love and intimacy longed for by
the persona. The poem is likely citing militant ideologues
in the black liberation movement who criticized Giovanni's
poetry as failing to comply with their standards of an
aesthetics for African-American literature (McDowell 136).

The career of poet is further problematized with sarcasm:

and as soon as i die i hope everyone who loved me
learns the meaning
of my death which is a simple lesson
don't do what you do very well very well and enjoy
it it scares white folk
and makes black ones truly mad

The difficulties of reconciling her talent as a writer with
the accompanying fame and celebrity, and of the consequent
scrutiny of her work by the public, open the persona to
criticism by the black literary community and distrust by
white readers who fear her success. The last lines of the
penultimate stanza again point a finger at other African-
Americans for not accepting the persona's work in a problematic reappropriation of terminology used to describe race relations during the period of enslavement of African-Americans: "... but I wanted to be a new person / and my rebirth was stifled not by the master / but the slave."

Up to this point in the poem, the persona has implied the valuation of physical and emotional intimacy mainly by producing negative examples of the strained relations that have separated her from rather than joined her to others she has cared about. Not until the final stanza does the poem return to imagery of the body that began with the blood and guts of the first stanza. In these lines the persona instead praises the virtues of touching, which sum up her posthumous wishes:

and if ever I touch a life I hope that life knows that I know that touching was and still is and will always be the true revolution

The ending of "When I Die" is echoed in the closing of "Poem (For Nina)," whose vital images are of skin and embracing: "let my world be defined by my skin and the skin of my people / for we spirit to spirit will embrace / this world." The themes of touching, love, and intimate contact in these two poems from My House also appear in the eroticaism of "Seduction" and the tender companionship
desired in "The Life I Led." The recurrent focus on physical intimacy in Giovanni's poetry demonstrates how the body in relation to others rejuvenates and transforms the persona in everyday life.

This passage presents an alternative to the belief advocated by white radical cultural feminists such as Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, and Sonia Johnson that women need to reclaim themselves as persons by first learning to know and understand their bodies (King 124), and the related idea of the French feminist theorists Cixous and Irigaray that "writing from the body" is a key to liberating the female psyche and physique. Yet for this poet as a woman of color, the revolution that Giovanni envisions diverges from the concepts developed by radical white American and French feminist theorists, in that she has never advocated separatism for women, as do the former, nor can her message be distilled down to a basic biological essentialism, of which the latter have often been accused. Written in 1972,

14 In particular, the line "I hope my shoulder finds a head that needs nestling." See the discussion of this poem that follows below, pages 234-37.

15 Ann Rosalind Jones summarizes this project as follows: "if women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men" (91).
this celebration of the tactile sense and the spatially most substantial of all human organs, the skin, must have seemed controversial to some of the African-American contemporaries of Giovanni at that time. She had originally spoken out as a supporter of the black activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, but later criticized the movement for being too dogmatic, masculinist, and limiting.

"The Life I Led" (n.p.), from the volume *The Women and the Men* (1975), describes the persona's views on the aging process and its potential effects on her body. Here again the persona outlines a basic affirmation of her physical self despite the changes and gradual deterioration it will undergo over the coming years. She respects her female body, and this poem thus seeks to overcome the (self-) loathing of women and their bodies so prevalent in Western culture.¹⁶

"The Life I Led" surveys the entire physique of the persona, from head to toe, and begins in the first stanza

¹⁶ In an examination of "somatophobia" and feminist theory, Elizabeth V. Spelman elucidates the consequences that despising the flesh have for race as well as gender: "'Flesh-loathing' is loathing of flesh by some particular group under some particular circumstances--the loathing of women's flesh by men, but also the loathing of black flesh by whites. . . . After all, bodies are always particular bodies--they are male or female bodies . . . but they are black or brown or biscuit or yellow or red bodies as well. We cannot seriously attend to the social significance attached to embodiment without recognizing this" (128).
with a description of how her body will change: "i know my upper arms will grow / flabby it's true / of all the women in my family." In the second stanza, "i know" is repeated twice more to introduce a number of other inevitable signs of increasing years, a phrase which confirms the persona's acknowledgment of, and acquiescence to, the effects of growing old on her outer self. Only in the last lines of the stanza does she reveal apprehension about the appearance of one of these physical changes; she expresses concern about the possibility that "age spots" may mar her skin:

i know that the purple veins
like dead fish in the Seine
will dot my legs one day
and my hands will wither while
my hair turns grayish white i know that
one day my teeth will move when
my lips smile
and a flutter of hair will appear
below my nose i hope
my skin doesn't change to those blotchy colors

Besides the potential change in skin tone, the persona seems to have come to terms with her aging body. She is imagining herself already as an old woman, although Giovanni was in her early thirties when this poem was published. In a number of other poems, the poet has often written about the lives of elderly women. The third stanza modifies the

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[17] See, for example, these poems about and/or dedicated to old or older women: "For a Lady of Pleasure Now Retired," "Poem for a Lady Whose Voice I Like," "Alabama Poem"
previous assertions about physical change, in that experiencing the aging process may be unpleasant:

\[
\begin{align*}
  &i \text{ want my menses to be undifficult} \\
  &i'\text{d very much prefer staying firm and slim} \\
  &\text{to grow old like a vintage wine fermenting} \\
  &\text{in old wooden vats with style} \\
  &i'\text{d like to be exquisite} . . .
\end{align*}
\]

Here the poet waxes sentimental about her old age with the cliché of comparing herself to aged wine. This simile, as well as the only other one used in the poem (from the second stanza, "purple veins / like dead fish in the Seine"), are simply not as effective or forceful poetically as the realistic depictions of the persona's body that guide the imagery. Another weakness of the poem is the sudden reference to the U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia, alongside another physical attribute of an aging woman:

\[
\begin{align*}
  &i \text{ think} \\
  &i \text{ will look forward to grandchildren} \\
  &\text{and my flowers all my knickknacks in their places} \\
  &\text{and that quiet of the bombs not falling in} \\
  &\text{cambodia} \\
  &\text{settling over my sagging breasts}
\end{align*}
\]

Giovanni attempts to ground this poem historically by placing it in connection with the bombing of Cambodia by American troops.¹ Yet in the context of the entire poem,

¹ This action sparked student protests on college campuses throughout the United States and resulted in the fatal shooting of three students by the National Guard at Kent State University on May 20, 1970, for example.
this image—or more precisely, a negation of the sound of continued bombardment—in the lines "i look forward to . . . that quiet of the bombs not falling in cambodia / settling over my sagging breasts" contrasts awkwardly with the descriptive image of the persona's aging bosom.

The poem returns to a description of the persona's physical form in the context of the everyday life and comfortable domesticity of an older woman in the next stanza: "i hope my shoulder finds a head that needs nestling / and my feet find a footstool after a good soaking / with epsom salts." Again, however, Giovanni shifts from the concrete imagery of the preceding lines to the following generalization in the ending:

    i hope i die  
    warmed  
    by the life that i tried  
    to live

Through abstraction and a lack of imagery to tie it to the rest of the poem, the final stanza weakens Giovanni's projected experience of growing old. The ending of "The Life I Led" illustrates what has been called "the inclusion of some misbegotten poems or prosaic or sentimental lines (which usually occur at the beginnings or ends of poems)" (McDowell 138) in Giovanni's poetry.

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fatal shooting of three students by the National Guard at Kent State University on May 20, 1970, for example.
Conclusion: The Nurturing Body

"Hands: For Mother's Day" (16-18) is a long prose poem from Giovanni's latest volume of poetry, *Those Who Ride the Night Winds* (1983). It highlights the activities of hands in providing maternal care, working both in the home and outside it, expressing emotion, and touching and massaging bodies, both living and dead. The poem ends with an explanation of how human beings evolved into two-legged creatures: it occurred not when man rose to hunt and kill, but when woman freed her forearms and hands to hold and embrace her young and her lovers.

"Hands" and the other selections from the volume's first section entitled "Night Winds"--which are dedicated to such persons as Billie Jean King, Phillis Wheatley, Martin Luther King, Jr., the children of Atlanta, and Rosa Parks--as well as half the poems from the book's second section, "Day Trippers," are written in a prose poem format. Giovanni here uses ellipses instead of standard line breaks, a practice which not only transforms the visual image of the poem on the page by giving it a greater density, but also combines the rhythms of the poetic line into a more prosaic style of narrative. These texts demonstrate the poet's

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19 "Mirrors" (22-24), "Linkage" (25-27), "The Drum" (30), "Flying Underground" (33), "Harvest" (39-41), respectively.
experimentation with longer poems, for many extend over several pages, a characteristic not typical of the poems from Giovanni's previous publications. There is a loquaciousness present in the poems of Night Winds that can indeed occasionally border on the trite; this talkative quality relates to Giovanni's reception as a popular--rather than an academic or literary--poet, and the broad base of her audience and appeal. Nevertheless, as an effect of its prose-poem format, "Hands: For Mother's Day" transmits its message with the dignity and solemnity of an oration, in honor of the holiday that pays tribute to the often unrewarded labor of mothers. It delineates both the pragmatic and the symbolic meaning of hands, particularly women's hands, and their role in the definition of both gender roles and evolution.

The poem highlights the importance of women's nurturance and care through manual labor and dexterity in

20 Harris characterizes her poetry as follows: "Giovanni is a good popular poet: she is honest, she writes well-crafted poems, and . . . she pushes against the barriers of the conventional; in other words, she responds to the complexities of the contemporary world as a complex individual . . . . In fact, much of Giovanni's value as a poet derives from her insistence on being herself; she refuses to go along with anybody's orthodoxy. . . . Unlike [Haki] Madhubuti [Don L. Lee, a black poet who has sharply criticized her poetry] she is not doctrinaire; she does not have a system to plug all her experiences into. She examines her time and place and comes to the conclusions she must for that time and place" (219).
the opening and closing stanzas, while the third and fourth sections elaborate on the theme. It begins:

I think hands must be very important . . . Hands: plait hair . . . knead bread . . . spank bottoms . . . wring in anguish . . . shake the air in exasperation . . . wipe tears, sweat, and pain from faces . . . are at the end of arms which hold . . . Yes hands . . . Let's start with the hands . . .

The persona employs free association with the image of hands, and the activities she calls forth are those performed primarily by women. While no explicit reference to women is made in this passage, the third stanza describes the revealing facial expression of a wife or mother who has lost her husband or child. Giovanni names contemporary female figures whose spouse or offspring has been killed, from "the mother of Emmett Till" and women "in Atlanta, Cincinnati, Buffalo," to "Betty Shabazz, Jacqueline Kennedy, Coretta King, Ethel Kennedy." "During one brief moment, for one passing wrinkle in time," she adds, even "Nancy Reagan wore that look . . . sharing a bond, as yet unconsummated . . . with" those other well-known widows of the past thirty years, in a reference to the assassination attempt by John Hinckley in 1981.

After the enumeration of the above names, the stanza continues with a focus on the tangible deeds of the
survivors, which include the preparation of the corpse and aiding those who also grieve:

... The wives and mothers are not so radically different ... It is the hands of the women which massage the balm ... the ointments ... the lotions into the bodies for burial ... It is our hands which: cover the eyes of small children ... soothe the longing of the brothers ... make the beds ... set the tables ... wipe away our own grief ... to give comfort to those beyond comfort ...

These acts range from attending to the dead body, to the mundane household chores that constitute everyday life and that a death necessitates, such as feeding and consoling the mourning family members and friends. This passage imparts the tradition in black culture where the bodies of the deceased are bathed and prepared for burial in the home. By describing this intimate caretaking of dead bodies in the poem, Giovanni stresses the healing that taking the preparation of the corpse into one's own hands provides. Whether administering oils to the deceased is intended literally or metaphorically, this final act of touching the body no longer living allows the survivors a last communion with the deceased person. The hands of women also tend to the living by shielding young ones from danger and easing their own pain as well as that of their friends and lovers.

The value of hands and their work lies for Giovanni not in a romanticized western ideal of beauty that is found in
contemporary media culture but in the fact that these parts of the body prove to be not only loving but strong and hard-working:

I yield from women whose hands are Black and rough. . . . The women who produced me are in defiance of Porcelana and Jergens lotion . . . are ignorant of Madge's need to soak their fingernails in Palmolive dishwashing liquid . . . My women look at cracked . . . jagged fingernails that will never be adequately disguised by Revlon's new spring reds . . . We of the unacceptably strong take pride in the strength of our hands . . .

Here the persona breaks down racial stereotypes that dictate the qualities that define a beautiful woman and provides a critique of white middle-class culture by bringing out the inherent classism in the advertisements of the companies she cites and by extolling hands that are not smooth and soft from the disuse of privilege. The contrast between the Afro-American women and the (white) ones in the TV ads is telling; the humor invoked here by the mention of common beauty aid products recalls the satirization of bourgeois domesticity that characterizes Ursula Krechel's "Hymne an die Frauen der bürgerlichen Klasse." Giovanni offers a compelling African-American alternative to the derisive portrait Krechel revealed in that critique of her heritage as a privileged white female westerner.

Though the first half of the final stanza is characterized by generalizations and a lack of images, the
The poem closes with a woman-centered rewriting of the origins of human life. Anthropologists have long assumed that early forms of humanity came to stand and walk upright when primitive tribes began living primarily as hunters and gatherers during the Paleolithic period. Giovanni attempts to disprove the belief that man first stood in order to practice the violent act of hunting, and contends that woman necessarily initiated the change:

Some of us ... on special occasions ... watch the ladies in the purple velvet house slippers with the long black dresses come in from Sunday worship and we realize man never stood up to catch and kill prey ... man never reared up on his hind legs to free his front parts to hold weapons ... WOMAN stood to free her hands ... to hold her young ... to embrace her sons and lovers ... WOMAN stood to applaud and cheer a delicate mate who needs her approval ... WOMAN stood to wipe the tears and sweat ... to touch the eyes and lips ... that woman stood to free the arms which hold the hands ... which hold.

These lines decenter primitive man as the focus of traditional anthropology and replace the ubiquitously male representations of human evolution—from the cave man through the Neanderthal man to the Cro-Magnon man—with a female counterpart who nurtures her mate and mothers her young, in other words, who generates and preserves life, rather than destroying it. Giovanni reconstructs the history of the human race by tracing back from herself and her mothers and sisters as contemporary women to primitive
woman, and imagines what impulses for survival shaped and forged her behavior as a female being among her peers.

While "Hands" makes a provocative discovery and sparks interest in women's role in human evolution, Giovanni universalizes the body imagery at the poem's close. The descriptive, concrete imagery of the body concentrated at the beginning yields to this generic depiction at the end of the poem, so that the intervening segments, with the exception of the third and fourth stanzas quoted above, diffuse a cohesion of the hands motif promised in the title. The connection made between mothers and hands emerges forcefully in the earlier stanzas, while the final stanza in its broad conjecture serves as a retelling of the development of humanity. The female of the species no doubt played a more important role than the subservient one traditionally granted her in history and science. Giovanni provides an alternative version of the old story of human evolution, stressing the nurturance and nonviolence typically ascribed to an ideal conception of woman, yet grounding her hypothesis earlier in the poem in the material existence of historical women. This poem continues Giovanni's constructive assessment of embodiment that runs throughout her poetry. The import of the body in the oeuvre of Nikki Giovanni lies in the many affirmative images that
picture bodies intact, whole, and as productive entities, in notable contrast to the recurring imagery of fragmentation, dismemberment, violation, and disease which, in varying degrees, characterizes the poetry of Helga Novak, Ursula Krechel, and Carolyn Forché.
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